

Homily for January 28th 2017

Memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas

Today is the memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas was so in love with Jesus Christ that from an early age he asked the question: “Who and what is God”? He was a theological child prodigy. First asking this question at the age of five, he pursued its answer til his death at the age of 49. He lived between 1225-1274.

In keeping with today’s Gospel Thomas delved deeply into the question: “Who is this that even the wind of sea obey him? Although much could be said about Thomas’ answer to that question three things stand out that our helpful for us in our own day. Because of Jesus Thomas saw clearly the relationship between every truth claim, the contingency of all things, and the humanity that is our because of Jesus.

Thomas saw with utter clarity that Truth is one because all truth comes from God. There can never be a conflict between the truths of philosophy/science on the one hand, and faith on the other hand. In Paris where he taught, there was a group advocating the double truth theory. This theory said: “there are two sets of truth. There are religious truth and scientific truth; and they may contradict each other and therefore need to be sequestered. Thomas Aquinas thought this was so much nonsense and said so. He made a public statement of it.

This is very important in our time when we see this conflict between faith and science; religion and reason. Thomas would say that if there is an apparent conflict between faith and science, between a religious truth and a scientific truth, either we are dealing with bad science or bad theology.

He followed Augustine in saying this: “If an interpretation of the Bible is opposed to what is clearly known through our scientific investigation we should interpret those parts of the Bible in a more symbolic and metaphorical way. This is a Catholic understanding. We, as biblical people, reach out to the sciences and take with great delight and appreciation what science teaches. However, science needs to be disciplined by what we know by Revelation. There cannot be a contradiction between the two. Thomas taught the unicity of truth.

Thomas also teaches us about the contingent relationship between all that exists. What are contingent things? Things that don’t contain within themselves the reason for their own existence. This said St. Thomas is a puzzle. Contingent things like you and me. We eat and drink, have parents, breathe air and are therefore contingent. We don’t explain our own existence. Plants, trees, animals, human beings and the cosmos itself are contingent. Therefore the fact that they exist needs to be explained. To try to explain this by an appeal to other contingent things will never be adequate but it simply postpones the explanation. We must come to some reality that exists through reason of its own essence. This is what Catholics call “God”.

St. Thomas was very moved by this view of God as expressed in God's self-revelation in Exodus 3:14 when Moses asked God for his name and God said "I am who I am". I am not a particular being. I am not one contingent thing among many. I am the sheer act of existence itself. Thomas saw this and recognized this was the rational ground for confirming God's existence

How important this understanding of contingency is in our own time when the so called new atheists argue that scientific categories obviate belief in God, that is they make it irrelevant.

They do no such thing. The sciences talk about relations that are contained among conditioned things. That is a very legitimate task but says nothing about the non-contingent ground of all existence. The sciences don't address the question of why there is something rather than nothing. Thomas saw that this was the fundamental question. God is not a superstitious holdover from a more superstitious time. He is the answer to that fundamental question that we call contingency.

Thomas was also a radical humanist because he was a Christian. He believed that God became human so that humans might become like God. Jesus became one of us so that we might become sharers in the Divine Nature. That means there is no humanism higher than Christian humanism. There is no claim made about the human being from ancient times to modern times that is more extravagant and more extraordinary than the Christian claim which is that we are meant for a share in the divine life.¹

How important this humanism is in a day of human rights when so many are looking for another kind of humanism based on gender redefinition, abortion rights and assisted dying rights have a very different basis for understanding the dignity of the human person.

It is a grace to realize that a man who lived so many centuries ago can help orientate how we live in 2017. May St. Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the unity of truth, contingent relationship between all things and the nature of human dignity inspire us to ask until our last breath, as he did:

"Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him"?

¹ I am grateful to Bishop Robert Barron whose video on Thomas Aquinas formed the content for this homily. See <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/video/reflections-on-st-thomas-aquinas/95/>