

Hysell: What St. Thomas Aquinas can teach us during church closures

Here at Couvent St-Jean-Baptiste where I live and study, several Friars Preachers have heartily but unsuccessfully tried to recruit me to their ranks; if the invitation is tempting, it's because being a Dominican tertiary sometimes feels like wearing an ill-fitting sock. Then I'm reminded why I became a diocesan priest: Stability in the local Church allows me to shepherd and to witness parishioners' growth in the spiritual life.

Recently, the language and behaviour of some Christians have left me worried for their spiritual health during this time when our bishops have temporarily suspended public liturgies. At the heart of my worry is a tendency to try and drive a wedge between the *virtues* and the *Sacraments*.

During St Thomas' time, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard had been the standard theological textbook for several decades. It consisted of four volumes on the Trinity, Creation, Christ, and the Sacraments, respectively. While writing a commentary on it (as was expected of up-and-coming theologians), St Thomas noticed a glaring problem: The only space given to discussion on the virtues was in the third volume, "On the Incarnate Word," where the virtues and gifts in Christ was given only a brief explanation. It was then that he decided to write an entirely new textbook on sacred doctrine.

His innovation was to consolidate the contents of the *Sentences'* volumes on Trinity and Creation into the "First Part" of this *Summa theologiae* and to consolidate the volumes on Christ and the Sacraments into the "Third Part." Then St Thomas extracted the questions on virtue and the gifts in Christ from the third volume of the *Sentences* and turned it into the massive "Second Part." In so doing, he intended this Second Part to function both as a spiritual director's handbook and, more significantly, to make the point that before talking about Christ and the Sacraments, Christians must be fitted well with the "infused virtues"—the cardinal (*Wis* 8:7) plus the theological virtues (1 *Cor* 13:13) elevated by the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit (*Is* 11:1-3)—because maturing Christians' believing in Christ and meeting Him in the Sacraments must be done virtuously.

Desiring Christ in His Sacraments while public liturgies are suspended, but desiring in an unvirtuous way is self-defeating because it forgets that growth in virtue is also the *aim* of the Sacraments. Already, because of our baptism and confirmation, we are incorporated into Christ and are temples for the Holy Spirit, and thus are empowered to act supernaturally. Yet, how much time and energy is being spent in 'sharpening' our virtues? Or is it easier to skip virtue-sharpening by acting uncharitably in the face of the Church's difficult situation? This is exactly why Christ so severely admonished the Church at

Ephesus: They were orthodox but had abandoned charity (*Rev* 2:1-11; cf *Lumen gentium*, 14).

The virtue of charity, St Thomas says, “gives the form to all other acts of virtue,” because it shapes us to stretch ourselves toward God. The Precept of Charity, therefore, is not “costume jewellery” for Christians but the very “how” of being Jesus’ disciples. But let us also look at two other infused virtues that seem to flounder in some Christians who throw a tantrum while temporarily being restricted the Sacraments: Fortitude and temperance.

Fortitude is how we ‘fortify’ ourselves with strength for excellence in discipleship. Some well-meaning Christians have argued that we ought to brave COVID-19 and hold public liturgies anyway. If we fall sick or die, we are giving witness to the world of our faith. St Thomas Aquinas could agree with this, at least, right?

No, St Thomas would not agree, because “virtue” stands midway between a shortcoming and an excess (see *Is* 30:21 and *Jos* 1:7); an excess with respect to fortitude is the vice of “daring.” Commenting on St Jerome’s version of *Sirach* 8:18, “Travel not with a rash companion, if thou wouldst not shoulder all his misfortune; he will go his own way, and thou share the reward of his folly,” St Thomas points out that this daring masquerades as courage because it arises from an emotional disturbance (“passion”) rather than orderly reason. “Now daring, insofar as it denotes a vice, implies excess of passion, and this excess goes by the name of daring. Wherefore it is evident that it is opposed to the virtue of fortitude...” Thus, wanting to risk infection by resuming public liturgies before the appropriate time decided by proper authorities in the Church falls short of virtue and, therefore, is less-than-Christian.

Like fortitude, temperance is a virtue about pacifying emotional disturbances, and one of the vices opposing it is a *capital* vice: Wrath. Certainly, we are upset about suspended public liturgies—but here we must be careful not to ‘take it out’ in the wrong way. It is precisely this ‘taking it out’ in anger that becomes the capital vice of wrath, and I have seen this done in a variety of ways, particularly against clergy or politicians. In the Office of Compline, we often hear the words “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (*Eph* 4:26, see also v. 31).

What makes wrath to be a capital vice is how it multiplies into “offsprings,” among which St Thomas identifies “clamor” and “contumely.” I highlight these two because they are the most evident on social media, which provides a convenient place to be anonymously vicious.[Picking up on Jesus’ words about name-calling in *Matthew* 5:22, St Thomas describes “clamor” as an “angry exclamation” or “disorderly and confused speech” and “contumely” as “injurious words” hurled at someone. Hence: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (*Eph* 4:29-30).

One last point. In a few short weeks, the Church will sing of the Holy Spirit, “the soul’s delightful guest,” on Pentecost Sunday. St Thomas ended each treatment of the virtues with their corresponding gift of the Holy Spirit, Whom Christians received in baptism and confirmation. Because we are tabernacles of the Holy Spirit (cf 1 Cor 3:16, 12:13), we are already graced to act out the virtues heroically. Let us then be gracious hosts by adoring the indwelling Trinity while we’re unable to adore the Blessed Sacrament. Let us be Christ’s hands, feet, and voices by being responsive to the Anointing One’s nudges in showing mercy to those who are helpless in this pandemic—the elderly, the disabled, single parents, and the unemployed.

One of St Thomas’ favourite Biblical commentators was St. John Chrysostom, who famously said “If you cannot find Christ in the beggar at the Church doors, you will not find Him in the Chalice.”

Maybe public liturgies aren’t suspended after all. Maybe, rather, they’ve been left uncelebrated.

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