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St. Thomas Aquinas on Sacred Scripture and Holiness

Abstract. In this article I intend to show that profound Scriptural roots of St. Thomas' thought on holiness. Although I will limit myself to three topics, namely (1) the holiness of God, (2) the holiness of creatures and in particular Christ as man and (3) holiness and the moral life, such an analysis reveals three fundamental features of his biblical exegesis. First, reading Sacred Scripture is first and foremost a confessional exegesis. Second, St. Thomas is able to show the fruitfulness of using a Dionysian metaphysics as an explicative tool in addressing the truth of Sacred Scripture. Thirdly, this truth is a Person, the Person of Christ.

Keywords: Holiness, Sacred Scripture, Thomas Aquinas, Biblical Thomism.

An analysis of the relation between Sacred Scripture and Holiness in the thought of St. Thomas runs the risk of implicitly accepting typically modern assumptions as starting points of the analysis. As a result it can happen that holiness is being reduced to a moral category, that is to say as an attribute of human beings and their efforts. Such a modern assumption which reduces theology to anthropology and Scripture to a set of moral rules or, at best, ideals, however, is contrary to Scripture and Thomism but also systematically unsound.[1]

Fortunately, St. Thomas, by way of Dionysius, gives us a fruitful warning. Dionysius the Areopagite, at the beginning of this treatise *On Divine Names*, advises to be "constrained by temperance and sanctity about divine things".[2] "Hosioteis"

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[1] For a profound criticism of this assumption as exemplified by Karl Rahner see Scheffczyk 1997 and Hauke 2012. For an exposition of the theocentric nature of *sacra doctrina* see for example Stöhr 1988. On the Christological and ecclesiological foundations of the universal call to holiness in *Lumen gentium*, chapter 5 see Schlosser 2012.

[2] Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus* I, 2: "et simus circa divina, temperantia et sanctitate constricti." "σωφροσύνη καὶ ὁσιότητι συστελλομένους" in Chevallier 1937, *Dionysiaca* vol. 1, 8.

is the same word that is used by Zechariah in the *Benedictus* in Luke's Gospel (Lc 1, 75), speaking about serving God "in holiness" (*in sanctitate*) before God "all our days" and by Saint Paul in Ephesians, 4, 24 when he speaks about clothing ourselves with the new self "created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness".[3] St. Thomas comments approvingly on this advice by Dionysius and adds that it is the light of Sacred Scriptures, deriving from the First Truth, which serves as the measure for our knowledge of divine things. Dionysius' advises us, therefore, not to impose our own thoughts upon what Scripture gives us ("temperance") and to conserve "the pure truth of Sacred Scriptures from every error" ("sanctity").[4] Elsewhere, commenting on Romans 1,2 ("Which he had promised before, through his prophets, in the holy Scriptures,"), Thomas notes that the Scriptures are sacred for three reasons: their origin is sacred, their contents and their effect in so far as they make holy.[5]

In what follows I will deal with three topics: (1) the holiness of God, (2) the holiness of creatures and in particular Christ as man and (3) holiness and the moral life.

1. The holiness of God

Following the advice of St. Thomas and Dionysius we find that in the Old Testament sanctity or holiness is first and foremost attributed to the personal God of Israel who reveals Himself in His transcendence, that is to say, in his majesty which cannot be manipulated by any creature. "Who shall be able to stand before the Lord this holy God?" (1 Sam, 6:20). Commenting on Ps. 23, 3 "who

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[3] See *Summa Theologiae* (=ST) II–II, q. 81, a. 8, sc. All translations of St. Thomas' texts are taken from the website aquinas.cc.

[4] *In De Divinis Nominibus* (=In DDN) c. 1, l. 1, no. 16: "*Et* sic, dum nos non plus extendimus ad agnoscendum divina, quam lumen sacrae Scripturae se extendit, *simus* per hoc *constricti*, quasi certis limitibus coarctati, *circa divina*, quadam *temperantia et sanctitate: sanctitate* quidem dum sacrae Scripturae veritatem mundam ab omni errore conservamus; *temperantia* vero, dum ad eas non magis nos ingerimus, quam nobis est datum."

[5] *In Rom.* c. 1, l. 2, no. 27: "Addit autem *sanctis*, ad differentiam scripturarum gentilium. Dicuntur autem sanctae, primo quidem, quia, ut dicitur II Petr. I, 21: *Spiritu Sancto inspirati*, II Tim. III, 16: *omnis Scriptura divinitus inspirata*; secundo quia sancta continent, Ps.: *confitemini memoriae sanctificationis eius*; tertio quia sanctificant; unde Io. XVII, 17: *sanctifica eos in veritate. Sermo tuus veritas est.* Unde dicitur I Mach. XII, 9: *habentes solatio sanctos libros qui in manibus*, etc."

shall stand in his holy place" Thomas writes: "Also, who shall be able to stand there, where he himself is, which is the holy place, the place of glory? The place of our sanctification, the hope of Israel (Jer 17:12–13). The place where you are standing is holy ground (Exod 3:5), as if to say, "Who can stand there?".[6] The profound difference between God and creatures is brought out by the prophet Hosea 11, 9 when God promises, despite Israel's ingratitude, to "not execute my fierce anger […] for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst." Similar words from Isaiah 12, 6 "in your midst is the Holy One of Israel" are read by St. Thomas typologically to refer to the Incarnation, the importance of which will become clearer below.[7]

The clearest testimony of God's sanctity or holiness can be found in the Trisagion in Isaiah 6, 3. The scene of the Lord sitting on the throne, surrounded by the seraphim who proclaim "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" reveals the deepest and innermost nature of God.[8] Thomas acknowledges that the threefold repetition denotes a superlative idea, an opinion shared by many exegetes today.[9] But Thomas also sees in it an indication of the Tri-une God and his providential care over creation as it is marked by God's generosity and goodness.[10]

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[6] *In Ps*. 23, 3, no. 207.

[7] See *In Is*. 12, no. 394; *Super Mt. [rep. Petri de Andria]* c. 2, l. 3, no. 195: "Tertio addit *magno*, quia isti magna iam cognoscebant de Deo, quia Deum incarnatum, et multum misericordem; Is. XII, 6: *exulta et lauda, habitatio Sion, quia magnus in medio tui Sanctus Israel*."; *Super Io*., c. 4, l. 6, no 674: "Item per hoc significatur duplex adventus Filii Dei. Scilicet primus, qui fuit mansuetudinis ad laetificandum; Is. XII, 6: *exulta et lauda, habitatio Sion, quia magnus in medio tui Sanctus Israel*. Unde et angelus ad pastores ait, Lc. II, 10: *annuntio vobis gaudium magnum, quia natus est vobis hodie salvator*." *Super Ave Maria*, a. 1 co: "Dominus filius in utero. Isai. XII, 6: exulta et lauda habitatio Sion, quia magnus *in medio tui sanctus* Israel."

[8] See Wright 1992, 237; Grotz 1962, 653.

[9] *Super Io*. c. 7, l. 3, no. 1058: "Quandoque importat magnitudinem devotionis, secundum illud Ps. CXIX, 1: *ad Dominum, cum tribularer, clamavi*. Quandoque vero cum hoc magnitudinem dicendorum, secundum illud Is. VI, v. 3: *Seraphim clamabant alter ad alterum, et dicebant: sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus exercituum*; Prov. VIII, 1: *numquid non sapientia foris clamitat, et prudentia dat vocem suam?* Et sic praedicatores clamare monentur Is. LVIII, 1: *clama, ne cesses, quasi tuba exalta vocem tuam*." See also *In IV Sent*., d. 8, q. 2, a. 4, qc. 3, expos.

[10] *In Is*. 6, l. 1, no. 219: "Secundo ponit laudis canticum, ibi *sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*. Et tria laudant: personarum trinitatem: *sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*; unitatis majestatem: *Dominus Deus exercituum*, qui omnibus praeest, Apoc. IV 8 *sanctus, sanctus, sanctus, Dominus Deus omnipotens, qui est et qui erat et qui venturus est*; provisionis liberalitatem: *plena est omnis terra gloria ejus*, quia usque

In two places in his writings St. Thomas explicitly and extensively defines sanctity or holiness.[11] In both instances Thomas starts from one of the many instances in which the Old Testament attributes holiness to God and combines this with the authority of a passage from Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus*.

Text 1	Sermo XII: Seraphim stabant
Manifestant ergo nobis misterium Trinitatis cum dicunt: Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus. Circa quod sciendum est quod, sicut Dyonisius dicit, nulla uia est adeo efficax ad cognoscendum Deum sicut est uia que est per remotionem: tunc enim Deus perfecte cognoscitur quando scitur quod ipse est super omne illud quod cogitari potest. Vnde de Moyse, qui familiarissimus fuit Deo secundum quod homini in uita ista conceditur, legitur quod accessit ad Deum in nube et caligine, id est cognoscendo quid non est Deus peruenit ad cognitionem Dei. Hec autem uia remotionis in nomine sanctitatis intelligitur, nam communiter secundum omnes doctores, sanctum idem est quod est purum, purum autem est quod est ab aliis separatum.	So they [the Seraphim] make the mystery of the Trinity manifest to us, when they say: *holy, holy, holy*. Concerning this we must know that, as Dionysius says, no way is as successful for getting to know God as the way of removal. For then God is perfectly known, when we know that he is above everything that can be thought of. Hence we read about Moses, who was very familiar with God according to what is granted to a human being in this life, that he approached God in a cloud and a thick mist, meaning: by getting to know what God is not, he arrived at knowledge of God. Well, this way of removal is understood by the term „holiness," for, in general, according to all teachers, „holy" is the same as what is pure, and „pure" is what is separated from other things.

The first text[12] stems from his sermon XII *Seraphim stabant*, preached on the Feast of the Trinity and probably dating from the first Parisian period (1252–1256). This sermon, which precisely has Is. 6, 3 as its *thema*. He discusses the meaning of sanctity when we attribute it to God, that is to say, to the sacred Trin-

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ad ultimas creaturas, quae per terram intelliguntur, et extendit diffusionem suae bonitatis, Jer. XXIII 24 *numquid non caelum et terram ego implebo, ait Dominus*. Et hoc secundum Dionysium, VII cap. Caelestis hierarchiae. Hieronymus: *plena est omnis terra*, per notitiam fidei, Eccli. XLII 16–17 *gloria Domini plenum est opus ejus. Nonne Dominus fecit sanctos enarrare omnia mirabilia sua, quae confirmavit Dominus omnipotens stabilis in gloria sua.*" This Trinitarian reading can be found in such Church Fathers as Theodoret of Cyr, Cyril of Alexandria and Origen. See McKinion 2004, 51.

[11] In *ST* II–II, q. 81, a. 8 Thomas notes that "it is by sanctity that the human mind applies itself and its acts to God: so that it differs from religion not essentially but only logically. For it takes the name of religion according as it gives God due service in matters pertaining specially to the Divine worship, such as sacrifices, oblations, and so forth; while it is called sanctity, according as man refers to God not only these but also the works of the other virtues, or according as man by means of certain good works disposes himself to the worship of God."

[12] *Sermones* 2014, 183.

ity, as indicated by the threefold 'Sanctus'. Thomas invokes Dionysius, saying "no way is as successful for getting to know God as the *via remotionis*."[13] Moreover, this *via remotionis* "is understood by the term 'holiness', for, in general, "according to all teachers", 'holy' is the same as what is pure, and "pure" is what is separated from other things."

In what follows he defines the meaning of "purity" and "separation from other things" but, following the *via remotionis*, St. Thomas uses the defects that are present in creatures, that is to say, the absence of purity and separation found in creatures which, by way of contrast, can inform us about the nature of the Tri-une God.[14] St. Thomas starts with identifying three "most excellent" aspects of creatures, i.e. regarding 1) essence, 2) knowledge and 3) affection, which correspond to Father, Son and Holy Spirit but which even as "most excellent" remain far behind the purity of God.

Regarding essence, Thomas notes that corruption, composition and mutability are found in creatures. Ergo, "the first principle is above this: incorruptible, simple, and immovable. And this holiness is the holiness of God the Father, who is the principle of the whole Divinity. The psalmist says: let them acknowledge your great name for it is terrifying and holy (Ps 99:3)." The names 'Power', 'Unity' and 'Eternity' are therefore attributed or appropriated to the Father.

Regarding knowledge, Thomas mentions the defects of knowledge being limited to either material, singular things, appearances and what does not intellectually exhaust God's essence. The opposite is "the knowledge of the Word of God; it contains all things, knows all things (Wis 1:7). […] And therefore is this holiness the holiness of God's Word. The psalmist says: yet you dwell in the Holy One, Praise of Israel (Ps 22:4), for this is the praise of the ones who see God, that they may dwell in the Holy One, meaning: participate in the knowledge of God's Word." The names 'Wisdom', 'Splendor' and 'Equality' are therefore appropriated to the Son.

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[13] On this aspect see the extensive study by Emery 2023a.

[14] This procedure also has a moral significance and fits into the verses following Is. 6, 3. For after witnessing the seraphim crying "Holy, holy, holy", the prophet, standing before the transcendent holiness of God says in vs. 5: " woe is me, because I have held my peace; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people that has unclean lips, and I have seen with my eyes the King the Lord of hosts." In his commentary on Is. 6, 5 (*In Is.* 6, l. 1, no. 221) St. Thomas remarks that Isaiah shows his humility in confessing his sin of omission in not denouncing king Uzziah and praising God, his sin of associating himself with evil men and finally his sin of presumption by thinking that someone who is impure can see God himself.

Regarding affection, Thomas mentions the deprivation of affection, the holding back of affection and the disquiet of affection, defects having to do with a self-centered and egoistic and therefore restless life. On the contrary, "holy affection is above these affections; it is the divine love that is not deprived since it loves all things that are, as it is said in Wisdom 11:25, and you hate nothing of the things you made. It is not closed, because when you open your hand everything will be filled with goodness, as the psalmist says (Ps 104:28). It is not disquieted, since it is the love of the ultimate end which loves itself and all things because of itself; and thus it is everlasting: in everlasting love (Jer 31:3)." Therefore to the Holy Spirit are appropriated 'Union', 'Goodness' and 'Enjoyment'.

Given God's simplicity, Thomas ends by noting that "in God, being, understanding, and willing are the same; and so the holiness of these three is the same."

Text 2	*In DDN* c. 12, l. 1, nos. 945/955
945: Circa primum, quatuor exponit: primo exponit quid sit sanctitas; et dicit quod, *secundum* nostram acceptionem, per sanctitatem intelligitur *munditia* quae est *libera ab omni immunditia et perfecta et immaculata* 955: Dicit ergo primo quod Deus, *qui est omnium causa*, supereminenter omnibus, habet plenitudinem bonitatis super omnia alia. Ideo ad designandum hunc excessum quo excedit omnia, dicitur in Scripturis *Sanctus sanctorum et reliqua*, idest Rex regum, Dominus dominantium et Deus deorum: designatur enim, in isto modo locutionis, emanatio quaedam a causa superiori, ut intelligatur, cum dicitur sanctus sanctorum, quod ab ipso emanat sanctitas in omnes alios et sic de aliis.	945. About the first, he expounds four things: first he expounds what sanctity is; and he says that, *according to* our reception, through sanctity there is understood cleansing which is *free from every uncleanness and perfect and immaculate* 955: Therefore he says, first, that God, *who is the cause of all things*, supereminently over all things, has the fullness of goodness over all other things. For this reason: for designating this excess by which he exceeds all things, he is called in the Scriptures *Holy of Holies and the rest*, that is, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and God of Gods: for there is designated, in this mode of speaking, a certain emanation from a superior cause, so that there might be understood, when he is called Holy of Holies, that holiness emanates from him into all other things, and thus concerning the others.
Designatur etiam quidam excessus, secundum quem Deus ab omnibus segregatur, quasi superior omnibus existens, ut sit sensus: *Sanctus sanctorum*, idest sanctus excedens omnes sanctos: sic enim ea quae sunt *sancta* et *divina* et *dominantia* et *regalia*, excedunt ea quae *non* sunt talia; *et rursus*, sicut *participationes* excedunt participantia, ut sanctitas sanctum, *ita collocatur super omnia existentia*, ille *qui est* superior omnibus existentibus, eo quod est *causa* quaedam *imparticipabilis omnium participantium et participationum*: causa enim excedit causata.	There also is designated a certain excess, according to which God is segregated from all things, as though existing superior to all things, so that the sense might be: *Holy of Holies*, that is, holy exceeding all holy men; so also those things that are *holy* and *divine* and *dominating* and *regal* exceed those that are *not* such; *and again*, as *participations* exceed things participating, as holiness a holy thing, *so there is gathered above all existing things* he *who is* superior to all existing things, because he is a certain *imparticipable cause of all participating things and participations*: for a cause exceeds things caused.

Recall that in Sermon 12 Thomas said about the definition of sanctity that it was held by "all teachers". In this second text we see that St. Thomas has principally Dionysius in mind. In chapter 12 of *De divinis nominibus* Dionysius treats of those names that designate the governance of things and in particular the name given in Daniel 9:24, "Sanctum sanctorum". St. Thomas fully accepts the definition: "free from every uncleanness and perfect and altogether immaculate cleansing" (*ab omni immunditia libera et perfecta et omnino immaculata munditia*). In his commentary Thomas understands these characteristics as three degrees of cleansing in which the *ratio sanctitatis* consists. The first degree deals with freedom from *every* uncleanness because it brings the subject of uncleanness into servitude and submission. The second degree deals with perfect cleansing so that nothing is lacking and disturbance by the passions is no longer possible. The third degree has to do with not only possessing purity in oneself but also the impossibility of something outside the subject drawing the subject to uncleanness. When we apply this *ratio sanctitatis* to God, Dionysius and Thomas continue, we end up affirming that God "exceeds all things", that is to say, that He is "supereminently over all things" and "has the fullness of goodness over all other things" but from Whom, as from a superior cause, emanates all holiness. At the same time a different excess is at play "according to which God is segregated from all things, as though existing superior to all things", that is to say, as exceeding the holiness of all holy men. Both realities are indicated by Scripture in describing God as "Holy of Holies" or, in the philosophical language of Dionysius and St. Thomas, "imparticipable cause of all participating things and participations."

In concluding this part, one can add that the Thomist tradition has authentically developed this aspect when commenting on q. 6 of the Prima Pars dealing with the goodness of God and on questions 14 and 16 dealing with the intellect and will of God.[15] In these commentaries one finds the identification of goodness and holiness as an essential attribute of God as well the recognition that, because God loves his most perfect goodness for his own sake in an infinite and immutable way, God is the highest degree of sanctity and in fact essentially sanctity. As one of these Thomists, Jean Baptist Gonet (1616–1684), maintains, God is formally holiness in so far as in Him there exists an identity between his will and the eternal law; and God is also holiness in an exemplary way as the rule of all holiness and finally in an eminent and causal way as the source and

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[15] For a protestant perspective on God's holiness see for instance Barth 1948, 394–413.

principle of all holiness. It is because of this threefold holiness (formal, exemplar and efficient) that the Seraphim in Is. 6 says "Holy, Holy, Holy".[16] His contemporary Vincent Contenson (1641–1674) remarks that Jesus himself emphasized reverence for God's holy name when in Mark 1, 26 he rebukes the man with the unclean spirit who said, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus orders him to be silent before driving out the unclean spirit because the sacred name should not be pronounced by those who are unclean.[17] In these and other authors of the Thomist tradition one finds extensive Scriptural passages supporting these insights, and some even proclaim at the beginning of their treatment of this topic that "every page of Sacred Scripture celebrates God's holiness."[18]

2. The holiness of creatures

From this theocentric approach it follows that every holiness found in creatures is derived from God's holiness.[19] This is indicated by Ps. 17:26, "With the holy, you will be holy", which for St. Thomas contains the idea that God both causes holiness in creatures as well as showing Himself to be holy by approving and rewarding holiness.[20] Here we find another way of expressing the *ratio sanctita-*

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[16] Gonet 1733, 80.

[17] Contenson 1728, 23.

[18] Zubizarreta 1937, 68; See also Garrigou-Lagrange 1950, 463–465. One of the earliest treatments of holiness as a divine attribute can be found in Dionysius the Carthusian (1402–1471). See his commentary on Isaiah 6 in Dionysius 1899, 374 ("Deus enim sublimis et benedictus, essentialiter sanctus est, et essentia ejus est sanctitas supersubstantialis, pura ac infinita, omnis puritatis, aequitatis ac sanctitatis origo, causa, vigor atque mensura. Sanctum namque vocatur, quod omni macula caret, omnique perfectione rclucel: quod certum est Deo perfectissime convenire. Clamant autem ter, Sanctus, ad insinuandum summae Trinitatis mysterium, scilicet quod in Deo sit trinitas Personarum") and his commentary on Dionysius' De Divinis Nominibus in Dionysius 1902, 331 ("Istud increatae sanctitati convenit absolute, quae sola est perfectissima, loquendo simpliciter. Deinde per imitationem convenit sanctitati Beatorum, qui comparatione viatorum sunt sanctitatis multum perfectae in genere suo…").

[19] Dionysius the Carthusian describes this derived holiness as follows: „sanctitas nostra differt ac deficit a sanctitate Dei in multis et infinite, quum Deus sit essentialiter, independenter, invariabiliter, incircumscriptibiliter sanctus." See Dionysius 1901, 628.

[20] *In Ps.* 17, no. 135 : "[…] *Domine, tu eris sanctus cum sancto*, sanctitatem in eo causando : Lev. XX, 8: *Ego Deus qui sanctifico vos*. Vel sic. *Tu eris sanctus effective*, idest ostendens te amare et adprobare sanctitatem."

tis in so far as everything that is ordered to God can be called holy. Numerous other Scripture passages give rise to this idea: Jeremiah 2:3, "Israel was holy to the Lord", indicates that it was dedicated to the worship of the Lord; St. Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:1 to present our bodies as "a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God" indicates for St. Thomas that "holiness in the proper sense bespeaks a relation to God, insofar as one does what is just before God."[21] An impressive summary of this central idea can be found John 13:3 where the Evangelist recounts how Christ, before washing the feet of his disciples, knew "that the Father had given all things into his hands, that He came from God, and was going to God". This verse manifests the dignity of Christ, not only by showing His power and nobility but also His holiness: "because *he was going to God*, for our holiness lies in our going to God. He mentions this because since Christ is going to God, it is special to him to lead others to God. This is done especially by humility and love; and so he offers them an example of humility and love."[22]

What is the foundation of this holiness, this "going to God"? Here Isaiah 42:1, quoted in Matthew 12:18, is of crucial importance: "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him". This shows for St. Thomas that three things are present in a holy man: "divine election («whom I have chosen»), love («my beloved»), and the effect which is grace («I will put my Spirit upon him»)". Elsewhere, commenting on Romans 8: 28, he clarifies that God predestines believers from all eternity, he calls them in time and sanctifies them.[23]

Among them, Christ, because of his hypostatic union, comes first as is clearly manifested in the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews. When the author of Hebrews writes that Christ's excellence surpasses that of the angels because God has anointed the Son "above your fellows", St. Thomas comments on this quote from Ps. 44:8 that Christ was anointed above all the other saints and that whatever oil, that is to say, whatever holiness is found in the saints, stems from Christ's

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[21] *In Rom.*, c. 12, l. 1, no. 953: "Proprie autem sanctitas dicitur per respectum ad Deum, inquantum scilicet homo servat ea quae sunt iusta, quoad Deum."

[22] *Super Io.*, c. 13, l. 1, no. 1743: "In hoc est sanctitas hominis quod ad Deum vadat […]: quod quidem specialiter fit per humilitatem et caritatem."

[23] *In Rom.*, c. 8, l. 6, no. 700: "Secundo attenditur id quod est ex parte Dei, qui primo fideles ab aeterno praedestinavit ; secundo ex tempore vocat ; tertio sanctificat."

overflowing according to John 1:16: "Of his fullness we have all received."[24] For this reason Christ is called "holy of holies; for he is the root of all holiness."[25] This expression, *radix omnis sanctitatis*, is often explained by way of Ps. 109:3, "in the splendors of the saints before the morning star I begot you". Christ is the exemplar of all spiritual graces with which the saints are endowed.[26] Divine adoption, "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17), entails pouring out the splendors of the saints, that is to say, enlightening them with wisdom and grace in order to conform them to Himself.[27] As origin and giver of grace, Christ has "preeminence" over all the saints and is Himself the "splendor of all the saints".[28] On the basis of Hebrews 2:11 which speaks of the unity of the sanctifier and the sanctified and Hebrews 13:12 which says that Christ "might sanctify the people by his own blood", St. Thomas emphasizes our dependence on Christ as the sanctifier and author of salvation.[29]

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[24] *In Ps.* 44, no. 455: "[…] unde dicit, *prae consortibus tuis*, quia Christus fuit unctus prae omnibus aliis sanctis: Joan. 1: *vidimus eum plenum gratiae et veritatis*. Consortes ejus dicuntur inungi, quia quidquid habetur de oleo isto, id est de gratia spiritus sancti, est ex redundantia Christi: Joan. 1: *de plenitudine ejus omnes accepimus*."

[25] *In Hebr.*, c. 1, l. 4, no. 65: "Sed quae comparatio est inter Christum unctum, et Christianos unctos? Ista, scilicet quia ipse habet eam principaliter et primo, nos autem et alii ab ipso effusam. Ps. CXXVII: *sicut unguentum in capite*, et cetera. Et dicit *prae participibus tuis*. Io. c. I, 16: *de plenitudine eius omnes accepimus*. Unde alii dicuntur sancti, ipse vero Sanctus Sanctorum. Ipse enim est radix omnis sanctitatis."

[26] *In I Cor.*, c. 11, l. 1, no. 583 : "indeficiens sanctitatis exemplar."

[27] *In Rom.*, c. 8, l. 6, no. 704: "Primo quidem in iure participandae haereditatis, sicut supra dictum est v. 17: *Si filii et haeredes, haeredes quidem Dei, cohaeredes autem Christi.* Secundo, in participatione splendoris ipsius. Ipse enim est genitus a Patre tamquam *splendor gloriae eius*, Hebr. I, v. 3. Unde per hoc quod sanctos illuminat de lumine sapientiae et gratiae, facit eos fieri conformes sibi. Unde in Ps. CIX, 3 dicitur: *in splendoribus sanctorum ex utero ante Luciferum genui te*, id est, profundentem omnem splendorem sanctorum."

[28] *Super Mt.,* c. 22, l. 4, no. 1824: "Si ergo ipse est, cuius participatione omnes sancti lumen recipiunt, praeeminentiam habet ad omnes sanctos in eo quod dicitur: *tecum principium in die virtutis tuae, in splendoribus sanctorum* etc.; unde ipse originaliter est splendor omnium sanctorum."

[29] *In Hebr.*, c. 2, l. 3, no. 130: "Primo enim ostendit quod dependemus a Christo. Sanctificatus enim dependet a sanctificato, Christus autem est sanctificans. Infra XIII: *Iesus ut sanctificaret per suum sanguinem*, etc. Bene ergo dictum est, quod quia est actor et sanctificator, dependemus ab ipso, ipse vero a Patre, a quo habet quod sanctificet, quod est secundum. Sed omnes, ipse scilicet qui sanctificat et nos qui sanctificamur, ex uno, scilicet ex Patre, quod est tertium."

With this emphasis on Christ, it should come as no surprise to find that St. Thomas assigns a special importance to the Eucharist. What distinguishes the Eucharist from all other sacraments is that, whereas in the other sacraments what is said to be holy is such only in a secondary way and only in a certain respect because it has the power of sanctifying, in the Eucharist the subject of holiness (*subiectum sanctitatis*) *simpliciter et per se* is present, that is to say, Christ himself sanctifying, "the cause of all sanctity"[30] and "the end of all sanctifying grace".[31] As such the Eucharist is the perfection of the other sacraments because it contains absolute holiness even apart from anyone receiving it. What exists through itself (*per se*) is more perfect than what exists through another (*per aliud*).[32]

The concrete and practical consequences of this are apparent. If, as we read in his treatise on the Eucharist, "Christ's holiness is the fount of all the Church's holiness", that is to say, if holiness is the effect of Christ's passion, the representation of Christ's passion in the Eucharist and our reverence due to His real presence require the consecration of all things used in this sacrament, in particular and of necessity the consecration of the altar, signifying Christ's holiness as the fount of all the Church's holiness.[33] Moreover, referencing 1 Cor. 11, 29 ("For he who eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the body of the Lord.") St. Thomas distinguishes between on the one hand the believer who receives the sacrament with consciousness of sin and unworthily and the unbeliever who does not believe in Christ's real presence. While the former "despises the use" of the sacrament, the latter, the unbeliever, sins even more and "despises the sacrament itself", which is none other than despising the holiness of the sacrament and the power of Christ acting in it.[34]

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[30] *In IV Sent.*, d. 13, q. 1, a. 2, qla 5, resp.: "in hoc sacramento continetur ille qui est totius sanctitatis causa."

[31] *In I Cor.*, c. 11, l. 5, no. 660: "hoc sacramentum perficitur in ipsa consecratione materiae, in qua continetur ipse Christus, qui est finis totius gratiae sanctificantis."

[32] *In IV Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 1, qla 1, resp.

[33] *ST* III, q. 83, a. 3, ad 2: "Quia enim sanctitas Christi fons est totius sanctitatis ecclesiasticae".

[34] See *ST* III, q. 80, a. 5, ad 2.

3. The moral life and holiness

St. Thomas comments on the many occasions in which the apostle Paul addresses his audience as "saints" (Hebr. 3:1; Phil. 1:1; Rom. 1:7) by referring to the "the power of Christ's blood"[35], following Hebr. 3:12 and the grace of the sacraments and in particular the sacrament of baptism.[36] The goal of the moral life and the necessary performance and growth in holiness ("servire iustitiae *in* sanctificationem", Rom 6:19)[37], which is always accompanied by the cleansing or pruning of the obstacles of sin – here St. Thomas references the image in John 15 about the vine and the branches – "because in this life no one is so clean that he does not need to be cleansed more and more"[38], consists in divinization, i.e.

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[35] *In I Cor.*, c. 6, l. 2, no. 287: "*Sed sanctificati estis* virtute sanguinis Christi per gratiam consecrati, secundum illud Hebr. ult.: *Iesus ut sanctificaret per suum sanguinem populum, extra portam passus est.*"

[36] *In Rom.*, c. 1, l. 4, no. 69: "Tertio, ponit gratiam iustificationis cum dicit *sanctis*, id est per gratiam et sacramenta gratiae, sanctificatis. I Cor. VI, 11: *sed abluti estis, sed sanctificati estis, ut sitis dilecti a Deo, vocati ad hoc quod sitis sancti.*"

[37] *In Rom.*, c. 6, l. 4, no. 506: "*Ita nunc*, scilicet liberati a peccato, *exhibete membra vestra*, scilicet per executionem bonorum operum, *servire iustitiae*, in lege divina nobis propositae: et hoc *in sanctificationem*, id est in executionem et augmentum sanctitatis." Elsewhere (*In Rom.*, c. 6, l. 4, no. 514) we read even more clearly: "Deinde cum dicit *habetis fructum*, etc., ponit effectum iustitiae, dicens *habetis fructum vestrum in sanctificatione*, id est, ipsa sanctificatio, hoc est executio sanctitatis per bona opera, est fructus vester, in quantum scilicet hoc spiritualiter et sancte vos delectat. Eccli. XXIV, 23: *flores mei fructus honoris et honestatis*, et cetera. Gal. V, 22: *fructus spiritus est gaudium, pax*, et cetera."

[38] *Super Io.*, c. 15, l. 1, no. 1985: "unde dicit *et omnem qui fert fructum, purgabit eum, ut fructum plus afferat*. Ad litteram enim in vite naturali contingit quod palmes multos surculos habens, minus fructificat propter humoris diffusionem ad omnes, et ideo cultores, ut magis fructificet, purgant eum a superfluis surculis. Ita est in homine. Nam homo bene dispositus et Deo coniunctus, si suum affectum ad diversa inclinet, virtus eius minoratur, et magis inefficax fit ad bene operandum. Et inde est quod Deus, ut bene fructificet, frequenter praescindit huiusmodi impedimenta et purgat, immittens tribulationes et tentationes, quibus fortior fiat ad operandum. Et ideo dicit *purgabit eum*, etiamsi purus existat: quia nullus est adeo purus in hac vita ut non sit magis magisque purgandus; I Io. I, 8: *si dixerimus quia peccatum non habemus, ipsi nos seducimus et veritas in nobis non est*. Et hoc *ut plus fructum afferat*, idest crescat in virtute, ut tanto sint fructuosiores quanto sunt mundiores; Apoc. ult., 2: *qui iustus est, iustificetur adhuc, et sanctus sanctificetur adhuc*; Coloss. I, 6: *verbum Evangelii fructificat et crescit*; Ps. LXXXIII, 8: *ibunt de virtute in virtutem*." In this regard St. Thomas frequently quotes Ps. 83, 8: "ibunt de virtute in virtutem".

the participation in God's holiness. In this regard a remarkable passage from his Sermon XVIII *Germinet Terra*[39], commenting on Gen. 1:11 "Let the earth put forth the green plant that brings forth seed and the fruit-bearing tree that yields fruit" on the occasion of the Feast of the Birth of Our Lady, is worth quoting in full, also as an example of medieval biblical exegesis:

Dicit: *Germinet herbam facientem semen*. Et cuiusmodi semen? Dico semen sanctum, semen uirtuosum et semen necessarium.	(3) It says: "Let it put forth the plant that produces seed." Seed of what kind? I say (3.1) holy seed, (3.2) virtuous seed, and (3.3) necessary seed.
Primo dico: fecit beata Virgo semen sanctum. Ysaias: *Semen sanctum erit quod steterit in ea*. Et quare sanctum? Quia erit sancti. Primo est sanctitas Dei quia ipse est sanctus sanctorum. *Sancti*, inquit, *eritis quia ego sanctus sum*. Huiusmodi sancti est semen, et ideo est sanctum semen. *Semen est uerbum Dei*, et Christus est Verbum Dei. Proprietas seminis est quod producat simile ei a quo procedit; ita semen Verbi Dei producit simile sui, quia facit Deos; unde in Iohanne: *dedit eis potestatem filios Dei fieri*.	(3.1) First, I say, the Blessed Virgin produced a holy seed, [in conformity with] Is 6.13: "It will be a holy seed that is in her." And why holy? Because its origin will be holy: first, the holiness of God, because he himself is the Holy One of the saints. "You [plural] will be holy," he says, "because I am holy" [Lev. 11, 45]. From such a Holy One the seed comes, and thus the seed is holy. "The seed is the Word of God" [Lk 8.11], and Christ is God's Word [cf. Jn 1.1–18]. It is characteristic of seed that it produces what is similar to that from which it comes forth. Thus the seed of God's Word brings forth what is similar to itself, because it produces gods. Hence we read in Jn 1.12: "He has given them the power to become sons and daughters of God."

In his *divisio textus* of Romans 12 on the new life in Christ St. Thomas describes the chapter as dealing with "instruction about that perfection of life relating to the sanctity by which a man serves God".[40] This instruction includes an admonition on the need to present oneself as holy before God (Romans 12:1–2) and secondly a teaching on how the gifts of God's grace which sanctify are to be used (Romans 3:4–21). The admonition regards both one's body (12:1: "that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your reasonable service") as one's soul (12:2: "And be not conformed to this world, but be reformed in the newness of your sense, that you may perceive what is the

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[39] *Sermones* 2014, 286–287.
[40] *In Rom.*, c. 12, l. 1, no. 953.

good and the acceptable and the perfect will of God"). St. Thomas emphasizes that the binding of our bodies to the service of God, to which "holy" in verse 12:1 refers, is a means to an end. "Holiness in the proper sense bespeaks a relation to God, insofar as one does what is just before God." In other words, man's justice consists principally in internal acts, acts by which he believes, hopes and loves because those are the acts by which he serves God. They are the end sought for its own sake. Moreover, while there is no limit set to an end, the means are limited in accordance with its proportion to their end. In other words, there are no limits on faith, hope and charity but there are or can be when it comes to means towards these ends.[41]

The admonition regarding the soul refers to the "newness of your sense" in Rom. 12:2 and exhorts the listener to take up by the grace of the Holy Spirit once again the beauty and the elegance which the mind possessed before the corruption by sin. St. Thomas remarks briefly and simply: "If a person does not share in this grace, he should desire to do so, and if he does share in it, he should desire to progress in it".[42]

Among the virtues which St. Thomas connects to holiness, a special place is reserved for the virtue of chastity. Here again the role of Christ is emphasized. When commenting on Christ's lineage in Matthew 1, St. Thomas names Christ "a particular teacher of chastity" (*doctor castitatis*) as one argument in favor of the fittingness of being born of a virgin. He supports this title by quoting Mt. 19:12: "there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven."[43] In his comments on Mt. 19:12 he emphasizes the importance of freely and continually giving oneself to chastity against some misguided and ultimately heretical interpretations of this verse. Another important element he brings out and which he sees reflected in the remainder of Mt. 19:12 ("He who can to receive this, let him receive it") is that the firm will, which makes one unafraid of immoderate impulses regarding sexual matters, is only attainable through the power of grace, that is, as a result of prayer, as said in Luke 11:9, "ask and it will be given".[44]

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[41] *In Rom.*, c. 12, l. 1, no. 964.
[42] *In Rom.*, c. 12, l. 1, no. 966.
[43] *In Mt.*, c. 1, l. 4, no. 113.
[44] *In Mt.*, c. 19, l. 1, nos. 1566–1572.

His reflections on chastity, in particular when commenting on the sixth beatitude in Mt. 5:8 "blessed are the clean of heart" and on several passages in the Letters of St. Paul, contain valuable insights, in particular for today's culture which either ignores chastity altogether or identifies it with the prudishness of an old-fashioned by-gone era or the obsession of some who have fallen victim to the most deplored sin of today, namely clericalism.[45] He comments on the sixth beatitude by saying that it refers not only to those who have "a general cleanness from unworthy thoughts" but "in a particular way, *blessed are the clean of heart*, i.e., those who have cleanness of body; for nothing so impedes spiritual contemplation as uncleanness of body does. *They obtain peace and holiness, without which no one will see God* (Heb 12:14)." It is good to remember that St. Thomas makes this connection between the cleanness of the heart and the cleanness of the body also on purely philosophical grounds, that is to say, as the result of an insight stemming from common sense. Aristotle argued that bodily pleasures and in particular the pleasures originating in the sense of touch are the most vehement pleasures and the ones that give the most pleasure. This is simply a neutral, non-moral, matter-of-fact observation due to our bodily nature.[46] When he continues his commentary on the sixth beatitude by claiming that it is especially through chastity that one advances toward the contemplative life, he relies on an insight we find in the questions on chastity in the *Summa*. There, in response to the objection that chastity is primarily concerned with the body and therefore not a virtue of the soul, Thomas unequivocally affirms that the soul is the subject of chastity whereas the body is the matter of the virtue. This is so because chastity results from a judgement of reason and will. "For it belongs to chastity that a man make moderate use of bodily members in accordance with the judgment of his reason and the choice of his will."[47]

This emphasis on the soul as the subject of chastity returns when commenting on 2 Corinthians 11:2, "For I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." Isn't "a chaste virgin" a tautology, one may ask. Not at all, says St. Thomas, because "sometimes a person is a virgin in

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[45] See Vijgen 2019 for a more extensive analysis.
[46] *In Mt.*, c. 5, l. 2, no. 435.
[47] *ST* II–II, q. 151, a. 1, ad 2.

body, but not chaste in mind."[48] The same verse 11:2 is used in the *Summa* to distinguish between the general virtue of chastity or spiritual chastity and the special virtue of chastity, as part of temperance. The essence of this general virtue of chastity consists principally in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity as that which enables the mind to be united to God.[49]

Conclusion

Much more can and should be said.[50] Let me formulate three concluding remarks. First, the topic of holiness and Scripture once again illustrates how for St. Thomas reading Sacred Scripture is never and can never be a neutral activity. Rather, it is a "confessional exegesis", to use the expression by the French scholar Gilbert Dahan, in which the confession of the faith is primordial and Scripture is a means to an end and directed by God so that through Scripture the truth necessary for salvation is revealed.[51] Our topic also reveals a second important feature of St. Thomas's biblical exegesis. Any truth, in our case a metaphysics grounded in God's transcendence and the creature's participation as illustrated by Dionysius, can be used in the service of the faith precisely because the truth necessary for salvation is one and addressed to the intellect.[52] Third and finally, that truth is a Person. St. Thomas, commenting on John 17:17 ("Sanctify them in truth. Your word is truth") writes that Christ prays: "Father sanctify them, that is, perfect them and make them holy. And do this in the truth, that is, in me,

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[48] *In II Cor.*, c. 11, l. 1, no. 377: "Nam aliquando aliqua est virgo corpore, quae non est casta mente."

[49] *ST* II–II, q. 151, a. 2.

[50] After completing the research on this text, fr. Gilles Emery (Emery 2023b) sent me his article "La «sainteté» selon Thomas d'Aquin". The reader will find in this superb article a much more extensive analysis of the lexicography regarding this topic. I thank fr. Emery for his kindness in sharing his work.

[51] Cf. *Ql.* VII, q. 6, a. 1. See also Roszak 2016, 205.

[52] Cf. *In I Cor.*, c. 1, l. 3, no. 43: "A person teaches in eloquent wisdom (*in sapientia verbi docet*), when he takes the eloquent wisdom, as the main source of his doctrine, so that he admits only those things which contain eloquent wisdom and rejects the others which do not have eloquent wisdom: and this is destructive of the faith. But one uses eloquent wisdom (*Utitur autem sapientia verbi*), when he builds on the foundations of the true faith, so that if he finds any truths in the teachings of the philosophers, he employs them in the service of the faith."

your Son, who am the truth (John 14:6). It is like saying: make them share in my perfection and holiness."[53] Commenting on the same verse, Joseph Ratzinger in one of his final writings expresses this as follows: "The word 'holy' expresses the special nature of God. He alone is the Holy One. Man becomes holy as he begins to be with God (*stare con Dio*). To be with God means to put aside everything that focuses only on me and become one with everything that God wants. But this liberation of the 'I' can be very painful and is never achieved once and for all."[54]

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[53] *Super Io.*, c. 17, l. 4, no. 2229: „Et ideo, Pater, *sanctifica*, idest perfice, *eos*, et sanctos fac. Et hoc *in veritate*, idest in me Filio tuo, qui sum veritas, supra XIV, 6, quasi diceret: fac eos participes meae perfectionis et sanctitatis. Et ideo addit *sermo tuus*, idest Verbum tuum, *veritas est*, ut sit sensus: *sanctifica eos* in me *veritate*, quia ego Verbum tuum sum veritas."

[54] Benedict XVI 2023, 121 (My translation).

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