



The Catholic Tradition of Classical Education

with Dr. Andrew Seeley

Lesson 5: St. Thomas Aquinas

Outline:

Brief introduction

- St Thomas heavily practiced the instructions of Hugh of St Victor. He spent most of his life leading study of Scripture and works of philosophers/theologians' works, like Aristotle.
- He did **linear commentary**, which includes:
 - analyzing parts of great works (chapters from Scripture)
 - understanding how the chapter contributes to the overall work's message
 - discerning what is the order within the chapter.
 - pinpointing the significance, and what kind of questions it raises.
- During this time of the Middle Ages, there was so much reading of great authors as they began to recover works of classical traditions (like Greek and Romans), that they began to question how to connect all this learning.
 - Question they posed: How does the meditation help us to understand ourselves, reality beyond the book?
- This produced a new form of intellectual exercise called the **intellectual manifestation**, which are basically debates and controversial arguments. Students would pick one side of each argument put forth by different scholars.
- St Thomas helped put together a **Summa** (summary of theology). He saw the need for students to have topics focused into proper order, so he wanted to simplify everything and raise important questions of interest.

St Thomas' methods

- **Example:** If he wants to discuss faith, he'll present 6 questions. Each one will have 10 points that he wants to demonstrate, in the form of articles.
- After posing questions, he will present stances on opposing sides of those questions.
- Finally, he would address all of those challenges, inputting his own reasons and judgements.

Article: Is it necessary for salvation to believe anything above what our own reasoning can convince us of?

First opinion: No. Hasn't God made all natures in a way that is sufficient to achieve their purpose? It seems that we can't see or understand some things on our own so we are created naturally in an incomplete way.



- St. Thomas' strategy is to introduce a stance that will confuse his students and lead them to think differently from their original thought process. This exposes any flaw in the reasoning that you start out with.

Counter opinion: 'Hebrews 11:6 - without faith, it is impossible to please God'. So there is biblical authority.

- St Thomas points to the ocean as an example. Its natural tendency is to flow downwards following gravity. But at the same time, the moon acts upon it pulling it upwards, and causing tides. There is an innate behavior and an outward stimuli.
- The analogy here is that humans are capable of learning and have a spiritual void to fill. We also have God as a prompting agent, guiding our learning nature, calling us to believe and engage in faith.

St Thomas' teaching on teaching itself

- One of the things that every teacher wants is to be able to put knowledge into your students. However, it doesn't work like that. A doctor cannot put health into his patient, only arrange methods that guide his patients towards health. He is only indirectly involved.
- Learning occurs by self-activity. No learning, no teaching. Student must connect virtue and knowledge and wisdom with habits. Repetition of activity of thought and passion will ingrain these traits into students gradually.
- Another general principle is that art imitates nature so in order to teach, you have to understand the natural processes of learning, i.e how do people discover things. So you have to provide the right imagery and words to stimulate learning.
- Because teachers share the same sacred office of Christ the one true teacher, every act of teaching that brings about something worthwhile for the students is connecting them with Christ and God.