THOMAS AQUINAS ON SANCTIFICATION

January 26, 1973

As we deal seriously with the wisdom of our church fathers on the question of sanctification, let us take a brief journey through the life and thought of Thomas Aquinas. His vast Summa Contra Gentiles and Summa Theologica resemble, in their logical and consistent structure, a kind of report from a medieval Problem Solving Unit.

Thomas Aquinas was a thirteenth century Italian, a Dominican, and a teacher all his life, having studied under Albertus Magnus. When he decided to become a member of the Dominican order, he met extreme resistance from his family. His mother called his brothers out of the military to collect him and held him in captivity for a year. Only when they were convinced that he had really decided to hold to his decision, did they finally relent and let him go.

Thomas' particular era was a fascinating one. He came along just at the time when the medieval scholars were rediscovering, through the pathways that had opened up in the Middle East, the works of the Greeks--particularly Socrates--and were beginning to incorporate those into their thinking and into their methods of teaching. That was for them something like the development of existentialism and phenomenology in our time. It was as if they had discovered a new plaything. Thomas and the scholars of his generation discovered a whole new way of thinking, a whole new and rational way of approaching their discipline; this is what he was deeply involved in. Consequently, he places tremendous emphasis upon rationality.

How is it that Aquinas sheds light on the kind of work that we have been struggling to do in sanctification? Are we off on our own inventive tangent, which nobody else has ever heard of before, in the way we have been talking about sanctification and the Other World, etc., or is there some correspondence to the work which has been done throughout the history of the Church? Although we are never interested merely in going back and claiming the authority of the historical church for our work, if what we are doing is valid on existential grounds, we are interested in recognizing the wisdom that has come to us from the past. For 2,000 years man has been struggling profoundly with the depth human problems. It seems unlikely that we should, in our time, be dealing with problems that are somehow entirely new or entirely different from the human problems that people of other generations were dealing with.

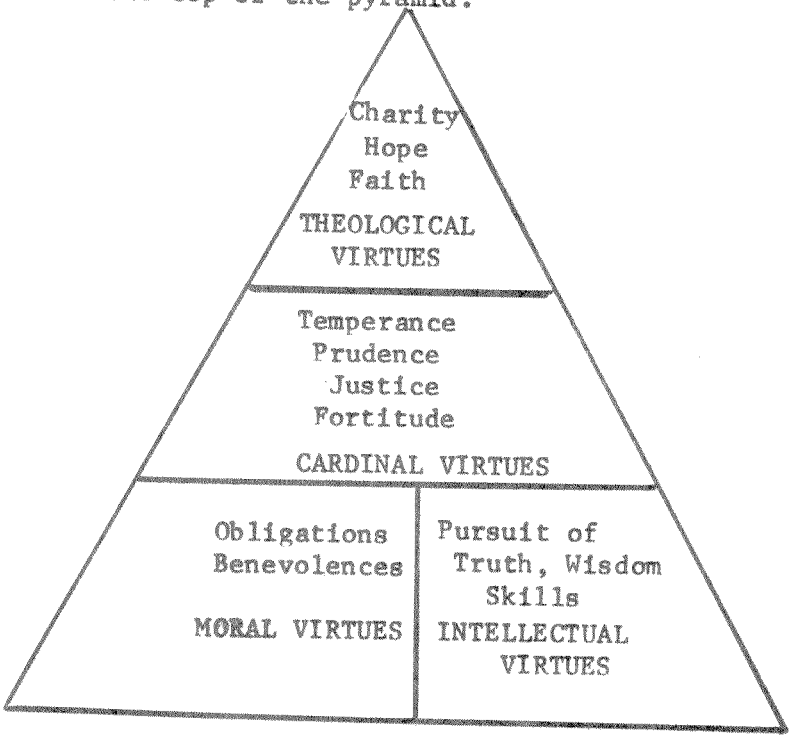
There are different ways to approach the topic. One way is to begin with the subject of "grace" and follow that through: Once grace has struck, what are the consequences of that? If you try to do that with Aquinas you discover, amazingly, that he reflects a bit about grace, then drops the subject and goes on to something wholly different, so that the issue does not become clear. Another way would be to come at it through the "law": what is it that governs human behavior? Perhaps in the laws Aquinas would be talking about how it is that human beings go about getting sanctified or perfected. But that is not his concern. The law, as he uses it, is very much in line with the way Luther deals with it--it is a teacher, and consequently it is the teacher prior to grace or prior to justification. The law, as a pedagogue, leads to Christ; on the other side of Christ you use the law to love with.

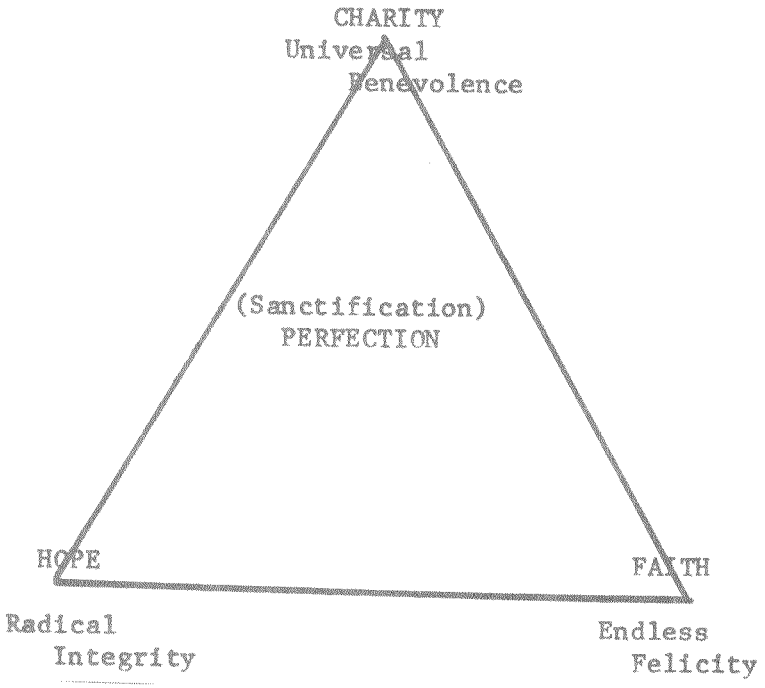
The way I found to be most helpful in coming at the subject of perfection is through Aquinas' discussion of the virtues that human beings need to understand

happy by knowing what you were created to do. A hammer is happy, so to speak, when it is driving nails. A human being is happy when he is on the road to perfection or becoming like God. Thus happiness does not define what my life is about, nor does it consist in the multitude of comforts and satisfactions of every kind and description which men seek often as the supposed source of their happiness. Aquinas says, No, this is not happiness, and that is not happiness; happiness is only the drive and the activity of becoming united with God. And since I am already on the way to being united with God, my life is what defines happiness. In essence, everything else he says follows from this.

Finally, Aquinas claims that the contemplative life is superior to the active life. Nowhere do you find anything in Aquinas that looks like an exposition on a 5th City or a massive teaching program or any kind of a globally oriented model. What you do find, however, is that he is not against action, but that the contemplative life is the life which brings consciousness to action. Another way to put that is that the contemplative life is the life which engages in prayer--which we talk about as the action prior to action. So, to be the sanctified one does not mean not to act, but to be the one who acts with full consciousness, thereby expanding his consciousness and becoming more like God as he engages himself at every point. That is as far as he goes, because Aquinas does not operate out of any clear sociological construct. He is not overly concerned with the nature of society, although he has sections in which he deals with the government and the social structure of his time.

In a more concrete vein, how is it that Aquinas talks about becoming perfect, or increasing or intensifying human consciousness? For him, the primary way to come at this is through the virtues: intellectual, moral, cardinal, and theological. Using I Corinthians 13 for his model, it is the theological virtues of Charity, Hope, and Faith, which tell you how perfection comes about. All other virtues in life are basically derivatives of these in the sense that they are derivative from reason. He thus arranges the virtues in a clear hierarchical fashion, with the theological virtues at the top of the pyramid.





Universal Benevolence in fact does correspond to Aquinas' charity. Both of them have to do with caring. Charity is caring for God, says Aquinas; it is caring for the good, which is God's good. The reason this becomes the foremost of the virtues is that charity loves God for the sake of God and God alone. That is, there is no secondary motive. There is nothing to be gained by loving God for one's self except as one lives his own self as negation, as consummate unity with God. When you become charitable toward God, or wish for the Good of God, then it becomes clear, since God is the Mystery or the No-thingness, that charity requires love or charity toward all things, toward the entire universe. This, for Aquinas, illuminates the scriptural pairing of love of God and love of neighbor as oneself. When you love the Mystery, you cannot do anything but love your neighbor in the universal context. Consequently, charity becomes almost identical to what we mean by Universal Benevolence.

Thomas Merton talks about the law of Christ and the imposed obligation to all men. Aquinas illuminates this in terms of the indicative rather than arbitarary and external pronouncements. Superficially, Aquinas seems to be coming at everything through a rational framework, but what he is attempting to do is to use rational categories with a rational method to describe an ontological reality. Therefore, if you decode carefully, you will find he is always talking about the indicative, not the imperative. When the Spirit invests himself in human life and alters it, and builds charity, that is an indicative, not something that you "ought" to do.

Hope and faith have one thing in common: When you have hope, you are hoping for something; when you have faith, you have faith that something will come, says Aquinas. In the case of hope, that which you are hoping for is to experience God's good. Therefore, it becomes a kind of secondary virtue. To paraphrase, Aquinas poses the question, "Is it true that God and Being are really the same thing? That is the "mortal combat" of Radical Integrity--striving for the right