

## Imperfect Persons in States of Perfection: Aquinas on Vocations

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Q1: Where do we find St Thomas's teaching on vocations?

The *Secunda Pars* – the greatest moral and spiritual theology book ever written – is the second and most studied volume of St Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. But amongst the least discussed questions of that volume are the very last seven, dedicated to *The Pastoral and Religious Lives*<sup>1</sup> or what we would call today 'vocations'. Here Aquinas treats two vocations in particular – religious life and episcopacy – while postponing consideration of the priestly and married vocations to the *Tertia Pars*. Coming immediately after fundamental matters such as purpose and happiness in human life, the moral psychology of human acts, the foundational principles of morality, the moral emotions and dispositions, grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, sin both original and more mundane, and its antidotes in the virtues both theological and mundane, his short tract on vocations might seem more an afterthought than a climax. In fact, however, St Thomas devotes the last part of the *Secunda Pars* to the age-old rivalry between the contemplative life and the active,<sup>2</sup> to the various God-given charisms<sup>3</sup>, and to various states of life – all as applications of his great work to particular vocations.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is the title of Jordan Aumann OP's translation of *STh* IIa-IIae 183-189, which constitutes vol. 49 of the Gilby *Summa* (Blackfriars, 1973). Aumann's introductory essay is at pp. xv-xvii. Other important commentaries on this tract include J. Aumann OP and D. Greenstock, *The Meaning of Christian Perfection* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1956); A. Royo OP and J. Aumann OP, *The Theology of Christian Perfection* (Dubuque, Iowa: Priory Press, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> *STh* II-II 171-178.

<sup>3</sup> *STh* II-II 179-182.

<sup>4</sup> See Brian Davies OP, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 289.

In *Studiorum Duce*m, his encyclical on St Thomas Aquinas, Pope Pius XI noted that:

[St Thomas'] eminence in the learning of asceticism and mysticism is no less remarkable [than his learning in moral theology]; for he brought the whole science of morals back to the theory of the virtues and gifts, and marvellously defined both the science and the theory in relation to the various conditions of men, both those who strive to attain Christian perfection and fullness of spirit, in the active no less than in the contemplative life. If anyone, therefore, desires to understand fully all the implications of the commandment to love God, the growth of charity and the conjoined gifts of the Holy Ghost, the differences between the various states of life, such as the states of perfection – the religious life and the episcopate – and the nature and value of each, all these and other articles of ascetical and mystical theology, he must have recourse in the first place to the Angelic Doctor.<sup>5</sup>

What does Pope Pius mean by referring to the religious life and the episcopate as “the states of perfection”? Well, he is using St Thomas' own categories. This would seem to put him (and much talk about vocations before the Second Vatican Council) at odds with the more egalitarian model of vocations in post-modernity. The Council famously taught that *all Christians* are called to holiness or perfect charity; rather than being the preserve of religious professionals, sanctity is the goal of spouses, parents and committed single people in the world, and of those belonging to lay fraternities, secular institutes or ecclesial movements, every bit as much as it is of bishops, priests and deacons, religious women and men.<sup>6</sup> These days we are disinclined to rank vocations as greater or less; we are more likely to emphasise the necessity for every Christian to assume an “intentional discipleship”, discern their personal vocation, and to recognise and respond to the opportunities and struggles in pursuing holiness.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, in the face of the humiliating revelations of child sexual abuse by members of the Church worldwide, it might seem almost perverse to describe bishops or religious as being in ‘states of perfection’. These revelations have served to underline for us how *imperfect* many bishops, priests and religious have been, and how unhealthy was the clericalist culture that romanticised them, and permitted, even facilitated, such gross failings by those called by Christ ‘to serve, not to be served’. Talk of the Church as ‘a perfect society’ and of its officeholders as in a ‘state of perfection’ might

<sup>5</sup> Pope Pius XI, *Studiorum Duce*m: Encyclical on St Thomas Aquinas (1923), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* 9-13 and esp ch 5.

<sup>7</sup> Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2012); Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (2013).

be thought to risk continuing and even magnifying such corruption; certainly any such talk must be ‘handled with care’.

Yet the very disillusionment of many Catholics and others regarding the behaviour of some of their spiritual leaders bespeaks the high ideals people still have for them: *would* that those officeholders had lived up to their high calling rather than failed it – and the young people in their care – so radically; *would* that they had been subjected to scrutiny and held to account according to the very ideals they professed. In the parables of the Talents, and of the Faithful and Unfaithful Stewards, the Lord was very clear that ‘Of everyone to whom much is given much will be expected.’<sup>8</sup> If bishops and religious are offered great opportunities for spiritual excellence, then their failures to achieve such excellence are all the more damning; indeed, St Thomas insists, they will be held more accountable for the same sin than a secular priest or layperson.<sup>9</sup>

Aquinas was not unaware of the particular temptations of clericalism: he emphatically criticises the avarice and ambition, pride and presumption of some of the professionally spiritual.<sup>10</sup> What’s more, he thought that whereas most people need only account for their own deeds at the judgement, prelates must give an account of the deeds of their flock as well; as “watchman over the house of Israel” the bishop must ensure his people’s spiritual safety as much as his own.<sup>11</sup> So if any bishops or religious were tempted to smugness by knowing theirs is a state of perfection, let them be humbled by the appreciation that this merely moves the already high bar set for all Christians even higher for them, and so increases the likelihood of their being judged failures. God, of course, never asks the impossible of us, and so if He makes great demands He offers greater graces to enable us to fulfil them; but as Dante and Fra Angelico made clear in their poetry and painting, for all their graces of office there are many wearing the mitre, the tonsure or the veil – if little else – in the cauldrons of hell!

## Q2. Whether St Thomas’ teaching on vocations is really an apologia for the friars?

So what is really going on in St Thomas’ claim that bishops and religious are *in statu perfectionis* whereas diocesan clergy and other laity are not? To understand this, we must go back to the year 1255. Paris had exploded in controversy. The University was refusing to

<sup>8</sup> *Mt* 25:14-30; *Lk* 12:42-48; cf. *1Tim* 6:20; *2Tim* 1:12-14.

<sup>9</sup> *STh* II-II 186.10.

<sup>10</sup> *STh* II-II 185. And 185.41.

<sup>11</sup> *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* ch 13, lect 3.

graduate students of the newfangled religious orders. The friars had been too successful and perhaps too ostentatious in their success, not just in preaching to and converting big crowds, but in ‘poaching’ laity (with their collections) from the parishes, vocations from the dioceses, and professors from the universities. They had been too successful, also, in gaining various privileges and exemptions from the popes, and perhaps too much inclined to rub the noses of the seculars in this. Trouble had been brewing for some time . . .<sup>12</sup>

Now Matthew of Paris wrote that Cistercians and other monks are the only *real* religious: they live decent, orderly lives, and are pleasing to God, Church and society; they (mostly) stick to their cloisters, work hard, and obey their superiors. The newfangled mendicant friars, on the other hand, wander all around the place, expecting others to feed them, and getting up to who knows what, their superiors not even knowing where they are.

Still more absurd, he thought, one variety of these friars were calling themselves ‘the Order of Preachers’, and asserting that they had been founded and approved specifically ‘for preaching and the salvation of souls’. Yet everyone in the mediaeval world knew that the office of preaching was reserved to bishops; priests in that world were only ‘extraordinary ministers of the Word’, sometimes reading out a homily from the Bishop and only rarely deputised to think for themselves. Yet these Dominicans claimed to be preachers as of right, as if they were a religious order of bishops!

William of St-Armour and his allies had had enough. They were determined, first, to claw back the privileges of the friars (including their ‘exemption’ from local control, their universal faculties to preach and absolve, and their right to appoint professors of theology in the University); secondly, to reduce their ministry to being auxiliaries to the diocesan clergy; and finally, to eradicate them altogether. He wrote furious pamphlets against the friars whom he labelled ‘spawn of the anti-Christ’. At first the popes and many bishops defended the mendicants who were, after all, in many ways their creatures and certainly amongst their most loyal supporters. But by November 1254 the campaign against the friars was working: so many troublesome rumours had reached the ears of Pope Innocent IV that he decided to revoke the friars’ privileges, subject them to local clergy, and pull them out of the universities.<sup>13</sup>

By the autumn of 1255, things were at fever-pitch. St Jacques’ Priory in Paris was virtually under siege. Mud and stones, garbage

<sup>12</sup> See Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 4-6.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Pierre Torrell OP, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Vol. 1: The Person and His Work*, revised edition, trans. By Robert Royal, (Washington: Catholic University Press of America, 1996, first published 1993), pp. 76-84.

and insults, rained down upon any friar who dared venture out. The University would not graduate the Dominican Friar Thomas or the Franciscan Friar Bonaventure and anti-Aquinas ditties were being sung in the pubs . . . Well, nothing served so well to unite and energize the friars than the advent of a common threat to their existence. Thomas and Bonaventure took to tag-team wrestling against the seculars in preaching and writing on the validity and even the preferability of the friars' life. Others, as we shall see later, were sent to the papal court to make the case. The Masters of both orders directed the brethren to recite litanies night and day: within two weeks the Pope was dead!<sup>14</sup>

'Beware the litanies of the friars' became the popular saying. The new Pope, Alexander IV, knew better than to take on the brethren with their long arguments and powerful prayers. He restored the privileges of the orders, had St-Armour and his lieutenants banished from Paris, and the friars readmitted to the University. As a last humiliation of the secular party, he required the University to graduate Aquinas and Bonaventure and give them professorial chairs though both were under-age.<sup>15</sup>

Things took a while to settle down: when Aquinas gave his inaugural lecture he had to be protected by royal troops.<sup>16</sup> The legitimacy of this new form of religious life continued to be contested, however, right till the end of St Thomas' life and beyond. Indeed, his very last project in 1274 was to join Bonaventure at the Second Council of Lyons; though he was already 'burnt out' and was to die along the way, the Dominicans wanted him there alongside the great Franciscan because it was rumoured there would be yet another push to suppress the friars.<sup>17</sup>

And so it is that St Thomas reads the story of Martha and Mary as a competition between the one who sits at the Lord's feet in *the contemplative life* – the monk or nun – and the one working in the kitchen in *the active life* – secular priest or layperson; Mary's part is better.<sup>18</sup> But now comes Thomas' more daring claim, one less clearly warranted by Scripture: if Mary's contemplative part is better, Martha's active part is still good; what would be best of all would be a third sister who mixed both the contemplative and the active life – as does the friar.<sup>19</sup> Stephen of Bourbon told the story of a Dominican

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, see also D. Chardonnens, *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, no. 240, pp. 267-270; no. 244, pp. 276-277.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Pierre Torrell OP, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Vol. 1: The Person and His Work*, p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Pierre Torrell OP, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Vol. 1: The Person and His Work*, p. 290.

<sup>18</sup> *Lk* 10:38-42.

<sup>19</sup> *STh* II-II 179-182, 18.6.

novice who was verbally abused by some monks for having joined the friars. Was it young Tommy from Aquino, who notoriously left behind preferment with the monks of Monte Casino to join the poor friars of Dominic? Well, whoever he was, the novice responded by innocently asking what Jesus would do: “Was not Our Lord’s the most excellent pattern of life?” When the monks automatically said YES, the lad quickly retorted: “Well, when I read in my Bible that the Lord Jesus was no white monk or a black monk, but a poor preacher, I know I’ve joined the right bunch!”<sup>20</sup>

It was amidst that heated controversy in Paris that St Thomas wrote one of his earliest works, *De perfectione spiritualis vitae*; while some of the heat had gone out of the debate twenty years later when he was writing the *Summa*, his tract on vocations maintains the polemic against the seculars and the spirited defence of Dominican life.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in what is an uncharacteristic display of personal petticoat, Aquinas argues strongly that “it is very fitting to establish a religious institute for preaching and the salvation of souls” and that “religious institutes dedicated to preaching and teaching have the highest place because they are closest to the perfection of bishops”!<sup>22</sup>

### Q3. Whether St Thomas really meant that bishops and religious are perfect?

So much for its provenance; but what on earth did St Thomas mean when he described the offices of bishop and religious as ‘states of perfection’, and does this still have anything to say to us in 2018? In a way characteristic of the Scholastics, Thomas distinguishes between perfections proper to a thing (*perfectio simpliciter*) and those accidental to its nature (*perfectio secundum quid*);<sup>23</sup> between those constituted in its proper being (*perfectio in esse*), in some activity (*perfectio in operatione*), or in achieving some goal (*perfectio*

<sup>20</sup> Paul Murray OP, *The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality: A Drink Called Happiness* (London: Burns & Oates, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> St Thomas includes questions directed very much to this controversy, such as: Whether the state of religious is more perfect than the state of prelates? Whether parish priests and archdeacons are more perfect than religious? Whether it is lawful for religious to live on alms? Whether is lawful for religious to beg? Whether it is lawful for religious to wear coarser clothes than others? See Aumann’s note (a) in *Summa*, vol. 47, p.49; Jean-Pierre Torrell OP, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2: *Spiritual Master* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), pp. 356-7; M.-M. Labourdette, “L’idéal dominicain,” *Revue thomiste* 92 (1992), pp. 344-354; A. Motte, “La définition de la vie religieuse selon saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue thomiste* 87 (1987), pp. 442-53. Torrell nonetheless notes St Thomas’ very positive view of ‘the secular’ at pp. 245-51, 307-8 etc.

<sup>22</sup> *STh* II-II 188.4 and 188.6.

<sup>23</sup> *STh* II-II 184.

*in assecutione finis*);<sup>24</sup> and between essential perfection (*perfectio essentialiter*), consequential perfection (*perfectio consequenter*) and from instrumental perfection (*perfectio instrumentaliter et dispositive*).<sup>25</sup> Human beings only attain substantial or proper perfection by living in perfect charity through the action of sanctifying grace, and ultimately by being raised to perfect beatitude in heaven; but they can also demonstrate some perfection in action and especially in virtue (habitual action) by acts of love of God and neighbour while here on earth.<sup>26</sup>

All people, whatever their state in life, can advance in the spiritual life from beginners, to the proficient, to the perfect, as they overcome sinful inclinations and vices, and progress in the life of grace and virtue.<sup>27</sup> But some are solemnly consecrated to such perfection, “binding themselves in perpetuity and with a certain solemnity to those things that pertain to perfection”.<sup>28</sup> These are the bishops and religious.<sup>29</sup> Aquinas sometimes describes bishops as priests with extra jurisdiction<sup>30</sup> – as was a common view until the Second Vatican Council finally defined that only bishops have the fullness of the priesthood.<sup>31</sup> Yet in the present tract he was already insisting that episcopal consecration makes a real and permanent difference: it binds a bishop to his flock in a way that a parish priest’s appointment to a parish does not; it requires him to be “a good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep”;<sup>32</sup> and it severely reduces a bishop’s freedom to transfer to some other office, work or state of life, since this would most often be a movement from better to worse.<sup>33</sup>

If bishops are consecrated to demanding pastoral duties by ordination for a particular flock, religious consecrate themselves by vows of poverty, chastity and (especially) obedience, and undertake various asceticisms (such as fasting, vigils, manual labour and community life), thereby entering “a school or exercise for the attainment of perfection” and “giving themselves entirely as a holocaust to God”.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *STh I* 6.3 and 73.1, on which see Aumann, ‘Introduction’, p. xvii.

<sup>25</sup> *STh II-II* 186.2.

<sup>26</sup> *STh II-II* 184.1; Aumann, ‘Introduction’, p. xvii.

<sup>27</sup> *STh II-II* 183.4.

<sup>28</sup> *STh II-II* 184.4 and 184.5.

<sup>29</sup> *STh II-II* 184.5.

<sup>30</sup> *STh Supp* 40.5.

<sup>31</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* 21.

<sup>32</sup> *Jn* 10:15; *STh II-II* 184.4 & 5.

<sup>33</sup> *STh II-II* 185.4. Perhaps excusing his friend and mentor Albert for resigning his see after only two years, Thomas notes at 185.5 if the salvation of his subjects can be sufficiently provided for in the absence of the Shepherd, then it is lawful for the Shepherd to leave his flock, whether it be for some benefit to the Church or because of personal danger”.

<sup>34</sup> *STh II-II* 184-186.

Like bishops, religious have only limited freedom to move from one state to another, lest they move from more perfect to less.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, Aquinas knew full well that talk of perfection in human beings is in a sense analogical or relative: only God is truly perfect; creatures may at best participate in or resemble that perfection;<sup>36</sup> “men embrace a state of perfection,” he says, “not as professing to be already perfect but professing to *strive* for perfection”.<sup>37</sup> Thomas was also quite realistic about how *imperfect* many bishops and religious turn out to be: indeed, he acknowledges that some are “totally lacking in charity and grace”; they are *mali episcopi* or *mali religiosi*! Meanwhile, many diocesan priests and unconsecrated laypeople make much greater progress towards perfection in charity.<sup>38</sup> Citing Matthew’s parable of the two sons, Aquinas notes that one may say YES to entering a state of perfection but then fail to observe it, while another son may say NO but ultimately do the Father’s will.<sup>39</sup> To say bishops and religious live in a state of perfection, then, is to say something *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive*.<sup>40</sup> So another way of talking of these two vocations might be as *solemnised states of potential greatness*.

Specifically citing this section of the *Summa*, the Second Vatican Council in its *Constitution on the Church* presents the religious life as a version of the common call to Christians to die to sin and be dedicated to God. Seeking to derive still more abundant fruit from the grace of their baptism, they vow to practice the evangelical counsels. These three “means to and instruments of love” unite those who practice them to the Church and her mystery in a special way.<sup>41</sup> And so echoing *Lumen Gentium* echoing St Thomas, the Council’s document on religious life is entitled *Perfectæ caritatis*.

<sup>35</sup> *STh* II-II 189.4 and 189.8.

<sup>36</sup> *STh* I 4; II-II 184.1 and 184.2. Referring as he does repeatedly in this section to Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, there is more than a hint of the Neoplatonic notion of participation by degrees in the divine perfections.

<sup>37</sup> *STh* II-II 184.5.

<sup>38</sup> *STh* II-II 184.4. See Stephen Pope, “Overview of the ethics of Aquinas,” in Pope (ed), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2002), pp. 30-56, at p. 48.

<sup>39</sup> *STh* II-II 184.4 citing *Mt* 21:28ff.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Sirilla, *St Thomas Aquinas’ Theology of the Episcopacy in His Commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles* (Doctoral thesis, Catholic University of America, 2008), p. 98 and sources therein.

<sup>41</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* 44.



## Q4. Whether a religious bishop is a contradiction in terms?

At this point we may wonder, given that the greatness of religious life is its devotion to God while the greatness of the episcopate is in its devotion to the flock, where the twain shall meet? I remember when I was named Bishop, some of the brethren conducted an informal *disputatio* on what it meant for one already in “a state of perfection” – religious life – to be appointed to another one – episcopacy. Some said the one perfection would be added to or even multiply the other; some thought the one might divide the other; but the general consensus was that being elevated to the episcopate would subtract one state of perfection from the other, leaving me a net spiritual value of zero!

St Thomas was all too aware that clerical religious may be made bishops however much their religious order might resist it. If the friars could poach seminarians, priests and professors, the seculars could get their own back by poaching Friars for the episcopate. Despite the Dominican Order’s resistance, the mediaeval popes appointed hundreds of the brethren as bishops, 28 of them as Cardinals, several as Masters of the Sacred Palace, apostolic penitentiaries or inquisitors, and two found themselves elected Pope – as was a third in the Renaissance. When St Albert the Great went to Rome at the time of the Paris controversy to plead the case for the friars’ privileges before the papal court, he was Provincial of Germany; when he left the court he was Bishop of Regensburg, a diocese in a mess. At my installation as Archbishop I recalled that the then Master of the Dominicans, Blessed Humbert of Romans, wrote to Albert imploring him to decline the papal mandate. “I would rather you were dead than a bishop,” Humbert said. Albert was at this time the Order’s most famous scholar but, unlike his protégé St Thomas and most other academics, he had proved himself to be a good administrator also, as Prior, Regent and Provincial. Humbert thought his elevation would be a great loss for the Order and only encourage further ecclesiastical plunder. “Why ruin your reputation and that of the Order by letting yourself be taken away from poverty and preaching?” he continued. “However troublesome you find the brethren, don’t imagine things will be better once you have secular clergy and powers to deal with . . . Better to lie in a coffin than sit in a bishop’s chair!”<sup>42</sup>

Try as Humbert might to assert that religious life and episcopacy were inconsistent, St Thomas knew that Albert was joining a long line of religious bishops. In defence of his mentor, he wrote that it would be sinful for a religious to ambition to be bishop so as to escape

<sup>42</sup> Joachim Sighart, *Albert the Great, of the Order of Preachers: His Life and Scholastic Labours*, trans. By T. A. Dikon (London: Washbourn, 1876), pp. 208-210.

evangelical poverty and obedience and pursue his own vainglory; but it would be equally sinful for a religious to disobey the Church's choice of him as bishop however unwelcome that was to him:

Just as it is a mark of an inordinate will that a man of his own choice incline to be appointed to the government of others, so too it indicates an inordinate will if a man definitively refuse the aforesaid office of government in direct opposition to the appointment of his superior.<sup>43</sup>

Thomas explains that religious choose to seek perfection, whereas bishops have the state imposed on them.<sup>44</sup>

There is a common misconception that religious who are raised to the episcopate thereby leave their congregation. But the Canon Law is quite clear: while my only superior in the Dominican Order is now his holiness the Pope, and I have lost all active and passive voice in the Order, yet I am a Dominican *usque ad mortem* and I'm required to live as much of my religious charism as, in my judgement, is consistent with my office.<sup>45</sup> Thus St Thomas writes:

If any religious observances do not hinder the episcopal office but rather serve as a safeguard of perfection, such as continence, poverty etc., a religious is obliged to them even after becoming a bishop, and to wear his religious habit as a sign of this obligation.<sup>46</sup> But if any religious observances are incompatible with the episcopal office, such as solitude, silence, rigorous fasts and vigils which might physically incapacitate him for his episcopal functions, a bishop is not bound to such observances. As regards the other observances, he may dispense himself . . . as religious superiors do . . . To repeat: a monk who becomes a bishop is not free from the yoke of monastic profession in everything, but only in those things that are incompatible with the episcopal office.<sup>47</sup>

Once again, St Thomas is insisting on the compatibility of the two 'states of perfection', even though he successfully begged out of every attempt to have him made a bishop.

<sup>43</sup> *STh* II-II 185.2.

<sup>44</sup> *STh* II-II 185.

<sup>45</sup> *CIC* 705.

<sup>46</sup> The obligation of religious bishops to wear their religious habit was reaffirmed by the Council of Trent (Session XIV, 6) and subsequent legislation (e.g. Pope Benedict XIII, *Custodes super* (1725)). While Pope Paul VI abolished specific religious episcopal habits, the contemporary *Ceremonial of Bishops* n. 1204 provides that bishops from religious orders may wear the habit of their institute.

<sup>47</sup> *STh* II-II 185.8.

## Q5. Whether there be similarities between these two vocations?

Though Humbert thought religious life and episcopacy inconsistent, and Thomas thought them different but reconcilable, I wonder if the two states might not in fact have more in common than first appears.

Thomas points out that one of the factors in common between these two vocations is that a person is only bound to them by a solemn act of consecration.<sup>48</sup> In that act of consecration God graces and the Church solemnly recognises the permanent self-gift by the religious or bishop to Christ and His Church; the nun indicates by her veil that she is a kind of bride of Christ and the monk by his habit that he is bridegroom of the Church; the bishop, by his ring, signifies a similarly ‘marital’ self-gift to his diocese. Thomas quotes St Gregory the Great to the effect that religious “keep nothing for themselves, but sacrifice to almighty God their tongue, their senses, their life, and their property”: in other words, they give their all.<sup>49</sup>

A second similarity might be with respect to the Office of the Word. In the mediaeval period, as we have seen, it was only the bishops and, then only very recently, the friars who were regarded as ‘ordinary’ preachers; for anyone else preaching was an ‘extraordinary’ ministry. Priests, it seems, were thought to be too active or too ignorant, and not sufficiently contemplative or educated, to have anything worth saying; monks were regarded as too contemplative or inactive, and not sufficiently engaged with the flock, to be willing to say anything. But both bishops and friars handed on the fruits of their contemplative life in the act of preaching. It is from this tract that Dominicans take their motto *contemplare et aliis tradere contemplata*.<sup>50</sup>

St Thomas says a bishop must be especially well-versed in the faith so that he can shepherd his flock with true doctrine and protect it from heresy. For all the talk about episcopacy as mere jurisdiction, what Thomas emphasises here is the contemplative and ‘prophetic’ (teaching and preaching) roles of the bishop. He follows Gregory on the importance of bishops being contemplatives and Pseudo-Dionysius on the bishop as “the enlightener in all things pertaining to his holy discourses”.<sup>51</sup> He therefore recommends that bishops study especially the Word of God rather than ‘fables or temporal banalities’ and says we should do this, not just so we can get lines out of the Scripture for our homilies but, more importantly,

<sup>48</sup> *STh* II-II 184.4 & 5.

<sup>49</sup> *STh* II-II 186.1 quoting St Gregory the Great, *Hom. 20 in Ezech.*

<sup>50</sup> *STh* II-II 187.1.

<sup>51</sup> *STh* II-II 182, 184.7 and 188.6; citing St Gregory the Great, *Pastoral* 2.6; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Eccl. Hier.* 5.

so we might become living Gospels ourselves.<sup>52</sup> Thomas has many similar things to say about religious, and the importance of their studies.

Q6. Whether there be similarities between these two vocations and the other Christian vocations?

St Paul points out that Christ equips each of us for some service: some He graces to be apostles, others prophets and evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers . . . So instead of being spiritual infants, tossed to and fro by fashionable heresies, we mature and *speaking the truth in love* grow into the mature body of Christ.<sup>53</sup> “The beauty of the Church,” Aquinas says, “is manifested by the diversity of vocations”.<sup>54</sup> To the extent that episcopacy is indeed the highest form of clerical life, and religious life the highest form of lay life, what might this say to the rest of the Christian people seeking to live out their vocations?

First, once we are aware both of how important are the states of episcopacy and religious life, and yet how radical is our shortage of them today, we should urgently pray for and support those two vocations.<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, these two great vocations should lead and inspire all the other ones. If the neo-Platonic side of Thomas leads him to suggest that human beings resemble and participate in the perfection of God, then we might also think each human vocation resembles and participates in the perfections of the others. What Christian vocations have in common is what is most fundamental: faith, baptism, the total gift of the self, the common pursuit of holiness, conforming to the mind and will of Christ, perfection in charity. Our task is to discern the path by which we are called to throw ourselves headlong into that adventure. Unlike the bad bishops and bad religious that Thomas repudiates, we must all abandon vice and co-operate with grace in our spiritual advancement.

What’s more, like religious life and episcopacy, other Christian vocations – most obviously marriage – must involve the total gift of the self, especially in acts of charity.

Fourthly, all Christian vocations require that we engage in a process of discernment, formation, self-giving and growth and whether we are

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter to Titus* ch 1, lect 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Eph* 4:7-16. See also Andrew T. Lincoln, “Ephesians”, in James G. Dunn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 133-140.

<sup>54</sup> E.g. *STh* II-II 183.2 and 184.4.

<sup>55</sup> *STh* II-II 189.9.

clergy or laity we must make space both for contemplative ease and thoughtful action if this is to occur.

Fifthly, as in the case of the religious bishop, a person may heed more than one calling, whether sequentially or contemporaneously. Someone might, for instance, pursue a married and parenting vocation while also being a member of a lay fraternity or ecclesial movement. Rather than dividing or subtracting from each other, such vocations may well support and enrich each other.

Reflecting upon the variety of vocations that there are in the Church I found myself pondering Christ's teaching that some people live perfect continence ("like eunuchs") because "they were born that way", i.e. are naturally so inclined; some people choose to live that way "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"; and some embrace it, though others had effectively made the decision for them.<sup>56</sup> This might be extended to vocations more generally. Often people have particular qualities better suited to one vocation than another; "they were born that way" so to speak. Others may find more than one reasonable life-plan attractive, and so must choose: St Thomas thinks religious *elect* to give up certain good but potentially distracting things in order to cling undividedly to a higher good. And some again have their vocation "thrust upon them", so to speak: St Thomas thinks that part of the perfection of the episcopacy is that it is conferred from above rather than sought from below.

Now, it seems to me that a person discerning his or her vocation and then seeking to live it out must consider precisely these three dimensions: first, what are my natural inclinations and spiritual gifts, what would I naturally be good at? Secondly, what are my personal aspirations, what spiritual gifts would I choose for myself, what state of life would make the most of me? And thirdly, what are my community's aspirations for me, what spiritual gifts is the Church ready to bestow upon me, what do they think I would be good at? And so, we consult, we think, we pray. But the purpose of practical reasoning and discernment is not to do more thinking and discerning; it is not even to work out what to do next. No, the purpose of practical reasoning and discernment is actually *to do* what I should do next. Some young people (and indeed some older people) spend their whole lives *not* deciding: they join the Order of Perpetual Discerners and delay committing to anything until it is too late. In the meantime, life passes them by . . .

<sup>56</sup> *Mt* 19:12.

## Q7. How is one rightly to discern one's own vocation?

St Thomas has little time for angst about our own unworthiness to pursue a high vocation. Knowing that the Christian life in general and the religious and clerical life in particular are calls to seek perfect charity, our own radical imperfection is in his view no excuse. "He who enters the religious state is not obliged to have perfect charity [yet], but to tend to it and work to attain it. . . . One who enters religious life does not profess to be perfect but to strive for the attainment of perfection, just as one who enters school does not profess to be learned but to study in order to acquire learning."<sup>57</sup> Thomas follows Origen in his commentary on the Lord's counsel to the Rich Young Man, "If you would be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor. . . . and come, follow me." The Lord asks not that the young man already be perfect but that he want to become more perfect: the imperfect beginner only gradually advances in perfection.<sup>58</sup> So, too, when Jesus calls Matthew the publican, Aquinas points out, he was not yet practised in keeping the commandments.<sup>59</sup>

So how do we know what our vocation is? Some people think vocational discernment is like solving an extreme Sudoku puzzle or finding buried treasure with a map full of riddles. On that view there's only one right answer, you'll probably take years of angst trying to work it out, most people will fail because 'discernment' is so labyrinthine, and God the puzzle-maker is happy to see most of us fail working out his will. . . . St Thomas would regard all that as nonsense, and he took a rather no-nonsense approach to vocations. While he acknowledges the Aristotelian counsel that important but doubtful matters deserve good counsel and long deliberation, Aquinas thinks we do not need to deliberate on whether religious life is good in itself (the Church teaches that it is) or better than most other paths we might be tempted to take (he thinks religious life or priesthood is often the better path). Nor should we angst about our own weaknesses, since we are promised divine assistance in pursuing our vocation and will have the support and judgement of more practised priests or religious once we enter formation. That some who join leave while in formation is no tragedy: he thinks that is precisely why the Church ensures a time of discernment and formation before we make any final commitment.<sup>60</sup>

So who should we consult when trying to work out what we are best suited to and when deciding which of several reasonable options to go for? That, St Thomas thinks, is a matter for the person

<sup>57</sup> *STh* II-II 186.2.

<sup>58</sup> *STh* II-II 186.1.

<sup>59</sup> *STh* II-II 189.1.

<sup>60</sup> *STh* II-II 189.10.

discerning but obviously it should be someone both pious and prudent. The ones to avoid, he suggests, are those set on preventing us from entering the convent or seminary – as his own family had been. Again giving us a rare glimpse of his personal petticoat, Thomas warns that “carnal friends oppose one’s spiritual progress . . . A man’s enemies are often from his own household . . . The Lord said that ‘No man putting his hand of the plough and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God’; well, he who delays entering religion to confer with his relatives is an example of someone ‘looking back’.”<sup>61</sup>

Recalling the story told by St Augustine in his *Confessions* of his long delay in embracing his vocation, St Thomas concludes the *Secunda Pars*, as I will this paper, with his final advice concerning vocations which becomes a prayer: “To those who take upon themselves the sweet yoke of religion, God promises the delight of divine fruitfulness and eternal rest for their souls. May He who promised this, lead us to it, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is above all things God, blessed for ever and ever. Amen.”

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<sup>61</sup> *STh* II-II 189.10.