

A Loving Kind of Knowing: Connatural Knowledge as a Means of Knowing God in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*

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Abstract

In his exegesis of Romans 8:15-16, Thomas Aquinas asks how it is that the Holy Spirit bears testimony in us that we are the children of God. He responds that the Spirit bears testimony “through the effect of filial love he produces in us.” At least in some circumstances, Aquinas suggests, we can come to know God through our experience of loving him. But Aquinas, following a long tradition, teaches that we love things insofar as we know them as good (cf: I-II, q.9, a.1, corpus and ad.3). How then can love give rise to knowledge?

Aquinas's teaching in the Summa Theologica on the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom provides a key to this question. The gift of wisdom makes use of the love of charity to know God (II-II, q.45). Charity, by making us “connatural” with God, can give rise to knowledge of God. I will then consider how the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom relates to the science of theology. The gift of wisdom, however, does not offer an independent or parallel path to knowledge of God, but rather, depends on faith and is the perfection to which the science of sacred is oriented.

Text

“For you have not received the spirit of slavery again in fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption of sons, in whom we cry: Abba, Father. For the Spirit himself gives testimony to our spirit that we are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:15-16). Commenting on this verse from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, Thomas Aquinas asks how it is that the Spirit bears testimony in us. It is not as the Father gave witness to the Son at Christ's baptism, announcing with external words, “This is my beloved Son” (Mat. 3:17). Rather, Aquinas says, the Spirit bears testimony to us that we are the children of God “through the effect of filial love he produces in us.”¹

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, trans. F.R. Larcher, ed. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), Ch. 8, lecture 3.

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It is worth reflecting on the idea expressed in Aquinas's exegesis: if it is by the effects of our love for God that we come to know ourselves as children of God and to call God "Father," then at least in some circumstances, we can come to know something about God through our experience of loving him. On the face of it, this may not seem like a remarkable idea at all. Experience teaches us that that loving and knowing are closely intertwined. For example, the more one knows a friend, the more deeply one loves her, and the more deeply one loves her, the more one wants to know her. In the same way, Aquinas says,² our contemplation of God both begins and ends in love. Love moves us to "gaze on His beauty," and upon obtaining God in contemplation, our love becomes more intense (ST II-II, q.180, a.1).

Aquinas's interpretation of Romans 8:16 is not remarkable for simply relating love and knowledge. It is remarkable for the causal order it proposes between the two. In the usual order of things, as Aquinas teaches, we love things insofar as we know them. The will is an appetite for goodness. But it is the intellect that determines what the good is and presents it as such to the will (ST I-II, q.9). But, in Aquinas's exegesis, our experience of filial love, effected in us by the Holy Spirit, is that by which we know ourselves as children of God and call God "Father." Here, it seems, the order is reversed: love moves the intellect to know by presenting its object to it.

Aquinas's interpretation of Romans 8:16 raises several questions about the role of loving God in coming to know him. How does love of God give rise to knowledge of God? What kind of knowledge does it give rise to? Finally, how does such "affective knowledge" of God or an "affective way" of knowing God relate to the knowledge of faith and the discipline of theology? Aquinas's account of the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom, I suggest, provides a key to answering these questions. The gift of wisdom, according to Aquinas, enables a person to judge rightly concerning divine realities; and, while wisdom is a perfection of the intellect, it is the effect of charity. By making us "connatural" with God, charity can give rise to knowledge of God. However, the knowledge of God afforded by the gift of wisdom, I will argue, does not offer an independent or parallel path to the knowledge of God held by faith. Rather, it depends on faith and is the perfection to which the science of sacred doctrine is oriented.

The Gift of Wisdom

According to Aquinas, the gifts are habits infused by God, by which human beings are made amenable to be moved by the Holy Spirit. The gifts enable human beings, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, to use the theological virtues of faith,

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/summa/index.html>.

hope, and charity to move themselves toward their supernatural end. The gifts presuppose the theological virtues, and each gift corresponds to a particular theological virtue (ST I-II, q.68). The gift of wisdom, Aquinas says, corresponds to charity (ST II-II, q.45, Prologue), and so he takes it up at the end of his treatment of this theological virtue in question 45 of the *Secunda-Secundae*.

It belongs to wisdom, Aquinas says, to consider the highest cause and to order and judge all things according to that cause. The architect, for example, is called wise in the field of construction because he designed the plans for the building and can, therefore, direct the work of the builders, carpenters, electricians, and so on. A person is said to be “wise simply” who “knows the cause that is simply the highest, which is God” and can, therefore, “judge and set in order all things according to divine rules.” According to Aquinas, human beings acquire this kind of judgment from the Holy Spirit. He is taking his lead here from St. Paul. “According to 1 Corinthians 2:15,” Aquinas writes, “‘the spiritual man judges all things’ because as stated in the same chapter, ‘the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God (1 Cor. 2:10)’” (ST II-II, q.45, a.1).

How does the gift of wisdom allow a person to search all things, even the deep things of God? Aquinas distinguishes two ways by which we can come to right judgments about something. “First, on account of perfect reason.” A man who has studied the virtues, for example, might form a right judgment about a matter of chastity by reasoning from ethical principles. In another way, a person can form right judgments about something “on account of a certain connaturality with the matter about which one has to judge.” A man who has the virtue of chastity, for example, even if he has never studied the virtues, can form a right judgment about matters of chastity by a kind of connaturality with the virtue. For the chaste man, the virtue of chastity is not a moral principle held in the intellect; it has become second nature to him. The virtue is in his appetitive faculty, ordering his passions according to reason.³ He can therefore form right judgments about matters of chastity by simply referring to his own inclinations. The Holy Spirit’s gift of wisdom, Aquinas says, judges divine realities “on account of a certain connaturality with them.” The wise man is perfected in divine things, not only by learning but by suffering divine realities (ST II-II, q.45, a.2).

How does the person who has the gift of wisdom suffer divine realities? How is the person with the gift of wisdom connatural with God? Aquinas offers a concise and intriguing answer: Connaturality with divine things is the effect of charity because charity “unites us to God” (ST II-II, q.45, a.2). To fully understand his answer, it is necessary to understand how charity unites us to God in such a way

³ Eleonore Stump explains, “A moral virtue is a habit of the will disposing the will to choose in accordance with reason ... The moral virtues are habits in the appetitive faculty or will,” Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 76-77.

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that God is directly and intimately present to us as chastity is to the chaste person. We can then ask how the gift of wisdom makes this love a means of knowledge.

The Presence of God as an Effect of Love

All love, according to Aquinas, transforms the lover.⁴ Indeed, for Aquinas, love *is* the transformation of the lover into the beloved. Love is the first effect wrought in the concupiscible appetite⁵ by the object of the appetite. This effect, he says, is nothing other than “complacency in that object; and from this complacency results a movement towards that same object, and this movement is ‘desire’” (ST I-II, q.26, a.2). We might say that love is the impression of the beloved on the appetite of the lover. As that which is known is present in the mind of the knower as a concept, so that which is loved is present in the appetite of the lover, as a kind of impression on his affections, as Aquinas explains, “causing him either to take pleasure in it, or in its good, when present; or, in the absence of the object loved, by his longing, to tend towards it with the love of concupiscence, or towards the good that he wills to the beloved, with the love of friendship” (ST I-II, q. 28, a.2).

Just as in natural love the beloved is said to be in the lover, so in the supernatural love of charity,⁶ the object of love—God—comes to be present in the person who possesses charity in a new and unique way. By charity, Aquinas explains, we are united to God because “the will is, so to speak, transformed into its end ... For the appetite of a thing is moved and tends towards its connatural end naturally; and this movement is due to a certain conformity of the thing with its end” (ST I-II, q.62, a.3). God becomes present to us in our very inclination toward him.

Charity as a Means of Knowledge

It remains for us to consider how, by the gift of wisdom, charity can be a means of knowledge and what kind of knowledge it gives rise to. First, however, it is important to clarify how love is not a means of knowledge. Connaturality with God does not give rise to knowledge of God independent of the intellect. It simply does not belong to the will to know. Will is an appetite for happiness or the good (I, q.82, a.1, 4); its action is not to apprehend or judge, but to incline (I, q.82, a.1). Nor does connaturality with God give rise to knowledge of divine realities other than those known by faith, because connaturality with God is the effect of charity

⁴ Daria Spezzano, *The Glory of God's Grace: Deification According To St. Thomas Aquinas* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2015), 226.

⁵ The sensory appetite of pursuit and avoidance. For a concise description of Aquinas's account of the will and appetitive faculties, see Stump, *Aquinas*, 21-22.

⁶ According to Aquinas, charity is the created virtue by which we love God with God's own love (ST II-II, q.23, a.2 corpus, ad.1).

and charity receives the object of its love from faith. Just as in the natural order the intellect judges an object to be good and presents it to the will as such (I, q.82, a.1, 4), so in the supernatural order. While the theological virtues are all infused together, the act of faith, Aquinas says, precedes the acts of hope and charity because “the movement of the appetite cannot tend to anything, either by hoping or loving, unless that thing be apprehended by the sense or by the intellect,” and “it is by faith that the intellect apprehends the object of hope and love” (ST I-II, q.62, a.4). Charity, therefore, and the connatural union with God by Charity, have no other object than that which faith proposes to them. As Aquinas explains: “the gift of wisdom presupposes faith, because ‘a man judges well what he knows’” (ST II-II, q.45, a.1).

Connaturality with God leads to understanding the same divine realities known through faith, but to understand them quite otherwise than we would without experiencing God connaturally.⁷ For charity, although it receives God as its object from faith, is able to attain to God in a way that faith cannot. While the virtues of faith and hope, Aquinas says, have God in himself as their object, “in their very nature, they imply a certain distance from this object: since faith is of what is not seen, and hope is of what is not possessed” (ST I-II, q.66, a.6). But charity, Aquinas says, “adheres to God immediately” (ST II-II, q.27, a.4, *sed contra*). By the Holy Spirit’s gift of wisdom, this experience of love becomes, as it were, the object by which we know God.⁸ As the chaste man, by referring to the inclination of his appetites, is able to form judgments about matters of chastity—for example, “this behavior is acceptable, that is not”—so the recipient of the gift of wisdom, by reference, or in light of, his experience of God in his love for God, is able to form judgments about God. It enables us, as John of St. Thomas explains, “to perceive that what is thus felt in our affections is higher and more excellent than every consideration of the cognitive powers,” that “more lies hidden in things of faith than faith itself reveals.”⁹

Acquired Wisdom and the Gift of Wisdom

It remains to ask how, if at all, the gift of wisdom relates to the discipline of theology, which Aquinas calls sacred doctrine. Sacred doctrine, according to Aquinas, is the science of God preceding from revealed principles (ST I, q.1, a.2). It is, therefore, a kind of wisdom because it is knowledge of the highest cause, by

⁷ R. Garrigou-Lagrance, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, trans. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1937), 315.

⁸ Garrigou-Lagrance, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, 261; Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or the Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), 261.

⁹ John of St. Thomas, *Curs. Theol.*, I-II, q. 68-70, disp. 18, a.4, n. 14, quotation and translation in Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite*, 262.

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which all things are ordered and judged (ST I, q.1, a.6). But sacred doctrine is acquired by study while the gift of wisdom is given by God; sacred doctrine judges divine realities by an inquiry of reason, the gift of wisdom judges by a connaturality with the divine realities known.

Are they then two distinct and independent modes of knowing God and judging all things in light of that knowledge? Perhaps in theory. The science of sacred doctrine receives its principles from faith and proceeds to manifest other aspects of the faith by arguing from those principles (ST I, q.1, a.8). By the principles of its method, it does not absolutely require that one have connatural knowledge of God. Conversely, the gift of wisdom, while it depends on faith because charity receives its object from faith, does not require the discursive arguments of sacred doctrine to understand or unfold the divine realities God has revealed. It knows them by a kind of direct experience of them.

But in practice, I suggest they should not be. The important role of the gift of wisdom in the science of sacred doctrine can be seen by analogy to other arts and sciences. An artist can more perfectly render the human form in paint or clay the more time he has spent studying it in life, seeing it in all its dimensions, how it moves, how light and shadows fall on it. A sociologist can better grasp the mores and practices of a group the more time he spends with them, participating in their way of life. Similarly, a person who by charity is connatural with God, who experiences divine realities directly, can better comprehend them and see the harmony between them.¹⁰ This connatural knowledge can then both spur and guide the science of sacred doctrine in its inquiry into divine truths.

More importantly, I would argue, the gift of wisdom is not simply an aid to the study of sacred doctrine. It is the end (at least in this life) to which sacred doctrine is oriented. In the very first article of the *Summa* Aquinas explains that the science of sacred doctrine is “for man’s salvation” (ST I, q.1, a.1). Sacred doctrine, according to Aquinas, is the knowledge by which human beings can order their lives and actions toward their final end who is God. It is oriented toward a life of grace. The gift of wisdom, on the other hand, presupposes a life of grace because it presupposes charity (ST II-II, q.45, a.4). And the gift of wisdom, Aquinas says, is given to every individual who has sanctifying grace in the measure that “suffices for their salvation” (ST II-II, q.45, a.5). Insofar, then, as sacred doctrine is knowledge of God ordered toward a life of grace and the gift of wisdom is a knowledge of God that presupposes a life of grace, it seems that the gift of wisdom perfects, at least in this life, the wisdom of sacred doctrine.

In light of Aquinas’s teaching on the gift of wisdom, we can return now to Romans 8 and Aquinas’s commentary on that text. “In the Holy Spirit, we cry, Abba, Father,” Paul writes, “for the Spirit himself gives testimony that we are sons

¹⁰ Garrigou-Lagrangé, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, 318.

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of God.” If we follow Aquinas in interpreting St. Paul, it is by our very experience of loving the Father as sons and daughters that we come to know ourselves as the children of God and God as Father. For, in loving the Father by charity our will is, so to speak, transformed into the object of our love. The Father becomes immediately present to us in our love for him. And by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit this immediate experience of the Father in our love for him becomes a means of understanding what we already know by faith, that God is our Father, in a deeper and most perfect way. We no longer simply say “Our Father who art in Heaven,” by rote. Rather, we cry out “Abba, Father.”

That we are the children of God, however, is not Paul’s conclusion. It is, as Aquinas recognizes, the major premise of a syllogism. If we are children of God, Paul reasons, we are then heirs. From the heights of affective experience of knowing God by union with him, we move immediately to the task of reasoning from these principles, that is to the task of sacred doctrine.

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