

## St. Thomas Aquinas's *Postilla super Psalmos* as the work of a Dominican friar and theologian at prayer

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*Abstract:* St. Thomas's commentary on the Book of Psalms, known as the *Postilla super Psalmos*, gives us a privileged insight into the mind and heart of a Dominican friar and theologian at work and at prayer. In this contribution I will elucidate these claims on the basis of elements found in his commentary and in particular in the areas of (1) Prayer and the Liturgy, (2) Christ, Mary and the Church, (3) Sin and Mercy and (4) Contemplation and Preaching.

*Keywords:* Thomas Aquinas, Order of Preachers, Book of Psalms, Prayer, Biblical exegesis

*Resumen:* El comentario de santo Tomás al Libro de los Salmos, conocido como la *Postilla super Psalmos* nos ofrece una visión privilegiada de la mente y el corazón de un fraile dominico y teólogo en el trabajo y la oración. En esta contribución dilucidaré estas afirmaciones a partir de los elementos que se encuentran en su comentario y en particular en lo que se refiere a (1) oración y liturgia, (2) Cristo, María y la Iglesia, (3) pecado y misericordia y (4) contemplación y predicación.

*Palabras clave:* Tomás de Aquino, Orden de Predicadores, Libro de los Salmos, Oración, Exégesis bíblica

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### Introduction

The *Postilla super Psalmos*, of which we possess a Latin text known as a *reportatio* composed probably by St. Thomas's trusted secretary Reginald of Piperno and dating to 1272-1273 when St. Thomas was lecturing at the Do-

minican studium in Naples (Morard, 2008; Torrell, 2015), offers us the final fruits of St. Thomas' academic career as *Magister in Sacra Pagina*. Contrary to the traditional account, there are no compelling reasons to think that the *Postilla*, which covers only Psalms 1-54, was unfinished due to St. Thomas' illness. Rather, covering such a number of psalms in one year was rather a common practice, as Morard has established.

In order to understand the title of *Magister in Sacra Pagina* given to medieval Masters one has to bracket the typically modern separations between dogmatic theology and scriptural exegesis, and between speculative reasoning and spirituality. In fact, the Master's threefold office of *lectio*, *disputatio* and *preaedicatio* constitute such a unity that the expressions *sacra doctrina*, *theologia* and *sacra Scriptura* "are employed as synonyms and designate the whole of divine teaching founded on Revelation" (Emery, 2005, p. 56). The renewed interest in St. Thomas' biblical exegesis in general and in his biblical commentaries in particular, an interest which is often identified as "Biblical Thomism", is partly directed at overcoming such modern separations (Vijgen, 2018). This unity is also clearly present in the Prologue to the *Postilla* where St. Thomas remarks that the Book of Psalms contains the whole of theology (*totius theologiae, totam Scripturam*), that is to say, it is "about every work of the Lord". The various modes (narrative, laudative, disputational, etc.) of the other books are here condensed in the most important "mode of praise and prayer". Everything in the Book of Psalms, therefore, is directed to prayer by which "the soul is to be joined to God". As such the Book of Psalms constitutes a privileged textbook for articulating and living out the Christian faith. In the words of James Ginther, St. Thomas "is keen that his students hear the voice of the praying Christ, and that they understand this orative reality to be inseparable from theological speculation. Prayer, for Thomas, is a fundamental feature of the theological enterprise" (2005, p. 227).

The Book of Psalms stands at the heart of Christian life and thought. More than any other book of the Bible, the Psalms provide the language and imagery for speaking about God and His inner life, His Son Jesus Christ, the human person and the Church. Many verses from the Book of Psalms belong to the collective memory of Christianity. For instance, Mark 12:10-11 uses Psalm 117: 22 ("The stone which the builders rejected; the same is become the head of the corner"). One finds this usage again in Acts 4:8-12 and 1 Peter 2:4-10. Mark's account of the trial ("My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?") and resurrection of Christ is dominated by the use of

Psalm 21. Matthew frequently uses psalms to show how Christ's life and words are in fulfillment of Old Testament Scriptures. Christ's words in Luke 23:46 ("Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit") stem from Psalm 30:6. Hebrews 2:5-8 makes lengthy use of Psalm 8:6 ("Thou hast made him a little less than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honor"). These few examples can easily be multiplied given the fact that one-third of the Old Testament quotations in the New Testament come from the Book of Psalms. Moreover, the practice of praying and singing the Psalms became an important part of the Christian life.

A critical figure is Benedict of Nursia, who in his Rule assigns a central place to the Psalms in his vision of the monastic and liturgical life. As Prudlo recalls: "The average monk would sing the Psalter in its entirety over 2,500 times during his life" (2020, pp. 42-43). Early Christian commentators often point out that it is not just the contents of the Book of Psalms that they find attractive but also its emotional effect. Ambrose remarks that although every part of Holy Scripture breathes forth the graciousness (*gratiam*) of God, it is the Book of Psalms that is especially sweet (*dulcis*) because, whereas other biblical figures such as Moses would occasionally praise God with songs, it was David who was chosen by God to do so continually in one entire book (Ambrose, 1999, *In Psalmum* I, 4-6). John Chrysostom notes: "nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wings, sets it free from earth, releases it from the prison of the body, teaches it to love wisdom, and to condemn all the things of this life, as concordant melody and sacred song composed in rhythm" (*In Psalmum* XLI, quoted in Daley 2015).

Numerous Christian authors have therefore occupied themselves with the interpretation of the Psalms either for praying or for learning. Within this reception history Jerome's various translations and revisions, widely used by St. Thomas, are of singular importance; in particular his revision of the liturgical texts at use in the Roman Church, which became known as the *Psalterium Gallicanum* and was included in his *Vulgate*, as well as his new translation in Latin by use of the Hebrew, the *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos*. Another important work is Augustine's *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, a collection of more than four hundred expositions on the entire Psalter, with thirty-two sermons on Psalm 118. Other important authors include Cassiodorus and Gregory the Great (Gillingham, 2008, 2018).

By the ninth century marginal and interlinear glosses on individual books of the Bible and in particular on the Psalms were starting to appear, resulting in various *Glossae* on the entire Bible such as the *Glossa ordinaria*

(1090-1130)<sup>1</sup>. Of particular importance are the *Glossae* by Peter Lombard on the Psalms, often referred to as the *Glossa Lombardi* or *Magna Glossatura* (1150-1160) (Colish, 1992; Stoppacci, 2007)<sup>2</sup>. Until the mid-fourteenth century, the Book of Psalms was one of the most commented-upon books of the Bible. However, as Martin Morard has shown, between ca. 1250 and 1270, interest in the Book of Psalms waned considerably, so that for instance Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, and Albert the Great did not produce commentaries on the Book of Psalms. St. Thomas is in fact the only scholastic author who has transmitted to us a commentary on the Psalms (Morard, 2004, 2008).

Despite the rise of Biblical Thomism in recent decades, the *Postilla* has received modest attention (for exceptions see Gandolfi, 1993; Ryan, 2001; Ginther, 2005), most likely due to the absence of a critical edition and the scarcity of modern translations. The year 2021, however, saw the completion of the first Spanish translation, published in four volumes, under the direction of Carlos Casanova (Tomás de Aquino 2014, 2016, 2018, 2021). The translation, accompanied by the best Latin text available, will undoubtedly give rise to a renewed interest in the *Postilla*, which according to Ryan, “reveals Thomas’s mature teaching on such themes as Christ, prayer, grace, and good works” (2001, p. 1). The extensive introductions by Enrique Alarcón, Piotr Roszak, Matthew Levering and myself discuss St. Thomas’s text from various perspectives. In the introduction to first volume, covering Psalms 1-15, Enrique Alarcón provides the reader with the most important text-critical information (authenticity, chronology, etc.). In the introduction to the second volume, covering Psalms 16-27, Piotr Roszak, who has published extensively on the *Postilla* (2010, 2011, 2012, 2020), places St. Thomas’ reading of the Psalms within the context of his biblical exegesis in general and illustrates the most important exegetical procedures (*divisio textus, notae, glossa, quaestiones*) in use by St. Thomas. Matthew Levering, in his introduction to the third volume covering Psalms 28-40, provides a status quaestionis of the contemporary research on the *Postilla* and examines in detail St. Thomas’s use of these Psalms in his *Summa theologiae*. I myself analyze the main doctrinal elements in the commentary on Psalms 41-54.

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<sup>1</sup> An electronic edition, prepared under the direction of Martin Morard, can be found here: <https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/livres-liste.php>

<sup>2</sup> An edition, called *In Psalmos davidicos commentarii*, can be found in *Patrologia Latina* 191, 55-1296.

In the following pages I intend to show that the *Postilla* displays crucial elements of St. Thomas's Dominican *spirituality* and interior life as a *Magister in Sacra Pagina* (Cessario, 2014, 1-17)<sup>3</sup>.

### **The *Postilla* as the work of a Dominican friar and theologian at prayer**

#### **Prayer and the Liturgy**

Having been raised from an early age by the Benedictines of Monte Cassino, for whom the liturgy and the divine office is of central importance, St. Thomas joined the Dominican Order at a time when the novices were obliged to memorize the Psalter (Mulcahey, 1998, pp. 101-102). His contemporaries have frequently mentioned his liturgical piety, in particular during Mass and the Divine Office. One of his earliest biographers, William of Tocco, reports:

One also saw him often when he was singing the psalm verse during Compline in Lent: "Do not reject us in old age, when my strength is failing" [Ps. 70:9], enraptured and consumed by piety, tears streaming down his face that seemed to be bursting forth from the eyes of the pious soul. (le Brun-Gouanvic, 1996, p. 155)

He was, moreover, actively engaged in the liturgy by way of his compositions for the Office of Corpus Christi. More fundamentally, it has been argued that he showed a marked interest in liturgical sources as authoritative statements or *loci theologici* of the Church (Berger, 2005; Nichols, 2008; Smith, 2018).

As a Dominican friar St. Thomas participated in the public and communal recitation of the Divine Office, of which the Psalms form its substantial part, and in doing so he took part in the apostolate of the Order. In the Dominican Order, liturgy and study are both an end in themselves, because they possess an inherent dignity as well as a preparation for and sustenance in the apostolate. "For even as it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, so is it better to give to others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely

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<sup>3</sup> Cessario correctly points to certain reservations in the use of the term *spirituality* when referring to the Dominican way of life, partly due to its modern use at a time when spiritual theology became separated from doctrine and morals.

to contemplate" (*ST II-II*, q. 188, a. 6). Humbert of Romans, who served as fifth Master General of the Order of Preachers from 1254 to 1263, reflects on the many reasons why it is useful to pray the Psalms in the liturgy. In no other book of the Bible, he observes, one has as it were (*quasi*) God himself in view. Moreover, Humbert lists the salutary effects as follows:

The singing of the Psalms drives away the demons, effects sanctity and refreshes the mind. It illuminates as the sun and flows as the oil, it extinguishes the illicit desire and shatters angers. It penetrates everything, fills everything, it divinizes man, it opens up the senses and gives the desire for the heavenly kingdom, it sets on fire the spiritual flame in the heart, it banishes the root of all evil, it is a consolation for suffering, a knowledge of the true light and it takes away the weariness of the soul. He who loves the incessant singing of the Psalms, cannot commit a sin. (*Expositio in Constitutiones*, c. 33, 1899, p. 99)

No wonder, then, that St. Thomas in his Prologue characterizes the Psalms as a soliloquy, "a conversation of man with God one to one, or speaking within himself alone, because this suits one who praises, and one who prays" (*In Ps.*, Prooemium).

Towards the end of his commentary on Psalm 49: 23, St. Thomas argues that liturgical prayer has a double finality: the vocal praise of God and man's sanctification. Following his Order's emphasis on the use of the voice (and the entire body) in the liturgy, St. Thomas writes that vocal prayers help to excite interior devotion whereby the mind of the person praying is lifted up to God (*ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 10) (Smith, 2014). As he writes in his commentary on Isaiah 12:4 ("Praise ye the Lord, and call upon his name"), this vocal praise is required for three reasons: a) the proclamation of divine praise by way of faith, prayer, preaching and meditation; b) the thanksgiving for the benefits received from God which is at the same time to be announced to the world; and c) the exultation of the joy present in one's heart by songs of joy (*In Is.* ch. 12, no. 388). For St. Thomas there is a particular reason for why this joy is to be found in the Book of Psalms. He remarks in the Prologue that the reason why the Psalms are so often used in Church is not only that they contain the whole of theology—a remark one finds as well in Humbert of Romans— but also "to give us hope of divine mercy". Amidst the reality of the "afflictions of the heart", the Dominican saint Thomas confesses the reality of Christ's redemptive sacrifice and its contemplation as the remedy thereof.

Only in this light is one able to grasp that justice is a part of mercy or, in the words of Gregory (*Moralia in Iob* 76, 13), that “the evils that here press upon us compel us to go to God” (*In Ps.* 54, no. 5; cf. *ST I*, q. 21, a 4, ad 3). Given the representational effect of signs, of which words are the most important, this inner sacrifice (*Ps.* 50:19: “A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit: a contrite and humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise”) is best expressed by vocally praising God (*Ps.* 49:23: “The sacrifice of praise shall glorify me”) (cf. *In Ps.* 26, no. 4; *In Ps.* 32, no. 3). Hence St. Thomas’s preference for vocal and not instrumental music within the liturgy (Ratzinger, 1974).

Commenting on Psalm 9:2 (“I will give praise to thee, O Lord, with my whole heart: I will relate all thy wonders”) St. Thomas notes that thanksgiving can be realized in three ways: with the heart, by words and by deeds. Verse 2 deals with thanksgiving by words, which can be used to either praise God or preach and announce God. Already at this point he remarks that our confession of praise should be in our heart and not merely on or lips but also that, while we should praise God according to our abilities, our praise will always remain “less than God himself”. In doing so, St. Thomas connects *Dt.* 6:5 (“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart”) with *1 Jn* 3: 20 (“God is greater than our heart”). He explains “with my whole heart” in the following way: “He, therefore praises God with his whole heart who accepts nothing which is against God, but who puts everything in relation to Him, whether through act or by habit”. Both in verse 2 and in St. Thomas’s mind the preaching and announcing of God (“I will relate (*narrabo*)”) flow immediately from praising God “because God gives benefits to be communicated (*communicanda*) to others”. Thanksgiving with the heart and by deeds is expressed in verse 3 (“I will be glad, and rejoice in thee: I will sing to thy name, O thou most high”). Having in mind the Pharisee in *Luke* 18:11, St. Thomas juxtaposes the sinner who tells another about his own good deeds and rejoices in them with the Psalmist who “delights in God always”. Finally, for the Dominican friar who recites the Office daily as a central duty of his religion profession, the deeds by which one gives thanks to God consist in the “manual labor” (*opus manuale*) of singing the psalms “because all of our works should have as their end the glory of God”. As he makes clear somewhat later in his comments on verses 11-13 (*In Ps.* 9, no. 8), praising the glory of God has as its fruit the knowledge of His name (vs. 11), that is to say, in knowing that God is omnipotent and good, a knowledge which causes hope. God’s name, i.e., the hope in His power and willingness (*potens ... volens*) for salvation, is especially (*praecipue*) expressed in the name Jesus. St. Thomas recalls *Mt.* 1:21 (“He shall save his people from

their sins”) and Phil. 2:10 (“That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow”). A second fruit of giving thanks to God and His name again fittingly belongs to the Order of Preachers and is expressed in verse 12 (“declare his ways among the Gentiles”). St. Thomas is succinct in what the content of such preaching should be and merely quotes from Gregory’s *Moralia in Job* (6:35): “He harvests the rich fruits of his preachings, who sends out the seeds of good work”. One would not be amiss in reading “good work” as referring to the labor of reciting the Psalms. Both St. Gregory and St. Thomas are to be understood as emphasizing (vocal) prayer as a requisite for effective preaching.

Psalm 41, which is used during the baptismal liturgy St. Thomas writes, and in particular verse 2 (“My soul hath thirsted after the strong living God; when shall I come and appear before the face of God?”), occasions St. Thomas to emphasize the desire of the catechumens to receive Baptism as well as on the graces received when one goes over into “the house of God”. In Psalm 42, St. Thomas explains that the judgment (*Iudica me, Deus*) one is asking for is not a judgment of severity which only considers the thing itself (*res*) but the judgment of mercy which considers both the thing and the condition of the person. Moreover, the separation from the unjust one, he explains, refers first of all to the cause of evil and less so to the place (*etsi non loco, saltem causa*). In other words, while one may share many things with the unjust “as a result of chance”, the good or bad use of things lies within our grasp. St. Thomas, moreover, explores how Psalm 42 continues the prayer of desire by the catechumens to enter the Church (“into thy tabernacles”), both here on earth and in heaven. From very early onwards in the history of the Church, Psalms 41-42 were used in the liturgy. The earliest record dates back to St. Ambrose (*De Sacramentis* IV, 7). During the early Middle Ages, the psalms appear as preparatory prayers in the liturgical books for the celebration of the Mass, a practice which became universal with the Missal of Pius V in 1570 and is still in use in the extraordinary form of the Roman Rite. St. Thomas explicitly mentions this fact –and it seems this is the only place in his works where he does so– when commenting on verse four: “And I will go in to the altar of God: to God who giveth joy to my youth”. Referencing Psalm 102:5 (“thy youth shall be renewed like the eagles”), he writes that joy and renewal of the spirit are necessary for those entering the heavenly altar, i.e. God himself (*In Ps. 42, no. 2*).

One encounters another instance of St. Thomas’ interest in the liturgy when he comments on Ps. 46: 2: “iubilare Deo in voce exultationis”. The ineffability of the God who is to be praised is exemplified by quoting Jere-



miah 1:6, “And I said: Ah, ah, ah, Lord God: behold, I cannot speak, for I am a child”. This praise of God’s ineffability, as he observes, is signified by the Church when the liturgy emphasizes a single word with a multiple set of chanted notes, as in the opening words of Psalm 65: “Iubilare Deo omnis terra”. Verse 6, “Ascendit Deus in iubilo, et Dominus in voce tubæ”, occasions him to comment on Christ’s Ascension and distinguish the two parts of the verse. Whereas the Apostles praised Christ on the basis of an imperfect knowledge of God (“God ascends with jubilee”), it was more fitting for the angels, who possess a clear knowledge of God, to announce God (“and the Lord with the sound of trumpet”).

### Christ, Mary and the Church

It is important to recognize from the start that for St. Thomas the Bible is not merely a collection of books written from different historical perspectives but “but a single source of revelation bearing witness to a single economy of salvation” (Healy, 2012, p. 193) at the heart of which stands Jesus Christ. As a result, there is a genuine continuity between old and new so that a Christological reading of the Psalms is an essential feature of revelation itself. St. Thomas’s christological reading of the Psalms becomes apparent in the introduction to his comments on Psalm 43, a prayer reflecting on the afflictions the whole people have to endure. Reflecting on the opening verse (“for the sons of Korah”), he identifies as the primary object of the psalm the “sons of the Passion of Christ”, i.e. the martyrs. Drawing upon the analogy of a father who gives his little children modest goods but to adults more precious goods, St. Thomas explains that God gave to the children who were under the Law modest, temporal goods while to those who are “perfect in the New Testament” (*perfectis in novo testamento*). God does not give precious, temporal goods but afflictions so as to increase their hope in eternal spiritual goods. St. Thomas finds confirmation in the third Beatitude (Luke 6:22), in which Christ says: “Blessed shall you be when men shall hate you”. Hence it becomes understandable when St. Thomas writes that the Psalm is intended “to detract the men of the New Testament from the appetite of earthly prosperity promised in the Old Testament (*In Ps. 43, no. 1*).

St. Thomas regards Psalm 44 (*Canticum pro dilecto*) as an epithalamium, i.e., a song celebrating the wedding nuptials between Christ and the Church which was initiated when “the Son of God united himself to the human nature in the virginal womb”. In fact, both Psalm 44 and the Song of Songs

deal with the same matter (Bonino, 2019). As a canticle for the Beloved, i.e. Christ, the psalmist praises the Son's divinity in verse 1, while his humanity is praised in verses 2-10a. Starting from verse 10b, Aquinas says, the psalmist praises Christ by way of his bride, the Church. Verse 10b, which, depending on the version of the Vulgate Aquinas is using, reads: "adstetit regina a dextris tuis in vestitu deaurato circumdata varietate" or "filiae regum in honore tuo stetit coniux in dextera tua in diademate aureo". The bride of Christ, the Church, is praised in regard to four things. First, there is the fact that her groom, Christ, is with the Church according to 2 Cor. 11:2 ("for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin"). Second, the dignity of the Church is expressed in the fact that she, like a queen, stands by her Groom, is always attached and united to Him. Third, the glory of the Church consists in her standing at his right-hand side. This means that the Church has always promoted the spiritual goods over the temporal goods. Fourth and finally, the Church is praised because of her splendid dress. Aquinas explains that "in vestitu deaurato" (clothing adorned with gold) means that the Church is clothed in a double vestment. The first vestment is the teaching of the two Testaments and he remarks that this vestment is not merely of gold but adorned with gold because it reflects divine wisdom, with which this teaching of the two Testaments is filled. The addition "circumdata varietate" refers to the multitude of languages in which the Church expresses herself. The second vestment refers to the virtuous acts of the Church. In this case, gold refers to charity. Again, this vestment is not merely golden but "deauratus", adorned in gold because, according to 1 Cor. 16:14, all the actions of the Church should be done in charity. The addition "circumdata varietate" refers to the variety of ways in which the virtue of charity can be realized according to Col. 3:12: "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience". St. Thomas considers it almost self-evident that verse 10b ("adstetit regina a dextris tuis in vestitu deaurato circumdata varietate") can also be applied to Mary, so that at this point in his commentary he immediately continues by adding the following statement:

And all this can be said with regard to the Blessed Virgin, who is the queen and the mother of the king, and who stands above all the choirs in a vestment adorned with gold, this is adorned by the divinity: not as God but because she is the mother of God. (*In Ps. 44, no. 7*)

In other words, everything which St. Thomas has said with regard to the Church in reading Psalm 44 can also be said of the Virgin Mary (Nichols, 2004).

One finds a similar ecclesiological and Mariological reading in St. Thomas' exegesis of Psalm 45:5-6, "The stream of the river maketh the city of God joyful: the most High hath sanctified his own tabernacle. God is in the midst thereof, it shall not be moved: God will help it in the morning early". After commenting how "in the midst thereof" (*in medio eius*) refers to the Church, aided by the spiritual illumination of the Holy Spirit, St. Thomas adds that these words can also be referred to the blessed Virgin, who is the city, and in whom the Holy Spirit lives and who sanctifies the womb of Christ's mother so that she has never sinned, not mortally nor venially (*In Ps.* 45, no. 3; cf. *In Ps.* 50, no. 3).

In developing St. Thomas' Mariology, the commentatorial tradition deemed it suitable to clarify this connection between Christ, Mary, and the Church by way of the expression *collum ecclesiae*, as one can see for instance in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Dominicans Peter de Godoy and Vincent de Contenson<sup>4</sup>. Christ is head of the Church, Mary is the intermediary which unites the head with the members. Mary is the mystical neck of the divine body which is the Church. As all movement and energy reaches the rest of the body from the head only by going through the neck, so the life of Christ reaches the faithful only by passing through Mary, the supernatural organ which connects the mystical head with members of the body.

The Christological and ecclesiological reading comes to the fore explicitly in Psalm 47 as well. The words of the opening verse "for the second day of the week" are connected to the second day of creation when God made

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<sup>4</sup> Petrus de Godoy (+ 1677) writes in his *Disputationes theologicae in tertiam partem Divi Thomae* volume 2, tract. 6. disp. 29, § 9, no. 127: "Quia Caput Ecclesiae non solum dicit perfectionem et excessum, sed etiam dicit influxum meritorium de condigno, quem B. Virgo in Ecclesiae membra non habuit; ideo non caput, sed Collum Ecclesiae dicitur, quia est conjunctior Christo capiti". See also Vincent de Contenson (1641-1674), *Theologia mentis et cordis*, volume 2, lib. X, diss. 6, cap. 2: "Decima quarta praerogativa: Mater Dei est complementum Trinitatis... Tum sexto, quia omnium, quae in nos a Trinitate dimanant, beneficiorum conferendorum voluntas completur Dei Genitricis precibus. Hinc a patribus Maria Vena Trinitatis, Vena Salutis nominatur; quia sicut sanguis, qui est vita carnis, occulte decurrit et irripet per venas; sic gratia, quae est vita animae, per Mariam dispensatur et refluit". Note however that the expression 'Collum ecclesiae' is first used by Hermann of Tournai (+ 1137) in his *De incarnatione* c. 8 (PL 180, 29D-30A) and can also be found in Richard of Saint-Laurent, Jean Gerson, Bernardin of Siena and Robert Bellarmine.

the firmament after He had created light on the first day. Given that Christ is the Light and the Church the firmament, Psalm 47, so he argues, deals with the “magnificence of the Church”. Unsurprisingly, then, St. Thomas applies verse 10 (“We have received thy mercy, O God, in the midst of thy temple”) to the Church and to Christ. The mercy of God can therefore refer to the mercy all receive in the Church by way of the sacraments. St. Thomas observes, however, that whereas the good receive with the sacraments both the grace and the effects thereof, the bad only receive the sacrament. Alternatively, Christ himself is mercy received either corporally as happened to Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) or by faith. St. Thomas adds that in this case “in the midst of thy temple” refers to the reception of Christ in agreement with the Church “for those who do not accept the general teaching (*communem doctrinam*) of the Church do not receive this mercy”. In the same vein, one finds a beautiful profession of faith on the part of St. Thomas when he comments on verse 13 (“Surround Sion, and embrace her”): “Some surround the Church with a wicked eye so as to attack her. But we surround her so as to love her. And thus, he says, ‘And embrace her, namely with loving’”.

### Sin and mercy

In his Prologue, Thomas writes that the reason why the Psalter is so frequently used in the Church is not only that it contains the whole of Scripture, as we remarked earlier, but also in order “to give us hope in the divine mercy, since although David sinned, he was nevertheless restored through penance”. As Garrigou-Lagrange so aptly formulated: “Mercy is the first manifestation of love” (Quoted in Cessario & Cuddy, 2016, p. 335).

Psalm 50, *Miserere*, is one of the most well-known passages from the Old Testament but was also frequently used in St. Thomas’ own liturgical life at the priory. He is aware that it belongs to the seven so-called penitential psalms: Psalm 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129 and 142. As he observes, however, the other six penitential psalms propose difficult things such as in Psalm 6:7 (“I have labored in my groanings, every night I will wash my bed: I will water my couch with my tears”) or in Psalm 101:10 (“For I did eat ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping”). Psalm 50 only implores divine mercy and for this reason, he writes, it is the most repeated psalm in the Church. Moreover, whereas Psalm 6 emphasized contrition, Psalm 31 confession by mouth, Psalm 37 satisfaction, Psalm 50 adds a new element, i.e., “how repentance restores man to perfection”. Psalm 50 therefore speaks

about the whole of Christian sorrow and reconciliation and takes those who read it –but better is to say those who pray it!– into the mystery of divine mercy and compassion for the person who acknowledges that through sin he has become estranged from God and wishes to return to Him. As father Leo Elders has observed: “Reading the commentary, and meditating on its exposition, procures a deep spiritual joy, for the richness of its content, its moving piety, and the affinity of Thomas with the thought of the Psalmist” (2011, p. 65).

One example of this affinity might be his comments on verse 8a: “For behold thou hast loved truth”. Here St. Thomas shows his perceptiveness of the mind of the penitent sinner. He writes:

He, who wishes to give satisfaction, must love that which God loves. God however loves the truth of the faith. John 18:37: “Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice”. Likewise, God loves justice. Psalm 88:15: “Mercy and truth shall go before thy face”. Such love of truth and justice is needed in a penitent in order that one might be punished in those things in which one has failed. (*In Ps. 50, no. 3*)

Another example might be his comments on verse 10: “in my hearing thou shalt give joy and gladness: and the bones that have been humbled shall rejoice”. As Romanus Cessario has observed: “the theme of joy being given back to the repentant sinner predominates in Aquinas’s theology”. Father Cessario gives as an example St. Thomas’ comment on Mt 5:4 (“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”) in which it is said that one who mourns for personal sins receives the consolation of joy (1990, p. 46). Similarly, commenting on verse 10, St. Thomas remarks that: “For through the sorrow of repentance the heart of man is crushed; and therefore, when men are glad, it is a sign that their bones which are sorrowful and suffering share joy”. Notwithstanding David’s sexual transgressions with Bathsheba the grace of forgiveness for a repentant sinner is more powerful and joyful. And so St. Thomas, commenting on verse 14, writes that the remission of sins:

Gives cheerfulness, for he who has grace has charity; and he who has charity loves God, and possesses him; and he who has what he loves, rejoices. Therefore, where charity is, there is joy. Romans 14:17 “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but joy in the Holy Spirit”. The Psalmist

had lost this joy; and therefore he asks that it be restored to him, when he says: “Restore unto me the joy”, not of worldly things, “but of thy salvation”. Another text has ‘the joy of Jesus’, that is, the Savior, through whom the remission of sins is accomplished”. (*In Ps.* 50, no. 4)

Just as St. Thomas has shown himself to be an excellent observer of the repentant sinner in Psalm 50, in Psalm 51 he provides us with a phenomenology of the sinner’s mindset. He writes:

It should be known, that in the man who clings to sin, three things follow in an order. The first is the delight of the sin. The second is the thought of the sin: for we think about those things that we take delight in. The third is the glorying on his part of having perpetrated the sin. For, one takes joy quite naturally when one does what one loves.

The somewhat enigmatic expression in verse 7 which says that God will take away “thy root (*radicem*) out of the land of the living” is connected to Ephesians 3:17 (“being rooted (*radicati*) and founded in charity”) so that it is charity, which is “the root of all good things”, that is being taken away” (*In Ps.* 51, no. 3).

Whereas Psalm 51 dealt with the wickedness of sinners in their affection toward sin, Psalm 52, St. Thomas observes, examines their wickedness in their contempt for God. Noting the many similarities between this psalm and Psalm 13, St. Thomas nevertheless ascribes a different goal to both psalms. Whereas Psalm 13 describes the first coming of Christ in the Incarnation, Psalm 52 deals with the second coming of Christ at the Last Judgment. In both places he deals with Anselm’s proof of God’s existence because Anselm introduces his proof with verse 1: “The fool said in his heart: ‘There is no God’”. The basis of his response, the distinction between *secundum se et non quoad nos* and *secundum se et quoad nos* is also present in ST I, q. 2, a. 1 (Elders, 2018). In both places he assigns the motif for rejecting God’s existence, that is to say for His care for creation, to the mistaken idea that God, being immaterial and unchangeable, does not know material and changeable things. In Psalm 13 he draws upon Dionysius (*De divinis nominibus*, chapter 7) to argue for the opposite: precisely because God as Creator knows in an immaterial way, He also knows everything that is material (Elders, 2019, pp. 122-123). In Psalm 52 he draws upon God’s perfection to argue that it belongs to His perfection to care for everything and gives Ecclesiasticus 16:18 as Scriptural corroboration: “Behold the heaven, and the

heavens of heavens, the deep, and all the earth, and the things that are in them, shall be moved in his sight". In both psalms he uses a very apt image to express God's closeness to the human soul: "The natural warmth (*calor naturalis*) of the human soul is God Himself" (*In Ps.* 52, no. 5). In Psalm 13 he clarifies the word "inutiles" (*simul inutiles facti sunt*) by saying "something is unprofitable when it does not attain the goal for which it was made" (*In Ps.* 13, no. 2). In Psalm 52 he connects this to the beautiful text by St. Paul: "If I don't have charity, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3) (*In Ps.* 52, no. 5).

In Psalm 53 the psalmist prays in the face of his persecutors. St. Thomas emphasizes that it is God's grace and mercy (*propter amorem divini nominis*) which is the ultimate cause of granting man's petition. Regarding the difficult passage here and elsewhere in the Book of Psalms where the psalmist asks God's judgement to come upon sinners, St. Thomas emphasizes God's transcendent justice over and against man's vengeance (*non petit ex desiderio vindicare*, *In Ps.* 53, no. 1). and remarks that a sinner's conversion should always be part of our prayers (cf. ST II-II, q. 25, a. 6, ad 3; q. 76, a. 1 and q. 83, a. 8, ad 1). In Psalm 54 one finds another instance of God's transcendence and the primacy of His causality regarding petitionary prayer: the order in which God receives a prayer not "on account of the prayer, but rather the prayer of those who are fit to be received, is received on account of the petition" (*In Ps.* 54, no. 2; see Bonino, 2010).

## Contemplation and Preaching

Commenting on Psalm 50, verses 15-16 ("I will teach the unjust thy ways: and the wicked shall be converted to thee. Deliver me from blood, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall extol thy justice"), St. Thomas writes that the psalmist promises a twofold spiritual sacrifice, namely a sacrifice of instruction, "through which his neighbor is taught", and a spiritual sacrifice of praise, "through which God is praised". In fact, on many occasions throughout the *Postilla* St. Thomas, the Dominican friar of the Order of Preachers, emphasizes the importance of preaching, which is directed to showing "the magnificence of God by proclaiming the faith and announcing the kindnesses of God, so that charity be inflamed in hearts of the listeners" (*In Ps.* 47, no. 4)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> See also *In Ps.* 10, no. 1: "Ecclesia fit obscura in novitate, quando non sunt in ea praedicatores et doctores"; *In Ps.* 41, no. 5: "Et hoc fit non propria virtute, sed, in voce cataractarum tuarum; idest inspiratione spiritus sancti, ex qua habet efficaciam lin-

Commenting on verse 21b (“then shall they lay calves upon thy altar”), St. Thomas even compares the sacrificed calves with preachers who, “bellowing (*mugientes*) with instruction in faith”, are laid upon the altar, that is, upon “the confession of faith” by the prelates (*In Ps.* 50, no. 9). A central part of God’s kindness is expressed by Sirach 35:26, “The mercy of God is beautiful in the time of affliction, as a cloud of rain in the time of drought”. Our Dominican saint connects the Lord’s description in Ps. 9:10 (“a helper in due time in tribulation”) to the Order of Preachers, for since God is indeed a helper in time of affliction, this fact, he notes, “ought to be preached” to the ones in need of God’s mercy (*tunc est eis praedicandum*) (*In Ps.* 9, no. 7). And this need is real. Commenting on the words of the Psalmist in Ps. 39: 6 (“I have declared and I have spoken they are multiplied above number”) he distinguishes between the declaration (*annuntiavi*), i.e., the manifestation of the divine works and the spoken word through which the Psalmist more explicitly (*expressius*) expresses God’s works than through signs. Moreover, St. Thomas continues, the necessity for preaching consists in the fact that the evil ones outnumber the good ones (*multiplicati super numerum*) and hence, referencing Mt. 7:13-14, to the evil ones it must be announced that the road to perdition is wide whereas the road that leads to life is narrow (*In Ps.* 39, no. 3).

Psalm 49, v.16 (“But to the sinner God hath said: Why dost thou declare my justices, and take my covenant in thy mouth?”) occasions St. Thomas to raise the question whether someone in the state of mortal sin sins mortally when he preaches or teaches publicly. He responds that this should never happen when the sin is public knowledge nor when the sin is only privately known but there is no repentance for in doing so, he provokes God. But if the sin is only privately known and there is repentance, the public preaching against sin is of value for “just as he detests the sins of others, so too does he despises his own” (*In Ps.* 49, no. 9; cf. *In Ps.* 50, no. 7). In verse 18 God laments: “If thou didst see a thief thou didst run with him: and with adulterers thou hast been a partaker”. Here one finds a very interesting use of the expression “spiritual adultery” (*adulterium spirituale*). On previous occasions St. Thomas had used this expression to refer to the violation of a woman who has professed the vow of continence (*ST II-II*, q. 154, a. 1, ad 3) or to the

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gna praedicatoris”; *In Ps.* 49, no.4: “Est autem duplex locutio Dei. Una est exterior per praedicatores. Hebr. 1: olim Deus loquens patribus in prophetis. Alia est interior per inspirationem”; *In Ps.* 17, no. 11. See the analysis by Morard (1999, pp. 138-139) and Torrell (1982, pp. 213-245).



leaving of one's spouse because of unbelief (*Super Sent.* IV, d. 39, q. a. a. 4, s.c. 2); on this occasion –which seems to be a unique instance in his writings– St. Thomas, inspired by 2 Corinthians 17 (“For we are not as many, adulterating the word of God”), uses the expression “spiritual adultery” as well as “spiritual theft” in reference to the explanation of Scripture. Whereas spiritual theft occurs when the true meaning of Scripture is corrupted and concealed, spiritual adultery twists the words of Scripture in another meaning or for another purpose “for instance, if one were to preach something for the sake of gain or seduction” (*In Ps.* 49, no. 9).

The afflictions and troubles brought upon by the psalmist's persecutors have, however, a remedy, St. Thomas argues. “And I said: Who will give me wings like a dove, and I will fly and be at rest?” (*Ps.* 54:7). It should come as no surprise that St. Thomas, a son of St. Dominic, offers us a profoundly Dominican commentary on this verse. In the face of the troubles that accompany the active life, the remedy lies above all in contemplation. Three kinds of “wings” are required to arrive at the act of contemplation: the wings of the moral virtues, the wings of charity, and the wings of wisdom. St. Thomas next contrasts the dove with the raven. He likens the latter to those philosophers who search for some truth but when found keep it to themselves and hence only think of themselves (*nihil cogitant nisi de se ipsis*) and do not strive towards holiness. It is the dove who returned back to the ark of Noah with an olive branch, that is to say, holiness consists not merely in the possession of truth, let alone in the acquisition of some truth, “but those fly like doves who both contemplate and turn back towards their neighbors, teaching what they have contemplated” (*contemplantur et revertuntur ad proximos contemplata docentes*, *In Ps.* 54, no. 5)<sup>6</sup>. In doing so they bring “the oil of mercy” to their neighbors. The resemblance to the Dominican adage *contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere* is unmistakable and, what is more, neither Peter Lombard's *Glossa* nor Hugh of St. Cher's *Postilla* mention this Dominican reading. In order to understand the comment that in their care for their neighbors one brings the “oil of mercy” to them, we can turn to St. Thomas' comments on the Baptism of Jesus in John 1:32. Reflecting on the reasons why the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus as a dove, St. Thomas writes:

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<sup>6</sup> See also the prologue of the so-called “oldest constitutions” (1236): “cum ordo noster specialiter ob predicationem et animarum salutem ab initio noscatur institutus fuisse, et studium nostrum ad hoc principaliter ardentique summo opere debeat intendere, ut proximorum animabus possimus utiles esse” (Thomas, 1965, p. 311).

For as the dove bearing the green olive branch was a sign of God's mercy to those who survived the waters of the deluge, so too in baptism, the Holy Spirit, coming in the form of a dove, is a sign of the divine mercy which takes away the sins of those baptized and confers grace". (*In Ioan.* 1, l. 14, no. 272)<sup>7</sup>

Or, in the words of Romanus Cessario and Cajetan Cuddy: "God's omnipotent mercy suffers no limitations in its power to save the miserable" (2016, p. 239).

Ps. 24:5 ("Direct me in thy truth, and teach me") shows that the goal of contemplation as the acquisition of the knowledge of unknown things will only be reached when it is God's truth which directs the mind. St. Thomas adds that this will not only happen through Scripture and creation "but also interiorly" (*sed etiam interius*, *In Ps.* 24, no. 4), as is expressed in John 6:45 ("Every one that hath heard of the Father, and hath learned, cometh to me"). Commenting on verses 15-16 ("My eyes are ever towards the Lord for he shall pluck my feet out of the snare. Look thou upon me, and have mercy on me; for I am alone and poor"), St. Thomas emphasizes God's primacy in this interior direction. The eyes of faith and intelligence elevate the soul to God in preparing for prayer. Moreover, the Psalmist's prayer itself depends (in itself and in its realization) upon God who in His mercy turns towards the Psalmist. For, as St. Thomas explains, it was Christ's turning and looking onto Peter which caused Peter to remember and weep (Lk 22:61-62) (*In Ps.* 24, no.11). Such a knowledge, when given by Christ, causes man to attain truth itself and no longer a pale image of it; it causes man to be no longer troubled by earthly preoccupations like Martha, who was "disquieted in vain" (Ps. 38:7), because he now contemplates the true condition of this life and strives towards the

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<sup>7</sup> The veiled criticism of prelates in *In Ps.* 54, no. 9 ("Et haec omnia dantur a Deo. Quandoque dantur quibusdam qui si habent pennas, tamen habent eas impeditas, ut praelatis cum admittitur eorum cessio") is explored more fully when commenting on "the merchants selling oxen, sheep and doves" in John 2: 14. *In Ioan.* 2, l. 2, no. 383: "It happens that certain prelates or heads of churches sell these oxen, sheep and doves, not overtly by simony, but covertly by negligence; that is, when they are so eager for and occupied with temporal gain that they neglect the spiritual welfare of their subjects. And this is the way they sell the oxen, sheep and doves, i.e., the three classes of people subject to them. First of all, they sell the preachers and laborers, who are signified by the oxen [...] They also sell those in the active life, and those occupied with ministering, signified by the sheep [...] They also sell the contemplatives, signified by the doves: "Who will give me wings like a dove, and I will fly?" (Ps 54:7)".

afterlife (*In Ps.* 38, no. 5). In order to remind us of the correct priorities and the force of earthly preoccupations, St. Thomas remarks that is fitting that the Church begins every hour of the divine office by imploring God's help (*In Ps.* 38, no. 12). He makes this remark when commenting on Ps. 38:22-23 ("Ne derelinquas me, Domine Deus meus; ne discesseris a me. Intende in adiutorium meum, Domine Deus salutis meæ"), but he undoubtedly has Ps. 69:2 in mind ("Deus, in adiutorium meum intende; Domine, ad adjuvandum me festina"), a verse which, ever since Benedict's Rule, has opened the divine office. St. Thomas remarks that the reason this verse has been chosen to open the divine office is the fact that it has the power to act against temptations. Here the influence of John Cassian, whose *Collationes* St. Thomas knew very well (Hofer, 2021), becomes apparent, for John Cassian considers Ps. 69:2 an "impregnable wall for all who are laboring under the attacks of demons", in particular as these attacks become apparent under the guise of the seven deadly sins (*Collationes* X, 10). It is no wonder therefore that St. Thomas refers to the moral virtues, one of the three wings (along with charity and wisdom) that are required for contemplation, as "a certain disposition towards contemplation" by which the ordering of the corrupt affections takes place (*In Ps.* 54, no. 54). In other words: "When the moral virtues are not functioning in the way that they should, which is not to affirm that every sin results in the loss of a virtue, the intellectual life falters" (Cessario, 2014, pp. 165-166)<sup>8</sup>.

### Conclusion

In this essay I have sought to show that the *Postilla* displays crucial elements of St. Thomas's Dominican *spirituality* and interior life as a *Magister in Sacra Pagina*, a friar, and a preacher. In our selected areas of (1) Prayer and the Liturgy, (2) Christ, Mary and the Church, (3) Sin and Mercy and (4) Contemplation and Preaching one can find a Dominican friar at work who took to heart his own teaching: "It is essential that they who labor for the salvation of souls should be remarkable both for learning (*scientia*), and for sanctity of life" (*Contra impugnantes*, ch. 4). Hence, in the *Postilla* we encounter not only the last fruits of his thought but are also directed towards the heart of his thought. A close reading of this text, therefore, increases a genuine *affectus* for St. Thomas' works, knowing that, just as is the case with

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<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere I have developed this argument at length (Vijgen, 2019).

Scripture, a correct understanding of St. Thomas' works presupposes a genuine love for them.

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