

THE THOMISTIC CONCEPT OF DEVOTION

[Second Installment]



III. SAINT THOMAS' CONCEPT OF DEVOTION AS DEVELOPED IN THE *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*

1. *The definition of Devotion.* In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Saint Thomas, because he was commenting on the works of another, followed an order of treatment that was not of his own choosing. In the *Summa*, however, the order is entirely his own and thus solely by reason of the place in which he treats devotion he resolves a question, the solution of which offered no little difficulty in his early treatment of devotion in the *Sentences*. The *Secundae* of the *Summa* is given over to the consideration of the particular means by which man is to attain his ultimate end—treating mainly the means that are at the disposal of every man. These the Angelic Doctor determines to be the three theological and the four cardinal virtues. The second cardinal virtue of which he treats is justice. As the first potential part of justice he assigns the virtue of religion, and his Question on Devotion is the first of a series of questions dealing with the acts of that virtue. Thus he indicates immediately his solution of the question regarding the connection of devotion with the virtue of religion. And by reason of the fact that devotion heads a group of questions on the *acts* of religion, it is evident that the Angelic Doctor has definitely determined its status in the realm of being.

In his prologue to the question on devotion Saint Thomas says: "The acts of religion are now to be considered—first the interior acts, for these are the principal ones—then the exterior acts, which are secondary. The interior acts of the virtue of religion are devotion and prayer, and devotion is to be considered first."¹³² He answers four general questions about devotion: What is it; To what virtue does it belong; What are its causes; What are its effects. His answer to the first question is different not only from his own doctrine in other works, where he considered it to be a disposi-

¹³² Deinde considerandum est de actibus religionis. Et primo, de actibus interioribus, qui sunt secundarii. Interioribus autem actibus religionis videntur esse devotio et oratio. Primo ergo de devotione agendum est (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 82, prol.).

tion of the soul, but also from the doctrine of anyone who pre-
ceded him. His answer is original and of immense importance. He
shows that it is by acts that man merits and he argues that by
reason of the fact that there is a special title of merit in devotion,
devotion must be a special act.¹²⁸ He shows from what is meant by
devotion that it must be a special act.

Devotion comes from the idea of dedication and those were called devout
or devoted who in some way dedicated themselves to God so as to be
utterly His. Therefore devotion is nothing other than promptitude of will
in those things that concern the worship of God. Since it is evident that
this is a special act it follows that devotion is a special act of the will.¹²⁴
Hence devotion is neither a quality nor merely a mode of acts of
religion. It is itself a special act.

The Angelic Doctor clearly determines the object of this special
act. "Devotion is the act of the will by which man offers himself
to God to serve Him and this is the ultimate end."¹²⁵ It is, as
shall be seen, certainly the ultimate end of all other acts of religion.
And it is the end of all human actions, as Saint Thomas seems to
indicate here,¹²⁶ in the measure that religion can command the
acts of the other virtues.

The all important question of what exactly this act of prompti-
tude implies and includes will be left to a later section where the
principal commentators on the *Summa* will contribute to its better
understanding. The remainder of this section will be devoted to a
consideration of devotion in its relation to the virtue of religion, to
the other acts of religion, and to other virtues and their acts.

2. *Devotion and the Virtue of Religion.* Saint Thomas con-
cludes that devotion is an act of the virtue of religion and he proves
it first by showing that devotion comes from the word that means
"vow," for a vow is certainly an act of religion.¹²⁷ He proves it

¹²² Actibus meretur. Sed devotio habet specialem rationem merendi. Ergo
devotio est specialis actus. (*Ibid.*, a. 1, Sed Contra).
¹²³ Devotio dicitur a devovendo: unde devoti dicuntur qui seipso quodammodo
Deo devovunt, ut ei se totaliter subdant. . . unde devotio nihil aliud esse videtur
quam voluntas quaedam prompte tradendi se ad ea quae pertinent ad Dei familia-
tum. . . Manifestum est autem quod voluntas prompte faciendi quod ad Dei
servitium pertinet est quidam specialis actus. Unde devotio est specialis actus
voluntatis (*Ibid.*, a. 1, c.).
¹²⁴ Et ideo, cum devotio sit actus voluntatis hominis offerentis seipsum Deo ad
ei servendum qui est ultimus finis. . . (*Ibid.*, ad 1um).
¹²⁵ Consequens est quod devotio imponat modum humanis actibus, sive sint
ipsius voluntatis circa ea quae sunt ad finem, sive etiam sint aliarum potentiarum
quae a voluntate moventur (*Ibid.*).
¹²⁶ Devotio dicitur a devovendo. . . , sed votum est actus religionis. Ergo et
devotio (*Ibid.*, a. 2, Sed Contra).

again by saying that it certainly pertains to the virtue of religion to will those things that concern divine worship and, since to will those things and to have a prompt will in those things pertain to the same virtue, it follows that devotion must be an act of religion.¹³⁸ His argument depends upon the fact that both acts have the same formal object and therefore must pertain to the same virtue. To use the example which Saint Thomas himself uses: man does not require two different habits in order to intend just things and to act justly. One and the same habit of justice takes care of both operations.¹³⁹

Saint Thomas gives the reason why he treats of devotion first among the acts of religion. "After devotion, which regards the will itself, prayer, which concerns the mind of man, is the principal act of religion."¹⁴⁰ Devotion, therefore, is the first and most important act of religion. The truth of this statement will become more and more evident when the relation of devotion to other acts of man is considered. He says again: "[Obedience] in the measure that it proceeds from reverence for God is contained in the virtue of religion. And it concerns devotion which is the principal act of religion."¹⁴¹

In considering the relation of devotion to the other acts of religion, a threefold division should be made. There are acts which pertain to religion by reason of the natural law and there are those which pertain to that virtue by reason of positive divine law. The former are prayer, adoration, sacrifice, vows, adjuration, and invocation or praise. Positive divine law has determined two different codes of ceremonial law. These correspond to the Old Law before Christ and to the New Law, which He instituted. Saint Thomas says of the worship of God in the Old Law that it was not distinguished from the worship of Him according to the law of nature as something altogether different, but rather as adding

¹³⁸ Ad eandem virtutem pertinet velle facere aliquid, et promptam voluntatem habere ad illud faciendum: quia utriusque actus est idem obiectum. . . . Manifestum est autem quod operari ea quae pertinent ad divinum cultum seu famulatum pertinet proprie ad religionem, . . . unde etiam ad eam pertinet habere promptam voluntatem ad huiusmodi exequenda, quod est esse devotum (*Ibid.*, 2, 2, c.).
¹³⁹ Iustitia est qua volunt homines et operantur iusta (*Ibid.*, Cf. Aristotle, *V Ethic.*).
¹⁴⁰ Et ideo post devotionem, quae pertinet ad ipsam voluntatem, oratio, quae pertinet ad partem intellectivam, est praecipua inter actus religionis, per quam religio intellectum hominis movet in Deum (*Ibid.*, q. 83, a. 3, ad Ium).
¹⁴¹ In quantum vero procedit ex reverentia Dei, continetur sub religione: et pertinet ad devotionem, quae est principalis actus religionis (*Ibid.*, q. 104, a. 3, ad Ium).

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something over and above what the natural law demanded.¹⁴² He says also of the worship of the Old Law that it was prefigurative of Christ.¹⁴³ And again he says that the sacrifice of the Old Law prefigured the immolation of Christ; the sacraments and sacred things of the Old Law prefigured those of the New; and the observances of the Old Law prefigured the life of those under the New Law.¹⁴⁴

The acts of worship proper to the Old Law are the ceremonial precepts of the Old Testament. The acts of worship proper to the New Law are the Mass, the Sacraments, and the liturgy as it exists in the Church today.

The question that naturally arises when devotion is said to be a special act, namely, the question regarding the reason why devotion is so often spoken of as though it were a mode of other acts of religion, is best treated here before beginning the consideration of the relation of devotion to other acts of religion. Why is man said to pray devoutly, genuflect devoutly, receive Holy Communion devoutly, and so on? It would seem that these are the acts, and devotion only their mode. The Angelic Doctor answers this question by saying that a mover always stamps with its own individuality the motion by which it moves anything.¹⁴⁵ Thus an expert critic can determine the authorship of a painting of one of the Masters simply by examining the characteristics of the work itself. For the painter has put into his work the defects or perfections that are peculiarly his own. He has, so to speak, painted himself into whatever subject he has chosen for his picture. Now the motor in man, that from which every movement of whatever faculty must come, is his will. Hence if the will is wholly given to God by the act of devotion, it necessarily follows that any movement which the will inaugurates must be devout.¹⁴⁶ Devotion is the first, the interior, and the principal act of religion and must, therefore, be in every act of religion, or the act is not a true act of religion at all, but has only the external appearance of one. Perhaps a comparison

¹⁴² Lex vetus distinguitur a lege naturae, non tamquam ab ea omnino aliena sed tamquam ei aliqua superaddens (*Ibid.*, I-II, q. 99, a. 2, ad Ium).

¹⁴³ Et ideo oportebat exteriorem cultum veteris legis non solum esse figurativum futurae veritatis manifestandae in patria, sed etiam esse figurativum Christi

¹⁴⁴ Unde sicut per sacrificia significatur Christus immolatus, ita etiam per sacramenta, et sacra illorum figurabatur sacramenta et sacra novae legis; et per eorum observantias figurabatur conversatio populi novae legis (*Ibid.*, a. 4, ad Ium).

¹⁴⁵ Movens imponit modum motui mobilis (*Ibid.*, II-II, q. 82, a. 1, ad Ium).

¹⁴⁶ Voluntas autem movet alias vires animae ad suos actus: . . . et ideo, cum devotio sit actus voluntatis hominis offerentis seipsam Deo ad ei servitandum, consequens est quod devotio imponat modum humanis actibus (*Ibid.*).

between devotion and the first act of the virtue of charity will clear up this point. They may be compared in the following way:

HABIT	PRIMARY ACT	SECONDARY ACT	OBJECT
Charity	Love	Almsgiving	Union with God.
Religion	Devotion	Sacrifice	Subjection to God

Every secondary act of charity must proceed through the primary act of the virtue so that it is just as impossible to have a true act of almsgiving without the love of charity as it is to have a true act of sacrifice without devotion. And devout sacrifice or devout prayer is spoken of in exactly the same sense as men speak of the charitable giving of an alms. Devotion is not merely a mode of the act of religion any more than love is the mode of the act of almsgiving. Hence, far from relegating devotion to a mere modality, the use of the word to modify other acts of religion indicates its profound importance and absolute necessity.

3. *Devotion and Prayer.* Saint Thomas has determined before that prayer is an act of the reason,¹⁴⁷ and he repeats that doctrine here in the *Summa*.¹⁴⁸ How, therefore, can it come under the influence of devotion which is in the will, or how, for that matter, can it even be an act of the virtue of religion, for religion is subjected in the will. Saint Thomas answers that this is due to the power of the will to move the other faculties of the soul and to ordain them to its own end. Hence, because religion is in the will, it can ordain the intellect to the worship of God.¹⁴⁹ Billuart adds that prayer is not only an act of religion but an elicited act of that virtue. And he argues that to be an elicited act of religion prayer need not be an act of the same potency as that in which the virtue is subjected, that is, the will. It is sufficient that it be ordained to the end of the virtue of religion without the intervention of any other virtue. He gives as an example an exterior act of confession of faith which, although it is elicited by the virtue of faith, is certainly in a different potency. "It is thus," Billuart says, "that the will informed by the virtue of religion moves the intellect to the worship of God by prayer, and thus religion directs this act of reason to its own end without the intervention of any other habit. So prayer is an elicited act of religion."¹⁵⁰ Billuart says here that

¹⁴⁷ Cf. p. 437, *supra*.
¹⁴⁸ Sic ergo patet quod oratio . . . est rationis actus (*Ibid.*, q. 83, a. 1, c.).
¹⁴⁹ Et ideo ex hac parte voluntas movet alias potentias animae ad suos actus (*Ibid.*, I-II, q. 8, a. 1, c.).
¹⁵⁰ Etenim ut actus dicatur ab aliqua virtute elicitus, non est necesse quod sit in eadem potentia in qua est virtus, sed sufficit quod per hanc virtutem dirigatur in

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many pray without intending thereby to worship God,¹⁵¹ and it is important to note that this is precisely the work of actual devotion in prayer, to bring to man the realization that in prayer he offers to God his noblest faculty as an act of reverence and worship. Father Mennessier, O.P., in a note to his French translation of the *Summa*, brings out the essential connection between devotion and prayer:

With regard to the value of prayer as an act of religion, its close psychological connection with the act of devotion should be noted. These two acts are complementary. Devotion turns our will toward God by an efficacious intention which delivers over to Him the whole man. In this consists its essential worth as an act of homage. But because it is an act of homage of a creature it cannot help being accompanied by that appeal to God which is called prayer. How is it possible to conceive of that efficacious intention of subtracting nothing from that which pertains to the honor of God without an appeal to His grace? The totality of that gift demands such an appeal. Prayer is contained in germ in devotion. Prayer and devotion in a complementary manner bear witness to our dependence upon God.¹⁵²

They are the two interior acts of religion by which the will and the intellect are given to God. It is important to note in this regard that, in the system of Saint Thomas, the other acts of religion are ordained not directly to God but directly to these interior acts. For it is his doctrine that men are subjected to God by the subjection of man's noblest faculties. Man's body is subjected to God through his soul. And the external acts of worship are ordained not directly to God Who has no need of them but directly to man who needs them to help the interior acts of devo-

suam finem, nulla alia mediante virtute. . . . Sic est autem in praesenti casu; voluntas enim, ut est informata religione, movet intellectum ad cultum Deo exhibendum per orationem, sicut religio hunc autem rationis dirigit in suum finem, nullo alio habitu mediante; quod est elici a religione (Billuart, *Cursus Theologiae Sancti Thomae*, t. 7, tract. De Religione, dissert. 2, art. 2).

¹⁵¹ Multi orant absque eo quod intendunt Dei cultum, aut cogitent de illa subjectione et reverentia illi exhibenda (*Ibid.*).

¹⁵² Notons à propos de cette valeur religieuse de la prière son étroite connexion psychologique avec l'acte de dévotion. Ces deux actes s'appellent mutuellement. La dévotion oriente notre vouloir vers Dieu en une intention efficace qui lui livre tout l'homme. C'est sa valeur essentielle d'hommage. Mais parce qu'il est hommage de la creature, cet acte ne peut manquer de s'accompagner de cet appel à Dieu qu'est la prière. Comment concevoir cette intention efficace de ne nous point dérober aux exigences de l'honneur de Dieu, sans un appel à sa grâce. La totalité de ce don exige. La prière est contenue en germe dans la dévotion. L'une et l'autre tendent à l'égard de Dieu d'une façon complémentaire (Mennessier, O.P., *S. Thomas d'Aquin, Somme Théologique, La Religion*, tome I^{er}, page 259-260).

tion and prayer.¹⁵³ This is a much more logical, because more orderly, doctrine than that of modern theologians who seek to justify external acts of religion by ordaining them directly to God.¹⁵⁴

4. *Devotion and Adoration.* Saint Thomas considers first among the external acts of religion, adoration, by which man ordains the acts of his own body to the worship of God. And the importance of devotion to adoration becomes evident when the Angelic Doctor divides adoration, to conform to man's nature, into the spiritual and the corporal. The spiritual he makes identical with devotion, and the external exists only on account of the internal. "In all the acts of latria," he says, "that which is external is ordained to the internal as to the principal. So it is that external adoration is on account of interior adoration, in order that, through the signs of humility corporally manifested, the interior affection to subject one's self to God may be excited. For it is connatural to man to go to the spiritual by means of the sensible."¹⁵⁵ He says again that external adoration must proceed from the spiritual and be ordained to it.¹⁵⁶ Hence devotion is necessary to adoration to the extent that without devotion there would be no external adoration but only empty formulae. Devotion is both the beginning and the end of adoration. Adoration proceeds from devotion and is ordained to it. Because of the similarity of the act of praise with that of prayer and of adoration, it will be convenient to treat that act here. Saint Thomas describes praise of God as the employment of the divine name as a means of praying to God or of glorifying Him. The act of prayer, because it is internal and second in importance only to devotion, has already been considered. In the praise of God, as in the adoration of God, Saint Thomas insists upon the necessity of interior affection of heart. "Vocal praise of God is necessary," he says, "not on God's account but for the sake of the one who is praising, whose affection toward God is excited by vocal praise of

¹⁵³ Deo reverentiam et honorem exhibemus non propter ipsum, qui in seipso est gloria plenus cui nihil a creatura adjici potest, sed propter nos: quia videlicet per hoc quod Deum reveremur et honoramus, mens nostra ei subijcitur, et in hoc eius perfectio consistit (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 81, a. 7, c.).
¹⁵⁴ Cf., e. g., Ad. Tanqueray, *Synopsis Theologiae Dogmaticae*. Vol. I, n. 173, p. 107.
¹⁵⁵ In omnibus actibus latriae, id quod est exterius refertur ad id quod interius sicut ad principalius, ideo ipsa exterior adoratio fit propter interiorum; ut videlicet per signa humilitatis quae corporaliter exhibemus, excitetur noster affectus ad subijcendum se Deo; quia connaturale est nobis ut per sensibilia ad intelligibilia procedamus (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 84, a. 2, c.).
¹⁵⁶ Adoratio corporalis in spiritu fit inquantum ex spirituali devotione procedit, et ad eam ordinatur (*Ibid.*, ad Ium).

