

Imitating God – According to Thomas

Review of

St. Thomas Aquinas and “The Ways of God”

By Thomas Merton

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

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Reviewed by **Thomas Snyder**

“Now this is beautiful!” Thomas Merton exclaimed to his novices on March 27, 1963. His enthusiasm was for a passage from St. Thomas Aquinas’ *The Ways of God*, which he then read:

And we should not only make a mutual gift of our eyes that they may see for others; of our ears that they may hear penitence; our mouths that they may be ready to preach and counsel; our feet that they may be the servants of our neighbors; our heart that it may meditate [on] his salvation of others; and also all that we can do outwardly by our words, inwardly by our desires, all that we are in body and soul we should give generously to each of those who are in Purgatory, and those who are alive and will soon be gone, in order that the will of God may be accomplished in them now and always.

The conference Merton presented that day was on “Goodness Shared,” the fourth of five in a series given between March 6 and April 3 on this work attributed to St. Thomas, *De Divinis Moribus*. After quoting these lines, he asserted that Aquinas “in one paragraph has said everything – this covers the whole work.”

Throughout these talks Merton leads his students, and now us, through Thomistic thought and the medieval philosophical arena which it came to dominate. It is an exploration of the nature of God, which is simple, perfect, infinite, immutable and one. The ultimate destination of this investigation is the very imitation of God. In the opening conference, here given the title “Imitating God,” Merton presses his listeners to understand what this means. This is not a matter to be taken lightly, and he argues that any weak substitute for the “real thing” is not what Aquinas is demanding: God intends, indeed desires, us to be like God. (Interestingly, imitation beer is held up as the inadequate example – very Mertonese!) Through our lives, vocations (of course, here specifically the monastic vocation), spiritual practices, personal intentions, faithfulness to others, we imitate God. This is done

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within the generosity of God who allows each person to pursue that imitation in freedom. Merton's emphasis on the relational nature of God also reveals the deep humanity of "the angelic doctor." This freedom, however, is shaped by contemplation and results in a new reality about ourselves. In this talk, building on one phrase from Aquinas, Merton reminds the novices that "He has given us a heart to meditate [on] the salvation of others." He comments: "Our heart belongs to everybody; we should be more 'real' at the end of our meditation than at the beginning." In this claim he weaves together contemplation and action, a recurring theme for him. The life of prayer is inextricably linked, even (especially?) in the monastic setting, with service to the world.

Commenting on "The Goodness of God," central to the overall theme of Aquinas' small book (80 pages), Father Louis in his next conference urges continual formation of conscience, "our whole job," as a response to God's grace. Christians must reproduce God's qualities in their lives, including God's goodness: "The good gives itself." This self-giving God gives to God's creatures without limit all that is communicable, all they can receive, yet God's generosity does not demand that this bear fruit immediately. All this leads to an understanding of God's supreme manifestation, the Incarnation. God communicates God's own self by becoming part of creation. Our human nature is reflected to God through Christ. In this Christlikeness, we give God the freedom to work in us, and any goodness that we have is for the good of others as well as ourselves. When Merton argues that all this goes with the monk's vocation, listening to his talks invites us to appropriate these possibilities for our own lives of service in Jesus' name. What then are we to do in response to this call? Merton gives what I would call a "big picture" answer: we are to thank God, keep our faculties of spiritual work alive and alert, and remember that we owe this to the rest of the world.

This series of Merton's conferences is carefully introduced by Father Anthony Ciorra, who has likewise provided introductions for many previous Merton audio presentations. He begins with some of Thomas Merton's personal history, especially his watershed encounter with Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, which was formative in his conversion, vocation and continuing thought, as is evident from the passages Fr. Ciorra reads from *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Father Ciorra then introduces *The Ways of God*, a work attributed to St. Thomas, a claim never satisfactorily demonstrated by scholars. The brief text is not about proof of God's existence, but an invitation to learn of God's attributes for reproduction in the lives of the faithful. He includes Raissa Maritain's 1946 observation that, while possibly not an authentic work of Aquinas, it belongs at least to a "faithful interpreter of his doctrines." Ciorra summarizes Merton's teachings from the final conference, "Living the Godly Life," when he says that the real reason for studying this work is not so much for the content, but for the spirit of the tract. This spirit opens us to deeper meaning in our Christian life of virtue, and manifests God by making sacred our view of creation and God's love for it. Our goodness is our response to God's love. This is how we "imitate God." In accessing this brief medieval tract, we find Aquinas (or his faithful follower) filled with a deep respect for the value of the person, establishing a true Christian humanism from the realms of theology and philosophy, affirming that persons are made in the image and likeness of God. At the conclusion of Father Ciorra's introduction, he offers the prayer which closes *The Ways of God*. The prayer begins, "O Gentle God . . ." May all our prayers, intentions, formation and service be lived in this holy gentleness. Then we truly will imitate God.