

**‘Desires, Counsels, and Christ: The Christology of Aquinas’ Treatment of the
Evangelical Counsels’
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Jaarboek Thomas Instituut te Utrecht 35 (2016), p. 49-73

continued as
European Journal for the Study of Thomas Aquinas (2019 - ...)



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DESIRES, COUNSELS, AND CHRIST: THE CHRISTOLOGY OF AQUINAS' TREATMENT OF THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS

Kevin G. Grove, C.S.C.

1. Introduction

This study treats the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience in the *Summa Theologiae* in the context of Christology. Specifically, I suggest that Thomas's treatment of the manner of Christ's life and temptations in *STh III*, qq. 40-41 brings together and builds on earlier material about the counsels as well as the desires which the counsels treat. The article accomplishes this as follows: first we look back to the place that Thomas explains the threefold causes of sin originating in the sense appetite and based on 1 John 2:16 (*STh I-II*, q. 77, a. 5). From there, we go to the treatment of the counsels, as part of the content of the New Law (*STh I-II*, q. 108). The counsels prove to be fittingly proposed in the New Law. In a next step, questions on charity and the religious state show that Christ's friendship actually is charity, and that the present life of human beings is oriented to perfect charity (of which the religious life is understood in an explicit way to be a school) (*STh II-II*, q. 186). Although Jesus Christ does not take vows, nor does Aquinas bring up the theme of the "counsels" as such in the *Tertia Pars*, Thomas makes arguments for the fittingness of the poverty, fleshly abstinence, and obedience of Jesus Christ (*STh III*, q. 40). In his temptations, Jesus Christ overcame the human desires which the counsels help to reform (*STh III*, q. 41). This, then, is the great hope that the counsels, understood in light of the Incarnation, offer to humankind. Christ as teacher gave instruction to humans as one having taken up a human nature in the person of Jesus Christ. Therein, his actions—including the practice of counsels—are instruction on our way to God, fitting the end of his Incarnation, and our end in bliss.

This progression, which structures the paper, is shown in “Figure 1” below.

Figure 1

Causes of Sin	Goods of the World	Human Desire (Triple Lust)	The New Law Counsel	Christian Practice	Religious State	The Incarnation	Christ's Temptations
Desire of the Eyes	Earthly Goods	Desire of the Eyes	Poverty	Alms-deeds	Poverty	Poverty as fitting	Own kingdoms of the earth
Desire of the Flesh	Bodily Goods	Desire of the Flesh	Continence	Fasting	Continence	Fleshly abstinence of Christ	Turn stones into bread
Pride of Life	Honors	Pride of Life	Obedience	Prayer	Obedience	Obedience to Law	Throw self off of parapet
<i>STh</i> I-II 77	<i>STh</i> I-II 108	<i>STh</i> I-II 108	<i>STh</i> I-II 108	<i>STh</i> II-II 186	<i>STh</i> II-II 186	<i>STh</i> III 40	<i>STh</i> III 41

The columns from left to right show issues as they appear in the *Summa Theologiae*. Each of the three causes of sin, indicated in the first column, correlates horizontally to the things that follow it. For example: the desire of the eyes as a cause of sin comes from an inordinate desire for earthly goods. The reformation of desire occurs in the New Law counsel of poverty as well as the Christian practice of almsgiving. In addition to showing how these columns relate, this article particularly stresses the importance of the Incarnation and of Christ's temptations (in the case of the desire of the eyes, Christ's temptation to own the kingdoms of the earth).

2. An Incarnational Approach to Counsels: Reclaiming *STh* III

Thomas Aquinas begins the *corpus* of the first article of the question on the manner of Christ's life (*De modo conversationis Christi*): “Christ's manner of life had to be in keeping with the end of his Incarnation, by reason of which he came into the world.”¹

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter *STh*], trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981), III, q. 40, a. 1 co. Unless otherwise noted, all English citations of the *Summa Theologiae* are from this translation.

This sentence provides an interpretive key to the rest of the article and the following articles concerning Christ's manner of life in the world.² Christ's "*conversatio*" or behaviors and habitual associations with others—including his poverty, his obedience to the Law, and his temptations—are all "fitting" with the end of his Incarnation.³ In the *Tertia Pars*, Thomas sets Christ's manner of life in an incarnational framework.⁴ I argue that this recapitulates Thomas's discussion of Christ's poverty, abstinence, and obedience in his earlier treatment of the same topics as counsels in the content

² One also notes the resonance with *convenientia* as interpretive key to Aquinas' Christology, especially in the *STh* III.

³ *Conversatio*, from the title of question 40, commonly means moving about in a place, but here *conversatio* more precisely means behavior and habitual association. Thomas writes: '*ut conveniret fini incarnationis.*' Although sometimes translated 'in keeping with,' the sense of 'conveniret' is most properly 'fitting,' *STh* III, q. 40, a. 1 co. See J.-P. Torrell, *Le Christ en ses Mystères: la vie et l'oeuvre de Jesus selon saint Thomas d'Aquin*, vol. 1 (Paris: Desclee, 1999), 211-257.

⁴ The following subcategories show where the relevant articles are situated. Christ's life in this world is a subset of the 'Life and Death of Christ,' which fits within the treatment of the Saviour himself. Thus, although this paper concerns primarily the counsels as they are treated within 'His Life in this World,' the incarnational framework of the whole *Tertia Pars* is assumed.

The Saviour

The Mystery of the Incarnation

Fitness of the Incarnation (1)

The Mode of Union (2-15)

Consequences of the Union (16-26)

The Life and Death of Christ (27-59)

His Coming into the World (27-39)

His Life in the This World (40-45)

Manner of Life (40)

Temptation (41)

Doctrine (42)

Miracles (43-45)

Departure from This World (46-52)

Exaltation (53-59)

of the New Law (*STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 3-4) and the religious state (*STh* II-II, q. 186). In *STh* III, qq. 40-42, the counsels reemerge as part of Thomas's reflection on the life of Christ, whose every action is for human instruction. And, as teacher, Christ's manner of life and temptations call forth the earlier texts concerning the evangelical counsels. Whereas Thomas previously explicated the counsels as fitting content for the New Law, and as fitting for humans generally, not until the *Tertia Pars* does Thomas argue that they were fitting for Christ. The reason for their fittingness, for Thomas, is the end of the Incarnation. And, the measure for Christ's poverty, abstinence, and obedience is also the Incarnation: that his assumption of our flesh might seem credible.⁵

This argument calls for a new scholarly evaluation of Thomas's treatment of Christ's manner of life. The questions in the *Tertia Pars* which treat Christ's life and death (*STh* III, qq. 27-52), perhaps for reasons of historical usage, are sometimes partially or wholly neglected in discussions of the evangelical counsels (especially concerning the religious state).⁶ As Fergus Kerr, O.P.

⁵ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 ad 3.

⁶ Expositions on the counsels most frequently occur in conjunction with secondary literature on the religious life. But even in these cases, scholars do not draw out the framework of the Incarnation for those questions in the *Summa Theologiae*. For instance, in Paul Philippe's *The Ends of the Religious Life According to Thomas Aquinas*, he utilizes *STh* III, q. 40 only to make the points that Christ is the highest example of the 'mixed life' and that all Christ's actions are our instruction. See: Paul Philippe, *The Ends of the Religious Life According to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Fraternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1962), 62n1-2, 79n1. Others are similar in their treatment of the counsels or religious life, but with little attention to Christ's manner of life in that regard, especially in terms of the Incarnation. For instance: L.M. Pocquet du Haut-Jussé, *La Vie Religieuse d'après Saint Thomas D'Aquin* (Paris: Pierre Tequi, 2000); J.G.J. Van den Eijnden, *Poverty on the Way to God* (Leuven: Peeters, 1994); Antonin Motte, O.P., 'La définition de la vie religieuse selon saint Thomas d'Aquin,' *Revue Thomiste* 87:3 (1987), 442-453; Marie-Vincent Leroy, O.P., 'Theologie de la vie religieuse,' *Revue Thomiste* 92:1 (1992), 324-343.

explains, at various points in history the questions on Christ's human life were printed in vernacular languages for devout readers.⁷ Kerr suggests that since these printings biblical scholarship has made some of Thomas's reflections seem elementary, leaving these questions ignored by even modern Thomists. The very need for a "little life of Jesus" is not the case when direct scriptural contact is readily available; thus, as Kerr states, this "renders Thomas's exposition completely redundant."⁸ The problem here, as it impacts this study, is twofold. First, these questions, when published as *libella* (regardless of pastoral benefits of a little life of Christ) were isolated from Thomas's Christological program in which they belong.⁹ I argue, for instance, that Thomas's exposition of Christ's poverty is presented in terms of the Incarnation and can only fully be understood in relation to the end of the Incarnation. Secondly, the questions on Christ's manner of life are indeed Thomas's reflections on Scripture, but not limitedly so. If understood in light of Aquinas' Christology and his earlier discussions of the counsels, then the scriptural account of the manner of Christ's life provides a rich commentary on a number of things—like virtue—that have preceded it. Thus, at stake is not only the subject matter of the counsels but also the value of *STh* III, qq. 27-52 for Thomistic scholarship.

3. The Causes of Sin from the Part of the Sensitive Appetite

Thomas explains that sin is always inordinate self-love, which includes a desire for some good.¹⁰ Because the passions include a desire for the good, they are in some way ordered also to the avoidance of evil, for in Thomas's system, avoidance of evil is caused by the appetite for the good. The three desires, which Thomas sets forth as the causes of all sin, emerge from scripture itself. They are circumscribed in 1 John 2:16 as the desire of the

⁷ Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 175.

⁸ Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 175.

⁹ See note 4.

¹⁰ *STh* I-II, q. 77, a. 5 co.

eyes, desire of the flesh, and pride of life. Thomas cites this verse.¹¹ The anthropology which underlies 1 Jn 2:16 is as old as the first man and first woman. When Eve gazes upon the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Genesis account, she says that it is “good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirous for gaining wisdom” (3:6). Thus the desires themselves have a history which antedates the fall in the garden. The desires in themselves are for goods. After the fall, they become inordinate desires for goods, as under conditions of sin they are separated from God as good and end. The counsels of the New Law work directly upon the reformation of these human desires.

4. The Counsels as the Content of the New Law

Aquinas’ exposition of the counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience begins in his treatise on the New Law (in *STh* I-II, q. 108 a. 3-4). He raises the objection that the Lord unfittingly taught humans to shun the glory of human favor only by fasting, alms-deeds, and prayer.¹² The objection is that there are many other good works besides these; and, Aquinas replies, citing 1 John 2:16, reiterating that all worldly temptations and their correlative goods may be reduced to three: the concupiscence of the flesh (pleasures of the flesh), the concupiscence of the eyes (earthly riches), and the pride of life (ambition to renown and honor).¹³ The three actions of fasting, alms-deeds, and prayer reform the three desires, respectively, and aid humans in the attainment of true glory.¹⁴ These actions were taught by the Lord to humans for the purpose of aiding in reforming desires for the goods of the world. These works

¹¹ *STh* I-II, q. 77, a. 5 sc.

¹² *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 3 obj. 4.

¹³ *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 3 ad 4.

¹⁴ *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 4 ad 4. ‘Reforming’ desire means less cupidity and the possibility of increased charity, which Thomas takes up more thoroughly in his discussion of the religious state. *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 2 co.

are the specific actions that correspond to three larger principles: the counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience.¹⁵

Aquinas then turns (in article 4) to argue that counsels are fittingly proposed in the New Law. Counsels are different from commandments, which, for Aquinas, are necessary for gaining eternal bliss. Counsels are not necessary, but might be “fitting” (*convenientia*) inasmuch as they make the attainment of eternal bliss more assured and expeditious. One could argue that they are not, as counsels are given as expedient things toward an end. Some things, indeed, are not expedient for everyone; thus, the counsels might not be fitting content of the New Law. Here Aquinas gives his primary argument for the evangelical counsels as fitting content of the New Law:

The counsels of a wise friend are of great use, according to Prov. xxvii. 9: *Ointment and perfumes rejoice the heart: and the good counsels of a friend rejoice the soul.* But Christ is our wisest and greatest friend. Therefore His counsels are supremely useful and becoming.¹⁶

The reason for the fittingness of the counsels as part of the New Law is that Christ is the one who gives the counsels. Christ who is wisdom, and friend to humanity, gives counsels.

Immediately, though, Aquinas distinguishes between a counsel and a commandment (in article 4). Poverty, continence, and obedience are not commandments, or obligations which remove things contrary to charity.¹⁷ The commandments concern matters necessary to attain eternal bliss whereas the counsels “are about matters that render the gaining of this end more assured and expeditious.”¹⁸ Therefore following the commandments is necessary for eternal happiness, but the purpose of the counsels is

¹⁵ *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 4 co.

¹⁶ *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 4 sc. The Latin is ‘*Ergo eius consilia maximam utilitatem continent, et convenientia sunt*’ which indicates most useful and ‘fitting’ although it is sometimes translated as ‘becoming.’

¹⁷ *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 4 co.

¹⁸ *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 4 co.

to “attain more speedily thereto by giving up the goods of this world entirely.”¹⁹

The counsels, firstly, are fittingly proposed in the New Law because they are counsels given by Christ. But for whom are they fitting? Thomas begins with the commandments as those things necessary for all. The goods of the world, and the desires that spring up concerning those goods, are the same for all people. Wealth, carnal pleasures, and honors, the three primary goods of the world as well as the triple temptation of the eyes, flesh, and pride of life are the goods and desires of all people, respectively. To wit, such was the case of the first man and the first woman in the garden concerning the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.²⁰ Because all of humanity experiences these same goods of the world and the correlative desires, the counsels are expedient to all people. Yet some people are “ill-disposed” such that the counsels are inexpedient on account of a disposition not inclined to them.²¹ Thus, when Christ spoke of the counsels, he spoke of, as Thomas says, fittingness. “If you wish to be perfect, go sell what you have” (Mt. 19:21), just like Paul said “This I speak for your profit; not to cast a snare” (1 Cor 7:35).²² Thus, in the section on Law, Thomas explains both that the counsels are fittingly proposed by the New Law, and he explains their fittingness for humans. When the Lord proposes the evangelical counsels, “He always mentions man’s fitness (*idoneitas*) for observing [them].”²³ Some observe them absolutely, others observe them in particular cases, when they give alms to the poor, refrain from carnal pleasure of some sort, or spend time in prayer. The counsels, in the treatise on the New Law, are fitting in two ways: 1. as content of the New Law; and 2. as befitting those who are able to observe them. At this point, however, Thomas

¹⁹ *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 4 co.

²⁰ Thomas explains in his questions on original sin that it is ‘concupiscence, materially, but privation of original justice, formally.’ *STh* I-II, q. 82, a. 3 co. See *STh* I-II, qq. 82-83. The temptations of Adam are found in *STh* II-II, q. 165.

²¹ *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 4 ad 1.

²² *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 4 ad 1.

²³ *STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 4 ad 1.

has made no mention of the counsels as related to Christ's own life. He details Christ's verbal instruction to humans, but at this point neither Christ's own observance of the counsels, nor their fitness for him are discussed.

5. Means to an End: Counsels and Charity in the Religious State

The counsels, as Thomas presents them in his questions on the New Law, are expeditious means to the end of eternal bliss, given to humans by their wisest and greatest friend. In *STh* II-II, q. 23, however, Thomas further explains how Christ shows his friendship to others. When Jesus spoke to his disciples and called them friends (Jn 15:15), he did so by reason of nothing else than charity. Charity, the most excellent virtue, is friendship between God and man. Friendship is the mutual well-wishing communication between two people.²⁴ Christ's communication of the counsels in the New Law is an act of charity, an act of the friendship between God and man. Thomas makes this implicit connection between charity and the counsels explicit in his treatment of the state of perfection and the religious state (*STh* II-II, q. 184-189).²⁵

Concerning the perfection of life (attaining one's proper human end in God), Thomas explains that the perfection of the Christian life "consists radically in charity."²⁶ And, in earthly human life, the perfection of that charity consists in observing the commandments and the counsels. First, the commandments are

²⁴ *STh* II-II, q. 23, a. 1 co.

²⁵ Thomas has three minor works on the religious life *Contra Impugnantes Dei Cultum* (1256), *De Perfectione vitae spiritualis* (1269), and *Contra pestiferam doctrinam retrahentium hominum a religione* (1270). But these works, the latter two of which were written in the same period as the *Secunda Pars* (1268-1272), either respond to specific controversies in the religious life or present very little that is theologically different from the *Secunda Pars*. Although there is a great deal in Thomas's treatment of the religious life, the theology of the counsels is most thoroughly explained at the end of the *Secunda Secundae*.

²⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 184, a. 1 co.

primarily and essentially the perfection of charity because the end of each commandment is charity.²⁷ But, secondarily and instrumentally, perfection also consists in the observance of the counsels. Thomas explicates the counsels in the context of the state of perfection very similarly to the way he describes them as the content of the New Law: “counsels are directed to the removal of things that hinder the act of charity, and yet are not contrary to charity, such as marriage, the occupations of worldly business, and so forth.”²⁸ The difference from the discussion of the counsels in the context of the New Law (*STh* I-II, q. 108) is that Thomas articulates the counsels at this point in the *Summa Theologiae* in terms of charity. Thomas presented the counsels as the wisest instructions of a closest friend in the New Law. Charity characterizes God’s friendship with humans and Christ’s instructions to the same.

Aquinas continues his discussion of the counsels in terms of charity through his treatment of the religious state, the last theme discussed in the *Secunda Secundae* before the treatment in the *Tertia Pars* of the Mystery of the Incarnation. The religious state, derived from the virtue of religion, is an exercise or school for attaining to the perfection of charity.²⁹ Those who enter into the religious state are not already perfect, but have the intention to fulfill acts of charity.³⁰ Human beings strive to reach the perfection of charity by various practices, just as a physician might employ different medicines in order to heal an affliction or a wound. With this description of the religious state as a school for the perfection of charity, Thomas discusses each of the counsels individually, asking whether or not poverty, continence, and obedience are necessary for religious perfection.

Thomas argues that poverty, chastity, and obedience are foundations whereby humans are able to foster greater charity (and

²⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 184, a. 3 co.

²⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 184, a. 3 co.

²⁹ For Thomas’s treatment of religion as a virtue, see *STh* II-II, q. 81; *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 3 co.

³⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 2 co.

therein less cupidity).³¹ The first of these is poverty. Poverty is the first “foundation” (*fundamentum*) for the perfection of charity, as taken from the instruction of Christ in Matthew, “Go, sell all thou hast, and give to the poor,...and come follow Me.”³² Riches, as Thomas explains, are in themselves of a nature “to hinder the perfection of charity, especially by enticing and distracting the mind” once they are possessed.³³ Riches in themselves are conducive instrumentally to the active life. But, they pose a danger to all humans. Christ indicated this in his teaching: a camel’s passing through the eye of a needle is easier than a rich man’s entering the kingdom of God.³⁴ The rich man who is blessed is the one who has been placed in the midst of riches, but does not love them. The counsel of poverty, made explicit as a vow of religion, removes the possibility of riches from the life of a man or woman such that he or she is able to pursue the perfection of charity.

Thomas presents continence in much the same manner. Christ introduced the counsel: “There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs, for the kingdom of heaven” and then added: “He that can take, let him take it.”³⁵ The vow of perpetual continence is only meant for those who are able to take it. Thomas also accounts for those who do not profess the vow of continence: “Lest anyone should be deprived of the hope of attaining perfection, he admitted to the state of perfection those even who were married.”³⁶ It would be an injustice for a husband to forsake his wife (whereas one can without injustice renounce riches). Thus, for Thomas, the “use of sexual union” hinders the mind from “giving itself wholly to the service of God,” either on account of “vehement delectation” or the demands of wife, children, and the temporalities

³¹ *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 3 co.

³² *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 3 co.

³³ *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 3 ad 4.

³⁴ Thomas cites both the Gospel of St. Matthew (19:21; 19:23) and the fathers (John Chrysostom’s ‘Homily 63 on Matthew’ and Gregory’s ‘Homily 15’) concerning poverty.

³⁵ Mt 19:12.

³⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 4 ad 1.

related to their upkeep, and the removal of these things is necessary for the religious state.³⁷

Obedience pertains to the school for the perfection of charity because obedience pertains to instruction. Obedience, first of all, is imitation of Christ. Christ instructs concerning poverty (Mt 19:21) but concludes his directive with the phrase “follow me.” This obedience in Christ, as Thomas states, is to be commended above all else. Christ it was who “became obedient unto death.”³⁸ Obedience extends to one’s whole life, even though it is not given regarding classical examples of morally indifferent acts. For instance obedience might not apply to rubbing one’s beard or lifting a stick from the ground. But the counsel of continence, and for religious the vow, extends to one’s whole life.³⁹ It is the primary instruction in the school of perfection. This makes obedience the primary of the three religious vows because it contains the other two. In the vow of obedience a human offers to God his or her own will, which is greater than offering the goods of the world (poverty) and one’s own body (continence).⁴⁰

At this point in Thomas’s presentation of the counsels in the treatise on the religious state (*STh* II-II, q. 184), he has changed to the language of vows. This language is unique to the religious state. The ends of religion require a certain binding, oblation, and even sacrifice or holocaust.⁴¹ Thus, the vows are obligatory and necessary ways in which vowed religious practice the virtue of religion.⁴² The counsels, however, remain oriented “to the perfection of the Christian life” generally.⁴³ The religious state, ordered specifically as a school in the perfection of charity, is one

³⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 4 co.

³⁸ Philippians 2:8. *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 5 sc.

³⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 5 ad 4.

⁴⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 8 co.

⁴¹ Religious life, for Thomas, is fitting even for penitents. Van den Eijnden treats holocaust and the religious life: *Poverty on the Way to God*, 156-169.

⁴² The virtue of religion is not limited to those who have professed religious vows.

⁴³ *STh* II-II, q. 186, a. 6 co.

explicitly and essentially vowed to the observation of the counsels. Nonetheless, in his treatment of the religious state, Thomas explains in greater detail the way in which charity relates to the counsels. Religious life is a school in the perfection of charity because the vows are a means to the ends of charity in Christ.⁴⁴

6. The Incarnation

Thomas's treatment of the religious state is the last topic of the *Secunda Secundae* before he begins the final section of the *Summa Theologiae* with the Mystery of the Incarnation. This in itself should not be passed over as insignificant.⁴⁵ At the heart of the discussion of the religious life is the state of perfection and how the counsels (through vows) are a school toward the end of perfect charity. Even though the religious life is only expedient for some people, the counsels are for all. After treating various other topics concerning the religious life, Thomas ends his treatise on the religious life explaining that one ought to be ready to enter into that

⁴⁴ Thomas's writings on the religious life treat many more subjects than the counsels, including things competent to religious life, kinds of religious life, and entrance into the religious life. For this study, Question 186 treats the vows sufficiently for the purposes of what is added to his previous discussion of the counsels as content of the New Law.

⁴⁵ Like Marie Dominique Chenu, O.P., I find that the *Tertia Pars* cannot be read as a 'mere postscript in Saint Thomas's scheme' but rather as contributing to the overall work in such a way that the *exitus-reditus* of man to God happens 'through Christ.' I argue that this reading of the *Summa Theologiae* helps to make sense of the placement of the treatise on the religious state as right before the Incarnation. The religious state is concerned, teleologically, with perfection, which can only come through Christ. Thus, the religious life and the content of the state of perfection lead into a necessary discussion of Christ as the second person of the Trinity having assumed human nature to himself in the person of Jesus Christ. See M. D. Chenu, O.P., *The Scope of the Summa of St. Thomas*, trans. Robert Edward Brennan, O.P. and Albert Marie Landry, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: The Thomist Press, 1958), 27-29.

state without undo hesitation as the yoke of Christ is sweet and he promises the refreshment of divine fruition and the eternal rest of souls.⁴⁶ After a short doxology to Christ, he begins to speak about the fittingness of the Incarnation.

The treatise on the Incarnation begins with resonances of the treatise on the religious state. In Thomas's distinction concerning the two types of necessity (whether or not it was necessary for the restoration of humanity that God should become incarnate), the Incarnation was, in one sense, "necessary" in that the end (i.e. the restoration of human nature) was achieved more conveniently on account of it.⁴⁷ And, in Thomas's ensuing lists of five, he names three things that directly correspond to the prior material concerning the New Law and the counsels as a school for the perfection of charity. In the furtherances in good, Thomas names increase in charity, example of well-doing in becoming human, and achieving the end of human life (which is full participation in divinity).⁴⁸ At the very least, these three articulate the necessity of the Incarnation in language similar to the explanation of the counsels of the New Law and the religious state.

But why would Christ practice poverty, etc.? Or have a need to practice? Thomas states clearly not only that Christ had virtue, but that "Christ was full of *all* virtue."⁴⁹ Virtues of a soul flow from grace and the grace of Christ was most perfect.⁵⁰ This is evident in Christ's exhibition of virtue. Christ condemned all riches, and in so doing he showed the highest kind of liberality and magnificence. Continence requires a distinction. For Thomas, even though Christ had no evil desires (rendering, as Thomas says, the adjective "continent" un-fitting for Christ) he still practiced temperance, which differs from continence only in that the temperate man does not suffer the evil desires of the continent

⁴⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 189, a. 10, co. and ad 3.

⁴⁷ *STh* III, q. 1, a. 2 co.

⁴⁸ *STh* III, q. 1, a. 2 co.

⁴⁹ *Emphasis added.* *STh* III, q. 7, a. 2 sc.

⁵⁰ *STh* III, q. 7, a. 2 sc.

man.⁵¹ And, Christ practiced these virtues as one having habitual grace, even with regard to his relationship to the human race: that his grace might “overflow upon others.”⁵² If Christ, however, was full of habitual grace and virtue, and he did not have evil desires, one might still ask why it was that Christ would take up voluntary poverty, fast in order to discipline his flesh, and be obedient to the Law? The answers to these questions come in his manner of living. And, the answer is that they fit the end of his Incarnation.

7. Christ’s Manner of Life: the Counsels and the Incarnation

In the first article concerning the manner of Christ’s life, on whether or not he should have associated with others or led a solitary life, Thomas writes: “Christ’s manner of life had to be in keeping with the end of his Incarnation, by reason of which He came into the world.”⁵³ Christ, to be sure, was not vowed to the evangelical counsels, but he became the teacher of these counsels. In order to manifest the truth, in order to free humans from sin, and that through him we might have access to God, Christ associated with humans. Therein, as Thomas replies to one objection, “Christ’s action is our instruction.”⁵⁴ On account of the Incarnation, Christ acted in the world among men; simultaneously his manner of life was instructive. Secondly, if Christ’s actions are those appropriate in terms of the Incarnation, Thomas is also able to use the incarnation as a measure, or rule for the practices of poverty,

⁵¹ Thomas follows Aristotle in his distinction between temperance and continence based on the existence of evil desires. *STh* III, q. 7, a. 2 ad 3.

⁵² *STh* III, q. 7, a. 1 co.

⁵³ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 1 co.

⁵⁴ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 1 ad 3. In different forms, this axiom occurs 17 different times in Thomas’s work. See Richard Shenk, O.P., ‘*Omnis Christi Actio Nostra Est Instructio*: The Deeds and Sayings of Jesus as Revelation in the View of Thomas Aquinas,’ (Vatican City: Pontificia Accademia di S. Tommaso d’Aquino: 1990), 104-131; and Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 118.

chastity, and obedience. The process of Christ's life, his manner of life, temptations, and doctrine, as recounted by Scripture, are "fitting" for Christ on account of the ends of the Incarnation.

Rather than continence, the first counsel (question 40, article 2) that Thomas takes up is the austerity of Christ in the world. As aforementioned, Christ did not practice continence because he did not have the evil desires that other men have. Rather, Christ practiced the virtue of temperance.⁵⁵ And, where one might expect that Christ would lead a most austere life in the world, renouncing bodily pleasures (like John the Baptist), Thomas cites Matthew, "The Son of Man came eating and drinking."⁵⁶ Article 2 first builds an argument for Christ leading a life associated with others. Thomas writes, "Now it is most fitting that he who associates with others should conform to their manner of living."⁵⁷ The evidence for this is scriptural, as Paul writes, "I became all things to all men."⁵⁸ Thus, for Thomas, it was fitting that Christ should conform his manner of eating and drinking to those for whom he came into the world. Christ also fasted and spent time alone in prayer: "He went out into a mountain to pray; and he passed the whole night in the prayer of God."⁵⁹ Although Thomas's presentation of the life of Christ first speaks of him coming into the world and partaking of food and drink.

Much like his treatise on the counsels, in which Thomas argued that fasting, prayer, and alms-deeds are not necessary for salvation but expedient on the way, in these articles concerning the manner of Christ's life, Thomas says again: "Abstinence in eating and drinking does not of itself relate to salvation, according to Rom. xiv. 17: 'The kingdom of God is not meat and drink'."⁶⁰ Christ, both in eating and drinking with friends and in fasting, demonstrated the two ways of life. His actions legitimated both. "Both these lives are lawful and praiseworthy—namely that a man withdraw from the

⁵⁵ See reference, note 51.

⁵⁶ Mt 11:19; *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 sc.

⁵⁷ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 co.

⁵⁸ 1 Cor 9:22; *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 co.

⁵⁹ Mark 6:31; *STh* III, q. 40, a. 1 ad 3.

⁶⁰ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 ad 1.

society of other men and observe abstinence; and that he associate with other men and live like them. And therefore our Lord wished to give men an example of either kind of life.”⁶¹

This still leaves the question, why would Christ fast? Aquinas cites Bede on the same issue, “abstinence is meritorious where the nature is weak. But why should our Lord, whose right by nature it is to forgive sins, [avoid those whom by their abstaining he could render freer from defilement]?”⁶² In the next response, Thomas quotes Bede again: “Christ fasted, that thou mightest not disobey the commandment; he ate with sinners, that thou mightest discern his sanctity and acknowledge his power.”⁶³ Both actions are fitting imitations of Christ. Christ did not fast out of some personal need for continence or weakness of nature. Rather, Christ fasted “that thou might learn how great a good is fasting, and how it is a shield against the devil, and that after baptism thou shouldst give thyself up, not to luxury, but to fasting.”⁶⁴ Thomas is clear here, quoting Chrysostom, that Christ did not fast because he needed it, “but as teaching us.”⁶⁵ On account of the ends of his Incarnation, Christ fittingly taught us to fast by pursuing the activity of fasting himself.

Christ did not make fasting a necessity of salvation, but an aid to humans. Indeed, there are limits to its usefulness. Christ only fasted to a certain point: “And for this did he proceed no further than Moses and Elias, lest his assumption of our flesh might seem incredible.”⁶⁶ The Incarnation serves a secondary function here. Christ’s assumption of the flesh serves as a measure of the fittingness of his fasting. All grace and virtue were in Christ. It would have been conceivable that he could fast beyond the limits of Moses and Elias. But he did not. And the reason he did not was that men would believe in his assumption of the flesh. If men were

⁶¹ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 ad 1.

⁶² The translation in brackets is my own. “[Dominus] cur eos declinaret quos abstinentibus poterat reddere puriores.” *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 ad 2.

⁶³ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 ad 3.

⁶⁴ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 ad 3.

⁶⁵ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 ad 3.

⁶⁶ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 2 ad 3.

to believe in his taking up the flesh, they had to believe that his fasting fit within the limits of the flesh.

Concerning poverty, Thomas uses the language of fittingness. Whereas earlier, the counsel of poverty was a fitting part of the New Law and a fitting counsel for humanity, Thomas now writes, “It was fitting *for Christ* to lead a life of poverty in this world.”⁶⁷ Thus, poverty was fitting for Christ. Firstly, poverty was fitting on account of his preaching, for which he came into the world. Secondly, Thomas makes an analogy with the death of Christ’s physical body. Just as Christ took upon himself death of his body in order to bestow spiritual life, so also did he bear bodily poverty to bestow on humans spiritual richness.⁶⁸ This second reason for Christ’s poverty is notably incarnational in its language. Christ took up the physical body, that he might die and bestow life eternal. Christ’s poverty has soteriological implications for the spiritual wealth of all of humanity. Thirdly, if Christ were rich, his teaching would be ascribed to cupidity. And fourthly, “the more lowly he seemed by reason of his poverty, the greater might be the power of his Godhead be shown to be.”⁶⁹ Thomas takes this from the Council of Ephesus, that from the time of Christ’s physical appearance on the earth, he lived a life of poverty:

He chose all that was poor and despicable, all that was of small account and hidden from the majority, that we might recognize his Godhead to have transformed the terrestrial sphere. For this reason did he choose a poor maid for His Mother, a poorer birthplace; for this reason did he live in want. Learn this from the manger.⁷⁰

This passage functions in the opposite manner as the Chrysostom citation in article 2 describing the limits of Christ’s fasting being the credibility of the Incarnation. Here, Christ’s voluntary poverty from the Incarnation forward, in his choice of Mother, manger, and

⁶⁷ *Emphasis added.* *STh* III, q. 40, a. 3 co.

⁶⁸ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 3 co.

⁶⁹ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 3 co.

⁷⁰ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 3 co.

manner of life, reveals not the credibility of his taking up of the flesh, but the power of his Godhead in those actions. The last line of the Ephesus citation, and the end of Thomas's *corpus* for this article is "Learn this from the manger." The poverty of Christ not only gives humans the reasons that were fitting for Christ to renounce the goods of the world in terms of benefit to humans, it also reveals the power of the Godhead whose second person assumed human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

Assumption of impoverished flesh by a Godhead who "transform[s] the terrestrial sphere" has consequences for human action. In the answer to the first objection, Thomas is clear about how humans should relate to the goods of the earth. He writes, "Those who wish to live virtuously need to avoid abundance of riches and beggary, in as far as these are occasions of sin."⁷¹ Abundance of riches is an opportunity for pride and beggary is an opportunity for thieving, lying and perjury. Christ chose voluntary poverty. This poverty was fitting for Christ and as one of his actions, is instructive for humans.

Lastly, Christ conformed his conduct in every way to the precepts of the Law. Earlier in the treatise on the Incarnation, Thomas stated Christ's obedience, "Christ had most perfect obedience to God, according to Philippians 2:8: "Becoming obedient unto death." And hence He taught nothing pertaining to merit which he did not fulfill more perfectly in himself."⁷² Christ's actions were in obedience to God, but also to the precepts of the Law. For this reason, Christ wished to be circumcised, the physical signification of man's intent to keep the Law. In each willful act of keeping the Law, Christ showed first his approval of the Old Law, such that "by obeying it he might perfect it and bring it to an end in his own self, so as to show it was ordained to him."⁷³

Furthermore, the acceptable reasons for Christ's seemingly breaking the Old Law are on account of his being the second person of the Godhead having assumed a human nature to his person. For instance, Christ healed a man on the Sabbath, a day on which God

⁷¹ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 3 co.

⁷² *STh* III, q. 7, a. 3 ad 2.

⁷³ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 4 co.

rested and thus commanded humans to do. Thomas replies in three ways, first stating that the precept against working on the Sabbath is not against divine work, but against human.⁷⁴ God ceased from creating on the seventh day but continues to keep and govern at all times. Christ's miracle was divine work. The Incarnation thus explains the legitimacy of Christ's obedience when an objector might find that Christ had broken the law. Thomas, however, continues to explain that the precept against work on the Sabbath takes exception for bodily health (i.e. the miraculous works of Christ concerned both body and soul). And thirdly, the Sabbath is not broken by those working for the worship of God. Understood in this light, what might have been a seeming breaking of the Old Law is Christ's true obedience to the Father, showing again his benefit to humans: health of body and soul as well as enabling men to worship God.

STh III, q. 40 demonstrates that Christ's manner of life was one for which the counsels were fitting. And, in their fittingness for Christ, he made them an example for the rest of humanity. In the case of continence, Thomas considers it more accurate to describe Christ as temperant rather than continent. But Christ did live a life of necessary eating and drinking with men as well as fasting, proving that both his abstinence from fleshly pleasures and his partaking in them were for our instruction. Thus, Christ observed poverty, fleshly abstinence, and obedience throughout his life on account of the ends of his Incarnation. This is further amplified by Christ's temptations.

8. Christ's Temptations: Actions of the Counsels

Thomas's first claim concerning the temptations of Christ is that they were "fitting."⁷⁵ Christ, full of all virtue, had no need to be tempted, but he wished to be.⁷⁶ And, he wished to be tempted in

⁷⁴ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 4 ad 1.

⁷⁵ Again, the Fathers of the English Dominican Province here use 'becoming,' which for the sake of consistency, I translate 'fitting.'

⁷⁶ A question which one might ask of Thomas at this point, yet he himself does not directly address, is whether or not Christ could really

order to show us how to overcome temptation, to strengthen us against them, to warn us that we are not free from them, and to fill us with confidence in his mercy.⁷⁷ Thomas explains that not only was it fitting that Christ should wish to be tempted, but that the temptations took place after a period of fasting, by which one is strengthened.⁷⁸ The reasons for Christ's fasting and for the limits of it are the same for his temptations as they were for his manner of life. Aquinas again quotes Chrysostom: Christ fasted, not as needing it for himself, but as for our instruction. Therefore, Christians ought to give themselves up to fasting after their baptisms, not give themselves up to luxury.⁷⁹ Also, Thomas repeats again the reason that the limit to Christ's fasting was that of Moses and Elias lest his assumption of human flesh might seem incredible. Aquinas adds, however, a new incarnational reason for the fasting of Christ at this point. Citing Hilary, Thomas says, "For the devil was to be conquered not by God, but by the flesh."⁸⁰ Not only does the Incarnation, then, serve as the ends which make Christ's fast fitting, and limit its extent (for credibility); also, the Incarnation allows for the possibility that the devil could be conquered by human flesh, not only by the power of God. And in this sense, Christ's fasting is also most fitting.

Thomas does not present Christ's temptations, which follow his fasting, using the language of "counsels." Rather, he presents the list in terms of the fall of the first man and woman in paradise. In this way, Thomas follows the Scripture and the triple desires of the flesh, eyes, and pride of life. In Scripture, the devil

be tempted given his inability to sin. See Joseph Wawrykow, 'Temptation,' in *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 147-149.

⁷⁷ *STh* III, q. 41, a. 1 co.

⁷⁸ Stephen Loughlin, 'Thomas Aquinas and the Importance of Fasting to the Christian Life', *Pro Ecclesia* 17:3 (2008), 343-361. Loughlin treats fasting, beginning with modern aversion to it, according to its benefits and limits for Christ.

⁷⁹ *STh* III, q. 41, a. 3 co.

⁸⁰ *STh* III, q. 41, a. 3 co.

tempted the first man and woman in three ways.⁸¹ Christ's temptations followed the same order. First the devil tempted Christ "to that which men desire, however spiritual they may be—namely, the support of the corporeal nature by food."⁸² This temptation (turning stones into bread) corresponds to the desire of the flesh, temperance for Christ, and the practice of fasting. Secondly, the devil "advance[d] to that matter in which spiritual men are sometimes found wanting, inasmuch as they do certain things for show, which pertains to vainglory."⁸³ Vainglory (throwing oneself off of the parapet) corresponds to pride of life, the counsel of obedience, and the practice of prayer. Thirdly, "he led the temptation on to that in which no spiritual men, but only carnal men, have a part—namely, to desire worldly riches and fame, to the extent of holding God in contempt."⁸⁴ The desire of the eyes (to own the kingdoms of the world) corresponds with the counsel of poverty and the corresponding activity of alms-deeds.⁸⁵ Thus, Christ's willing to be tempted meant that he was able to undergo and overcome the temptations (from the devil, an external, not internal, source of temptation) to which the first man and woman succumbed.

Thomas concludes the text on the temptations of Christ, however, with yet another quotation on vanquishing the enemy through human, not divine, means. "Christ resisted these temptations by quoting the authority of the Law, not by enforcing his own power."⁸⁶ Therein, Christ's obedience to the Law allowed him to overcome each of the temptations of the flesh. The reason for this obedience, however, is from Leo, "so as to give more honor to his human nature and a greater punishment to his adversary, since the foe of the human race was vanquished, not as by God, but as by man." The achievement of Christ's overcoming temptation is

⁸¹ Gen 3:1.

⁸² *STh* III, q. 41, a. 4 co.

⁸³ *STh* III, q. 41, a. 4 co.

⁸⁴ *STh* III, q. 41, a. 4 co.

⁸⁵ For the schematic chart of the counsels, temptations, vows, and corresponding Christian practices, see Figure 1.

⁸⁶ *STh* III, q. 41, a. 4 co.

further augmented by the fact that Christ as human overcame what humans had theretofore not been able to do. And in so doing, Christ left instruction for all those who, as humans, endure the temptations of the eyes, flesh, and pride of life.

9. Christ the Teacher

Thomistic scholarship often refers to Thomas's line that Christ's actions are our instruction.⁸⁷ Jesus Christ emerges in the *Summa Theologiae* as a teacher whose life formed the content of his teaching.⁸⁸ One way of reading Christ as teacher is he whose example is to be imitated. Christ was indeed a moral exemplar, one who contained all grace and virtues, and for whom it was fitting to observe voluntary poverty, fleshly abstinence, and obedience to the Law of the Father. Yet, as Michael Dauphinais points out, imitation of Christ is a rather narrow interpretation of how Christ ought to be understood as teacher. Dauphinais suggests:

It is not simply a good man that offers us example, but it is God who became man that offers us example. God is the one who should be followed. Yet human beings have no way of imitating God, at least not according to their natural capacities....human beings are not merely to imitate the human nature of Christ, but are meant to imitate the Person of Christ, the Word of God. Following Christ's divine example can be called ontological exemplarity. In addition to following Christ's deeds, we are also to imitate Who He is.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ See note 54.

⁸⁸ This is the reason, for instance, that Christ did not write his teaching down (*STh* III, q. 42, a. 4 co.). He adopted the most excellent manner of teaching, which was not writing on paper, but writing on the human heart.

⁸⁹ Michael A. Dauphinais, 'Christ the Teacher: Pedagogy of the Incarnation According to St. Thomas Aquinas,' (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2000), 261.

Dauphinais explains that imitation of Christ is not a slavish imitation of each word and action of the human Christ. Rather, Christ's actions as our instruction mean that humans are to imitate Christ by "follow[ing] along the way of Christ." And the way, "is Christ Himself."⁹⁰

Dauphinais' argument can be furthered in terms of the manner of Christ's life. Christ did not take up, for instance, an austere life in the world such that no one might legitimately use the goods of the world. Rather, Christ came eating and drinking with humans; but the same Christ also fasted in the desert and took time away from the crowds in order to pray. The teacher Christ was God incarnate such that all might learn the ways of charity, or friendship with him, by means of imitating his life and person. Not all are fit to take vows of poverty, continence, and obedience. But for all human beings, God can be forsaken on account of the goods of the world, the desires of the flesh, and human pride. Thomas's treating the three counsels in the context of the Incarnation adds to his earlier discussions of the counsels. They are still the counsels of a good friend, for the end of charity. But, in light of Christ's living them, and by means of them overcoming temptation for humanity by his human person, they became part of imitating Christ's person. Also in this sense, and perhaps mostly so, they are fitting to the end of the Incarnation.

10. Conclusions

Thomas begins his treatise of Christ's manner of life by stating that Christ's manner of life had to be fitting the ends of the Incarnation.⁹¹ The best reading of the questions which treat the manner of Christ's life, his temptations, and his teaching, is one guided by this initial comment. First, it establishes that these questions cannot be taken separately from the treatise on the Incarnation, and that reading them as *libella* or *glossa* on Scripture is too narrow a reading for Thomas's project.

⁹⁰ Dauphinais, 'Christ the Teacher,' 262.

⁹¹ *STh* III, q. 40, a. 1 co.

Rather, Thomas's treatment of the manner of Christ's life and his temptations brings together earlier material in the *Summa Theologiae* within the Incarnation, the final part of the theological work, as an *exitus-reditus* journey to God through Christ. This is modeled in Thomas's treatment of the counsels. The counsels first appear as the content of the New Law. As fitting content for the New Law and as fitting counsels for humans, they are given as the counsels of a friend Jesus Christ. Questions on charity and the religious state show that Christ's friendship actually consists in charity, and that human life is oriented to perfect charity (of which the religious life is understood in an explicit way to be a school). Although Jesus Christ does not take vows, nor does Aquinas bring up the "counsels" as such in the treatise on the Incarnation, Thomas makes arguments for the fittingness of the poverty, fleshly abstinence, and obedience of Jesus Christ. At last, the counsels are those of humanity's closest friend because by means of the Incarnation the counsels were fitting for this friend. In his actions, the same Incarnation served as a limit for the extent of his activity. And even in temptation, in which Jesus Christ overcame the human desires which the counsels help to reform, he overcame these temptations in such a way that the enemy might be vanquished by a man. This, then, is the great hope that the counsels, understood in light of the Incarnation, offer to humankind. Our teacher—himself the fullness of virtue—gave instruction to humans as one having taken up a human nature in the person of Jesus Christ. Therein, his actions are instruction on our way to God, fitting the end of his Incarnation.

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