

Thomas Aquinas on the Formal Sufficiency of Scripture



Dr. Michael Liccione has responded to my post on the distinction between formal and informal sufficiency of Scripture, and specifically objects to my reading that Thomas Aquinas subscribes to a “formal sufficiency” of Scripture. By a formal sufficiency I had meant that Scripture has an inherent intelligibility that does not derive from some source outside itself. To the contrary, I had stated that a merely material sufficiency would not have an inherent intelligibility, but would rather derive its intelligibility from an outside source. Dr. Liccione specifically quarrels with my reading of Aquinas, and insists to the contrary, that Aquinas affirmed the “material sufficiency” of Scripture

in the sense explained by WW, in no way affirmed the formal sufficiency of Scripture in the sense explained by WW. That is partly why Aquinas, like Newman and even Vatican II after him, most certainly did see a magisterium as necessary for interpreting Scripture reliably.

I find this a startling admission, and shows at least that I have not misunderstood the kind of argument being put forward by current disciples of John Henry Newman. Dr. Liccione’s defense for his interpretation of Aquinas is a quotation from S.T. 2.2.5.3:

Now the formal object of faith is the First Truth, as

manifested in Holy Writ and the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth. Consequently whoever does not adhere, as to an infallible and Divine rule, to the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth manifested in Holy Writ, has not the habit of faith, but holds that which is of faith otherwise than by faith.

Unfortunately, the passage does not mean what Dr. Liccione claims that it means, as one can discern from its immediate context. Thomas is not concerned here with epistemological questions such as Dr. Liccione's distinction between "opinion" and the infallible teaching of the "magisterium." Indeed, the authority of the magisterium is not the point of discussion at all. Aquinas mentions the "teaching of the Church," but he nowhere mentions the pope, for example. To know what he means we have to know which specific teaching of the Church he is talking about, and why he considers it infallible.

The answer to this question is not difficult to find. Aquinas is asking a very specific question in 2.2. art. 5: "Whether a man who disbelieves one article of faith, can have lifeless faith in the other articles?" Thomas's answer is that "Neither living nor lifeless faith remains in a heretic who disbelieves one article of faith," the reason being that anyone who doubts an article of faith cannot have the virtue of faith. So, the specific question is not about the authority of the magisterium, but about a person who refuses to believe a specific article of faith. The question is not about epistemology, or even the authority of the church, but about the specific content of belief or unbelief. What particular false belief deprives one of the virtue of faith? To answer this we have to know what Thomas means by an "article of faith."

What does Thomas mean by an "article of faith"? The answer can be found in Question 1 of the very same section. Here Thomas identifies the "First Truth"—the "formal object of faith"

referred to in q. 5—with Deity itself (art. 1). However, the material things to which faith assents includes not only God, but things related to God, specifically those divine operations that aid the human being on the way to salvation. Specifically, they are “Things concerning Christ’s human nature, and the sacraments of the Church, or any creatures whatever, come under faith, in so far as by them we are directed to God, and in as much as we assent to them on account of the Divine Truth.”

Aquinas is quite clear what he means by the expression “article of faith.” When using the expression, he is referring quite specifically to the “Rule of Faith” (my expression) summarized in the creeds. He makes this clear in q. 1, art. 8, when objection 5 complains that the “articles of faith” are unsatisfactory because the Eucharist is not mentioned. Aquinas summarizes the articles as follows:

Now with regard to the majesty of the Godhead, three things are proposed to our belief: first, the unity of the Godhead, to which the first article refers; secondly, the trinity of the Persons, to which three articles refer, corresponding to the three Persons; and thirdly, the works proper to the Godhead, the first of which refers to the order of nature, in relation to which the article about the creation is proposed to us; the second refers to the order of grace, in relation to which all matters concerning the sanctification of man are included in one article; while the third refers to the order of glory, and in relation to this another article is proposed to us concerning the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting. Thus there are seven articles referring to the Godhead.

In like manner, with regard to Christ’s human nature, there are seven articles, the first of which refers to Christ’s incarnation or conception; the second, to His virginal birth; the third, to His Passion, death and burial; the fourth, to His descent into hell; the fifth, to His resurrection; the

sixth, to His ascension; the seventh, to His coming for the judgment, so that in all there are fourteen articles."

The "articles of faith" are simply identified with the subject matter of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. How do these truths of salvation that are summarized in the Creeds become known? How do the articles of faith become objects of faith? The answer is clear: They are "all things contained in Holy Writ."
1.1. rep. obj. 3.

So Thomas states specifically in q. 1. Art 9 why the Church needs a summary formulation of its faith:

The truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ, diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice, which are unattainable by all those who require to know the truth of faith, many of whom have no time for study, being busy with other affairs. And so it was necessary to gather together a clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ, to be proposed to the belief of all. This indeed was no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.

Note that Aquinas says (in essence) that the Scripture contains all things "sufficient" for salvation, that the "truth of faith" can be gathered from Scripture, but that one needs study and practice to know this truth. Many do not have this capacity, not because Scripture is not inherently intelligible, but because they do not have the time for study or are too busy. Moreover, the creedal formulations of faith are "no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it."

One could hardly come up with a better way of saying that Scripture is "formally sufficient." Although not everything in Scripture is clear—it contains some things obscurely—its essential subject matter is evident to those who have the

time, study, and practice to read it properly, and its essential content—its intelligible subject matter—can be found in the Creeds, which provide a “clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ . . .” not an addition, but “something taken from it.”

Of course, as a Medieval Catholic, Aquinas certainly did believe that the “universal church cannot err”—Vincent of Lerins would agree ; he affirms in the very next article that the pope can draw up a creedal symbol, and he bases his argument for papal authority on a classic Petrine passages (Lk 22:32). But, again, this argument in no way departs from his affirmation of the formal sufficiency of Scripture. Thomas states in 2.10. rep.obj. 1:

The truth of faith is sufficiently explicit in the teaching of Christ and the apostles. But since, according to 2 Pet. 3:16, some men are so evil-minded as to pervert the apostolic teaching and other doctrines and Scriptures to their own destruction, it was necessary as time went on to express the faith more explicitly against the errors which arose.

Aquinas does not regard the pope as providing to Scripture an intelligibility it does not already have, or that of bringing out a truth that was not already evident in Scripture. To the contrary, “the truth of faith is *sufficiently explicit* (my emphasis) in the teaching of Christ and the apostles,” that is, Scripture. Rather, papal authority is needed not because Scripture is not clear on the essential matters of salvation, but because “evil-minded” people deliberately “pervert the apostolic teaching,” and so it is necessary to “express the faith more explicitly” against error. No Reformation Christian who would affirm the necessity of confessions, synods, or councils would disagree. Certainly the church needs an authority to correct those who willfully disregard the “truth of faith,” which is “sufficiently explicit” in Scripture.

Moreover, not only does Thomas affirm the inherent intelligibility (and therefore formal sufficiency) of Scripture, he explicitly addresses the question of development in 1.7, when he asks “Whether the Articles of Faith have increased in course of time.” Thomas responds:

The articles of faith stand in the same relation to the doctrine of faith, as self-evident principles to a teaching based on natural reason. Among these principles there is a certain order, so that some are contained implicitly in others; thus all principles are reduced, as to their first principle, to this one: “The same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time,” as the Philosopher states (Metaph. iv, text. 9). In like manner all the articles are contained implicitly in certain primary matters of faith, such as God’s existence, and His providence over the salvation of man, according to Heb. 11: “He that cometh to God, must believe that He is, and is a rewarder to them that seek Him.” For the existence of God includes all that we believe to exist in God eternally, and in these our happiness consists; while belief in His providence includes all those things which God dispenses in time, for man’s salvation, and which are the way to that happiness: and in this way, again, some of those articles which follow from these are contained in others: thus faith in the Redemption of mankind includes belief in the Incarnation of Christ, His Passion and so forth.

Aquinas makes clear then what he means by an “increase” in the articles of faith. The Old Testament prophets had implicit faith in Christ who was to come; the apostles actually knew the “mystery of Christ.” This is hardly a “development” in Newman’s sense.

What finally is the point of Thomas’s statement in 2.2.5.3 quoted by Dr. Liccione? The meaning is clear. A heretic who rejects one of the articles of faith, specifically stated in

the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, which are "clear summaries" of the "sufficiently explicit" subject matter of revelation found in Scripture (God's creation and salvation of humanity in Christ), does not have the faith of the Church, and the Church does not err when it affirms this creedal summary of the teaching about God's salvation of humanity (the "articles of faith") which finds its origin in the clear sufficient explicit teaching of Scripture. Moreover, the magisterial authority of the church has the right and obligation to explicitly endorse and teach clearly this creedal doctrine that summarizes teaching found in Scripture when it is rejected by willful heretics.

This is an understanding that would certainly be affirmed by Anglican theologians in my own tradition like John Jewel or Richard Hooker. In fact, Jewel's "Apology of the Church of England" is a defense of the catholicity of the C of E built around an outline that follows the Creed, which he argues is a summary of the clear teaching of Scripture, and the heart of Catholic faith. Jewel argues further that the authority of the keys means that the Church has the authority to forgive or retain sins based on the promises of Scripture:

We say also, that the minister doth execute the authority of binding and shutting, as often as he shutteth up the gate of the kingdom of heaven against the unbelieving and stubborn persons, denouncing unto them God's vengeance, and everlasting punishment: or else, when he doth quite shut them out from the bosom of the Church by open excommunication. Out of doubt, what sentence soever the minister of God shall give in this sort, God Himself doth so well allow of it, that whatsoever here in earth by their means is loosed and bound, God Himself will loose and bind, and confirm the same in heaven. And touching the keys, wherewith they may either shut or open the kingdom of heaven, we with Chrysostom say, "They be the knowledge of the Scriptures:" with Tertullian we say, "They be the interpretation of the law:" and with Eusebius,

we call them "The Word of God." The Apology of the Church of England

Jewel's summary of the purpose of the keys is virtually identical to what Aquinas says in ST 2.2.5.3. The current controversy that is dividing the Anglican Communion of which I am a member has occurred because leaders of the Church have repudiated not only the plain teaching of Scripture about sexuality, but also the explicit teaching of the creeds concerning the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ for salvation. It is because the teaching office of the Church (as represented by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Consultative Council) has refused to exercise their responsibilities as holders of the power of the keys that the Communion is in danger of splitting, and that many Anglican Churches in the Global South have broken communion with the Episcopal Church USA, and have instead endorsed the new North American Anglican Province as the faithful, orthodox and catholic representative of Anglicanism in North America.

I conclude then that Dr. Liccione has misinterpreted Aquinas here. His distinction between an interpretation of Scripture that is mere "opinion" rather than the indubitable certainty that comes from the magisterium reflects rather the concern about epistemic certainty that first appears with a vengeance in the post-Reformation Tridentine controversies, and which reappears in the epistemological anxieties that one finds in Newman's critique of "private judgment." But it is not Aquinas.

The key passage for understanding Thomas Aquinas's own views on the role of Scripture is actually found in ST 1.1-10, where Thomas discusses *sacra doctrina* in a perichoretic or symbiotic relationship with *sacra scriptura*, as well as his exegetical writings. Thomas's understanding is similar to what Heiko Oberman has called Tradition I, as opposed to the late Medieval understanding of Tradition II which is echoed by

Tridentine theologians. Thomas's understanding of Scripture is certainly not the understanding of Tridentine apologists like Bellarmine and (definitely) not that of Newman.

Two of the most helpful recent discussions of Aquinas's understanding of Scripture can be found in:

Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum, eds. *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (T & T Clark, 2004).

Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum, eds. *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries* (T & T Clark, 2005).

I recommend them. Nicholas Healy suggests in the latter volume that Aquinas's understanding of the relation between revelation, Scripture and preaching has affinities to Karl Barth's notion of the threefold Word of God.

Addendum: After posting the above, I decided to add this rather lengthy but telling quote from Nicholas Healy's "Introduction" to the above *Aquinas on Scripture*, pp 18-19.

[For Thomas,] Sacra doctrina is in some important respects identifiable with Scripture. . . . But sacra doctrina is not normative, or not in anything like the way Scripture is. The teaching of the Creeds is fundamental, not because it is a product of the Church but because the credal statements are drawn from Scripture. The teachings of the Fathers have authority, but only of a probable kind. While Thomas treats the 'holy doctors' with immense respect, he does not hesitate to correct their imperfections, 'loyally explaining' or 'reverently expounding' (exponere reverenter) their remarks so that they better conform to Scripture. He insists that 'faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors.' Thus Thomas does not anticipate the later Roman Catholic doctrine of two sources of revelation, Scripture and Church

tradition. Though he admits an oral apostolic tradition, this has no authority with regard to doctrine, but applies only to specific practices. Scripture alone is the basis of our faith, and of itself it gives us knowledge sufficient for our salvation, to which nothing new can be or need be added (my emphasis).

In sum, the exegesis of Scripture can never be dispensed with. We cannot rely upon intermediary work, whether theological systems or conciliar documents or papal teachings. Such intermediaries are vital and constitute the ongoing disputatio that informs the Church's quest for more truthful preaching and witness. But for that quest to be successful, teachers and preachers must return ever anew to Scripture. . . .

*. . . Thomas engages in conversation with everyone he can possibly think of, irrespective of their methods or even their religious beliefs. A glance at his commentaries will find him referring to Aristotle and other philosophers and their commentators (including mediaeval Muslims), Church doctrines, papal definitions, ancient heresies, the exegesis of the Fathers, and contemporary proposals, together with a cloud of references to other parts of the Bible. All potential sources of truth are brought into the discussion in order that Scripture may be the more deeply probed and understood. Yet none of the non-biblical sources are permitted to govern the interpretation, which lies with the *sensus litteralis vel historicus* alone. Instead, it is they who are brought within Scripture's orbit and made to serve its divine author's communicative intention.*

By the way, I love the above picture of Thomas. Mary (representing the Church) points Thomas to the Father, who hands him the Scriptures. Thomas receives the Scriptures directly from the Father, and looks through them (as it were) to God. Mary (the Church) does not point to herself; neither

does she hand Thomas the Scriptures, or interpret them to him. Nor does she stand between Thomas and the Scriptures or between the Scriptures and God. Theologically, this is correct.