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INTRODUCTION

Every civilization has classic expressions. There are some cultural artifacts that come to sum up a period and a style while also becoming part of the common patrimony of human society. In European civilization Shakespeare's plays not only epitomize Elizabethan England, but continue to be read around the world. The same is true of the art of Michelangelo and Leonardo, the music of Bach and Beethoven, the writings of Cervantes and Goethe. In terms of the long Middle Ages (ca. 500–1500 C.E.), when Catholic Christianity was a dominant force, it is not surprising that many of the most famous cultural artifacts are religious. Disputes about which expressions of medieval culture are the most characteristic continue, but few would question that in art the medieval cathedral plays a central role, just as Dante's *Divine Comedy* does in literature. From the perspective of religious thought the *Summa theologiae* of the Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) has a unique place, in terms of both its profundity and its influence. Given its length, few have

ever read the whole of the *Summa*. College graduates, especially students of religion and philosophy, may have studied a few selections, but somehow the *Summa* remains one of the few medieval works, along with Dante, known to the general public, at least in name.

This is a brief account of the *Summa theologiae*. More specifically it is a biography of the *Summa*, introducing its intellectual gestation in the mind of Thomas, its structure and contents, and some aspects of its impact on later history. It may seem foolhardy to attempt a short book about such a large book. The *Summa* is a massive work, containing over a million and a half words divided into three large parts containing 512 topics (*quaestiones*) and no fewer than 2,668 articles (*articuli*) dealing with particular issues (some topics are given only two articles; the longest receives seventeen). In the translation of the English Dominicans published in the early decades of the past century the *Summa* takes up 2,565 double-column pages. Even more daunting is the vast literature that has been devoted to explaining the *Summa*. Although the work was contentious from the start, and its history has had ups and downs, the *Summa* has never lacked for readers and commentators. It has been calculated that over a thousand commentaries have been written on the *Summa*, not a few longer than the original. Commentary, however, scarcely tells the whole story, because some of the most interesting chapters in the reception of the *Summa* in the

seven and a half centuries since its writing concern thinkers who did not consider themselves followers of Thomas, but who pondered his thought to enrich their own speculation, sometimes in appreciation, sometimes in opposition. Even today, when the age of long commentaries seems over, scores of books and even more articles are published every year dealing with Thomas and especially with what is universally admitted to be his most important work, the *Summa theologiae*.

The following account is selective and personal—one scholar’s attempt to present what an interested and curious reader might want to know about the *Summa* and its reception. In thinking about the book, I have been guided by something dear to Thomas and central to what he was trying to do in writing the *Summa*—what he called *sapientia*, that is, wisdom. According to Thomas, wisdom is to be numbered among the “intellectual virtues,” or operative habits of the mind. It is the greatest of these because “it deals with the highest cause, which is God.” Thomas continues, “And because judgment is made about an effect through its cause, and the same is true about lower causes through the higher cause, so wisdom is the judge of all the other intellectual virtues; it belongs to it to put them all in order. It has a kind of commanding role (*quasi architectonica*) with respect to all the others.”¹ Thomas tells us at the start of the *Summa* (Ia, q. 1) that the subject of the work is what he calls *sacra doctrina* (sacred teaching

or instruction) and argues that it is a *scientia*, a “science” in the Aristotelian philosophical sense of an organized body of knowledge based on strict deductive reasoning (see chapter 2). But he also insists that *sacra doctrina* is a *sapientia* (q. 1.6), and not just the metaphysical wisdom that Aristotle argued was the judging and ordering habit of the human mind insofar as it philosophically considers the First Cause, but a wisdom that is found *in* God and communicated to humans through revelation. The cultivation of this higher form of wisdom rooted in revealed truth is what the *Summa* is all about. Sometimes this wisdom rooted in faith is supplemented by a third form of wisdom, the *sapientia* that Christians held was one of the seven special graces or gifts of the Holy Spirit, enabling the recipient to have a “connatural” awareness of divine truth and proper action.

Thomas, like other medieval authors, thought that the etymological root of *sapientia* was *sapida scientia*, literally, “tasteful, or savory knowing,”² thus emphasizing that *sapientia* has a greater affective, even experiential, quality than abstract deductive reasoning. He also holds that wisdom is its own reward: finding wisdom is not merely instrumental to achieving some other goal. In the prologue to his *Commentary on Boethius’s “De hebdomadibus”* he summarizes, “Zeal for wisdom has this privilege, namely that in pursuing its work, it pleases itself even more. . . . Hence, the contemplation of wisdom

is like a game for two reasons. First, because a game is enjoyable and the contemplation of wisdom brings the greatest delight. . . . Second, because a game is not ordered to something else but only to itself; this belongs to the delights of wisdom.”

The wisdom found in revelation and the wisdom that is the gift of the Holy Spirit go beyond any wisdom we can acquire by our own thinking—they are what Thomas calls “supernatural gifts.” They come forth *from* God and are integral in our return *to* God, that is, they are salvific. For Thomas there is a cycle of wisdom, a circular process of emanation and return to God, following the order of the circular model of the creation and return of the universe. This cycle is also written into the plan of the *Summa* (more on this in chapter 2). For Thomas, as for most ancient and medieval thinkers, circular movement was the highest form of motion. As he put it in his other *Summa*, the *Summa contra Gentiles* (*SCG*), “An effect is most perfect when it returns to its source. Hence the circle among figures and circular motion among all the forms of movement are the most perfect, because there is a return to the source in them. For this reason in order that the whole of creation attain its final perfection, it is necessary for creatures to return to their source.”³

The cycle of wisdom is a useful way of thinking about the production of the *Summa theologiae* in Thomas’s mind and the story of its reception. The friar’s efforts in creating his masterpiece were

generated by wisdom and designed to cultivate and increase wisdom (not just knowledge) in those to whom the book was taught, as well as in its later readers. What follows is my attempt to illustrate the cycle of wisdom that for Thomas Aquinas was the purpose of the *Summa theologiae*.⁴

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