



Inexhaustible Questions

A popular saint and a doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas is often quoted and even more often referenced. There is not a corner of the Catholic world that has not been touched by his brilliance. It might be a devotional prayer, a song sung in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, or a lengthy explanation of the power of the sacraments through matter and form.

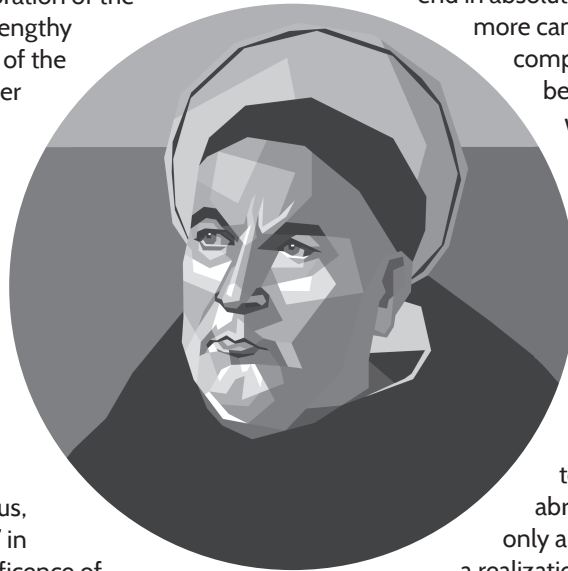
Catholics devoted to the saints will recall a popular story about this prayerful and contemplative saint. According to tradition, at the end of his life, he received a vision of God in all his glory. This powerful vision made him exclaim, or so the often-told story tells us, “that everything is straw,” in comparison to the magnificence of God. The story invites us to reflect on our own choices and the perspective that we might bring to our spiritual life.

We could leave the story there and easily profit from it, but that would be a mistake. The piety expressed and the example of the miraculous that the story describes is important but incomplete. In retelling the story, it is important to note that

Thomas Aquinas was a systematic (scholastic) theologian. A systematic theologian operated on the principle, the system, that if you answered each question fully and completely it might lead to another question or—and this is essential—it might end in absolute truth. In such truth, nothing more can be added, the answer is complete, the questions have been exhausted. However, while absolute truth is interesting in theory, there are always more questions than answers.

When Thomas arrived at his famous moment—sitting in his cell surrounded by all the books that he dictated to monk scribes who were literally worn out trying to keep up with him—it was abrupt. His experience was not only a vision of God, but it was also a realization that he would never run out of questions. The promise of systematic theology was fundamentally flawed. It was perhaps a wonderful tool to study some things, but it was not a tool to solve all things. It was always going to be incomplete and never finished.

Some readers may be uncomfortable with the story in the manner that I have shared it. They may prefer to keep the emphasis on the mysterious



and the profound: *God visited Thomas!* I agree that such a vision is profound, but I also understand, and our orthodox spiritual tradition agrees, that divine experience is also human experience. Human experience reflects the experience of the sacred and the divine. It is not an either/or experience. Rather, it is both/and. It is not that one explanation is true and the other false, but both perceptions and understandings help us understand the fullness of what was experienced.

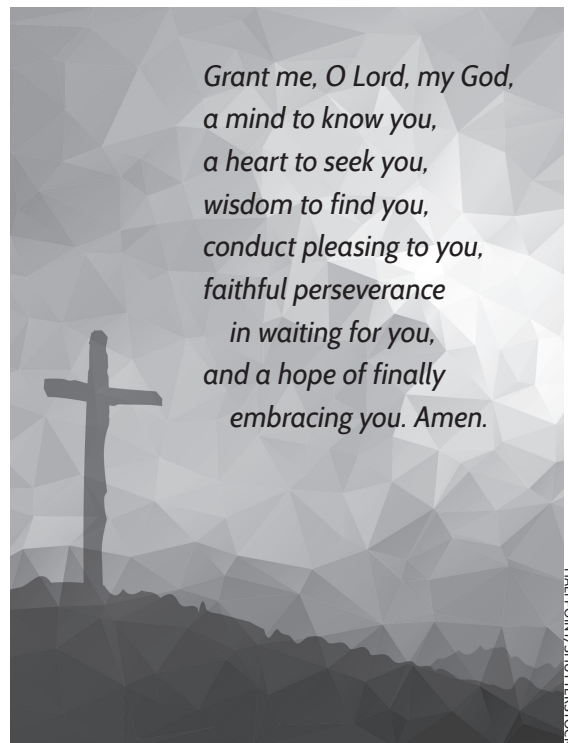
People with the scrupulous disorder may find my telling of St. Thomas' end-of-life experience enlightening. The disorder bombards them with unanswered questions, each of which contains the false promise of certitude that always disappoints. Engaging in an endless pursuit of trying to answer all questions and doubts is "so much straw." The pursuit is like trying to capture the needle in the haystack—only to find it, turn around in triumph, and see another needle out of the corner of your eye. The haystack, as is slowly revealed, has not just one needle but many needles, all hidden, waiting to be discovered. Even a life of effort and devotion will not discover them all. Perhaps the most honest response in the searching is not, "Eureka, I have found it!" but rather, "My Lord and my God."

Trying to develop a more contemplative spiritual practice may be an invitation, inspired by the story of St. Thomas Aquinas, that the scrupulous might find helpful. More information, precise facts, clearer definitions all have their place but they might not be within the reach of those who suffer with the "doubting disease." It might be better to cultivate a position of wonder and awe, of mystery and of the sacred, even if the cultivation might at first be uncomfortable and challenging. Is it more important to understand or to accept?

I have slowly and at times painfully discovered that I do not need to understand everything. I have learned to give myself permission to enjoy a sunset and thank God for the beautiful display of color and

hue. I have learned that not everything needs to be sorted and put in place. A little bit of the unknown and the disorganized, even the incomplete, has never really interfered with what is important and necessary. I have learned that it is not always good to give up everything in order to get just one thing. I have learned that either/or is not as life-giving as both/and. I prefer light over darkness.

The story of St. Thomas Aquinas continues after the tale of his vision. It is about a man who chooses not to write again. It is not that he had answered all the questions that once propelled his frantic study, but rather that it did not matter to him that there were questions that would not and could not be answered. He found peace not only in what was certain and absolute but also in what was unknown and still to be discovered. ✨



What is more important: to understand or accept?

Ten “Entrées” to a Better Life

In an effort to know, accept, and improve yourself, I propose you incorporate the following ten activities or pursuits over the course of a week. The idea is not to carry out the ten activities as quickly as possible and then dedicate the rest the week’s 168 hours to doing nothing or falling back into your dominant flaw. The vital ten is a “full meal” consisting of three main courses and dessert. Each “entrée,” in turn, includes three ingredients or activities.

The first entrée is that of **survival**—the most fundamental and essential of the ten because it deals with our physical, mental, and spiritual renewal. 1. Prayer: We each choose how much time in our day is dedicated to God. 2. Nourishment: Meals not only supply us with physical energy but also provide important breaks that give each day the structure and space to share time with family and friends. 3. Sleep: Nothing is more restorative to our nervous system than getting enough sleep and sleeping well.

Our second entrée is **personal responsibilities**. 1. Work and/or study are essential if we are to be responsible members of our family and society. 2. Physical exercise: The recommended amount of physical activity for adults is thirty minutes per day or its equivalent spread out over at least two sessions a week. 3. Reading: Set aside a couple of hours a week for this kind of learning.

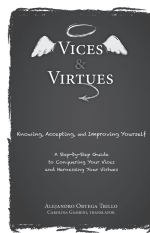
The third and last main entrée is **other people**. 1. Family life entails many different ways

of spending time together, such as engaging in conversation, resolving conflicts, relaxing, and sharing intimacy. 2. Friends make up our social life. 3. Community: It’s almost imperative to devote some time to others through social work, service, or ministry.

The final course of this meal is **dessert**. Once all nine of the previous activities have been covered, we have space for an activity of pure personal delight, a hobby. Hobbies allow us to follow our passions, give us something to look forward to, entertain us, and give us some distraction from daily stresses.

Unforeseen situations frequently arise and get in the way of our orderly plan. Rather than being a rigid necessity for a virtuous life, the vital ten provide a guideline that points us in the right direction: toward important activities in our daily life and away from those that lead us into our vices.

Our primary obstacle? Our own resistance to change. If we yield to God, however, we will change and, at least in certain areas, a new person will be revealed. Our family, friends, coworkers, even our own heart, will live more peacefully. ⚙



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Mailbox

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE, LIGUORI, MO 63057 • NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q. *At the end of my confession, the priest added, “and also for your sins of presumption.” This surprised me. Now I am wondering if I should include the sin of presumption in my confession from now on.*

A. It is unfortunate that the priest did that. He should have resisted his own piety and devotion, an idea that would help him, but not so much for you. You have no obligation whatsoever to include the sin of presumption in your confession.

Q. *I was unloading my shopping cart into my car and the cart got away from me and bumped into the car next to mine. I think there was a scratch. I did not leave a note or wait for the owner of the car to return. Now I am worried about sin and restitution.*

A. There is no sin and no restitution needed. Shopping carts routinely bump into other cars in the parking lot. It is a consequence of tight parking spaces and carts on wheels, not a consequence of a deliberate decision to sin and cause damage. You don't need to do anything more.



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