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Sanctifying Oneself in the Study of Theology

*(Translation of Talk for the ½ Day Retreat with Master of the Order for
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In 1953 a very famous film was released, starring the charming Audrey Hepburn and the legendary Gregory Peck. The title was *Roman Holiday*. This is perhaps not this title that I would choose to describe your years of study in Rome. If I had to choose a cinema classic, I would rather choose the 1951 film *Quo vadis*, in which we see St. Peter strongly tempted to leave Rome and its innumerable problems as soon as possible... I bet this was also your temptation on certain days.

Indeed, after the enchanting discovery of the beauty of the Eternal City, after the various surprises that the Italian culture offers to foreigners, a stay in Rome for studies is an austere time. This is especially so for a confrere newly ordained to the priesthood and sent to Rome soon after. Full of zeal for the apostolic mission, convinced, like St. Dominic, that "he will be truly a member of Jesus Christ only the day he can devote himself with all his strength to gaining souls, as the Savior of all our Lord Jesus Christ offered himself totally for our salvation," our young priest finds himself condemned to sit in dusty libraries for (at least) eight hours a day, either studying the grammatical subtleties of Southern proto-Babylonian or trying to figure out why on earth St. Thomas changed his mind about the distinction between essence and suppositum in separate substances. There is no lack of the penitential dimension during these years. Perhaps a redeeming fact is that in Rome pizzas and ice cream are great and the climate almost perfect.

That said, your study time in Rome is not a parenthesis in your apostolic life. It does not suspend it. It would already be more appropriate to consider it as a time of preparation for the mission, a time of hidden life and personal maturation. To speak of preparation, however, is equivocal. It seems to suggest that Dominican life will begin only after this time, once you return to your province to assume various apostolic responsibilities. Now, this is not true. It is *hic et nunc*, here, in Rome, and now, that the Lord calls us to holiness, that is, to the perfection, the flourishing, of our Christian life in the Dominican mode. Such perfection, as repeated many times by St. Thomas, especially in his polemic with the secular teachers, consists essentially, formally, in charity. In other words, in love of God and neighbor. Therefore, I would like this morning to meditate with you on the fact that the study of theology (and related disciplines, such as philosophy, canon law or Church history) is a genuine work of charity and, in consequence, a path of

sanctification, of growth in holiness. In fact, the study of theology arises from charity and makes charity grow. To show this, I will proceed in three stages. First, I will discuss the practice of theology as a form of love for God (1). Next, I will examine the practice of theology as a form of love of neighbor (2). Finally, I will conclude with St. Thomas' reflections in *Ila-IIae*, q. 188, a. 5, on the place of study in religious life (3).

1/ Theology as an implementation of God's love.

Theology is a form of intelligence of faith (*intellectus fidei*). It is not the only one: *lectio divina* or meditation on the mysteries of the Rosary are other forms of the same quest for intelligence of faith. But theology is its properly "scientific" form in which the reflection on faith is structured according to the criteria and rational requirements of "science," in the Aristotelian sense. It is a matter of "inculturating" the intelligible content of faith into the structures of human intelligence.

Theology, as *fides quaerens intellectum*, takes its place in a dynamic that moves from faith to the beatific vision. Faith is the starting point (and permanent foundation) of theology. Without faith, there is no theology. Thanks to faith, we hold as true all that God's Wisdom teaches us through the Word of God. Not because we directly and clearly perceive its truth, but because we trust in the One who assures us that it is true. Now, because of its obscurity, its chiaroscuro (we know that it is true but we do not know why it is true) and its imperfection as a form of knowledge (we are not made to believe but to see!), faith stimulates in the believer a movement that drives him to seek to understand and assimilate what he believes. Faith does not gratify the intellect but, on the contrary, provokes it. The believer wants to assimilate all the intelligible sap contained in the Word of God, wants to release all its potential as light for the intellect. "Whoever does not want to understand what he believes and believes that it is enough to believe those things that must be understood, does not know what faith is for." (St. Augustine, *Letter 120*) Therefore, it is the intrinsic dynamism of faith that impels us, in imitation of Mary most holy, to "keep all these things, pondering them in our hearts" (Lk 2:19), to explore with all the resources of reason enlightened by faith "the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal plan which he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:10-11). Theology then becomes like an anticipation of the joy of Heaven, of the Vision in which we would see God and everything will become clear, obvious. In short, the intelligence of faith is "a certain beginning or participation in future happiness" (*Ia-IIae*, q. 66, a. 5, ad 2).

Now, this quest, resulting from the very nature of faith (and not from optional curiosity), is also animated by charity, that is, by love for the One who is the very Object of theological contemplation. Indeed, theology is radically theocentric. It has no other object (formal object) than God Himself and has no other end than to know God. The theologian considers all things insofar as they are referable to God and insofar as they enable us to know God better. It is because I love God that I want to know Him better. "Quid Deus? What is God?" asked St. Thomas as a child. Precisely, with St. Thomas, we must distinguish between two types of

contemplation: that of the philosopher and that of the theologian. The philosopher's contemplation consists in the metaphysical and sapiential gaze that grasps God as the Cause of being as being and looks at everything in this light. Such contemplation is motivated above all by the love of knowledge, because knowledge is the good of the intellect. It enriches our life and makes it fuller. The Christian's theological contemplation, on the other hand, is motivated more by love for the One being contemplated, that is, the thrice holy God. St. Thomas explains this, regarding the patron of contemplatives, the apostle St. John:

"His contemplation is perfect; for such an act is perfect when the one contemplating is lifted up to the height of the reality contemplated. For if one remains at a lower level, however sublime the object contemplated may be, contemplation is not perfect. Therefore, to be such it must rise and reach the proper goal of the reality contemplated, with the adherence and consent of will and intellect to the truth being contemplated. "Knowest thou perhaps in its perfection the path of the clouds? - that is, the contemplation of the preachers (=the clouds contain the water that fertilizes the earth as the word of God transmitted by the preachers fertilizes the hearts) - do you know that it is perfect?', because they firmly adhere, with will and intellect, to the supreme Truth contemplated" (*Prologue to the Commentary on the Gospel of John*).

But here we must distinguish two complementary forms of Christian contemplation. The first is theological contemplation which, being expressed in a rational (analogical) discourse with a universal vocation, is the only one capable of being communicated or preached as such. The *contemplata* of which our motto *contemplata aliis tradere* speaks are the fruits of this theological contemplation. The other form of contemplation is 'mystical' that is, infused contemplation. It comes from the Holy Spirit's action in us through His gifts, especially the gift of Wisdom. Such mystical contemplation consists in the personal experience of God's presence made possible by the 'connaturality' or familiarity resulting from the union created by charity between our soul and the Triune God who dwells in it. But this eminently personal contemplation is by definition 'ineffable' and therefore incommunicable as such.

Where are you staying? the very first disciples ask Jesus. "Christ says, 'Come and see,' because the dwelling of God, both in glory and in grace, can be known only by experience: in fact, it cannot be explained in words. Thus we read in Revelation: 'To the one who overcomes, says the Spirit, I will give a white stone, and on this stone is written a new name, which no one knows except the one who receives it'" (*Commentary on the Gospel of John*, c. 1, lett. 15).

Although not communicable as such, this spiritual experience, this mystical wisdom is nevertheless the biotope, in which theology as an intelligence of faith can flourish. It is the atmosphere in which theology can fully unfold, avoiding, among other things, the traps of "rationalism" or ideologies. Spiritual experience, in

fact, keeps alive the sense of mystery and stimulates the desire for God that serves as a driving force for theology. Consequently, the intensity of the theologian's personal spiritual life, as well as his attention to the experience of the saints, indirectly affects his intellectual work. Most of our great theologians have been both saints and close to saints (think of the closeness between Meister Eckhart and the contemplative nuns, that of Bañez and St. Teresa). In the reverse sense, theology gives spiritual life its objective foundations and preserves it from sentimentality or subjective illusions. In short, the saint and the theologian form a good pair. That said, theology remains knowledge with its rational requirements, so it is not enough to be a saint to be a theologian. Prayer is no substitute for study!

Your study time in Rome is an opportune time to settle this balance between the study of theology and the life of prayer, in its various forms, personal prayer and liturgical life. Father Lagrange said, "I like to listen to the Gospel when it is sung by the deacon at the ambo, amid the clouds of incense: then the words penetrate my soul more deeply than when I find them in a discussion in a magazine" (*Revue biblique*, 1892, p. 2). And we know that St. Thomas' "typical day" (when he was not traveling) consisted of shuttling between the cell (studying), the church (praying) and the pulpit (teaching).

2/ Theology as the implementation of love of neighbor.

The God we contemplate is the God of love who desires to communicate Himself. Therefore, transmitting the knowledge of God is a requirement that arises from contemplation itself. We preach "*ex abundantia contemplationis*," as St. Thomas says. Preaching overflows from contemplation. Our study is thus animated by love for our neighbor, a concern to communicate to him the knowledge of God that saves him. That "neighbor" to whom we communicate the fruits of our contemplation is first and foremost the "distant" neighbor, the one who does not know God but is called to share with us the knowledge and friendship of God. But it is also (we often forget this) the "near" neighbor, the brother with whom we live and share God's friendship.

Indeed, a certain sharing of theological work nourishes and strengthens our fraternal fellowship. "Talking with God and about God" begins in community. We are called to edify one another by "talking about God," sharing our intelligence of faith. Think of the conversation between St. Augustine and his mother Monica in Ostia, or the spiritual exchanges between St. Benedict and his sister Scholastica. Modeled after the dialectic of Plato's *Convivio*, in exchanging with each other the wonders of God, they rise higher and higher toward the Source, toward God. Of course, it is not easy to talk to each other about such intimate things. Spiritual exchange on the model of Benedict and Scholastica is not taken for granted. There is a story in my province that a brother (whose name I will not mention) barged into another's room one day and, after an interminable monologue in which he expounded his thoughts on every conceivable subject without the other even being

able to open his mouth, concluded, "Ah, you see, how good it is to exchange among brethren." Personally (but I'm not bragging), I don't much like discussing, much less debating, theology at the dinner table, over pasta and steak, or in the hallways. There are too many parasitic factors in these discussions (the desire to be right, to make a good impression, to show mental ease...). I do not at all deny the usefulness of dialogue, of these direct person-to-person confrontations, which often spur us to come out of our own prejudices, but I confess that I prefer to listen to a brother preach or give a report, or even to read what the brethren write so that I can think about it later. To each his own method. The capital point is to be edified by the contribution of the brothers and sisters.

Let's move on to the next 'distant thing' to the apostolic mission that aims to prepare and foster an encounter with his one Lord. Theological work aims at (at least) three purposes:

1/ The first is to ensure that the authentic Word of God is preached, the only one that can touch and heal hearts, and not some counterfeit, some genetically modified Organism, that is, the product of our flights of fancy or ideologies. Our contemporaries are legitimately concerned about bequeathing a livable planet to future generations. Likewise, as ministers of the Church we must be careful to pass on unchanged what the Church has received from Christ. "O Timothy, guard the deposit (what has been entrusted to you)" (1 Tim 6:20), St. Paul asks Timothy. One must ensure the traceability of the product, as they say. Therefore, one of the goals of our assiduous study of God's Word and Tradition will be to cooperate effectively with the bishops in their task of preaching the true Catholic faith.

2/ A second purpose of our study in the service of mission is to de-mine the cultural and intellectual terrain to make it possible for our contemporaries to accept the Word of God. Indeed, in every culture, there are ideas and ways of thinking, deeply rooted in social life, that condition people's existential choices. These cultural structures can hinder the reception of God's Word. For example, there is a whole mythology that has been grafted onto scientific theories of the evolution of species (hypostatization of Life or Nature, presentation of human history as the fruit of chance...) and that objectively closes access to a conception of man open to the spiritual dimension to so many people. Or again, the reduction of rationality to the 'hard sciences' alone, prevailing in our societies, inevitably leads to relativism in the philosophical, moral or religious realm, incompatible with the truth dimension of faith, since all these areas of human existence are no longer held to be the responsibility of reason, with its claim to universality and objectivity, but are left to opinion and feelings. Now, it is crucial for us to understand how our contemporaries think and why they think the way they do. It is up to philosophy to help us understand where these thought structures come from (which helps to put them in perspective and thus overcome them). We need to take seriously the fact that the cultures of our Western societies have radically changed. They are no longer Christian or even Christian-inspired. They are based on visions of man, of the meaning or nonmeaning of life that no longer

have anything to do with the Christian vision.... Therefore, we need to identify their principles, to criticize them certainly, but also to perhaps seize some of the opportunities offered for preaching. For example, radical individualism (with all its negative consequences) may also lead to a certain rediscovery of the sapiential dimension of Christianity, once excised by the one-sided insistence on the social dimension of faith... That said, confrontation with these often very coherent but hermetically closed worldviews with respect to faith is a dangerous exercise, a test for our personal faith. A confrere who devotes himself to this confrontation needs to intensify his spiritual life in proportion, and he needs the support of the community. It is not prudent to venture down this road alone. I have talked about the cultural situation in the West, its atheistic and nihilistic culture, which otherwise affects the global village. But a similar task falls to our brethren in Africa or Asia. They must thoroughly penetrate the cultural systems in which they live, to discern what in them constitutes both stones of expectation for the Gospel and points of resistance to the faith.

3/ The third goal of theological work as service to one's neighbor is to catch a glimpse of the attractive beauty of the Mystery, that is, the coherence of God's plan. First, its internal consistency, that is hymned by St. Paul at the end of his reflection on God's plan: "O depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unfathomable are his judgments and inaccessible his ways!"(Rom 11:33). But we must also show how the light of faith is able to illuminate and make sense of the whole natural order of human realities.

The apostolic purpose of the study also determines its object. That is to say: what, as Dominicans, should we study? To put it briefly, and to repeat a constant exhortation in our Constitutions: study must "be useful to one's neighbor." Therefore, we must avoid the vice of *curiositas*. Curiosity in St. Thomas has little to do with the annoying habit of looking through the keyhole to spy on the brethren. No, curiosity is much more than that. It means any use of intelligence disconnected from the deep purposes of human and Christian existence. In other words: the curious person is the one who wastes his intelligence, using it for what is not worthwhile. Instead, genuine study must be "worthwhile," that is, it must be an appropriate means to achieve the person's purposes, depending on his or her state of life or specific mission. A doctor, so fascinated by science fiction books that he neglects to update his skills by reading specialized medical journals, would certainly fall into the vice of curiosity. Instead, the early Dominicans insisted on the need to subordinate study to the usefulness of others. In this regard, there is a very harsh message from Umberto de Romans, Master of the Order of Preachers: "Several things hinder the carrying out of our mission. The first is the lack of knowledge of languages to the study of which some friars hardly want to devote themselves, while many in studying put before utility a varied curiosity."

Let us be clear. Intellectual life cannot be subjected to short-term utilitarianism. It is not a matter of limiting study to solving topical problems in a hurry. One must be able to stand back or take a higher view (precisely in order to be able to respond with more depth to today's problems). The balance to be established is not easy: on the one hand, it takes gratuitousness in intellectual life but, on the other hand, one must be careful to maintain some connection with the missionary purpose of the Order. Our brethren on the Leonine Commission identifying variants in the manuscripts of St. Thomas' commentaries on Aristotle are not wasting their time. Eventually, they will offer us a reliable text that will help us understand a doctrine of St. Thomas that is useful for thinking about today's reality... Let us say that these ultra-specialized studies must be balanced on a personal level by the concern to nurture one's general (theological) culture. Moreover, these ultra-specialized studies must be somehow ordered to theology:

"Philosophers profess to study the human sciences from the standpoint of human doctrines. But religious men apply themselves primarily to the study of the letters concerning 'doctrine according to godliness', to use St. Paul's formula (Titus 1:1). As for other teachings, this is not the business of religious, whose lives belong entirely to the divine ministry, except insofar as they are ordained to theology" (*Ia-IIae*, q. 188, a. 5, ad 3)

This is one of the (countless) differences with the Jesuits. A Jesuit can study to become an expert in cell biology. The goal is to penetrate scientific circles to ensure a Church presence. I do not believe that a Dominican can unscrupulously specialize in cell biology, although he must keep abreast of the state of science, especially if he teaches philosophy of nature or theological anthropology.

3/ *Ia-IIae*, q. 188, a. 5

I conclude briefly with article 5 of q. 188 of *Ia-IIae*. Q. 188 is devoted to the diversity of forms of religious life. This diversity, which gives glory to God, results from the diversity of the particular ends pursued by different religious orders, that is, the diversity of the works of charity to which they devote themselves. Among these works, St. Thomas mentions the salvation of souls by means of preaching (Art. 4), and in the following article he asks whether "a religious order should be instituted to study." The wording is strange because study cannot be the very purpose of a religious order. In fact, Thomas asks whether it is legitimate for a religious order to make study a structural part of its identity (defined by mission). In the body of the article, St. Thomas distinguishes three levels of justification for study in religious life, going from the general to the particular, that is, from religious life in general to the Dominican vocation.

* First, study is useful to religious life in general because it fosters the practice of vows. For example, it fosters chastity because of its penitential dimension.

* Second, study is especially useful for contemplative religious life. On the one hand, study helps eliminate error and delusion, which are so frequent in spiritual life. On the other hand, study nourishes contemplation.

* Third, study is undoubtedly necessary for religious cooperating in the preaching mission of bishops, as is the case for the brothers of the Order of Preachers.

So, dear Brothers, to work!