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Aquinas on Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Thomas Aquinas has a philosophy of education. In this article I try to indicate what it amounts to by focusing not only on his theoretical discussions of teaching and learning but also on what can be gleaned about his approach to teaching by looking at his own teaching practice as displayed in some of his writings. In addition, I look at two of Aquinas's sermons that shed light on what he thinks about teaching and learning.

Keywords

Aquinas, teaching, learning, knowledge, action and agent, teachers and doctors, education, virtue, *Summa Theologiae*, *De Veritate*, *Puer Jesus*

I

Aquinas was a theologian and philosopher, yet he was also very much a teacher in the sense that you and I are.[1] That is because much of his life was spent trying to educate students sitting in front of him. Many well-known theologians and philosophers were never formally employed as teachers. John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli were never so employed. Neither were Descartes, Hume, or Leibniz. Aquinas's basic job, however, was to teach people face to face. He spent much of his time writing, but almost all of his voluminous literary output was produced while he was also working at the classroom level.

From around 1251 to 1256 Aquinas lectured at the University of Paris, first on the Bible and then on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, which was the standard theology text-book of the day. In 1256 he

[1] The present article is the text of the second of two lectures delivered to Catholic teachers of religious education on July 3rd 2014 at St. Ethelreda's church in London. I am grateful to John Williams for permission to reproduce the lecture for publication. John and I were students together in our local comprehensive school in Wales, and he organized the lectures I gave on July 3rd. John and I were both taught by the late and great Dan Williams, a teacher better than whom is hard to imagine.

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became a Master of Sacred Theology at Paris and continued to lecture on the Bible while also presiding over academic debates in which students played an active role. He relinquished this Parisian position in or around 1259, but he took it up again from 1268 to 1272. Between 1259 and 1268 Aquinas was teaching Dominican friars in Orvieto and Rome. In 1272 he was appointed to be head of a Dominican house of studies in Naples, where he taught until just before his death in 1274. In short, Aquinas spent around twenty three years of his short life as an active teacher. So, he was definitely one of us.

Teachers, however, do not always have a philosophy of education, and even if they do, they tend not to have philosophical theories about teaching and learning. Yet Aquinas does have a philosophy of education, one which incorporates theoretical views on what teaching and learning amount to. And it is quite a developed one. Aquinas's views on teaching and learning contribute to a significant part of what he wrote. They even help to account for the very existence of his *Summa Theologiae*, which is his best known and most influential text.

II

Why did Aquinas write the *Summa Theologiae*? His reasons, to start with at least, seem to have been largely pedagogical. In 1265 Aquinas's religious superiors directed him to establish a teaching house for Dominican students in Rome. He was given a free hand when it came to what he taught, and he seems to have begun in a conventional way by lecturing on Lombard's *Sentences*. While he was teaching in Rome, however, Aquinas started to work on the *Summa Theologiae*, and its Foreword provides us with some evidence as to why he did so, for it has this to say:

> Since the teacher of Catholic truth has not only to build up those who are advanced but also to shape those who are beginning ... the purpose we have set before us in this work is to convey the things which belong to the Christian religion in a style serviceable for the training of beginners. We have considered how newcomers to this teaching are greatly hindered by various writings on the subject, partly because of the swarm of pointless questions, articles, and arguments, partly because essential information is given according to the requirements of textual commentary or the occasions of academic debate, not to a sound educational method, partly because repetitiousness has bred boredom and muddle in their thinking. Eager, therefore, to avoid these and other like drawbacks, and trusting in God's help, we shall try to

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> pursue the things held by sacred teaching, and to be concise and clear, so far as the matter allows.[2]

These words clearly come from a teacher worried about how to convey the truths of the Catholic faith to people wanting to learn them. So, this teacher is saying that his *Summa Theologiae* is intended to meet an educational need.

What need? Aquinas evidently thought that too many students of Catholic truth in his day lacked reading matter that was concise and clear. So, he wrote the *Summa Theologiae* with an eye on precision and clarity. But I think that Aquinas had another pedagogical aim in mind when writing this text. I believe that he intended or hoped for it to replace a whole spate of literature that regular working Dominicans had foisted on them as they studied and then went about the business of preaching and hearing confessions (their canonical function as Dominicans). This literature mostly consisted of text books or manuals on moral theology and canon law, and it did little to place moral theology into a full theological context. Yet, when writing the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas tries to do just that. Moral theology is at the center of the work, but not as if in a vacuum. It is presented by Aquinas with a work-up to it in which he writes about the nature of God, the nature of human beings as things falling under God's providence, and human perfection in general. And the sections on moral theology in the *Summa Theologiae* are followed by discussions of the saving work of Christ and the means by which Christians might unite themselves to this.

So, the *Summa Theologiae* is a treatise which tries to present Christian teaching as a whole and to locate moral theology accordingly. And its origins appear to lie in Aquinas's attempts to educate not just university students but ordinary Dominicans working in the field while needing intellectual support to help them in their labors.[3] The *Summa Theologiae* is the work of a teacher thinking about students of a certain kind. And it indicates that Aquinas was not only concerned to engage in advanced academic interaction and disputation. It shows that he was anxious to engage in the practice of teaching at a more basic level.

[2] I quote, with slight modification, from Volume 1 of the Blackfriars Edition of the *Summa Theologiae* (Eyre and Spottiswoode and McGraw-Hill Book Company: London and New York, 1964), p.3.

[3] I elaborate on this point in Chapter 1 of my *Thomas Aquinas's 'Summa Theologiae': A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 2014).

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III

Practice, however, is one thing, while theory is another. So, how does Aquinas theorize when it comes to teaching and learning? There are two places where he does so explicitly and at some length. These are Question 11 of his disputed question on truth (*De Veritate*) and article 1 of Question 117 of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*. So, let me now say something about these texts, both of which are concerned with the question 'Can one human being teach another?'.

IV

You might, of course, say that we obviously can teach each other since we have schools. Yet Aquinas approaches his question with caution since he is aware of reasons that might be given for supposing that nobody can teach anyone else.

Two of these reasons are biblical ones. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus says 'You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students'.[4] The 'one teacher' in this verse is clearly meant to be God. In the gospel of Matthew, therefore, Jesus seems to be saying that the only teacher is God, and Aquinas wonders what this position might imply when it comes to human teachers.[5] He also wonders along the same lines with an eye on the first chapter of John's gospel, where we are told that 'the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world'.[6] The reference here is to the Word becoming flesh, and it gives Aquinas pause when thinking about teaching and learning given the supposition that, as he puts it, 'whoever teaches the truth enlightens the mind, for truth is the light of the mind'.[7]

Additionally, Aquinas notes, there seems to be a problem about teaching if this is thought of as causing someone to gain knowledge. For how can one *cause* someone to know? Or, as Aquinas phrases the problem:

> Teachers do nothing to their pupils save to put certain signs before them which signify something either by words or gestures. Now one cannot teach others, causing knowledge in them, by putting certain signs before them. For either one proposes signs of objects that are already known, or signs of objects that are unknown. If they are known

[4] Matthew 23:8. I quote from the New Revised Standard version of the Bible.

[5] Matthew 23:8 comes up for discussion both in *De Veritate* 11,1 and *Summa Theologiae*, 1a,117,1.

[6] John 1:9.

[7] *De Veritate*, 11,1. I quote from Volume I of James V. McGlynn's translation of the *De Veritate* (Henry Regnery Company: Chicago, 1953), p.79.

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> objects, then the ones to whom the signs are put already have the knowledge and so do not acquire it from the master; if they are of unknown objects, they cannot learn anything at all from them. For instance, if one put Greek words before Latin speakers ignorant of their meaning, they could not be taught by this means. So no one can in teaching others cause knowledge in them.[8]

The general idea behind this argument is that students can only learn if they already somehow know what words signify, in which case they are not really learning when their teachers talk to them or present them with illustrations or examples and the like. Aquinas rehearses a related argument in *De Veritate* 11,1. According to this:

> If the knowledge is caused by one person in another, the learner either had it already or he did not. If he did not have it already and it was caused in him by another, then one person creates knowledge in another, which is impossible. However, if the learner had it already, it was present either in complete actuality, and thus it cannot be caused, for what already exists does not come into being, or it was present innately. But such innate principles cannot be actualized by any created power, but are implanted in nature by God alone. So, it remains true that one person can in no way teach another.[9]

Yet Aquinas does not, in fact, take this line of argument, or the argument referring to 'signs', to show that we cannot teach other people. Nor does he think that the quotations from the gospels of Matthew and John undermine the belief that we can really teach one another. He tries to defend himself on these fronts by offering a view of teaching and learning that he takes to be something of a compromise between two historically notable views concerning human knowledge.

The first of these is one that Aquinas attributes to the Islamic philosopher Averroes (1126–1198). According to Averroes, we are all, as it were, plugged into one understanding mind and therefore really have nothing to learn as individuals. Aquinas agrees with Averroes insofar as he thinks that understanding is something that people can genuinely share, as they cannot, he thinks, share their bodily processes, including those associated with sensing and having emotions. According to Aquinas, if you and I realize that cats are carnivores, we have exactly the same thought. And yet, he thinks, I cannot have your toothache or your fear, even if I can understand what these amount to.

But Aquinas does not buy into the claim that all people share one understanding mind to which they are somehow connected. Nor does

[8] *Summa Theologiae*, 1a,117, 1. I quote from Volume 15 of the Blackfriars Edition of the *Summa Theologiae*, pp.129 and 131.

[9] I quote again from McGlynn's translation (p.78), though with slight modification.

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he agree with a view of human knowledge that he attributes to Plato. According to this, all knowledge is really a kind of remembering of what we knew before we were born, from which it would seem to follow that there can be no learning and no teaching in this life. Aquinas, however, argues that in teaching and learning there is genuine activity both on the part of teacher and learner. Learners, he says, have to contribute to their learning by bringing some knowledge with them as they are being schooled. Yet, he adds, teachers can lead people to further knowledge by presenting them with certain data, with new things to consider, and by drawing their attention to logical consequences and to connections that students might not have been able to notice on their own.

In short, Aquinas really does think that teachers can make a difference to people in helping them to come to know what they did not previously grasp. But he is also of the view that teachers are stuck with what their students bring with them as students. I mean that he recognizes that one's success in teaching is inevitably constrained by the intellectual abilities that one's students have to start with.

In this connection Aquinas compares teachers to doctors. Doctors have to work with the material constitution of the patients they are trying to treat, and the ability of doctors to cure will depend on how curable their patients are. By the same token, says Aquinas, teachers are constrained by what we might call the intellectual health of their students — their natural ability to move forward intellectually. So, he observes:

> As there are two ways of being cured, that is, either through the activity of unaided nature or by nature with the aid of medicine, so also there are two ways of acquiring knowledge. In one way, natural reason by itself reaches knowledge of unknown things, and this way is called discovery; in the other way, when someone aids the learner's natural reason, and this is called learning by instruction … Consequently people are said to teach others inasmuch as, by signs, they manifest to the others the reasoning process which they themselves go through by their own natural reason. And thus, through the instrumentality, as it were, of what is told them, the natural reason of pupils arrives at a knowledge of the things which they did not know. Therefore, just as the doctor is said to heal a patient through the activity of nature, so someone is said to cause knowledge in another through the activity of the learner's own natural reason, and this is teaching.[10]

And how does Aquinas try to square this line of thinking with the biblical passages that seem to imply that only God teaches? He does so by making a distinction. Yes, he agrees, God is the primary teacher since God is the Creator and since all creaturely teaching and

[10] *De Veritate*, 11,1 (McGlynn, p.83, with slight modification).

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learning come about by God's creative action. And yet, Aquinas adds, creaturely causes, though all secondary causes, are genuine causes. So, there can be human teachers acting as instruments of God and being true causes as they do so.

Some people have suggested that if God exists, then nothing that God creates actually does anything since for God to create is for God to hold everything in being as the first cause of everything created and of its operations. But, and for various reasons, Aquinas takes a different line. Basically, he thinks that the fact that I believe that God exists does not mean that I am thereby committed to supposing that I cannot, for example, wash a glass. Yes, he agrees, all glass-washing gets done by people who are creatures of God acting as instruments of God (acting as agents used by God to get certain things done). But, he thinks, creatures of God, including teachers, have genuine causal powers through which God works to achieve what he wants to bring about.

V

But when do teachers teach? I mean, can one run a clock on the process of teaching? Can one, for example, define 'teaching' in terms of the time that one spends in a classroom with students? In response to this question Aquinas again has something theoretical to say, something that you might find deeply consoling, as I do. For the people who pay us to teach basically assume that we are teaching for all of the time that they are paying us, while Aquinas rejects this assumption. In his view, which he derives from Aristotle, teaching only occurs as learning occurs.

If I were asked to explain what I do as a teacher I would start by saying things like 'I talk in class', 'I provide hand outs', 'I write on blackboards', 'I meet with students who have questions', and so on. And, of course, it is because I do such things that I earn my salary. As we all know, however, I can go through these processes until I am blue in the face without anyone actually learning anything. And that, thinks Aquinas is because, as he puts it, 'the action of the agent is in the patient'.

Some philosophers make a rigid distinction between cause and effect. David Hume is a good example. In his *A Treatise of Human Nature* he says:

> As all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and as the idea of cause and effect are evidently distinct, 'twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment and existent the

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> next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle'.[11]

Hume seems to think that a cause is something with its own identity quite apart from what it brings about, as, say, two balls on a billiard table are distinct things in and of themselves. But, and in the sense of 'cause' that Hume appears to have in mind, Aquinas thinks about causality rather differently. He holds that something is a cause only insofar as it is having an effect. He thinks, for example, that I am only the cause of my cat getting fed insofar as my cat is eating by virtue of me. And he thinks that I only teach insofar as someone is learning because of me. In his *Commentary on Aristotle's 'Physics'* Aquinas maintains that 'action and passion are not two changes but one and the same change, called action in so far as it is caused by an agent, and passion in so far as it takes place in a patient'.[12] And, applying this thought to teaching and learning, Aquinas holds that we are only teaching as our students are actually learning because of us. But this, of course, is a thought that we should keep between ourselves and not share with our employers.

VI

In what I have just been reporting, we have the core of Aquinas's theoretical understanding of teaching as both possible and as amounting to the leading of people from what they know to what they do not know. As I have noted, however, Aquinas was a teacher who tried to teach by writing as well as by speaking. So, might it be that his teaching, *insofar as we have access to it in his writings*, can entitle us to draw some conclusions concerning what principles he employed as a teacher? My view is that it can.

VII

To some extent, I have already indicated that this is so when quoting from the Foreword to the *Summa Theologiae*. From this alone one can safely infer that Aquinas, at least as a teacher of what he calls 'beginners', thought it good to start from where his students were and to be clear and direct. Let me call this 'Aquinas's first principle of teaching as reflected in his writings'. It amounts to the maxim

[11] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, second revised edition by P.H. Nidditch (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1978), p.79.

[12] I quote from *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings*, edited by Timothy McDermott (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 1993), p.84.

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'Always pay attention to what your students are bringing with them as they turn to you as a teacher, and always take care to strive for clarity while avoiding distracting or potentially confusing material'. Or, as Aquinas bluntly observes in one place, 'It is the duty of all teachers to make themselves easily understood'.[13]

But allow me to say now that from his practice as a teacher who wrote we can glean that Aquinas had at least five other teaching maxims or principles.

One of these is that teachers should, with an eye on truth, always pay attention to logic and to rigor in argument. As I have said, Aquinas thinks that an important part of teaching amounts to drawing the attention of students to what follows from what and to how it follows. But that, of course, implies that teachers will be at fault if they are not concerned to employ careful and valid arguments when talking to their students; and, in his many writings, Aquinas himself is evidently at pains to proceed with deference to sound reasoning practice. His many different conclusions might be faulted on various grounds, but his argumentative standards are extremely rigorous. And, though his teaching duties did not require him to do so, he wrote commentaries on the logical works of Aristotle — as much, I suspect, for his own benefit as for that of his potential readers.

In one place Aquinas says 'People who are real teachers must be concerned with the truth'.[14] In another place he asserts 'The doctor sees to it that people's lives are preserved; tradespeople supply the necessities of life; teachers take care that human beings may learn the truth'.[15] So, I take it, for example, that Aquinas has no time for teachers whose primary aim is self-promotion or the wooing of admirers, fans, or groupies. He thinks that teaching is a serious business in which striving for truth by abiding by sound logical standards should always be the chief concern. You may, of course, now feel like saying 'But not all teachers teach logic'. Yet Aquinas, I think, would take such a response to be missing an important point. It is obviously true that not all teachers teach logic. But logic can be taught by example, and good logical habits are needed anytime that we reason at all while aiming to arrive at true conclusions. And, thinks Aquinas, they are especially needed if our aim is to lead people from what they know to what they do not yet know but might come to know as a result of our prompting and guidance.

A third teaching principle that I think can be extracted from Aquinas's writing practice might be expressed in the imperative 'Strive to encourage students to learn from as many people as

[13] *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae,101,2. The words I quote come in an objection to the article to which I refer. But Aquinas evidently accepts what they say.

[14] *De Veritate*, XI,1.

[15] *De Regno*, Book II, Chapter 3.

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possible'. I say this (a) because of the way in which Aquinas frequently draws on the writings of a large number of people when trying to develop what he wants to say, and (b) because of the way in which he continually raises lots of objections to what he wants to say while responding to them so as to flesh out his own position.

Some authors proceed as if they have little to learn from others. Aquinas, however, does not. Typically, he writes while trying to learn from many thinkers, even if he disagrees with some of them. He does so, for example, when bringing Aristotle into his discussions, albeit that Aquinas has a very different set of beliefs to commend than does Aristotle.[16] And when it comes to objections, Aquinas's basic line is 'Bring them on'. By this I mean that he evidently thinks that one should strive to consider the best that might be said against something that one gives out to students as being true. This thought of Aquinas is all over his Disputed Questions, and it is present in what he writes even in the *Summa Theologiae*.

Aquinas's Disputed Questions derive from actual debates in which objections were raised to positions that Aquinas wanted to defend. Aquinas worked through these objections while incorporating them into a series of final products because he obviously thought that one can progress in learning, and therefore in teaching, by noting what might be said against what one thinks and by explaining why the objections might not work. And another teaching maxim of Aquinas that I derive from this fact is 'Inform your students about the best that has been said against what you are telling them, and help them to reflect on it'. A related teaching maxim of Aquinas would seem to be 'Encourage your students to ask questions'.

Aquinas thinks that we progress in understanding by asking questions of the form 'How come?'. Thus, 'How come the mess in the kitchen?' or 'How come human beings?'. Indeed, and as I said this morning, Aquinas presses the 'How come?' question so as to ask 'How come something rather than nothing?'. But people answer 'How come?' questions in different ways, and sometimes they arrive at very different answers. As far as I can see, however, Aquinas thinks that, all things being equal, and with an eye on educating rather than confusing, teachers should inform their students of a number of these different answers while also trying to help them to reflect on them so as to see what, if anything, can be learned from them.

[16] Aquinas is sometimes described as an Aristotelian. But, while acknowledging debts to Aristotle, and while often employing Aristotelian terminology, Aquinas's teaching differs from that of Aristotle in striking ways, especially when it comes to the notions of causality and virtue. I try to draw attention to this in my *Thomas Aquinas's 'Summa Theologiae': A Guide and Commentary* cited above. See also Mark D. Jordan, *Rewritten Theology: Aquinas after His Readers* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2006).

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Yet another teaching principle of Aquinas is 'Teachers should be morally virtuous'. And you might think that this principle is evidently true. But it is not. For why cannot even a moral reprobate be a good teacher? Suppose that I have a side-line in selling cocaine to drug addicts. Does that mean that I cannot teach chemistry well? Surely not. Suppose that Fred beats his wife and children. Does that mean that he cannot teach geography well? Again, surely not. Yet Aquinas does not seem to think otherwise. His 'Teachers should be morally virtuous' maxim is getting at a point about understanding and willing.

Some people have made a rigid distinction between understanding and willing by saying that once we have understanding we can then go on to engage in willing. Hence, for example, the notion of 'will-power', construed as what we use when trying to do what we know that we ought to do, or when trying not to do what we know we ought not to do. But Aquinas does not accept this distinction between understanding and willing. He thinks that willing and understanding go together insofar as what we find desirable, and therefore want, depends on how we view things. According to Aquinas, there is no operation of the will that is not also an operation of the intellect, and *vice versa*. There is an interweaving of being attracted and of understanding that cannot be easily disconnected. We think of what we are attracted to thinking about, and we are attracted to what we think of. So, Aquinas holds that what we know partly depends on what we find appealing, implying that learning, and, by implication, teaching, requires certain virtues when it comes to rightly directed attention and goals. Hence, for example, Aquinas can observe that what he calls 'the contemplative life', which he takes to be concerned with study, involves well ordered will and not just intellect. Or, as he says in the second part of the *Summa Theologiae*:

> Those are said to live the contemplative life who are chiefly intent on the contemplation of truth. But intention is an act of the will ... because it has to do with the end, which is the object of the will. Hence, as regards the very essence of its activity, the contemplative life belongs to the intellect; but as regards that which moves one to the exercise of that activity, it belongs to the will, which moves all the other faculties, and even the intellect, to their acts.[17]

In short, Aquinas thinks that good teaching and good learning depend on a properly ordered will, on will directed to what is really good.

Finally, when it comes to teaching maxims implied by what Aquinas writes, there is the principle 'Be humble'. In saying this

[17] *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 180,1. I quote from volume 46 of the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, and McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, 1966), p.15.

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I mean that Aquinas thinks that teachers should recognize their dependence on God for the good that they do as teachers.

Aquinas's writings are shot through with the conviction that God accounts for all creaturely good. So, he takes God to account for the acquisition and imparting of all learning. As he writes in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

> God is not only the cause by His intellect of all things which naturally subsist, but even every intellectual cognition is derived from the divine intellect. Necessarily, then, it is by the Word of God, which is the knowledge of the divine intellect, that every intellectual cognition is caused.[18]

If that is true, of course, it would seem that teachers need to realize that what is good in their teaching comes from God before it comes from them. At one level, Aquinas holds that teachers should be proud of themselves since they share in God's work of bringing it about that learning occurs. Or, as he says in a lecture delivered in 1256: 'The minds of teachers ... are watered by the things that are above in the wisdom of God, and by their ministry the light of divine wisdom flows down into the minds of students'.[19] Yet Aquinas also clearly thinks that their role as divine instruments ought to leave teachers conscious of their need for divine assistance. As he concludes the lecture from which I have just quoted, he says that 'no one is adequate ... by himself and from his own resources' for the 'ministry' of teaching. He adds that 'we can hope that God will make him adequate', while ending with the words 'May Christ grant this to us'.

VIII

What of students, however? Does Aquinas have advice to offer them? That he does can be seen from a sermon he preached to a mostly student audience in Rome sometime between 1268 and 1272. The sermon is based on Luke 2:52, which speaks of the boy Jesus advancing in age and wisdom. So, at one stage in his sermon, Aquinas reflects on what it means to advance in wisdom and how people might do this. Throughout the sermon, Aquinas is taking the adolescence of Christ to be an example for all adolescents.

[18] *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV,13. I quote from the translation of Book Four of the *Contra Gentiles* by Charles J. O'Neil (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame and London, 1975), pp.96–97.

[19] This passage occurs in Aquinas's inaugural lecture as a Master of Theology at Paris. I quote from Simon Tugwell (ed.), *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings* (Paulist Press: New York and Mahwah, 1998), p.355.

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One thing he stresses is the desirability of growing intellectually as one grows physically. Students may not want to learn, but Aquinas suggests that they should do so in order that their intellectual maturity should keep pace with their physical maturity and so that their opportunities for learning are not thrown away or are not left to be taken up at a time when it is not possible to benefit from them. Aquinas then goes on to say that students should listen generously, inquire diligently, respond prudently, and meditate attentively.

They should listen generously, he says, since they need teachers to instruct them. And they should listen with perseverance. Aquinas notes that even after three days Jesus was still paying attention to teachers in the temple in Jerusalem and asking them questions.[20] In this connection Aquinas adds that 'we should not just open our ears to one teacher only, but to many ... [since] one man has not advanced in all fields'.[21] 'What you do not learn from one', he says, 'you learn from someone else' so as to be able to 'pick the flowers' from different teachers. At the same time, however, Aquinas insists that students should not so much pay attention to who is teaching them but to the truth of what someone teaching them says. He observes: 'No one ought to have a friend in truth; we ought to cling only to the truth'. Much room for thought here, if I may say so.

When it comes to the need for students to inquire diligently, Aquinas first appeals to the preciousness of arriving at truth while arguing that truth, because of its intrinsic value, should be pursued as fervently as we often strive after money. But, he adds, students would be wrong to think that truth is only to be learned from contemporaries. 'You should not', he says, 'be satisfied inquiring only of the ones present, but you ought to inquire also of the old ones who are not with us any more. If you do not have an abundance of people, you still have an abundance of texts'.

Turning to the notion of prudent responses on the part of students, Aquinas first insists that students should recognize their limitations and not try to answer questions to which they do not know the answers. He says: 'If someone asked from you what is beyond your knowledge and strength, you should not consider yourself obliged to respond'. Yet, Aquinas adds, students should also not feel obliged to answer questions from teachers who are trying to undermine or humiliate them. If anything, he says, students improperly taunted by questions from teachers should try to think of some good questions

[20] Actually, Aquinas held that Jesus had nothing to learn from human teachers. But he does think that, in listening to others, Christ provides us with an example to follow.

[21] My quotations from the sermon *Puer Jesus* all come from *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, translated by Mark-Robin Hoogland (The Catholic University of America Press: Washington, D.C., 2010), pp.87–107). The critical edition of Aquinas's academic sermons, to be published by the Leonine Commission, is currently in press.

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to throw back at them. He goes on to say that students should deal with questions from teachers directly and clearly. He writes: 'There ought to be prudence in an answer so that it is in proportion with the question, not with elegant epithets of words, but to the point. Otherwise the answer will be full of wind'.

And finally, says Aquinas, students need to brood over what their teachers tell them. They should reflect or ruminate or meditate on it. 'Meditation', says Aquinas, 'is the key to the memory of someone who can read and listen to many things, but cannot keep it unless he meditates'. He continues: 'Just as food does not nourish unless it is first chewed, so you cannot advance in knowledge except by chewing, through frequent meditation, the things that you have heard'. And, Aquinas adds, students need to meditate on all that they have heard and should try to do so in a serious and non-superficial way. This piece of advice, of course, might seem very commonsensical, as does much that Aquinas recommends in his sermon on Luke 2:52. But I think it interesting that even someone of Aquinas's intellectual stature should resort to common sense and the obvious when advising students going about their business as students. Perhaps he thought, as I tend to, that common sense is not all that common, and that people often fail to notice what is obvious.

IX

Outside the sermon on Luke 2:52 Aquinas has other things to say that bear on how students should think. Let me just mention a few of them.

One question of the *Summa Theologiae* is devoted to the virtue of what Aquinas calls *studiositas*, which he takes to be needed when it comes to having the virtue of temperance.[22] We can translate the word *studiositas* as 'devotion to learning'. And Aquinas commends this as having to do with temperance since he contrasts it with an immoderate desire to know, which he calls *curiositas*, which we might translate as 'poking your nose into what does not concern you' or 'being hell-bent on learning in an inappropriate way'. In other words, Aquinas clearly thinks that students should energize themselves to study prudentially.

By 'prudence', Aquinas basically means, not so much 'caution' or 'cunning', as what Jane Austen refers to as 'good sense'. Prudence, he thinks, is the virtue of practical wisdom, something that Jane Austen takes her heroine Elizabeth Bennett to grow into as her silly younger

[22] *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae,166. The question consists of two articles.

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sisters and her pedantic older sister do not.[23] In short, Aquinas thinks that being prudent is not just a matter of knowing. He thinks that it amounts to having a range of moral virtues. And he thinks that prudence is a virtue as much needed by students as it is by anyone else. In another part of the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas commends *docilitas* ('being teachable') as a virtue falling under prudence.[24]

As I am sure Jane Austen would have been the first to agree, prudence or good sense is not easily acquired by people on their own and in a short time. And we are certainly not born with it. Or, as Aquinas says: 'When it comes to prudence people stand in the greatest need of being taught by others, especially by older people who have acquired fair insight when it comes to the outcome of human actions'. Citing Aristotle and the book of Ecclesiasticus as authorities, Aquinas goes on to say that even 'the unproved assertions and opinions of experienced people who are older than we are, and prudent, deserve as much attention as those they support by proofs, for experience gives them a grasp of principles'.

The moral that I take Aquinas to have in mind for students here is 'Unless you have reason not to do so, pay attention to what older people who seem to be virtuous are telling you'. Of course, Aquinas is aware that trusting someone appointed to teach might lead a student into disaster on various counts. He knows that there can be bad teachers and teachers anxious to exploit students for immoral purposes. And he knows that some people lie. But he does not regard such facts as telling against the practical reasonableness of being prepared to learn from people with more experience and knowledge than one has — even if such people cannot present one with a string of formal demonstrations proving that what they say is true.

And this, I am certain, is why Aquinas often speaks of Christ as our teacher. Aquinas thinks that the whole of sound Christian theology derives from what Jesus taught his disciples, though he also thinks that none of this can be proved to be true philosophically. His position is that the claim that Jesus was God cannot be proved from premisses that all reasonable people must accept. He thinks that it has to be believed as being taught by Jesus, whom Aquinas takes to be divine. He also thinks that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be proved from premisses that all reasonable people must accept. He thinks that it has to be believed as being taught by Jesus, whom Aquinas takes to be divine.

[23] For more on this, see Herbert McCabe, 'Aquinas on Good Sense', reprinted in Brian Davies (ed.), *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives* (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 2002).

[24] *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae,49,3.

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So, Aquinas refers to Christ as 'the first and original teacher of the faith'[25] since he takes Christ to teach with authority as being divine.[26] And Aquinas takes the core of Christ's teaching to be something that can only be believed to be true. He bluntly denies that it can be demonstrated to be true. In taking this view, however, Aquinas does not see himself as presenting an unusual view of teaching. I mean that he does not think that teaching always proceeds by means of demonstration. His view is that students will often have to take what their teachers say on faith in order to get to a position of being able themselves to do research. Or, as he says in his sermon conferences on the Apostles Creed:

> If everyone were willing to believe only those things that they might know with certitude, they would not be able to live in this world. How would anyone be able to live unless they put belief in someone? How would they even believe who their own father might be? And therefore it is necessary that human beings believe someone about those things which they cannot know perfectly by themselves.[27]

According to Aquinas, all students have to start by just believing their teachers — a point which he then draws on when talking about the relationship between Christians and Christ as their teacher. He does this in, for example, his commentary on the Gospel of John in which he says that the intellectual life 'is made perfect by the true knowledge of divine wisdom' imparted by Christ. He adds:

> But no one can arrive at any wisdom except by faith. Hence it is that in the sciences, people do not acquire wisdom unless they first believe what is said by their teachers. Therefore, if we wish to achieve the life of wisdom [concerning divine things], we must believe through faith the things that are proposed to us by it. As it says in Hebrews 11:6, 'Those who come to God must believe that God is and rewards those who seek him'. Again, as Isaiah 28:16 says, 'If you do not believe, you will not understand'.[28]

[25] *Summa Theologiae*, 3a,7,7.

[26] For discussion of Aquinas on Christ as a teacher, see Michael Sherwin O.P., 'Christ the Teacher in St. Thomas's *Commentary on the Gospel of John*', in Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (ed.), *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology* (The Catholic University of America Press: Washington, DC., 2005).

[27] *Collationes Credo in Deum*, 1. I quote from *The Sermon Conferences of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Apostles' Creed*, translated, edited, and introduced by NicholasAyo (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1988), p.23.

[28] I quote, with modification, from Aquinas's *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, translated by James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher, Part 1 (Magi Books: Albany, New York, 1980), p.310. The quotation is part of lecture 4 of Aquinas's commentary on John 5.

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Aquinas, of course, is aware that teachers can deceive their students. So, it is not his view that we should always believe everything that anyone tells us. But he is clear enough that, prior to the acquisition of knowledge based on reasons, there is always belief that does not rest on demonstration or grounds.[29] And Aquinas factors this thought into what he says about teaching and learning in a way that allows him to suggest that learning from Christ is not totally different from learning from teachers in general.

XII

That said, however, Aquinas thinks that the best teaching of all in terms of content is Christ's teaching. He refers to this as *sacra doctrina* ('Holy Teaching'), which is the subject matter of the *Summa Theologiae*. Indeed, the very first question of that work is entitled 'The Nature and Scope of Sacred Teaching' (*de sacra doctrina, qualis sit et ad quae se extendat*). And this preoccupation with 'Sacred Teaching' would, I am sure, have led Aquinas, were he alive today, to offer some strong suggestions concerning the way in which teachers of religious studies should be professing their subject in Catholic schools today when it comes to matters of curriculums and topics to be taught. But that, perhaps, is matter for another lecture.

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[29] For what I take to be a brief but cogent defense of this position coming from a 20th century philosopher, see Elizabeth Anscombe, 'What Is It to Believe Someone?', in C.F. Delaney (ed.), *Rationality and Religious Belief* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1979).

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