

Exégesis y contemplación. El sentido literal y espiritual
de la Escritura en los comentarios bíblicos de Tomás de Aquino

*Exegesis and Contemplation. The Literal and Spiritual Sense
of Scripture in Aquinas Biblical Commentaries*

[481-504]

En los últimos años se ha observado un creciente interés por la exégesis bíblica de Tomás de Aquino. Después de un largo período de silencio sobre este tema, han surgido nuevos estudios que presentan las características del método de la exégesis de Tomás de Aquino y su contenido. El objetivo de este artículo es ir más allá y centrarse en la naturaleza específica de la "epistemología exegética" tomista y el carácter de su sentido espiritual, el sentido del debate entre Smalley y De Lubac. El aspecto característico de este enfoque exegético es hacer hincapié en el papel de la contemplación en la exégesis, no sólo como un tema, sino también como una posición fundamental de un exegeta hacia el texto inspirado.

In recent years a growing interest in Biblical exegesis of Aquinas has been observed. Finally, after a long period of silence on this theme, new texts have appeared which present the characteristics of the method of Aquinas's exegesis and its content. The aim of this article is to go further and focus on the specific nature of Thomas' "exegetic epistemology" and the status of its spiritual sense, the significance of which has been the subject of debate between Smalley and De Lubac. The characteristic aspect of this exegetic approach is to emphasize the role of contemplation in exegesis, not only as a theme, but also as a fundamental position of an exegete towards the inspired text.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Tomás de Aquino, tomismo bíblico, contemplación, exégesis medieval, hermenéutica bíblica.

KEY WORDS: Thomas Aquinas, biblical thomism, contemplation, medieval exegesis, biblical hermeneutics.

Exegesis and Contemplation. The Literal and Spiritual Sense of Scripture in Aquinas Biblical Commentaries

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Puzzlement is not uncommon amongst readers of Thomas Aquinas's Biblical commentaries during their first encounter with these works. These may seem unattractively formal at first glance, however once one becomes familiar with the logic behind their discourse, they may captivate with their message, pedagogical approach and respect towards the reader's intelligence. Thus, at this stage, it becomes permissible to say that Aquinas's exegetical corpus is, as a whole, a rather persuasive invitation to delve into the very depths of biblical texts¹.

There can hardly be any doubt about the importance of Biblical exegesis and the role of its history in our Catholic heritage (and beyond) however it would appear that more attention ought to be paid to the fertile intellectual ground which it can offer us. That is why a thorough analysis of the changes that were taking place from St. Augustine to St. Thomas Aquinas is of essential importance in our understanding of how different hermeneutical systems underwent a gradual process of assimilation, which can be referred to as an *osmosis* sorts. This gradual penetration did not only involve using the same methods and techniques, but was for Aquinas's part, an act of reciprocal theological thinking.

Thomas Aquinas was well aware of this dimension of Christian exegesis. Hence his belief that his analysis of the Gospel of St. John ought to be located within a dialogue with commentaries written since the earliest beginnings of the Patristic age. He did not produce unconventional or

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¹ G. DAHAN, *Thomas d'Aquin, commentateur de l'épître aux Éphésiens*, 15.

provocative interpretations, yet he adopted an integral (not integrist!) approach, focusing on details as well as on a broader perspective of St. John's Gospel. According to Aquinas, the Word of God gives the interpretation its rhythm and direction, which the reader ought to follow. We cannot impose our feelings onto the Biblical text. Rather, we need to listen carefully. Failing that, an exegesis which uses Sacred Scripture for its own purposes is likely to limit itself exclusively to one dimension of meaning or in Aquinas's words (following St. Gregory the Great): *adulterio spirituale*².

In Thomas's view, exegesis is not necessarily being transformed into a set of arguments. Instead it reaches out to the very source of theological reflection seeking to explain Sacred Scripture. Thus, the ultimate goal of the medieval exegete is to write the kind of interpretation that will allow the reader to follow the main subject but at the same time enjoy the uniqueness (the indispensability) of each of the meanings of Sacred Scripture, which in the midst of its wealth remains in the unique relationship of unity guaranteed by Christ, *verbum abbreviatum*. It is Christ that John the Baptist had in mind when he wrote "among you stands one you do not know" (John 1:26), and from many theological interpretations of this fragment Thomas draws attention also to the one that shows Christ present in the entire Sacred Scripture but not always recognised by the Pharisees.³

Earlier Patristic commentaries were in the main more homiletic, allegorical, personal and pastoral, while Aquinas's commentary on the Gospel of St. John, although more formal and literal, is also pastoral – as observed by J.-P. Torrell – but the pastoral material is by no means similar to the Church Fathers. While the Patristic commentaries could be read, the medieval ones could apparently be studied⁴. They include fewer digressions which break up the order of the discourse as Aquinas seems to have cared about holding the attention of his readers, which he attracts by using *divisio textus* or long general explanations, the famous medieval *notae*, that stop the cursory word for word discourse. They do not slow down the explanation of Sacred Scripture but introduce the space necessary for reflection, in which Aristotelian tools become useful in the quest for the truth.

Before we commence our attempt to chart Aquinas's reading of St. John's Gospel, it would not go amiss to turn our attention to the relationship be-

² *In Ps.* 49, n. 9.

³ *In Ioan.*, cap. I, lect. 13.

⁴ T. Mc GUCKIN, *Saint Thomas Aquinas and Theological Exegesis*, 99-120.

tween exegesis and theology, understood as *sacra doctrina*⁵. Next, we will focus on the commentary on the Gospel according to St. John in order to analyse Aquinas' method of discovering the Biblical meaning and the deep contemplative approach that he adopts in his interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. In conclusion, it will be attempted to outline the main features of Aquinas's theological exegesis.

I. Aquinas as Magister in Sacra Pagina: from exegesis to sacra doctrina

Aquinas's Biblical commentaries are something more than just supplementary literature or additional source of inspiration. Although they still remain in the shadow of the *Summa Theologiae*, his work on Sacred Scripture was nevertheless a major channel of expression for his theological ideas. This dependence on Sacred Scripture, treated as the "testimony" of Revelation, marked significantly the style of theology by Thomas Aquinas, which was perceived as one discipline namely *sacra doctrina*. The path to *sacra doctrina* stretched forth from exegesis i.e. from immersion in the Word of God, whose power, potential and wealth were supposed to be used by a theologian. That is why a medieval theologian was described as *magister in Sacra Pagina*: the world of his intellectual quest was defined not so much by the words of the Scripture, but by the momentous discovery of the virtuality (both spiritual and doctrinal) of the Word of God⁶. According to Aquinas in his commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, the Word of God should be seen as transcendental since it goes beyond word: "The task of a good interpreter is not to consider words, but sense"⁷. It means that the aim of the exegesis is to give the attention to words, but in order to discover their *sensus* and *res* which the words denote. For God does not only express certain truths in words but also speaks through events which have meaning. Thomas frequently alluded to these mutual relations of literal and spiritual sense in the prologues to his commentaries where he clearly presented the theme and method of the exegesis. They draw the main line of interpretation right from the outset and prompt the reader towards Aquinas's idea of correct hermeneutic way. As M. Levering

⁵ See H. ANZULEWICZ, *Zwischen Faszination und Ablehnung*, 129-166.

⁶ See E. REINHARDT, *Thomas Aquinas as Interpreter of Scripture*, 71-90.

⁷ *In Matt.*, cap. XXVII, lect. 1: "officium est enim boni interpretis non considerare verba, sed sensum".

emphasized, this practice must be always interpreted in the light of deeper assumptions, among which the most significant aspect is the participatory character of history, which is not a continuum of moments but a participation in God's providential care of his creation⁸.

I.1. Hermeneutical programme of Thomas

In our analysis, Aquinas' prologue to the commentary on the Lamentations by Jeremiah (*In Threnos Jeremiae expositio*) is particularly important⁹. It differs in style from later commentaries (thus some even doubt its authenticity which has not been questioned yet), but it sheds light on the Scriptural text and offers the reader the ways to discover its deeper meaning.

Typically, Thomas uses a Biblical text as a hermeneutical key to unlock the meaning of another text. In the case of Lamentations, this is perfectly illustrated by a fragment from Ezekiel (2:9-10), whereby a scroll of papyrus written on both sides with Lamentations is being mentioned: "When I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. And he spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe". Apart from the traditional question about the contents of the book concerned, its author and the metaphorical gesture of a hand stretched out towards humanity (which could possibly be an imagery of the Creation, but even more so of the Incarnation of the Word of God), Thomas pays considerable attention in his prologue to particular details e.g. Ezekiel's scroll of papyrus is described as rolled (*liber involtus*). In order to read the Scriptural text, it has to be un-rolled with the help of hermeneutical tools, which take into consideration the literary style (or as Thomas explains: the beauty of words, rhythm and rhetoric). The very sense and need of hermeneutics is deeply rooted in the act of "unrolling" the meaning that results from the fact that the truth can be delivered in many ways¹⁰. Thomas allegorically reads the description of how various objects used in temples were wrapped up threefold in the fourth chapter of the Book of Numbers, and states that the sense of the Scriptural text is also wrapped

⁸ See M. LEVERING, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis* (Chapter 1).

⁹ See G. DAHAN, *Thomas Aquinas: Exegesis and Hermeneutics*, 45-70.

¹⁰ G. DAHAN, *Lire la Scripture au Moyen Age*, 225.

by the Holy Spirit in three layers and requires active participation on the exegete's part. His role is not limited to highlighting and analysing words, their history and linguistic characteristics. It would make his commentary very superficial and would never get him beyond the first layer. The exegete is required to explain the Scriptural text through the same spirit with which it was written and reveal this explanation with the help of the Holy Spirit¹¹. At this point we are to encounter one of Thomas Aquinas's key exegetical statements: multitude also reflects benefit and for this reason the scrolls "had writing on the front and on the back", because the wisdom was written on both sides and in two ways –in the shell of the literal sense and in the hidden intellectual meaning, so that what was written in John 10:9 ("They will come in and go out, and find pasture") comes true¹².

Thomas sees the discovery of the sense of Sacred Scripture as breaking through the shell (*cortice*) to reveal the precious, hidden spiritual meaning protected by the literal sense. This sense is above all *qui primo per verba intenditur, sive proprie dicta sive figurate*¹³, which denotes that what matters is not the sound of the words themselves, their literal interpretation but the sense associated with historical realization of salvation plans. The reading of the literal sense encompasses three levels and shapes, starting with *littera*, the text in its grammatical articulation, through *sensus* (taking into consideration the context) and *sententia*, namely the presentation of salvific truth which opens in Christ and New Testament¹⁴. The literal sense should be discovered first, but it is not the end as it opens the spiritual sense, which is the reality signified by the literal sense. At the same time, both senses may be separated from each other and introduced independently. A nut shell (returning to Thomas's metaphor) is significant not because of itself but because of what it protects i.e. the nut. We may find this imagery somewhat unexpected yet even more surprising seems to be the use of a quote

¹¹ *In Threnos*, prol.: "Haec enim involutio Spiritus Sancti explicatur a sacris expositoribus: quia sacrae Scripturae eodem spiritu sunt expositae quo sunt editae, sicut dicit Augustinus". It is important to remind about the moral requirements set to the people who interpret the Scripture, as stressed out by Thomas.

¹² *In Threnos*, prol.: "In multiplicitate etiam ostenditur utilitas; unde sequitur: *qui erat scriptus intus et foris*, utrobique enim sapientiam scriptam continet: scilicet in cortice litteralis sensus, et in abditis sententialis intelligentiae, ut sit verum quod dicitur Joan. 10: *ingredietur et egredietur et pascua inveniet*".

¹³ *In Iob*, cap. I.

¹⁴ See I. M. MANRESA, *El hombre espiritual es el que entiende las cosas espirituales*, 391-422.

from the St. John's Gospel, meant as it were not just to illustrate but also to broaden the reflection¹⁵. It is a characteristic feature of Aquinas's style: a quote is intended to bind together previous interpretations, but at the same time leaves sufficient room for further interpretation. Entry, exit and finding pasture in John 10:9 illustrates the dynamic a relationship between the literal and spiritual sense. One conditions the other. We cannot abandon one in order to find the other. Entry is the discovery of the spiritual sense, which allows going back and understanding the literal sense better (exit). It is only after one has entered and exited that they can arrive at the pastures of the Good Shepherd.

What are we make of this as a whole? It would appear that Aquinas seeks to demonstrate here that a spiritual sense does not exist outside a literal one: the spiritual sense cannot be "squeezed out" of the literal one, it cannot be abandoned on the way to the spiritual discovery, but both perspectives have to be kept in creative suspense, in constant relationship between the spiritual and the literal. The spiritual sense is not "the icing on the cake," something added, but is rotted in the literal sense. It is very important, as Karl Froelich observes, that Thomas practically never discusses one sense, for example literal one, without others; his reflection on the senses of Scripture combines them in one¹⁶. The spiritual sense does not have to be further explained (as something artificially added), it is only necessary to break through the shell (*cortice*) of the literal sense in order to discover what lies underneath. This breaking, however, is a spiritual act that gives a word its consistency, in which the spiritual sense is completely submerged¹⁷.

¹⁵ More about this technique in Aquinas see P. ROSZAK, *The Place and Function of Biblical Citations*, 115-139.

¹⁶ Medieval academic exegesis is significantly indebted to preceding interpretation of Sacred Scripture. There was a well-known discussion in the mid-twentieth century between Beryl Smalley and Henry de Lubac about the character of medieval exegesis and whether the work of Aquinas marked the beginning of the decline of interest in spiritual interpretation. De Lubac did not agree with this view and pointed out that there were deeper links between the spiritual and literal meaning in the works of Thomas Aquinas. These meanings, pointed out De Lubac, are not developed dialectically. See R. ALDANA, *La inteligencia espiritual de la Sagrada Escritura*, 9-58; W. WRIGHT, "The literal sense of Scripture according to Henri de Lubac: insight from patristic exegesis of the transfiguration", 252-277.

¹⁷ G. DAHAN, *Le sens littéral dans l'exégèse chrétienne*, 244-247.

I.2. Sacramental dimension of exegesis? *Res* and its meaning

The multitude of meanings in Aquinas's prologue to Lamentations is, as he argues, beneficial, not burdensome. A single interpretation would be of no use to the reader and would not reflect the human nature, which in contrast to God (and angels) needs many words to express reality. His understanding of the matters of God goes from the literal sense to the spiritual one, just like his cognitive path leads from what is understood by senses to what is understood by reason.

Since Aquinas' commentary on St. John's Gospel, on which this paper focuses, frequently takes the path of allegorical interpretation, it is worth investigating what Thomas may have had in mind whenever he points to an allegorical sense. According to its etymology, allegory is an expression of one thing whilst meaning another (derives from Greek ἄλλος, "different", "other" and ἀγορεύω "to harangue, to speak in the assembly ἀγορά (*agora*), "assembly"). We need, however, to look for the sources of this fundamental difference between things and words:

For signification is twofold: one is through words; the other through the things signified by the words. And this is peculiar to the sacred writings and no others, since their author is God in Whose power it lies not only to employ words to signify (which man can also do), but things as well. Consequently, in the other sciences handed down by men, in which only words can be employed to signify, the words alone signify. But it is peculiar to Scripture that words and the very things signified by them signify something. Consequently this science can have many senses¹⁸.

Adapting words so that they signify things is not the only dimension: God can as *auctor principalis* give things many meanings. This way Thomas opens up a range of issues which are of vital importance for the understanding of his exegetical technique¹⁹. This technique, it should be stressed is in sharp contrast to modern hermeneutics (particularly that which is in-

¹⁸ *In Gal.*, cap. IV, lect. 7.

¹⁹ On the basis of these considerations emerges certain "metaphysics of writing" that Thomas undertakes. For the Scripture the act of being written down is secondary – see the epilogue of the Gospel according to St. John. See K. WHITE, *Aquinas on Oral Teaching*, 505-528.

spired by Schleiermacher and Dilthey) which considers history merely as a way of understanding a text²⁰. Conversely, for Aquinas history meant much more, as demonstrated by Torrell and Levering.

In a way we could say that Thomas expresses in these words his belief about the “sacramental dimension” of the exegesis which cannot be disregarded. The sacramentality is expressed here in the fundamental reference to *res*, i.e. not stopping at the meaning of a word (e.g. baptism is not only about wetting the head with water), but it plays a ministerial role. De Lubac in his interpretation of Aquinas said that a letter is a “sacrament of the Spirit”. *Signum visibile* in the Gospel leads further afield. Aquinas’s mission is in this respect to discover where a symbol may lead us to²¹. This is where the allegorical reading of the events described in the Gospel according to St. John carried out by Aquinas in his commentary has its beginning. It is not a play on words or associations, (already known to medieval exegetes via the *distinctiones*), rather this is the motivation to reach the *res*, quite akin to the Creed, which ends in a thing, not in the order of words²².

Res is unfathomable, which means that it constantly carries a potential of further (and deeper) investigation of God’s truth. It would therefore be fair to say that Aquinas is an “insatiable exegete” who searches for sense and poses questions as in debates, while reading biblical texts from the fundamental perspective of a cohesive plan of Salvation. His understanding of the literal sense is not limited to individual words. Quite one the contrary. It encompasses the text as a whole and each of its parts at the same time. To a certain degree, the literal sense is the expression of the unity of Holy Scripture in its entirety, as fulfilled through Christ. It has its own established plan of action: the first step is always to determine what has been written (hence –as illustrated in the commentary on Psalms– continuous attempts to compare a different *allia littera*, i.e. textual criticism)²³, but the literal meaning is not exhausted here. Aquinas repeatedly warned in va-

²⁰ D. SARISKY, *Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Exploration*, 13. It is about the phenomenon of “deregionalisation”, a term introduced by P. Ricoeur to reflect the attempt to adjust the biblical hermeneutics to the model of natural sciences. It involves belief that the theological view of text is irrelevant for its interpretation. That is why theology disappears as an important factor from exegetical practice of the modern biblical studies.

²¹ *In Ioan.*, cap. V, lect. 1

²² See *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1 a. 2 ad 2: “Actus autem credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem”.

²³ G. DAHAN, *La méthode critique dans l'étude de la Bible*, 103-128.

rious commentaries against reading words superficially, *superficie litterae*²⁴ and advocated further study. Therefore, Aquinas says at times: *Patet littera. Sensum mysticum prosequamur*. It follows that we cannot stop halfway through.

Aquinas dedicated his work to commentaries because he had an ecclesial awareness of the Scripture entrusted to the Church, which demands that we go beyond the individualistic approach in order to read the sense of the Scripture in a dialogue with others. It is astonishing how frequently Thomas quotes various Fathers of Church, from both the East and the West. It is a result of his work on “Catena Aurea”, which opened up for him the treasure chest of patristic exegesis, used in his work on the commentary to the Gospel according to St. John, which is the focus of this paper. He wrote it during his second stay in Paris in the years 1270-1272. It is *reporatio* by Reginald (of Piperno) created at the request of fellow friars and the provost of Saint-Omer, Adenulf of Anagnia. In Thomas’ commentary, St. John is described as a model of human contemplation because he is primarily focused on the divinity of Christ.

II. Christological meaning of Scripture according to Aquinas

In Aquinas’s theology the argument from the Scripture has a special place. When he considers the reason for the Incarnation, he relies on Biblical history. But the reference to the Scripture does not mean that he treats it as a source of his argumentation. Aquinas’s line of enquiry in his commentary on the Gospel according to St. John means finding a Christological sense, reaching Christ who binds both testaments together. This, according to Aquinas enables full understanding, just as in the case of the

²⁴ *In Ioan.*, cap. XII, lect. 7. Thomas warns against staying on *superficie litterae* and at the same time alerts about what he used to call *depravatio Scripturae*, when the Word of God is adjusted to suit the reader’s measures and goals, and this way its understanding is flattened and becomes one-dimensional. The ideal is to understand and search, as demonstrated by two quotes from the Book of Proverbs and Psalms, in which we can find two verbal connotations to “searching”. But there is more: they hide spiritual viewpoints. In the further part of his commentary, Thomas maintains that through Christ the Old Testament and the Commandments come alive and can give life. They give life to the Scripture as long as they point to Christ: either through the testimonies of prophets, or their mystic actions or through the figures and sacraments of Law (e.g. the Passover Lamb).

disciples' journey to Emaus: *aperuit illis sensum, ut intelligerent Scripturas* (Luke 24:45), a quotation frequently used by Aquinas. Only the perspective of Revelation in Christ constitutes a true focus of reading spiritual intelligence of Scripture and a real sense of the divine author.

Significant in this respect is the interpretation of words from St. John's Gospel whereby Christ addresses the Apostles: "Lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are white already for harvest" (John 4:35). First, Aquinas draws our attention to the circumstances of this utterance because after his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Christ talks to the Apostles about two kinds of harvest: physical and spiritual. The physical harvest is still four months away (which means that this event takes place in winter, as noticed by Aquinas), whereas the spiritual harvest opens up several levels of interpretation. On the one hand, we have the interpretations of Augustine and Chrysostom, who understand this harvest as the fruit of salvation and following the path of faith:

The statement that the fields are already white is metaphorical: for when sown fields are white, it is a sign that they are ready for harvest. And so he only means to say by this that the people were ready for salvation and hear the word. He says, look at the fields, because not only the Jews, but the Gentiles as well, were ready for the faith: "The harvest is great, but the workers are few" (Mt 9:37). And just as harvests are made white by the presence of the burning heat of the summer sun, so by the coming of the Sun of justice, i.e. Christ, following his preaching and the miraculous demonstration of His power, men are made ready for Salvation²⁵.

Origen's quintessentially intellectual interpretation associates harvest with the presence of the truth in the human soul. It is clear that Aquinas analysed this interpretation in a more detailed way and gave it a more Christological character. It reaffirms the human ability to discover the truth (contrary to the "academics" who were sceptical in this respect) and the effort put in its discovery in this life (identified by 'four months' quickly passing by) that results in the "harvest of truth". However, it also seems that by following Origen's line of interpretation Aquinas, nonetheless suggests his own one. Aquinas notes that

²⁵ *In Ioan.*, cap. IV, lect. 4.

for by the “fields” we specifically understand all those things from which truth can be acquired, especially the Scriptures: “Search the Scriptures... they bear witness to me” (John 5:39). Indeed, these fields existed in the Old Testament, but they were not white for the harvest because men were not able to pick spiritual fruit from them until Christ came along and made them white by broadening their horizons: “He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45)²⁶.”

Exploration in this perspective is not only lifting up one’s eyes, but is also extracting the true meaning of Sacred Scripture through Christ. By using imagery taken from the Mount of Transfiguration, Aquinas notes that just as Moses and Elijah talked to Jesus and suddenly disappeared (Mt 17), so only the doctrine of Christ will remain when the shadows of the Law and the teaching of the prophets subside²⁷. This Christological sense is also revealed in the interpretation of “the gate of the sheep pen” from John 10:1, which is used by those who have good intentions towards the sheep. Sacred Scripture, according to Aquinas, is such a gate. Here Aquinas follows St. John Chrysostom²⁸, considering it to be valid even when compared with Augustine’s reading in which the gate signifies Christ and not Sacred Scripture.

For Aquinas Sacred Scripture is also *cor Christi*. This description is more than just a metaphor. It is quite clear that Aquinas is aware here of the pivotal role of the One who binds both testaments, giving Sacred Scripture its meaning and existence. The heart opened by a spear on the cross signifies an opening up to the new understanding of earlier prophecies²⁹. For Aquinas, this subordination of the interpretation of Sacred Scripture to Christ and the descent to the deeper understanding of the Scripture are also expressed in the inscription on the cross. The first interpretation analyzes all the elements of the inscription: “Jesus from Nazareth, King of the Jews” expresses *mysterium* of the cross. But the work of interpretation does not end here. Aquinas embarks upon a spiritual interpretation of the words

²⁶ *In Ioan.*, cap. IV, lect. 4.

²⁷ *In Matt.*, cap. XVII, lect. 1.

²⁸ P.-Y. MAILLARD, *Christus clarificatus in passione*, 365-381.

²⁹ *In Ps.* 21, n.11: “Per cor Christi intelligitur sacra Scriptura, quae manifestat cor Christi. Hoc autem erat clausum ante passionem, quia erat obscura; sed aperta est post passionem, quia eam jam intelligentes considerant, et discernunt quomodo prophetiae sint exponendae”.

and points out that the presence of Hebrew (the sacred language of liturgy and indeed of Jewish religious literature), Greek (the language of those seeking wisdom) and Latin (the language of the legal system of public administration and of secular power *tout court*) suggests that everything is subordinated to Christ. The significance of these three languages is patterned on subfields of philosophy: Thus, according to Aquinas, Hebrew is the theological philosophy, Greek, the language of a natural philosophy and Latin –of practical philosophy³⁰.

The quoted fragments of Aquinas' commentary demonstrate his method of theological interpretation of biblical texts, which involves discovering the sense of things and words, and keeping an eye on both dimensions. These are the poles of not only the heuristic procedure that discovers the sense, but also the coordinates on which Aquinas based the foundations of exegetical epistemology. It is about reaching the increasingly deeper layers, and moving from word to thing. It reminds Aquinas of a treasure buried in the ground, which –after the purchase of the field around it– has to be dug up. This treasure is the spiritual sense that is the purpose of Sacred Scripture (*finis Scripturae*).

II.1. Exploration of literal and spiritual sense in the commentary on John

How Aquinas put into practice his idea of searching deeper in the commentary on the Gospel according to St. John can be illustrated by the interpretation of Jesus's well-known gesture of writing with His finger on the ground (John 8:6) after a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery was brought before him. Aquinas, always a careful reader, notes three different actions being taken: Jesus bending down, writing and being on the ground. The question about what Jesus wrote on the ground also appears (Jesus wrote either a quote from Jeremiah 22:29-30, or his own words: "Any of you who is without sin..."; but Thomas notes that "neither of these opinions is certain").

Thomas gives three reasons for appropriateness (*convenientia*)³¹ of this writing. All of them aim before long to discover the spiritual sense. Their legitimacy is based on other texts from Sacred Scripture quoted by Aquinas

³⁰ *In Ioan.*, cap. XIX, lect. 4.

³¹ P. ROSZAK, *Credibilidad e identidad*, 91-102.

and (needless to say) they are not simple connotations but delicate connections, similar to a nervous system. It is the dynamics of resonance, in which one quote summons another. The first *ratio*, taken from Augustine, is based on the belief that the names of the disciples are written in heaven (Luke 10:20), but the names of those who put Jesus to test are written on earth. The second reason goes back to Incarnation and is about the act of “bending down”. It signifies making signs (miracles) on earth. During his life on earth Jesus performed miracles in his earthly body. And finally, writing on the ground illustrates that the old law was written on hard tablets of stone that symbolised its rigidity, while writing on soft ground indicates that the new law was more flexible and lenient. The first reason shows negative connotations of the ground and earth, the other two give them a positive meaning. But the analysis does not end here. The text has one more message to deliver that cannot go unnoticed for the scholastic exegete: the moral premise. The scene of writing on the ground gives advice on how to behave when we are asked about our opinion about someone: (1) kindness understood as passing a judgement about a person not from afar but by getting closer to them (and their life) – this is suggested by Jesus bending down, it is a synonym of mercifulness (as illustrated by a quote from Jacob 2:13) and gentleness (Galatians 6:1). Next (2) gentleness in judging, illustrated by a finger nimble in writing and (3) certainty, illustrated by the act of writing.

Aquinas’s exploration in his commentary on the Gospel according to St. John resembles husking of the spiritual sense, similar to husking of the ears of a cereal plant. The disciples of Jesus caused indignation of Pharisees because they husked on the Sabbath³². The spiritual sense is like the “pearls” that should not be thrown to pigs because they will not appreciate it (they are “*mali fidelis*”)³³. But it is also –following the interpretations of Thomas– like the crumbs that were collected after multiplying bread in order to keep feeding the hungry after the first hunger was satisfied. Or a vineyard surrounded by a wall and a tower. Thomas also mentioned the method of discovering the spiritual sense in his commentary on Psalm 8 and following the interpreta-

³² For many of the medieval commentators this scene represents precisely the mode of husking the spiritual sense from literal one –see B. SMALLEY, *The Study of Bible in the Middle Ages*, 269.

³³ *In Matt.*, cap. VII, lect. 1: “*Margaritae, idest sensus spirituales, non debent porcis dari; I Cor. II, 14: animalis homo non percipit ea quae Dei sunt, idest, ne forte contemnat; Prov. XXVII, 7: anima satiata conculcat favum*”.

tion by Augustine. In his opinion, the scene of crushed grapes that become wine points to the spiritual sense, which must be “squeezed out” of a word: *a verbis litteraliter positis separatur sensus spiritualis*³⁴.

With such a distinctive horizon of comprehension it is easier to decipher certain passages from the Gospel according to St. John. A good example thereof is the way Thomas understands the scene of washing the Apostles’ feet by Jesus in the Cenacle. The way he approached this text perfectly encapsulates the style, tools and dynamics of the commentary in its entirety. On the one hand Aquinas suggests a literal interpretation (always the first one), in which the gesture of standing up from the table, folding the robes and taking the sheet is a symbol of Jesus’s humility. These three actions of Jesus show three characteristics of a good servant: he understands the needs of others (standing up), he is ready to work (he rejects excesses which may become a hindrance) and he is willing to serve (which is signified by the sheet). In the mystical sense, this scene refers to two mysteries of Christ: The Incarnation and the Passion. “Standing up” is a Biblical idiom which signifies intervention. To be precise: God’s intervention when we need to be rescued from a torturer. Denudation is the sign of Passion when – literally – Jesus’ robes were torn off by the soldiers, and then he had his hips covered with a cloth in the tomb. In a mystical sense, folding of a robe signifies shaking off the yoke of mortality and accepting the lightness of immortality³⁵.

Aquinas constantly gives the reader a choice, moving to different levels of interpretation. He creates a net of references based on verbal or ideological associations which build scriptural imagination and the microclimate of reading, thanks to which the contents of Sacred Scripture become clearer.

III. *Sensus excogitatus*. Contemplative sense of exegetical practice in Aquinas

Aquinas’s commentary on St. John’s Gospel reveals a unique kind of contemplative exegesis. This uniqueness is revealed right from the outset, when Aquinas presents the rationale behind the commentary in the prologue³⁶. The advantage of the Gospel of St. John results from following

³⁴ *In Ps.* 8, n. 1.

³⁵ *In Ioan.*, cap. XIII, lect. 1.

³⁶ *In Ioan.*, prolog.

John's sublime contemplation, which is expressed through the Gospel. But there is more to it. This time the focal point is the way Aquinas progresses, which itself becomes exegetical contemplation. Its characteristic is the very act of contemplation as explained by Aquinas in his commentary on Psalm 54, the last of the surviving commentaries dedicated to the psalms. Aquinas's muses on the meaning verse 6 thus: "So I said, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest". He focused on several elements. First, the dove that refers to the story of Noah who released a raven and a dove to check if the flood was over. A returning dove is a symbol of contemplation that gives rest:

Wings like a dove, not wings of a raven. For the raven did not turn back to the ark, but the dove returned bearing a green olive branch. Those fly like ravens who do not turn back to the ark by the affection of holiness, for they do not think of anything but themselves, namely how they might track down some truth, like the philosophers; but those fly like doves who both contemplate and turn back towards their neighbors, teaching what they have contemplated, those who with the green olive branch in their mouth, bear as porters the oil of mercy, devoting themselves to their neighbors³⁷.

The wings mentioned here have threefold meaning for contemplation: order, which it introduces into life thanks to moral virtues (such as patience and humility), charity ("which most greatly makes [one] fly to contemplation") and wisdom, without which it is easy to fall into error while contemplating about the matters of God. Eagle is the symbol of high flight, characteristic of wisdom, which is related to the Gospel of St. John. For this reason contemplation is illustrated by flight (and not by walking or running), and while elaborating on this thought and following in the footsteps of Richard of Saint Victor, Aquinas notices that there are several kinds of flying amongst birds: upwards, downwards, to the left, to the right, and sometimes in a circle. Birds also seem to be at times suspended in the air, moving forward and backwards. This is how he summarises it:

And, so, to ascend in contemplation is to consider sublime causes, and to descend is to turn one's attention to lower effects. Likewise, to go

³⁷ *In Ps.* 54, n. 5.

forward is to consider more closely the contraries that are applied to many people. To go back when one considers private matters. Likewise, right and left when one considers some circumstances. Circularly when one considers the accidents of things; but when an individual person is signified, then it is rest³⁸.

The circular movement, characteristic for contemplation, can also be seen in Thomas's commentary on the Gospel according to St. John.³⁹ And it does not only affect the doctrinal dimension, but also the way the text moves forward. Contemplative exegesis depends precisely on this kind of –contemplative– approach to the text that describes a flight of a bird. And all of this in order to surround the text and search for the better light. The same investigative activity has a contemplative “focus” which is expressed in the ideal of the old tradition of *lectio divina* which leads everything towards the more profound observation of Christ's presence. According to de Lubac, as early as the twelfth century, some people warned against the temptations of *hodierni dialectici* who wanted to separate theology from exegesis and alerted about the *curiositas* that shifts the attention away from Scripture⁴⁰. What makes the exegetical style of Thomas Aquinas different is the contemplative identity of Sacred Scripture and theology, which is based on the vitality of the four senses of the Scripture and at the same time is open to any truth that comes from philosophy and other sciences. That is why the spirit of this exegesis is perhaps best expressed by Aquinas's belief in *sensus excogitatus* of Holy Scripture. The term *excogitatus* means to study intently and carefully in order to grasp or comprehend fully and appears as a synonym of the contemplative study of Holy Scripture, which integrates everything that is true⁴¹. In this approach Thomas is a successor of the tradition of the school of St. Victor which perceived contemplation as the aim of practicing exegesis. *Sensus excogitatus* is a path, based on contem-

³⁸ *In Ps.* 54, n. 5.

³⁹ Just like, when pointing out the divinity of Christ (“You are from below, I am from above”), he points out that the characteristic feature of people who come from below is the circulation around the things of the flesh – *In Ioan.*, cap. VIII, lect. 3.

⁴⁰ H. de LUBAC, *Exegese medievale*, I, 103-104.

⁴¹ *In Matt.*, cap. XXIII, lect. 2: “facit mentionem de templo, de auro et de altari, in quibus significatur vita contemplativa et gloriosa. Per aurum contemplativa significatur, per quod significatur subtilis sensus excogitatus ipsius Scripturae: quia quantumcumque videatur rationabilis, nihil est nisi sit in templo, idest nisi confirmetur in sacra Scriptura.”

plation and wisdom, to discover harmony (*convenientia*) of God's action in salvation history. It does not rely on the whim of omnipotent God, as the nominalists may suggest, but on the primacy of truth about good and on rationality guarded by Sacred Scripture. It is indicated by the image of the temple and its gold as the symbol of contemplation, namely the particular conditions needed for the full knowing of truth which is far from being arbitrary.

III.1. Discovering the divinity of Logos

The divine nature of Christ is of prime interest in Aquinas's commentary on St. John's Gospel. Its discovery is the prism of interpretation of nearly every passage of the Gospel. The healing of the son of an official from the village of Cana in the Galilee illustrates the progress of the father's faith in the Divinity of Christ that is taking place in him. At first, this faith is feeble, when the terrified father merely asks on behalf of his son while passively waiting for Jesus to come from Judea to the Galilee (the closer Jesus draws, the more hopeful the father gets) and then the father urges Jesus to enter his house. Next, the tension grows when Jesus "summons" the father, and the official calls Jesus "Sir". Now when the official returned home and believed what Jesus had said to him, realising thus His Divine nature, his faith was perfected. This growth in faith is linked with the acquisition of knowledge about God's power in Christ and shows the purpose of St. John's contemplation, which is nothing the sublime itself –because it refers to God himself. Aquinas attached immense importance to the prism of interpretation: he does not focus on the narrative description but enquires about the *ratio Scripturae*⁴². What matters here is a profound plan of Scripture, which is clear from the perspective of salvation history, namely the literal sense of the New Testament and at the same time about its sense which should not be distorted but rendered in accordance with God's salvation plan. That is where Aquinas sees a certain rhetorical strategy of the divine author that resonates every time he realises appropriateness of such and no other wording. A good example of this is the way he interprets raising Lazarus from the dead in the Gospel of John. When Jesus arrives at Martha's home to raise Lazarus

⁴² De *Veritate*, q. 7 a. 4.

from the dead, he first asks where he had been laid to rest. For Aquinas the ensuing question would be; What is the purpose of this question? Aquinas's solution thus is: Christ enquired about Lazarus's burial place not only to clarify to all and sundry that Lazarus was really dead but also for two mystical reasons: First, the Lord does not know the whereabouts of sinners because He has not been touched by sin. Second, rising from sin to the state of justice emanates from inscrutable destiny. For this reason "our Lord, implying this, acts as one who does not know, since we also do not know this"⁴³.

The contemplative character is also expressed in the style of John's Gospel (to which Aquinas often draws attention – the role of the human author is brought out in the thirteenth century's exegesis) which seeks to demonstrate the power of Divinity and the realism of humanity⁴⁴. Whenever St. John the Evangelist writes of something human in Christ (e.g. that he cried at Lazarus' tomb), he adds to this something about Divinity. Even when writing about Passion, the moment of Jesus' greatest weakness, he describes divine events (solar eclipse, cracking of rocks)⁴⁵. That is why "just as John shows his divine nature and power more explicitly than the other Evangelists, so he also mentions his weaker aspects and other such things which especially reveal the affections of Christ's human nature"⁴⁶. The power of Christ's divinity is a common denominator for the whole Gospel of John, and is reflected in the actions and teaching of Christ, as well as in his Passion and death⁴⁷. Christ, as Aquinas puts it, remains hidden in his Divinity, just like a fish hides in water.⁴⁸ Contemplation means the discovery of Divinity and Martha's conduct in the aforementioned passage from John 11 plays an important role in this discovery and symbolises "the rest of contemplation"⁴⁹.

⁴³ *In Ioan.*, cap. XI, lect. 5.

⁴⁴ See T. F. BELLAMAH, *The Interpretation of a Contemplative*, 229-255.

⁴⁵ *In Ioan.*, cap. XI, lect. 5.

⁴⁶ *In Ioan.*, cap. XI, lect. 6.

⁴⁷ *In Ioan.*, cap. XII, lect. 1: So far the Evangelist has been showing the power of Christ's divinity by what he did and taught during his public life. Now he begins to show the power of his divinity as manifested in his Passion and death. See M. SABATHE, *La Trinite redemptrice*.

⁴⁸ *In Ioan.* cap. XXI, lect. 2.

⁴⁹ *In Ioan.*, cap. XI, lect. 4: "per Mariam signatur, quae domi sedet quieti contemplationis".

III.2. Taste of inner contemplation

The contemplation of the Divine nature of Christ has its principles and finds many intriguing references in the commentary on St. John's Gospel. The progress of this contemplation and its presence in each Christian's life is illustrated in a significant scene of two disciples namely John and Peter, rushing to the empty tomb. It is an explanation that Thomas calls *secundum mysterium*⁵⁰. They represent two types of people: John – those who are *vacantes contemplationi veritatis*, while Peter represents those who abide by the commandments. This parallelism of the two disciples is likewise developed by Aquinas in other passages of his commentary, whereby he points out Peter's intensity of emotions and John's depth of intelligence (when Peter sees the resurrected Jesus, he throws himself into a lake and starts swimming to join Jesus sooner).

Finally, it is worth highlighting the way in which Aquinas follows the line of interpretation suggested by Gregory the Great with regard to the mud which Jesus spreads over the eyes of the blind man. Aquinas's comment about the taste of inner contemplation hidden behind Jesus' gesture illustrates how the practice of contemplation develops:

According to Gregory, however, the spittle signifies the savor of intimate contemplation, which flows from the head into the mouth, because due to the love of our Creator we have been touched even in this life with the savor of revelation. Thus the Lord mixed spittle with earth and restored sight to the man born with his contemplation, and heals our understanding from its original blindness⁵¹.

Contemplation is true seeing, never complete on earth. It indicates the way leading from things seen to things unseen, which Aquinas considers to be a secret communication of John's Gospel. The teaching of Christ is always accompanied by some visible sign, a starting point for deep contemplation⁵². The contemplation of visible things should have this perspicacity, thanks to which it will be possible to reach the invisible. This is the

⁵⁰ *In Ioan.*, cap. XX, lect. 1.

⁵¹ *In Ioan.*, cap. IX, lect. 1.

⁵² *In Ioan.*, cap. V, lect. 1.

role of the analogies with the corporal and the spiritual life: they open up our minds increasingly to deeper levels of understanding. What constitutes their importance is the direction of contemplation, its deepest perspective. It is hidden in the aforementioned verse from the St. John's Gospel: "They will come in and go out, and find pasture" (John 10:9). In a similar way, contemplation first involves coming into the contemplation of Christ's Divinity, in order to "go out" into the contemplation of his humanity and find in both the joy of contemplation⁵³. It is encouragement not to see the humanity of Christ in isolation from divinity. Yet, insofar as style is concerned, it is quite clear that Aquinas does not care much about the wealth of eloquence here. Rather, he seeks to help the reader discover the spiritual dimension of the Biblical text and experience Christ through His present in Holy Scripture. The contemplative dimension of the commentary does not only involve comments about the nature of contemplation, its subject and indeed its principles. It also includes frequent and short pieces of advice about spiritual issues, encouraged by the message of the verses –e.g. the fragment about Jesus healing in a temple: *ad conditoris cognitionem venire volumus, fugienda est turba pravorum affectuum, et declinanda sunt malorum conventicula, et fugiendum est ad templum cordis nostri, quod Deus invisere et habitare dignatur*⁵⁴.

IV. Conclusions

The analysis of both the exploration of the Biblical sense and the contemplative approach in Aquinas' works, seems to suggest that we are dealing here with theological exegesis which does not focus on details. Rather, it tends to see the Bible as a whole⁵⁵.

It understands the references and is able –just like in a good painting– to preserve some of the most vigorous brush strokes, not losing the perspective of the whole text. It is able to establish links on multiple levels and approach the same subject from different angles. It creates a 'scriptural imagination', thanks to which we can understand Scripture better. It would be fair to say

⁵³ *In Ioan.*, cap. X, lect. 2: "[...] ingredientur, scilicet sancti, ad contemplandam divinitatem Christi, et egredientur, ad eius humanitatem considerandam; et in utroque pascua invenient, quia in utroque gaudia contemplationis gustabunt".

⁵⁴ *In Ioan.*, cap. V, lect. 2.

⁵⁵ See R. B. HAYS, *Reading the Scripture with the Eyes of Faith*, 5–21.

that in recent years the profoundly scriptural essence of Aquinas's theology has been duly re-discovered.⁵⁶

Aquinas could not be clearer on this: "the truth of faith is contained in Sacred Scripture"⁵⁷. Apart from superficial reading, what is needed is exegesis that knows various *modi dicendi* and "requires a prolonged study and practice". In scholastic exegesis, the analysis of Holy Scripture was described from the very beginning as a "discipline", order and method, the principle of life, the norm of faith and customs, and that is why the question about the validity of giving four explanations of Holy Scripture did not result from the exegete's creativity, his rhetorical moves, but from traditional *ordo*⁵⁸.

This variety of exegesis has few characteristic features. First, a scriptural framework attributed to every science was an ideal of medieval exegetical practice: the integration of everything that is in Holy Scripture with any branch of knowledge leading supposedly towards a fuller manifestation of Scriptural contents. The strong sense of belonging to the same world, which medieval exegetes used to share, should be noted in this context. It is permissible to say that we can see with hindsight the transformation of this sense into an exegetical quest for a lucid *fundamentum*. The *unum* that is the truth.

In Aquinas's exegesis it becomes the journey into the bedrock of the very depth of the text, from the literal sense to the spiritual one. In his search for the foundations and the originality of the structure of St. John's Gospel Aquinas notes that after John's six utterances, the seventh one is Jesus'; he also quotes Hilary: *mirabilis connexio verborum*⁵⁹. It sets the tone and dictates the rhythm of his interpretation of Holy Scripture.

The outcome is the creation of a doctrinal synthesis, in which the allegorical sense is not neglected. It engenders a certain *universum*, in which there is space for spirituality alongside the dogmatic component and both remain in a state of full unity. Aquinas's Biblical interpretation is broad and brings out the novelty of the Christian message by using subtle dialectics (of the Old and New) and by showing the theological fruitfulness of Holy Scripture. It is an active exegesis that does not presume a passive reading

⁵⁶ T. PRÜGL, *Thomas Aquinas as Interpreter of Scripture*, 386-415.

⁵⁷ *S.Th.* II-II, q. 1, a.1, ad 1: "Veritas fidei in Sacra Scriptura diffuse continetur et variis modis et in quibusdam obscura. Ita quod ad eliciendum fidei veritatem ex Sacra Scriptura requiritur longum stadium et exercitium".

⁵⁸ Thomas often points to *doctrina sive disciplina* (*In Ioan.*, cap. V, lect. 1).

⁵⁹ *In Ioan.*, cap. V, lect. 4 (769).

on the part of the reader who is not being spoon-fed. On the contrary. The reader is being made a participant at the exegetical process (an aspect of reader-text relationship much fêted in our time by the likes of Barthes or Ricoeur), but going back to Gregory the Great and his *Scriptura cum legentibus crescit*). The understanding of Aquinas's indebtedness to the Church Fathers remains of vital importance here.

To a modern reader, the style of Aquinas' exegesis may seem dry and formal but we need to understand that a scholastic commentary suggests a different, more active, kind of reflection. A reader is not a passive recipient who is given everything ready. Quite contrary, the whole system of *divisio textus* together with questions indicates a different model – participating and dialogical. A listener asks about *ratio Scripturae*, because he is not satisfied with a simple juxtaposition of texts. Thomas does not want to force a reconciliation of different texts or an agreement on a version; he always looks for deeper reasons⁶⁰. If he collects interpretations from the Fathers of the Church, in doing so he does not resemble an ant but a bee (it is a typical for Renaissance distinction in the field of literature): he collects nectar, he does not merely build an anthill. He adopts an attitude of someone who does not want to be restricted to a certain interpretative group and who has an independent mind (it is visible in the way he uses Peter Lombard's Gloss for the Epistles of St. Paul, because it is "forced, deforming and disloyal" to St. Paul⁶¹).

Inspiration does not only refer to the pages of Holy Scripture, but also to its contents. Theology in the commentary is in the service of the (always inexorable) discovery of this intelligence that helps uncover the truth of the Revelation. It is not only a starting point but in fact, a *sine qua non*. A prerequisite without which Revelation would remain beyond comprehension. Without this essential relationship with Holy Scripture, theology may be at risk of becoming degenerated⁶².

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⁶⁰ See R. WIELOCKX, "Limites et ressources de l'exégèse thomasiennne. Thomas d'Aquin sur Jn 4, 46-54".

⁶¹ *In Eph.*, cap. I, lect. 2: ... secundum expositionem Glossae, quae quidem expositio videtur extorta...".

⁶² My gratitude to Cyril Chilson from Oxford University, Blackfriars, for his important suggestions and comments about this article.

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