PROJECT MUSE®

Aquinas at Prayer: The Bible, Mysticism and Poetry by Paul Murray (review)

Bruno M. Shah O.P.

Nova et vetera, Volume 14, Number 1, Winter 2016, pp. 362-366 (Review)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nov.2016.0006>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/609204>

end of his introduction will certainly be of help, in due time, to the beginners who read this book and who become inspired by its powerful vision of the human journey, dust bound for heaven. N·V

Matthew Levering
Mundelein Seminary
Mundelein, IL

Aquinas at Prayer: The Bible, Mysticism and Poetry by Paul Murray (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), xii + 274 pp.

NEWS OF PAUL MURRAY'S publications always promises edification and delight, and *Aquinas at Prayer* delivers. It picks up on Jean-Pierre Torrell's seminal study, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, which, toward the beginning of volume 2, quotes Étienne Gilson: "[the *Summa Theologiae*'s] abstract clarity, impersonal transparency, crystallizes before our very eyes [Thomas's] interior life" (cf. 16). For Murray, the student and devotee of Thomas need not stop at defending his lapidary prose or expositing his spiritual brilliance. One can boldly aim for "a direct way of gaining access" to his very interior life. To that end, *Aquinas at Prayer* looks at Thomas's prayers and biblical commentaries and their expression of heartfelt desire and poetic grace.

Part I, "Aquinas: man of prayer," begins by considering "The interior life of a 'mystic on campus'" (chap. 1). Murray argues that Thomas deserves the title "mystic," addressing a contention found in Adrienne von Speyr's *The Book of All Saints*, "a truly unique and bizarre document" (4). That book lists over two hundred dictations to Hans Urs von Balthasar, ostensible records of entranced visions of "saints" at prayer. Thomas is witnessed as all head and no heart. Contrarily, Murray discovers much of the "secret" of Thomas's heart precisely in his conceptual clarity and "plainness." Hyper-intellectualism in scientific endeavor is a real danger to avoid (Murray cites Charles Darwin as an intriguing example)—but it is a danger to which Thomas did not fall prey. The Angelic Doctor was significantly concerned with "experience" and "affection" in life and in theology. His spiritual ardor is one Murray likens (as did Gilson) to that of St. John of the Cross, connecting the nothing of "*non nisi te*" with that of "*todo y nada*." Even publicly, Thomas defended his positions with vehemence, e.g., "on campus" at the University of Paris. At the same time, his intellectual confidence was balanced with a certain apophaticism, and he taught by way of the *quaestio*.

It would be helpful to know what Murray thinks are the formal judgments of Thomas's apophaticism. What does it really mean to say that "[Thomas] is prepared, at times, to risk sounding almost like an agnostic"? (26) Is it even the case that "believing Christians today seldom hear from preachers and teachers about the incomprehensibility of the divine nature"? (25) It might rather seem that that is all the rage. Indeed, certain kinds of emphasis upon "mystery," while casting aspersions upon Latin and/or scholastic theology, fund various discourses of "experience." It is just this trend that demands that the superior "theologian" be a "mystic." For Murray (and Torrell), M. D. Chenu is in the background, for whom theologies are expressions of spiritualities. (See the debate between Louis Bouyer and Jean Daniélou on whether the one Church of Christ reducibly has one or many spiritualities.) But if someone like von Speyr is commonly accepted as a "mystic," why is the medieval magister's head in need of such a post-Reformation laurel?

Not too long ago, theologians debated about the nature and universality of mystical prayer. One could abandon reference to these debates—between Dominicans and Jesuits, somewhat adjudicated by a Benedictine (Cuthbert Butler)—because of their controversialism or jargon. Indeed, Murray is wary of "the dogged, abstract idiom of a scholastic philosopher or theologian" (159). But the "universal call to holiness" of the "new evangelization" has its roots in these very debates (and arguably in the position of Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, via St. John Paul II). The "spiritual theology" of a saint might be understood as a "practically practical science" (Jacques Maritain) without becoming a windowless factory that manufactures deductions to no end. I think this is an overall take-away from *Aquinas at Prayer*: utilization of scientific reason, vehemence of loving desire, and creativity of poetic expression all find iconic integration in the Church's Common Doctor.

Like any great teacher, Murray not only gives his students wonderful conclusions, of which there are many in *Aquinas at Prayer*; he also inspires them to discover new questions and answers. Not for nothing is he a favorite and longtime professor at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas in Rome (the Angelicum), president of its Institute of Spirituality, and Master of Sacred Theology (a Dominican accolade of the highest rank, carefully given by the Master of the Order). He is also an accomplished and scintillating poet. One of this book's luminous facets is that it seems to be a very personal quest: a Dominican seeking to discover and bear witness to the interior life of another Dominican. Appropriately, Murray draws heavily upon early biographies, especially

those of Dominicans William of Tocco and Bernard Gui. Moreover, Murray's own experience—as a preacher, teacher, and poet—is, I infer, critical for his accessing Aquinas from the friar's own experience of those same gifts. Murray possesses the proper connaturality to apprehend Thomas's life of prayer—a noteworthy fact that adds unique authority and verve to his arguments.

Murray makes the fraternal situation of Aquinas's own thought and passion evident in chapter 2, "Four prayers: the influence of Humbert of Romans," where he considers four of the *Piae preces*. Although these short personal prayers are written in prose, Murray lays bare the "clear bronze-like pattern of thought and image" characteristic of "good verse" (34), providing fresh English translations in versified style. Precisely as devotional prayers, it is not surprising, he says, that they were not included amongst the *opera* catalogued for Thomas's canonization. They are almost certainly by a Dominican—a kind of pious response to a letter issued by Bl. Humbert, Master of the Order of Preachers (1254–1263). If the prayers are Thomas's, identifying Humbert as an influence upon him is a scholarly gain.

But Lydia Maidl finds the "popular" language of the prayers unrepresentative of Thomas's "scholastic conceptual world." Against her conclusion, Murray deploys Mark-Robin Hoogland's presentation of Thomas's "academic sermons," noting that Thomas used different linguistic and conceptual registers. In these sermons, the technical language is sparing and the discourse is "strikingly plain and simple." In the prayers, Humbert's words are "imaginatively transformed," rendered more in keeping with concerns and phrasing characteristically Thomas's. The same mind and heart is at work in the theology, sermons, and prayers. Finally, William of Tocco's inclusion of the *Piae preces* in the fourth and final edition of his biography of Thomas resolves the question for Murray. All told, his wide consideration of the most recent scholarship, his attention to the best and original manuscripts, his own theologico-poetic attention, and his Dominican connaturality are marshaled to proffer an original, coherent, and personal apologia for the authenticity and import of these prayers.

Part II, "Prayer considered: soundings in the biblical commentaries," is where, to my mind, Murray's sense for the way of the friar preacher is most significantly at play. He continues the happy trend in recent scholarship of giving attention to the commentaries of a first-rate magister in *Sacra Pagina*. He further highlights the charismatic and ecclesial context of Thomas's mendicant preaching order. Different from the neo-Platonic, spiritualistic readings of the monastics, and

against contemporary influences from creation-disparaging heretics, Thomas analyzes the surface of the text, attentive to the materiality of things and happenings. The use of logic is meant to serve this reverence for the literal in service of the Church's contemporary needs.

Murray notes that Thomas's attention to "prayer" in the Pauline commentaries has not received focused attention from scholars. Thomas repeatedly considers prayer in these commentaries in terms of "petition" and "thanksgiving." To understand prayer in terms of "petition" had come to be regarded "as almost the poorest cousin within the family of prayer" (101). But approaching "prayer" as the "prayer of asking" unlocks the deeply experiential and Christological mode of Thomas's theology. Murray's work further demonstrates "something of Thomas's own passion, as a friar preacher." It "bear[s] witness, and with telling force and beauty, to both the apostolic and contemplative energy and passion of St. Thomas" (108–109). The reader gathers that Murray's close reading of the commentaries likewise manifests something of his own passion, as well as "humility and tact" similar to Thomas's commentarial restraint and deliberateness (per Kenelm Foster).

In Chapter 5, "Praying in time of need: Aquinas on the Psalms," Murray locks in on the most exigent questions about the nature of prayer: how is it that prayer is at once most simple and most arduous? What does it mean to pray always? Why does God sometimes feel absent? As he does throughout his book, Murray selects the choicest passages and phrases from Thomas. In a marvelous commentary on Psalm 32, both Dominicans teach us that "prayer is the interpreter of hope." How? Reflecting on God's nature to be merciful and on mercies received nourishes hope, which exercises itself in prayer. Thomas himself, "in a situation of manifest terror [while sailing through a life-threatening storm], reminded himself of the two greatest 'favors' of God's mercy in all of human history: the Incarnation and the Redemption. And that thought, that memory of grace in itself, was enough to give him confidence and serenity" (145). Analytic attention, speculative commitment, and practical import are strung together and furthermore concretized through a narrational snapshot of Thomas's own life.

The most enchanting section of the book is Part III, which one suspects also contains the work dearest to Murray: "Poet of the Eucharist: the hymns and canticles of Aquinas." Throughout four chapters and an appendix, he considers the only known vernacular work attributed to Thomas, the *Corpus Christi* texts, and the *Adoro te devote*, which Murray subheads "the finest prayer of Aquinas." It is this final chapter on the *Adoro te* that, if it is not too precious to say, "sings with

authority" (cf. 237). It recapitulates the main themes and positions of the book, while introducing an original argument on the *Adoro te*'s two-part structure as one of reflection, or adoration, and petition. In all of the commentaries, the most recent historical and textual research is consulted and illuminatingly presented, arguing for Thomas's authorship (new translations are provided).

To Murray's mind, the hymns and canticles are assuredly "poetry." Alluding to W. H. Auden's pithy description, Murray states that poetry is "memorable speech" (cf. 231). But it is the "musical," "singing" quality of Thomas's work that most establishes its poetic form. Murray also raises the question of poetry's relation to truth and theology. What was the value of poetic expression for Thomas himself? Did he not say that poetic knowledge suffers from a *defectum veritatis*? In answering these questions, drawing upon the work of the late Jesuit, Walter J. Ong, Murray would connect the medieval and the modern, resisting the postmodern. On the one hand, certain moderns grant that poetry is a supreme form of expression, though this appreciation tends to be grounded in skepticism at the conclusiveness of "reason." On the other hand, though not scientific, Thomas locates the nature of poetry within the ambit of logic. Murray's resolution is to show how Thomas is the "poet of paradox."

The presentations are compelling, and Murray's close poetic analyses themselves repay close reading. Admittedly, one may question the degree of rapprochement that is suggested. Throughout his book, Murray references many modern writers one would not expect to find in a scholarly work about Thomas Aquinas's interior life—Herman Hesse, Ted Hughes, Rainer Maria Rilke, Archibald MacLeish, Dylan Thomas, Ezra Pound, Seamus Heaney, etc. Do these references help to convey Murray's arguments? Perhaps they do not so much. But their inclusion is more personal than probative. They reveal the author's love of God and humble delight in contemplation, rooted in his apostolic experience of the age's approaches to truth and beauty. If what our time needs are, pace Kierkegaard, not only witnesses, but also teachers and poets, we have all three in Murray. What he ultimately says about Thomas regarding his apostolic and contemplative spirit is also rightly said of Murray himself: he is a *bonus theologus*. All of us who aspire to the same must certainly study the one; we would also do well to read the other. N V

Bruno M. Shah, O.P.
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana