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Is St. Thomas Aquinas's Moral Teaching Christian? The Answer of Servais Pinckaers, O.P.

Abstract

Servais Pinckaers, in his most important work, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, asks the provocative question: is the Moral Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas Christian or, alternatively, does Aquinas rely so much on the ethics of Aristotle that his teaching is merely philosophical? This paper presents an overview of Pinckaers's answer to this question. His answer is important in that it addresses a common misinterpretation of St. Thomas, which is to overstress his Aristotelian influence and understate his reliance on Scripture, the Fathers (especially Augustine), and the New Law of the Gospel. In this way Pinckaers forms part of a *ressourcement* in Thomistic studies that seeks to reaffirm the evangelical character of Aquinas's work and its importance in the renewal of Moral Theology called for at Second Vatican Council.

Is St. Thomas Aquinas's Moral Teaching Christian?

The Answer of Servais Pinckaers, O.P.

Paul Morrissey

Introduction

In his magnum opus, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, Servais Pinckaers (1925-2008), the renowned moral theologian, asks the provocative question: is St. Thomas Aquinas's moral teaching Christian?¹ The question he says, although seemingly odd, is a valid one. This is because, for many, St. Thomas relies so much on Aristotle's ethics that the morality one finds in his works is more philosophy than theology. And it is true that when one turns to the second part of the *Summa Theologiae* Christ is rarely mentioned.² In answering this critique Pinckaers recognizes two pitfalls when reading St. Thomas. The first is what he calls myopia, just choosing to read that which one is interested by, thus ignoring the entire theological vision of the *Summa* as well as its general structure. In answer to this myopia Pinckaers says that the *Summa* can be compared to a great medieval cathedral. Each part of the cathedral is separate but it cannot be split off from the whole. So while the moral section of the *Summa* seems devoid of the Trinity and Christ, this is because St. Thomas begins his masterpiece with God and the Trinity and completes it in part three with Christ:

It is no cause for surprise to find the Blessed Sacrament is located in only one place in the cathedral: we know that radiates throughout the whole edifice. In the same way, the summa, a well-planned work, treats of Christ, the Trinity, and the Eucharist in specific sections designed to stand out in eminence for those who know how to take an overall view of the theological construction in its entirety.³

The second pitfall that Pinckaers recognizes when interpreting St. Thomas is what he calls double vision. This is where we bring preconceived categories to a particular work. Thus the modern reader brings the divisions of a modern theologian to the work of St. Thomas. For example, the modern theologian divides morality and dogma, philosophy and theology,

¹ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr Mary Thomas Noble O.P. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 168. Using a concordance for the *secunda secundae*, Pinckaers notes the following in terms of number of citations. *Vis-à-vis* non-scriptural sources Augustine is cited 1630 times, Aristotle 1546 times. The Old Testament is cited 1839 times and the New Testament 2003. Pinckaers, "Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas," trans. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P., in John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (eds), *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2005), 4.

² Pinckaers cites the prologue of the *tertia pars* of the *Summa* as the key to how St. Thomas links morality to dogma, especially to Christology: "Forasmuch as our Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ, in order to 'save His people from their sins'" (Mt 1:21), as the angel announced, showed unto us in His own Person the way of truth, whereby we may attain to the bliss of eternal life by rising again, it is necessary, in order to complete the work of theology, that after considering the last end of human life, and the virtues and vices, there should follow the consideration of the Saviour of all, and of the benefits bestowed by Him on the human race." See Servais Pinckaers, "The Body of Christ – the Eucharistic and Ecclesial Context of Aquinas's Ethics," trans. Craig Steven Titus in Berkman, John & Titus, Craig Steven, (eds), *The Pinckaers Reader – Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2005), 29. Originally published as "La morale et l'Eglise: Corps du Christ," *Revue Thomiste* 100 (2000): 239-58.

³ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 170.

morality and spirituality. So whereas St. Thomas saw no divisions in theology the modern theologian sees them everywhere in the work of St. Thomas. For example, St. Thomas's treatment of happiness seems completely philosophical and not even concerned with morality as it is presently understood. So when the modern moral theologian comes to St. Thomas for inspiration he skips past the treatment of happiness and the sections on virtue and simply looks at the section on human acts:

Clearly these distinctions, usually lodged incognito in the readers head, have so dissected St. Thomas's moral teaching that there is hardly anything left but human acts, a smattering of passion, and a small sampling of virtue. The place in the sun is turned over to natural law and sin. We also note that the most explicitly Christian treatises have been removed from moral theory proper we have witnessed the decapitation of St. Thomas.⁴

In this article I wish to give a brief overview of Pinckaers's interpretation of Aquinas. This interpretation highlights the Christian nature and inspiration of Aquinas's ethics: the importance of Sacred Scripture, the influence of the Church Fathers, the presence of St. Augustine, the synthesis with Greek philosophical reason, and Aquinas's theology of the New Law.

I. The Importance of Scripture in the Work of St. Thomas

There has been a renewed interest in, and awareness of, St. Thomas's use of Scripture in his theology. This is true not only of his great works of synthesis – the two *Summas* – but also in his many Scripture commentaries.⁵ This basic theme in recent scholarship shows that St. Thomas saw Scripture as a principle source of the theological exercise. “At the heart of Thomas Aquinas's scientific theology of salvation lies the narrative of Scripture – the fulfilment of Israel's Torah and Temple through the New Covenant of Christ Jesus.”⁶ This interest in Scripture as a source of St. Thomas's theology is also true for Servais Pinckaers who has been labelled a “biblical Thomist”:⁷

For Thomas, the words of Scripture, even when very simple in their formulation, can open up more direct access – far more than even the most elaborate Scholastic reasoning – to the reality theology addresses. This is particularly true of those books and authors of the Bible that he himself comments upon and quotes most frequently, such as the Psalms, Isaiah, Job, the Gospels, Paul, and John. According to Thomas, simple and direct understanding is loftier than the reason it guides. It, in fact, enables communication with angelic and divine intelligence.⁸

⁴ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 171

⁵ The recent interest in St. Thomas's scripture commentaries is seen for example in, Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, (eds) *Reading John with St. Thomas* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2005) and Daniel, A. Keating, John Yocum, and Thomas Weinandy, (eds) *Aquinas on Scripture: an Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries* (London: T&T Clarke, 2005).

⁶ Matthew Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation according to Thomas Aquinas* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2002), 3. This same author highlights the integral nature of Scripture in Thomas's Trinitarian theology, see Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*.

⁷ Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., “Interpreting Thomas Aquinas: Aspects of the Dominican School of Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century,” in Stephen J. Pope, (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 366.

⁸ Servais Pinckaers, “Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas,” 11.

In order to explicate Pinckaers's views on St. Thomas's use of Scripture it is necessary to understand what he means by "sources" in the Angelic Doctor's writings. Pinckaers, in speaking of St. Thomas's theological sources, sees what he calls interior sources. These differ in kind to the exterior sources, namely the texts and authorities that St. Thomas uses in his theology. Pinckaers elaborates on this using St. Thomas's own analysis of teaching,⁹ whereby there is a twofold action, external and internal. The external is the authority of acknowledged masters who help the disciple form his or her mind in right reason. The internal is the light of the natural intellect:

For in every man there is a certain principle of knowledge, namely the light of the active intellect, through which certain universal principles of all the sciences are naturally understood as soon as proposed to the intellect. Now when anyone applies these universal principles to certain particular things, the memory or experience of which he acquires through the senses; then by his own research advancing from the known to the unknown, he obtains knowledge of what he knew not before.¹⁰

Pinckaers applies St. Thomas's distinction to the Dominican master himself. The authorities (external sources) that St. Thomas uses speak to an interior source, namely his natural genius that allows him to enter into a communion with these very authorities, whether it is Aristotle, St. Paul, Matthew, or St. Augustine. This communion is so intimate that in large part "it breaks down historical separations."

There is, however, a higher interior source for theology: the Word of God with the grace of the Holy Spirit. St. Thomas recognises this higher source, especially evident in his explication of the New Law, which is, as will be made clear, an area of St. Thomas's thought that has been rather neglected. Thus, apart from the natural law whereby we can know through natural reason the good and the true, there exists a higher principle of grace:

There are two ways in which a thing may be instilled into man. First, through being part of his nature, and thus the natural law is instilled into man. Secondly, a thing is instilled into man by being, as it were, added on to his nature by a gift of grace. In this way the New Law is instilled into man, not only by indicating to him what he should do, but also by helping him to accomplish it.¹¹

The efficacy of the New Law of Christ is the Holy Spirit, who both enlightens our intellect and strengthens our will so as to know and live the law of Christ.¹² This higher interior principle (the Holy Spirit) creates a connection between the Word of God fully revealed at Pentecost and the contemporary Christian believer and theologian. Thus when St. Thomas refers to a passage from Scripture, it is not simply an external authority. Rather:

Through his faith he receives this verse of the Gospel as a word of the Lord bearing within it a present truth, capable of throwing light upon contemporary life.....For Thomas, this promise of Christ is not only a historical word, a subject for exegetical

⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, I, 117.1

¹⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, I, 117.1

¹¹ Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, 106, 1 ad 2

¹² "Now that which is preponderant in the law of the New Testament, and whereon all its efficacy is based, is the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is given through faith in Christ. Consequently the New Law is chiefly the grace itself of the Holy Spirit, which is given to those who believe in Christ." Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, 106, 1

study; thanks to the light of the Spirit, it becomes a present Word, opening up to him and to humanity a future that surpasses anything Aristotle and the pagan philosophers could have imagined.¹³

In his summation of the hierarchy of external sources in St. Thomas's theology, Pinckaers places the Word of God, expressed in Sacred Scripture, as the summit.¹⁴ This is followed by the Fathers (and secondarily by later masters like Peter Lombard). The philosophers – principally Aristotle – provide the authorities that are derived from human reason alone.¹⁵

II. The Moral Theology of the Fathers

In order to understand St. Thomas one needs to understand his external sources, especially those whom he uses to help ponder theological questions. This is the view of all sapiential Thomists such as Pinckaers – to understand Thomas we need to first understand the Fathers, and Doctors, and philosophers who come before him. The following passage demonstrates how, for Pinckaers, St. Thomas cannot be stripped away from the great tradition that precedes him:

Owing to the action of the Spirit, Thomas enters into profound communion, in the love and the search for truth, with all the authors whom he consults: with the Fathers, as commentators on the word in the name of the church, and with the philosophers, as witnesses to the humanity and the nature that God has created in his image and likeness and that remain subject to the wisdom of his providence in spite of sin. In writing the *Summa*, Thomas is aware that he is listening to the Lord teaching on the mountain, in the company of the Fathers and the holy Doctors of the Church, in the same fellowship with all those, philosophers and others, who, without having been able to hear this voice directly, had nonetheless known how to welcome, even if imperfectly, the light of truth shining at the summit of their souls. For him, it is not merely a beautiful picture or an ideal, but a living communion in the light of the truth poured into the hearts by the Spirit, who had already hovered over the waters at the beginning of creation.¹⁶

Before addressing how St. Thomas needs to be read in light of the Fathers of the Church it is necessary to see the way in which Pinckaers views the patristic period in the overall development of moral theology. In concentrating on the Fathers, Pinckaers seeks to address a lacuna in thinking about moral theology in patristic thought. That is, so the argument goes, because there is little in the way of systematic moral theology in the writings of the Fathers their contribution to moral teaching was negligible. Pinckaers characterises this view as one of seeing moral theology in the patristic age as being at an infantile age; that it is only later that it will mature and grow as a discipline.¹⁷ Contrastingly, Pinckaers views the patristic period as a golden age of moral theology.¹⁸ There are three dimensions of patristic moral thought that

¹³ Pinckaers, "Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas," 22.

¹⁴ "At the highest level of authority is the Word of God, expressed in Scripture. This is what furnishes the prime substance of theology and constitutes its principal source, the highest and surest one. It is rounded out by the teaching of the great councils, which interpret it in an authentic way in the name of the Church, and by the confessions of faith which summarize their teaching." Pinckaers, "Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas," 7.

¹⁵ Pinckaers, "Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas," 7, 8.

¹⁶ Pinckaers, "Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas," 23.

¹⁷ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 207.

¹⁸ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 207

Pinckaers sees as vitally important: scriptural exegesis, the integration of Greco-Roman culture and philosophy, and spirituality.

All theology for the Fathers begins with Sacred Scripture. The Scriptures were the source of theology and it was scriptural commentaries that made up much of the theology of the Fathers. This was also true of moral theology even if this phrase was unknown. The approach to morality in the writings of the Fathers, in light of their reading of Scripture, was very different to later periods, including our own.¹⁹ For modern thinkers the Scripture is sourced for moral norms, laws, prohibitions etc. whereby a particular ethical position can be supported; a type of moral ‘proof texting.’ Contrastingly the Fathers have a far wider view of the riches of Scripture for the moral life. All Scripture possesses a moral significance, especially in terms of the ‘third sense’ of reading scripture, the tropological or moral. Scripture, in this sense, has a moral power for the individual Christian life whose *telos* is happiness or salvation.

Pinckaers describes the exegetical method the Fathers employ as a “real” approach to Scripture;²⁰ an approach he contrasts with literary or positivist exegesis. This real approach is so called because the Fathers wanted to go beyond the words and signs of the text to the reality that is signified, namely, God and his revelation in Christ.²¹ Therefore, of primary importance was faith in the Word of God; a faith that was living and active; a faith that sought participation in the mysteries that Scripture revealed; an understanding that all of Scripture was a work of divine wisdom.²² For Pinckaers, the Fathers’ exegesis is aptly called real for two reasons: first, because it seeks to move beyond the literal text to the reality that the Scriptures reveal; second, the realities, once found, are contemplated and penetrate into the “reality” of our own life through practice (morality).²³ He elaborates on this point with an analogy of bread making, whereby the bread is the exegesis and the wheat from which it is made is Scripture. First the husk needs to be stripped off to get to the grain of wheat. The husk in the analogy is the human coverings of the text (language, genre, author idiosyncrasies, etc.) The key tool in this exercise was faith. Secondly, the grain is ground to produce flour. Here the word is ‘crushed’ through meditation; a meditation involving reflection, memory, and experience. This meditation leads to practice, the kneading of the flour, that in order to become bread needs the water of regular prayer. The final stage is the baking in the oven, analogous to the fire of trial, whereby the Word having been understood, contemplated, and lived out, is purified like gold.

This *real* exegesis is particularly appropriate for moral theology because it brings the word of God into the reality of the Christian’s life. This is important in light of Pinckaers’s understanding of the unitive dimension of theology. There are “vital bonds” between moral theology and Scripture that when neglected result in a poverty in the study of both fields.²⁴ It is for this reason, states Pinckaers, that it is indispensable we relearn, “in the school of the

¹⁹ In writing about moral theology as found in the Church Fathers, Pinckaers recognises three different types of writings: scriptural commentaries, personal documents (works of a more personal nature in terms of the arrangement of the material covered and explained, for example, St Ambrose’s *De officiis*), and works dealing with particular ethical problems. See, Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 196-198.

²⁰ Servais Pinckaers, O.P., “Lecture positive et lecture ‘réelle’ de la bible”, *Sources* 3 (1977): 108-118.

²¹ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 200.

²² Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 201.

²³ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 201.

²⁴ See, Servais Pinckaers, O.P., “Scripture and the Renewal of Moral Theology,” trans. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P., in Berman, John & Titus, Craig Steven (eds), *The Pinckaers Reader – Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2005), 48, 49. Original version, “L’usage de l’Ecriture dans la théologie morale,” *Nova et Vetera* 2 (1995).

Fathers, the art of ‘baking the bread of the Word.’”²⁵ It is also indispensable in understanding the moral theology of Aquinas.

III. Aquinas the Augustinian

For Pinckaers, St. Thomas is more Augustinian than Aristotelian.²⁶ In fact, Pinckaers is a very relevant figure in the recent renewal in seeing the important influence of Augustine in the theology of St. Thomas.²⁷ In his overview of moral theology Pinckaers pays special tribute to the place of St. Augustine. Especially important is Augustine’s focus on the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount.²⁸ The key criterion in the moral life of the Christian is happiness. Not rules, not legalities, not impossible dreams, rather the abiding happiness that comes from a life lived in communion with Christ.²⁹

Pinckaers sees a number of ways in which St. Augustine’s theology is a prelude to the work of St. Thomas. For example, a particularly strong theme in Augustine, according to Pinckaers, is unity: the unity of movement toward God who brings about a unity in humankind and all creation. Also, there is a unity that rejects any separation between philosophy and theology, or between dogma and mystical/spiritual thought. “His thought moves from one level to another, as supple, casual and sure as life itself, creating a single work at a single thrust. Thus we can speak of unique rhythm in St. Augustine’s thought. An image of this might be a sphere, with each point on the surface connected to the hidden centre so as to reveal its presence at all times.”³⁰

Pinckaers describes St. Augustine as a pioneer in moral theology. His work, like any pioneer, remained unfinished. He describes it as a scaffold ready to be completed by the genius of St. Thomas. St. Augustine was speculative in his theology; a speculation that was married to spiritual and mystical experiences. Augustine encountered the love of God and reflected upon it. Pinckaers cites Augustine’s great work on the Trinity as an example of how he experiences love which moves him to reflect on God and what it means to love God (moral

²⁵ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 202.

²⁶ Obviously, for Pinckaers St. Thomas is both. However, the neglect of Augustine in neo-scholastic, neo-thomistic writings led him to accentuate the influence of St. Augustine. For example, Pinckaers states that St. Thomas meets Augustine “personally” as a disciple, faithful and creative. See, Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 145.

²⁷ Tracey Rowland counts Pinckaers as one of three recent Dominican ethicists (the others being Romanus Cessario and Benedict Ashley) as leading an “Augustinian” turn in Catholic moral theology. By this she means a turning away from the tendency to reduce moral theology to rules and laws, to a richer vision whereby happiness or beatitude is the *telos* of the moral life and the starting point for moral theology. See Tracey Rowland, “The Augustinian Turn in Catholic Moral Thought,” *Australasian Catholic Record*, Vol. 83, No. 2, (April 2006): 239-246. Alisdair MacIntyre traces the Augustinian train in Aquinas through St. Albert the Great. See, Alisdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 115. For a selection of essays that cover Augustinian influence in Aquinas see, Michael Dauphinais, Barry David & Matthew Levering, (eds), *Aquinas the Augustinian* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2007).

²⁸ The Sermon on the Mount is a key stone to all of Pinckaers’s reflection on the moral and spiritual life (a distinction that Pinckaers himself was loath to recognise). See, for example, “La Loi évangélique, vie selon l’Esprit, et le Sermon sur la montagne,” and “L’agir chrétien et ses dimensions selon le Sermon sur la montagne,” in Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *L’Évangile et la morale* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg, 1990).

²⁹ See Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Pursuit of Happiness – God’s Way: Living the Beatitudes*, (New York: Alba House, 1998). For a detailed discussion of happiness and its meaning in the moral life see Servais Pinckaers, O.P., “Qu’est-ce que le Bonheur,” in *Le Renouveau de la Morale* (Paris: Casterman, 1964), 77-87.

³⁰ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 211.

theology): “Behold, God is love. Why do we rush to the heights of heaven, the depths of the earth, in search of the one who is near to us, if we would be near to him? Let no one say, ‘I don’t know what to love.’ Let him only love his brother, and he will be loving this same love.”³¹ The key for theology, according to St. Augustine, is to remain humble before the mystery. Thus no theological moral system, states Pinckaers, should be viewed as complete or definitive or finished. The mystery is always disclosing itself. Thus we should never compare in an evaluative sense the theology of St. Augustine and the theology of St. Thomas. Pinckaers states that we cannot say that one is better than the other:

We need rather to see them as two magnificent expressions of the inexhaustible riches of the mystery of Christ, and try to profit from them both. Since they belonged to two different spiritual families, these theologians complement each other. It is useless to seek to interpret one through the other or to reduce them to a common denominator. So Augustine cannot be contained within to mystic categories, at least not those of the modern textbooks. To recognize this diversity and theology is a fine exercise in developing mental breadth and flexibility.³²

IV. Integration of Greek Philosophy

St. Thomas, as is widely appreciated, attempted to marry the best of Greek philosophical thinking – especially Aristotle and his Greek and Latin commentators – with Christian theology. To the extent he was able to do this, St. Thomas is seen as the exemplar in being able to unite faith and reason.³³ This is no more evident than in his ethics. St. Thomas sees Aristotle as his guiding light in understanding the human person created in the image and likeness of God. What does it mean to be human, to be a moral agent? It is in answering this question that Thomas uses Aristotle and his philosophical reasoning especially regarding the virtues.³⁴ In highlighting how St. Thomas integrates Aristotle with the morality of the Gospel, Pinckaers gives the example of St. Thomas’s definition of the theological virtue of charity. This is found in the *Secunda secundae* of the *Summa*, in Question 23. As Pinckaers notes, St. Thomas uses in his discussion of charity the study of friendship found in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* alongside the idea of Christian friendship with God.³⁵ Aristotle is used by St. Thomas to ground

³¹ Augustine, *De trinitate*, 8.7.11, cited in Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 211.

³² Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 212.

³³ “Thomas recognized that nature, philosophy’s proper concern, could contribute to the understanding of divine Revelation. Faith therefore has no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it. Just as grace builds on nature and brings it to fulfilment, so faith builds upon and perfects reason. Illumined by faith, reason is set free from the fragility and limitations deriving from the disobedience of sin and finds the strength required to rise to the knowledge of the Triune God. Although he made much of the supernatural character of faith, the Angelic Doctor did not overlook the importance of its reasonableness; indeed he was able to plumb the depths and explain the meaning of this reasonableness. Faith is in a sense an “exercise of thought”; and human reason is neither annulled nor debased in assenting to the contents of faith, which are in any case attained by way of free and informed choice. This is why the Church has been justified in consistently proposing Saint Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology.” John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, n. 43. As pointed out to me by a reviewer of this article, Pinckaers’s emphasis on faith and conversion in moral theology can run the risk of underselling Thomas’s speculative rigour and the important distinction between reason and revelation. For an overview of Pinckaers’s understanding of the relationship between faith and reason see my, “Faith in Faith: Reason, Faith and Prayer in the Theology of Servais Pinckaers, O.P.,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, Vol 18:2, Spring 2015, 88-103.

³⁴ “As a witness to humanity, Aristotle becomes in St. Thomas’s eyes a servant of the Gospel. Moreover, this daring perspective authorizes him discreetly to correct and transform the teaching of the Stagirite so as to open it to Christian truth.” Pinckaers, “Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas,” 13.

³⁵ St. Thomas cites the Gospel of St. John, “I will not now call you servants . . . but my friends.” (15:15). He then goes on to discuss the thought of Aristotle combining them with the Christian insights of the St. Paul.

what it means to love another in human friendship. However, St. Thomas needs to make changes to the analysis that Aristotle gives. This is so he can give an account of the higher friendship that is Christian charity, namely, the friendship one has with God. Human friendship is then a type of analogy used to describe divine love.³⁶

St. Thomas's use of Aristotle in his moral theology follows in the tradition of St. Paul: "Fill your minds with everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honor, and everything that can be thought virtuous and worthy of praise" (Phil 4:8). In this, states Pinckaers, St. Thomas was firmly in the tradition of St. Augustine and the Fathers of the Church; namely, that the human wisdom of the Greeks and the Romans could be used in the service of Christian theology. St. Thomas, however, was able to do this in a way heretofore never been achieved: "Aristotle's teaching, together with the natural virtues, is lifted up into a new moral organism. It is assimilated and transformed. In St. Thomas's teaching we are not dealing with the Aristotle of the past, reconstituted historically, but with the Aristotle of the present, revitalized and actualized within a specifically Christian moral setting, where the principal role is played by the evangelical law."³⁷

V. St. Thomas's Interpretation of the New Law

St. Thomas's teaching on the new law is, according to Pinckaers the high point of his moral teaching.³⁸ There are, states Pinckaers, three towering peaks in the moral theology of St.

"According to the Philosopher (Ethic. viii, 2,3) not every love has the character of friendship, but that love which is together with benevolence, when, to wit, we love someone so as to wish good to him. If, however, we do not wish good to what we love, but wish its good for ourselves, (thus we are said to love wine, or a horse, or the like), it is love not of friendship, but of a kind of concupiscence. For it would be absurd to speak of having friendship for wine or for a horse. Yet neither does well-wishing suffice for friendship, for a certain mutual love is requisite, since friendship is between friend and friend: and this well-wishing is founded on some kind of communication. Accordingly, since there is a communication between man and God, inasmuch as He communicates His happiness to us, some kind of friendship must needs be based on this same communication, of which it is written (1 Corinthians 1:9): "God is faithful: by Whom you are called unto the fellowship of His Son." The love which is based on this communication, is charity: wherefore it is evident that charity is the friendship of man for God." *Summa theologiae*, II II, 23, 1.

³⁶ Pinckaers, "Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas," 11-14. On this see also, Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 188-190 and *Plaidoyer pour la vertu* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 153-58.

³⁷ Pinckaers, *Sources*, 181. The following quote highlights Pinckaers understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology, an understanding inspired by Thomas: "This sort of association between philosophy and theology is based on St. Thomas's maxim: "*Gratia non tollit, sed perficit naturam*," which could be rephrased: theology does not destroy, but perfects philosophy. In our opinion, however, the principle should not be understood in the sense that philosophy, as a work of reason, must first be constructed while saying to oneself that in any case it will be confirmed by grace, but rather in the opposite sense: we must have the boldness to believe in the Word of God and to abandon ourselves to grace, in the assurance that, far from destroying whatever is true, good, and reasonable in philosophy, grace will teach us how to make it our own, to develop it and to perfect it, while revealing to us a broader and more profound wisdom than any human thought, the wisdom given by the Holy Spirit who unites us with the person of Christ and his Cross by teaching us to 'live in Christ.'" Servais Pinckaers, "The Place of Philosophy in Moral Theology," trans. Michael Sherwin, O.P., in Berkman, John & Titus, Craig Steven (eds), *The Pinckaers Reader – Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2005), 72.

³⁸ For Pinckaers's discussion of Aquinas's account of the New Law, a subject that he returns to again and again, see, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 172-190; "The Return of the New Law to Moral Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64 (1999), trans. Hugh Connolly. Originally published as "Le retour de la Loi nouvelle en morale," in *Praedicando et docendo: Mélanges offerts au Père Liam Walsh* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1998); *Le Renouveau de la morale* (Paris: Casterman, 1964), 31-40; "La Loi évangélique, vie selon l'Esprit, et le Sermon sur la montagne," *Nova et Vetera*, 60 (1985): 217-228; "Esquisse d'une morale chrétienne. Ses bases: la Loi évangélique et la loi naturelle," *Nova et Vetera*, 55 (1980): 102-25; "La Loi nouvelle et le rôle du Saint-Esprit," *Kerit*, 129 (1996): 42-46. For a critique of Pinckaers that centres on the neglect of law in his definition of

Thomas: the seeking of happiness fulfilled in the vision of God; the theological virtues that allow us to live in God; and the evangelical law (the new law of Christ), “which is the high point of all legislation issuing from the wisdom of God and communicated to human beings.”³⁹ It is this third peak of St. Thomas’s moral teaching that has been the most neglected since Thomas.

We find St. Thomas’s teaching on the new law in Question 106 of the *Secunda secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*. He defines this law in the following way:

‘Each thing appears to be that which preponderates in it,’ as the Philosopher states (Ethic. ix, 8). Now that which is preponderant in the law of the New Testament, and whereon all its efficacy is based, is the grace of the Holy Ghost, which is given through faith in Christ. Consequently the New Law is chiefly the grace itself of the Holy Ghost, which is given to those who believe in Christ. This is manifestly stated by the Apostle who says (Romans 3:27): “Where is . . . thy boasting? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith”: for he calls the grace itself of faith “a law.” And still more clearly it is written (Romans 8:2): “The law of the spirit of life, in Christ Jesus, hath delivered me from the law of sin and of death.” Hence Augustine says (De Spir. et Lit. xxiv) that “as the law of deeds was written on tables of stone, so is the law of faith inscribed on the hearts of the faithful”: and elsewhere, in the same book (xxi): “What else are the Divine laws written by God Himself on our hearts, but the very presence of His Holy Spirit?”⁴⁰

The essential elements of the New Law are the grace of the Holy Spirit and faith in Christ.⁴¹ The three key concepts are grace, Holy Spirit, and faith. Pinckaers links these three key words as outlined in his definition of the New Law to St. Thomas’s theology as a whole. The New Law is a grace and is connected to St. Thomas’s teaching regarding salvation and the study of Christ as head of the church and fount of grace in the third part of the *Summa*. The New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit. This connects to the study of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Trinity; that person who is love and gift in the heart of God (questions 37 and 38 the first part of the *Summa*). Pinckaers also notes here the connection to the study of the gifts of the Holy Spirit as part of the moral life. This grace of the Holy Spirit that is the New Law comes through faith in Christ. This connects to the theological virtues whereby faith is the head of the virtues that lead ultimately to charity, the form of all virtuous life. The reference to Christ also connects to the third part of the *Summa* where St. Thomas demonstrates that Christ is our unique way back to God.⁴² This leads Pinckaers to state that “clearly, not only ethics but the

Christian ethics see, John A. Cuddeback, “Law, Pinckaers, and the Definition of Christian Ethics,” *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2009): 301-26. For a critique of Pinckaers regarding his discussion of the New Law and his seeming neglect of how it relates or does not relate to the Old Law see, Paul Martens, “On the Superiority of the New Law: Stumbling through some difficulties with Thomas Aquinas,” *Theology Today* 60 (2003): 170-85.

³⁹ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 172.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 106. 1. We can note here, in this definition, how St. Thomas synthesizes both Aristotle and Augustine in his theological reflection of the New Law.

⁴¹ There is also, states Pinckaers and following St. Thomas, a written aspect of the New Law which comes through the Church, both in her teaching and conferral of sacraments. See, Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 176.

⁴² Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 177. On the connection of St. Thomas’s moral theology and his Christology in the *Summa* see, Thomas P. Harmon, “The Sacramental Consummation of the Moral Life According to St. Thomas Aquinas,” *New Blackfriars* (2009): 465-480.

whole of theology converges in the treatise on the evangelical Law, from the moment of its definition.”⁴³

The history of St. Thomas’s teaching on the evangelical law is a rather sad one in that it was, on the whole, neglected after his own age. Pinckaers highlights how three of the most famous commentators on St. Thomas, each of whom was extremely influential in how St. Thomas’s theology was passed on through the ages, treated the New Law teaching of Aquinas. Cajetan did mention St. Thomas’s definition but made no comment upon it. Billuart, after discussing St. Thomas’s teaching on the natural law thought there was nothing more to add regarding Thomas’s teaching on the old and New Laws.⁴⁴ Suarez integrated St. Thomas’s teaching on the New Law into the legalistic understanding of moral theology of his time. Christ is a new Moses and his New Law needs to be read in this framework.⁴⁵

It is St. Thomas’s teaching on the evangelical law that motivates Pinckaers to state categorically that “St. Thomas’s moral teaching is therefore primarily evangelical and only secondarily Aristotelian.”⁴⁶ The discussion on the moral life begins with grace that infuses faith, hope, and charity in the human intellect and will. These theological virtues inform and supersede the natural virtues that are ruled by reason: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Moreover, following St. Augustine, St. Thomas links to each of the virtues one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. To faith is linked the gifts of understanding and knowledge; to hope the gift of fear of the Lord; to charity the gift of wisdom; to prudence the gift of counsel; to justice the gift of piety; to fortitude to the gift of courage; to temperance the fear of the Lord. Therefore, even the natural virtues espoused most expertly by Aristotle, are supernaturalised in the theology of St. Thomas. The gifts of the Holy Spirit become interior to the natural virtues enabling these virtues to be ordered towards supernatural happiness in God.⁴⁷

After St. Thomas, Catholic moral theology focused more on law whereby law was seen as an expression of the divine will. St. Thomas, as Pinckaers notes, sees law as a work of wisdom, that is, the wisdom of God that engages the intellect first and then only the will. Therefore, law in the writings of St. Thomas is far more nuanced than the modern understanding of law as simple rules and obligations. For St. Thomas there are five types of law: the eternal law, the natural law, civil law, the Old Law, and the new (evangelical) law.⁴⁸ The eternal law is the divine source of all legislation. The natural law is the human participation in the eternal law. Human or civil law is derived from the natural law. The Old Law is the revelation of God pertaining to the natural law. Finally, we have the fulfilment of divine revelation in the evangelical of the New Testament. These laws are interconnected and, in a certain sense, form a circular motion beginning with the divine mind of God and finding their way back to God through the evangelical law. And this is why Pinckaers can say that the

⁴³ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 178.

⁴⁴ For Pinckaers’s critique of Billuart’s account of St. Thomas’s moral theology see Pinckaers, *Le Renouveau de la morale*, 128-131.

⁴⁵ On this decline of seeing the New Law as part of Thomistic moral theology, see also Pinckaers’s commentary on John Paul II’s encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, “An Encyclical for the Future: *Veritatis Splendor*,” trans. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P., in, J.A. DiNoia, O.P. and, Romanus Cessario, O.P. (eds), *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology – Studies by Ten Outstanding Scholars* (New Jersey: Sceptre, 1999), 25, 26.

⁴⁶ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 181.

⁴⁷ On St. Thomas’s teaching regarding the infused natural virtues see the essay by Michael Sherwin, O.P., “Infused Virtue and the Effects of Acquired Vice: A Test Case for the Thomistic Theory of Infused Cardinal Virtues,” *The Thomist*, 73 (2009): 29-52.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 91.

evangelical law is the most important law in St. Thomas's moral theology: it brings all law, including the natural law, to perfection.

What then is the content of the evangelical law? In question 108 of the *Summa* St. Thomas says, following the lead of St. Augustine, that the Lord's Sermon on the Mount "contains the whole process of forming the life of a Christian."⁴⁹ St. Thomas makes clear, however, that the New Law contains nothing new at the external level of human acts, that is, there are no new precepts to be added to the Old Law.⁵⁰ Rather, the New Law is directed towards interior acts, to the will, to the intellect, to intention, and to love.⁵¹ This, however, does not mean that external and interior acts are separate.⁵² Every human act is made up of an external and interior dimension. The interior act is the formal dimension of morality whereas the external act is the material or secondary dimension. The evangelical law as given by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount is, as we have already noted, described by St. Thomas as a grace of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it comes from outside the human person and infuses the person at the interior level of human action.⁵³ St. Thomas's commentary on the sermon highlights three points: first, the reference to happiness as found in the Beatitudes is shown as the end of all human action; second, the sermon's relation to self and our need to be detached from all that leads us away from God; and third, our interior relationship with others as determined by charity.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 108. 3.

⁵⁰ "The right use of grace is by means of works of charity. These, in so far as they are essential to virtue, pertain to the moral precepts, which also formed part of the Old Law. Hence, in this respect, the New Law had nothing to add as regards external action. The determination of these works in their relation to the divine worship, belongs to the ceremonial precepts of the Law; and, in relation to our neighbour, to the judicial precepts, as stated above (Question 99, Article 4). And therefore, since these determinations are not in themselves necessarily connected with inward grace wherein the Law consists, they do not come under a precept of the New Law, but are left to the decision of man; some relating to inferiors--as when a precept is given to an individual; others, relating to superiors, temporal or spiritual, referring, namely, to the common good." Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 108. 2.

⁵¹ "This he does in regard to man himself, in two ways, corresponding to man's two interior movements in respect of any prospective action, viz. volition of what has to be done, and intention of the end. Wherefore, in the first place, He directs man's will in respect of the various precepts of the Law: by prescribing that man should refrain not merely from those external works that are evil in themselves, but also from internal acts, and from the occasions of evil deeds. In the second place He directs man's intention, by teaching that in our good works, we should seek neither human praise, nor worldly riches, which is to lay up treasures on earth." Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 108. 2.

⁵² In reply to the objection that the Kingdom of God is purely interior or spiritual and therefore the New Law affects solely interior acts, St. Thomas replies, "The kingdom of God consists chiefly in internal acts: but as a consequence all things that are essential to internal acts belong also to the kingdom of God. Thus if the kingdom of God is internal righteousness, peace, and spiritual joy, all external acts that are incompatible with righteousness, peace, and spiritual joy, are in opposition to the kingdom of God; and consequently should be forbidden in the Gospel of the kingdom. On the other hand, those things that are indifferent as regards the aforesaid, for instance, to eat of this or that food, are not part of the kingdom of God; wherefore the Apostle says before the words quoted: "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink." Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 108, 1.

⁵³ "As stated above (106, 1,2), the New Law consists chiefly in the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is shown forth by faith that works through love. Now men become receivers of this grace through God's Son made man, whose humanity grace filled first, and thence flowed forth to us. Hence it is written (John 1:14): "The Word was made flesh," and afterwards: "full of grace and truth"; and further on: "Of His fulness we all have received, and grace for grace." Hence it is added that "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." Consequently it was becoming that the grace flows from the incarnate Word should be given to us by means of certain external sensible objects; and that from this inward grace, whereby the flesh is subjected to the Spirit, certain external works should ensue." Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 108, 1.

⁵⁴ "Therein man's interior movements are ordered. Because after declaring that his end is Beatitude; and after commending the authority of the apostles, through whom the teaching of the Gospel was to be promulgated, He orders man's interior movements, first in regard to man himself, secondly in regard to his neighbor." Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 108. 2.

Another important characteristic for St. Thomas in interpreting the New Law of Christ is freedom. The evangelical law is a law of liberty. This is also a fundamental dimension of Pinckaers's call for the renewal of moral theology, namely, the need to give an authentic account of human freedom. The Christian moral life involves a law of freedom and not a law of restriction or obligation. This is because the New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit.

According to St. Thomas the New Law is freedom in three ways. First, it helps us recognize and undertake those precepts that are necessary for salvation.⁵⁵ Second, because the law is grace it prompts the person to act in true freedom in order to do that which is good until point that which is evil.⁵⁶ And third, the New Law gives counsels that are added to the precepts necessary for salvation.⁵⁷ This signifies the freedom of the New Law that differs from the Old Law which contained only precepts. The counsels are not obligatory for salvation but in freedom they allow the Christian to reach the end of his life with greater surety and efficacy.⁵⁸

The importance for Pinckaers of the New Law as interpreted by St. Thomas is aptly demonstrated in the following:

St. Thomas's definition of the New Law can be of enormous help to us in disposing of various elements of the Christian life in their proper order. The formulation of this teaching, root of one of the great spiritual renewals of history, has acquired a universal value and may be considered as a theological expression of gospel living for all times. And in the structure of the *Summa theologiae* the treatise on the New Law is the keystone supporting all of moral theology in its relation to the life of the Trinity, *through* the Holy Spirit who communicates the father's love to us (*Prima pars*), and *to* the person of Christ, through faith and the reception of sacramental grace (*Tertia pars*). It is very fitting, therefore, that the encyclical should have turned to this teaching. Yet St. Thomas is no more than an interpreter of the Gospel. He leads us to the spirit, our sanctifier, and to Christ our Saviour, 'the way of truth by which we may come, through the resurrection, to the blessedness of eternal life.' (prologue of the *Tertia pars*)⁵⁹

⁵⁵ "First, because it does not bind us to do or avoid certain things, except such as are of themselves necessary or opposed to salvation, and come under the prescription or prohibition of the law." Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 108, 1.

⁵⁶ "Secondly, because it also makes us comply freely with these precepts and prohibitions, inasmuch as we do so through the promptings of grace." Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 108, 1.

⁵⁷ "The difference between a counsel and a commandment is that a commandment implies obligation, whereas a counsel is left to the option of the one to whom it is given. Consequently in the New Law, which is the law of liberty, counsels are added to the commandments, and not in the Old Law, which is the law of bondage. We must therefore understand the commandments of the New Law to have been given about matters that are necessary to gain the end of eternal bliss, to which end the New Law brings us forthwith: but that the counsels are about matters that render the gaining of this end more assured and expeditious." Aquinas, *ST*, I II, 108, 4.

⁵⁸ In commenting on Pinckaers's description of the Thomistic understanding of freedom linked with grace and faith in Christ, Matthew Levering makes the following point: "From the inclinations to the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, moral theory revolves theocentrically around the work of God as the ground of human action and fulfillment. Ultimately the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit fills a natural law in us and elevates us to communion with the Trinity.... Natural law can only be understood in light of the absolute and ongoing primacy of God's creative work in us, a reality that grace manifests. Practical reason discerns, from the integrated and hierarchically ordered dynamisms of the natural inclinations, the precepts of the natural law. These inclinations inscribe a wisdom whose theocentric grounding cannot be properly articulated outside the kind of richly speculative metaphysical description that Pinckaers provides." Matthew Levering, "Natural Law and Natural Inclinations: Rhonheimer, Pinckaers, McAleer," *The Thomist* 70 (2006), 189.

⁵⁹ Pinckaers, "An Encyclical for the Future: *Veritatis Splendor*," 29, 30. Here Pinckaers is alluding to John Paul II's reference to St. Thomas's teaching on the New Law found in *Veritas splendor*, n. 45: "The Church gratefully accepts and lovingly preserves the entire deposit of Revelation, treating it with religious respect and

Conclusion

As a biblical Thomist, Servais Pinckaers spent his academic life trying to resuscitate the Christian nature of the ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas. He did this knowing that the Angelic Doctor must be a primary source in the renewal of moral theology called for at Vatican II.⁶⁰ If indeed moral theology is to be more evangelical in its vision, the Christian ethics of Aquinas provides a unique and unequalled example to follow.

fulfilling her mission of authentically interpreting God's law in the light of the Gospel. In addition, the Church receives the gift of the New Law, which is the "fulfilment" of God's law in Jesus Christ and in his Spirit. This is an "interior" law (cf. Jer 31:31-33), "written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor 3:3); a law of perfection and of freedom (cf. 2 Cor 3:17); "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:2). Saint Thomas writes that this law 'can be called law in two ways. First, the law of the spirit is the Holy Spirit... who, dwelling in the soul, not only teaches what it is necessary to do by enlightening the intellect on the things to be done, but also inclines the affections to act with uprightness... Second, the law of the spirit can be called the proper effect of the Holy Spirit, and thus faith working through love (cf. Gal 5:6), which teaches inwardly about the things to be done... and inclines the affections to act (*In Epistulam ad Romanos*, c. VIII, lect. 1.)'." John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 45, [http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0222/_P5.HTM#\\$2C](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0222/_P5.HTM#$2C) (accessed 16/5/2011).

⁶⁰ "Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world." Vatican Council II, *Decree on Priestly Formation, Optatam totius*, n. 16.