

Thomas Aquinas: Soteriology as a Doctrine of Friendship

Introduction

When I was studying in Fribourg in Switzerland, I had a dogmatics seminar with Dominican Father Christoph Schönborn, who later became Cardinal and Archbishop of Vienna. In Fribourg, he taught the theology of Thomas Aquinas, whose 800th birthday will be celebrated in 2025. Christoph Schönborn called the virtue of charity (*caritas*) the center of the *Summa Theologiae*, echoing some prominent European Thomists. This became my life's theme, which is still my focus today in Rome at the Pontifical Gregorian University, at the Institute of Anthropology, Dignity and Care (IADC), when I teach about soteriology and friendship in Thomas Aquinas. I will return to this at the end of my essay.

About thirty years ago, in my dissertation on Thomas's main theological work, the *Summa Theologiae* (ST), I reflected on the understanding of "friendship as a paradigm of salvation"¹ and, in particular, on the inner connection between grace, the virtues, and soteriology and Christology. I would like to present some of the central ideas, some or even most of which may be well known, but which in my opinion are also forward-looking for today in the context to be presented.

1. The Inner Connection Between the Doctrine of Grace and Christology in the Summa Theologiae

Thomas Aquinas was a child of his time with his reception of Aristotelian philosophy. The latter forms the framework for the ST, which was written beginning in the late 60s of the 13th century, just a few years after the completion of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (ScG). In contrast to the Western doctrine of redemption, in which Christology and the doctrine of grace are often barely connected, the ST is characterized by the fact that Thomas thinks both treatises, Christology and the doctrine of grace, in close connection. However, what exactly does it mean when Thomas understands grace – communion with God – as mediated

1 See H. DÖRNEMANN: *Freundschaft: Die Erlösungslehre des Thomas von Aquin*, Würzburg: Echter, 2012; Id.: "Thomas von Aquin: Wegbereiter einer neuen Erlösungslehre", in: *Review of Philosophy and Theology of Fribourg* 47 (2000), 135-149.

through Christ (see ST I-II, q. 112, a. 1 ad 2)? Against the background of this question, it can be shown, starting from the Aristotelian understanding of friendship – which he uses in a new way as the basis for the ST – that the connection between Christology and the doctrine of grace can be opened up in a surprising way.

2. *Conditions of Human Action in the ST*

My topic at this point is not the ethics of Thomas Aquinas in general. Nevertheless, I would like to begin my thoughts with two principles of his ethical approach, which commentators highlight even today, against the background of which the basic soteriological idea of the ST first becomes clear. As Thomas understands it, humans have an unconditional, purely formal desire for bliss, for the infinitely good. In the formal orientation of the human being to bliss, the freedom for particular and manifold goods is founded. Thomas develops these two basic ideas in the first section of the second part of the ST (I-II), where he deals with the question of the attainment of salvation. He is convinced that humans cannot achieve bliss by themselves. In the second section of the second part of the ST (II-II), Thomas unfolds the concrete path, attitudes, and means of connecting with God together with the explanations in the third part (III). Already in the first section of the second part, he provides references that become important for understanding his doctrine of salvation.

3. *Exceeding the Possibilities of Action in Friendship*

A close reading of the ST shows that Thomas takes up the question of how humans can be in communion with God at the beginning of the *Secunda Pars* with reference to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), precisely at the point where he deals with the question of the attainment of happiness (*De adeptione beatitudinis*, ST I-II, q. 5). In order to explain the possibility of free will turning to God “through divine help”, he says with Aristotle, “For what we do by means of our friends, is done, in a sense, by ourselves.”²

Likewise, a closer examination of the questions about the mode of action of Christ's passion shows that through the possibility of transcending one's own range of action in friendship, the second “limit” of the human ability to act is also surmountable. For in order to solve the dilemma that humans cannot reach God because of their guilt, Thomas again draws on the insight that a friend can

2 “Quae enim per amicos possumus, per nos aliquantulum possumus.” THOMAS AQUINAS: *Summa Theologiae*, I-II q. 5, a. 5 ad 1, hereafter ST; see ARISTOTLE: *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.3 (1112b27), hereafter NE; THOMAS AQUINAS: *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.3 (no. 477), hereafter *In Eth.*

act through a friend and thus bring about something that would be unattainable for them if left to themselves: “Insofar as any two people are one in charity, the one can atone for the other.”³ Are these references to the idea of friendship to be read as indications of the ST’s understanding of redemption? Friendship as a model of salvation?

4. *Friendship as a Paradigm of Salvation*

Thomas’s understanding of the idea of friendship can be found in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, written shortly before the ST. First of all, Thomas agrees with Aristotle that a friendship between humans and gods cannot exist: The gods “surpass humans in all good things”. Therefore, Thomas adds, “they do not maintain friendship with humans so as to converse and live with them” (see *In Eth.* 9.9, no. 1634). “If the persons are far apart, like humans and God, then the friendship we are discussing does not survive.”⁴

In contrast, Thomas speaks quite naturally of friendship with God in the ST. Without hesitation, he names the connection between humanity and God in the very first article of the treatise on charity as a friendship with God (ST II-II q. 23, a.1):

Accordingly, since there is a communication between humanity 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 Cor 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 humans for God.⁵

Is it stated at this point – in the *caritas* treatise (ST II-II q. 23, a. 1f.) – that the concept of friendship, which many commentaries apostrophize as central to the understanding of Thomas’s theology, also and especially has a key function in the doctrine of redemption? And can the understanding of friendship be used to open up the soteriology of ST from an anthropological perspective? Let us first take a closer look at the conditions of friendship as Thomas borrows them from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

3 “In quantum etiam duo homines sunt unum in caritate, unus pro alio satisfacere potest”, ST III q. 48, a. 2 ad 1.

4 “Et si multum distent, puta sicut homines a Deo, non adhuc remanet talis amicitia, de qua loquimur”, *In Eth.* 8.9 (no. 1635).

5 “Cum igitur sit aliqua communicatio hominis ad Deum secundum quod nobis suam beatitudinem communicat, super hac communicatione oportet aliquam amicitiam fundari. De qua quidem communicatione dicitur I ad Cor. I, fidelis Deus, per quem vocati estis in societatem filii eius. Amor autem super hac communicatione fundatus est caritas. Unde manifestum est quod caritas amicitia quaedam est hominis ad Deum”, ST II-II q. 23, a. 1.

4.1. Aristotelian Friendship Criteria and Their Inclusion in the ST

In describing the love of God (*caritas*) as friendship (*amicitia*), the characteristics of friendship listed in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are also adopted: following Aristotelian terminology, the friendship with God is also called a reciprocal love, meaning a love for the partner for their own sake, which presupposes and constitutes a *communicatio*.⁶

Thomas draws on Aristotle's comments on the conditions of friendship in his commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics* and also transfers them to the ST. The Aristotelian friendship criterion of a "reciprocal unconcealed love"⁷ finds its counterpart in the opening question of Thomas's Christology: because human knowledge and love are always connected with something physically perceptible (see ST III, q. 1, a. 3 ad 1), it corresponds to the conditions of being human that people are led to salvation "per visibilia": the invisible God is revealed through the visible (see ST III, q. 1, a. 1; ScG 4.54), and the love of God becomes perceptible in the life of Jesus. The suffering and death of Christ emerges and becomes manifest in the highest way. What divine love is in itself we only know in relation to this revelation of God's love in the humanity of Jesus.

However, according to Aristotelian criteriology, one can only speak of real friendship when the outwardly witnessed love is also believed⁸ by the partner – transferred to the friendship with God: when a person believes God's love. Analogous to the Aristotelian understanding of friendship, faith is the last condition of friendship with God, but in this it is also the first act of friendship. And it is precisely this understanding that can be described as the quintessence of Thomas's treatise on faith (ST II-II, qq. 1-16),⁹ in which a friendship with God can also be possible, despite being between unequal partners.¹⁰

4.2. Friendship as an Exemplary Model for the Doctrine of Salvation

Would these key thoughts indicate that the understanding of friendship can be used as an explanatory model for the interpretation of Thomas's doctrine of salvation as a whole, one that also allows the doctrine of salvation to be explained for our times?

6 See *In Eth.* 8.2 (no. 1559).

7 "benevolentia mutua non latens", NE 8.2 (1155b34-1156a3); *In Eth.* 8.2 (no. 1560).

8 "Non oportet autem quod unus acceptet alium ad hoc quod sit eius amicus antequam unus appareat alteri amandus et credatur ita esse", *In Eth.* 8. 4 (nr. 1582).

9 See H. DÖRNEMANN: *Freundschaft*, 87-104, 176-185.

10 Aristotle says that friendship between unequal partners is possible through a proportional process; see NE 8.8 (1158b23-28); *In Eth.* 8.8 (no. 1630). If someone gives what they can, with all their ability, the equality that is important for a friendship can be established even between unequal partners: if a person loves God with their whole heart and believes, lives, and acts out of their love. This describes the community made possible by God and the living exchange (*communicatio*) that is the basis of a friendship with God. God's prior love, made visible in his creation and incarnation and his sacrifice, precedes our response. But God does not justify us without us. We can perceive his love and accept his offer of friendship.

In fact, recent research on Thomas¹¹ has shown that, in his soteriology, in the third part of the ST, Thomas integrates the explanatory models of “merit”, atonement/satisfaction”, “sacrifice”, and “redemption” given to him by tradition into the more comprehensive model of “efficiency”. For, in contrast to the other models, the instrumental causal efficiency of Jesus’s humanity (see ST III, q. 48, a. 6; q. 64, a. 3) is more general and formal, encompasses the other models, and thus evaluates the salvific significance of the entire life of Jesus, of Christ’s humanity as a whole, so that a rash and too short-sighted interpretation of individual salvific moments of Christ’s life is avoided.

The term “instrument” does not give rise to any forensic-judicial associations from the outset, because it already implies an effect specific to this instrument: In a freedom-giving spiritual contact (*contactus spiritualis*),¹² the instrument uniquely connected to God (*instrumentum coniunctum Divinitatis*)¹³ enables humans to relate to it freely, that is, to respond in faith and love. The instrument uniquely connected to God (the humanity of Jesus) becomes efficient in the way that divine and human activity intertwine, that is, where the active sign of God (in faith and love) is understood and received.

In this salvation as a living love of friendship, we are able to become fully good and fulfilled persons. And just as Aristotle can say for the interpersonal sphere that mutual benevolence between friends is “easy” (*facile*),¹⁴ “better” (*melius*), and “with more pleasure and alacrity” (*delectabilius et promptius*) than *ceteris paribus* between strangers,¹⁵ Thomas now uses the same words in the ST to describe our friendship with God: in the friendship with God, a person’s highest possible action, which in a sense infinitely exceeds their natural powers, becomes “easy” (*facile*) and “with promptitude and pleasure” (*prompte et delectabiliter*).¹⁶ “For God with his omnipotent power could have restored human nature in many other ways.”¹⁷ But just as it is “fitting” for Aristotle that one friend finds happiness through another or attains bliss in a spiritual communion with a friend,¹⁸ Thomas uses the same term to describe the way of salvation as “most fitting” (*convenientissimus*) (see ST III, q. 1, a. 1ff.).

11 See H. KESSLER: “Christologie”, in: T. SCHNEIDER (ed.): *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, vol. 1, Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewald, 2022, 361-365.

12 “Per spiritualem contactum efficaciam sortitur: scilicet per fidem et fidei sacramenta”, ST III, q. 48, a. 6 ad 2.

13 See ST III, q. 48, a. 6; q. 64, a. 3.

14 See *In Eth.* 9.9 (no. 1897).

15 See *In Eth.* 9.9 (no. 1889).

16 See ST I-II q. 107, a. 4.

17 “Deus enim per suam omnipotentem virtutem poterat humanam naturam multis aliis modis reparare”, ST III, q. 1, a. 2.

18 See NE 9.9 (1169b8-10), resp. *In Eth.* 9.9 (no. 1888); NE 9.9 (1169b16-22), resp. *In Eth.* 9.9 (no. 1891); NE 9.9 (1170b10-17), resp. *In Eth.* 9.9 (no. 1911).

5. *Thomas Aquinas: Common Doctor in Today's Theological Debate*

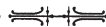
These key thoughts indicate that the understanding of friendship can be used as an explanatory model for the interpretation of Thomas's doctrine of salvation as a whole. In my teaching work at the Institute of Anthropology in Rome, the preceding thoughts have a double meaning: on the one hand, it is about protecting, promoting, and enabling people to enter into self-determined mutual relationships of friendship,¹⁹ ultimately also friendship with God. And on the other hand, it also uses the model of God's love of friendship to see again and again the standard in which God's love leads us to our best selves.

In this, the understanding of friendship has significance for the present and is above all a revolutionary idea of Aristotle's reception in the Middle Ages. Also, it is one that makes possible the explanation of the doctrine of salvation for our times from an anthropological perspective, which once again proves Thomas Aquinas to be a Common Doctor in today's theological and philosophical debate.

SUMMARY

Thomas Aquinas: Soteriology as a Doctrine of Friendship

On the occasion of the 750th anniversary of the death of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the author highlights a central theme of Thomas Aquinas's main work, the *Summa Theologiae*. By presenting the inclusion of Aristotle's doctrine of friendship in the most influential theological Summa of the Middle Ages, it becomes clear how the understanding of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, borrowed from the contemporary philosophical context, can be identified as a key architectural idea of the soteriology of the "Common Doctor". It can also be seen how, for Thomas, friendship with God is not only the result, but also the "fitting", even "most fitting", way of salvation itself. A central form of thought also emerges from today's perspective: the doctrine of salvation in Christianity can be developed from an anthropological perspective and forms of interpersonal relationships, marriage and partnership, can be understood in close connection with this.



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19 See H. DÖRNEMANN: "Eheliche Liebe als 'größte Freundschaft' (AL 123): Die Vielfalt heutiger Partnerschafts- und Lebensformen und die Perspektive einer Gradualität in der Seelsorge", in: *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 23/2 (2017), 192-198.