

The Path to Self-Knowledge

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# Three Homilies

## *1. The Path to Self-knowledge*

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Eamonn Conway

‘And some seed fell into rich soil, and growing tall and strong, produced crop’ (Mk 4:1-20). A saint’s life is like the seed which found rich soil and produced a great harvest. Today we recall the seed which fell on very fertile soil indeed in a small village ironically called Roccasecca (dry rock) near Aquino in Italy in 1225, the spiritual and intellectual fruit of which still nourishes the life of the Church.

Thomas was a mendicant priest. He joined the Dominican Order at the age of nineteen, against his family’s wishes. Why did he choose this radical life-style of self-denial? Perhaps because he was convinced that his first love was and would remain God. Because he wished to give his life to seeking God. Every decision of consequence is also an in-cision, a cutting off, a leaving aside, often of people and things which are good in themselves, in pursuit of a greater good. Thomas made such a decision. He cut himself off, from family, from marriage, from wealth and possessions. This is hard for us to understand. We live in a time when priesthood and religious life are largely discredited, even among many who still value Christianity. In part this is because some priests and religious have not been able to live up to their commitments. Priesthood has also lost some credibility because it is open only to unmarried men. But that is not the whole story as to why priesthood and religious life are unpopular. In fact, arguably, these issues only scratch the surface. And when we get beneath the surface do we not find that many people, perhaps including ourselves, really doubt the value of a life-long commitment? Would we not prefer if all our decisions and choices were revisable? Does not the language of renunciation, self-sacrifice, self-denial, even among Christians, now sound old-fashioned and outmoded in our ‘high-tech, high-spec’ world? Does not the very idea of

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putting oneself out for the love of God seem not only ridiculous but somehow extreme and even a little perverse?

Some day women and married people may be ordained. That that day has not yet come does not take from the value or the importance of those who can and do commit themselves radically for the sake of the Gospel. And if that day comes it will not make life-long commitment, renunciation and self-denial any easier or more attractive. The question, then, that St. Thomas's freely chosen way of life puts to each one of us is: how much of ourselves, here and now, in the limited circumstances in which we live, are we prepared to put on the line, for the love of God and the sake of the Gospel? Have we the courage to commit ourselves? And to those of us who have committed ourselves, are we committed enough so that others find through us the courage to 'leave all and follow him'?

Thomas was not only a mendicant priest. He was also a theologian. He produced most of his work over a period of twenty years and died aged forty-nine. His achievement is that he brought and held together very different worlds. For example, he brought Christianity into conversation with the Greek world as represented by Aristotle. This in turn enabled him to overcome false dichotomies such as those proposed between faith and reason, the human and the religious, the spiritual and the intellectual, and no doubt, if he had been on the faculty of a place like All Hallows rather than Paris, he would have bridged the gap between experience and research, between the pastoral and the academic. One could take as Thomas's motto, *contemplata aliis tradere*, to hand on the fruits of contemplation. To contemplate ... to chew over, to enjoy and endure, to struggle with before God. For Thomas theology wasn't really about solving problems, whether personal, social or ecclesial. It certainly wasn't about passing examinations in order to get a job. It was more a meditation done in the presence of God. It was a way of honouring God by using the intellect, itself God's gift, in search of truth. Can we imagine Thomas, by candlelight, piecing together the jigsaw pieces of this great love story between God and humanity? Even in a world of photocopiers, handouts and PCs, study remains a solitary and lonely activity. Genuine study is also a risky activity because it forces us beyond the cosy confines of our own limited minds and hearts and exposes us to the wisdom and insights of others who teach us to think and think again. We can learn a lot about ourselves when we take the risk of studying, not least how little we know.

So what can we learn here from St Thomas? Just as we can lose confidence in priesthood and religious life, we can also lose confidence in study and particularly in theological study. This has

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happened to many priests who found that the particular kind of theology they learned in the seminary nourished neither their own faith nor that of others. But there still is no substitute for theology in the life of a priest or a minister. As priests and ministers our business has first and foremost to do with God. How can we do that business with integrity if we are not in love with God and have not stretched our minds and hearts to their fullest in pursuit of knowledge of God? Theology, of course, is also the surest path to self-knowledge because to stand before God is also to stand before ourselves.

St Thomas: mendicant priest and theologian. We also think of St. Thomas as a mystic. This does not mean he had privileged knowledge of God. All it means is that he recognized God's fingerprints in the most ordinary of circumstances and events. And that this recognition of God in human experience overflowed into prayer and study. So what would Thomas the mystic have to say to us today? I imagine he would say to us: help people to learn how to pray and how to study. He would probably say something else. Knowing his abhorrence of false dichotomies I imagine he would have cautioned against any divorce between theology and spirituality. Today we sometimes hear people saying yes to one and no to the other. They wish to study theology in a way which involves no faith commitment. Or they wish to study spirituality which demands no intellectual commitment. Take the first of these: theology without spirituality. Is it possible to study theology without at least some faith? The strange thing is that God seems to be found only in the very act of surrender to God. And what of a spirituality without theology? Is it not like the seed which fell on rocky ground 'where it found little soil and sprang up straightaway, because there was no depth of earth, and when the sun came up it was scorched and, not having roots, it withered away.'

'And some seed fell into rich soil, and growing tall and strong, produced crop.' St Thomas, mendicant priest, theologian and mystic. His life yielded thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold. To be here in a place such as All Hallows, to be free to pray, reflect and study, is a great privilege. The sower who planted that seed some 750 years ago in Roccasecca near Aquino is still sowing seeds. May we be grateful for that. And may our most profound act of gratitude be to provide a seed-bed rich in soil which we tirelessly and intelligently till.