

THIS ARTISTRY OF TRANSLATION

Kevin Vost, *The One-Minute Aquinas*. Manchester: Sophia, 2014.

When passing from one language to another, translators have to make choices, and—all too often—words once rich with ambivalence and steeped with meaning are rendered with flat denominations, utterly lifeless and vacuous. Scripture scholars have made an industry of pointing out just how much can be lost in translation. *Traduttore, traditore*. To translate is to betray. And the experience is not just limited to the written medium. How many times have we heard someone remark: “Oh, the book is much better than the movie!” And yet, despite our acknowledgement of the limitations of translation, we continue to do it. Part of the motivation is the money to be had, most painfully evidenced by the division of *The Hobbit*, a three-hundred page book, into three (count them, three) movies. And yet, despite the Marxist temptation to leave it at that, there’s more to the question. We translate to make available the inexhaustible riches that we have discovered with difficulty. The movie producer makes the candid recognition that all will not read the book, but yet it is worthy of a wider audience. To that end, he translates the written word to speech, gesture, lighting, music, motion, and staging; hoping to capture, transpose, and (in some rare cases) amplify the truth and beauty of the original composition. The artist is a translator and his task is lofty.

Theology shares in this artistry of translation. Rather than translating from Latin to English or from script to cinema, the theologian is called by God to translate the divine wisdom into human words. Though he stands before the super-intelligibility of the Almighty as an owl before the noon-day sun, this in no way mitigates the fact that man can come to know something of God, by his gracious assistance, and can communicate this knowledge

to his contemporaries and subsequent generations. St. Thomas was just such an artist. By a generous participation in God's intelligible light, he gazed deeply into the mysteries of the faith and scrutinized the manifest presence of God in the world around him. With the assiduous determination of a true soldier, he penned tome after tome in an effort to expose God's deep intelligibility—giving sound doctrine to teachers, solid food to contemplatives, and glory to the most high God. Unfortunately, by a confluence of factors, his light does not shine as brightly as it ought in the present day, and for that reason, he himself stands in need of translators.



LOVE LEADING THE PILGRIM — EDWARD BURNE-JONES

Kevin Vost's most recent foray into Thomistic translation provides just such a help. In its most popular translation, the *Summa Theologica* numbers over 3,000 pages. Beyond mere length, it doesn't always admit of easy access. For the catechist giving a talk on Christ, it can be difficult to sift the fifty-nine questions on the Incarnation, hypostatic union, and the mysteries of Christ's life in search of the perfect content for a forty-five minutes presentation. Add to that, the somewhat specialized vocabulary of Aristotelian natural philosophy and metaphysics, the initially difficult structure of scholastic argumentation, and the bevy of subordinated clauses and prepositional phrases, and voilà: for some, it is just easier not

to try. What Vost has done is to employ the artistry of a translator to render St. Thomas's master-work eminently accessible to students of every walk of life. Like Josef Pieper before him, Vost has brought St. Thomas into the realm of contemporary plain-speak and, in so doing has compromised nothing of the rigor and vigor of the Angelic Doctor. *The One-Minute Aquinas: The Doctor's Quick Answers to Fundamental Questions* is a compact rendering of the key insights from the *Summa Theologica*, divided into small enough portions as to be readily digestible. Vost takes each treatise in St. Thomas's master work, and reduces it to a short chapter without adornment, skillfully abbreviated to incorporate only the most essential distinctions from each section. In so doing, he cleaves to the intention of St. Thomas's original inspiration for "instructing beginners" without an undue "multiplication of arguments." And so, while to some it may seem a violence to reduce the treatise on justice (sixty-six questions and almost three hundred pages in translation) to a mere five pages, he is able to maintain a sense of scope and proportion which affords the reader a representative sampling of what matters most. Students of St. Thomas often find that it can take time to enter into his thought world, but that once done successfully, his reasoning and insights begin to register with a connatural fit. The genius of Vost's work is that it expedites this initiation and saves the student a few classes in Aristotelian philosophy without attenuating St. Thomas's theology.

Besides penning very readable prose, Vost also breaks up the progression by what he terms "Dumb Ox Boxes." In these delightful intermissions, he attends to less important questions that are nonetheless interesting for today's reader: drinking, science, devotion to the saints, and distraction in prayer all receive brief but helpful treatment in these snippets. In the spirit of a true artist, he has even adapted St. Thomas's doctrine to the curiosity-driven-point-and-click tendencies of the current culture, using it as a vehicle to draw the reader deeper in love for the Thomistic approach to God and reality.

Vost's area of expertise is psychology, and so, quite understandably, he expresses a preference for the morals section of the *Summa* (the sizeable Second Part). In fact, the Second Part played a significant role in his own conversion. After having fallen away from the faith in his teens, Vost rediscovered his faith in his forties, in large part due to his research on the treatise on prudence (q. 47-56). Thus, for Vost (as he explains in a delightful footnote), the morals section was his entrée into what became a veritable odyssey into the thought of St. Thomas. Subsequently he read in the First Part (God, creation, angels, and man) and the Third Part (Christ and the sacraments) and discovered therein a whole vision of God and man: "So although it took me twenty-five years, regaining my faith, with the grace of God and the *Summa Theologica*, was as easy as II, I, III!" Modeling the book on his own path of discovery, Vost arranges *The One-Minute Aquinas* in just that order, beginning with the Second Part and only subsequently moving to the First and Third Parts.

While I understand his reasons for doing so, this gives occasion to one of my only criticisms of the book. St. Thomas was deliberate in arranging the *Summa* as he did and for that reason, the order should be treated as on par with content in its genius. In the prologue, St. Thomas states that one of his reasons for writing was to arrange sacred doctrine in the "order of the subject matter" and not simply according to the somewhat haphazard plan of the theological manuals that preceded him. For this reason, St. Thomas situates the study of morals in between his treatises on God/creation and Christ/sacraments. With this framing, man's return to God is strategically positioned between, on the one hand, the nature of the Godhead in whose image we share by our intellect and will; and, on the other hand, the nature and life of Christ, in whose humanity and grace (disbursed in the sacraments) we are redeemed and reconciled to the Father. Thus, the treatment of the virtues in the Second Part only attains to its full dignity in light of its cause and end. It also appears that Vost has employed some confused language in his description of the intra-Trinitarian life

(170-1) and of the coordination of the divine and human intellects and wills in Christ (205-6). And yet, these criticisms are minor and do not detract from the overwhelming merit of the book as an apologetic tool and helpful entry into the contemplative wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas.

And with that, I commend to your reading this excellent book. For those who have “despaired of comprehending the most brilliant theologian who ever lived,” *The One-Minute Aquinas* extends its hand as a companion in the dark wood. For in an age in which the way of faith and reason has most certainly been lost to us, we stand in greatest need of one who has traced with artful intelligence the lineaments of the divine wisdom and who offers to us a holy teaching fit for the refutation of error and the contemplation of the most high God.

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