

GIRDED WITH GRACE

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THE TEMPERANCE OF ST. THOMAS

St. Thomas Aquinas is well known as the Angelic Doctor, the Universal Doctor, and the Patron of Catholic Schools. Lesser-known, however, is his title “Lily of Innocence.” Joining the Dominican Order against the wishes of his parents, St. Thomas was captured and imprisoned by his own blood-brothers to discourage his aspirations to this newly-founded order. When St. Thomas remained steadfast in his Dominican vocation, his brothers devised a plan to attack his religious vocation much closer to its core. One day, they sent a prostitute into St. Thomas’s cell thereby tempting him to sexual sin that could destroy his vocation. His response is as surprising as it is well known—St. Thomas chased her out of the room with a flaming timber from the fireplace; afterwards, he was ministered to by angels, who gave him a heavenly cincture of purity.

St. Thomas Aquinas is an authority on chaste living not only because of his brilliance and wisdom but also as a result of his heroic personal virtue, attested to by this story from his early years and also by the fact of his canonization. His wisdom will first help situate the virtue of chastity in the context of the more general virtue of temperance; second, it will be used to chart a way out of the illness of unchaste living.

In chapter nine of his work, *Liber de Perfectione Spiritualis Vitae*, or “A Book on the Perfection of the Spiritual Life,” St. Thomas Aquinas explains an interesting phenomenon: He says, “Now the more the flesh is pampered, by superabundance of food,



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and by softness of life, the more will its concupiscence increase.” A foray into the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas’s most popular and mature work, will help explain this phenomenon.

The virtue of temperance is part of a larger class of virtues called “moral virtues.” As St. Thomas explains, “it belongs properly to moral virtue to moderate those passions which denote a pursuit of the good” (*STh* II-II, q. 141, a. 3). The moral virtues sort through the jumble of knee-jerk reactions, emotions, feelings, and passions within us, allowing timely and appropriate passions their due attention and leaving the rest aside, choosing the course of action that will lead to our fulfillment and avoid the self-destruction of sin.

More specifically, the virtue of temperance “is properly about pleasures of food and drink and sexual pleasures” (*STh* II-II, q. 141, a. 4). It is a mistake to regard these as inherently evil desires that should be beaten down after the manner of riot police subduing a violent gang; to the contrary, St. Thomas explains that these are “the most natural operations” since food and drink preserve the individual person, and sex preserves mankind. These desires are normal and healthy parts of the human experience—however, “all things have their season,” says Qoheleth.

A person whose only rule of life is to do whatever he or she feels like doing at all times is on a path of self-destruction, and this is abundantly clear regarding both of the above-mentioned aspects of the virtue of temperance. To be convinced of this truth, one only needs to approach a buffet line on an empty stomach; for most, this awakens a strong desire, a kind of Cookie Monster within, and the desire has the single goal of eating food without much reference to quantity or timeliness. At this, an intemperate person says nothing but an unqualified “yes” and eats much more than was actually necessary to satisfy hunger; thus, the person degrades himself by allowing this desire to become a sole measure of action with no regard to reason and common sense.

Choosing to eat this way over and over leaves a person stuck with the vice of intemperance—a vice which they implicitly embraced—and crafts an intemperate person. Habitual excess in food clearly abuses the body, but it also threatens the soul, since after mankind’s fall in original sin, our cracked and fissured passions are no longer sure guides on the narrow way of Christian life but rather, alas, often lead to sin and excess when they are taken as absolute guides, and “the wages of sin is death,” says St. Paul.

Moreover, this is just as true concerning the other aspect of the virtue of temperance—regulation of sexual pleasure. A virtue is absolutely vital in this regard, for a person who indulges in every sexual desire has adopted a program of self-destruction. In general, chastity causes one to indulge in sexual desire only at the

fitting time; in the concrete, chastity means something different for the single person and the married person. For example, the married person has exactly one sexual partner—his or her spouse. Furthermore, in the words of *Humanae Vitae*:

Responsible parenthood is exercised by those who prudently and generously decide to have more children, and by those who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time (*HV* 10).

Married couples are called to live out the fruitfulness of conjugal love in a way that is both open and prudent.

Following this wisely-charted path in any state of life or vocation involves working with (and sometimes working against) our passions and emotions; this requires prudence and self-control, again necessitating the virtue of temperance, particularly that of chastity. Keeping one's eating and sexuality in proper rule to promote authentic and abiding human flourishing and happiness, the moral virtue of temperance enables the man or woman who possesses it to freely and easily choose the path of wisdom. This virtue brings order to the emotions and feelings at work within us and is an important part of the conversion of life to which all are called.

Furthermore, this virtue teaches us that conversion is not only about a change of behavior or the imposition of new laws on our everyday life—though change and law are certainly part of conversion. Temperance also involves the shaping of our very reasons for action, and the imprinting of wisdom on our passions and emotions. Though we all live with the effects of original sin, Jesus seeks to redeem every last part of us, from the highest to the base, with his sanctified humanity as the instrument of our redemption.

We could look to popular culture for examples of widespread defects in the virtue of temperance. Regarding the first aspect of this virtue, there is the phenomenon of “all-you-can-eat” buffet restaurants. Let us not judge the consciences of American diners, but one must wonder if the appeal of a practically unlimited amount of food available for consumption is really the presentation of an opportunity to eat a perfectly temperate and reasonable amount of food, or rather the base pleasure of casting the guidance of reason to the wayside and taking no rule other than the Cookie Monster within.

With reference to the second aspect of the virtue of temperance, the widespread practice of unchaste behavior among the young is well known and even acceptable and encouraged in some circles; this malady is clearly a problem of intemperance. This self-destructive behavior is often the norm and has created a culture of intemperance—indeed, the excess has become the standard. Young people are inculturated into this environment and formed by it, left affected for a lifetime with deformed understandings of love, sexuality, and relationships. The sad but inevitable outcome of this lifestyle is an inability to rightly order, affirm, or deny the various emotions and desires that come with everyday life.

MEDIEVAL SOLUTIONS TO A PERENNIAL PROBLEM

The problem is evident. What is the solution? In his *De Perfectione*, St. Thomas gives a surprising answer: “The first and chief remedy [against obstacles to chastity] is to keep the mind busied in prayer and in the contemplation of divine things.” This is a tall order, particularly in a society in which day-to-day life usually includes a bombardment from advertisers and the media with material that does little to foster “the contemplation of divine things.” One isn’t even spared by staying home, but rather all the more dangerously exposed, thanks to the Internet.

The “contemplation of divine things” is so difficult today because society has given us another form of contemplation, or rather an anti-contemplation that clouds the heart and drags down the flesh. The wages of sin is death. Here in the *De Perfectione*, St. Thomas quotes the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians: “And do not get drunk on wine, in which lies debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another [in] psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts” (Ephesians 5:18-19). Chastity is not simply a fight over actions—it’s a fight for the inner man, for Christ’s reign in our heart of hearts, and a call to follow St. Paul’s advice to avoid intemperance and be filled with the Holy Spirit, keeping the mind busy with our hearts in song.

St. Thomas was aware that a renewal of the inner man implies a renewal of the outer man. As a religious, St. Thomas was assisted in the pursuit of virtue by laws given to him by his superiors, his rule, and the Dominican constitutions. The cumulative wisdom of generations upon generations of religious made it clear that such guidelines for conduct were of great assistance. The life of the friars includes the practice of both fasting and abstinence. The former limits how much food is eaten, the latter what kinds.

These penitential practices, necessary for the Christian life, also assist us in the pursuit of the virtue of temperance. As St. Thomas said earlier, overindulgence in food leads to an increase in concupiscence. Fasting and abstinence greatly assist the life of virtue—especially the virtue of chastity—by helping a Christian build the habit of allowing grace, Divine wisdom, and reason to guide his conduct rather than the fleeting (and often destructive) impulses of passions and emotions. Thus, if someone wishes to grow in chastity, prudently practicing fasting and abstinence can help keep the emotions in right order and allow wisdom to rule the day. Growth in one aspect of temperance disposes us to growth in another.

Another reason for the guidelines given by Dominican religious life is quite simple and can be explained by quoting an exhortation given to the reader of the *De Perfectione* by St. Thomas. St. Thomas

reminds the Christian that he or she must be mindful of his or her own weakness; indeed, as St. Thomas writes (citing St. Jerome), “how fragile is the vessel.” Though the Christian is strong in Christ, he or she must at the same time never lose awareness of man’s utter weakness and poverty apart from Christ. Thus, when St. Thomas warns that “the practice of continence is impeded by sight,” or when, in his own lifetime, the Dominican superiors of Rome warn the friars to refrain from “hearing confessions of women in our churches at night,” the goal is not terror in the face of ordinary day-to-day life but rather a humble awe before our weakness and our need for the grace of Christ.

Even though these norms were intended for St. Thomas and his fellow Dominican friars, the deeper wisdom contained is perennial and helpful for anyone—living chastely requires practical, common-sense safeguards. Indeed, anyone wishing to grow in chastity must not reduce their method to mere wishes and half-hearted promises—as St. Paul says, “the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.” In all honesty and truth, the person aspiring to more perfect chastity should both pray for this grace and also change the habits and patterns of their day-to-day lives to avoid occasions of sin and enjoy the true freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

St. Thomas Aquinas is an authority on the virtue of chastity. His teaching illumines the path of virtue by situating the virtue of chastity within the larger virtue of temperance, showing that both chastity and temperate eating involve the pursuit of wise and ordered living by affirming or refusing to act upon the various desires of one’s daily life. In addition, St. Thomas advises his hearers to contemplate lovingly divine truth rather than that which gives death. Finally, as a religious—but as anyone should be—he was aware of his status as a fragile vessel and the need to take practical and prudential safeguards to preserve his purity.

In our present age, the wisdom of St. Thomas is perhaps more necessary than ever, not only because of the difficulty of living

chastely in today's culture, but also due to the unique approach taken by St. Thomas; rather than just telling those pursuing chastity to "try harder," he shows the interconnection of the virtues within every Christian and urges the importance of prayer. Every triumph of reason and prudence ordering an otherwise wayward passion (whether it concerns food and drink, sexual pleasure, or anything else) positively influences a person's whole manner of life and his or her habits, thus making prudence a subconscious and joyful rule of life.

Under the auspices of the Dominican Order, there is today a sacred brotherhood committed to this pursuit of chastity and purity. Bound together by that same heavenly cincture given to St. Thomas on his day of triumph over temptation, the members of the Angelic Warfare Confraternity, following their enrollment, likewise wear a cord or medal in imitation of their chaste patron and, as with one voice, offer prayers daily for themselves and for all the men and women of the Confraternity. Thus, leaving behind mere talk, they choose to clothe themselves with that same mark of St. Thomas's chastity, begging that their purity may be as constant as the cord that they never remove. With St. Thomas Aquinas as a heavenly patron and with mutual intercession, may all Christians together grow in imitation of Christ, "from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love."

For more information about the Angelic Warfare Confraternity or to seek membership, visit www.angelicwarfare.org.

Louis Bertrand Lemoine entered the Order of Preachers in 2010.