

## “Come and See”

### St Thomas’s teaching on our encounter with Christ

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Why is it that some people accept Christ as the Son of God and their Savior and others do not? Why is it that some respond to evangelization and others do not? Certainly sometimes inadequate knowledge or unpersuasive arguments make an evangelizer ineffective. Sometimes the evangelizer’s own life is not a model of what he is preaching. But when Christ is the evangelizer, none of these negatives could possibly apply. Is there any explanation why some convert when they are invited to “Come and see” and others do not?

Aquinas uses an Aristotelian principle to shed light on this question. Many readers might be surprised to discover how great an influence Aristotle had on Aquinas in his commentaries on scripture, but one cannot read far into the *Commentary of Aquinas on the Gospel of John* without seeing the influence of Aristotle everywhere. One extremely important view shared by Aristotle and Aquinas is their understanding that by nature the human person is designed to be receptive to the truths of reality; in Aquinas’s terms, God gave man the equipment to grasp the truths he needs to know - both universal and particular truths. The mistakes we make in reading reality, that is the reality accessible to us, are because of defects - such as defects in our senses, our intelligence, and - what will be the focus of this paper - also our character.

A fundamental principle of Aquinas’ thought is that “everything is received in the manner of the receiver.” In respect to physical reality, this principle seems quite uncon-

troversial. Among other things, it certainly means that we can hear only the sounds that are in the range of our auditory abilities; we can see only the colors in the range of our optical abilities, we can smell things only in the range of our olfactory abilities, and so forth. The range of all human beings is limited; there are more sounds, colors and smells than we can perceive by our senses; and the range of the abilities of individuals varies considerably. Even what is within our range as human beings, is perceived differently to some extent by particular human beings because of the quality of their senses. So, too, do the powers of our intellect limit what we can know about reality; those with higher IQs and sharper intellects can comprehend a greater range of information about the world.

But the principle is not limited only to our physical means and instruments for grasping physical reality and the quality of our intellects. Aristotle and Aquinas maintained that living a good moral life assists one in grasping reality; disorderly passions can distort one’s reading and response to reality and thus being moral, that is, having one’s passions ordered, assists one in perceiving reality correctly. Having our passions ordered not only calms us enough to allow us the peace and serenity to be truly responsive to realities before us, they also enhance our intellectual abilities or cognitive capacities, much as a pair of glasses restores order to our visual powers and enables us to see better. When our receptors of reality are in good shape we perceive reality better and thus have better data with which to think. Disordered desires warp our perception of reality and thus provide erroneous information to our intellects.

In his commentary on John’s Gospel Aquinas used these Aristotelian principles especially in his analysis of why certain individuals respond favorably to Christ and why others do not. Aquinas repeatedly notes that John presents those who

accept Christ’s message as those who are “well-disposed” (285), as those have the “proper intention” (289). Individuals of good moral character or at least moral honesty, benefit most from moral instruction and respond best to an encounter with grace. They “see” better than others what is in front of them. In fact, they are most readily converted to Christ.

One might think that the chief obstacle for immoral individuals in responding to Christ is the fact that his moral teachings are demanding, and thus sinners reject him because they do not want to change their ways.

Certainly, Aquinas’ *Commentary* makes clear that those who do not live a moral life cannot participate in the light of Christ because even should they be able to acknowledge the truth of His claims, they find Him and His message unappealing. (101) As true as that is, what I want to emphasize is that some reject Christ not because his message is too strange or even because of the command to abandon sinful ways. Rather I want to stress that the vicious are quite unable to get a sure read on who Christ is: vice clouds the intellect and prevents us from seeing what is to be seen, from hearing what is to be heard; goodness, on the other hand, enhances our receptivity to truth.

Throughout his commentary Aquinas certainly speaks of the limitations of man’s intellect for grasping the divine, but he also stresses the limiting power of man’s sinfulness. He allows that the phrase “the world did not know him” could be understood to refer to “inordinate lovers of the world.” He draws upon Augustine and the letter of James to underscore the point:

Augustine says ... [Love of the world is] what chiefly withdraws us from the knowledge of God, because “Love of the world makes one an enemy to God” (Jas 4:4); “The sensual man does not perceive the things that pertain to the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:14) (see also 182)

Here the reference is largely to pagans who refuse to acknowledge the existence of God but it also refers to those who reject Christ because of their sinfulness - and again, they reject not just His message but they fail to perceive who He is. The *Gospel of John* illustrates this truth through stories followed by explicit statements of Christ that reinforce the same truth; statements that speak of sheep who can hear their shepherd's voice, and those who have eyes to see and ears to hear being able to respond to His message. Late in the Gospel, after lengthy teachings and many miracles, John remarks that many Jews still did not believe in Christ. Aquinas explicitly tells us that they could not believe because of their wickedness (and this was not an anti-Semitic statement; that is, he was not suggesting that all Jews are wicked).

Here I would like to demonstrate Aquinas's concern with this topic by looking at his commentary on several of John's stories of Christ's personal encounters with others. Aquinas makes much of the moral condition of those whom Christ encounters and shows that Christ interacts differently with individuals of different moral conditions; in several early encounters, we see him moving from interacting with those who seem exceptionally good to those who are still living in a state of serious sin. We see that either goodness and/or willingness to recognize one's sinfulness is necessary for successful conversion.

All the encounters involve the words "Come and see" which emphasize that faith involves a personal encounter of some kind; it requires immediacy and some ability to see.

The first conversion story is told very briefly and indirectly; John tells us that two men became disciples of Christ upon by hearing John's testimony about Christ at his baptism. Aquinas notes that not everyone who was witness to the Baptism converted, but only those who were "well-disposed." (285) In response to their question "Where do you live?" Christ first utters the words "Come and see."

## The sensual man does not perceive the things that pertain to the Spirit of God

Aquinas interprets Christ's response "Come and see" in the literal, mystical and moral way. In explicating the mystical Aquinas notes that Christ asks the disciples to "Come and see" "because the dwelling of God, whether of glory or grace, cannot be known except by experience; for it cannot be explained in words. "Come" means "believe and work", "see" means "experience and understand". Aquinas explains that we can come to know God in four ways; 1) by doing good works 2) by rest or stillness of the mind; 3) by tasting the divine sweetness; and 4) by acts of devotion. (293)

Andrew, who heard these words, immediately goes to get his brother Simon, to bring him to see Christ. Aquinas, who regularly remarks on the moral condition of those who respond favorably to Christ, tells us that the name "Simon" means "obedient" (303) Aquinas tells us that Christ wins over Simon by revealing hidden knowledge to him — he knew Simon's name, he knew his past, he knew his future; such was enough to convert Simon.

We see fuller dynamics in the conversion of Nathanael, an encounter remarkably parallel to that with Simon for Christ also knows hidden things about Nathanael, but such is not sufficient for his conversion. Aquinas's reflection on the conversion of Nathanael (lectio 16) again reflects his interest in the condition of the convert as a partial explanation of the conversion. First he tells us that the name "Nathanael" means "gift of God — and it is "God's gift if anyone is converted to Christ." He tells us that Nathanael was someone learned in the law of Moses and the prophets. As we recall, Nathanael was skeptical

about Philip's claim that Jesus was the one Moses spoke of in the law, since he doubted that anything good could come out of Nazareth. Yet shortly thereafter, to Christ's apparent surprise and our own, Nathanael proclaims his belief in Christ simply because Christ tells him he saw him sitting under the fig tree.

Nathanael's approach to Christ followed upon Philip's invitation to "Come and see." Aquinas tells us that Philip knew that Nathanael "would no longer argue with him if he tasted the words and teaching of Christ." (319). And at this point Aquinas tells us that there are two ways by which men are converted to Christ. First some are converted "by miracles they have seen and things experienced in themselves or others." (320) Aquinas tells us that the way of miracles can be dangerous, because devils and those who receive their help can simulate miracles. It is the second mode of conversion that he identifies as "more efficacious" that of being "converted through internal insights, through prophecy and the foreknowledge of what is hidden in the future." Aquinas maintains that this is the mode of Nathanael's conversion — that he is converted because Christ makes things known which are hidden; things of three kinds — "things of the heart; past facts, and future heavenly matters" and that knowing these things is "not a human but a divine achievement."

What Christ knew of the heart of Nathanael is that he was a "true Israelite, in whom there is no guile." Aquinas seems to accept two explanations of this insight, both indicating that Nathanael was a righteous man or at least a man who knew he was a sinful man. Aquinas understands Christ's comment that Nathanael was under the fig tree in a symbolic way; he maintains that the fig tree represents sin and uses the fig tree that would produce no fruit and that fact that Adam and Eve used the leaves from a fig tree to hide their shame as proof for this understanding. He understands Christ to be calling



Nathanael away from sin and to be looking upon him with divine mercy, as one predestined from eternity. Again, to our and Christ's surprise Nathanael immediately pronounces Christ the Son of God. In an earlier passage (273) when Aquinas commented on the baptism of Christ where the Holy Spirit rested upon him, he states that the Holy Spirit will not rest on those in a state of sin, so it seems right to think that Nathanael, because of his lack of guile, his awareness of his own sinfulness, was a worthy recipient of the grace of conversion that Christ bestowed upon him. Yet, Nathanael was not chosen to be an apostle. Aquinas explains that Christ did not want the conversion of the world to the faith to be attributed to human wisdom, but solely to the power of God. And so he did not choose Nathanael as an apostle, since he was very learned in the law; he rather chose simple and uneducated men." (334). Again the point seems to be that education and sophistication are not key to recognizing Christ – goodness is.

The next conversion scene is that with Nicodemus. Christ tells Nicodemus he must be "born again" or he cannot see the kingdom of God. Aquinas explains that the sensual man cannot perceive those things that pertain to the spirit but that one needs spiritual regeneration and spiritual vision to see the kingdom of God (432). Aquinas understands Christ to chide Nicodemus, the sensual man, for his slowness in grasping that he is speaking about spiritual regeneration. He cites Corinthians 2:14: "The sensual man does not perceive those things that pertain to the "Spirit of God." And he comments further, "...so because Nicodemus was yet carnal and sensual, he was unable to grasp, except in a carnal manner, the things that were said to him". (437) Aquinas gives the fact of Nicodemus' sensual character as one of the three reasons for Nicodemus' slowness (462) – it stands in the way of his recognizing Christ. Since

Nicodemus is learned in Jewish law and should, therefore, be prepared to readily accept the statements of the wise and those who possess great authority, Aquinas finds his hesitancy especially reprehensible.

Because Nicodemus is more corrupt, he needs more teaching and indeed, we do not learn in this passage what is Nicodemus' ultimate response. As of yet, he is too attached to the flesh to understand Christ's spiritual message.

The next one-on-one encounter that Christ has is with the Samaritan woman at the well. Aquinas sees a progression here, a move from giving the message to the Jews to delivering it to the Gentiles. Again, the point is made that carnal and sensual creatures mistake Christ's message; the woman did not understand that Christ was speaking of spiritual water when He spoke of the living water He was able to give her. What Aquinas represents as her saving grace, was her willingness to admit what Christ accused her of – having many husbands and living with one who was not her husband. Upon hearing that Christ knows secrets about her, she recognizes that He is a prophet.(596) Aquinas admires the woman for continuing her questioning about where one should worship: "Here we should admire the woman's diligence and attention: for women are considered curious and unproductive, and not only unproductive, but also lovers of ease, whereas she did not ask Christ about world affairs, or about the future, but about the things of God..." (596) Aquinas tells us that Christ revealed himself to this woman because she truly wanted to know and because of her simplicity. She then exhibits what Aquinas takes to be a sign of a genuine conversion; she goes to find others and tells them to "come and see"; she needs to share the truth with others.

There are several other encounters and many other statements of Christ that involve the principle that the moral condition of those who encounter Christ is key to their

response to Him. This principle has practical consequences for those who would evangelize. Often evangelizers they think if they are not successful it is because the quality of the arguments or their witness was not powerful enough, but, indeed, as Aquinas's *Commentary* maintains, the explanation for failure could be in the condition of the recipient. Christ did a lot of teaching that fell on deaf ears – ears that were deaf largely because of the corruptness of the listener. Thus the evangelizer must frequently have recourse to prayer and sacrifice rather than argumentation for it is grace that is largely responsible for the moral conviction, the awareness of one's own sinfulness, that leads to contrition and correction. We should not conclude, of course, that whenever someone fails to respond to evangelical efforts, this proves that the individual is morally corrupt. Lack of intelligence or understanding and invincible ignorance may play a role and, certainly, there may be something off-putting about the evangelizer. The same principle leads us to conclude that prayer and sacrificing will not only help the recipient of those graces, but also the petitioner for the graces, for when we pray we improve our characters and thus become more disposed to "Come and see" the truth and to share it more effectively with others.

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