

Daily Meditation 03-18-24

Honoring Thomas Aquinas's Non-Dualism & Proto-Feminism

Good morning.

And Happy day-after-St.-Patrick's-Day to you. I am recording this on St. Patrick's Day. I'm wearing a "Vriditas Greening Power" shirt here, which is a Celtic favorite color. And of course, green is also the color of the fourth chakra, the chakra of love.

In today's meditation, I am responding to a question from an activist in the women's ordination movement, about giving her a reason to come to Orvieto, to study with us the work of Thomas Aquinas, this summer. And there's so much more to be said on this topic, than I was able to fit in today's meditation. And as I pointed out in my notes, I have 10 pages on this topic in the introduction to my major work, "Sheer Joy: Conversations with Thomas Aquinas on Creation Spirituality."

In many ways, Aquinas broke with the misogyny of his theological ancestors. For example, Augustine said that man, but not woman, is made in the image of God. And Aquinas said, men AND women are made in the image of God. And he talks about marriage, that friendship is at the heart of marriage. He talks about super-abundant love between men and women. He says,

"The greater the friendship, the more permanent it should be. The greatest friendship is that between man and wife." Friendship, he says, spells equality. Experience shows that women are treated like servants, in polygamy, as a rule -- but that humans are meant to treat each other as equals. And that this is a basis of politics and society as well. But he says, conjugal friendship is unique, he thinks, to the human species. I don't think he's right about that; other species express conjugal friendship. But at least he's underscoring this level of equality between husband and wife.

He says that there's a reason for education being at the center of parenting. And that this is the principal reason why a husband and wife commit to each other, for the sake of the children, and their education.

He praises Mary Magdalene for her boldness, and calls her a prophet and the Apostle of the Apostles, because she announced the Good News of the Resurrection. And he says, he marvels at her boldness, and so forth. So the husband/wife relationship is one of equality, not inequality.

On the other hand, there is what I call the clay feet of Aquinas on this topic. Remember that Aquinas says that "a mistake about Creation results in a mistake about God." And so that's why

he was so keen on listening to scientists. And in his day, Aristotle was a discovery that occurred in Europe, by way of Islam. Aristotle was being translated in Baghdad, on a regular basis, into Latin -- from Greek into Latin. And this was entering Europe, especially through Spain, where Islam was very strong.

And he follows a false biology of Aristotle, about how women are inferior, biologically, to men. And this is not to excuse Aquinas, but it is the only science he had. And of course, it was that attitude that spread, not only through Aristotelians, but through others. Remember, it was only in the 19th century that humanity discovered that women release the eggs for conception. It was felt that men did all the work with sperm, and that women were like a field receiving that seed.

So this confirms his point: that a mistake about Creation is also a mistake about God. It results in a mistake about understanding one another, male and female, also. So he followed Aristotle right down that one rabbit-hole. But at the same time, as I point out in my essay, he very much pursued the non-dualism that was in Aristotle's physics, as opposed to the dualism that was so much a part of Platonism and Neo-Platonism.

So again, I laid this all out in my book on "Sheer Joy." But there is so much more to say. And I say much of it, in my book "The Tao of Thomas Aquinas: Fierce Wisdom for Hard Times," where I share his teaching on celebrating "the wonderful communion of body and soul," those are his words. And he says that "what is truly human, is the fact that a person is not just soul, but a combination of body and soul." So he goes on to elaborate. And he says,

We have to cherish the body. Our body's substance is not from an evil principle, as the Manichaeans imagined, but from God. Therefore, we ought to cherish the body by the friendship of love, by which we love God.

Now Eckhart, who follows right after Aquinas and builds on him, says, "The soul loves the body." That's very different from Augustine having said, "the soul makes war with the body."

So all this adds up to an attitude that I think is proto-feminist, because it is a quest for non-dualism. And it was a quest Aquinas made for his entire adult life. And as I allude to, in my essay, he was condemned for it not once, not twice, but three times, after he died. Because he insisted on the consubstantiality, the equality of matter and spirit. And he refused to go along with Augustine's idea that "spirit is whatever is not matter." In fact, he says, spirit is élan, the vitality in all matter. And this is clearly a rupture with dualism, and a profound effort to move down a non-dualistic path. And that is, as Rosemary Ruether says, the path that feminism is committed to.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.