

The Traditional Virtues
According to St. Thomas Aquinas

The Traditional Virtues According to
S T . T H O M A S
A Q U I N A S

A Study for Men

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Gastonia, North Carolina

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“For the rest, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever modest, whatsoever just, whatsoever holy, whatsoever lovely, whatsoever of good fame, if there be any virtue, if any praise of discipline, think on these things.”

—Philippians 4:8

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Preface

About

THE “SWORD&SPADE” SERIES was born from a magazine by that name. That publication began as an attempt to give real men in the real world something worth reading and arguing about. We did not just want to produce more “content” to be consumed on the internet and discarded, but to offer something to actually help them escape the snares of the screen, develop a deeper wisdom in a shallow world, and connect the brilliant light of the traditional Catholic intellectual tradition with the gritty reality of men leading in their homes and communities.

There is a treasury of wisdom in our books, and it is only accessed by study and conversation. And there is a form of wisdom only learned through working, leading a home, and navigating a dangerous world. *Sword&Spade* brings those worlds—the libraries and the workshops—together. We borrowed one of Peter Maurin’s sayings, “every workingman a scholar and every scholar a workingman.”

In medieval times men linked their identities and vocations to the tools they used and the work they did. A trained soldier would be dubbed a knight by a sword. A blacksmith

would be declared a “master” and, like the knight, handed his tools as a useful badge of honor. We chose the tools of the sword and the spade to represent our duties and vocations as men. The sword is the tool of the warrior, and the spade is the tool of the farmer. The warrior wields the sword in the securing and protecting of the good, and the farmer works the spade in the cultivation and provision of the good. Yes, “God is a warrior” (Ex. 15:3), so we must war as He would have us war. But, also, “My Father is a farmer” (John 15:1 - *Pater meus agricola est*).

The Sword

Distracted and disarmed by sin and error, a man’s weaknesses become the door of disorder and demons. If he does not fight, his house falls alongside him. “[H]ow can any one enter into the house of the strong, and rifle his goods, unless he first bind the strong? and then he will rifle his house” (Matt. 12:29). We can’t let ourselves be bound by the flesh, the world, or the devil. We must fight.

The sword defends what must be defended and attacks what deserves attack. It is the strength unique to men applied to the fights unique to men. A good soldier keeps his sword sharp and ready. The careless and slothful make poor soldiers. Their weapons are dull, and their leadership is vain. The reckless soldier attacks the wrong things in the wrong ways—like Peter’s swipe at a guard’s ear—wasting time and strength, and perhaps causing further war. The cowardly soldier flees what he should face.

The true warrior is not merely violent, nor does he fight for fighting's sake. He does not fight what he hates but for what he loves. "For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places" (Eph. 6:12).

The soldier—the one who wields the sword—must learn both the ways of the enemy and the ways of heroes.

The Spade

Many would argue that the most important tool today is the sword because the fight has come to our door. In some ways I agree. But seeing the decimation of the family and Catholic culture in this modern era, I would argue that we are now in a time that desperately needs more men using the spade well, cultivating true and authentic households and communities rooted in the truth of our faith. I don't think we are really fighting a "culture war" at all, because it could be argued we don't even have a culture, which is a shared way of life in a particular place and time. Instead, there is an anti-culture, a consumerist and frenetic pseudo-culture that keeps us plugged in to the artificial and man-made while divorcing us from the things that give birth to true and Catholic culture, like nature, relationships, family, prayer, and God Himself.

If a man will fight for what he loves, he must also love well that for which he fights. Although a man must learn from the soldier, he must remember that after Adam's first work of being fruitful and multiplying, his next work was to till

and keep the garden, making it fruitful and multiplying. The spade is the tool that keeps the garden; it is the application of man's strength to the cultivation of his *domus*, his domain. A father fights to secure peace in his place, so that his children and community can flourish and grow toward their true ends. His sword is necessary, but he eagerly awaits its transformation into a tool of cultivation, an implement that "tills and keeps" the garden. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares" (Is 2:4 RSVCE).

Because the true end of all war—the wielding of the sword—is peace, a wise man must also learn to live peacefully and prudently in the domain of his vocation with the joy that comes from knowing he possesses good things. "Blessed are all they that fear the Lord: that walk in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labors of thy hands" (Ps. 127:1–2). A matured man, even and especially in times of chaos and disorder, regains peace in the spade, as Odysseus found his father toward the end of *The Odyssey* as peace and order were being restored:

Odysseus found his father in solitude
spading the earth around a young fruit tree.

On the other end of a sword is an enemy, but on the other end of a spade is life, which must be cherished and worked wisely. A farmer's work is very different from a soldier's. He does not cut down but prunes. He does not trample but cultivates. He takes no spoils but sows the seeds. He, therefore, must study and understand his surroundings so that his actions help his soil bear more fruit than it would have without him. This is a humble act that submits implicitly to

God, because by seeing and respecting the created nature of a thing, you respect the thing's Creator.

Yes, we will always need men capable of wielding the sword, but we must not neglect the work of cultivation, or planting, tending, leading, and guiding those for whom, by our vocation, we must care. This study of the virtues, I pray, will reinforce that truth. As Saint Thomas Aquinas shows us, a virtuous life requires that we fight away our enemies ruthlessly and tend the gifts of grace and life carefully. For that, we'll need both tools: the sword and the spade.

Introduction

Where This Study Can Take You

THIS STUDY WILL introduce you to some of the most profound, enduring, and challenging explanations of a good life, which is a virtuous life. The intent, however, is not just to know about the virtues, but to advance in virtue. We want to understand the virtues—the truth—in a way that pulls us out of empty expressions like “be yourself.” How can I “be myself” if I don’t know what the “self” is, what makes it tick, and what gives life to it or kills it? What does growth in virtue look like?

Synthesizing the thoughts presented in these pages, virtue is what brings us things that we know we lack: order and peace in our lives, substance and depth in our friendships, and a direction for living.

Yet, there is another desire that drives us. It is a desire that goes beyond even our hopes for good order, relationships, and direction. It is the reason behind everything we do. In fact, this one reason influences every action, habit, desire, dream, etc. At least, according to the most read and respected philosophers of all time (including Saint Thomas

Aquinas), the motive, reason, and inspiration lurking behind *everything* we do is this one word: *happiness*.

Happiness not only is the goal of our earthly existence but is our heavenly existence, as the Baltimore Catechism reminds us: “God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next.”¹ A man marries a woman because he thinks doing so will make him happy. He may also divorce her for the same reason. In such an example, however, we see that reaching toward happiness can lead to health or sickness, truth or error, life or death. The wise man, therefore, is the man who actually lives in a way that brings true and lasting happiness. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, the happy life is the virtuous life, which is a life that integrates a man within himself and within the world. Virtue isn’t a program or method, but the powers and potential of man brought to maturity, put in order, and enjoyed with others.

Many of us have an idea of what “virtue” means, and we’ve heard the word plenty of times. The secular world even kind of likes it. But this is where we must be careful. Some of the Church Fathers were actually wary of using the word *virtue* to describe “the good life,” because pagans used the word too without reference to Jesus Christ, Who is our way, truth, and life. Therefore, we need to make sure we’re thinking about virtue as *Catholic* men.

The disciplined, self-denying, and duty-bound life of virtue is one truly opposed to the life of self-discovery, self-fulfillment, and self-expression we grasp at today. This is the

¹ *Baltimore Catechism Two* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2010).

paradox Our Lord spoke of when He was on earth. He who seeks to lose his life will save it, and he who seeks to save it will lose it. To “lose” your life is to be virtuous because it is a total dedication to actual happiness. And, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, that happiness is God alone. There is nothing else. Everything—and I mean *everything*—comes down to this truth. You were made for God, and He alone is your perfect happiness.

Therefore, perhaps the most important correction to make about our idea of virtue is knowing that growing in virtue can never be seen as some worldly “self-improvement” program. To grow in virtue *might* have the side effect of making you a respected leader, more successful, or even more likeable. But it might not, and you might learn to treasure such things less as they are purified from a purely worldly motivation. To be happy, therefore, is to stop trying to make ourselves happy and to start seeking God above all. Happiness is God. This liberating truth does not make us careless and dismissive of the passing things in this life, but it does put them in order, perspective, and to good and true use.

Our Guide and Source: Saint Thomas Aquinas

There is no better guide to the virtues than Saint Thomas Aquinas, known as the Angelic Doctor, especially his work the *Summa Theologica*. The *Summa* is widely held as one of the most important Christian works of all time and is certainly one of the most quoted and studied texts in history. It is not only a summary and synthesis of Catholic thought, but it also takes the achievements of ancient and

pagan philosophers and brings them where they couldn't go by reason alone. Socrates was put to death in ancient Greece because he reasoned that there was only one God and not many. Yet, his reason could not know God fully as Trinity. We could say such men reached as far as possible by reason, and God reached down to bring us the rest of the way by revelation. Aquinas incorporates Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and others. Thus, the *Summa* represents the height of human potential and the goodness of a God that comes to meet us.

Pope Leo XIII said that, given how succinctly and thoroughly Aquinas summarized Christian thought and teaching, "he is rightly and deservedly esteemed the special bulwark and glory of the Catholic faith."² When the bishops from around the world convened at the Council of Trent to counter the new errors of Protestantism, they placed the *Summa* on the high altar alongside Sacred Scripture. This doesn't mean they thought it to be equal with Scripture as an infallible book, but that in presenting the truths of God contained in Sacred Scripture, especially when refuting errors, Aquinas is a sure guide and synthesizer of the broad and deep intellectual tradition of the Church.

Simply put, no teacher or theologian has been so confidently proposed by the Church as Saint Thomas Aquinas. And he is not merely a great mind—he is truly a saint. His heroic chastity, amazing intellect, and enduring faithfulness as a teacher, priest, and man is an inspiration. We do well to learn from so great a master, and to ask for his help. For this

² Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, 17.

reason, the summaries of Aquinas's thought are surrounded as well by prayers he composed.

The Context of Conversation

This thirty-week program is designed to facilitate understanding by study *and* conversation. Today we imagine “study” solely in terms of individual labor to learn, perhaps bracketed with an occasional lecture or internet video, usually for the purpose of profit or profession advancement. Yet, from Augustine to Aquinas to John Henry Newman to Chesterton, it is clear that we arrive at a clearer and deeper understanding of truth through face-to-face conversations, and that the purpose of shared study is to grow in wisdom for its own sake.

The word “conversation” comes from the Latin word *conversare*, which literally means “to turn around with,” but can mean to “live or dwell” with someone. Conversing, therefore, is what we do with those close to us, especially fellow Catholics, because what we turn over together in a conversation is truth—and I mean in-person, not through the mere “communications” of texts and emails. As the Thomistic philosopher Josef Pieper explains, the very purpose of a word is to give it to another in speech, and the very moment we come to understand and see something as true in the mind, the need for sharing it with others follows. “In the very attempt to know reality [the truth],” Pieper says, “there already is present the aim of communication. And . . . we may well presume at first that we are relating only to this one

person we are addressing at one time. Still, what do we talk *about*? Indeed, we can talk only about reality, nothing else.”³

My hope is that this book will be used within households and local communities amongst friends, strengthening those relationships through the shared love of truth.

Isaiah 1:18 has been a favorite verse for those engaged in the study of divine things. “Come let us reason together,” the verse says. The prophet Isaiah shows God eager to help man know Him better, which happens by a gradual process of heartfelt communication. God, of course, does not “learn”—He knows and sees all as in a moment. Still, dialogue with God and with others is required if we desire to grow in wisdom.

Some men erroneously view conversation as “just talk,” something fluffy or unnecessary. This is an error that contradicts our very tradition. Were the conversations between the Apostles “just talk”? No, even the most learned and ferocious readers know that individual study has great value, but to sharpen our minds, soften our hearts, and arrive at genuine self-knowledge, we need other people.

You will note, however, that I don’t provide “discussion questions” or “small group ideas.” While I understand such detailed instruction can sometimes be helpful, it can also feel artificial or create a sense that the sections are merely lessons to plow through like elementary worksheets. I am expecting and proposing that, especially in the case of those who rarely discuss and digest truth with others, the skill and

³ Josef Pieper, *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 16; emphasis in the original.

art of conversation will be a fruit of the study itself, and that the challenge to engage is a challenge to develop more substantial relationships. This will require a certain willingness, openness, and sincerity with the material and the person with whom you are studying.

Who Is This Study Meant For?

As the title suggests, this study is for men. The way it has been catered thus is by summarizing and presenting those parts of Aquinas's teaching on the virtues that are clearly applicable to the vocations and realities of masculinity. This is not to say most of the truth is not universal, and easily enjoyed by women as well, but we know well that there is a reason the devil tempted Adam and Eve separately, and why God also addressed them separately after they sinned (see Gen. 3). Sexual differences often require different approaches and emphasize different matters in the spiritual life.

While possible to do alone, I imagined two *groups* engaging with this material. The first is a father and son, sitting at a kitchen table, engaged together in the quest to be better men—sons, brothers, and fathers. My hope is that every son will be guided more fruitfully into manhood by recognizing that manliness and virtue are the same thing. While a father's silent example is crucial, his son has a unique need to be explicitly taught in the ways of manliness by his father. Fathers have a responsibility to teach their sons to be virtuous, because the challenges men face are unique to their sex and, therefore, one who has "gone before" must help those after him. Having the common language and understanding

of virtue—of the good life—assists in this grave duty by uniting father and son in the truth.

The other group is a band of brothers like Fraternus, an apostolate I have been a part of since 2008. Fraternus unites men in Christian fraternity to grow closer to God by studying the virtues. Within Fraternus there are “squads” that dedicate a year to each other in accountability and prayer, as well as the study of the virtues. The weekly content of those meetings is brief and introductory. This study dives deeper, but is still meant for that setting, especially for those prepared and willing to embrace the spirit of brotherhood that is central and essential to our Faith. Saint John, the apostle who laid his head upon Our Lord’s heart at the last supper, teaches forcefully that brotherliness is itself a sign of our conversion to God and maturity in faith. “We know that we have passed from death to life,” the Apostle says, “because we love the brethren” (1 Jn. 3:14).

General Structure

Each weekly lesson has:

An opening description of a virtuous man.

A 2–4 paragraph summary of the *Summa* on that virtue.

A “Know Thyself” reflection to help us examine our own dispositions, habits, and understanding in the light of truth.

Quotes, prayers, and daily private readings. Surrounding each lesson are references to prayers, quotes from the

saints, and even a daily Scripture passage to draw the study through the whole week.

How This Study Presents the Summa

Although Aquinas is an excellent guide, his writings can be difficult to approach without theological training. In this work, I have taken the *Summa's* section on the virtues (two hundred plus questions comprising nearly a thousand pages of my five-volume set) and put them into more accessible and summarizing prose. By “summarizing” I do not mean watered down, nor have I made it “accessible” by making it essentially *easy*. Sometimes it will be a stretch to grasp what Aquinas is getting across, but, like lifting weights or growing in any skill, to be stretched is to grow in strength, experience, and maturity.

Although this format differs from the *Summa*, I have attempted to keep the vocabulary and phrasing of Aquinas so that we can regain a shared and traditional vocabulary to talk about virtue, vice, sin, and so on. I have kept, for example, his use of uncommon words like pusillanimity and magnanimity, while trying to define them in common language, such as pusillanimity means, essentially, to be wimpy, and magnanimity means to be a man of great and noble spirit. These direct quotes are all footnoted with the hopes that some readers will take their study further into the *Summa* itself.

The paragraphs are divided to provide pause between main points for conversation and clarification.

Know Thyself

The “Know Thyself” section is critical to bringing the “topic” of virtue into our lives. “Know Thyself” is an ancient aphorism of Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, often adopted by Christians as a challenge to self-knowledge and examination. Aquinas says, “It is necessary for perfection that man come to know himself.”⁴ To learn about virtue is one thing, but to learn about virtue without it being revealing and convicting within our own moral and spiritual life is bordering on a waste of time, or at least a shallow exercise.

Far from presenting the virtues as some sort of monochromatic “hack” to a good life, Aquinas acknowledges that each of us is very different, and while vices and temptations tend to be universally felt, our own experience, personality, and circumstances drastically effect our ability to even know what one ought to do, let alone actually do it. If we are to avoid making virtue some abstract reality, then it requires that we constantly read it into our lives, rather than holding the ideas at a safe distance.

This can be daunting. But to grow in virtue, we must strengthen the good in us and purge the evil. This comes not by avoiding or justifying imperfection, but facing it head on. This is not naval gazing or self-focus, but a necessary part of maturity. “We must not be disturbed by our imperfections,” says St. Francis de Sales, “since for us perfection consists in fighting against them. How can we fight against them unless we see them, or overcome them unless we face them?”⁵

⁴ *Summa Theologica*, II-II. Q. 132. A. 1.

⁵ St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, I, ch. 5, 48–49.

And coming to grips with our own imperfections is a lot easier with those close to us, in our own home and community. These are the people that know us, weaknesses and all. In fact, Aquinas says that the feeling of shame for our sins (a good feeling) is stronger when we are around those that know the “real” us. To see people that have been hurt by us, or that have come into direct contact with our sins, is a constant and visible reminder of our own weaknesses. We don’t have to face our faults often when we’re not around people that are affected by them. Those close to us in relationship and even friendship, therefore, are some of the best people to whom we can admit our faults to and from whom we can accept correction.

Daily Insights and Prayer

Each lesson includes two items that ought to be read privately: The first is the saint narrative described above that ends with a prayer to Our Lady, under a title related to the virtue being studied, and next is a daily prayer and Scripture passage for individuals to consider during their private devotions and reading, along with an examination of conscience based on the capital sins.

The prayers are also from Aquinas himself, and as you learn about the virtues, you will see the power in his prayers. The Scripture passages are short, and come exclusively from what are called the “Catholic Epistles” of the New Testament: the collection of letters circulated in the young churches founded by the Apostles in the years following Our Lord’s Ascension. I suggest doing the readings and short prayer in

the morning and the examination of conscience in the evening. These prayers and passages, prayed and read daily, are proposed for the following reasons:

- If you already have a regular devotional life, the few verses and prayer will not derail that progress or good habit but will help the weekly lessons seep into daily consideration.
- If you do not pray daily, the simple practice of a short prayer with the reading of Sacred Scripture is a simple and effective way to start.
- The content of the prayers and verses provides a sort of cross-referencing with the ideas from the weekly lessons, as I have arranged them to relate to the virtue being studied and discussed. Doing so in times of silent reflection will hopefully increase the fruitfulness of the longer weekly lessons meant to be conducted with others.
- The Epistles, as distinct from the historical format of the Gospels and The Acts of the Apostles, were written to instruct and challenge budding Christian communities surrounded by a society that was hostile or indifferent to the Gospel. Because much of Christian society has long collapsed, these books may have a fresh relevance to our times.
- Many Catholics lament being unfamiliar with the Scriptures. This daily practice can help one learn to navigate the Scriptures with more confidence. I have ordered the readings in each lesson to follow the order of the Bible itself. Day one, for example,

might come from Romans (the first Epistle of the New Testament) and the seventh day come from the letters of St. John, which are almost at the end of the Bible. Each week, therefore, one will work in order through the New Testament, having to find the book, chapter, and verse. Like a regularly walked path, this daily spiritual walk will increase familiarity with the books—location, content, etc.

For Those Leading

Although this study can be used amongst brothers and friends, I expect that there will be those tasked or naturally suited to lead, and to those leaders I have a few simple points to help make sure you complete the study:

- 1. Commit to a particular time and place to meet.** Make a calendar and give it to all that are participating. I know there are many things I would like to do with my children, but until we set the place and time, it won't happen. If you plan on completing this study, plan out the dates, times, and places. If you need to take weeks off, schedule them ahead of time, and if something comes up unexpectedly and you miss a meeting, put the makeup day on the calendar.
- 2. Prepare ahead of time by reading through the material and have a lived example for the “know thyself” section.** I have provided direction there, but you should come prepared with a personal story that will not only provide greater insights

but will also strengthen the trust within the group through humility and appropriate vulnerability. For example, if the lesson points out that disordered fear can make us cowardly in the face of challenge, consider telling a story from your own experience of that truth. Note that more often the story will be more instructive not when you explain how you acted virtuously, but how you learned a hard lesson from a mistake or weakness. The content of the lessons will be lofty, but your experience and stories will draw it down to reality and cement it in the memory. People remember stories more easily than ideas.

- 3. Do not engage participants like a teacher with a lesson objective to get through.** Anyone leading the group is also participating, and although you may be acting as a guide, you are still walking the same path and wrestling the same angel. Knowing it may take time, focus on encouraging true consideration and conversation, not simply ploughing through, and asking lead-on questions. Be comfortable with moments of silence as the ideas sink in. The more you engage the material as a fellow man, and not an expert teacher, the less it will feel forced or formulaic. This time spent as friends and brothers will bring life to the study itself, saving it from the drudgery of being “just one more thing to do.” In other words, along with bringing a story (see point 2), you must really bring *yourself* to the table for this to be fruitful.

4. **Instead of “teaching” by restating the lessons in your own words, consider asking questions first or relating the idea to a tangible example.** For example, if Aquinas says that sins like gluttony often precede other sins like lust, ask if this corresponds to their experience. One of the great benefits of conversation is that the truth perceived and articulated by another almost always reveals an insight we don’t see on our own. If the *Summa* teaches anything, it shows that even disagreements can bring out greater truth if debated and discussed honestly. Don’t treat the other people studying as problems to be solved or computers to be programmed, treat them as persons with minds, hearts, and feelings (don’t worry, the place of “feelings” are in the *Summa* too, so it isn’t sappy nonsense).
5. **As to the practical leadership, always open the meeting with prayer and just follow the text.** You may begin by asking if anyone has had helpful insights from the daily private reading. After prayer, read the sections out loud, slowly. Pause if needed to discuss, clarify, or make sure that the points have been understood. The quotes can also be read out loud in between sections. Then, always end by discussing the “Know Thyself” content. If the discussion goes deeper in one area, you can dwell there—just make sure to end with the “Know Thyself” section and a closing prayer.

Where You Will Be at the End

Returning to the “why” of this study, this book is meant to help us grow in virtue. We are doing this study with others because, with their help and friendship, we will advance more than if we do this by ourselves. We want to grow in virtue because it brings us closer to God. And we want to be closer to God because we were made for Him, and only in Him will we be truly happy.

As to the practical accomplishment, anyone who completes the weekly lessons on Aquinas will have surveyed all of the central teachings from the *Summa* on virtue. If you also engage with the daily passages from Sacred Scripture, you will read from every single Epistle (including the somewhat obscure ones rarely heard about, like Philemon and Jude). And I don’t mean just bits here and there, you will read an extensive portion of each Epistle, excluding only those parts that truly did not relate back to the lessons (like details of St. Paul’s travel plans). I hope that this too increases the reader’s confidence in approaching the Scriptures regularly and fruitfully.

And, if done with others—your sons or brothers in the Faith—you will have strengthened friendships in a noble way. The governing form of all virtues, according to Aquinas, is charity (love). Aquinas defines and explains charity by exploring what that word means, which he says is summed up in the one word, *friendship*. Not only do we need and long for friends, but this is also the closest image of our life in God that we have. Therefore, the very setting of this study, along with the content and conversation, can be a place of maturity in virtue. May God grant that to us in His goodness.

CHAPTER 1

Faith

INTRODUCTION TO FAITH

DURING THE FRENCH Revolution, the Catholic faith, and the personal faith of Catholics, was publicly maligned and persecuted by anti-Catholic political revolutionaries and the mobs they whipped up. The revolutionaries of that time did not merely want to displace the Church's influence on French society, they wanted to destroy every remnant of it. With hatred of traditional life, particularly in the image of royalty and priesthood, one of them famously said that they would be "done" only when the last king was strangled with the guts of the last priest.

In their attempt to destroy the Church, they publicly and vehemently blasphemed God and all things holy and tried to recategorize faith as something opposed to reason and the progress of society. They went so far as to create new names for the days of the week, write up a totally different calendar to counter the liturgical rhythms of the French, and they even placed a woman on the altar in Notre Dame and worshipped her, calling her "the goddess of reason."

They killed priests and religious, punished people for practicing their faith, and did all they could to make the law work against faith.

In one region, however, the faithful defended themselves. That region called the Vendée (located in Western France next to the Atlantic Ocean) was a place of deep faith, where the people resisted and fought to preserve their Christian life. They had as their uniform a simple image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, prayed fervently their Rosaries and frequented the sacraments, and generally gave a legitimate resistance to the murderous ravaging of those bent on stomping out the Faith. In the end they were defeated, but not totally. The faith and fortitude that they showed eventually compelled the government to allow them freedom, and to this day their witness is celebrated as a testament to simple, pure, and zealous faith. The power of their faith changed the course of history.

But why was this little region of France so much more zealous than the rest of the country? France was Catholic—where did the zeal of the Vendée come from? Preceding the Vendée's story, and likely being the source of much of its power, were the preaching and travels of Saint Louis de Montfort. De Montfort was a man who, even from an early age, gave himself entirely to God. He is best known for his writings on Mary—Pope Saint John Paul II credited Montfort for his love and devotion to Mary—but we could sum up de Montfort's life and the source of his zeal with his own motto: "God alone." That motto was his life and a testament and summary of his faith. Faith enlightened, enlivened, and enabled an amazing life of missionary work.

One of the regions de Montfort travelled most, and in which he preached the most about faith in God, was the Vendée.

Saint Louis de Montfort shows us the power of one who trusts God as a loving Father. Enlightened by his faith, his work became supernatural. In a society with many levels of aristocracy and public honor, he honored even the lowliest of people, seeing God's presence in them. In the suffering, he saw Christ on the cross. In the pure and good, he saw the goodness of God. In his service to all, he saw service to Christ. He once brought a suffering beggar to the doors of his community and cried out, "Open the door for Jesus Christ!" This was no show—he saw Jesus with the eyes of faith.

In his time there was a heresy called Jansenism that was spreading throughout France. Even though it had been condemned by the Church, it persisted. This heresy convinced people that their human nature was so corrupt that one could hardly ever receive Communion. Jansenism kept people away from the sources of strength for faith, like the sacraments generally, and kept them in a servile fear that made human frailty, not the mercy of God, the center of faith. Saint Louis de Montfort fought this heresy vehemently because it denied the Faith that God has given us, a Faith that teaches us to approach God because He has called us and offers us His mercy. Faith is the movement of the mind and will toward God, but it is always a movement that is in response to God's invitation. Faith does indeed reveal our own sinfulness, but it does so to make us free to approach the throne of grace, not run from it. De Montfort never tired of bringing God to the people and the people to God.

His faith in God also made him a faithful son of the Church. His zeal for God compelled him to be a missionary, travelling from diocese to diocese and parish to parish, igniting in the hearts of the faithful a more vibrant faith. He especially preached the power of the Rosary, which many say was the source of strength for people of the Vendée region. The power of his preaching was proved repeatedly in conversions, and one would think this would make him a welcome guest in any place. However, fallen human nature being what it is, with its envy and mistrust, de Montfort found himself denied by some clergy; some bishops even refused him entry into their dioceses. But since faith is not only submission to God, but also submission to the legitimate authority of the Church, de Montfort walked a thousand miles to Rome to receive counsel from the Pope as to whether he should continue his work. The Pope told him to continue to submit to local bishops, because one cannot serve God and malign his Apostles, but the Pope also gave him the title Missionary Apostolic. This title not only recognized the truth of his faith and preaching, but also furthered his missionary work by giving it powerful credibility. One cannot be faithful to God without also being appropriately faithful to the Church, and Saint Louis de Montfort showed himself to be a son of God and the Church.

As has happened many times before, the faith of one man impacted the lives of countless others. Faith is an invitation from God to life in Him. It arrives firstly as a grace communicated directly to our hearts, eventually calling forth action. As Aquinas will show us, faith is a response. God initiated the life of faith by His own revelation, especially

in the coming of His Son, whose teaching, miracles, and conquering of death are the surest witness to the truth of His message and Person. He also willed that we as mere creatures share in that mission of bringing others to faith. Faith is the entry into eternal life and grace, and our lives are proposals to countless others who, by seeing and hearing the life of faith in us, come to know the God that loves them. Saint Louis de Montfort is but one example of how powerful the faith of one man can be in saving souls and changing the world. We have much reason to believe that God wills to do similar things in our time through our witness.

Saint Louis de Montfort, pray for us.

Pledge to the Queen

Faith is a virtue necessary on earth, because in this life we see through the senses, but God's presence is pure spirit. Faith helps us see with our heart and mind what is unseen in our flesh. Therefore, faith will not be a virtue we retain or need in heaven, because we will see God wholly in the beatific vision. While it is true that Our Lady was sinless, it is still holds that she had faith, because she still lived in this life, and though her mind was always on God, her eyes saw the same world we do. What we see in her Assumption is the effect of faith. We call Our Lady's entrance into heaven by the name of the *assumption* because it was the action of God. This is unlike our Lord's ascension into heaven, which He did by His own power. In Mary's assumption, therefore, we have an image of what God desires for His faithful ones: that they be so docile to His will that they allow Him to give

them their crowns of glory, the rewards and signs of their great faith. In Mary, however, we don't see total passivity. Her trust in God was active and, along with St. Joseph, we see the power of faith in receiving from God all that He has to give. The Assumption of Mary would have been the moment when her faith on earth literally gave way to the perfect vision of heaven. May we, her sons, follow her to that perfect and eternal vision of God.

*Immaculate Virgin, Mother of Jesus and our Mother, we believe in your triumphant assumption into heaven where the angels and saints acclaim you as Queen. We join them in praising you and bless the Lord who raised you above all creatures. With them we offer you our devotion and love. We are confident that you watch over our daily efforts and needs, and we take comfort from the faith in the coming resurrection. We look to you, our life, our sweetness, and our hope. After this earthly life, show us Jesus, the blest fruit of your womb,
O kind, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.*

WEEK 1

The faithful man has responded
to God's divine invitation.

“Two things are requisite for faith. First, that the things which are of faith should be proposed to man: this is necessary in order that man believe anything explicitly. The second thing . . . is the assent of the believer to the things which are proposed.”

—Saint Thomas Aquinas

+Prayer before study (pg. 203).+

Hearing and Willing

In many circles the word *faith* is dismissed as something opposed to reason and an authentic intellectual life. To believe, it is said, is to turn off or darken your mind—to deny reality and cling to emotions or opinions. However, according to Aquinas, faith is a virtue of the intellect that sheds light on human understanding. It does not deny the power of reason but takes it further than it can go on its own. It does not deny or contradict what we know by other means, but it is above it. Faith, or believing, in the natural sense, is necessary for most knowledge. We typically *know* something as a result of firsthand sense experience, like seeing and touching. We do not “know” most things through our own witnessing, but by trusting certain sources—parents, teachers, scientists, historians, etc. We only “know” what we are told because we “believe” the one who told us.

Believing allows for a faster growth in knowledge, skipping over the tedium of our own private investigation, so that we can move to other truths. We learn to make judgements about who is trustworthy and who isn't, but we must believe some as trustworthy or we would never trust doctors to cure us, pilots to fly us, or parents to inform us who our grandparents are. All of these acts are acts of belief, whereby a truth is proposed to an individual by a reliable source.

Unlike all other forms of knowledge, however, the object of Christian faith is what Aquinas calls "the First Truth,"¹ which refers to God as the beginning and end of all creation, the most important and consequential of truths for man. This highest of truths is actually "the end of all our desires and actions,"² the ultimate truth and life we hunger for as man. And, as we believe someone to tell us their own personal history because they are a witness to it, so too by Christian faith we believe the truth of God "because it is revealed by God"³, and by believing what God has revealed "man is helped on his journey towards the enjoyment of God."⁴ Faith, therefore, is the key and path to true human happiness, the fullness of knowledge, and true contentment.

Unlike earthly knowledge, faith is the assent of the mind specifically *to things we cannot see* because the truths of God are immaterial (spiritual). Aquinas points out that *vision*, even though rooted in the eyes, is actually "in the intellect,"

¹ *Summa Theologica*, II-II. Q. 1. A. 1.

² II-II. Q. 4. A. 2. Ad 3.

³ II-II. Q. 1. A. 1.

⁴ II-II. Q. 1. A. 1.

because it is only there that we understand what we see.⁵ This is why, for example, when someone asks if we understand we might respond, “Yes, I *see* your point.” We retain not a sense memory of what we have seen but also a memory of this understanding. If someone says “picture an elephant” you “see” the elephant in your mind. Faith is something seen in the mind without physical presence, because we are moved by grace to accept something unseen as if it were seen. And, ultimately, this “sight” of faith “is succeeded by the heavenly *vision*,”⁶ because, as Saint John says (1 Jn. 3:2), one day we will truly see God, and this is the beatific *vision* that is the end of our salvation. Supernatural faith is a form of sight and knowledge made available to us by God, because we are made in His image with a rational intellect and soul. Now, for belief to become the virtue of faith, we do not merely need to know about God, but also need to submit to Him wholly and entirely. In a way, even the demons have a form of faith in that “they are compelled to believe through their natural intellectual acumen,”⁷ but this is not the virtue of faith, since they reject God by an eternal decision rather than submitting their minds to Him.

Faith, although it is in the intellect, also requires the *will* of man to *respond* to the “Divine invitation”⁸ of God, moving the intellect to “assent.” Faith, then, is “an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will

⁵ II-II. Q. 4. A. 2.

⁶ II-II. Q. 4. A. 2. S.C.; emphasis added.

⁷ II-II. Q. 5. A. 2. Ad 2.

⁸ II-II. Q. 2. A. 9. Ad 3.

moved by the grace of God.”⁹ Breaking that down, we see there are the three parts in the act of faith: a truth being proposed to the intellect, God’s grace inviting us to respond, and The will moving the intellect to assent to the proposed truth. It is essential to note in this that God’s grace is working in us even *before* this movement of the will occurs, the decision to trust and believe in God by faith. This grace active in us helps us by faith to not just know about God, but to know God Himself—as we might say we *know* a friend or family member in a different way than knowing things about them like hair color, height, etc. Without this response from man, the invitation of God to salvation is rejected, and man’s true and eternal happiness is lost to him.

“Learning unsupported by grace may get into our ears; it never reaches the heart. But when God’s grace touches our inmost minds to bring understanding, his word which has been received by the ear sinks deep into the heart.”

—Saint Isidore of Seville

Know Thyself

Aquinas has shown us that faith comes by an intertwining of different things: the intellect, will, and our cooperation with grace. We can be lacking in any of these areas. As to the intellect, some might fail to grow in their knowledge of the Faith and remain ignorant of truth. As to the will, some have sensed the truth of Faith but make very little movement of the will toward God. And this leads to the

⁹ II-II. Q. 2. A. 9.

last aspect: cooperation with grace. Some view faith as man's achievement rather than God's work in their soul. It is good to consider how we have or have not responded to God's offer of faith.

Daily Prayer and Reading

O Merciful God, grant that I may eagerly desire, carefully search out, truthfully acknowledge, and ever perfectly fulfill all things which are pleasing to Thee, to the praise and glory of Thy name. Amen.

Day 1	1 Cor. 2:10–13
Day 2	2 Cor. 5:11–21
Day 3	2 Cor. 6:1–13
Day 4	Gal. 2:1–10
Day 5	Col. 2:6–7
Day 6	2 Thess. 2:13–17
Day 7	Heb. 3:7–19

+*Prayer to acquire the virtues* (pg. 204).+