

# Heroic Habits





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# HEROIC HABITS

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Discovering the Soul's Potential for Greatness

Fr. Ezra Sullivan, OP

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*To the Blessed Virgin Mary,  
Mater Misericordiae*



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## CHAPTER 1

# A SAINT'S HABITS

He hurriedly dipped his quill in the ink-pot, trying to remember the last words that echoed in his ears. Almost without thinking, the scribe allowed the wisdom to flow from his hand onto the yellow vellum. In a glance, he assessed his progress: his writing trailed more than half-way down the animal skin that had been scraped and stretched and now bore the marks of a miniscule script. He took a breath and blocked out the sound of the three other scribes scribbling away; he forced himself not to consider what the speaker was saying to the fellow next to him. Instead, he focused on what he had to write: “Therefore, there can be such a disturbance of anger that the tongue is entirely impeded from the use of speech. The result is being tight-lipped.”

*“I’m almost there myself,”* the scribe thought.

He had been sitting on the unpadded bench in the unheated room for three hours. The skin on his knuckles was cracking from the dry cold, and his foot felt itchy. His stomach growled: it was a fasting day. With his peripheral vision, he could see the speaker, dressed in white, overflowing with buoyant energy and sober passion.

*“Doesn’t he ever get tired? Isn’t he hungry? The sacristan told me he was up all night praying. He’s probably forgotten to eat again. God, come to my assistance!”*

From his wandering thoughts, the friar brought his attention back to the page. Just as he was finishing up a paragraph, the speaker approached the scribe’s desk.

“Brother Reginald, mark a new section. Prologue. Now that we have considered human acts and passions, we will now consider the principles of human acts. The first of these is the intrinsic principle of human acts—namely, habits.”

Making small marks on the parchment, Reginald replied, “Yes, Brother.” He took another breath, flexed his fingers, and felt his heart lighten from being closer to his friend. Then he plunged back into the text that would become known as the *Summa Theologiae* of his fellow Dominican, Thomas Aquinas.

\*\*\*

Aquinas’s impact on the world can hardly be calculated. His contemporary Bernard Gui would write, “The teaching of Thomas has become an object of admiration for almost the entire world. It instructs the studious, corrects the wayward, guides the wanderer. For he teaches divine matters in the way which most aptly and discreetly employs all those human means which can serve in the work of men’s salvation.” Gui argued that the brilliance and subtlety of Aquinas’s intellect was manifest in “his vast literary output, his many original discoveries, his deep understanding of Scriptures.”

At the height of his powers, Aquinas was phenomenally prolific. In terms of a sheet of today’s printer paper, Aquinas

was writing an average of nearly twelve and a half pages of words a day, every day, all year long. Many scholars would be content if even one of their books were read by specialists in a hundred years. By the end of his short life—less than fifty years—Thomas Aquinas had composed a series of lengthy treatises that are still considered among the most important and profound works of theology and philosophy ever written. Nearly eight hundred years later, they remain influential around the world to specialists and amateurs alike.

What was the secret of Thomas's productivity?

We can quickly dismiss the idea that he wrote so much simply because he had secretaries at his disposal. Assistants may have multiplied Aquinas's strength, but it was *his strength*. According to Gui, "His memory was extremely rich and retentive: whatever he had once read and grasped he never forgot; it was as if knowledge were ever increasing in his soul as page is added to page in the writing of a book." In Thomas's language, he was the "primary" human cause of the text, and the scribes were collaborative "secondary" causes. Thousands of pages, tens of thousands of objections and replies, and millions of words were written because there was something in Thomas Aquinas that gave him the power to harness his mnemonic energy, as well as that of his secretaries, to produce an astounding result.

What was in him?

We have already seen his answer: habits. For Aquinas, a good habit was not a mere repeated pattern of behavior but also the principle underlying them. A habit is the coiled spring of interior strength, the source of personal flourishing, the "intrinsic principle of human acts."

Aquinas was able to do what he did because of his habits. More than that, he was able to *be who he was* because of his habits. “A minimum of time allowed to sleeping and eating,” Gui notes, “and all the rest given to prayer or reading or thinking or writing or dictating.” While every great person has at least some great habits, Aquinas went a step further than nearly all of them. He unlocked the secret of habits. In addition to developing and exercising his habits to an extraordinary degree, he gave us his own insights about how we might achieve greatness in our own way—and he did so above all in his *Treatise on Habits*.

Aquinas’s *Treatise on Habits* in his *Summa Theologiae* is one of his greatest and most unique contributions to Catholic ethics. No other great Catholic writer has a treatise on habits—not Augustine, nor John Chrysostom, nor Bonaventure; not Scotus, nor Robert Bellarmine, nor Alphonsus Liguori; no Church Father, no medieval scholastic, no modern mold-breaker. Despite this fact, Aquinas’s rich exposition on the nature and growth of habits has been neglected through the centuries. Thomist moral theologians and ethicists have preferred to mine his thought on flashy ideas like sin, or complex puzzles like human action, or issues able to be politically weaponized like natural law. A handful of references in scholarly works point to Aquinas’s insights on habits, but they have been little more than trail markers hinting at more to come. Until now.

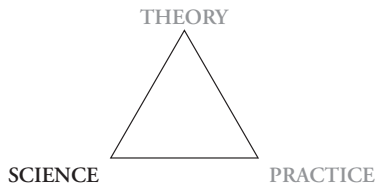


## Why This Book Is Different

Upon looking at this book, some readers might think, “Another book on habits? There are so many out there. They’ve sold millions of copies, helped so many people. How can this book make a difference in a crowded market?”

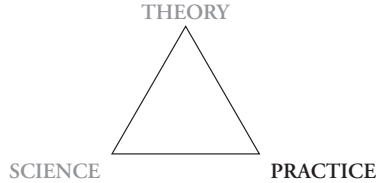
In response, I would point out that the best books on habits ought to contain three key elements: science, practice, and theory.

Representing a *scientific* approach, William James in the nineteenth century helped psychologists and scientists investigate human habits on a formal and empirical level. The advent of neuroscientific techniques and biological chemistry have more recently enabled researchers to develop models of the effects habits have on the brain and nervous system. Nevertheless, contemporary scientific works that address habits are necessarily narrow, as the following illustration indicates.



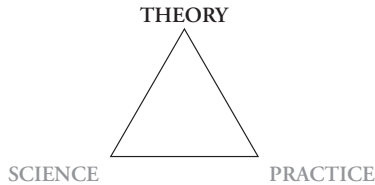
Although their research generates a lot of data and they have good scientific technique, there is often a lack of integrative insight and practical applicability. If you are lucky, you can find practical tips either in the last few sentences of an equation-laden article or baked into a heavy textbook that specialists lug around.

In contrast, texts that focus on *habit-practice* have the advantage of being more accessible. Written for the average reader, these popular books provide practical and entertaining accounts of habit acquisition and development, as the following illustration indicates.



The best popular habit literature incorporates science, at least indirectly. But even when they are not oversimplifying complexity, practically none of them are based on a rich understanding of the human person. Their theory is typically as thin as that of the average disposable self-help book.

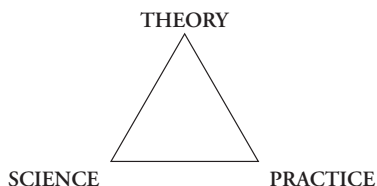
Then there are books that cover *habit-theory* in a deep and systematic way. These works are rare, and most of them are in Latin commentaries on Aquinas's own work. Their language, complexity, antiquity, and lack of practical advice leaves them moldering on dusty bookshelves.



The few English-language books that have attempted to make Aquinas's theory accessible and practical have narrowed in on specific applications such as health or addiction.

Finally, there is the book you are reading right now. It draws upon the best of the science, practice, and theory on

habits. The synthesis is possible because it is undergirded by the theology and philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. There is no other book like it.



The present book is founded on my extensive research, some of which was published in *Habits and Holiness: Ethics, Theology, and Biopsychology* (Catholic University of America Press, 2021). That book contains more practical tips, but it also wades through many scientific and scholarly debates that will not detain us here. The two books complement and supplement each other. Neither can fully replace the other. To be the most helpful, I offer the most practical advice in this book up front, in chapter 2. That way, as you read later chapters, you can implement what you learned earlier.

A “bonus feature” of this book is that it draws extensively from the lives of the saints. This is no Catholic quirk. Practical books need stories to illustrate and exemplify the lessons therein. The nature of a thing is most apparent when it is in optimal form, and the saints are those who have reached an optimal human condition because of their habits. They lived out their habits heroically.

Although extraordinary people have developed Olympian habits in one area or another, few have had great habits in all of the most important areas. Tiger Woods may have been a Mozart at golf, but he was less than a Yoko Ono at marital fidelity. In contrast, the great saints were heroic in all their

moral habits as a whole. Their skill-sets were radically diversified. Some, like Aquinas, were superhumanly productive in their works, whereas others were more contemplative and manifested less exterior productivity. But all the saints were heroic *spiritually*, for heroism in one great habit entails heroism in all habits that count the most.

Hence, the lives and reflections of the saints are best suited to help guide us along the way to developing our best habits to the highest degree. As Aquinas states in his commentary on the book of Job, “God not only orders the lives of the just for their own good but also renders them visible for others” so that we might profit from their example.

### **Why This Book Will Help You**

There is something true to the claim that the Angelic Doctor’s work is hard and dry. But it is true for reasons similar to why a lobster is hard and dry: its skeleton is on the outside. Many scholars of Aquinas take it to be their job to host a “Thomistic lobster bake”: to trap one of those decapods and serve up the meaty bits with butter. With that metaphor in mind, one might suppose that my role in this book is to copy down faithfully the thought of Aquinas on habit and to add my own commentary and examples to make Thomas tastier for the palate.

That’s not the way I see it.

If developing habits were as easy as eating buttery food, then we all would be heroes merely by reading self-help books.

But that is not the case. All personal habits come at a personal cost. The ones you acquire are at the cost of your disciplined efforts, and even the habits given by God cost your cooperation with his grace. Simply scanning the words of the page can at best develop your knowledge and *dispose* you for developing habits in other realms of your life. Even then, you are doing the scribe's share of the work. Indeed, to benefit from a book on habits, *you* must be a Brother Reginald and your soul must be the vellum on which you write the lessons you learn from Aquinas and the other masters you will meet. If up to now you feel that your life has been less of an epic and more of a farce, do not worry: the point of this book is to help you gain those heroic habits that will truly make your story one worth retelling.

While this work is rooted in Thomas's ideas and develops them in light of the best science and practical insights that are now available, it is not a mere repetition of his insights. It will not only guide you to develop better atom-sized habits that are of immediate practical benefit but also help you establish the right goals for your life, giving you a deep sense of clarity and conviction for the long road ahead. It will also help you receive God-sized habits that only the divine author can write within you.

Your nature is like parchment. You have been stretched and scraped through experience, much like vellum in preparation for writing. Through your conscious actions, you have written and doodled on your soul. Some script has faded away and is difficult to read; other paragraphs you have underlined; others you have crossed out; some stories you have tried to re-write; still others you have written over and

over again. God is an author as well. Not only did he give you the vellum but when you invite him, he writes on your soul. Then there is the devil, who tries to interfere and blot out what God has written, or to obscure it with graffiti. The work of acquiring habits is similar to grasping a quill in your hand and writing the story of your character, the tale you are telling about yourself.

The work of cooperating with God's way of writing habits into your soul is similar to the way the writers of Sacred Scripture cooperated with divine inspiration. In Aquinas's view, there were two authors of Scripture: "one divine and principal, the other human and instrumental." The principal agent makes his contribution through the instrumentality of the secondary agent. Through the shape of the quill's nib, an author makes his mark on the page; through a human's thoughts, feelings, and very life, the divine author writes the story of a saint-in-the-making. This is what Thomas's biographers meant when they said he was an "admirable instrument of the Holy Spirit." God used the friar's own humanity to create something extraordinary. The first extraordinary thing was Thomas himself; and secondly, man of his exterior works were extraordinary, even heroic. It follows that Aquinas's profound theory of habits, incarnated in his own life, will ultimately make this book on habits more practical. Better theory leads to more effective practice. It is my hope that this book can help you cooperate with the Holy Spirit so that, with God, you may write onto the parchment of your soul many heroic habits.

## **What to Expect**

The typical self-help book is full of wooden formulae about how to live a happier life. Some even propose algorithms to live by as strategies for better human living. Catholics often follow suit—unfortunately. Whether justified or not, traditional Catholic morality has the reputation of being a series of legalisms and rule-sets. Many authors have reinforced that perspective to the point of insisting that the chief way to holiness is to have a “rule of life” and innumerable little rules that govern every year, month, week, day, and even every minute of our lives. That is not the approach of Thomas Aquinas, and it is not the approach of this book.

Law has two primary purposes: to impel us to do something good and to restrain us from doing something evil. Exterior rules of life are necessary to give us a push when we are not inclined to do good and to hold us back when we are inclined to do evil. They provide guidelines if we do not know what to do in the moment, or when we waver in the face of temptation. In this way, rules can be like parents who nudge their children to act politely, to excel in school, to eat healthy food, and to pray before bedtime. All of these are good behaviors. If the rules are never internalized, though, if the person never comes to maturely grasp the import of the rules and make their spirit his own, he can slowly become infantilized. He could allow someone else to make the rules of life for him while his brain goes on auto-pilot, or he could follow a rule in some exterior manner without the more difficult and important work of transforming his interior life.

Eventually, a person comes to see that hyper-specific exterior rules of life can never account for the roadblocks and blind turns that he encounters along the road. “Lift up your heart to God every sixty seconds.” That’s a great rule. But it requires exceptions: “Lift up your heart to God every sixty seconds *unless doing so distracts you from other duties that require all of your attention, such as brain surgery or NASCAR driving.*” The rule is thus transformed: “Lift up your heart to God every sixty seconds *when reasonable.*” That last part, the “reasonable” portion, is where the habit of prudence comes into play. Prudence is the habit of mental maturity whereby we know the right thing to do, and our intellect commands us to do it in the right way, at the right time. We are not autonomous driving vehicles. Instead of being guided solely by an exterior law, we must interiorize it through prudently-guided habits.

Bad motives may also corrupt a legalistic way of life. It is all too easy to follow a rule from a base fear of being punished, or from craving the rewards of obedience, as a child might ace all his tests to avoid punishment for bad marks or to receive money. Unfortunately, legalism leads people to think they are developing themselves merely by adhering to some behavioral norms for achievement. Human flourishing means more. Flourishing requires the full use of the mind; it also requires the broad development of the heart. Thomas insists that only two “rules of life” are absolutely necessary for our perfection: love of God and love of neighbor. As St. Paul said, “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rm 13:10).

Do not mistake me for an antinomian. My approach does not ignore the real value imparted by good law. Indeed, I



think one of the chief vices in our day is the rejection of God's law, the moral law, the natural law. My point is that just as no series of rules can make a scribbler into a great writer, so no rule of life is sufficient for developing heroic habits. Rules do help. Principles, in the sense of flexible guidelines, help even more. I will offer some along the way. My primary aim, however, is not to help you change your exterior behavior by force of wooden rules. Rather, it is to help you change your *interior life* with the grace of God—that is, through developing acquired and infused habits. Once that happens—and it may take a long time and a lot of suffering—you will find that doing the right thing comes more easily, quickly, sweetly, and skillfully. Your habits will have become heroic.