

Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Biblical Interpreters: “I Call You Friends” (*John 15:15*)

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For many centuries, scholars have recognized the philosophical and theological heritage of Thomas Aquinas. Today, many are attentive to his contributions. What is neglected in the church and in the academy are his biblical commentaries that express his passion for the Word of God. Do too many centuries separate Thomas who lectured and wrote about the bible at the University of Paris in the mid-thirteenth century and contemporary interpreters who converse in classrooms and the Internet as well as through professional conferences and journals? Can Thomas be in dialogue with contemporary biblical theologians to access the riches of biblical texts for believers?

This essay explores the interpretive insights of Thomas Aquinas in tandem with a recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993)¹ and contemporary scholars. It also illustrates the points of comparison and contrast with selections from Thomas’ *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, especially 15:1–15 in dialogue with current interpreters.

Thomas Aquinas and Interpretation

What resources do scholars bring to interpret a text? Thomas’ study at Naples, Paris and Cologne provided him with diverse contributions of theologians and philosophers for interpreting Scripture. He was familiar with Conciliar and Papal decrees, the Greek and Latin Fathers, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, Plato, Aristotle and Boethius.² He read only the Vulgate edition of the Bible although his prodigious energy for study would have impelled him to learn

¹ The Pontifical Biblical Commission presented the document to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993. It was published in *Origins* 23.29 (January 6, 1994): 497–524. It is abbreviated *IBC* in later references. For a complete of Catholic documents about Scripture, see Dean P. Béchar, ed. and trans., *The Scripture Documents: An Anthropology of Official Catholic Teachings* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002).

² D. J. Kennedy, “Thomas Aquinas,” Jacques Maritain Center: CE-Aquinas at <http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain>.

Hebrew and Greek if philological study with comparative languages had been available. The discipline began a century after his death.

Thomas' methods of investigating the literal sense of a text as well as multiple spiritual senses without distinguishing them are often regarded as naïve and pre-critical because they do not correspond to contemporary, post-modern scholarship in the church and the academy.³ His interpretive lenses are challenging because they do not follow the criteria of objective, value-free and neutral scholarship that was heralded with the advent of historical criticism over two centuries ago.

Sometimes his style of writing is also disconcerting. It lacks the "engaging informality of Patristic commentaries . . . and the technical and sometimes journalistic resources of modern commentaries, explanations and paraphrases."⁴ Second, his Scholastic method of definitions, divisions, arguments and footnotes reflect a particular order that is challenging and sometimes difficult to follow.⁵

Otto Pesch evaluates Thomas' style:

The biblical commentaries of Thomas are quite often rather tiresome to read. The text is divided in minute detail and this sometimes results in a stark analysis, which pursues the grammatical and logical connections. by the Often this is expanded by the exposition of various possible interpretations among which Aquinas does not always decide.⁶

Accordingly, contemporary scholars do not often write about Thomas' commentaries. They refer to his analyses of texts infrequently. Thomas does not appear on bibliographies for Exodus, Psalms, Job, Matthew, John, or the Letters of Paul. M. Arias Reyero who wrote his dissertation on his exegetical works considers them "the least original part of his oeuvre."⁷ Perhaps he was searching for clear, functional exegesis whereas he admits that for Thomas there is not "a strict separation between exegesis and theology, interpretation and pastoral life, exegesis and moral theology."⁸

³ David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985): 74–82.

⁴ James A. Weisheipl, "Introduction," *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, Part I, St. Thomas Aquinas (Albany NY: Magi Books, 1980) 5.

⁵ Weisheipl, 6.

⁶ Pesch cited in Thomas F. O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 70.

⁷ M. Arias Reyero (*Thomas von Aquin als Exeget* Einsiedeln, 1971, 26) cited in Leo Elders, "St. Thomas Aquinas and Holy Scripture," Thomistic Institute 2000, Jacques Maritain Center at: <http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain>. Cf. John Franklin Johnson, "Hermeneutics in Thomas Aquinas: An Appraisal and Appreciation," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45. 3 (1981): 223–32 and M. Dubois, "Mystical and Realistic Elements in the Exegesis and Hermeneutics of Thomas Aquinas" *Creative Biblical Exegesis: Christian and Jewish Hermeneutics through the Centuries*, JSOT Supplement 59, eds. B. Uffenheimer and H. Reventlow, 1988, 39–54.

⁸ Reyero cited in O'Meara, 71.

“The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”

In contrast, the 1993 document is structured to maintain a “strict separation” of categories that reflects the development of biblical studies and theology in the Church for several centuries. The divisions of the document express the disengagement: I. Methods and Approaches for Interpretation; II. Hermeneutic Questions; III. Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation and IV. Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church. I will connect the categories to offer readers implications that are recognized in contemporary interpretation theory.

In the ensuing analysis, readers may observe that the Roman document parallels and contradicts other contributions in the church and the academy. One basic distinction that the *IBC* maintains is the difference between “methods” and “approaches” (I). A “method” is “a group of scientific procedures employed in order to explain texts.”⁹ The only “method” is the Historical-Critical Method. For the authors of the *IBC*, there are many more “approaches” in interpreting biblical texts today. An “approach” is “a question of an enquiry proceeding from a particular point of view.”¹⁰ The distinction is not utilized in the literature outside the document. In fact, many commentators note that the *IBC* prefers the Historical-Critical Method to the other “approaches.”

Another distinction of the *IBC* is to consider hermeneutical questions only in light of their usefulness for exegesis and separate from various meanings of a text, i.e., literal, spiritual and fuller senses.¹¹ In contrast, contemporary interpreters agree on two basic distinctions: First, the umbrella concept is *hermeneutics*, i.e., a process of interpretation whereby understanding occurs in the encounter of a reader and a text. In post-modern hermeneutics, the interest is “in present meaning mediated by language through interpretation rather than in historical meanings uncovered by exegesis which are then inserted into contemporary contexts by a process of application.”¹² In addition, “the reader’s presuppositions, familiarity with other materials, experiences, competence, community, expectations, desires, etc., influence either consciously or subconsciously the construction of the meaning.”¹³

⁹ *IBC*, Introduction, B., footnote 1.

¹⁰ *IBC*, Introduction, B., footnote 1.

¹¹ *IBC*, II. A. 1. 2; B.1.2. 3.

¹² Sandra M. Schneiders, “Hermeneutics,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 1160.

¹³ Amy-Jill Levine, “Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/Knox Press, 1996), 140. In particular, “Problems arise, however, when the reader finds contradictions or inconsistencies within the text itself or when what the reader judges to be factual, liberating, aesthetically valuable, or even of interrogative interest is apparently ignored, undercut, or denied by the text.”

In contrast, *exegesis* is only one category of hermeneutics. It is the reconstruction of authorial intention for the first community of hearers/readers. Ordinarily, it is limited to historical criticism, especially the Historical-Critical Method. The *IBC* valuation of *exegesis* is evident by its lengthy description of the Historical-Critical Method and its short treatment of hermeneutical questions.¹⁴

A third distinction of language between the *IBC* and contemporary interpreters is specifying “worlds of the text,” a label that does not appear in the *IBC*. Interpreters ordinarily locate themselves in one, specific location, or world of a text from which to discover possible meanings of a text. There are three, discrete worlds:

First, there is the World behind the Text or Historical Criticism. Its focus is to interpret the relationships that constitute the *Sitz im Leben* (contextual location) of persons whose lives are disclosed in the biblical text. It is a task of reconstruction to determine how persons constructed their worldviews and symbolic universes to find identity, purpose and meaning. Here, the Historical-Critical Method enjoys hegemony in the church and the academy for over 200 years. Its partner, the Social-Scientific Method, investigates patterns of culture and human behavior. It was developed in the last few decades. The *IBC* discusses both constitute parts as a Historical-Critical Method and Approaches That Use the Human Sciences.¹⁵

Second, the World of the Text or Literary Criticism. Its focus is to interpret texts through considerations of what is involved in analyzing features of a literary document, e.g., text qua text. It is a task of entering into the fictive world of the text and probing its truths as disclosed by the author’s literary skills. Narrative and Rhetorical Methods are utilized to find meaning in a text. The *IBC* discusses this type of criticism as New Methods of Literary Analysis.¹⁶

Third, the World in Front of the Text or Contemporary Reader Response. Its focus is to interpret texts for a response to present situations. It is a task of mutual correlation and critique between the presuppositions and *Sitz im Leben* of readers and authors of texts thereby focusing on the dialogical dynamic of contemporary readers and text. Two familiar methods are Liberationist Criticism and Feminist Criticism. Again, the *IBC* categorizes this type of analysis as Contextual Approaches.¹⁷

A fourth distinction is when readers look for what type of meaning results from using a particular world of the text, the *IBC* does not connect explicitly the relationship of method/approaches with meaning. However, in reading the section on Hermeneutic Questions (II.)

¹⁴ *IBC*, II. A.

¹⁵ *IBC*, I. A. and D.

¹⁶ *IBC*, I. B. 1. 2. 3.

¹⁷ *IBC*, I. E. 1. 2.

in tandem with Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church (IV.), we can make some associations. The “literal sense” is a reconstruction of authorial intention that is discovered through the Historical-Critical Method.¹⁸

The “spiritual sense” includes “three levels of reality: the biblical text, the paschal mystery and the present circumstances of life in the Spirit.”¹⁹ Here I connect the use of the Bible in the liturgy, *lectio divina*, pastoral ministry and ecumenism.²⁰

The “fuller sense” is “the deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly by the human author.”²¹ A new meaning to a biblical text occurs in ongoing doctrinal tradition, e.g., the Trinity, and in documents of the Ecumenical Councils. I attach the “fuller meaning” with two contemporary movements that utilize the Bible in the Church throughout the world, namely, Actualization and Inculturation. “Actualization” is based on the theological conviction that the treasures of the Bible cannot be exhausted by one culture or time. It occurs when a text is considered in light of contemporary situations. A community participates in actualization when the group hears the word of God within a concrete situation; identifies aspects of the present situation that it highlights or questions; and realizes insights for the present situation.²²

Similarly, “Inculturation” also has a theological foundation because “the Word of God transcends the cultures in which it has found expression and has the capability of being spread in other cultures, in such way as to be able to reach all human beings in the cultural context in which they live.”²³

In this process, there are at least two dynamic steps: First, translating the Scriptures into languages of the people. Second, interpreting them so that there is a “more explicit relationship with the ways of feeling, thinking, living and self-expression which are proper to the local culture.”²⁴ These steps are to be “mutually enriching” so that there is not a “superficial ‘adaptation’ of the message . . . and a syncretistic confusion.”²⁵

The *IBC* considers these worlds of interpretation and their corresponding methods as separate and distinctive. I am aware of only two scholars who fuse horizons for interpretation. Paul Ricoeur, a philosopher of religion, in Paris, developed a hermeneutics of interpretation that requires attention to personal experience as well as study of the various worlds of texts for personal appropriation of

¹⁸ *IBC*, I. A.

¹⁹ *IBC*, II. B. 2.

²⁰ *IBC*, IV. C. 1–4.

²¹ *IBC*, II. B. 3.

²² *IBC*, IV. A.

²³ *IBC*, IV. B.

²⁴ *IBC*, IV. B.

²⁵ *IBC*, IV. B.

any text. Sandra M. Schneiders, a brilliant American hermeneut, developed transformational hermeneutics in her 1999 monograph, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Scripture*.²⁶ Her hermeneutics not only embraces the worlds of the texts but also profound and broad theological reflection on the sacred text and its invitation to committed Christian life in the church.

Summarily, the crux of interpretation is developing an adequate hermeneutical theory that acknowledges an author and addressees as well as invites contemporary readers into a dialogue with the text in its multiple possibilities. Sandra M. Schneiders describes the interpretive process as “a dialect between explanation and understanding.”²⁷ “Explanation” often is a process of reconstruction for the contemporary reader so that one is aware of authorial intention and meaning. On the other hand, “understanding” is a process whereby the reader encounters the text in its surplus of meaning for potential transformation of the reader and the worlds in which the reader functions.

While the *IBC* and other interpreters often make clear distinctions and categories for an analysis of the text, Thomas connected the literal sense as the basis for the spiritual sense.²⁸ Although he made many distinctions, Thomas did not separate his analysis into discrete categories for academic discussion and pastoral application. Rather, he considered study as a spiral that embraces and connects prayer to apostolic preaching, teaching and writing. Accordingly, interpreting the Bible and questioning it were integral and preliminary to teaching and preaching.²⁹

John 15 according to Thomas and Contemporary Interpreters

Thomas begins his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* with a quotation from Isaiah 6:1 that is not found in any other manuscript: “I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the whole house was full of his majesty, and the things that were under him filled the temple.” Through a careful analysis of the verse, Thomas aligns the quotation as a *definition* of the gospel.³⁰ He indicates that the Beloved Disciple wrote the Fourth Gospel to teach us how to

²⁶ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

²⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders, 17.

²⁸ Ceslaus Spicq (quoted in Elders, p. 6) observes that Thomas’ determination for finding the literal meaning of a text as well as his explanations is remarkable and accurate among all medieval exegetes.

²⁹ Mary Margaret Pazdan, “I Call You Friends (John 15): Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Biblical Interpreters,” lecture for St. Thomas Aquinas Symposium, St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, IN, January 28, 2002.

³⁰ James A. Weisheipl (“The Johannine Commentary of Friar Thomas,” *Church History* 4, 1976, 191) notes that the second phrase of the verse is entirely missing and the final phrase ought to be translated as “his train filled the temple.”

contemplate. His contemplation was perfect (*perfecta*) because “John not only taught how Christ Jesus, the Word of God, is God, raised above all things, and how all things were made through him, but also that we are sanctified by him, and adhere to him by the grace which he pours into us . . .”³¹ Many interpreters today follow his example by focusing on the spirituality and/or mysticism of the Fourth Gospel.³²

In developing the contemplative depth of the gospel, Thomas amasses an impressive selection of writings including Patristic writers and philosophers as well as his own insights throughout the *Commentary*. He writes because from the conviction that God gifts the interpreter with grace and illumination of the intellect to understand the depth of revelation and the heart of the truth.³³ The reader also gains facility for contemplating God in Jesus, “the Word made flesh,” and “discovering in the text an existential self-understanding through love.”³⁴

Are Thomas and contemporary interpreters compatible? Do they overlap in their analyses? What does an analysis of the literal sense of John 15 disclose? We remember that the text is embedded in the Last Discourses of Jesus, chapters 14–16. Thomas divides chapter 15 into five pericopes (sections). He informs his students and readers that “in this talk our Lord wants to comfort the disciples” about his imminent suffering and death as well as “the troubles which would come upon them.”³⁵ Raymond E. Brown, who synthesizes historical commentators’ work, treats the structural division and content differently as does Wes Howard-Brook who focuses on chiasmic literary structure.³⁶

In citing the vine and the branches, vv. 1–8, Thomas notes:

Considering the literal sense, we see that a natural vine with branches that have many shoots bears less fruit, because the sap is spread out through all the shoots. Thus the vinedresser prunes away the extra shoots so that the

³¹ *CGJ*, 8.

³² E.g., Raymond E. Brown, *A Retreat with John the Evangelist: That You May Have Life* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1998); Demetrius R. Dumm, *A Mystical Portrait of Jesus: New Perspectives on John’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); John R. Painter, R. Alan Culpepper and Fernando F. Segovia, eds. *Word, Theology and Community in John* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002) Mary Margaret Pazdan, *Becoming God’s Beloved in the Company of Friends: A Spirituality of John’s Gospel* (Canfield, OH: Alba House Communications, 2003) <7 CDs/5 audio-cassettes>; Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (2nd ed.; New York: Herder and Herder, 2003).

³³ T. F. Torrance, “Scientific Hermeneutics of Aquinas,” *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 13 (1962), 264.

³⁴ Weisheipl, *Church History*, 105.

³⁵ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 1, 1978.

³⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John: XIII–XXI, AB 29a* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship*, The Bible and Liberation Series, 2nd printing (New York: Orbis, 1999).

vine can bear more fruit.³⁷ <Again>, just as the branch literally, a material branch, *cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine*, from whose roots sap ascends to give life to the branches, so *neither can you bear fruit unless you abide in me*.³⁸

In contrast, Brown offers several pages of philological notes for verses 1–17 and a general commentary that includes parallel themes from the Hebrew Bible and the gospels.³⁹

Next, Thomas quickly moves to various “spiritual” senses of the text that other Johannine scholars do not address. He considers how the vinedresser cultivates the vine:

Now to cultivate something is to devote one’s interest to it. And we can cultivate something in two ways: either to make what is cultivated better, as we cultivate a field . . . or to make ourselves better by the cultivating, and in this way we cultivate wisdom. God cultivates us to make us better by his work, since he roots out the evil seeds in our hearts . . . But we cultivate God . . . by adoring, in order that we may be made better by him: ‘If any one is a worshiper,’ that is, a cultivator of God, ‘and does his will, God listens to him’ (9:31).⁴⁰

Jesus’ self-identification as “the vine” (v. 1) prompts Thomas to connect the allegorical and sacramental meaning: “My blood is drink indeed” (6:55).⁴¹

An outstanding example of how Thomas understands spiritual senses is his comment on verse 3: “You are already clean by the word that I have spoken to you”:

The word of Christ, in the first place, cleanses us from error by teaching us (Tit 1:9). . . . Secondly. . . . by its power moves our hearts, weighed down by earthly things, and sets them on fire . . . Thirdly, when God is invoked in baptism. . . . For this word of faith is so strong in the Church that it even cleanses infants, although they themselves cannot believe, when it is proclaimed from the faith of those who believe, offer, bless and touch the infants, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 18:19). Fourthly, the word of Christ cleanses by the power of faith.⁴²

For verse 5b, “Those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (NRSV),⁴³ Thomas highlights several moral senses:

³⁷ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 1, 1985.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1990. The italicized print represents the bold print of the *Commentary* here and in all citations.

³⁹ Brown, *The Gospel of John: XIII–XXI*, AB 29a.

⁴⁰ Brown, 1982.

⁴¹ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 1979.

⁴² *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 1987.

⁴³ NRSV translation is cited for all Johannine quotations.

Such persons bear a threefold fruit in this life. The first is that they avoid sin. Secondly, they are eager to accomplish works of holiness . . . Thirdly they are eager for the progress of others. . . . They also produce a fourth fruit. . . . eternal life is the last and perfect fruit of our labors. . . .⁴⁴

Thomas also cites verse 5b as a response to the proud Pelagians who claim that they can do “by themselves, without the help of God, the good works of the virtues and of the law.”⁴⁵

For verse 8a, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,” Thomas describes how Christ’s words abide in the disciple: loving, believing, meditating and accomplishing them.”⁴⁶ The individual not only internalizes Christ’s words but accomplishes them, “bears much fruit” (v. 8b).

Next, Thomas summarizes what verses 9–12 indicate about how disciples remain in Jesus. They are “to love our neighbor based on his example.”⁴⁷ It is a prelude to his insights about friendship in verses 13–16.

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (v. 13). Here Thomas states that Christ laid down his life for his enemies “to make him his friends.”⁴⁸ He also notes that laying down one’s life for one’s friends” is the sign of the greatest love “because there are four lovable things to put in order: God, our soul, our neighbor, and our body. We should love God more than ourselves and our neighbor, so that for the sake of God we ought to give ourselves, body and soul, for < rather than and > our neighbor.”⁴⁹

“You are my friends if you do what I command you” (v. 14). For Thomas, “friends” can be understood in two ways, namely, either because one loves or one is loved. Similarly, “if you do what I command you,” means that a friend, who is a guardian of one’s soul, will guard or keep God’s commandments. Also, God confers grace and helps those who are loved to keep the commandments. “It is not they who first loved God, but God makes them lovers by loving them.”⁵⁰

The sign of Christ’s friendship for them is the heart of verse 15: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” Thomas comments:

⁴⁴ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 1992.

⁴⁵ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 1993.

⁴⁶ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 1995.

⁴⁷ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 2010.

⁴⁸ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 2009.

⁴⁹ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 2009.

⁵⁰ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 2011.

a friend reveals the secrets of his heart to his friend . . . Now God reveals his secrets to us by letting us share in his wisdom: ‘In every generation she <Wisdom> passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets’ (Wis 7:27).⁵¹

What does Jesus hear from the Father? Correspondingly, what do the disciples hear from Jesus? For Thomas, Jesus hears the knowledge of his essence from the Father that he shares with his disciples.⁵² Thomas quotes Gregory:

‘All the things he has made known to his servants are the joys of interior love and the feasts of our heavenly fatherland, which he excites in our minds every day by the breath of his love. For as long as we love the sublime heavenly things we have heard, we already know what we love, because the love itself is knowledge.’⁵³

As a contemporary interpreter, I interpret verse 15 within the theology of the Fourth Gospel. Jesus whose life with the Father includes dynamic, mutual knowing, shares that reality with the disciples and invites them to share in their life.⁵⁴

The cause of friendship is described in verse 16a: “You did not choose me but I chose you.” Thomas comments: “It is the usual practice for each one of us to say that he or she is the cause of friendship . . . Our Lord rejects this . . . He <says>: Whoever has been called to this sublime friendship should not attribute the cause of this friendship to himself, but to me, who chose him or her as a friend . . . So, I have chosen you by predestining you from all eternity, and by calling you to the faith during your lifetime.”⁵⁵

Being chosen for friendship with Jesus is just the beginning. In verse 16b, Jesus continues, “And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” For Thomas, the verse implies going to travel “over the whole world to convert the whole world to the faith . . . <which> is the fruit of conversion . . . so that the faithful would be led into eternal life and their spiritual fruit flourish.”

When we look at John 15, we see especially the beauty of the vine and branches imagery and the friendship sayings. They express the dynamic life of Jesus, the Father and the disciples in mutual knowing,

⁵¹ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 2016.

⁵² *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 2017.

⁵³ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 2018. The citation is attributed to Greg. Hom. xxvii in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, volume IV, Part II, St. John (Albany, New York: Preserving Christian Publications, Inc., 1995), 486. The identity of Gregory is unclear.

⁵⁴ Mary Margaret Pazdan, *Discipleship as the Appropriation of Eschatological Salvation in the Fourth Gospel* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1982), 311–313; “Gifts, Challenges, and Promises in John 13—17,” *The Bible Today* 38.2 (2002), 78.

⁵⁵ *CGJ*, Part II, 15, 2019, 2024.

loving and abiding, Disciples are also commissioned “to bear much fruit”, i.e., to invite others to believe in Jesus and the Father.

Are Thomas’ insights valuable for contemporary interpreters? Is it possible for them to dialogue? Do they recognize his insights?

Eleonore Stump, a medieval philosopher at St. Louis University, evaluates Thomas’ *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*:

<It> also belongs to Aquinas’s mature philosophical theology and contains detailed discussions of such subjects as the nature of the Trinity, the beatific vision, and the love of God, as well as sensitive, acute interpretations of the biblical narrative.⁵⁶

However, Dr. Stump also recognizes that his scholarly emphases are directed toward appropriating earlier philosophers’ and theologians’ insights rather than on “engaging in historical investigation of the biblical texts.”⁵⁷ She is not sure that Thomas “would have welcomed contemporary historical biblical scholarship if he had known it.”⁵⁸

Walter H. Principe, a Thomistic scholar from the Pontifical Medieval Institute in Toronto, observes that while Thomas’ biblical commentaries often parallel and corroborate his theological works, <they> “add significantly to them because the scriptural texts often lead Aquinas to criticize certain kinds of traditions and also to affirm from Scripture itself a key criterion for judging traditions.”⁵⁹ In his lecturing and writing, Thomas wrote practical applications for his students. His criteria for “rejecting some traditions . . . that oppose the Gospel and God’s will, may have been a warning to his students about such ‘pseudo-traditions.’”⁶⁰

Thomas F. O’Meara, another Thomistic scholar at Notre Dame University, comments:

Exegesis and theology go together. The words of the Bible are not verbal celestial magic but exemplifications of the interplay of the created and the graced. Not confusing literary forms, Aquinas within the limitations of his time sought to understand in the text an inspired meaning and then its relationship to science and life.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Eleonore Stump, “Biblical Commentary and Philosophy,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 254.

⁵⁷ Stump, 256.

⁵⁸ Stump, 256.

⁵⁹ Walter H. Principe, CSB, “‘Tradition’ in Thomas Aquinas’ Scriptural Commentaries,” *The Quadrilog: Tradition and the Future of Ecumenism: Essays in Honor of George H. Tavard*, ed. Kenneth Hagen (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Michael Glazier, 1994), 43.

⁶⁰ Principe, 52.

⁶¹ Thomas F. O’Meara, 71. Cf. Torrance, 285..

When we consider biblical commentators' assessment of Thomas in the church and the academy, he is often dismissed as pious, spiritual and not focused. His style and interpretive lens do not parallel contemporary journals, monographs and commentaries. He does not fit in *one* world of the text, according to the categories of post-modern hermeneutics. Rather, he embraces and relates all of them to a text because of his *single-hearted passion* for the Word of God. According to the Pontifical Biblical Commission's recent document, Thomas epitomizes Catholic interpretation:

<It> deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the church, whose first concern is fidelity to the revelation attested by the Bible. Modern hermeneutics has made clear, as we have noted, the impossibility of interpreting a text without starting from a 'pre-understanding' of one type or another.⁶²

Thomas inherited models of interpretation from tradition, his "pre-understanding." However, he drew from other sources, e.g., Aristotle and Jewish commentaries, and utilized patterns of dialectical learning, namely, definition, division, and demonstration, to create a responsible tradition for the church. Most of all, Thomas demonstrates "the dynamic pattern of interpretation that is found within the Bible itself and continues in the life of the church. This dynamic pattern corresponds to the requirement that there be a lived affinity between the interpreter and the object . . ." ⁶³

For Thomas, there was no academic distancing between "the interpreter and the object", i.e., the Word of God. Thomas developed his extraordinary gifts of preaching, teaching and writing to speak the truth about the Word in the midst of and in service of the Church and the world.⁶⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx sums up Thomas' life. He is "love in the form of service of the truth which liberates men and women . . . He is also a saint in his rational thinking. And our rational and technological age, above all our Western culture today, has special need of such saints."⁶⁵

Thomas' biblical commentaries, especially his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, are invitations to all of us to consider: What is our passion? Are we willing to be engaged in the vocation to which God calls us? Are we willing to use all the gifts of our minds and hearts in service of the Word? It does not matter who we are or where we live or what we do for a living. God through Jesus calls us friends. We are invited to live in that friendship, to go forth and bear fruit, to ask for

⁶² *IBC*, III.

⁶³ *IBC*, III.

⁶⁴ Boyle, 9.

⁶⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *For the Sake of the Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 129.

whatever we need that Jesus' joy may be in us and our joy may be complete (John 15:11).

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