

Integration of Knowledge in the University in Light of Saint Thomas Aquinas

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Part of my preparations to come to the ICUSTA 2022 Conference here in Argentina involved applying for a visa. After I submitted all the required papers to the Embassy, and before I was asked to make a payment for the visa, I was told that I would be interviewed through video call. It sounded to me like an examination. I wondered whether I would still be required to pay if I did not, as it were, ‘pass the examination.’ At the start of the interview, I was put at ease by the friendly and relaxed manner of the embassy official who interviewed me. After a few preliminary personal questions, I got surprised that the embassy official was keen to discuss about Saint Thomas Aquinas. The first question he asked about Saint Thomas was: “Given that he lived in medieval times in the 13th century, is Saint Thomas Aquinas still relevant today?” I had not expected that the interview would be a discourse on Saint Thomas. Nevertheless, I welcomed it as I was in the process of putting my ideas together for this paper, and St. Thomas was very much in my thoughts. I also soon discovered that the embassy official had done his homework on who Saint Thomas was and what St. Thomas taught when he asked: “Saint Thomas was influenced by Aristotle, wasn’t he?”

My discussion with the embassy official gave me the idea that in order for the university to integrate knowledge in the light of St. Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the starting point – especially for our students, many of whom are millennials growing up in the digital age where getting information is got instantly at the click of a key board – is to answer the question the embassy official asked me, to answer that question even before students ask the question: “Given that he lived in medieval times in the 13th century, is Saint Thomas Aquinas still relevant today?”

There are many passages from St. Thomas’ writings that can be cited to show how relevant St. Thomas is to today’s world, and indeed to all the future, but one that grabs one’s attention for this purpose is the following from Summa Theologica:

“So the best ordering of power within a city or a kingdom is obtained when there is one virtuous head who commands over all; and who has under him others who govern virtuously; and when, furthermore, all participate in the election of those who rule.

This is the best form of constitution which results from a judicious admixture of the kingdom, in that there is one person at the head of it; of aristocracy in that many participate in the government according to virtue; and of democracy or popular rule, in that rulers may be elected from the people and the whole population has the right of electing its rulers.

It was such a form of government which was established by the divine law” (St. Thomas Aquinas, The Solutio of the First Article, Question 105, Summa Theologica.

Commenting on this passage, Antonio Fazio, Governor of the Bank of Italy, wonders:

“Who among us, today, men and democrats of the twenty-first century, would not be willing to subscribe the substance of these assertions? They were set down more than seven centuries ago, in an age in which kingdoms and principalities, and the right to rule them, were acquired and maintained mainly by force of arms” (Antonio Fazio, 2000).

This passage would be of interest to students of Political Science, Political Economy, History, and Governance. Many other passages could be identified from St. Thomas' various expositions to show his relevance to today's world and, indeed, to the world of the future. These passages would be derived from the many knowledge disciplines in which St. Thomas excelled, disciplines such as Philosophy, Theology, Logic, Law, Bioethics, and many other disciplines of knowledge.

Emphasizing St. Thomas' relevance to the twenty-first century as shown in the passage on democracy quoted above, Antonio Fazio says:

"The principles enunciated here are those upon which the Italian Constitution and other modern constitutions are based.

Sovereignty belongs to the people, which has the right to elect those by whom it is to be governed.

Anyone may be selected, and all take part in the voting; there is no discrimination of any kind.

However, the text adds, the person who is selected to govern must be chosen for his capacity and moral qualities, secundum virtutem. His subordinates, designated to govern particular aspects of political and social life, must be with reference to the same criterion. They form an aristocracy, not in the common acceptance of a wealthy propertied class, but according to the etymon signifying the "best", "the worthiest" (Antonio Fazio, 2000.)

The argument to make here is not so much that St. Thomas' discourse was relevant well beyond his time, but that he articulated fundamental truths that are not governed by time or geographical limitations. He articulated universal truths derived and integrated from the philosophers of the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome, the Church fathers and, above all, the scriptures.

St. Thomas Aquinas speaks to all ages, particularly our age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the age of Artificial Intelligence where robots function more efficiently than human beings, because he helps us to have an approach to engage, or perhaps even to answer the perpetual problem, the apparently unsolvable conundrum, the imponderable: how can we reconcile religion with science, and how do we reconcile faith with reason?

Abraham Joshua Heschel says, *"One of the maladies of our time is shattered confidence in human nature. We are inclined to believe that the world is a pandemonium, that there is no sense in virtue, no import in integrity; that we only graft goodness upon selfishness, and relish self-indulgence in all values, that we cannot but violate truth with evasion. Honesty is held to be wishful thinking, purity the squaring of the circle of human nature. The hysteria of suspicion has made us unreliable to ourselves, trusting neither our aspirations nor our convictions. Suspiciousness, not skepticism, is the beginning of our thinking. This sneering doctrine holds many of us in its spell. It has profoundly affected the character and life of modern man. The man of today shrinks from the light. He is afraid to think as he feels, afraid to admit he believes, afraid to love what he admires."*

With a fundamental belief in natural law, Justice, in God, in the goodness of man, and in the hierarchy of creation as part of the law of nature, with God, whom St. Thomas describes as "the pure being," at the helm, St. Thomas provides hope to the world of shattered confidence

described by Heschel above. St. Thomas' belief in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity is a rallying call for all human beings to live by these virtues. Yes, man may err, St. Thomas acknowledges, but that does not mean he is bad, or that he is incapable of doing good. In fact, before one condemns himself or is condemned by others, St. Thomas argues that moral philosophy requires that rightness or wrongness be judged in consideration of the following fundamental qualities:

1. **Existence.** The fact that we are alive is good. Yes, the fact that a blind man exists is good; what is bad is that he is blind. Before a blind man begins to consider his as a shattered world as described by Heschel above, he should acknowledge and be grateful that he is alive, that he exists.
2. **Object of an activity.** Aquinas believed that moral action was best assessed by examining the object and goal of the action. He agrees with Aristotle who said a married man who steals to pay for a prostitute is more an adulterer than a thief. Intentions are therefore for St. Thomas an important aspect of rightness and wrongness. We pray today that God purifies our intentions, and Masses are also offered for specific intentions.

While discourses on the universal and timeless truths propounded by St. Thomas Aquinas can be conducted in the various knowledge disciplines St. Thomas wrote about as mentioned earlier in this presentation, knowledge disciplines such as Theology, Law, Logic, Philosophy, Politics, Governance, History, Bioethics and others, it would help, in my view, if the university were to design a course on Thomistic Ethics that would be an integration of Thomistic discourses from his various knowledge disciplines. Ethics is defined as *“that branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions”* (Dictionary.com). St. Thomas' moral philosophy goes beyond the mere existence or incidence of an action to include, as required by natural law, the object, goal and circumstance of such an action. The Thomistic Ethics course would thus amalgamate and integrate moral perspectives from across all knowledge disciplines.

The Thomistic Ethics course would be a rich exploration of St. Thomas Aquinas proposition that faith and reason, and science and theology need not be opposed to each other but could, on the contrary, co-exist.

When all is said and done, however, especially in this conundrum of reason and science on one hand, and faith on the other hand, St. Thomas would echo St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 5:7: “For we walk by faith, not by sight,” which, by itself, is a contradiction for the university which teaches science, logic and reason and pass students on how well they articulate and apply them.