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The Theology of Thomas Aquinas, Selected Topics

15 February 2009

### **“In Your Light We See Light”**

In I,12, St. Thomas addresses the question of how creatures can have knowledge of God. After having established the possibility of a created intellect seeing the essence of God, I,12,5 explores the question, “does a created intellect need some created light in order to see the essence of God?” Thomas’ affirmative to this question builds on the previous article that concludes that a created intelligence cannot see God *through its own nature* because the essence of God is far beyond the mode of the being of the knower. So, if a created intelligence cannot see God through its own nature, it can only see God by receiving supernatural help. The natural created intellect must be supernaturally raised to a level so that “the very essence of God becomes the intelligible form of the intellect” [I,12,5c21].

The ability of the created mind must be enhanced by divine grace, and this enhancement is called “illumination” of the intellect. The use of this term here invokes the analogy to the necessity of physical illumination in order for physical sight to operate. However, there are important differences with this illumination by grace because it is primarily a transformation of those who are to see God so that they are made like God, and thus becoming like God by grace, are able to see him. In contrast, physical illumination does not change the eye, but instead renders the object of sight intelligible. Indeed, this is the first objection in the article that since God is himself light, a created light is not needed in order to see him. Thomas’ answer is that the created light is not needed in order illuminate God, but to give the knower the capacity to receive the light of God. The use of two kinds of light here become confusing, but we can’t blame Thomas for using this terminology because it is Biblical, as is seen in the SC which quotes Ps. 36:9, “In your light we see light.”

As I thought about this idea of God creating light within his creatures by grace so that they could see the light of his essence, I was reminded of the theology of Gregory Palamas. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Greek Hesychast monks claimed to be able to see the uncreated light of God, but opponents said such a claim was impossible because God was unknowable in his essence. In the monks defense, Gregory Palamas explained that although God is unknowable in his *essence*, he can be known and seen through his *energies*, which are also a part of his being. It was the energies of God that the Hesychasts were seeing.

It appears to me that from a Thomistic point of view, Palamas' essence/energy distinction is unnecessary. Whether or not the Hesychasts actually did see the uncreated light of God, Thomas said that a vision of God's essence is possible, but such vision is not comprehensive [I, 12,1ad1]. Although this vision is primarily seen as given to the saints in heaven, Thomas does give examples of two men who have had such a vision in this life, Moses and Paul [I,12,12ad2].

One additional difference with Palamas is that he claimed to have seen this light with his physical eyes<sup>1</sup>. However Thomas explains in I,12,3 that this is not possible because the power of bodily vision cannot extend beyond corporeal things, and God is incorporeal.

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1 . Fortescue, Adrian. "Hesychasm." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 14 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07301a.htm>>.