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AQUINAS AND THE COMMUNITY OF HUMAN PERSONS

Michael W. Strasser

For the sake of simplicity, let us ponder on the community of humans considered as the education and the communication of human persons; an education and a communication that spring forth only from an extraordinary kind of friendship. We shall see that with varying degrees of success, Greeks, Jews and Christians understood this friendship to be primordially an act. Through his study of their three traditions, St. Thomas Aquinas was able to say how this act was realized among us.

We should notice first that when we speak of the *human* community we are always speaking of a community of *persons*.

For St. Thomas, *human* persons are enfleshed spirits. Being spiritual bodies or bodily spirits by nature, we are always only more or less intellectual and always only more or less free. In fact, being embodied spirits, our intellectuality and our freedom are frighteningly pedestrian. "Pedestrian" describes the step-by-step progress of the human individual and the human species toward greater intellectuality and ever greater freedom. It is not an uninterrupted progress as the history of man makes abundantly clear. Still, on the planet Earth, it is only man who, by his reasoning and his choices, lifts his children, or at least tries to elevate them, a little bit higher out of the pit of primitivity from which we all began.

This is to say that humans as persons can learn from their predecessors how to surpass their predecessors. But, when we reflect upon it, we come gradually to see that this is not an easy task. After all, we must count among our predecessors some who were truly great. If, then, we ever come to see even further than our ancestors, it will happen only because like dwarves we sit on the shoulders of those giants.

That beautiful metaphor, passed on to us by the 16th century Diego de Estella, is after all only a metaphor. What was he telling us? Surely, he was not saying that we are physically taller than our ancestors—even if we are. Nor was he saying that we shall be wiser than they, or better, simply because we have appeared on the scene a moment later. No. He was saying that only if we do two things can we hope to surpass them: if we learn all that they have to teach us, then we shall be their equals in knowledge. Secondly, if we learn all that they can teach us in a shorter time than it took them to learn it, then, and only then, shall we be enabled to learn more than they knew. We shall stand taller as persons than previous generations stood only if, by learning quickly from them, we learn still more and do even better.

It would seem then that possessing ourselves as a community of persons—something that other animals do not do—we have also in the records of that history an

extraordinary wealth of resources. Those records contain such riches because all those ancestors of ours were teachers. What is more, not only the continuity of the human community but also the constructive discontinuities of that community are nothing more nor less than the deliberate and continual and patient labor of learning and teaching. But, the process, let us notice, takes place only in that order: learning and then teaching. Thus, the motto of the Order of Brothers-Preachers, to which St. Thomas Aquinas belonged, was "survey, behold, observe, consider, then give the fruits of your contemplation to others" (*contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere*).¹

This notion of the human community as a familial and rigorous educational process was already foreshadowed by the Greeks. Plato in his *Phaedo*, in the *Republic*, in the *Symposium* and in the *Laws* makes it clear that the entire course of human life should be a continual receiving and giving of instruction. For him, this is the principal task of the human community. For Aristotle also, the central occupation of government was to provide for the inculcation of, and even the habituation into, excellence (*areté*) in all the citizens. Aristotle was in agreement with Plato on this: the chief work of society is to encourage the love of justice, taken as synonymous with excellence, but, most of all, to foster a unique kind of friendship.²

It comes as no surprise, then, to notice that the Greek expressions for community, instruction and friendship tend to converge (cf. *koinonía*, *homilía*, and *philía*). This also suggests, however, that the principal school of ancient Greece was not the Academy or the Stoa; nor was it the Lyceum of Aristotle nor the Garden of Epicurus. It was Athens itself; it was the community of Athenians, all knowing each other and (at least in time of war) supporting each other; all instructing one another by rigorous example and competitive performance.

This ideal of the community as synonymous with education and as based upon friendship is passed along to the Middle Ages. Therefore, if the parallel holds true, the principal school in the 13th century was not at Montpellier or Bologna, nor was it at Paris or Oxford. It was the monastery or the convent which was the school of "Christian living." It was the community of monks or nuns, a community of "brothers" or "sisters," who knew each other and (except when they were in need of reform) supported one another; all, by the example of their lives, educating each other for heaven, i.e. for citizenship in the kingdom of God.

Yet, a singular difference distinguished the city of God from the city of Athens. It is seen in the fact that citizenship in Athens was restricted solely to those whose parents had been citizens. No such extrinsic limitations were imposed upon those who sought membership in the community of heaven.

If we concentrate upon the community of human persons, says Thomas Aquinas, we shall find it different from any other community on the planet.

In Aquinas' terminology, *communitas* in its most general sense meant no more than *sharedness* or *commonness*. Thus, Aquinas can speak of the *communitas* of a genus or the *communitas* of a species. But, the sharedness of a *communitas* of per-

sons is not merely the set of qualities peculiar to some genus—as, for example the qualities of sensation and locomotion that set apart the genus of animals from the genus of plants in such a way as to constitute the *communitas* of animals. No, the *communitas* of persons is not even reducible to the *communitas* of a species; thus, for example, it is something more than the merely gregarious behavior of the primates.³ The *communitas* of persons is something radically different. For “man is more communicative with the other than any other animal known to be gregarious such as the crane or the ant or the bee.”⁴ In short, it is because the community of humans is a community of persons that we are fated to being more communicative than any other animal on earth.

I say “fated” because communicativeness can sometimes seem more a curse than a blessing. Thus, St. John Berchmans used to say: “my penance is to live the common life.”⁵ He was undoubtedly referring to the agony that is occasionally involved in trying to understand another person or in attempting to make oneself understood; he was pointing, I suspect, to the labor of exchanging ideas in time and through the fumbling efforts of the body; he may have been thinking of what is the most terrifying thing of all—the ways in which *with the best of good will that we can muster* we yet hurt, sometimes cripple and, on occasion, even destroy one another. More often though, community life, extended through our bodies and drawn out through time, is less than dramatic; we offend by failing to compliment the other for his or her small achievement; it may be, as the commercials admonish us, that we simply neglect to use the proper deodorant. Nor are our friends all they should be. One talks far too much; another talks so rarely that he hardly seems a friend at all. One person, wishing to amuse, becomes boisterous; another, unwilling to risk the enthymeme, spells out all the steps in his thinking until we find ourselves nodding ever more vigorously in the hope of speeding him on to his conclusion. Such encounters are exhausting. But, so are those with a colleague who is obsequious to the extent of being a flatterer, not to mention those dreary meetings with persons who are more surly and more discontented than anyone has a right to be. So much for the community of humans according to John Berchmans!

The community of humans is set apart from all other communities by being so extraordinarily communicative that, for St. Thomas, *communicatio* is a synonym for the *communitas* of persons. But, because our community is a community of embodied persons it is a society in which we must endure the other as well as enjoy him.

Our problem is now emerging. If the community of human persons is not only the joy of learning and the triumph of teaching but also the never-ending discipline of receiving instruction and the grueling labor of giving it again; if communication amongst us is not only as warm as the hearth and as ecstatic as love but also so open to offense as to almost invite betrayal, so inevitably soul-searing as to include both the giving and the receiving of offense, then how shall we poor humans ever bring it off?

Is it too much to say that we probably fail at least as often as we succeed? And, is it invidious to suppose that the ancient Greeks may have failed even more frequently than we? Apart from the history of their quarrels and their wars, there seems to be further evidence for this evaluation in the fact that they had no word for the quality that might have dissipated or at least reduced their animosities.

Both Plato and Aristotle agree that a community needs friendliness even more than it needs justice. Still, they had no word for friendliness. We understand that it is friendliness they were talking about only because, for example, Aristotle says such things as the following: the attitude we are talking about "most resembles friendship (*philia*)," but, unlike friendship it need imply "no emotion or affection for one's associates."⁶ A community needs this benevolent disposition of everyone for his neighbor, if the community is to cohere. Those sages of antiquity knew that a community absolutely requires this preference of good for the other along with the readiness to suffer his unintended offenses even if the other be from the opposite end of the city. Yet, the Greeks, who had a word for everything, knew no word for this most important element of community living. Was it for them more a dream than a reality?

The significance of words sometimes escapes us. When someone questions the propriety of a word we are inclined to dismiss the issue as being merely "semantic;" we might as well have said "pedantic" or "trivial." But, for the ancients and the mediaevals who thought that "community" was synonymous with "communication" and "conversation,"⁷ a single word could quite literally spell the difference between life and death. It still happens with the pronouncement, "innocent" or "guilty."

A concern with the word we seek was present also in the 16th century. Efforts were then being made in England to translate the Bible from what had been the vernacular, Latin, into what had now become the language of the people, English (just as St. Jerome had centuries before translated the Bible from its previously universally understood language, Greek, into what had then become the language of everyone, Latin). In the generation before Shakespeare, St. Thomas More, himself one of the creators of modern English, was enthusiastic about this important project. The one word, however, that he did not know how to translate was *caritas*. He objected to using "love" in its place. This man who loved a first wife and a second; this man who loved his several children along with their husbands and wives and their children; this man who cared for his father with reverence and his father's successive wives (five in number); this man who welcomed wards to his home and young artists such as Holbein and wandering scholars such as Erasmus; this man who fed the poor at his table and built hospitals for them on his property; this man who loved his clients and his fellow citizens and even his king—this "man for all seasons" did not think "love" was good enough as a translation of *caritas*.

Surely, Thomas More would have approved the Anglicization of *caritas* into "charity." At that time "charity" was a word that means exactly what *caritas* had

meant in Latin: the utterly unique love of God for man and man's love in turn for God and neighbor. It remained for a later age to demean "charity" to a begrudged contribution to a community fund.

Several centuries before the Christian era, the translators of the Hebraic Bible into the Greek Septuagint must have had a similar problem. However, they solved it by finding that there had been a Greek word for this most vital of communal forces all along. *Agápe* would do well in place of the Hebrew, *'ahebh*. But, why had the Greeks themselves not noticed it? Why did we have to wait for the writers of the Bible to discover it?

This is not to say that the verb *agapáo* was not already present in Epic Greek. Used of persons, it meant to treat them with affection, to caress, to love, to be fond of. Used concerning things, it meant to be well pleased with them or contented with them.⁸ Various derivatives of this verb, all having clearly related meanings, are found in ancient Greek literature from Homer to Plutarch. Yet, "it is indeed striking that the substantive *agápe* is almost completely lacking in pre-biblical Greek."⁹

In the Old Testament the various words used to express the spontaneous feeling that moves one toward the giving of oneself to another person or to the seizing of a thing which awakens this feeling or to the performance of actions in which pleasure is felt—all these words had both a profane and a sacred use.¹⁰ But, besides being a feeling that moves one to overt action, love is a strange power of the soul; thus, one loves "with all one's heart and soul and strength." Love is most often directed toward persons. Therefore, in its religious use, love is always a correlative of God's personal nature; love for God's word, or law, or temple are always referred back to a love of the divine person. The emotive and the psychic features of love merge in the Old Testament when one notices that love is such a powerful expression of personal life that it can hardly be voiced without conveying its passionate note. In any case, there is such a blending here of profane and sacred that one scholar has said: "in Hebrew . . . there is absolutely no possibility of expressing, even though it may be felt (2 Samuel 1:26), the distinction between the two magnitudes of *éros* and *agápe*."¹¹

To the above remarks, another scholar adds what seems to be a very important qualification. That is, Prof. Stauffer agrees that the same Hebraic term *'ahebh*, is the main word for love in the Old Testament and it is used in place of the whole range of different Greek terms which express different kinds of love. However, he also sees an easily overlooked distinction between the Hebrews' use of *'ahebh* for *éros* and their use of the same term for *agápe*.

To make this clear he lists the meanings that the Greek terms for love had prior to their employment by Hebrew translators. *Eros* meant passionate and, usually, sensual love; *philia* was the solicitous love of friend for friend which is not so much an impulse that overcomes (like *éros*) as it is a task we are inclined to do but which we could nevertheless avoid; *agápe*, however, had neither the intoxication of *éros* nor the affectionate concern of *philia*. Uncertain of etymology, *agapáo* was also weak

and variable in meaning. Nevertheless, it did have one meaning which we have not yet mentioned. *Agapáo* could mean, "I prefer," "I esteem one person more highly than another."

Thus contrasted, *éros* was a general love of almost anyone or anything, a love that tended to seek satisfaction wherever it could; but, *agápe* was a love which distinguished its object from others, a love which chose the other and clung to him.

This suggests a further clarification. Old Testament religion has nothing of that religious eroticism, found in the Greek world and other surrounding nations, which expressed itself in such institutions as temple prostitution and fertility cults. On the one hand, God's love for Israel is not, like *éros*, impelled; it is an act of free choice. On the other, the love for God and neighbor which is demanded of Israel is not a matter of emotion but of doing. More than that, the love of Yahweh and the Israelite is exclusive. This active and preferential character of *'ahabh* is probably the reason why the translators of the Hebrew text almost always render this, their favorite word for love, into *agápe*. This means, of course, that even their notion of erotic love was different from that of the Greeks.¹² In short, "the true victor in the competition is the ancient *'ahabh*, which impresses upon the colorless Greek word its own rich and strong meaning."¹³

In the New Testament, Hillel's summary of all the commandments is reaffirmed: love God and love your neighbor. Only now *agápe* is demanded with an exclusiveness that makes all other commands no more than means to it; every other activity finds in this its standard. Financial wealth, prestige, not even persecution should deter us from this one commandment. Now, however, neighborly love is decisively freed from its restriction to one's fellow citizens. It is not so high flown as to be a love of humanity. It is still sober: "love your neighbor as yourself." What has changed is the meaning of "neighbor."

There are other changes, at least by way of expectation of future human conduct. For example, the command to love one's enemies. Care should be given without expecting it to be returned. Good should be done to those who hate us. We should return blessings for curses; we should pray for those who persecute us. An unheard of will for bearing witness is now in evidence. It is as though everyone should act in this manner and as though everyone could.

Another change is in the account given of the world. Jesus brings forgiveness for our sins. Here is an event whose foundation exists in God alone. Here is a mercy that obliges us to be peacemakers as well; rather than judge our neighbors we should be prepared to forgive them. Everywhere is the call for peace and reconciliation. Jesus even calls some to walk in the way of the prophets; this is best expressed in compassion for others and especially for the lowliest.

For St. Paul, the eternal love of God has become in Christ a world-changing event. Characteristically, he speaks of this event in verbal forms and in the past tense: God

has sent his Son for our sakes and, through him, has brought us back to life and has made us his work of art. Divine love aims at the production of a new kind of human being. Still, this is a work which needs human cooperation; in fact, it is a call to the fullest freedom. God has spoken first; from him proceeds the relationship and from him *agápe*. Our *agápe* is only our decision to permit that which we have received to flow back. This love for our brothers stands under the sign of the cross. Therefore, it is a readiness for service and sacrifice, for forgiveness and consideration, for lifting up the fallen and restoring the broken. Because *agápe* builds the future, it is the only vital force which has a future in this age of death.

St. James expresses *agápe* in concretely practical commands which forbid a comfortable escape. We should not withhold the rights of laborers; we should treat with respect even those who are dressed in rags. For St. John, *agápe* is a heavenly reality which is revealed and made victorious through our activity. It makes of the Father and the Son and the Son's people a fellowship which is not of this world. The law of this fellowship is *agápe*; it is a kind of existence; it is even "an actualization of God in this world."¹⁴

St. Thomas Aquinas was more concerned with the meaning of this biblical legacy than most of us today. Since childhood he had been wondering about it. Since his youth he had dedicated his life to a vigorous and painstaking study of it, along with an orderly and exhaustive presentation of it. Most important of all, like Paul, James and John, like Ambrose, Augustine and Anselm, he had been trying to live it.

Apparently he saw the dream of Greek friendliness realized only in the City of God. For him it must have been the example of some of the Benedictine monks at Monte Cassino. No doubt too it was the living performance of Dominican brothers he had met in Naples. Could it have been anything else that impressed him so much as the lives of these men who had put aside wealth and family and their own will to free themselves for the work of God? Wasn't it their day in and day out practicing of community as the education and communication of human persons that moved Thomas to go and do likewise?¹⁵

If, then, we ask our question of Aquinas what will he reply? The question was: if the community of human persons is such a harrowing labor that we sometimes seem tragically destined to it, how shall we ever bring it off?

His answer is consistent with both his tradition and his experience. It is the characteristically qualified reply of a theologian: we, by ourselves, will never bring it off. But, if we are able to notice that the extraordinary friendship that the community of humans requires has already been shown to us by the God who gives us a share in his blessedness, then we have in that gift the foundation for friendship with God.¹⁶ Now this friendship is not arduous since it is an already accomplished union. Moreover, since this is a friendship on-the-way it is always open to further growth.¹⁷ But, since it is God's own goodness that we esteem in this friendship, it is in the name of this same goodness that we ought to esteem our neighbor; that is,

that he might be in God.¹⁸ And, by the way, it is very one-sided to consider this friendship painful. In fact, even on-the-way, it is much more the source of joy than it is the occasion for sorrow.¹⁹ It is also the source of peace, of compassion, of beneficence and of the various works of mercy—including the readiness to correct our friends when they are seriously in the wrong.

Just as the extraordinary friendship of the Bible had to be present to the Hebrew translators of the Septuagint before they could find the Greek word to express it, so the community of human persons as education and communication had to be both learned and lived by Aquinas before he could find the verb that is the source of this more abundant life.²⁰ Having found it, he was able to root all the forms of Aristotelian excellence (*areté*) in the friendship that Aristotle could not so much as name.²¹

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NOTES

St. Thomas uses these very words himself; cf. *S.T.*, II-II, q. 188, a. 6.

Nic. Ethics, VIII, 1 (1155a22-28); *Pol.* II, 5 (1263a39).

³ *S.T.*, I, Q. 30, a. 4, ad 3.

⁴ *St. Thomas Aquinas on Kingship to the King of Cyprus*, done into English by Gerald B. Phelan, revised with introduction and notes by I. Th. Eschmann, O.P., The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, Canada (1949), Bk. I, ch. 1 (p. 5). This quotation obviously borrows from Aristotle; cf. *Politics*, I, 2 (1253a8-18).

⁵ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1st ed., The Encyclopedia Press, N.Y. (1913) vol. VIII, p. 451, article by H. Demain, S.J. This rich quotation was first pointed out to me by my distinguished colleague, the Reverend Cornelius C. Holly, C.S.Sp., chairman of the Classics Department, Duquesne University.

⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, 6, 1126b12-1127a12. It is W. D. Ross who translates this usage of *philia* as "friendliness."

⁷ It is perhaps revealing that most of the intensely active meanings of the English word, "conversation," have been obsolete since the 17th century; cf. *Webster's Third International Dictionary*.

⁸ Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press (1961), p. 4.

⁹ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. and London (1964), vol. I, article on *agapáo*, *agápe*, *agapétós* by Ethelbert Stauffer, p. 37. I was introduced to this invaluable source by the Reverend Francis X. Malinowski, Acting Chairman, Department of Theology, Duquesne University. It was he and Professors John Opie, Department of History, Duquesne University, and Thomas Schaub, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, who transliterated for me the Hebrew terms in Kittel.

¹⁰ These remarks are in all instances taken from the article by Gottfried Quell, *Ibid.*, pp. 21-35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹² It is true that Plato and Aristotle and finally Plotinus will have *éros* undergoing various transmutations that elevate it above mere bodily hunger. But rarely does *agápe* arouse special consideration.

¹³ G. Kittel, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁵ Concerning the relationship of the counsels to the commandment that sums up all the other commandments, he wrote: "Therefore, we see that although this command precedes the counsels in intention, yet in execution, the counsels precede this command." *Contra doctrinam retrahentium a religione*, c. 7.

¹⁶ *S.T.*, II-II, Q. 23, a.1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Q. 24, a.4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Q. 25, a.1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Qq. 28-33.

²⁰ This is a reference to Aquinas' emphasis on loving as the act more proper to *caritas* than being loved in *ibid.*, q. 27, a.1. The verb is *diligere*, to prefer, to esteem highly.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Q. 23, a.6.

