ELEVEN

Christ the Teacher in St. Thomas’s
Commentary on the Gospel of John

MICHAEL SHERWIN, O.P.

"Do not let yourselves be called teacher (magister), because one
alone is your teacher, the Christ." (Mt 23:10)

The first chapter of the Gospel of John describes an encounter be-
tween Jesus and two disciples of John the Baptist. These two disciples
are following Jesus when suddenly Jesus turns to them and asks,
“What do you seek?” The disciples respond, “Rabbi [which is translated
as ‘teacher’ in English, or magister in Latin], where do you dwell?”
(1:38). In his Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, Thomas Aquinas
portrays this encounter as a model of all encounters with Christ that
lead to discipleship. Aquinas regards it as initiating a unique relation-
ship, the relationship between Christ, the master, and his followers,
the disciples (see Ioan. 1, lect. 15, nn. 290–94). In the pages that follow
we shall investigate Aquinas’s description of this relationship and the
theory of moral education it implies.1

THE MEANING OF THE TERM MAGISTER

The first difficulty we must surmount is how to translate the term
magister. In common English parlance, “master” is regularly paired
with servant or slave. A master is one whom we must obey. Although
in the Latin of Aquinas a magister is also one whom we obey, this is

1. For an extended treatment of this theme that complements the present essay, see
the doctoral dissertation of Michael Dauphinais, The Pedagogy of the Incarnation:
Christ the Teacher according to St. Thomas Aquinas (Notre Dame: University of Notre
Dame, 2000).
not its primary connotation. *Magister* connotes not so much dominion over another as expertise in a domain of knowledge. A *magister* is one who has mastered a discipline. Aquinas himself, for example, was deemed a *magister in sacra pagina*, a title signifying that he was proficient in the study of sacred Scripture and had acquired an expert understanding of the unique *disciplina* it contains, the *disciplina spiritualis* known as *sacra doctrina*. It is in this context that we can also grasp the meaning of the term "discipulus." *Disciplina* and *discipulus* both derive from "discere," a Latin verb meaning "to learn." A person's identity as a disciple comes from his status as a learner of a specific discipline. It is this desire to learn that is the hallmark of the true disciple. Indeed, in Aquinas's view, the honest desire to learn from the Lord distinguishes a true disciple of Christ from those who follow him out of curiosity or only in order to test him (see *Joan*. 8, lect. 2, n. 1160). Perhaps a helpful way to convey in English the nuance of these terms and the relationship they express is by appealing to apprenticeship. Aquinas's description of discipleship with Christ is akin to apprenticeship with a master: Christ is the master craftsman of the human life, and his followers are apprentices in the trade of right living. With these terms better in focus, we can turn our attention to St. Thomas's conception of how Christ, the master, guides his people in this divine apprenticeship.

2. The contrast between the English word "master" and the Latin term *magister* emerges vividly when we compare the Latin of the Vulgate Bible with the English of the Revised Standard Version. Although in English we sometimes translate the Greek word *byron* as Lord and sometimes as Master, the Latin of the Vulgate never translates *byron* as *magister*. The Vulgate exclusively employs *dominus* to translate *byron*, reserving *magister* to translate *diakonos*. For example, although the RSV makes "master" the correlative of "slave," for the Vulgate, as for Aquinas, the correlative of *servus* is not *magister* but *dominus*, such as in the biblical phrases, *non est servus maior dominio suo* (Jn 13.16) and *servus nescit quid facit dominus eius* (Jn 13.15).


THE FATHER AS A TEACHER WHO CALLS AND
ATTRACTS US TO DISCIPLESHIP

The first reference to the term “magister” in St. Thomas’s Commentary on John appears in his analysis of the opening phrase of the Gospel: “In the beginning was the word.” Thomas considers the ways in which Christ is a “beginning,” a principium. He explains that in any discipline there is a twofold order: an order proper to the nature of the subject and an order that belongs to it in relation to us. Consequently, in the discipline of the Christian life (disciplina christiana) Christ is the beginning and principle of our wisdom in two ways. According to his proper nature in his divinity as the Word of God, he is wisdom itself. In relation to us, however, as the Word made flesh in the incarnation, he becomes a wisdom attainable by us (Joan. 1, lect. 1, n. 34). Both as the Word and as the Word-made-flesh, therefore, Christ is the principle and wellspring of all our wisdom.

This description of Christ places God the Father in the role of the teacher and Christ in the role of what is taught. Indeed, elsewhere in his Commentary, Aquinas describes Christ as the “ars patris,” the embodiment of the Father’s redeeming art. Just as the Word was the pattern (exemplar) according to which the Father created the world, so too the Word is the pattern (exemplar) according to which we are justified (Joan. 13, lect. 3, n. 1781). Aquinas holds that Christ himself addresses the Father’s role as the teacher of salvation in the Bread of Life discourse. There, Christ quotes Isaiah (54:13), “They shall all be taught by God,” adding that “Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me” (Jn 6:45). For St. Thomas the crucial feature of the Father’s pedagogy is the way in which it leads us to a relationship of loving trust with his Son. The Father does not merely teach us about the Son, he leads us to him; as Christ himself states, “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him” (Jn 6:44).

Aquinas asserts that the Father does this in the gift of faith. Although the act of faith is something we do, it is primarily a gift of God, who “draws” us to believe in his Son. By responding to this gift through an act of loving trust in Christ, one begins to be a disciple of Christ and enter into the apprenticeship of the Christian life.

This drawing by the Father is most effective, because, “every one who has heard the Father and has learned, comes to me.” Here he mentions two things: first, what relates to a gift of God, when he says, “has heard,” that is, through God who reveals; the other relates to a free decision (liberum arbitrium), when he says, “and has learned,” that is, by an assent. These two are necessary for every teaching of faith.
“Every one who has heard the Father,” teaching and making known, “and has learned,” by giving assent, “comes to me.” (Ioan. 6, lect. n. 946)

The disciples hear what the Father reveals about his son through the Father’s revealing grace, but they only learn what this means through a loving assent of the will. In other words, although faith is a gift that enlightens the intellect, we only truly learn what faith reveals when we respond in God’s gift of love. Aquinas is careful here to strike a balance between knowledge and love in the act of faith: although the intellect’s hearing requires the learning of love, love’s learning also requires the intellect’s hearing.

In each way [that one comes to Christ] it is necessary that one hear and learn. The one who comes through a knowledge of the truth must hear when God inspires: “I will hear what the Lord God will speak within me” (Ps 84:9); and he must learn through affection, as was said. The one who comes through love and desire—as the Lord describes below (Jos 7:37), “if any one thirsts, let him come to me and drink”—must hear the word of the Father and grasp it, in order to be moved in his affections. For that person learns the word who grasps it according to the meaning of the speaker. But the Word of God the Father breathes forth love. Therefore, the one who grasps it with eager love, learns, “Wisdom goes into holy souls, and makes them prophets and friends of God” (Wis 7:27). (Ioan. 6, lect. 5, n. 946)

In order to love, the intellect must first hear. Nonetheless, to learn what the intellect hears, we must love what we hear.⁵

Lastly, Aquinas affirms that the Father’s pedagogy leads to action. This hearing and learning lead the disciple to right action in imitation of Christ. Just as in speculative reasoning one who learns is led to affirm the right conclusion, so too in practical reasoning, one who learns is led to engage in right action (Ioan. 6, lect. 5, n. 946). Consequently, in Aquinas’s view, the Father’s pedagogy leads us to Christ in a threefold way: “by the knowledge of truth, the affection of love, and the imitation of action” (Ioan. 6, lect. 5, n. 946).

We began our analysis of the Father’s role in the call to discipleship by noting that St. Thomas portrays the Father as a teacher and Christ as what is taught. Elsewhere in his Commentary, however, we learn that as the wisdom of God, Christ is also our teacher. “As the wisdom of God he teaches everyone” (Ioan. 13, lect. 3, n. 1775). Not only does he teach us in his humanity by his words and deeds, but as God he teaches us interiorly, illuminating our minds. Indeed, although for Aquinas, the Father, Son, and Spirit are all equally our teachers (Ioan. 16, lect. 3, n. 2103), through the incarnation the

Son becomes our teacher in a unique way. He it is who calls us to enter into a unique apprenticeship of trust.

**FAITH IN THE MASTER AS THE CORNERSTONE OF DISCIPLESHIP**

The Role of Faith in Learning

In the *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas explains the necessity of faith by analogy with the process of learning in the sciences. "In order for someone to arrive at the perfect vision of happiness, he must first believe God, as a disciple believes the master who is teaching him." In order to learn from another, we must first believe that the other is trustworthy and knowledgeable in the subject at hand. Aquinas elsewhere explains that this is true at all levels of human learning. In his *Conferences on the Creed*, he states:

If a person were willing to believe only those things that he could know with assurance, he would not be able to live in this world. How would anyone be able to live unless he believed someone? How would he even know who his own father was? One must, therefore, believe someone about those things that he cannot know perfectly by himself.

Aquinas offers a similar argument in his *Commentary on John*:

This intellectual life is made perfect by the true knowledge of divine wisdom, which is eternal life: "this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3). But no one can arrive at any wisdom except by faith. Hence it is that in the sciences, no one acquires wisdom unless he first believes what is said by his teacher. Therefore, if we wish to acquire this life of wisdom, we must believe through faith the things proposed to us by it. "He who comes to God must believe that he exists and rewards those who seek him" (Heb 11:6); or as we read in another verse of Isaiah, "if you do not believe, you will not understand" (Is 28:16). (*Ioan. 5*, lect. 4, n. 771)

Like students everywhere, an apprentice in the Christian life must first trust his teacher, trust that his master knows the way of holiness and union with God, and desires to share that knowledge with us.

---

6. STII-II, q. 2, a. 3.


8. *Collationes Creido in Deum*.
The Disciples' Growth in Faith

St. Thomas notes that in John's Gospel the followers of Jesus grow in their faith. For example, Thomas explains that when Nicodemus calls Christ "Rabbi," he recognizes Christ's office as a teacher; when Nicodemus further states that "no one could perform the signs you perform, unless he had God with him" (Jn 3:2) he affirms Christ's power. Yet, Nicodemus goes no further. Consequently, although Nicodemus believes that Christ is a true teacher who comes from God and is empowered by God to perform signs, he is silent about whether Christ is God. In St. Thomas's view, Nicodemus has the gift of faith but still remains in the ignorance of an imperfect faith. For this reason, it was appropriate for Nicodemus to come to Jesus at night. "Night was appropriate to his ignorance and the imperfect knowledge he had of Christ." (Ioan. 3, lect. 1, n. 427) Aquinas adds, however, that the literal reason Nicodemus visits him at night was his imperfect love. Nicodemus, he explains,

was one of those of whom it is said that they "believed in him; but they did not admit it because of the Pharisees, so that they would not be expelled from the synagogue" (Jn 12:42). Their love was not perfect, so it continues, "For they loved the glory of men more than the glory of God." (Ioan. 3, lect. 1, n. 427)

Here again Aquinas establishes a close connection between knowledge and love. Nicodemus approaches the Lord in darkness, a darkness caused by an imperfect faith and a faulty love.

St. Thomas portrays Mary Magdalene as another example of a disciple whose faith is imperfect. She recognizes the resurrected Christ as her teacher, and hence calls him Rabbi, but she is still ignorant of his divinity. Hence, in Aquinas's view, when the Lord tells her not to cling to him, he is telling her not to cling to her partial understanding of who he is (see Ioan. 20, lect. 3, n. 2517). We should note that Aquinas apparently does not see her partial faith as blameworthy. In the Summa theologiae, Aquinas allows that as with all students, the disciples' understanding is partial in the beginning, but grows over time.

Progress in knowledge can occur in two ways. In one way, on the part of the teacher, he or she, or many, who advances in knowledge, through a temporal succession. This is how knowledge advances in the sciences by means of human discovery. In another way, progress in knowledge occurs on the part of the learner, as when a teacher who knows the whole art does not give it all to the student from the beginning, because the student would not be able to grasp it all, but, adjusting himself to the student's capacities, gives it to him gradually. This is the reason why the human person ad-
vances in the knowledge of faith through a temporal succession. Hence, the Apostle compares the period of the Old Testament to childhood (Gal 3–4).9

Aquinas identifies concrete examples of the disciples’ growth in faith in his analysis of the Johannine account of the Last Supper. When Jesus tells the disciples that they know both where he is going and how to get there, Thomas the Apostle balks at this and exclaims, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?” (Jn 14:5). Aquinas explains that although the disciples deny it, they do already on one level know where Jesus is going and the way to get there, because they already know Jesus who is both our goal and the way to it. “Christ is at once both the way and the destination. He is the way by reason of his human nature and the destination because of his divinity” (Joan. 14, lect. 2, n. 1868). Yet, their knowledge of Jesus is still imperfect. “They knew, but they did not know that they knew” (Joan. 14, lect. 2, n. 1866). Aquinas explains this apparent paradox by appealing to the distinction between principles and conclusions.

One and the same thing can be known perfectly and imperfectly, as is clear in the sciences, where one who knows all the principles of a science is said to know that science, although imperfectly, . . . because everything that belongs to that science is virtually contained in its principles. But one knows that same science more perfectly when he knows the individual conclusions that were virtually in the principles. In this way also we can have a twofold knowledge of divine matters. One is imperfect and is gained by faith, which is a foretaste of that other future knowledge and happiness which we will have in our heavenly homeland. (Joan. 15, lect. 3, n. 2018)

Consequently, at this point in their journey with Christ, the disciples know Jesus and have learned from him the fundamental principles of the faith—“for they knew many things about the Father and the Son which they had learned from Christ”—but they do not yet grasp the implications of this teaching (Joan. 14, lect. 2, n. 1866). They still do not grasp that Jesus and the Father are one; hence, even at this late date Philip asks, “show us the Father” (Jn 14:8). He still does not understand that he who sees Jesus sees the Father (see Joan. 14, lect. 3, n. 1886). Nonetheless, Aquinas holds that the Lord does not fault them for this ignorance, because knowledge of the Father and of Christ’s relationship to him is difficult to grasp. “For it is difficult to go to the Father, nor is it surprising that they did not know the way, because although they perfectly knew Christ as man they did not perfectly understand his divinity” (Joan. 14, lect. 2, n. 1866).

St. Thomas also draws on St. Paul’s distinction between the “spiritual

9. ST’II-II, q. 1, a. 7, ad 2.
man” and the “natural man” to explain the manner of the disciples’ growth in understanding. At first, the disciples fail to grasp Christ’s teaching because of their purely natural mindset. Later, however, after they receive the grace of the Spirit they begin to acquire a spiritual perspective. This spiritual perspective enables them grasp the content of Christ’s message.

The natural person receives spiritual teachings as mere figures of speech, not because they were spoken to him that way, but, since his mind does not have the power to rise above material things, spiritual things remain hidden to him: “the natural person does not perceive the things that belong to the spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14). Yet, the spiritual person receives spiritual teachings as spiritual. In the beginning, the disciples themselves had a purely natural mindset, and what was said to them remained obscure to them. They received it as mere figures. But, after they were made spiritual by Christ and were taught by the Holy Spirit, they began to grasp spiritual things clearly as spiritual. (John. 16, lect. 7, n. 2532)

This passage reveals that the transition from purely natural to spiritual understanding becomes possible only through the action of the Holy Spirit in the gift of grace. We shall look at the Spirit’s role in this divine pedagogy more fully in a later section. Here, however, the key feature to recognize is the role of faith. In Aquinas’s view, we grow in our understanding of Christ only by trustingly clinging to him.

If, therefore, you ask by what way you should go, accept Christ, for he is the way: “this is the way, walk in it” (Is 50:21). As Augustine says: “walk by means of the man and you will come to God. For it is better to limp along on the way than to walk rapidly off the way.” Because he who limbs on the way, even if he makes little progress, is approaching his goal; but if one ambles off the way, the faster he runs the further he gets from his goal. Yet, if you ask where you should go, adhere to Christ, because he is the truth at which we desire to arrive. “My mouth will meditate upon the truth” (Prov. 8:35). If you ask where you should remain, adhere to Christ because he is the life. “He who finds me finds life and shall have salvation from the Lord” (Prov. 8:35). (John. 14, lect. 2, n. 1870)

Since Christ is “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6), it is by slowly walking in his way, clinging to his truth, and remaining in his life that we advance on the way, grow in knowledge of the truth, and begin to be fully alive.

According to Aquinas, this growth in faith occurs in and through an ongoing dialogue with Christ. Some people pose questions out of a lack of faith, as when Zechariah questions the angel. Others, however, question out of a zeal to learn (studium addiscendi). The Virgin Mary is the classic example of this studious desire. Indeed, even Nicodemus is motivated by a sincere desire to learn, and for this reason he merits an answer from the Lord (John. 3, lect. 2, n. 458). The dialogue between master and disciple also entails the Master
asking questions of his disciples. For example, in the Bread of Life discourse Jesus asks Philip, “where shall we buy bread that these may eat?” (Jn 6:44). Commenting on the Evangelist’s explanation that Jesus posed this question in order to test Philip, Thomas affirms that this questioning was part of the teacher’s method of teaching others by means of questions (see Ioan. 6, lect. 1, n. 850). The role of such questions is to prompt the disciples to reflect (Ioan. 13, lect. 3, n. 1773). Aquinas asserts that “we should meditate on the works of God because they are profound” (Ioan. 13, lect. 3, n. 1773). To this end, Christ questions the disciples in order to “rouse their understanding” (Ioan. 13, lect. 3, n. 1773). For example, the questions Jesus poses both to Martha at the tomb of her brother Lazarus and to Peter at the lakeshore after the resurrection lead the disciples to come to deeper understanding. Specifically, the questions reveal the effect of God’s grace in the lives of his followers: they bring to light Martha’s faith and Peter’s love (Ioan. 11, lect. 4, n. 1518; 21, 3, n. 2617). Indeed, St. Thomas goes so far as to describe Peter’s encounter with the Lord as an examination (examinatio de dilectione) (Ioan. 21, lect. 3, n. 2617).

Aquinas recognizes that the questioning dialogue between the master and his disciples can at times become heated. The classic example of this occurs in Christ’s relationship with Peter. Aquinas describes Peter’s exchange with the Lord over the washing of his feet as a confrontation between master and disciple (Concertationem discipuli et magistri) (Ioan. 13, lect. 2, n. 1751). Nevertheless, because Peter confronts his teacher from a sincere and loving desire to learn, Christ explains to Peter the meaning of his actions (see Ioan. 13, lect. 2, nn. 1752–54).

10. The term concertatio is rarely employed by Aquinas. The translators of the English edition of the Commentary translate it as “encounter,” but this is too weak. In the thirteen instances Aquinas uses the term it always carries the connotation of a conflict out of which someone emerges victorious. In other words, concertatio always implies a victor and a victima. In its strongest form it is synonymous with pugna, as when Thomas employs it to describe the conflict between the good and bad angels (I Sent., d. 11, q. 2, a. 7, sc. 2), or when he speaks of the “concertatio hærorum” proper to warfare (Expositio super lob ad literam, ch. 29). In this same vein, Thomas explicitly regards it as a synonym for “pugna velut” and “moxnaeclad” which we would normally translate as boxing or wrestling (ST II-II, q. 95, a 8, obj. 3, and ST I-II, q. 32, a. 6, ad 3). In its weakest form, it signifies a verbal argument (concertatio verborum), such as the ones that occur between lawyers (ST II-II, q. 388, a. 3, obj. 2). This seems to be the sense of concertatio in the Commentary. Peter is arguing with Jesus in a confrontative manner. Note that St. Thomas does not fault Peter for his confrontative manner. On the contrary, he describes Peter’s actions as flowing from his intense love and friendship for Christ (Ioan. 13, lect. 2, n. 1753); moreover, Thomas portrays Peter’s question to Jesus as “words that have great depth,” verba magnum pondus habent (Ioan. 13, lect. 2, n. 1755). What St. Thomas does find blameworthy in Peter’s behavior is his stubborn refusal to conform himself to the wisdom and will of Christ (Ioan. 13, lect. 2, n. 1758). For Aquinas, therefore, the questioning and probing heart is no danger as long as it is a humble heart willing to commend itself to the wise care of Christ.
In Aquinas’s view, the process by which the disciple grows in knowledge ultimately leads from the knowledge of faith to the knowledge of glory.

The ultimate happiness of the human person consists in the supernatural vision of God. The human person cannot come to this vision except through being taught by God, as is stated in John’s Gospel: “everyone who has heard and learns from my Father comes to me.” But this instruction (disciplina) makes the human person participate in this knowledge, not all at once, but successively, according to the manner proper to his nature. For everyone who would learn such things must believe in order to come to perfect knowledge, as the Philosopher also affirms, stating that “the learner must believe.” Consequently, in order for someone to arrive at the perfect vision of happiness, he must first believe God, as a disciple believes the master who is teaching him.11

According to Aquinas, therefore, when the Lord leads the disciples to grow in their understanding, he does so gradually, in the way a teacher guides his students from faith to clear sight.

THE MASTER’S METHODS

St. Thomas’s General Theory of Teaching

Scattered throughout his Commentary on John, St. Thomas offers brief observations concerning the nature of learning. For example, when commenting on the assertion from John chapter 7 that “whoever speaks on his own seeks his own glory” (Jn 7:18), Thomas states that all our knowledge is from another, explaining that we acquire knowledge in three ways: by way of discovery, by way of revelation, or by way of instruction (disciplina). In discovery, we learn from the things we are investigating; hence Paul states that “the invisible things of God are clearly known by the things that have been made” (Rm 1:20). In revelation, we learn directly from God. When we learn from a disciplina, however, we learn from a teacher (IJohn, 7, lect. 2, n. 1040). St. Thomas presents elsewhere what he means by a disciplina. A disciplina is any demonstrative science in which we acquire knowledge from demonstrations offered by a teacher (magister).12 In the Summa theologiae, we learn that a disciplina need not refer merely to speculative knowledge. There are also practical disciplines. For example, Thomas describes religious life as a disciplina vel exercitium, containing that “whichever wishes to learn or to train for a goal,

11. ST II-II, q. 2, a. 3.
12. In Biothi De Hebdoumatisius 1: “ex huiusmodi autem principiis intendit concludere et facere nota omnia quae consequenter tractanda sunt, sicut fit in geometria, et in alis demonstrativis scientiis, quae idem dicuntur disciplinae, quia per eam discipulis aggregatur scientia ex demonstratione quam magister proponit.”
must follow the direction of someone under whose guidance they learn and are trained, as disciples learn from a master.\textsuperscript{13} Knowledge acquired from a disciplina, therefore, is knowledge acquired in a relationship with a teacher, with one who is a master in that domain of knowledge.

We also find in the Summa theologiae Thomas’s description of how a master teaches a discipline. “Whoever teaches leads a student from things he knows to the knowledge of things he does not know, as is stated in the Posterior Analytics: ‘every doctrine and every discipline causes knowledge from pre-existing principles.’”\textsuperscript{14} Thomas states that a teacher does this in two ways. The teacher either offers aids to learning, such as sensible examples or less universal propositions, that help the student reason from what he knows to what he does not know, or the teacher guides the student step by step through the stages of reasoning from principles to conclusion, much the way one might trace on a map the stages of an itinerary. In the first way, the teacher is helping the student reason by himself from principles to conclusions; in the second way, the teacher guides the student through a process of reasoning that he could not achieve on his own.\textsuperscript{15}

Thomas notes, however, that both these ways of teaching presuppose the presence of principles within the student that the teacher does not cause. For this reason, the role of the teacher is akin to the role of the physician. Just as a physician leads the patient to health by helping the principles of health within the patient do their work in healing, so too the teacher leads the student to knowledge by helping the principles of learning do their work in reasoning to conclusions.\textsuperscript{16} In other words, as is the case with the physician, a teacher is merely the external cause of the student’s learning. The essential work of learning is done by the student himself and through his natural gifts.

Aquinas holds, however, that Jesus is an exception to this rule. Following the conclusions St. Augustine reaches in the De Magistro (Augustine’s famous dialogue with his son, Adeodatus), Aquinas contends that Jesus teaches both exteriorly, in the ways described above, and interiorly in his divinity, as the cause of the inner principles of learning. He teaches externally through instruction and internally through illumination, enlightening the mind with the principles of wisdom and knowledge.\textsuperscript{17}

The twofold character of Christ’s teaching provides Aquinas a way to interpret the words of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel, “Do not let yourselves be called teacher (magister), because alone one is your teacher, the Christ” (Mt

\textsuperscript{13} STII-II, q. 186, a. 5.  
\textsuperscript{14} STI, q. 117, a. 1.  
\textsuperscript{15} STI, q. 117, a. 1.  
\textsuperscript{16} STI, q. 117, a. 1. ad 1.  
\textsuperscript{17} See De ver. q. 11, a. 1 corpus and ad 8; Augustine, De Magistro (PL 32: 1193–1220).
23:10). Christ alone is the true teacher because in his divinity he is the first cause of all our learning, teaching us interiorly as the cause of our inner principles of learning. Christ’s disciples, on the other hand, can be called teachers only by extension. They merit this title only to the extent that they participate in Christ’s teaching mission. They are the external instruments of Christ’s interior teaching action.\textsuperscript{18} St. Thomas gives us a poignant account of this truth in his inaugural lecture, delivered in the Spring of 1236 when he was assuming the responsibilities of a magister for the first time. After describing the exalted nature of the teaching office, he adds,

But “who is capable of this?” (2 Cor. 2:16). . . . Yet, although no one is adequate for this ministry by himself and from his own resources, he can hope that God will make him adequate. “Not that we are capable of a single thought on our own resources, as if it came from us, but our adequacy is from God” (2 Cor. 3:5). So the teacher should ask God for it. “If people lack wisdom, they should beg for it from God and it will be given them” (James 1:5).\textsuperscript{19}

He concludes by beseeching his audience, “let us pray that Christ may grant this to us.”\textsuperscript{20} Christ, therefore, is the one true teacher. In his divinity he is the first cause of all learning. Yet, in the greatness of his power and providence he is able to employ his creatures as instruments and secondary causes of his teaching. They thus become teachers by participation and truly merit the title magistri.\textsuperscript{21} Consequently, since it is by God’s good design that they can become teachers, their attitude toward Christ must always be one of prayer. They must ask Christ the teacher for the insights they need as the instruments of his instruction.

Christ the Teacher

In his \textit{Commentary on John}, St. Thomas is true to his Christ-centered theology of education. Thomas portrays Jesus as a teacher instructing his disciples about the way to eternal life. Aquinas affirms that Jesus teaches both by word and by example (\textit{Joan.} 2, lect. 2, n. 375). By the example of his submission to the Law, Jesus teaches humility to his disciples, (\textit{Joan.} 2, lect. 2, n. 375) while with his challenging words to Nicodemus he teaches Nicodemus this same virtue (\textit{Joan.} 3, lect. 2, n. 460). By the example of his obedient love of

\textsuperscript{18} De rer., q. 11, a. 1 ad 1.
\textsuperscript{19} Principium \textit{Rigant montes de superrioribus.}
\textsuperscript{21} De rer., q. 11, a. 1 ad 9.
the Father, Jesus teaches his disciples the character of the obedient love they should extend to him (Joan. 15, lect. 2, n. 2003). Like other teachers, Jesus both instructs the faithful and refutes his adversaries (Joan. 8, lect. 1, n. 1118). Unlike other teachers, however, his teaching during his earthly ministry had the power to illumine and to vivify the faithful—"because his words are spirit and life"—and to overcome and hold at bay those who wished to destroy him (Joan. 8, lect. 2, n. 1118; 8, 2, n. 1163).

The Summit of Christ's Teaching Mission

Although Thomas portrays several events in the Gospel—such as Christ's actions at the feast of booths—as emblematic examples of Christ's teaching, Thomas seems to regard the events of the Last Supper and of the passion as the summit of Christ's teaching ministry. Indeed, Aquinas follows Augustine in proclaiming that "Christ hung from the cross the way a teacher sits in his chair (sicut magister in cathedra)" (Joan. 19, lect. 4, n. 2441).\footnote{22} John's description of the passion as Christ's glorification seems to suggest to Aquinas this educational role. Aquinas regards glorification as a type of revelatory teaching. One who is glorified is "known with clarity" (Joan. 13, lect. 6, n. 1826). In Aquinas's view, the glorification of Christ is what reveals both the merit of his humanity and the fullness of his divinity. Specifically, it reveals the perfectly obedient love of God and neighbor present in Christ's human nature and the full divinity present in his divine nature (Joan. 13, lect. 6, n. 1829).\footnote{23} "He began to have this glory [in other words, he began to be known with clarity] at his passion and resurrection, when people began to recognize his power and divinity" (Joan. 13, lect. 6, n. 1830). Aquinas has in mind here the acts of faith expressed by such people as the centurion at Christ's death, Mary Magdalene at the tomb, and Thomas the Apostle in the upper room. The glorification of Christ makes his perfect humanity and full divinity known in the gift of faith. In Aquinas's view, the revelatory properties of these events are so profound and universal they are how all people in the gift of faith come to knowledge of God. "All who know God owe this to Christ" (Joan. 13, lect. 6, n. 1830).

Aquinas also tells us here that the events of the passion begin the moment Judas leaves the upper room (Joan. 13, lect. 6, n. 1827). Consequently, the Last Supper is also the moment when Christ's true identity begins to be recog-

\footnote{22} For example, his care for his mother during his suffering on the cross teaches us the importance of coming to the aid of our parents (Joan. 19, lect. 4, n. 2441).

\footnote{23} For his treatment of the merit of his humanity glorifying God, see Joan. 13, lect. 6, n. 1828. For his treatment of the glorification of his divinity, see Joan. 13, lect. 6, n. 1829.
nized clearly, as Christ himself states from his place at the table: “Now is the Son of man glorified” (Jn 13:31; Ioan. 13, lect. 6, n. 1827). This fact seems to lead Aquinas to portray the events of the Last Supper as something akin to a graduate seminar on the Christian life. He views every word and deed of Christ on that night as belonging to a rich pedagogy of perfection.

The Role of Christ’s Example

Aquinas discerns an order of presentation in Christ’s pedagogy. “The sequence found in this exhortation is that Christ later taught in words what he had first done by his actions” (Ioan. 13, lect. 3, n. 1769). Christ first acts and then explains his actions. Aquinas holds that this procedure is fitting because the example of one’s life teaches more powerfully than the eloquence of one’s words.

For when we are dealing with the conduct of people, example has more influence than words. A person chooses and does what seems good to him, and so what one chooses is a better indication of what is good than what one teaches should be chosen. This is why when someone says one thing and does another, what he does has more influence on others than what he has taught. Thus it is especially necessary to give example by one’s action. (Ioan. 13, lect. 3, n. 1781)

Aquinas reminds us that the purpose of Christ’s teaching is to lead us to the Father. This fact shapes Christ’s behavior during the Last Supper. “Since Christ is going to God, it is special to him to lead others to God. This is done especially by humility and love; and so he offers them an example of humility and love” (Ioan. 13, lect. 1, n. 1743). Since humility and love are what especially lead us to God, Christ offers them the humble and loving example of washing their feet.

St. Thomas affirms that Christ’s example of humble love is meant first of all to prepare them for the events of his crucifixion and death (Ioan. 13, lect. 1, n. 1738). Thomas adds, however, that the act of washing their feet is also meant to teach them the nature of the service they should render to each other. Indeed, Thomas regards Christ’s actions as offering a perfect symbol of true service. A good servant always strives to notice whatever might be lacking at the table; hence, the servant stands in order to survey the needs of all the guests. Moreover, to be unencumbered in this service, a good servant wears a minimum of clothing. Lastly, a good servant always has on hand what he needs to serve his master well. According to Aquinas, John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus exhibited each of these traits. Jesus stood, removed his garments, and placed a towel around his waist to dry his disciples’ feet. Christ, therefore, is the good servant, giving his disciples an example to follow.
The Implications of Christ’s Clothing and Posture

St. Thomas later contrasts Christ’s behavior when washing his disciples’ feet with his behavior when explaining to them the meaning of these actions. When washing their feet he embodies the symbols of a servant; when explaining his actions, however, he takes on the symbols of a teacher. Thomas draws our attention to both Christ’s clothing and posture. Indeed, he points out that the Evangelist himself is careful to note both of these. In Thomas’s view, clothing and posture are both important. Clothing is important because “different clothing is suitable to different people depending on the different activities appropriate to each. Thus, Sirach states, ‘a man’s attire . . . shows what he is’ (Sir 19:30)” (I John 13, lect. 3, n. 1770). Aquinas continues:

One sort of attire is suitable for a servant, and another for a teacher. Now because a servant must be ready to serve, he does not have any superfluous clothing: and so Christ, when he wished to serve, “rose from supper, and laid aside his garments.” Yet, it is proper for a teacher, who should have gravity and should emanate authority, to be suitably attired. Thus, when our Lord begins to teach, he “puts on his garments.” (I John 13, lect. 3, n. 1770)

Aquinas addresses what he seems to regard as an evident truth. What a teacher or preacher wears affects how his message is received. Aquinas, however, is silent concerning the character of this clothing. He tells us that teachers should be “suitably attired”—literally that they should be “suitably ornate” clothing, vestium decens ornatus—but offers no description of the type of clothing that would serve this purpose.

St. Thomas next addresses the pedagogical significance of Christ’s posture, of his decision to recline while teaching them the meaning of his actions.

When Christ began to serve he rose; thus [the Evangelist] says that Christ “rose from supper.” Yet now, about to teach, he reclines; hence [the Evangelist] says “when he had reclined again, he said to them.” The reason for this is that doctrina should take place in tranquility. (I John 13, lect. 3, n. 1770)

Aquinas defends the connection between tranquility and learning by adding a line from Aristotle’s Physics: “it is by sitting down and by being quietly at rest that the soul becomes wise and prudent” (I John 13, lect. 3, n. 1770). In his Commentary on the De Anima, Aquinas makes this reference to Aristotle explicit:

24. Physics 7.3 (247b10).
Understanding is best compared to quiet rest. Aristotle himself teaches this in book seven of the Physics (7.3) where he states that one cannot become wise until he rests and becomes quiet. This is why it is not easy to find wisdom among the young and the restless. Instead, one finds wisdom when he is quietly at rest. Hence, Aristotle says that it is by sitting down and by being quietly at rest that the soul becomes wise and prudent.  

The environment proper to the disciplina that is sacra doctrina, therefore, is to recline and be at rest with the Lord, like the disciples in the upper room. Consequently, for St. Thomas, the upper room at the Last Supper becomes the ideal model for theological instruction.

St. Thomas adds that Christ’s act of washing the disciples’ feet is not merely an example; it is also a mystery (Ioan. 13, lect. 2, n. 1756). This washing is a mystery that “signifies a interior cleansing” (Ioan. 13, lect. 2, n. 1756). Indeed, Thomas follows the Fathers of the Church in discerning layers of meaning in Christ’s every action while washing the disciples’ feet (see Ioan. 13, lect. 2, nn. 1746–48). The reference to mystery points to the Holy Spirit’s role as the interior master who will teach the disciples the deeper meaning of Christ’s actions after the resurrection.

The Holy Spirit as an Internal Teacher

We noted earlier that St. Thomas describes Christ as a teacher who teaches both exteriorly by his words and actions and interiorly as the cause of the intellectual principles by which the disciples understand these words and actions. Later in his Commentary, however, Thomas explains that Christ’s interior teaching occurs through the Holy Spirit. “No one learns without the Holy Spirit teaching” (Ioan. 14, lect. 6, n. 1959). Christ in his humanity teaches exteriorly, but this exterior teaching is rendered intelligible through the Holy Spirit. “The Son, since he is the Word, gives teaching to us; but the Holy Spirit enables us to grasp it” (Ioan. 14, lect. 6, n. 1958). The Spirit, “in a hidden way aids our ability to know” (Ioan. 14, lect. 6, n. 1960). Aquinas seems to regard the Spirit’s action as necessary in any act of understanding.

25. In De Anima 1, lect. 8, n. 123: “[intelligentia] magis assimilatur quieti quam monit, sicut, sicut ipse dicit in septimo physicorum, non potest fieri aliquid sapiens, quando monus eius non resident nec quiuescunt, unde in puere et in omnibus in quibus motus non quiuescunt, non de faci lavetur sapientia. sed tunc aliquis sapientiam acquirit, quando quieti: unde dicit, quod in quiuescendo et sedendo, anima fit sapiens et prudens.” See also STI-II, q. 33, a. 1 obj. 1. Aquinas appears to be quoting the Physics from memory, because in his commentary on the Physics he renders the line slightly differently: “sed scientia quae est cognitione speculativa, et prudentia, quae est ratio praestis, adveniunt animae per quietationem et residentiam corporali- um motionum et sensibilium passionum” (In Physic. 7, lect. 6, n. 925).
Christ the Teacher in *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 189

No matter what a person may teach by his exterior actions, he will have no effect unless the Holy Spirit gives an understanding from within. For unless the Spirit is present to the heart of the listener, the words of the teacher will be useless: "the inspiration of the Almighty makes him understand" (Job 32:8). *(Joan. 14, lect. 6, n. 1958)*

Aquinas is here offering a window into the role of love in learning. He seems to be saying that unless there is love in our hearts we cannot truly understand what our teachers are telling us. At this point, Thomas says no more about this interesting educational principle. Instead, he chooses to underline that Christ in his humanity is no exception to this rule. "This is true even to the extent that the Son himself, speaking by means of his human nature, is not successful unless he works from within by the Holy Spirit" *(Joan. 14, lect. 6, n. 1958)*. Christ teaches exteriorly by his words and actions, but interiorly through the action of the Holy Spirit.

In commenting on Jesus' statements that he will send them the Spirit "who will teach them all truth" (Jn 14:26), Thomas discerns two stages in the Spirit's presence among the disciples. There is the initial presence of the Spirit that sanctifies them and gives them a partial understanding of Christ's words and actions. St. Thomas holds that the disciples already had received the Holy Spirit in this way before the events of the Last Supper. This is the meaning of Christ's statement that only their feet need to be washed (Jn 13:10; *Joan. 13, lect. 2, nn. 1762–69*). Moreover, this preliminary presence of the Spirit is what prepares them to receive the fullness of the Spirit after the resurrection. Thomas explains that to be prepared to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit the disciples must be loving and obedient. "The disciples needed a twofold preparation: love in their hearts and obedience in their work" *(Joan. 14, lect. 4, n. 1908)*. Both of these are from the Holy Spirit.

No one can love God unless he has the Holy Spirit: because we do not act before we receive God's grace, rather, the grace comes first: 'he first loved us' (1 Jn 4:10). We should say, therefore, that the apostles first received the Holy Spirit so that they could love God and obey his commands. But it was necessary that they make good use, by their love and obedience, of this first gift of the Holy Spirit in order to receive the Spirit more fully. *(Joan. 14, lect. 4, n. 1909)*

One characteristic of God's gifts is that "if one makes a good use of a gift given to him, he deserves to receive a greater gift and grace" *(Joan. 14, lect. 4, n. 1909)*. Consequently, the Holy Spirit, by empowering the disciples to love God and to obey him in their actions, prepares them to receive the fullness of the Spirit after the resurrection.

Thomas holds that the Spirit's role in the Son's teaching mission is fitting because of the way the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.
The Holy Spirit leads to the knowledge of the truth, because he proceeds from the Truth, who says, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ (Jn 14:6). In us, love of the truth arises when we have conceived and considered truth. So also in God, Love proceeds from conceived Truth, which is the Son. And just as Love proceeds from the Truth, so Love leads to knowledge of the truth. (Jn 14, lect. 4, n. 1916)

The love that proceeds from truth leads to knowledge of the truth because “it is love that impels one to reveal one’s secrets” (Jn 14, lect. 4, n. 1916). The Son is Wisdom and Truth itself. The Spirit, as proceeding from the Truth, comes to us to make us sharers in the divine wisdom and knowers of the truth. This is what makes the Holy Spirit a teacher. “The Spirit teaches because he makes us share in the wisdom of the Son” (Jn 14, lect. 6, n. 1960). Earlier we noted that the Father draws us to himself through the teachings of the Son. Now we find that the Father’s action through the Son occurs in and through the action of the Spirit. The Father speaks a Word that breathes forth Love. In the incarnation this Word speaks in human words, words that are vivified and made effective by the love of the Spirit.

FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD AS AN INTIMATE APPRENTICESHIP

St. Thomas later describes the disciples’ participation in divine wisdom by analogy with human friendship. He portrays the relationship between Christ and his disciples on the eve of his passion as a life of “companionship with Christ” (societas Christi) that entailed “freedom from the burdens of material things,” and established them in a “mode of life that holds everything in common” (Jn 16, lect. 8, n. 2171). Thomas offers here a concise description of the Early Dominican conception of the “Apostolic life.”26 The only missing feature is the apostolic vocation to proclaim the Gospel. Thomas has not forgotten this aspect of the apostolic life. Instead, true to the witness of the Gospels, he portrays the general commission to preach the Gospel as arising only after the resurrection, when the disciples receive the fullness of the Spirit.

Aquinas holds that when the apostles abandoned Christ during his passion, they suffered a threefold loss. They lost their companionship with Christ, their freedom from material care, and their common life together. Yet, after the resurrection of Christ and their reception of the Holy Spirit,

they not only regain their friendship with God and with each other, they are emboldened by the Spirit to go out and teach the nations. Not surprisingly, therefore, when St. Thomas describes the friendship with Christ that the Spirit establishes among the disciples, he focuses on two educational aspects of this friendship: Divine friendship is the context within which (1) God teaches the disciples, and (2) the disciples put this teaching into practice by teaching others.

Christ Reveals his Secrets to his Friends

St. Thomas follows Aristotle in asserting that “the true sign of friendship is that a friend reveals the secrets of his heart to his friend” (I, 15, lect. 3, n. 2016). This is so because the intimacy existing between friends creates confidence. Since friends are “of one mind and of one heart,” what one friend says to the other seems to remain hidden in one’s heart. Aquinas explains that something similar occurs when we become the friends of God. As God unites our hearts and minds to himself, “God reveals his secrets to us by letting us share in his wisdom: ‘In every generation [Wisdom] passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets’” (Wis 7:27; I, 15, lect. 3, n. 2016). Although it is God’s love that establishes us in divine friendship, it is only by responding to this love that our friendship grows. Specifically, it is only by loving God in return (in and through the grace of the Holy Spirit) that we grow in our knowledge of God. “The secrets of divine wisdom are principally revealed to those who are united to God by love” (I, 13, lect. 4, n. 1807). According to Aquinas, the love poured into our hearts by the Spirit is so powerful that it renders the words of Christ as effective today as they were when Christ first spoke them. Because we love Christ’s words, they remain alive within us and are able to teach us (I, 15, lect. 1, n. 1995). They also empower us to teach others.

The Friends of Christ Become Teachers of the Gospel

Although St. Thomas is clear that the ultimate goal of Christ’s teaching is to lead the disciples to the joy of heaven (I, 16, lect. 8, nn. 2173–74), he nonetheless also affirms that one of the reasons Christ educates his disciples is to incorporate them into his mission of leading people to himself. Thomas affirms that in his actions, Christ “most of all wanted to instruct [his disciples] who were going to be the teachers of the whole world (magistri orbis terrarum)” (I, 6, lect. 1, n. 864). As the “Spirit of Truth,” the Holy Spirit “teaches the truth and makes those he teaches like the one who sent him” (I, 16, lect. 3, n. 2102). The disciples become like the Truth by becoming
teachers. "The Spirit will give them the confidence to preach clearly and openly" (Isa. 16, lect. 4, n. 2106). The process whereby "they become fit for bearing the fruit of teaching" entails keeping Christ's words dwelling in their hearts (Isa. 15, lect. 1, n. 1998). Thomas describes this as a fourfold process: "amando, creando, meditando et implendo" (Isa. 15, lect. 1, n. 1995). His words remain in the disciples when they love them and believe them, meditate upon them and accomplish them. These four actually reduce to the twin stages of contemplating and giving the fruits of our contemplation to others.27 We are to contemplate what we believe and love, and then embody it in our actions (implendo). We embody the words of Christ "by living well" and "by teaching well" (Isa. 15, lect. 1, n. 1996). Thomas describes each of these as glorifying God. Thomas takes special care to note that teaching well "also glorifies God," citing Isaiah: "Glorify the Lord by teaching" (Is 23.15; Isa. 15, lect. 1, n. 1996). As we noted earlier, Aquinas describes glorification as a revelatory action. What is glorified is known clearly. Thus, Thomas is saying that the good news of Christ remains in the disciples when they make God known by the tenor of their lives and the quality of their teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study we have seen that St. Thomas presents Christ as a magister. As sent by the Father and working through the Spirit, Christ is the master of the spiritual life. He teaches the disciples the way to eternal happiness and how to grow to full stature as teachers themselves. In the process of presenting Christ as a teacher, Thomas also advances a fairly developed philosophy of education. To learn a practical disciplina one must have a mentor who embodies the skills of this discipline and who knows how to teach it to others. Students need to begin by trusting their master, by having faith in his knowledge and abilities. They must also love the subject they are learning in order truly to grasp what it means. The process of acquiring this skill occurs gradually. In learning a task, students naturally pass through stages of understanding and competence. Consequently, when teaching a practical discipline, the master recognizes and respects each student's ability and level of understanding, teaching each one according to his or her capacities. This apprenticeship occurs in an atmosphere of dialogue, where, because of the trust established between master and disciple, the student is able to question and challenge as well as be questioned and challenged. This method of teaching also establishes a camaraderie between the master's students. Together, they grow to know

27. See ST II-II, q. 188, a. 6.
and love their subject more deeply and acquire a zeal to share this knowledge and love with others.

St. Thomas apparently regards these characteristics as the component features of any authentic method of teaching, of any method that respects human nature. When Thomas presents Christ as a teacher, he portrays him as respecting these natural facets of teaching and learning. Christ both embodies the human role of a *magister* and elevates this role, drawing it into the life of grace. In the incarnation, the eternal Word begins to speak in human words and fills these words with his eternal Love. He speaks these human words in a human way: in a community of companionship, where his disciples learn gradually, in dialogue with their master, with the goal of one day participating in their master’s mission to proclaim the good news. By proceeding in this way, Christ respects how humans learn. He respects the developmental, affective, and social facets of human learning. In short, St. Thomas regards the Christ of John’s Gospel as the model Christian educator, a model for all those involved in education to follow.