

**Brian Welter**

*Saint Thomas en plus simple*  
by Jean-Pierre Torrell\*

Dominican professor of theology at Switzerland’s University of Fribourg, Jean-Pierre Torrell delivers a straightforward and accessible introduction to Thomas Aquinas in the form of a literary biography. *Saint Thomas en plus simple* aims at non-specialists or theology and philosophy beginners. The author shows how the controversies of the day or requests from various churchmen inspired Thomas’s major and minor writings. The saint relied extensively on a long line of thinkers, including Aristotle, Augustine, Dionysius, and Hugues of St. Victor. What motivated him above all was the search for the truth, which he believed could be found in a wide range of sources: pagan classics, Christians, Muslims and Jews, and nature. Torrell depicts Thomas as a man of his time and its controversies, even if, from our perspective, these writings often appear timeless.

The last chapter, the most satisfying yet also most challenging, outlines the most significant aspects of the saint’s teaching. This includes Thomas’s use of the Bible for developing his anthropology. Scripture’s claim that the human individual is made in God’s image inspired much fruitful philosophical reflection, as Torrell demonstrates:

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“Declaring that humans are made in the image of God means stating the reason, the final cause as philosophers say, of the creation of man. God made man *for* that, *so that* he would be in his [God’s] image.”<sup>1</sup> Being a reflection of the divine image implies man’s purpose, which Thomas outlined in many writings. Ultimately, the plan of the *Summa theologica*, “exit and return,” expresses in spiritual terms each individual’s spiritual itinerary. Torrell shows how the theme of exit and return leads to an interweaving of systematic theology, practical theology, and spiritual life. Everything is oriented towards its end. This gives Thomas’s practical theology a significant role in his attempt to demonstrate and emphasize man’s freedom.

In contrast to the ending, *Saint Thomas en plus simple* starts off easy on readers in following Thomas’s life. The early works tend not to be as challenging as the *Summa theologica*. Torrell depicts how the saint, “a genius in movement, in the act of perpetual discovery,”<sup>2</sup> developed his thinking throughout his life rather than setting everything in stone early on. Alongside this dynamism, he kept his preaching simple, free from scholastic technicalities and subtleties: “Thomas’s preaching appears astonishingly concrete, underpinned by daily experience, concerned with social justice and honesty in business dealings.”<sup>3</sup> This preaching extended his theology, which itself was founded on the Bible. The saint’s interpretation of the Bible aimed to elevate the soul. He found the Bible suitable for this role because, though written by humans, its ultimate author is God. Inspired by the Bible, such as the Paulinian corpus, Thomas developed the notion that “the entirety of Jesus’ life is the mystery of God’s love that reveals itself and acts in history.”<sup>4</sup> Only briefly noting that this emphasis on mystery has its roots in the

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<sup>1</sup> Torrell, *Saint Thomas en plus simple*, 202.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

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earliest Christian traditions, Torrell leaves the reader wanting more on this most fascinating topic.

The chapter “A Man of Combat” highlights the fact that Thomas’s life was not all contemplation. He was profoundly affected by the theological and philosophical controversies of his day, including the battle between the mendicants at the University of Paris in 1255–1256, which concerned the rights of members of these orders to act as university professors. In his *Perfection of the Spiritual Life* he addressed the issue of poverty and argued for “the superiority of the apostolic life over that of the contemplative.”<sup>5</sup> As elsewhere in the book, Torrell links the work with Thomas’s service to his order. As well, he shows the practical nature of Thomas’s teachings.

The virtuous life forms a pillar of Thomas’s practical vision of man, Torrell points out. Humans possess dignity because they are made in the image of God. Thomas regards humans as partners of God. This vision reshapes how we picture our relationship with Him, and has implications for our moral life: “At the same time, this obliges us to conduct ourselves in a way that is befitting this quality. It is here that we must find the foundation of our moral obligations, and not in a commandment.”<sup>6</sup> Though the author strives to show Thomas as a man of his time, such points as the above reflect the more timeless aspects of Thomistic thought. This understanding of the dignity of the human even fits into modern personalist thinking. After reading *Saint Thomas en plus simple*, we can more readily appreciate how John Paul II was so deeply impacted at the same time by both personalism and Thomism.

The richness of this theological anthropology and the discussion of the moral life extends to the spiritual journey through the theme of departure and return, a theme with roots in the ancient world. “Certain-

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

ly, all things in the universe return to God, but man has the privilege of doing so consciously and freely,”<sup>7</sup> Torrell notes. It is in the vision of this journey that Thomas’s teachings on human intelligence, freedom, and autonomous action come into greatest focus in *Saint Thomas en plus simple*. Torrell emphasizes the centrality of friendship and, underpinning that, charity, which is totally disinterested love, “a love in which one loves the Good more than oneself.”<sup>8</sup> This notion of charity, which begins in God’s trinitarian love, extends to the whole human community. Unfortunately, Torrell only briefly mentions Thomas’s political philosophy. Contemporary readers, living in an increasingly turbulent political world, would have benefitted from Thomas’s insights into man as a political animal.

Readers instead benefit from Torrell’s development of Thomas’s anthropology, particularly the discussion of the body and soul and of form and matter. Without going into too much detail, Torrell conveys the basics: “Form is the principal element” of the person, and it animates matter.<sup>9</sup> Readers get a clear sense of how this is the primary aspect of our nature as humans according to the medieval perspective:

Because we are individuals composed of soul and body, different levels of life inhere in us according to the relatively greater or weaker involvement of the soul or the body (we eat and extract nutrition with our organs; we perceive through our senses; we reflect through our intelligence). We can therefore speak of the vegetative, sensitive, and intellective lives.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas rejected the widespread notion of his day that we have multiple souls. The “intellective soul,” the only one we have, exercises its power over the appetitive, sensory, and intellectual levels. In keeping with the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

aim of showing him as a man of his times, Torrell discusses the saint's treatment of Averroes's teachings on Aristotle's theory of the intellect.

By the end of the book, the reader is acquainted with Thomas's teachings on God, the human being, the Logos, and on how these fit into the structure of the *Summa theologica*. Throughout his life, Thomas was a pastoral and moral theologian, a lover and expositor of the Bible, and a defender of the truth against philosophical and theological controversy. After this introduction, readers will want to know more.



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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas en plus simple* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2019). According to the author, (1) Torrell's book is a straightforward and accessible introduction to Thomas Aquinas in the form of a literary biography, and (2) it acquaints the reader with Thomas's teachings on God, the human being, the Logos, and on how these fit into the structure of the *Summa theologica*.

KEYWORDS

Jean-Pierre Torrell, Thomas Aquinas, Thomism, Bible, theology, God, Logos, anthropology, human being.

REFERENCES

Torrell, Jean-Pierre. *Saint Thomas en plus simple*. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2019.