

AN APPRAISAL OF THOMAS AQUINAS' THOUGHTS ON THE FEMININE QUESTION

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Abstract

Thomas Aquinas in the Summa Theologiae, (II, II, and Q. 46) says 'wisdom denotes a certain rectitude of judgment according to the eternal law.' He therefore talks of the office of the Wiseman. A wise person is one who 'desire to taste all kinds of knowledge.' In Aquinas' epistemology, the totality of being is opened to human understanding because 'the soul is in a sense all things.' Opposed to wisdom is Stultitia (folly). Folly he says, is a certain paralysis of the senses, cause by: fear, laziness, or stupefaction by a concern for baser things like food and sex. The Wiseman has the double task of refuting errors and propagating truth. For the Church, Aquinas exercised the office of Wiseman effectively. Pope Leo XIII say he was 'greatly enriched as he was with the science of God and the science of man.' Yet, feminist's theologians in the Church have found fault lines with his writings on women, in statements such as 'the woman is a misbegotten male.' Aquinas is blamed for promoted sexism and patriarchy androcentricism in theology. Our intention in this paper is to present and analyze Aquinas's thoughts on women, consider his sources justifications and finally check whether correctives can be found in his work.

Keywords: Feminine Question, Thomas Aquinas, Person, Man and Woman

1. On Engaging Thomas Aquinas

The Church throughout the ages continues to offer St. Thomas Aquinas as an example to be emulated by Christian thinkers. In Pope Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris: on the Restoration of Christian Philosophy According to The Mind of St. Thomas, the Angelic Doctor*, many reasons are put forth to account for why Aquinas is considered the *Prince* of the Medieval Philosophers and a sure model for Christian thinkers. It is said of him:

Now far above all other Scholastic Doctors towers Thomas Aquinas, their master and prince. Cajetan says truly of him: 'so great was his veneration for the ancients and sacred Doctors that he may be said to have gained a perfect understanding of them all,' Thomas gathered together their doctrines like scattered limbs of a body, and moulded them into a whole. He arranged them in so

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wonderful an order, and increased them with such great additions, that rightly and deservedly he is reckoned a singular safeguard and glory of the Catholic Church. His intellect was docile and subtle; his memory was ready and tenacious; his life most holy; and he loved truth alone. Greatly enriched as he was with the science of God and the science of man, he is likened to the sun; for he warmed the whole earth with the fire of his holiness, and filled the whole earth with the splendor of his teaching. There is no part of philosophy which he did not handle with acuteness and solidity. He wrote about the laws of reasoning; about God and incorporeal substances; about man and other things of sense; and about human acts and their principles. What is more, he wrote these on these subjects in such a way that in him not one of the following perfections is wanting: a full selection of subjects; a beautiful arrangement of their divisions; the best method of treating them; certainty of principles, strength of argument: perspicuity and propriety of language; and the power of explaining deep mysteries.²

Thomists and thinkers in all fields who have picked up interest in the works of Aquinas over the centuries since his death and read him diligently would agree with Pope Leo XIII's description of his singular achievements. However, we are aware of the existence of the 'carping few,'³—the groups of anti-Thomists found both within and outside the Church who hold the opinion that the era of Aquinas is long over. Some feminist theologians on their part think Aquinas is still very much alive in the Church. They believe the rebound of his theology and that of other classical thinkers like Augustine is responsible for the feminist crisis at the heart of the Church today. Feminists such as Elizabeth Johnson and Schussler Fiorenza hold Aquinas theologically responsible for thoughts that have led to the oppression of women in the Church⁴ with severe consequences on the poor image of the woman in the society at large. In spite of these serious accusations, the Church's overall attitude towards Aquinas' contributions to theology of philosophy has not changed. The decree of the Second Vatican Council on the formation of Priest *Optatam Totius* reaffirms Aquinas as a model for young scholars. This is not to exonerate Aquinas in the eyes of feminist theologians—Thomas Merton's, though a great admirer of Aquinas clearly states that we have to come to terms with

² Pope Leo XIII *Aeterni Patris: on the Restoration of Christian Philosophy According to The Mind of St. Thomas, the Angelic Doctor*

³ Charlotte Bronte: Jane Eyre.

⁴ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 47.

Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is*

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the fact that some aspects of Aquinas's theology are 'outdated' and we may add that some have already been corrected by the Church as he himself prayed for at the time of his death.

Because of the uniqueness of Aquinas', some well-meaning Thomists such as: Mary Anne Fatula, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Jean Pierre Torrel, Anton Pegis, Aidan Nichols, Josef Pieper, John Paul II, Anthony Akinwale and Thomas Merton have urged contemporary scholars to approach Aquinas's works, read and interpret them in a way that rather than closes up his wisdom, reveals his works as a well—spring of wisdom for Christian Philosophers and theologian. Thomas Merton particularly sums up his thoughts on the disdain shown to Aquinas's works in these words: 'the current popular reaction against St. Thomas is not due to anything in Thomas himself, or even the 'scholastic' method.'⁵ He adds 'anyone who takes the trouble to read St. Thomas Aquinas and understand him will be surprised to find that the values people seek elsewhere have from the first been present in him and can always be accessible without too much difficulty.'⁶ According to him, the 'spirit and perspectives of St. Thomas are modern in the soundest sense of the word, although admittedly his Aristotelian physics, cosmology, biology etc., are hardly up to date.' Merton is of the opinion that these noted deficiencies 'do not affect the worth of his thought as a whole.' To sum up his position, Merton is of the opinion that where there is need to transpose Aquinas's thoughts into slightly different terms, it is not too difficult to do so. He therefore appeals to those reading Aquinas to focus on Aquinas's devotion to truth rather than the militant attitude of some Thomists who refuse to listen at all to 'non-Thomists' arguments or who listen to them with a very triumphalist attitude. In Merton's opinion, the Church does not present Aquinas as the only authority, rather, he is presented as a model and guide for philosophers and theologians.

Far from staging an apologetics in favour of Aquinas, what we are doing in this paper is to set the stage for a fruitful engagement with Aquinas's work with the right frame of mind. Aquinas believed that Truth was attainable through faith and reason. Truth, he posits is convertible with being—therefore where there is being, there is truth. Aquinas as one who exemplified in his own life what it means to exercise the office of the Wiseman with utmost devotion understood the twofold office of 'propagating truth and refuting errors.' Anton Pegis, one of the Commentators on Aquinas tells us that Aquinas set out among other things, to 'to correct the errors of existence'⁷ in the works of Plato and other philosophies of his time. These errors of existence in Plato were those of: a) epistemology, b) body-

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of Guilty Bystander*, 205.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 205

⁷ Anton Pegis...

soul connection and c) becoming. In correcting these errors of existence, Aquinas developed an anthropology grounded on an understanding of human nature whereby: the essence of the soul, powers of the soul and their operations are ordered in a certain way to man's end. Aquinas in his anthropology focused on the human person in terms of: origin, becoming an end. It is in this light that his discourse on *The Creation of The First Man and woman* and his general discourse on man and woman as an image of God emerges.

To address the feminists' concern that Aquinas's discourse on women is patriarchic, androcentric and sexist, and his language about God masculine,⁸ we shall make recourse to Aquinas own work, especially his anthropology and epistemology as it relates to the male and female genders.

2. Aquinas' Understanding of Person

Aquinas paid attention to the concept of 'person' since the term 'person' is predicated of God and human beings. In the *Summa Theologiae*⁹, Aquinas discourses the Divine Persons. He defines a person as an 'individual subsistence of rational nature.' This definition, borrowed from Boethius accentuates the difference between *essence, hypostasis and substance*. Aquinas writes that 'the particular and individual are found in the rational subject which have dominion over their own action; and which are not only made to act, like others, but which can act of themselves for actions belongs to singulars.' The human person, who is an individual substance of rational nature is composed of matter and form. Quoting Boethius still, Aquinas says *a simple form cannot be a subject*. He posits that form's self-subsistence is derived from the nature of its form, which does not supervene to the things subsisting, but gives actual existence to the matter and makes it subsist as an individual.' He explains that as far as human nature is ordered, hypostasis to matter and substance to the form because *matter* is the principle of subsisting and form the principle of subsisting. Aquinas' concept of person as we have said is equally predicated of God and preeminently to God. On this, Aquinas explains thus:

Person signifies what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a subsistent individual of rational nature. Hence, since everything that is perfect must be attributed to God, forasmuch as His essence contains every perfection, this name person is fittingly applied to God; not, however, as it is applied to creatures, but in a more excellent way; as other names also, which, while giving them to

⁸ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is*, p.33-36

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I Q. 29

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creatures, we attribute to God; as we showed above when treating of the names of God.¹⁰

Writing on the Divine Persons,¹¹ Aquinas explains that there are three persons in God. There is the Person of the Father, the Person of the Son and the Person of the Holy Spirit. There are three hypostases, but one nature in God. The three presences are of the same essence. Also, person as predicated of God signifies relations of origins among the three persons of the Trinity. For Aquinas, 'relations, as such, enters into the notion of person indirectly' because 'in God the individually-i.e distinct and incommunicable substance-include the idea of relation.'¹² The implication is that the concept of person as applicable to God makes it possible and easier to explain procession in God. Aquinas is clear enough when he explains that the nature of God is different from human nature, thus the word 'person' though applicable both to God and man, is not used equivocally. God is a self-subsistent being who is simple, pure act, immutable...¹³ Meanwhile human beings are composed of matter and form, in potency and are finite. As concerns language about God, Aquinas specifies that although the concept of person is predicated preeminently to God, and the names we attribute to God are 'analogous' God is neither male nor female for he is not composed of matter and form.¹⁴ Aquinas says human beings can name God from creatures by giving 'abstract names to signify His simplicity and concrete names to signify his substance and perfection, although both these kinds of names fail to express His mode of being, forasmuch as our intellect does not know Him in this life as He is.' Aquinas also says the name predicated of God are substantial-though they fall short of all full representation of Him. He is of the view that there is no name which is univocally predicated in equivocation of God and creatures. But ends up saying, 'He Who Is' is a Proper name of God, since God disclosed it Himself in Scriptures.

After considering the concept of person as applicable to God, Aquinas treats of man, who is also predicated 'a person,' an individual substance of rational nature. He takes into account human nature: the powers of the soul, the order of the powers, the operations of the powers as man's end attainable through beatitude. When he first treats of man—who is on the border of spirituality and materiality, he focused on human nature in general—neither making distinctions between male nor female as he treats of the soul, the powers of the soul, the intellect, the will, and the appetites. The distinctions between male and female becomes evident when

¹⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q.13, Art. 2

¹¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I Pt. I, Q. 29,

¹²Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q.30. Art 2.

¹³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q 3. Art. 3.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 13, art. 1.

he talks of the *Production of the First Man's Body* and the *Production of the Woman*.¹⁵

3. Aquinas on the First production of Man and Woman

In his discourse on 'The Production of Man's Soul,' the production of the first man's body and the production of the woman¹⁶ put forward the following thesis:

It was necessary for woman to be made, as the Scriptures says, as the helper to man; not, indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation. This can be made clear if we observe the mode of generation carried out in various living things. Some living things do not possess in themselves the power of generation, but are generated by some other specific agent, such as some plants and animals by the living influence of the heavenly bodies, from some fitting matter and not from seed: others possess the active and passive generative power together; as we see in, plants which are generated from seed; for the noblest vital functions in plants is generation....¹⁷

Aquinas goes further to discuss the question of whether woman should have been made from man? He gives reasons why he thinks that it was most fitting that woman should be made from man:

firstly, in order to give man a certain dignity as principle of the whole human race, so that man might love woman all the more, to secure domestic happiness and the finally for a sacramental reason: When all things were first formed, it was more suitable for the woman to be formed from man than (for the woman female to be from the male) in other animals. First, in order thus to give the first man a certain dignity consisting in this, that as God is the principle of the whole universe, so, the first man.¹⁸

Concerning the question as to whether the woman was made from the rib of the man, Aquinas explains that:

The rib belonged to the integral perfection of Adam, not as an individual, but as the principle of the human race; just as the semen belongs to the perfection of the begetter, and is released by a natural

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Quests. 91 and 92.¹⁵

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 90-92

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*,. Thomas here explains that the woman is a helper to man only in the specific areas of generation and not in other works. I, Q. 92. art 1.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 92. Art 2.

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and pleasurable operation. Much more, therefore, was it possible that by the Divine power the body of the woman should be produced from the man's rib.¹⁹

In all this, Aquinas posits that the creation of man and woman and the manner of doing so was entirely God's project. 'God alone, the Author of nature can produce an effect into existence outside the ordinary course of nature. Therefore, God alone could produce either man from the slime of the earth, or a woman from the rib of man.'²⁰ Aquinas however makes an interesting distinction between *individual human nature* and *human nature in general*. Concerning the individual nature of woman, he says: 'As regards the individual nature, woman is a defective and misbegotten male, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from defect in the active force....'²¹ And to explain the subjugation of the woman, the subjection of the woman to the man, Aquinas explains in these words. 'Subjection is twofold: One is servile, by virtue of which a superior makes use of a subject for his own benefit.'²²

While Aquinas derives his theology of the formation of the first man and the first woman from the creation account in Genesis, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her work believes that the authority of the Canon of Scriptures as the valid source of 'revelation'²³ is already problematic. She is of the opinion that feminist theologians have to engage in 'transgressing canonical boundaries in order to both undo the limits, functions, and extent of the canon' as regards its views on women. She 'searches the Scriptures' in a double sense. She avers that it is important that women 'scrutinize and interrogate Scriptures in order to uncover their 'crimes' of silencing and marginalization. It is her stand that the canon of Scriptures itself is responsible for the 'historical silencing and textual marginalization of women.' Fiorenza is fierce with her total rejection of the canon of scripture, on the other hand, Elizabeth Johnson thinks a reinterpretation of the canon in a manner that takes into account women's experiences will be beneficial for the whole Church.

John Paul II as a Pope and a Thomist in his body of works on the dignity of women in *Dignitatem Mulieris*, *Theology of the Body*, *Love and Responsibility* and others borrows many positive insights from Aquinas' anthropology on the composite

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 92.art 3

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 92. Art. 1. Rep.obj. 1.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 92. Art. 1. Rep.obj. 2

²³ *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, Vol. II, ed. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza,

nature of the human person. John Paul's II works can take into account the composite nature of man and women, the powers of the souls, their faculties, and sensuality in a way that act as corrective to the teachings of Augustine and Aquinas on the relationship between man and woman. Unlike Aquinas' portrayal of the man as the active principle in principle in procreation, John Paul II plainly puts it that that every human being is an *alteris incommunicabilis*, incommunicable being who can only open up to another wilfully. He talks of the complementarity of male and female-especially in marriage. He says both male and female are both *a subject and an object on the other's action*. As subjects both are initiators of actions and as objects, both are recipient of actions from the other.²⁴ Such a wholistic understanding of the person destroys any tendency to 'use' people, especially in marriage whereby the woman is often more vulnerable.

4. Elizabeth Johnson's Remarks on Aquinas's Anthropology Concerning Women

For Russell, feminists are 'women who advocate changes that establish political, economic and social equality of the sexes.' She explains that 'feminist theology strives to be human and not just feminine.' All oppressed people 'groan' together with creation as the await liberation. In her opinion, the process of feminist liberation theology strives to ensure that discussions about women is not built on any preconceived notions about the nature of women. By preconceived nature about women, we are talking about societal standards that are not built on a good understanding of nature but rather an understanding of gender roles. Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre* tells us that 'women feel just as men feel' and that they equally long for opportunities for the exercise of their faculties. She writes:

It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and million are in silent revolts against their lots. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, and it is narrow minded in their more privilege fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings, and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do

²⁴ John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*.

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more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.²⁵

With such views of the desires of women, feminist theology according to Elizabeth Johnson, engages in at least three interrelated tasks: it critically analyzes inherited oppressions, searches alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and risk new interpretations of the tradition in conversation with women's lives.²⁶ Johnson does not hide the fact that Aquinas' synthesis on women is one of the most andocentric. In her words:

In theology androcentrism ensures that ruling men will be the norm for language not only about human nature but also about God, sin and redemption, the church and its mission. One of the most influential andocentric syntheses in the Catholic tradition is that of Aquinas, which may serve as an illustration of how such of how such pattern of thinking works. Aquinas accepted, as part of the Aristotelian heritage that he was shaping into Christian language, the notions of ancient Greek biology that the male seed carried the potency for new life. He furthermore figured that under optimum conditions men, who are the pinnacle of creation, would reproduce their own perfection and create sons. The fact is, however, that they do not, for at least half of the time they generate daughters who will fall short of the perfection of the male sex. This indicates that the man was not up to par at the time of intercourse. Perhaps his seed was damaged, or he was on short energy due to hot, humid weather...woman's defective nature and the further fact that women in the garden of paradise and elsewhere is an occasion of sin for man do not indicate, however, that it would have been better had God never created woman at all. Woman is created by God for very definite purpose, namely, reproduction, which is the only thing that man cannot do better without her help. As for her being a temptress to man, Aquinas argues, the perfection of the universe depends on shadows as well as light, and in any event, God can bring good out of evil.²⁷

Johnson finds fault with Aquinas language about God his predication of personality of God. Though Aquinas clearly states that there is no gender in God because God

²⁵ Charlotte Bronte; *Jane Eyre*, 109.

²⁶ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, 29.

²⁷ Ibid

is pure form.²⁸ She believes his use of metaphoric language and masculine pronouns tilt towards the predication of maleness to God.

Predicating personality of God, however, immediately involves us in questions of sex and gender, for all the persons we know are either male or female. The mystery of God is properly understood as neither male nor female but transcends both in an unimaginable way. But insofar as God creates male and female in the divine image and is the source of the perfections of both, either can equally well be used as metaphors to point divine mystery. Both in fact are needed for less inadequate speech about God, in whose image the human race is created.²⁹

Johnson proposal as a corrective to Aquinas's work is that terminologies which reflect the feminine qualities of God should be introduced female terms be introduced in naming God. The neglect of female metaphors speaks volumes about the kind of image of God we wish to project. Many theologians are quick to point out that Johnson misread Aquinas. Secondly, there is the debate on the consequences of change of terminology as regards the broad sweep of theology. But whatever, be the concerns raised against Johnson's proposals, one must agree that, the need to listen to feminist concerns is important.

Aquinas in his discussions on the nature of the soul, the body soul-connections, the powers, the appetite powers and the will does not make distinctions between the male and females, he sees these powers operating equally both in men and women. For him, the subordination of the woman to the man is 'God's will', yet he emphasizes that 'the woman was created from the rib of the man so that... He could treat her as an equal.' When Aquinas discusses modesty in dressing, he is fast to address women. When he talks of soteriology in the third part of the *Summa Theologiae* he talks of Mary and whether women can baptize. Aquinas notes:

the image of God, in its principal signification, namely the intellectual nature, is found both in man and in woman. Hence after the words, *To the image of God He created them* (Gen. i. 27). Moreover, it is said *them* in the plural, as Augustine (Gen. ad.lit. iii. 22) remarks, lest it should be thought that both sexes were united in one individual. But in a secondary sense, the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature. So, when the Apostle had said that *man is the image and glory of man, but woman is the glory of man*, he adds his reason for saying it: *for man*

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 12.

²⁹ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, 55.

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*is not of woman, but woman of man; and man was not created for woman, but woman for man.*³⁰

Aquinas posits that in one way, woman is the image of God, and in another way, she is not the image of God, but the glory of man. Still on the discourse on the image of God, Aquinas says we see the image of God in man in three ways. The first way consists in man's possession of a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God. He says 'this aptitude consists in the very nature of the mind, which is common to all men.' In the second place 'conformity of grace' in as much as man actually or habitually knows and love God, and thirdly 'in as much as man knows and loves God perfectly; and this consists in the likeness of glory. Thus, the threefold image: *of creation, of re-creation, and of likenes*. Aquinas say the first is found in all men, the second only in the just, and the third only in the blessed. We can therefore deduce that men as well as women are capable of being the image of God in all three ways.³¹

5. The Vocation of Woman in Christ

Women in theology have taken up the task of reflecting on themselves. Mary Anne Fatula, Edith Stein, Elizabeth Johnson, Raissa Maritain and others have tried to articulate what it is like to be a woman from within and what woman's vocation in God is really about. Edith Stein on her part has this to say:

Women's destiny stems from eternity. She must be mindful of eternity to define her vocation in this world. If she complies with her vocation, she achieves her destiny in eternal life...'God created man in his image; male and female he created them.' When He put humanity into the world, not as a single but as a dual species, there had to be a different meaning of life for each species as well as a mutual one. Both were formed according to God's image. Each finite creature can reflect only a fraction of the divine nature; thus, in the diversity of His creature, God's infinite unity and oneness appear to be broken into an effulgence of manifold rays. Just so, the male and female species imitate the divine prototype in different ways...Augustine and Thomas and those following in their tradition find likeness of the Trinity in the human spirit. Although perceived in many ways, it is accepted by most that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are rendered back in being, knowledge, and love. Divine wisdom was incarnated as Person in the Son; Love came as Person in the Spirit. The Intellect is predominant in masculine nature; on the other hand, in women's nature, it is the emotions. We can thus

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q.93. Art. 4, Rep. Obj. 1.

³¹ Aquinas identifies the threefold image of God in man. Pt. I, Q.93, art.4.

understand why a particular association is constantly being made between woman's nature and the Holy Spirit...Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit is deity, we find it again in woman's destiny as 'Mother of the Living.' The spirit goes out of itself and enters into the creature as the begetting and perfecting fruitfulness of God; just so does women bring forth new life and helps the child to a most perfect development when he or she attains an autonomous existence. So do we also find the Holy in all works of womanly love and compassion, in as much as it is the Holy Spirit, as Father of the poor, consoler and helper, who heals the wounded, warms the numb, refreshes the thirsty, and bestow all good gifts. In womanly purity and gentleness, we find mirrored the spirit which cleanses the defiled and makes pliant the unbending; it abounds not only in those who may be already pure and gentle but also in those women who want to spread purity and gentleness about themselves. This 'gracious spirit' wants nothing else than to be divine light, streaming out as a serving love; nothing is more contrary to it than vanity that looks out for itself, and desire that likes to amass for itself. That is why the foremost sin of pride, in which vanity and desire coincide, is a falling-off from the spirit of love and defection from feminine nature itself.³²

Raissa Maritain on her part says when women study, they discover themselves and the meaning of existence. She writes:

As an atheist, I preferred metaphysics because it is the supreme science, the ultimate crowning of reason. As a Catholic, I love it still more because it allows us to have access to theology, to realize the harmonious and fertile union of reason and faith. It was not enough for me to live, I wanted a reason for living and moral principles which were based on an absolute certain knowledge...Among all the science, it is metaphysics which, after all, seems to me best suited for a feminine mind with a gift for abstraction.³³ That often young women enter into the realm of knowledge with intellectual passion more ardent and a love of truth more disinterested than young men do. If they are usually less gifted than men for the constructive synthesis and the inventive work of reason, they possess over them the advantage of a more vital and organic feeling for knowledge. When they love truth, it is in order to bring it down into life itself. When they love philosophy, it is because it helps

³² Edith Stein, *Woman*

³³ Jacques Maritain, *Raissa's Maritain's Journal*, 43.

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them to discover themselves and the meaning of existence; and they well understand the saying of Plato, that we must philosophize with our whole soul.³⁴

It is interesting to note that nowhere in Aquinas is there any suggestion that the female intellect is inferior. Even when he said 'some people have better intellects than others,' he wasn't comparing women to men. Also, when he touches on original sin, he is not out to blame Eve. Aquinas prefers to talk of the sins of 'our fore parents.'

6. Can Correctives be found in Aquinas's Works on the Feminine Question?

Aquinas's treatise on the Blessed Virgin Mary reveals the unique role of a woman in salvation history. 'Blessed among all women' she enjoys a special place in the life of the Church, and her femininity, gives credit to the femininity of all other women. She is a 'prototype' of all women in the Church. Mary Ann Fatula's works on *Aquinas on Friendship* believes that understanding Aquinas' treatise on friendship is a way to bridge the male female gap. Mary, O'Driscoll, O.P, writing on 'Women in the Dominican order'....³⁵ Shows how the women within the order have flourished and contributed greatly.

Aquinas' continuous influence on men and women of our time testify to Merton's position that a weakness in his work do not affect the sum total of his thoughts. The active engagement of women in the propagation of Aquinas' thought is a great achievement. Jacques Maritain credits the success of the Thomistic Circle ran by himself and his wife Raissa to the 'feminine ambiance' of their home which serve as a place of encounter for lovers of Aquinas's thoughts—people from all works of life. Raissa Maritain's love for Aquinas's reflects that general acceptance of him, in spite of hitches on his view of the woman. An interesting statement in Raissa's own thoughts sheds light gives credit to Christian thinkers—who are predominantly men of course. She says Christianity played an original role in the emancipation of men and women and that sometimes 'young women may not realize the long historical and intellectual effort it took to bring 'the human person, in man and woman, to consciousness of its dignity' and that 'the sense of human dignity is the mark of every civilization of Christian origins and foundation even when our fickleness of mind causes us to forget it'³⁶

³⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Raissa's Maritain's Journal*, 49.

³⁵ Mary, O'Driscoll, O.P, 'Woman and the Dominican Charism, with particular reference to Catherine of Sienna' *Angelicum* Volume 81, Annum 2004, Fasciculus 2.

³⁶ Raissa Maritain, 51

Concerning the topic emancipation still, this theme remains a topical one among all who feel oppressed within the Church. The Church is called upon to be attentive to these voices. Russell has made the distinction between ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation.’ She is of the opinion that most times, when people want to talk about freedom, they bring in the word ‘liberation.’ However, she thinks the two terms have different connotations. Liberation focuses on the *process of struggle with ourselves and others towards a more open future*. She avers that freedom mean different things to different people and the ‘struggle towards liberation varies with each person and with each human community.’³⁷ Feminists’ theologians have expressed their concerns in concrete terms and are have also made suggestions on the way forward. And there are signs that the Church is listening. In a work ‘The Vatican and Feminism’ the author avers that³⁸...

7. Conclusion

Aquinas’ discourse on women has fault lines which are traceable to the metaphysics he inherited from Aristotle with all its deficiencies. Yet we are certain that Aquinas’s did not mean to harm the female folk. This prayer of his said shortly before his death, exonerates him of any malice towards women: ‘I receive you, Price of my redemption, I Receive You, Viaticum of my pilgrimage, for love of Whom I have studied, kept vigil, labored, preached, and taught. Never have I said anything against you. If I have, it was in ignorance, and I do not persist in my ignorance. If I have taught anything false, I leave correction of it to the Roman Catholic Church, Amen’³⁹

³⁷Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective-A Theology*, 25

³⁸The Vatican on Feminism,

³⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Devoutly I Adore Thee: The Prayers and Hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Trans. Robert Anderson and Johann Moser, New Hampshire Sophia Institute Press, 1993