

ADORO TE DEVOTE — A SYNTHESIS OF
ST. THOMAS AQUINAS'S EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY

ANDREI GOTIA

Internationales Theologisches Institut
Kartause Maria Thron
A-3292 Gaming, Österreich
fisoj@catholic.org

In this article, the author provides a close analysis the most famous Eucharistic hymn written by St. Aquinas, *Adoro Te devote*, in the light of passages from the *Summa Theologiae* which treat the Holy Eucharist. In looking at Fra Angelico's *La Crocefissione*, which contains one of the renowned portraits of St. Thomas, the author finds similarities with the hymn.

*Adoro Te devote, latens Deitas,
Quae sub his figuris vere latitas:
Tibi se cor meum totum subiicit,
Quia Te contemplans totum deficit.*

*Visus, tactus, gustus, in Te fallitur,
Sed auditu solo tuto creditur:
Credo quidquid dixit Dei Filius,
Nil hoc verbo veritatis verius.*

*In cruce latebat sola Deitas,
At hic latet simul et humanitas:
Ambo tamen credens atque confitens,
Peto quod petivit latro poenitens.*

*Plagas, sicut Thomas, non intueor,
Deum tamen meum Te confiteor;
Fac me Tibi semper magis credere,
In Te spem habere, Te diligere.*

*O memoriale mortis Domini,
Panis vivus, vitam praestans homini:
Praesta meae menti de Te vivere,
Et Te illi semper dulce sapere.*

*Pie pelicane, Iesu Domine,
Me immundum munda Tuo sanguine,
Cuius una stilla salvum facere
Totum mundum quit ab omni scelere.*

*Iesu Quem velatum, nunc aspicio,
Oro fiat illud, quod tam sitio:
Ut Te revelata cernens facie,
Visu sim beatus Tuae gloriae.*

If one were to imagine St. Thomas praying the *Adoro Te devote*, one would immediately¹ think of Fra Angelico's *La Crocefissione*,² where the saint is represented with a concentrated, intense gaze, and a heart irra-

¹ On the relationship between the two Dominicans, John Saward wrote in his book, *The beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1997, p. 40f): "St. Thomas Aquinas is Fra Angelico's missing master. [...] The Angelic Doctor-Friar is without doubt the chief teacher of the Angelic Painter-Friar, the source of his philosophical and theological aesthetics." I will point out this special relationship in the case of *Adoro Te devote* in three instances.

² Circa 1442, Refectory, San Marco, Florence.

diating its love for the One Crucified,³ the One Who in His resurrected body is truly, really and substantially present in the Holy Eucharist.⁴

The gaze, which is implicit in the direct addressing to Christ, is of capital importance here. J. Pieper wrote to this effect the following:

The ultimate fulfillment, the absolutely meaningful activity, the most perfect expression of being alive, the deepest satisfaction, and the fullest achievement of human existence must needs happen in an instance of beholding, namely in the contemplating awareness of the world's ultimate and intrinsic foundations.⁵

When contemplating Christ in the Holy Eucharist, St. Thomas is contemplating the "world's ultimate and intrinsic foundations" and gives this a poetic expression which must by no means be considered of lower importance than, let us say, the *Summa*, because poetry is the closest form to contemplation and to love, as J. Pieper was fully aware when he prefaced his volume by St. Augustine's saying: "Cantare amantis est," and by J. de Maistre's: "Reason speaks in words alone, but love has a song."

Adoro Te devote is St. Thomas's love song for Jesus Christ present in the Sacrament of the Altar for which he had the deepest devotion:

While saying Mass he was utterly absorbed by the mystery, and his face ran with tears. At night, when our nature demands repose, he would rise, after a short sleep, and pray, lying prostrate on the ground; it was in those nights of prayer that he learned what he would write or dictate in the daytime. [...] All this is confirmed by his own statement to brother Reginald, that prayer and the help of God had been of greater service to him in the search for truth than his natural intelligence and the habit of study.⁶

The first stanza of this beautiful hymn composed by St. Thomas for the Feast of Corpus Christi (instituted by Pope Urban IV in 1264) be-

³ First, St. Thomas is the only one depicted with an irradiating heart, which is a proof that Fra Angelico knew the fervent devotion of Thomas in regard to the Eucharist, both from the writings and from the life of the *Doctor communis*. The painting, although called 'The Crucifixion', actually refers to the Sacrifice of the Mass, which is the only possible way for St. Thomas and other saints to be present and contemplate the Crucified. John Saward connects beautifully the Eucharist and the radiance, quoting St. Albert the Great's commentary on Jo 17, 22f (*ibid.*: 108).

⁴ Cf. The General Council of Trent, 13th Session, *Decree on the Most Holy Eucharist* (1551) [ND 513].

⁵ J. Pieper, *Only the lover sings: Art and contemplation*, tr. by L. Krauth, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1990, p. 22.

⁶ K. Foster, O.P. (ed.), *The life of St. Thomas Aquinas. Biographical documents*, Longmans, Green & Co. & Helicon Press, London & Baltimore, 1959, p. 37.

gins with the word which most properly describes the attitude one should have in front of the Holy Eucharist: *Adoro*. This is the highest step according to St. Augustine in the passage from *ratio*, through *oratio* to *adoratio*.

In addressing Christ present in the Holy Eucharist, St. Thomas calls Him *Deitas*⁷ (1st, 3rd stanza), *Dei Filius* (2nd stanza), *verbum Veritatis* (2nd stanza), *Deus* (4th stanza), *panis vivus* (5th stanza), *pius pelicanus* (6th stanza), *Jesus Dominus* (6th stanza), *Jesus* (7th stanza). This hymn is not only meant for the saint's devotion, but for a popular audience also. It is therefore very important to clarify from the very beginning that God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, is the One adored in the Holy Eucharist.⁸ I will return to the appellatives *panis vivus* and *pius pelicanus*.

The way the Divinity is present here is described by the line *Quae sub his figuris vere latitas*. *Figurae* describes the species of bread and wine, indicating that the first form of Eucharistic adoration is the Holy Mass, while *his* shows proximity, in heart and space, to the Holy Eucharist. The possible difference between *latens Deitas* and *latitas* could be that the Godhead is hidden in a special way outside the Holy Eucharist, and this calls for a *disciplina arcani*, while the frequentative *latitas* refers to the repeated transubstantiation of the bread and wine, through which Christ is *vere* present.

As I said in the beginning, the “organs” of adoration are the eye—for the species—and the heart—for the substantial presence. The latter, by its total subjection to the mystery, turns away from anything less, which can only be defective in relation to God: “*Tibi se cor meum totum subiicit, / Quia Te contemplans totum deficit.*”

The second stanza introduces the adorer to a Eucharistic theology of the senses: “*Visus, tactus, gustus in Te fallitur, / Sed auditu solo tuto creditur;*” If Christ is truly present—*vere latitas*—how can the sight, feeling

⁷ Following Dom A. Wilmart, who exposed the difficulties presented by the text, J.-P. Torrell, O.P., in his *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Cerf-Ed. Univ. de Fribourg, Fribourg & Paris, 1993, p. 195), chooses another reading of the first two lines of the hymn: “*Adoro devote, latens veritas / Te qui sub his formis vere latitas*”. The first, *veritas* for *Deitas*, is a less fortunate choice, because it removes from the text, understating it, the expression of the very important fact that Christ *God* is present in the Eucharist, overemphasizing thus the truth of Christ (*veritas, vere*); the second, *formis* instead of *figuris*, would support better the parallel with a poem of Jacopone da Todi, but it would not make the text richer. I therefore will follow the Marietti text, *Opuscula theologica*, t. 2.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the presence of the divinity of Christ in the Holy Eucharist see *ST* 3, 76, 1 ad 1.

and taste be mistaken when coming into contact with the Holy Eucharist? Without making a detailed analysis,⁹ the saint simply says: “in Te fallitur.” Christ is not to be perceived by the sight,¹⁰ feeling, taste in the Holy Eucharist, because He is not the species, which are perceived by the senses,¹¹ but the substance hidden under them. St. Thomas continues saying that only through hearing can be given credit [to the mystery] safely: “*Sed auditu solo tuto creditur;*” but one does not have to believe a concept, a law, but a Person, and that is why the impersonal *creditur* is replaced further on by the personal *credo*, which is appropriate for the Son of God: “*Credo quidquid dixit Dei Filius.*” The first stanza introduced the adverb *vere*; the second goes deeper in stating the identity of Christ: *Veritas*. Not only is He present truly, but He is Truth itself, St. Thomas keeps reminding the adorer in a unique blending of explicit catechesis and Scriptural reference.¹² This act of faith in the words of the Truth itself has a more profound implication: Thomas was not at the Last Supper, so if he believes what Christ said, it is in the virtue of the priest acting *in persona Christi*, which means that the priest, the sacrifice and the victim are the same. As Bl. D. C. Marmion puts it, “In the sacrament of the Eucharist, it is God, it is Christ who gives Himself to us.”¹³

Comparing the crucifixion and the presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist, following the first two lines of the first stanza, the adorer can only reach one conclusion: “*In cruce latebat sola Deitas, / At hic latet simul et humanitas;*” the Eucharist demands greater faith than Christ’s human life demanded: His contemporaries were invited to go beyond

⁹ This line and the following were a reason for some to doubt the hymn as truly Thomistic.

¹⁰ This Eucharistic poem is indeed a synthesis not only of St. Thomas’s Eucharistic theology, but also of our Christian life: we begin by contemplation (*contemplans*) to end with the beatific vision (“*Ut Te revelata cernens facie, / visu sim beatus tuae glorie.*”). John Seward writes beautifully: “Now faith has to do with unseen realities, and so just as the one Person of the Son offers us His divinity in an invisible manner, so here, in the Sacrament, He offers his humanity in an invisible way: ‘Blessed are they who do not see and yet believe. . .’ The hiddenness of the Real Presence is a mark of His chivalrous Heart: He does not force His beauty upon us, with a fury of obviousness. He invites us into the bridal surrender, to faith in Him in obscurity.” (1997: 98).

¹¹ Cf. *ST* 3, 75, 1: “The presence of Christ’s true body and blood in this sacrament cannot be detected by sense, nor understanding, but by faith alone, which rests upon Divine authority.”

¹² Cf. *Jo* 14, 6.

¹³ Bl. D. C. Marmion, *Christ the life of the soul (Spiritual Conferences, 10th ed.)*, Sands & Co., London & Glasgow, 1922, p. 258.

His human form, we are invited to go beyond the form of bread and wine and to recognize that He is true man and true God and that He is present on the altar with His humanity, body and soul, and His divinity.¹⁴ It is remarkable how St. Thomas's poetry resembles official professions of faith: "*Ambo tamen credens atque confitens, / Peto quod petivit latro poenitens.*" When the adorer is assimilated to the penitent thief,¹⁵ one is at the same time made a witness of the crucifixion, of the last act of the offering that Christ made and continues to make in an unbloody manner, and our position in regard to Him is clarified: we are the reason for His suffering and we are the beneficiaries of His daily sacrifice.

St. Thomas brings in the fourth stanza the example of the Apostle Thomas, with whom he does not share the same vision,¹⁶ but the same conclusion: "*Plagas, sicut Thomas, non intueor; / Deum tamen meum Te confiteor;*" It is interesting to recall what one of his biographers, B. Gui, wrote on the two saints:

Or again, lastly, is he not another Thomas? Not indeed like Didymus in doubting, for our Thomas's hold on divine things was firm and sure; but resembling that Apostle in entering the abyss of the side of Jesus Christ (does not Thomas mean 'abyss?')—entering as one invited, and therein searching out and expressing the mysteries contained there, with such assurance that it is as if his hands had handled what the finger of his intellect points to.¹⁷

Again St. Thomas, at this point in this meditation, recalls the Scriptural basis of the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, asking, like the father with

¹⁴ Cf. the oath of Berengarius of Tours (1079): "I, Berengar, believe in my heart and confess with my lips that the bread and wine which are placed on the altar are, by the mystery of the sacred prayer and words of the Redeemer, substantially changed into the true and proper and life-giving body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord; and that, after consecration, they are Christ's true body, which was born of the Virgin and hung of the cross, being offered for the salvation of the world, and which sits at the right hand of the Father; and Christ's true blood, which was poured forth from his side; not only by way of sign and by the power of the sacrament, but in their true nature and in their reality of their substance." [ND 1501]; for a detailed discussion of the entirety of Christ's body present in the Holy Eucharist, see *ST* 3, 76, 1–6.

¹⁵ Fra Angelico seems to have had *Adoro Te devote* in mind when he painted *La Crocefissione*: not only St. Thomas and other saints are contemplating with intense gazes the Crucified, but the penitent thief too adores, with a loving abandonment in his eyes, Christ the Lord.

¹⁶ One should notice, however, that St. Thomas enjoyed at least once the miraculous sight of Christ, as reported by B. Gui, in Foster (1959: 43f).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 36.

little faith and great love and humility,¹⁸ for an increase in the virtues of faith, hope and love: "*Fac me Tibi semper magis credere, / In Te spem habere, Te diligere.*"

In the same train of thought St. Thomas recalls the words of Christ in the first two lines of the fifth stanza: "*O memoriale mortis Domini! / Panis vivus, vitam praestans homini!*"¹⁹ The Eucharist is a memorial of Christ's death: it is clearly not a mere supper, but the same sacrifice, now offered in an unbloody manner so that the saving power of the bloody sacrifice may be applied to the living and the dead.²⁰

It is interesting that St. Thomas wants his *mens* to be nourished by the Bread of Life. The word can mean 'mind', 'heart', 'soul', 'conscience', 'intellect', and clearly St. Thomas does not want to make communion an intellectual act in a narrow sense of the word, but the connection between the Holy Eucharist and his writings is noteworthy: "He had a particular devotion to the Sacrament of the Altar; and no doubt the special profundity on this subject was due to the same grace that enabled him to say Mass so devoutly."²¹ The last line of this fifth stanza offers a very beautiful image, where St. Thomas joins synaesthetically taste and understanding in relationship to the Holy Communion: "*Et Te illi semper dulce sapere.*"

And now back to *Pie pellicane* of the sixth stanza. The pelican is generally the symbol of Christ the Redeemer, the one who gives his blood to nourish his offspring.²² The 'dirt' that needs to be washed in Christ's blood is sin and, in his simple and direct manner, St. Thomas reminds us that we are sinners, who need to be bathed daily in this most sacred bath, but that we are also the 'chicks' of the pelican, its very precious offspring, for whose eternal life He sheds His own blood: "*Pie pellicane, Iesu Domine, / Me immundum munda Tuo sanguine;*" The salvific

¹⁸ Cf. Mk 9, 22–24.

¹⁹ For the institution of the Eucharist, see Lk 22, 19; for the places where Christ calls Himself the Bread of Life, see Jo 6, 35; 47; and esp. 51.

²⁰ For the detailed analysis of the necessity of the Eucharist for salvation, see *ST* 3, 73, 3; for the reality of the sacrifice see *ST*, 3, 83, 1.

²¹ Gui, in Foster (1959: 37).

²² The original story about the pelican and the shedding of its blood is to be traced back to the *Physiologus*. For a detailed survey of the development of this metaphor, see *Enciclopedia cattolica*, vol. IX, s. v. pellicano. This is the third instance where one can trace a relationship between *Adoro Te devote* and *La Crocefissione*: above the Crucified Christ, Fra Angelico painted a pelican feeding its offspring with drops of blood from its chest. Under the pelican and above the cross, one reads the words of the Psalm 101: 7: "Similis factus sum pellicano solitudinis." A most fitting caption, which invites all to come and to console Christ by partaking of His body and blood.

power of the Blood of Christ extends to the entire world and to any sin:²³ “*Cuius una stilla saluum facere/ Totum mundum quit ab omni scelere.*” One could wonder why St. Thomas refers to this power by *quit saluum facere* and not by *facit*. Just as Christ offers His Blood ‘for many’²⁴ not because He wants to exclude someone from salvation, but because He knows that some will refuse Him, in like manner St. Thomas, implicitly, distinguishes between the objective and objective redemption.

The last stanza mirrors the first one, but enlarges the frame to the future glory: the beatific vision. The vocabulary is that of seeing: *aspicio, velatum, revelata, cernens, facie, visu*. In this lexical choice St. Thomas gives expression to the intensity of his thirst — “*oro fiat illud quod tam sitio*” — and, as it were, a ‘foretaste’ of the beatific vision: “*Iesu, Quem velatum nunc aspicio, / Oro fiat illud quod tam sitio; / Ut Te revelata cernens facie, / Visu sim beatus Tuae gloriae.*” Except for the third stanza, where the relation is implicit by the reference to the dialogue between Jesus and Dismas, every single stanza contains a personal reference to the Person in the Holy Eucharist: *Te* (1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 7th), *Tibi* (4th), *Tuo* (6th). The Eucharist is the most direct relationship between the Godhead and the creature, a relationship of love.

I started by showing the preminent role of poetry as a form of prayer in the life of St. Thomas. It is interesting to know that the last energy invested by the Angelic Doctor was on poetry, love poetry: “And it was indeed appropriate that the great worker in the school of the Church should terminate his teaching on that song of eternal glory.”²⁵

²³ *ST* 3, 79, 3: “[T]his sacrament has from Christ’s Passion the power of forgiving all sins, since the Passion is the fount and cause of the forgiveness of sins.” Cf. *ST* 3, 79, 4 for the special case of venial sins.

²⁴ Cf. Mk 14, 24.

²⁵ The song was the *Canticle of Solomon* (Gui, in Foster 1959: 55). For the attaining of glory through the Holy Eucharist, see *ST* 3, 79, 2.