CONTEMPLATA TRADERE

On Its Being Better to Illuminate than Merely to Shine

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Certain questions, good questions, never seem to be asked any more. Certain other questions, even when asked, confine the range of possible answers by some a priori theory or prejudice that prevents us from taking a look at the whole scene. Our character is decided too much by what we do not want to know, especially when what we do not want to know is in fact the truth.

When I am not busy writing law school recommendations for otherwise normal students, who even seem to understand that about seventy percent of the world's abundant supply of lawyers already exists in the United States, I wonder if they ever ask themselves about ends? I know the question of "ends" cannot be mentioned in the polity itself because that would imply that some forms of life are better than others. We do not want that sort of teaching around. Virtue cannot be a viable option, for that would mean that some things are vices. Still, as an act of rebellion, it is good to wonder about things that we are not supposed to think about. Wonder, after all, was one of those things that most distinguished our lot, as Aristotle once said.

Thomas Aquinas inquired about what sort of religious life was best -- one devoted to contemplation, one devoted to an active life like giving alms or attending the sick, or one in which elements of both contemplation and action were present. In giving his answer to this query, Aquinas used the example: "Just as it is greater to illuminate something than merely to shine, so it is greater to pass on to others what we have contemplated (contemplata tradere) than just to contemplate" (II-II, 188, 6). That is an unforgettable image, I think, a light shining on nothing.

Few would suspect in that brief passage that much controversy lies hidden. The first thing that Aquinas suggests is that bishops are supposed both to teach and to contemplate. It is a good thing to imitate their example. We wonder whether Aquinas was not merely defining what bishops are supposed to do but also urging them to do it, as if perhaps some don't!

It is not enough, moreover, that we do good works or pray to God. What we do should directly flow from what we behold and pray about. Behind Aquinas' brief remark is an awareness of the wholeness of our being, that we are to think and act, think before we act, act on the basis of what we think. We are to contemplate, that is, think rightly about the things that are.

The early Jesuits, a couple of hundred years after Aquinas, came up with their own "answer" to this famous position of Aquinas about passing on to others what we first contemplate ourselves. These early Jesuits thought themselves to exist not so much in order contemplata tradere but they were rather to become in actione contemplativi, (contemplatives in action). The great Dominican formula seemed to have the noble notion of spending much time figuring things out, then going forth to teach and preach what one had drawn into his soul.

The Jesuit formula, for its part, suggested that what goes on in the world of action had its own spiritual content. We were to behold this content as it came forth onto the visible world. One could interpret the Jesuit formula either as seeing the newness of the divine providence working itself out in the events of
the day or as being engaged in worldly affairs but with a certain distance, all of this in order to realize
the abiding things of God in all things, even in the events of the day.

What does this have to do with ends, virtue, and not adding to the world's supply of lawyers, or with
the questions that do not seem to be asked any more? We are to take into our soul all the things that are,
even the meaning of our own actions. Those things that flow into us and those things that flow out of us
belong to one world. We are not complete if we do not reflect on the highest things, or even on our own
things. Nor are we complete if we do not seek to relate all things to one end, not just to any end, but to
the truth of things.

We need not all be bishops, or Dominicans, or Jesuits, or professors, or lawyers, or aides in hospitals,
or providers for the poor, though we can choose any of these ways of life with a good spirit. But in each
of our actions, we are to behold, not ourselves, but the things that are. We are to pass on those truths we
have first contemplated and reflected on. If no one teaches us this truth in our own world, we are to seek
a world in which such things can be asked. We are not to be defeated by the questions no professor or
politician will ask us.

In actioe contemplativi. Contemplate tradere. In these two phrases, we can rediscover the world in all its
causes.

Sicut enim maius est illuminare quam lucere solum, ita maius est contemplata aliis tradere quam solum contemplari.

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