

Contemplation and action as the perpetual basis of religious life

Searching for the identity of religious life means not only searching for its essence, but also thinking about its daily functioning: a life in contemplation and in action. Aquinas' basic characteristics of these two forms of life and their comparison can help us grasp this identity.

1) "Each living thing is thought of as living by the operation which is most proper to it and toward which it is most of all inclined—in the way that the life of plants is said to consist in their being nourished and in generating, whereas the life of animals consists in their sensing and moving around, and the life of men consists in their understanding and in their acting in accord with reason. Hence, in the case of men, the life of each man seems to be what he especially delights in and tends toward most of all, and it is in this sort of life that every man wants especially "to live in company with his friend," as Ethics 9 points out. Therefore, since some men mainly tend toward the contemplation of truth and some mainly tend toward exterior actions, it follows that the lives of men are appropriately divided into the active and the contemplative."

ST II II, q. 179, a. 1

2) Gregory says: "The contemplative life retains, with one's whole mind, charity with respect to God and neighbour, and it adheres to the sole desire for the Creator."

ST II II, q. 180, a. 1, s.c., Hom. in Ezech.

Does the contemplative life involve diverse acts?

3) "The contemplative life has a single act (a) in which it is brought in the end to completion (*unum actum habet in quo finaliter perficitur*), viz. the act of contemplating the truth (*scilicet contemplationem veritatis*), and (b) from which it has its unity. On the other hand, the contemplative life has many acts by which it arrives at that final act. Some of them have to do with the reception of principles by which one proceeds toward the contemplation of truth; others involve the movement away from the principles toward the truth, the cognition of which is being sought; and the last and completing act is the very act of contemplating the truth."

ST II II, q. 180, a. 3

4) As regards those things that a man receives from God, prayer is necessary—this according to Wisdom 7:7 ("I called upon [the Lord], and the spirit of wisdom came upon me"). On the other hand, as regards those things that he receives from a man, listening is necessary insofar as he receives it from the voice of a speaker, and reading is necessary insofar as he receives it from what has been handed down in writing.

ST II II, q. 180, a. 3, ad 4

Is it appropriate to divide the operation of contemplation into three movements, the circular, the straight, and the oblique?

5) Among corporeal movements the primary and more complete ones are local movements. And so intellectual operations are very usefully described by their likeness to these movements. Among these movements there are three differences. For some are circular movements, in accord with which something moves uniformly around the same centre; others are straight movements, in accord with which something proceeds from one [terminus] to another; and the third are oblique movements in the sense that they are composed of the other two movements. And so, among the intellectual operations, that which has uniformity absolutely speaking is attributed to a circular movement, whereas an intellectual operation that proceeds from one thing to another is attributed to a straight movement, and an intellectual operation that has some degree of uniformity while progressing toward different things is attributed to an oblique movement.

ST II II, q. 180, a. 6

Is the active life more important than the contemplative life?

6) “Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.” In expounding on this verse in *De Verbo Domini* [Sermon 103] Augustine says, “Not ‘You have chosen a bad part’, but ‘She has chosen the better part’. Listen to why it is better: ‘Because it will not be taken away from her. At some future time, the burden of necessity will be taken away from you, whereas the sweetness of truth is eternal.’” Still, in a certain respect, and in a particular case, the active life should instead be chosen, because of the necessities of the present life—just as in *Topics 3* the Philosopher likewise says, “Being a philosopher is better than becoming rich, but becoming rich is better than suffering want.”

ST II II, q. 182, a. 1

7) Because of the necessity of the present life, an individual is sometimes called away from contemplation to the works of the active life—yet not in such a way that he is forced to abandon contemplation entirely. Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 19 Augustine says, “Charity with respect to truth seeks a holy idleness, while the demands of charity undertake honest work,” that is, the work of the active life. “If no one imposes this latter burden on us, we must free up time to look for and ponder truth. On the other hand, if it is imposed on us, we have to bear it because of the demands of charity—yet not in such a way that our delight in the truth is altogether abandoned, lest that sweetness be subtracted and these present demands oppress us.” And so, it is clear that when an individual is called from the contemplative life to the active life, this is done not in the manner of a subtraction, but in the manner of an addition.

ST II II, q. 182, a. 1, ad 3

Does the active life have greater merit than the contemplative life?

8) “The root of meriting is charity. Now since, as was likewise established above (q. 25, a. 1), charity consists in love for God and neighbour, it follows, as is clear from what was said above (q. 27, a. 8), that to love God in His own right is more meritorious than to love one’s neighbour. And that which directly involves loving God is more meritorious by its genus than that which directly involves loving one’s neighbour for the sake of God.”

However, it can happen that one individual merit more in the works of the active life than other merits in the works of the contemplative life—for instance, if, because of the abundance of his love for God and in order that God’s will might be fulfilled for the sake of His glory, he might now and then endure a separation from the sweetness of divine contemplation for a time.

ST II II, q. 182, a. 2

Is the contemplative life impeded by the active life?

9) There are two respects in which the active life can be thought of: First, with respect to the very application to and exercise of actions. And on this score, it is clear that the active life impedes the contemplative life, since it is impossible for an individual to be simultaneously occupied with exterior actions and free for divine contemplation. Second, the active life can be considered with respect to the fact that it aggregates and orders the interior passions of the soul. And in this respect the active life is an aid to contemplation, which is impeded by disorder in the interior passions. Hence, in *Moralia* 6 Gregory says: “Let those who desire to hold on to the fortress of contemplation first prove themselves on the battlefield by the exercise of works, in order that they might carefully ascertain whether or not they still inflict evils on their neighbours; whether or not they bear with equanimity evils inflicted by their neighbours; whether or not their mind is in any way overcome with joy because of good temporal objects; whether or not they are wounded by excessive sadness if such goods are withdrawn. Then they will carefully consider, once they have drawn back within themselves to explore spiritual things, whether they are any longer carrying with them the shadows of corporeal things or, perhaps, whether they are by their discretion driving away any shadows that they have already carried with them.”

ST II II, q. 182, a. 3