

## St. Thomas Aquinas

# The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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### OF THE ACTIVE LIFE (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must now consider the active life, under which head there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether all the works of the moral virtues pertain to the active life?
  - (2) Whether prudence pertains to the active life?
  - (3) Whether teaching pertains to the active life?
  - (4) Of the duration of the active life.
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### Whether all the actions of the moral virtues pertain to the active life?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that the acts of the moral virtues do not all pertain to the active life. For seemingly the active life regards only our relations with other persons: hence Gregory says (Hom. xiv in Ezech.) that "the active life is to give bread to the hungry," and after mentioning many things that regard our relations with other people he adds finally, "and to give to each and every one whatever he needs." Now we are directed in our relations to others, not by all the acts of moral virtues, but only by those of justice and its parts, as stated above ([Question \[58\]](#), [Articles \[2\]](#),8; [FS](#), [Question \[60\]](#), [Articles \[2\]](#),3). Therefore the acts of the moral virtues do not all pertain to the active life.

**Objection 2:** Further, Gregory says (Hom. xiv in Ezech.) that Lia who was blear-eyed but fruitful signifies the active life: which "being occupied with work, sees less, and yet since it

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[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS181.html](#)ling of good deeds." Now this would seem to belong to charity, whereby we love our neighbor, rather than to the moral virtues. Therefore seemingly the acts of moral virtue do not pertain to the active life.

**Objection 3:** Further, as stated above ([Question \[180\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)), the moral virtues dispose one to the contemplative life. Now disposition and perfection belong to the same thing. Therefore it would seem that the moral virtues do not pertain to the active life.

**On the contrary,** Isidore says (De Summo Bono iii, 15): "In the active life all vices must first of all be extirpated by the practice of good works, in order that in the contemplative life the mind's eye being purified one may advance to the contemplation of the Divine light." Now all vices are not extirpated save by acts of the moral virtues. Therefore the acts of the moral virtues pertain to the active life.

**I answer that,** As stated above ([Question \[179\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#)) the active and the contemplative life differ according to the different occupations of men intent on different ends: one of which occupations is the consideration of the truth; and this is the end of the contemplative life, while the other is external work to which the active life is directed.

Now it is evident that the moral virtues are directed chiefly, not to the contemplation of truth but to operation. Wherefore the Philosopher says (Ethic. ii, 4) that "for virtue knowledge is of little or no avail." Hence it is clear that the moral virtues belong essentially to the active life; for which reason the Philosopher (Ethic. x, 8) subordinates the moral virtues to active happiness.

**Reply to Objection 1:** The chief of the moral virtues is justice by which one man is directed in his relations towards another, as the Philosopher proves (Ethic. v, 1). Hence the active life is described with reference to our relations with other people, because it consists in these things, not exclusively, but principally.

**Reply to Objection 2:** It is possible, by the acts of all the moral virtues, for one to direct one's neighbor to good by example: and this is what Gregory here ascribes to the active life.

**Reply to Objection 3:** Even as the virtue that is directed to the end of another virtue passes, as it were, into the species of the latter virtue, so again when a man makes use of things pertaining to the active life, merely as dispositions to contemplation, such things are comprised under the contemplative life. On the other hand, when we practice the works of the moral virtues, as being good in themselves, and not as dispositions to the contemplative life, the moral virtues belong to the active life.

It may also be replied, however, that the active life is a disposition to the contemplative life.

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**Whether prudence pertains to the active life?**

**Objection 1:** It would seem that prudence does not pertain to the active life. For just as the contemplative life belongs to the cognitive power, so the active life belongs to the appetitive power. Now prudence belongs not to the appetitive but to the cognitive power. Therefore prudence does not belong to the active life.

**Objection 2:** Further, Gregory says (Hom. xiv in Ezech.) that the "active life being occupied with work, sees less," wherefore it is signified by Lia who was bleary-eyed. But prudence requires clear eyes, so that one may judge aright of what has to be done. Therefore it seems that prudence does not pertain to the active life.

**Objection 3:** Further, prudence stands between the moral and the intellectual virtues. Now just as the moral virtues belong to the active life, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), so do the intellectual virtues pertain to the contemplative life. Therefore it would seem that prudence pertains neither to the active nor to the contemplative life, but to an intermediate kind of life, of which Augustine makes mention (De Civ. Dei xix, 2,3,19).

**On the contrary,** The Philosopher says (Ethic. x, 8) that prudence pertains to active happiness, to which the moral virtues belong.

**I answer that,** As stated above ([Article \[1\]](#), ad 3; [FS, Question \[18\]](#), [Article \[6\]](#)), if one thing be directed to another as its end, it is drawn, especially in moral matters, to the species of the thing to which it is directed: for instance "he who commits adultery that he may steal, is a thief rather than an adulterer," according to the Philosopher (Ethic. v, 2). Now it is evident that the knowledge of prudence is directed to the works of the moral virtues as its end, since it is "right reason applied to action" (Ethic. vi, 5); so that the ends of the moral virtues are the principles of prudence, as the Philosopher says in the same book. Accordingly, as it was stated above ([Article \[1\]](#), ad 3) that the moral virtues in one who directs them to the quiet of contemplation belong to the contemplative life, so the knowledge of prudence, which is of itself directed to the works of the moral virtues, belongs directly to the active life, provided we take prudence in its proper sense as the Philosopher speaks of it.

If, however, we take it in a more general sense, as comprising any kind of human knowledge, then prudence, as regards a certain part thereof, belongs to the contemplative life. In this sense Tully (De Offic. i, 5) says that "the man who is able most clearly and quickly to grasp the truth and to unfold his reasons, is wont to be considered most prudent and wise."

**Reply to Objection 1:** Moral works take their species from their end, as stated above ([FS, Question \[18\]](#), [Articles \[4\],6](#)), wherefore the knowledge pertaining to the contemplative life is that which has its end in the very knowledge of truth; whereas the knowledge of prudence, through having its end in an act of the appetitive power, belongs to the active life.

**Reply to Objection 2:** External occupation makes a man see less in intelligible things, which are separated from sensible objects with which the works of the active life are concerned. Nevertheless the external occupation of the active life enables a man to see more clearly in judging of what is to be done, which belongs to prudence, both on account of experience, and on account of the mind's attention, since "brains avail when the mind is attentive" as Sallust observes [*\*Bell. Catilin., LI*].

**Reply to Objection 3:** Prudence is said to be intermediate between the intellectual and the moral virtues because it resides in the same subject as the intellectual virtues, and has absolutely the same matter as the moral virtues. But this third kind of life is intermediate

## Whether teaching is a work of the active or of the contemplative life?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that teaching is a work not of the active but of the contemplative life. For Gregory says (Hom. v in Ezech.) that "the perfect who have been able to contemplate heavenly goods, at least through a glass, proclaim them to their brethren, whose minds they inflame with love for their hidden beauty." But this pertains to teaching. Therefore teaching is a work of the contemplative life.

**Objection 2:** Further, act and habit would seem to be referable to the same kind of life. Now teaching is an act of wisdom: for the Philosopher says (Metaph. i, 1) that "to be able to teach is an indication of knowledge." Therefore since wisdom or knowledge pertain to the contemplative life, it would seem that teaching also belongs to the contemplative life.

**Objection 3:** Further, prayer, no less than contemplation, is an act of the contemplative life. Now prayer, even when one prays for another, belongs to the contemplative life. Therefore it would seem that it belongs also to the contemplative life to acquaint another, by teaching him, of the truth we have meditated.

**On the contrary,** Gregory says (Hom. xiv in Ezech.): "The active life is to give bread to the hungry, to teach the ignorant the words of wisdom."

**I answer that,** The act of teaching has a twofold object. For teaching is conveyed by speech, and speech is the audible sign of the interior concept. Accordingly one object of teaching is the matter or object of the interior concept; and as to this object teaching belongs sometimes to the active, sometimes to the contemplative life. It belongs to the active life, when a man conceives a truth inwardly, so as to be directed thereby in his outward action; but it belongs to the contemplative life when a man conceives an intelligible truth, in the consideration and love whereof he delights. Hence Augustine says (De Verb. Dom. Serm. civ, 1): "Let them choose for themselves the better part," namely the contemplative life, "let them be busy with the word, long for the sweetness of teaching, occupy themselves with salutary knowledge," thus stating clearly that teaching belongs to the contemplative life.

The other object of teaching is on the part of the speech heard, and thus the object of teaching is the hearer. As to this object all doctrine belongs to the active life to which external actions pertain.

**Reply to Objection 1:** The authority quoted speaks expressly of doctrine as to its matter, in so far as it is concerned with the consideration and love of truth.

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considers the matter of the interior concept. For it pertains to the man having wisdom and knowledge to be able to teach, in so far as he is able to express his interior concept in words, so as to bring another man to understand the truth.

**Reply to Objection 3:** He who prays for another does nothing towards the man for whom he prays, but only towards God Who is the intelligible truth; whereas he who teaches another does something in his regard by external action. Hence the comparison fails.

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## Whether the active life remains after this life?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that the active life remains after this life. For the acts of the moral virtues belong to the active life, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)). But the moral virtues endure after this life according to Augustine (De Trin. xiv, 9). Therefore the active life remains after this life.

**Objection 2:** Further, teaching others belongs to the active life, as stated above ([Article \[3\]](#)). But in the life to come when "we shall be like the angels," teaching will be possible: even as apparently it is in the angels of whom one "enlightens, cleanses, and perfects" [\*Coel. Hier. iii, viii] another, which refers to the "receiving of knowledge," according to Dionysius (Coel. Hier. vii). Therefore it would seem that the active life remains after this life.

**Objection 3:** Further, the more lasting a thing is in itself, the more is it able to endure after this life. But the active life is seemingly more lasting in itself: for Gregory says (Hom. v in Ezech.) that "we can remain fixed in the active life, whereas we are nowise able to maintain an attentive mind in the contemplative life." Therefore the active life is much more able than the contemplative to endure after this life.

**On the contrary,** Gregory says (Hom. xiv in Ezech.): "The active life ends with this world, but the contemplative life begins here, to be perfected in our heavenly home."

**I answer that,** As stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), the active life has its end in external actions: and if these be referred to the quiet of contemplation, for that very reason they belong to the contemplative life. But in the future life of the blessed the occupation of external actions will cease, and if there be any external actions at all, these will be referred to contemplation as their end. For, as Augustine says at the end of De Civitate Dei xxii, 30, "there we shall rest and we shall see, we shall see and love, we shall love and praise." And he had said before (De Civ. Dei xxii, 30) that "there God will be seen without end, loved without wearying, praised without tiring: such will be the occupation of all, the common love, the universal activity."

**Reply to Objection 1:** As stated above ([Question \[136\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#), ad 1), the moral virtues will remain not as to those actions which are about the means, but as to the actions which are about the end. Such acts are those that conduce to the quiet of contemplation, which in the

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**Reply to Objection 2:** The contemplative life, as stated above ([Question \[180\]](#), [Article \[4\]](#)), consists chiefly in the contemplation of God, and as to this, one angel does not teach another, since according to Mt. 18:10, "the little ones' angels," who belong to the lower order, "always see the face of the Father"; and so, in the life to come, no man will teach another of God, but "we shall" all "see Him as He is" ([1 Jn. 3:2](#)). This is in keeping with the saying of Jeremias 31:34: "They shall teach no more every man his neighbor... saying: Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least of them even to the greatest."

But as regards things pertaining to the "dispensation of the mysteries of God," one angel teaches another by cleansing, enlightening, and perfecting him: and thus they have something of the active life so long as the world lasts, from the fact that they are occupied in administering to the creatures below them. This is signified by the fact that Jacob saw angels "ascending" the ladder---which refers to contemplation---and "descending" ---which refers to action. Nevertheless, as Gregory remarks (*Moral. ii, 3*), "they do not wander abroad from the Divine vision, so as to be deprived of the joys of inward contemplation." Hence in them the active life does not differ from the contemplative life as it does in us for whom the works of the active life are a hindrance to contemplation.

Nor is the likeness to the angels promised to us as regards the administering to lower creatures, for this is competent to us not by reason of our natural order, as it is to the angels, but by reason of our seeing God.

**Reply to Objection 3:** That the durability of the active life in the present state surpasses the durability of the contemplative life arises not from any property of either life considered in itself, but from our own deficiency, since we are withheld from the heights of contemplation by the weight of the body. Hence Gregory adds (*Moral. ii, 3*) that "the mind through its very weakness being repelled from that immense height recoils on itself."