Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
by Dr. Stephen Loughlin

01.30.09: Rejoice and Be Glad!

I must say that even after two decades in the field, the intellectual life is still full of surprises. As you may remember from my prior reflections, I am engaged happily in the work for which I was granted a sabbatical, namely the composition of a book introducing Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* to first and second year undergraduates. I had been doing preparatory reading for about two years, but it is only lately, having been freed from any and all teaching and administrative duties, that I have found my mind wholly occupied with this project, and this more so than I had anticipated. Allow me to explain. Part of a professor’s survival includes developing the capacity to switch quickly between different tasks and areas of thought, without which very little would get done. In planning my sabbatical, I had thought how wonderful it would be to get this book written, and also to attend to many other projects at the same time. My surprise consists in the fact that now that I am ever so happily absorbed in this work, I find, to my dismay, that I am incapable of attending to anything other than the book! It is not for want of trying. I am, as they say, ready, willing and able. But I find that when I turn, say, to the composition of a reflection for the members of the *Center*, nothing arises, or if something does, it finds its way very quickly into the trash. Having turned this situation over for a bit in my mind, I have come to understand that my sabbatical had been a long time in coming, and that I have so missed the leisure of attending, for hours on end, to the very things that got me into this profession in the first place. It is as if my mind has risen up in indignation and has declared: “Enough of the service to which you have bound me over these past 10 years! You will serve the task at hand, the contemplating of the divine matters directly related to the Saint Thomas Aquinas and his *Summa Theologiae*, and will allow nothing else to get in the way! Names of people? Forgotten! Places to be? Denied! Duties to consider? Pleasant conversation? Ideas to contribute at the lunch table with your fellow colleagues? Pah! I need this silence and the contemplation it allows so that I might be healed of the trivia with which you, my owner, have injured me. I have been rescued temporarily from the dreck that you have had me entertain these past 10 years on a daily basis, and I intend to savor every moment. It is not enough that you have thrown my way a bone or two in the form of reading in the early hours of the morning after prayer. I hereby jealously guard access to my frontal lobes and will only consider the things of wisdom herself. Moreover, I…” Well, I think you get the drift. I have indulged this mood for the past month (seeing the reasonability of my mind’s position and respecting the service that he has rendered) and have, among other things, not attended to anything else. I think, however, that I have effected a truce with him, having discerned a possible compromise concerning work outside of the book,¹ namely in allowing the work with which I am currently engaged to overflow in some way into these reflections, to become part of the source of the inspiration of all things connected with discernment. I hope this works and that the truce holds. For I cannot even begin to entertain what sort of troops would have to be deployed should this shaky detente collapse.

¹ which, by the way, is progressing quite nicely, thank you very much, with the first chapter finished, and the very long and complicated second chapter off to a very good start.
In the midst of my surprise, it occurred to me how very much I enjoy the pursuit of truth and wisdom. I must say that I am so pleased to be in my cell of an office for a good 8 to 10 hours a day (sometimes 12 if my wife is at work), contemplating theological and philosophical matters. The time flies and I find myself at the end of the day abuzz with ideas, barely able to sleep, only doing so knowing that it will happen all over again the next day. Now, I am not unusual in this regard. Many of you have heard me relate stories along these lines, especially about a former professor of mine who considered a hot Friday night to consist in sitting by a fire with a bottle of wine reading Book III of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. The pursuit of that which is true, good and beautiful is inherently pleasing, and is a defining characteristic not only of the life of the scholar, but of any person who seeks to be authentically happy. Take three examples that are dear to my heart.

The life of St. Thomas Aquinas clearly demonstrates the enjoyment he took in pursuing wisdom and truth. When you read his biography, you encounter a man who is so in love with God that he places the entirety of the enormity of both his mind and his energies at His service, not only that he might behold the mysteries of the faith, but that he might teach and preach all that he had discovered to those within his Order and the Catholic communities that they served. He was so focused upon the things of God that he had little time for anything else, and would not have had it any other way. His devotion to Christ and to the Eucharist were especially wonderful. His work issued from his prayer before Christ on the cross, and at the end of his life he brought the entirety of his mind to bear upon the Eucharist itself. It said by some writers that although the *Summa Theologiae* was left incomplete at Aquinas’s death, it was, nonetheless complete for him insofar as everything that he had written had found its culmination in the person of Christ, the salvific act, and his real presence in the Eucharist, the concerns of the third and final part of the *Summa*. With his devotion to and love of Christ so addressed, perhaps his vision during the mass on the feast of Saint Nicholas led him to realize that there was simply nothing more for him to write. Be that as it may, the enjoyment that Thomas had in beholding those highest of truths was clearly a pleasure beyond all telling, a pleasure that foreshadowed the knowledge of God in the next life, and thus is one to which we are all called and of which we will one day partake. His anticipation of it in this life, and the lengths to which he went to enjoy and share it with others, stand as a testimony to the sheer delight and truly human propriety of the life of study.

St. Thomas Moore, particularly as he is depicted in that marvelous film *A Man for All Seasons*, represents for me a powerful example of the good life, one lived out of the formation effected by the intellectual, cardinal and theological virtues, especially as these are brought to bear upon the living of the Word in each moment of his life. There is something so attractive about a person who has a finely tuned intellect and uses it well in both his theoretical and practical endeavors, or one whose life bespeaks of justice in everything that he does. Equally desirable are those who exhibit true courage especially in the most perilous of circumstances, or those who have such control over their desires that they exude not only a joyous peace but an integrity that bespeaks a holy and joyous self-possession. The beauty exuded by a person of faith is beyond compare, and the hope that such

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2 something you should all be doing not just with respect to him, but also with respect to the lives of all the saints, the heroes of our faith, models and guides to the vocations that we seek to emulate.

3 He had completed his treatise concerning the Eucharist, and had just started the questions on penance when he put down his pen consequent upon a vision he had during the celebration of mass on the feast of St. Nicholas, December 6, 1273.
people hold deep within their hearts speaks of a youth and energy that is eternal. Finally, words fail in the presence of true love, in whose presence the Word itself becomes incarnate yet once again. In the lives of the saints, but particularly that of Thomas Moore, all of these are on display, and one feels within the very depths of one’s person, the stirring of something that reminds us of what it must have been like before the fall of man. So desirable is this that we gravitate almost unconsciously to people of such perfection. In the face of Thomas Moore, and others who exude such virtue, one is both condemned for what one is, and redeemed for what one is. It is a truly humbling experience, one that impels one to emulate the very thing that has condemned one. Personally, I experience this at every conference that I attend, with every holy priest that I meet, and in the person of my wife. I cannot help but feel in these instances as that woman saved from being stoned to death by Christ must have felt as she went forward, loved out of her fallen condition and into the radiant promise of all that she was and could be.

Finally, consider the jazz pianist Chick Corea. When I reflect upon the many live performances that I have experienced over my life (the only way to enjoy music, in my opinion), Corea’s performances stand out from all the others. One is struck not so much by their virtuosity (which itself is enormous) but rather by the profound beauty and attendant joy that flow from them, a beauty and joy usually found in the persons of the saints, the virtuous and the wise. To find both beauty and joy in all of their lightness, profundity and authenticity in music (let alone in any art or person) is a rare thing indeed, something to which most artists aspire, and, in the case of music, is intrinsic to the Western tradition’s best works (the entirety of the works of J. S. Bach, some of those of Mozart, the entire corpus of Palestrina and Vittoria, and the tradition of Gregorian chant itself are to my mind the best examples). Jazz is a difficult art form. It is practiced by many but is mastered in both its structure and spirit by few. Corea is for me one of the finest masters of this art. His technique is perfect and he enjoys full command of his instrument. He has studied assiduously the works of the great jazz and classical composers of our tradition, and is at ease in both genres, understanding deeply their art, structure, spirit and purpose. He communicates these things effortlessly in his performance. Personally speaking, I only began to understand the beauty inherent in atonal music through his performances and compositions, especially of his *Three Quartets*. On the few occasions that I have heard him perform live, the passing of time has a funny way of being suspended, as his playing evokes the experience of the eternal now. Such occasions remind me of what it is like to teach. He is humble and never arrogant, extremely sensitive and never overbearing, full of the beauty and the joy of his art in such a way that he becomes the best of musicians, namely one who exhibits that uncanny capacity to “get out of the way” of his art, to lay all that he is and all that he has struggled to acquire before the music itself, and, if found worthy, to “speak” with a voice other than his own. This, in my view, is the only way that one could ever hope to explain how it is that performers at the Van Cliburn competition can play so maturely at so young an age, that they can display in their performances the depths of the human condition and a maturity of human emotion far beyond anything that their tender years could possibly have afforded them. True artists like Chick Corea are those who are taken up by the “mania” of their art. They bear the mark of those who have been used, and would rather not speak of that moment since it is holy, preferring instead that the performance speak for itself, thankful that they were deemed worthy for bringing such beauty into the world. I can say quite honestly that my life has been made better by his music and artistry.

I am surprised by two things on a regular basis. The first, as I noted at the start of this reflection, is how enjoyable are those activities that are proper to our humanity, far outweighing any allure that our animal nature puts before us. The second is closely related, namely how few people consider properly human activities as
enjoyable. Many consider the intellectual life, or even just reading, to be a hardship (enjoyed only by those of great genius or those who seek to avoid real life and labor), feel that the life of virtue is one of utter boredom and is inherently depressing (filled with old dry withered almost dead people moping about feeling self-righteous about their lives but secretly wishing to let go and live the ribald life), and judge beauty to be something that is wholly in the eye of the beholder, something that we ourselves determine and thus requires no vision, no learning, no dedication, no virtue and no effort. Such views are very prevalent in our world, but simply are incorrect. Argument is ineffective, however, as a corrective. Instead, there is only the example of lives dedicated to the true, the good and the beautiful, lives that manifest wisdom, prudence, justice, courage, temperance, faith, hope and love. Herein lies one of the reasons why we should never despair of being Christian in this world, particularly amidst its viciousness. For in a life well lived, striving for those things which are truly human, and will perfect us in our humanity, we experience not only the true, dignified and exalted pleasure promised us as children of God, but also fulfill the responsibilities of being Christ for others. Thus, as St. Francis De Sales states, be who you are and be that well, never compromising your vision concerning who you are, never despairing over who you find yourself to be, but being what you are as God sees you. Thus aspire with all your person to take on the mind of God so that you might see yourself as He does, and in that sight, be all that this entails. In this spirit, consider the beautiful words of Aquinas as a place to begin, words taken from the office of readings from his feast day of January 28:

Why did the Son of God have to suffer for us? There was a great need, and it can be considered in a twofold way: in the first place, as a remedy for sin, and secondly, as an example of how to act. It is a remedy, for, in the face of all the evils which we incur on account of our sins, we have found relief through the passion of Christ. Yet, it is no less an example, for the passion of Christ completely suffices to fashion our lives. Whoever wishes to live perfectly should do nothing but disdain what Christ disdained on the cross and desire what he desired, for the cross exemplifies every virtue. If you seek the example of love: Greater love than this no man has, than to lay down his life for his friends. Such a man was Christ on the cross. And if he gave his life for us, then it should not be difficult to bear whatever hardships arise for his sake. If you seek patience, you will find no better example than the cross. Great patience occurs in two ways: either when one patiently suffers much, or when one suffers things which one is able to avoid and yet does not avoid. Christ endured much on the cross, and did so patiently, because when he suffered he did not threaten; he was led like a sheep to the slaughter and he did not open his mouth. Therefore Christ’s patience on the cross was great. In patience let us run for the prize set before us, looking upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who, for the joy set before him, bore his cross and despised the shame. If you seek an example of humility, look upon the crucified one, for God wished to be judged by Pontius Pilate and to die. If you seek an example of obedience, follow him who became obedient to the Father even unto death. For just as by the disobedience of one man, namely, Adam, many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one man, many were made righteous. If you seek an example of despising earthly things, follow him who is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Upon the cross he was stripped, mocked, spat upon, struck, crowned with thorns, and given only vinegar and gall to drink. Do not be attached, therefore, to clothing and riches, because they divided my garments among themselves. Nor to honors, for he experienced harsh words and scourgings. Nor to greatness of rank, for weaving a crown of thorns they placed it on my head. Nor to anything delightful, for in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.4

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4 Taken from his commentary upon the Apostles’ Creed (at “He suffered under Pontius Pilate”). The version presented here is edited somewhat, omitting the biblical passages that support Thomas’s discourse here.