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A Guide to Reading Aquinas' Academic Sermons

Przewodnik po lekturze kazań akademickich Akwinaty

Book review: Randall B. Smith, *Reading the Sermons of Thomas Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide*, Steubenville, Emmaus Academic, 2016, xxxiv + 342 pp., ISBN: 978-1-941447-97-0

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In an article in *Nova et Vetera* in 2012, prof. Randall B. Smith of the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, offered helpful instructions for studying the sermons of Thomas Aquinas.¹ It is most fortunate that he is now able to present us with a book-length introduction to reading the sermons. Such is also the opinion of scholars of the stature of Alasdair MacIntyre and Jean-Pierre Torrell, whose ringing endorsements feature on the book's dust cover.

Those interested in the sermons of Aquinas will no doubt be familiar with Marc-Robin Hoogland's translation of the academic sermons.² Smith follows the text of the translation, with minor emendations, and recommends that the reader of his book has Hoogland's to the side, because 'Reading the Sermons of Thomas Aquinas' is "above all meant to inspire the reader to go back to the texts of Aquinas with greater understanding and increased appreciation for the art, the craft, and the genius of the Common Doctor of the Church" (p. xxxiv). Both Smith and Hoogland limit their studies to the academic sermons, as they are

¹ R.B. Smith, 'How to Read a Sermon by Thomas Aquinas', in: *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, 10–3 (2012), 775–803.

² M.-R. Hoogland, *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, Washington D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2010.

found in the recent Leonine edition.³ Therefore, they do not include the longer *collationes* on the Our Father and Hail Mary, the Creed, and the Decalogue.

1. Content and structure of ‘Reading the Sermons’

The first chapter presents all of the important themes of the book, which are then further expanded upon in the following chapters. This chapter is a comprehensive overview of the structure of the medieval sermon, and Smith argues that the purpose of this structure was to facilitate its memorising by the listeners.⁴ He demonstrates this with the sermon *Ecce rex tuus*. This verse from the prophet Haggai is the *thema*, and each of these words has a place in the structure of the sermon. The word *rex*, for example, is the lead for a discussion of Christ as king. This suggests unity, fullness of power, abundant jurisdiction, and equity of justice. In a similar way, each of these words is associated with a number of topics related to the main theme of the sermon. When we understand the opening line of each sermon as such, Smith argues convincingly, there is no reason to suggest that Aquinas is practising eisegesis, reading meaning *into* the text. The opening verse is not the subject of the sermon, but structures it. Apart from the mnemonic advantages, there is also a theological justification for this practice. Again, the sermon *Ecce rex tuus* provides us with an example. Although the prophet may not have intended these words to refer to the Christ, they were taken up by the writers of the gospels in relation to the events of Palm Sunday. Aquinas shares this Christocentric understanding of the Old Testament with the New Testament writers, on the basis of the belief that the Holy Spirit could intend to prefigure Christ not just in words but in historical events as well.

After this introduction on the mnemonic and exegetical principles underlying the structure of the sermons, chapters two to four address the “nuts-and-bolts” of Aquinas’ style of preaching. The twelfth century saw a true homiletic revolution, with the development of the *sermo modernus*. Unlike the monastic sermon, which was often a line-by-line commentary on a pericope, this type of

³ L.-J. Bataillon (ed.), *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia* vol. 44.1: *Sermones*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2014.

⁴ Most of this first chapter is taken from *Nova et Vetera* article, cf. xix, 2–8, 11–13, 16–17, 24–27 of the book and 775, 777–785, 787–788, 800–803 of the article. This is not indicated in a footnote, nor is the article included in the select biography at the end of the book.

sermon was structured around a *thema* such as the one mentioned in the first chapter. The verse was usually chosen from the readings of the day, a practice which Aquinas followed for roughly half of his sermons. Defining the purpose of a *prothema*, a short reflection which followed the *thema*, proves to be more difficult. Smith presents a number of possible interpretations, drawing not just from Aquinas' sermons but also from Bonaventure's. It is certain that in their sermons, the *prothemata* were short and simple, making a single point, or leading to a prayer. The rest of the sermon is crafted around the *thema*, which is developed in two ways: it is divided into different thematic parts (*divisio*), which are subsequently 'dilated', or unfolded (*dilatatio*).

The third chapter is devoted to the process of *divisio*. Making use of Robert of Basevorn's *Forma Praedicandi*, Smith shows the three different ways of employing the *thema* in the sermon. Although that work is from 1322, long after Aquinas' death, Smith makes use of the work to help organize his approach to the sermons. Using a somewhat contemporary method of understanding these medieval sermons is indeed preferable to the alternative of imposing a present-day structuring on them. The chosen framework furthers the understanding of the sermons, thus underscoring the legitimacy of this choice. Basevorn offers a set of basic rules, and adhering to them is a way for the preacher to force himself to a certain creativity, forbidding him to be repetitious. Aquinas' and Basevorn's processes are twofold: first the preacher divides the sermon into parts, then he continues with the declaration of the parts. As numerous examples demonstrate, Aquinas did indeed use this *sermo modernus* format for his sermons. In an extensive discussion of the sermon *Germinet terra*, Smith demonstrates the function of the *thema* with greater precision. This lengthy exposition drives home his point that the organization of a sermon around a mere six relevant words, allows for both memorability and a rich theological content. Once the reader of the sermon is able to see this internal order, the sermons "can become infectious, like reading the *Summa* or appreciating all the intricately interrelated parts of a vast medieval cathedral" (p. 89). Even though the sermons are highly structured, they do allow for creativity, as Smith points out by showing three different ways of employing the word "blessed".

Having discussed the function of the *divisio*, Smith moves on to the *dilatatio* in chapter four. This chapter is structured around the eight methods of dilation described in both Basevorn's *Forma Praedicandi* as well as the *Ars Concionandi*, a work which was erroneously attributed to Bonaventure. Aquinas is "adept at each of these methods and makes frequent use of nearly all of them at one point or another, even in the few sermons of his that still survive" (p. 114). Examples drawn from the sermons illustrate this point throughout the chapter. The first of these is from the sermon *Emitte Spiritum*. There, the noun 'send

out' forms the basis of the dilation of the sermon: it discusses the mission of the Spirit, the Person sent, the effect of the One sent, and the receptive *materia* of this effect. This sermon also features in the description of another form of dilation, namely argumentation. Aquinas argues that all things are moved to a certain end. Now, if things are moved to a supernatural end, they must have a supernatural mover. This example returns in the description of method eight, the consideration of causes and their effects. The recurrence of sermons in different parts of this chapter makes it clear that a sermon can contain several forms of *dilatatio*, a point which Smith raises at the end of the chapter. He pays a considerable amount of attention to the method of 'chaining' *auctoritates*, which in this case refers to Biblical verses. The fruits of this method are in its rhetorical effect, as well as in "inspiring and instilling a certain biblical literacy in a largely illiterate audience" (p. 138). Although this may be indeed the case for the longer *collationes* preached to the people, this argument seems to be a bit out of place in a discussion of the academic sermons. Another way of approaching this phenomenon might be to argue that Aquinas comes up with these texts exactly *because* his listeners are familiar with them. As Smith rightly argues, religious like Aquinas had an intimate relation with the words of Scripture which they recited, meditated upon, and studied without ceasing, already constituting a "biblically-influenced linguistic community" (p. 141).⁵ It is within this linguistic community that it makes perfect sense to make an abundant use of the four senses of Scripture, explained in one the largest sections of chapter four.

The extensive discussion of the method and practice of the *sermo modernus* is followed by an evaluation of this type of sermon. Smith addresses a number of objections that are likely to be raised by their present-day readers. Here, the main work of reference is *The Art of Preaching*, a work from 1940 by the Anglican scholar Charles Smyth. His work is taken up for a further consideration of Aquinas' sermons with regard to their structure, their being anchored in the Bible, and their use of rhetorical devices. Engaging with Smyth, Smith addresses some classic reproaches leveled at Aquinas, such as using the Bible merely for the purpose of proof-texting. Because he has devoted so many pages to the content and structure of the sermons, he can easily address these and other concerns. In this discussion, the author not only presents us with the merits of Aquinas' method of preaching, but also indicates how these insights might be beneficial for present-day preachers. This is backed up by anecdotal evidence on the supposed dire straits that preaching finds itself in, such as remarks on the willingness "to tolerate sloppiness in both logic *and* rhetoric" (p. 198), and,

⁵ Cf. M.-R. Hoogland, *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, p. 10–11.

in an earlier chapter, a lamentation on the use of “mind-numbingly dull personal stories, silly pious tales, and inaptly chosen and incompetently described movie scenes” (p. 178). Although the author’s irritations are understandable, they can be a distraction to the reader because in this type of remark, Aquinas’ sermons are used not as a tool for learning but as a stick to beat present-day preachers with. Fortunately, Smith offers a number of short reflections on the vital question: what purposes should a good sermon serve? He argues that for Thomas the answer to this question lies in describing the traits of a preacher.⁶ Moving on to the content of the sermon, Smith posits three elements of good preaching, it teaches sound Christian doctrine, engages in moral formation, and brings about a deepening engagement with Sacred Scripture. Aquinas, he posits, “does all three of these as well as most and better than many” (p. 213). He leaves it up to the reader to decide how useful he or she deems the content and method of Aquinas’ sermons for our day.

In the sixth and final chapter, Smith recapitulates the main insights from the preceding chapters. He again underscores his argument that Aquinas’ preaching was thoroughly Biblical, even though his methods differed from the historical-critical method of reading the Bible. His understanding of the Bible is deeply Christocentric, and his preaching reflects this. Grammar and rhetorical tools were not replaced by logic, but rather were placed at the service of this effort. In these reflections, Smith also acknowledges a key weakness of the *sermo modernus*: because its end was usually doctrinal teaching and moral exhortation, “this sort of preaching was admittedly not usually well-suited to providing an overall contextual reading of Scripture” (p. 227). He goes on to argue that such a contextual reading can be found in the Biblical commentaries of the thirteenth century. In two useful appendices, the reader is presented with an analytical outline of the academic sermons of Aquinas, and with a short discussion of the readings of the medieval Dominican lectionary and their relation to the sermons.

⁶ Here, Smith makes use of a spurious part of the commentary on Matthew, #456 in the Marietti edition. He is aware of this, as footnote 58 on p. 209 demonstrates. Therefore, it is unclear why he takes this text of Peter of Scala and discusses it as if they were Aquinas’ words. For a discussion of the preferable traits of a preacher, it is perhaps better to turn to a related discussion. In his inaugural lecture *Rigans Montes*, cap. 4, Aquinas speaks of the qualities a teacher should have: “Requirat enim Deus: ministros innocentes, [...] intelligentes, [...] ferventes, [...] obedientes”. For the edited texts of *Rigans Montes*, see: M. Estler, *Rigans Montes (Ps. 104, 13): Die Antrittsvorlesung des Thomas von Aquin in Paris 1256*, Stuttgart, Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2015, p. 83–108.

2. Brief remarks and angles for further research

By now, it will be clear to the reader that Smith has delivered an impressive and valuable study. Yet, in any work there will always be some elements that could have received more attention than they did. For 'Reading the Sermons', the nature of the textual tradition is one such element. It is obvious that Smith is interested in the content of the sermons, as many of his readers will be. But what are we reading when we are reading a 'sermon of Aquinas'? Smith points out that of some sermons indeed only fragments survive. But it should also have been stressed that for none of the extant sermons, Aquinas dipped his quill in ink. The texts are *reportationes*, taken down by secretaries of Aquinas. One of the advantages of such texts is that they allow us a glimpse into Aquinas' practice of preaching.⁷ But we should be aware that the text available to us is a secretary's abstract, giving us the framework of an actual sermon. Considered thus, we can say that the text of a sermon is derived from a number of sources. The main source is of course Aquinas' sermon as it was given. As Aquinas preached, the secretary would either take notes or would actively try to remember what the master said. Later, the secretary would write down the sermon, with his own recollection of it in mind of course. In such a process, the memory of the scribe is an important factor, especially because *reportationes* were not necessarily taken down immediately after the sermon was given. So what we find in the text of the academic sermons is a composite of the actual sermon, possible notes, and the scribe's memory. Furthermore, the sermons of Aquinas were reported by different secretaries, which accounts for some of the differences between them.⁸ Although one can hardly expect the author to address all these issues at length, a caveat to the reader would have been in order.

It is clear that Smith's interest in the sermons is largely theological, and this is a legitimate approach. Other researchers might help us to see what lies below the surface. Sermons do not just give us a view of the theology of the preacher, the choice of topics also reflects the concerns and tendencies of his day and age. Torrell already pointed out that in the sermons we find indications of supersti-

⁷ Cf. J.-P. Torrell (translation), *Thomas d'Aquin: Sermons*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2014, p. 23; the remarks of L.-J. Bataillon in his introduction to the Leonine edition of the *Sermones*, p. 134.

⁸ M.-R. Hoogland, *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, p. 11–12.

tion, antisemitism, and a male-dominated culture.⁹ Hoogland also notes that the religious life is the theme of quite a few sermons.¹⁰ These sermons reflect the contemporary tensions between regular and secular clergy. At the same time, sermons were also contributing to either tempering or inflaming these tensions.

Since the longer *collationes*, or sermon conferences, are not the subject of this book, further study of these texts is of course necessary. One of the questions that might be raised in such a study is how to evaluate the praise for Aquinas' sermons. On a number of occasions, in the introduction in particular, Smith refers to contemporary testimonies lauding the preaching of Aquinas. But does this praise pertain to the academic sermons held in Latin, to his vernacular sermon conferences to the people, or to both? The praise of Aquinas' popular preaching is taken to be applicable to his academic preaching as well. It would be worthwhile to further examine the differences between these two styles of preaching, especially because Smith presents the academic sermons as exemplary to the present-day preacher. The comparison is even more relevant when we take into account that the sermon conferences treat exactly the sort of topics that a parish priest, concerned with the *cura animarum*, would address.¹¹ If we wish to learn what Aquinas preached to the people, and how he preached to them, what better source to turn to than sermons that were held *coram populo* and on subjects pertaining religious practices they were familiar with?

One final remark concerns the choice for Smyth's *The Art of Preaching* as the main work of reference. Smith presents valid arguments for this choice with regard to the evaluation of Aquinas' sermons. But since making recommendations to present-day preachers clearly is another one of his concerns, it is a less fortunate choice. Since Vatican II, increasing attention is being paid to the audience of a sermon, in addition to doctrinal content and moral exhortation.¹² Because Smyth is the point of reference, the importance of knowing one's listeners and their contexts receives little attention. Furthermore, unlike in the

⁹ J.-P. Torrell, *Initiation à Saint Thomas d'Aquin: Sa personne et son oeuvre* – nouvelle édition, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2015, p. 109. Cf. M.-R. Hoogland, *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, p. 13.

¹⁰ M.-R. Hoogland, *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, p. 14–15. Cf. J.-P. Torrell, *Thomas d'Aquin: Sermons*, p. 27–28.

¹¹ Cf. C. Muessig, 'Medieval Preaching', in: E. Foley, C. Vincie, R. Fragomeni (eds.), *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2016, p. 68–69.

¹² For the factors that played a role in this 'turn to the assembly', see: G. DeBona, 'Preaching after Vatican II', in: E. Foley, C. Vincie, R. Fragomeni (eds.), *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2016, p. 95–97.

thirteenth century, today's preacher is 'as one without authority'.¹³ Needless to say, this was much less of an issue to Smyth and Aquinas. Preachers looking to use 'Reading the Sermons' in their own sermon preparation should factor in these and other present-day concerns.

Conclusion

With 'Reading the Sermons', Randall Smith has filled a lacuna in the available literature on Aquinas. His well-structured book presents us with a meticulous analysis of the sermons, and makes use of a wide range of sources. Like in his earlier contribution in *Nova et Vetera*, he draws attention to the importance of memory in medieval culture and, in extension, for our understanding of these medieval sermons. The analysis of the method used to structure the sermons is enlightening, especially because it makes use of the medieval *Forma Praedican-di* rather than imposing another structure on it. 'Reading the Sermons' can also be of some use for present-day preachers who wish to learn from an acclaimed medieval preacher. But because of the small amount of attention paid to both the textual tradition of the sermons, as well as to post-Vatican II perspectives on the homily, such learning will require an effort from the reader – or perhaps it can be the subject of a subsequent study. Through this book, Smith will likely achieve his goal, which was to "drive the reader back to the sermons prepared as much as possible to read them with some appreciation of the historical, intellectual, and cultural context within which they were written" (p. 218).

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¹³ F. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, fourth edition, St. Louis, Chalice Press, p. 121–122. I thank my colleague Jos Moons S.J. for helping me understand the issues with the older preaching manuals with regard to audience and context.

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