

Tomas Aquinas and Contemporary Leadership

Abstract: The interest of modern business ethics in the thought of St. Thomas is well-known, as evidenced by the publications of such authors as D. Mele, P. Santori, M. Hirschfeld, exposing the topics of the market, trade, but also the moral qualifications of the business leader. In a special way, Aquinas has become present in various theories of leadership, cited for his aretology. Numerous studies focus on the indicated virtues of a leader, especially concerning the relationship to risk (such as prudence), but also perseverance in the pursuit of good (such as longanimity). Many contemporary MBA courses draw implicitly on the Thomistic heritage, although an increasing number of authors have recently pointed explicitly to this philosophical and theological background. The imitation of God, the supreme call of the moral life according to Aquinas, also applies to the sphere of leadership, the management of the multitude, which draws from the treatise “on the government of God” in the Summa of Theology. St. Thomas is also the inspiration for textbooks on leadership in the church, and by both Protestants and Catholics, making Him a “universal doctor” in this dimension as well.

Keywords: business ethics, leadership, Thomism

Tomasz z Akwinu i współczesne przywództwo

Streszczenie: Zainteresowanie współczesnej etyki biznesu myślą św. Tomasza jest powszechnie znane, o czym świadczą publikacje takich autorów, jak D. Mele, P. Santori, M. Hirschfeld, eksponujące tematykę rynku, handlu, ale także kwalifikacji moralnych lidera biznesu. W szczególności sposób Akwinata stał się obecny w różnych teoriach przywództwa, cytowanych ze względu na jego aretologię. Liczne badania koncentrują się na cnotach lidera, w szczególności dotyczących stosunku do ryzyka (np. roztropność), ale także wytrwałości w dążeniu do dobra (np. długomyślność). Wiele współczesnych kursów MBA czerpie pośrednio z dziedzictwa tomistycznego, choć coraz większa liczba autorów wskazuje ostatnio wyraźnie na to filozoficzne i teologiczne tło. Naśladowanie Boga, najwyższe wezwanie życia moralnego według Akwinaty, odnosi się również do sfery przywództwa, które czerpie z traktatu “o rządach Bożych” w Summie teologii. W ten sposób św. Tomasz staje się również inspiracją dla podręczników dotyczących przywództwa w Kościele, zarówno dla protestantów, jak i katolików, co czyni go “uniwersalnym doktorem” również w tym wymiarze.

Słowa kluczowe: etyka biznesu, przywództwo, tomizm

In this paper, I will want to draw attention to the surprising phenomenon of the frequent references to Aquinas that appear in publications on economics and management. Most often we remind on his contributions to metaphysics, anthropology, political philosophy or theologies. But I believe that Aquinas's theories of social and economic life, although imprinted with the mark of his times and its political realities, are astonishing in their actuality, resulting from an in-depth analysis of human being and his actions. What is drawing the scholar's attention in this field?

Aquinas's opinions are invoked, for example, on the phenomenon of rising just prices, loans and interest or even, here I will probably surprise you more, 'uberisation'! Since Aquinas did not use 'Uber', as far as I know, although he was traveling a lot in his life, nevertheless his ideas allows researchers to explore very contemporary proposals, such as so called 'collaborative market pricing' (Azzi, 2020). But abundant references to his thought are not about point-scoring issues, but about a broader vision.

It is evident that there is an interesting discussion going on in our time about the shape of the future economic culture, and the questions it raises concern the relationship between faith and risk, the metaphysics of trust or the theology of money. And functioning within the market is no longer seen today as merely the task of 'managers', technicians with mastered procedures, as there is a perceived need for leaders, skillful guides on difficult, uncertain roads that are faithful to mission. This is precisely the message that Thomas left as Doctor Communis: he reminded us that it is not knowledge of procedures, in itself, that guarantees success, but the reaching of the ultimate goal - and only a virtuous leader, whose task is *ad debitum finem perducere* (De regno, lib. 1 cap. 15c.), can lead to it.

Therefore, in the face of a leadership crisis, one cannot be surprised by the current renaissance of Thomist-inspired studies on business ethics, the purpose of corporate action or the decision-making of those responsible in companies. The sheer number of publications on the subject in the world's leading periodicals testifies to a not coincidental trend, which is linked to a return to Aristotle and his theory of the virtues based on eudaimonia, i.e. the good life proper to man in proper relation to external goods (for which the possession of virtues is necessary). As Steven Steyl argues, this renaissance actually began in 2006 (Steyl, 2020).

But is this interest in St. Thomas as an inspiration for management, not the invention of theoreticians who have never run a business and are spinning idealistic musings about the market and the laws that govern it? For business practitioners, does this scholastic theologian have something meaningful to contribute? Or is it merely a matter of management history, with no reference to the challenges facing a generation preparing for the next industrial revolutions associated with the world of artificial intelligence? These questions encourage to search St. Thomas's contribution in the field of contemporary business ethics, in leadership theory and in the search for theological justifications, i.e. for a specific 'spirituality of leadership', which unfortunately is often reduced to mere charity, whereas Thomas looks much more broadly at dignity (even 'vocation') of leading others to the right goal. Thomas

became the patron – this could be another name for doctor communis - of such a search for leadership.

I will try to answer these three questions, and both from the perspective of a theologian who, in his doctoral dissertation, analysed a treatise from the Summa of Theology on the “government of God” (I, qq. 103-119), and of a man, for 30 years, actively running an international steel business. I mention this my life experience, but without forgetting the ‘management’ of a family with six children, which undoubtedly required the qualities of a leader... and even co-leadership with my wife Basia.

1. Aquinas and contemporary business ethics

Being a Doctor Communis is certainly expressed in the respect with which Thomas’s ideas are received in areas that were not explicitly developed in his time, or where there is no explicit reference to them. Sometimes it is extremely confusing because some people do not see Thomas’s theory of leadership because he did not devote a particular section of the Summa to it or dedicate a separate work to it, even though *De Regno* was not only a handbook of politics but would also have been suitable as a guide for leaders.

But Thomas always thinks deeply and leaves the principles that apply not to the function of the boss in the company, but looks at the many types of leadership and asks about the essence, and this he expresses through many terms, *gubernatio*, *directio*, *manuduction* (Orłowski, 2022), but also sees the importance of creating the conditions for growth, asks about self-direction and leadership of others, particular and universal perspectives, requiring imagination on the part of the leader and the ability to incorporate the opinions of others into decisions, an appropriate division of labour, but also a synergy of reason, inner sense and experience. These, let’s call them ‘leadership coordinates’, allow a better appreciation of his project as a holistic vision, where anthropological and ethical elements are closely connected.

It is worth citing here the work of several prominent authors, such as the Spanish ethicist Domènec Mele, associated with the IESE Business School in Barcelona, who has been working for many years on ‘practical rationality’, Thomas’s decision theory and the theory of the enterprise, in which he draws extensively on Aquinas’s metaphysics. It is prudence that, for him, should be the virtue at the top of the ranking of leadership qualities, as it makes it possible to take decisions subject to uncertainty or risk, building - thanks in part to prudence - the potential of a leader who gains experience and carries out correct rational processes. Interestingly, Mele does not limit himself to repeating or quoting Aquinas, but applies parts of the potential virtue of prudence to current attitudes, reformulating scholastic terms into terms that sound familiar to today’s ear, e.g. the use of experience, care to understand phenomena and situations, seeking advice, considering the most relevant data, prudence and righteous moral living (Mele, 2010). For ‘how to solve it’ questions, e.g. a challenge, a problem, a

dilemma, the modern leader seeks advice and from such advice, Mele argues, is woven 'The Summa', if only in the form of decision-making theory, which can also be applied in social welfare, where a lot of risk and probabilism arises, as Brian Taylor has shown.

The key is practical wisdom, which, however, is not simply a 'procedure', but concerns the knowledge of truth and remains in relation to the affective sphere of man. For this reason, wisdom is referred to by St Thomas as 'palatable knowledge' (*sapita scientia*). At the same time, this 'taste' is linked for Aquinas to a dynamic perception of wisdom not as ossified encyclopedic knowledge, but as a process of growth that makes itself known in the leader's environment - he compares it in one of his biblical commentaries to the fragrance that occurs when bread is baked (Roszak, 2016). A virtuous leader everyone is able to smell around him or her.

Many authors today point out that in the face of a crisis in business ethics - centred on utilitarianism or consequentialism - a return to religious inspiration will be a valuable proposition, which has directed interest towards theological works on virtue and examples of biblical leadership. Not surprisingly, one has begun to notice, as Paolo Santori of Tilburg University does in *Thomas Aquinas and the Civil Economy Tradition. The Mediterranean Spirit of Capitalism* published by Routledge in 2021, that Thomas's role in the history of economics was far from being merely a critical one, remaining above all a 'creative' one: his reflections are a kind of grammar for the modern art of management. Categories such as 'gift', 'exchange', 'common good' set the framework for subsequent traditions (Santori, 2020). Thus, after overcoming the first objections to including a religious approach to management, there was a flowering of studies on economic aspects (market morality, corporatism, the value of labour, the principles of Catholic social teaching, etc.), and then also on leadership.

But the inspiration of Thomas's ideas also can be applied to the very shape of economic life. Recently, Mary L. Hirschfeld has written her *Aquinas and the Market. Towards a Humane Economy* (Hirschfeld, 2018). She points out that Aquinas's ethics can, in this regard, provide important clues for a 'theological economics' that reminds us that economics is always 'because of some reasons' and for certain purposes. Aquinas' virtue ethics, based on a realistic anthropology rather than a reductive vision of *homo oeconomicus*, seems to have been paving the way in world publications for many years. Contemporary theology, according to Hirschfeld, could benefit a great deal from a return to Thomas in matters of economics: not just in terms of pointing out the ethical aspects of economic life (I), nor on the basis of a separation of scope in which theology and economics deal with different matters (II), but as a critical approach to economic assumptions (III). Therefore, she believes that the theology of Aquinas with its architectural approach, in which the pursuit of happiness occupies a key place, fits perfectly into this role. The way to achieve it - also in business - is prudence, which teaches to 'order goods into a certain whole', not just to cumulate them (goods). The example Mary Hirschfeld uses is poetry, whose quality does not increase with the number

of words, or a painting, which does not get better the more paint it has on it. The accumulation of instrumental goods without reference to the ultimate goal is a mismanagement that does not build human excellence and happiness.

Understanding the message of Thomas's treatise on the government of God in terms of leadership ethics seems to be part of a broader programme of ethical renewal that Elisabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre initiated with their 1981 publication *After virtue*. Until the publication of MacIntyre's book, it seemed that the dilemma in the field of ethical reflection remained deontology or utilitarianism, i.e., on the one hand, an attitude that saw virtue in conformity to rules (various varieties of Kantianism fall into this category), and on the other hand, the measure remained the effect of an action.

2. "Tacit" Thomistic theology in leadership

What always caught my attention during MBA training courses or in lectures of great speakers I attended (Brian Trac, Anthony Robbins, Jim Collins, Ken Blanchard, Warren Bennis, Robert J. Thomas) was the convergence with ideas expressed by Aquinas, but of course without mentioning him. I had the impression of a certain 'tacit theology' hiding beneath the surface of a lot of advice saying that one must be diligent, hard-working, fulfil promises, not lie etc. A good example of this would be the 4R Model of Transformational Leadership, proposed by Mark W. McCloskey, which when one reads it e.g. about accountability, engage, incentive, that leadership is about mission, not 'transaction' only, it feels as if the 'Summa of Theology' is speaking a new language, but it is still the same 'Summa', although not explicitly referenced. Of course, McCloskey has developed a detailed model tailored to the realities of the company, specifying which leader behaviours should be considered to support the achievement of results and which should not, but there will be some consonance with Thomas. Others like Stephen Covey, insist that a leader cannot be understood without a broader anthropological reference, including a spiritual and religious dimension, because he or she is the 'whole' leader, not just in his or her intellectual capacities: narrowing down to only single competencies would be like using bad maps in the field.

Fortunately, today an increasing number of authors refer to St. Thomas directly, both when considering the virtues of leadership and, perhaps interestingly, even when constructing questionnaires and scales to measure virtues, as can be seen in the Leadership Virtues Questionnaire (LVQ) directly based on Aquinas' ideas (Riggio, 2010). It is also in Thomas that the manager-leader distinction, which is key to modern theories, can be seen, as highlighted by Abraham Zaleznik. The difference between the two - manager and leader - is essentially one of creativity, a kind of non-consequential thinking, looking not for current solutions but for long-term change, not so much dividing a problem into smaller units but treating phenomena holistically. This leads the leader to look for the best solutions at a given stage, but also to consider all, often opposing, options in order to come up with new solutions.

It is these competences that the formation programme develops, which, although not explicitly expressed and referred to the leader, is nevertheless found in the aretology of Thomas Aquinas. This programme develops not only the virtues responsible for relationships with others, but also mainly emphasises contemporary leadership courses, focusing mainly on the relationship to the team. For Aquinas, these will be extremely important issues, but they seem to be balanced by an emphasis on the ability to achieve goals and therefore to take risks and be long-winded, which makes his Aretology a relevant proposal also for contemporary leadership training programmes. Basing the formation of leaders on virtues, however, does not mean simply positing an ideal model for leadership candidates to match, but fostering or improving the inner dynamics of the person, which implies a holistic view of the process, rather than developing only certain sectoral skills

This follows from the idea of what being a leader is all about for Thomas. As well as simply saying that it is leading to a goal, taking into account the nature of each entity, Thomas offers three metaphors that show well how he treats leadership:

The helmsman guiding the ship into the harbour - It is not the boat that is the end in itself, but it was built to sail and deliver the products to the right harbour. It is entrusted to a captain (Thomas uses the phrase governor) to steer it, just as a man is subject to will and reason in his voyage through life. This is how Thomas reads one of his favourite quotes from the Book of Sirach (Syr 15:14), that God has left man in the hands of his council: *Deus ab initio constituit hominem, et reliquit eum in manu consilii sui.*

The doctor stimulating the body to act - according to this medical theory prevalent in the Middle Ages, the doctor does not directly influence illnesses, but strengthens the body to overcome difficulties on its own.

The fire that warms - this metaphor emphasises kindling others into action, i.e. the art of motivating, energising, empowerment.

But alongside these metaphors, one can see in Aquinas the potential for reflection on virtues, which can even lead to a full formation programme for Christian leaders. One can divide these groups of virtues into virtues that improve relationships with others (e.g. justice, fidelity, gratitude, truthfulness) and those concerning risk (longanimity, courage, caution (cautio), forethought (cautela). But let us take two virtues, fortitude and temperance, as examples. How does he relate them to leadership?

For Aquinas, the exercise of authority in a community is oriented mainly towards the attainment of the goal and leading towards it despite the difficulties that may arise along the way. The overcoming of difficulties by a leader call for the formation in fortitude, which in contemporary language is often called 'resilience' (Platovnjak and Svetelj, 2022). It is about a person's attitude towards difficulties that are taken up and overcome, becoming an opportunity for the growth of goodness - in line with Paul's "power is made perfect in weakness" (cf. 2 Cor 12:9). In Aquinas' Aretology, fortitude is one of the cardinal virtues, which is supposed to improve the mastery of fear in the realisation of the good, so that man

does not deviate from what is valuable under the influence of external dangers. For Aquinas, such resilience is built up through knowledge, but also well ordered experience. .

The skill that brings order to the sphere of striving, where feelings understood as stirrings of the will occur, is temperance. It does not appear in leadership courses under this term, as it is known in classical philosophy, but is rather presented under a changed name, e.g. as “the skill of self-control”. It is about subjecting individual spheres of life to the guiding power of right reason (Latin: *recta ratio*) and thus controlling feelings and selfish inclinations for the good of the organisation which the leader has been entrusted to lead. Thus, temperance is about a certain balance of goods and keeping desires within certain limits, about establishing a necessary and beautiful order. This, in turn, translates into overcoming the temptation that arises in management to judge individual tasks from the perspective of short-terminism.

In reflecting on risk, it is necessary to take into account not only epistemological uncertainty, understood as the difficulty of predicting the final outcome, but also the leader’s behaviour while waiting for a decision is important. Sometimes good decisions, due to lack of perseverance and patience, are abandoned, which later turns out to be a mistake; at other times, stubbornly sticking to one’s decision, instead of correcting it in the face of objective facts, can bring fatal consequences. In such situations, in which a leader’s action does not pass the immediate test of correctness and one has to wait a long time for the results, St Thomas emphasises the value of the virtue he calls *longanimitas*. Aquinas distinguishes patience from *longanimitas* by the measure of time, although both concern perseverance in good in the face of difficulties that arise. Surely, one of such difficult matter for a leader is the risk and uncertainty that is involved in the decision: how to choose rightly among many options? How to measure an acceptable risk? Once again, Aquinas is offering virtue perspective on risk: to develop certain habits that deal with it.

3. Theological agenda in leadership – imitating God in management?

We come to a final point that refers the theological programme contained in Thomas’s vision, a kind of theology of leadership. Just as the central idea of Christian morality is imitation of God and to follow Christ, so leadership is about imitating the style in which God rules the world (Roszak, 2017; Roszak, 2018). The exemplarism of Aquinas’s ethics, which was recalled in the 20th century, can be applied here too, thus avoiding some of the difficulties of building a spirituality of leadership that has been reduced to pointing out the dangers of wealth. Thomas’ proposal, without forgetting the warnings against the absolutisation of material goods, is creative: the leader can imitate God’s stewardship on creation by his virtue action in leadership. What does it consist in?

It is well reflected in the Latin expression of God's governance, that the Creator *disponit omnia suaviter*. This 'meekness' in God's governance consists in guiding all creation towards the good, in accordance with their nature (e.g. freedom): some entities are so guided naturally (spontaneously), and others voluntarily, since by their nature they are 'masters of their activity' (Platovnjak, 2019). The realisation of this governance, however, is not continually exercised directly by God, but it is more proper to God's goodness that he governs some entities by means of others, for in this way more goodness appears in creation - he grants 'the grace of being the cause' (In Iob, cap. 1). *Ars gubernatoria* thus means an intimate presence, granting power to entities to act. It is already difficult not to hear in these general characteristics the talk of empowerment, incentive so repeated in MBA courses....

But it is interesting to see Thomas's inspiration for leadership in two more areas where not everyone sees it: it is about angelic rule and the existence of leadership in garden of Eden, before the sin of Adam and Eve.

The discussion of angels brings with it interesting clues about leadership: it involves the influence of one creature over another, so the closer a creature is to God, the more influence has over others. Hence, good angels rule over evil angels, for although an evil angel may be in a higher hierarchy of beings, an angel from a lower hierarchy rules over him by virtue of 'the power of God's justice'. The justification for superiority, then, does not lie in the nature itself, Aquinas notes, that one was born a leader or in a particular social class, which would be a sufficient title to be a leader, but the basic criterion remains one's ethical excellence. The government of evil spirits over others consequently, as Aquinas notes, bases in the God's justice, and is not a merit of evil spirits as such. The obedience of evil spirits to one another, on the other hand, is due to the convergence of aims and the fact that the criterion of power is decisive in their relations. This is, however, for St Thomas synonymous with evil governments (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 109, a. 4, ad 3).

The second example concerns original justice, inherent in man characterised by *rectitudo* of reason and feeling, body and soul before sin (Vanzini, 2023; Roszak, 2023). What was 'governance' like in paradise? Is the fact that we need leadership the result of sin?

Thomas believes that 'paradisic governance' would not amount to preventing the deficiencies and impotence of the weak (this is what a king does when defending his subjects), nor would it lead to the correction of behaviour, for one of the functions of power is to lead to good action, to virtue (Bergner et al., 2022; Orłowski, 2022a). The absence of original sin meant that, in a state of innocence, power would never cause harm to another, and the will would follow willingly after the good, so the only form of power in paradise would be to serve oneself with wisdom and understanding. Authority outlined in this way would essentially amount to counselling, which is why St Thomas describes this authority and the resulting subjection as a situation in which "the superior uses his subordinates for their benefit and good: and this subjection would also have existed before sin. For the good of order would be lacking in the multitude of men, if some were not governed by others wiser"

(In Sent., lib. 2, d. 44, q. 1, a. 3 c). In the case of a rational creature, it cannot be an end for something else, so the authority that existed in the first state (the so-called *prima praelatio*) “did not consist in the service of men by those in leadership, but in the action of one serving another with greater wisdom and a greater world of intellect” (In Sent., lib. 2, d. 44, q. 1, a. 3c). There would thus be a kind of leadership that aimed to save the order of good in the community (*bonum ordinis in humana multitudine*), possible to lose if some were not led by wiser (S.Th., I, q. 92, a. 1 ad 2).

Conclusion

I have tried to show briefly that Thomas remains Doctor Communis also in the context of contemporary leadership theories. The inspiration he leaves behind can lead to important, practical guidance and the creation of formation models for Christian leaders. Thomistic leadership is still waiting to be developed and implemented.

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