



St. Thomas Aquinas' Response to the Reign of Emotions in Contemporary Culture

We live in an age in which emotions seem to have been elevated to the supreme criterion of truth. Contemporary society constantly repeats messages such as: *"Follow your heart," "Do what you feel," "If it makes you happy, it's right,"* or *"Don't suppress who you are."* On social media, in films, in advertising, and even in some religious circles, authenticity is often identified with the spontaneous expression of feelings.

Yet this vision raises a decisive question:

Should man be governed by his emotions or by reason enlightened by grace?

The Catholic tradition answers with remarkable clarity: **emotions are good, but they must not govern human life.**

Few have explained this reality as profoundly as **St. Thomas Aquinas**, the **Angelic Doctor**, who devoted a significant portion of the *Summa Theologiae* to the study of the passions of the soul, virtue, and self-mastery.

Far from being an outdated philosophical treatise, his teaching constitutes a genuine spiritual remedy for modern man, who is constantly swept away by impulses, changing feelings, and disordered emotions.

The Great Deception of Our Time

One of the greatest cultural confusions consists in identifying **feeling** with **being**.

Today people say:

- "I feel like a woman, therefore I am one."
- "I no longer feel love for my spouse, so my marriage is over."
- "I don't feel like going to Mass."
- "I don't feel God."
- "I don't feel that it's a sin."



Everything seems to depend on feelings.

But the Catholic faith has never taught that truth depends on emotions.

Truth remains unchanged even when our moods change.

Jesus did not say:

| *“Truth will be whatever you feel.”*

Rather, He declared:

| ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”*** (John 14:6)

Truth is not born from feelings; rather, feelings must learn to be directed toward the truth.

Man According to St. Thomas

To understand the problem, we must first recall how St. Thomas understands human nature.

Man possesses:

- intellect
- will
- sensibility

Sensibility includes precisely the emotions or passions.

These are not evil.

On the contrary.

They were created by God.



The problem arises when they cease to obey reason.

St. Thomas teaches that the virtuous man does not eliminate the passions; **he orders them.**

Here lies one of the greatest differences between Christian thought and many ancient philosophies.

Christianity does not seek to turn man into a machine without feelings.

It seeks to make him a saint.

What Are the Passions?

In the *Summa Theologiae* (I-II, qq. 22-48), St. Thomas carefully studies the passions.

He defines them as movements of the sensitive appetite caused by a perceived good or evil.

In other words, they are natural responses of our emotional dimension.

Among them we find:

- love
- hatred
- desire
- aversion
- hope
- despair
- fear
- daring
- anger
- joy
- sorrow

All of them can be directed toward good or diverted toward evil.

There is no passion that is evil in itself.



What is evil is their disorder.

Modern Sentimentalism

Contemporary culture has replaced the classical concept of virtue with that of emotional authenticity.

Today, expressing what one feels is considered more important than asking whether those feelings are true or good.

This gives rise to expressions such as:

- “I can’t help it.”
- “That’s just who I am.”
- “My heart tells me to.”
- “I have the right to be happy.”

Yet experience shows that emotions are constantly changing.

What excites us today may leave us indifferent tomorrow.

Anyone who builds his life solely upon emotions ultimately lives a profoundly unstable existence.

Reason as the Queen of the Soul

St. Thomas teaches that God created an interior order.

The intellect knows.

The will chooses.

The passions assist.



They must never replace the intellect or dominate the will.

When the opposite occurs, moral disorder appears.

This is precisely what humanity experiences after Original Sin.

The passions no longer spontaneously obey reason.

For this reason, the Christian life also consists in an interior restoration.

Original Sin and Interior Disorder

Before the Fall, Adam possessed perfect mastery over his inclinations.

There was no conflict between reason and emotions.

After the Fall, concupiscence entered human nature.

St. Paul describes this struggle masterfully:

“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.” (Romans 7:19)

This interior battle is part of the human condition.

Therefore, no one can rightly say:

“Because I feel it, I must do it.”

Precisely because our nature has been wounded.



The Virtue of Temperance

St. Thomas' answer does not consist in violently suppressing emotions.

His answer is virtue.

Especially the virtue of **temperance**.

Temperance moderates the attraction of sensible pleasures so that they do not enslave man.

It does not destroy desire.

It purifies it.

It does not eliminate joy.

It ennobles it.

It does not suppress love.

It orders it.

Self-Mastery Is Not Repression

A frequent criticism claims that Christianity represses feelings.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

To repress means to hide.

To master means to govern.

The difference is immense.

A wild horse may possess tremendous strength.



But only when it accepts the bridle can it serve to reach a destination.

So it is with the passions.

Their strength is a gift.

Their direction depends upon virtue.

Christ: The Perfect Model

Jesus experienced genuinely human emotions.

He felt:

- sorrow
- compassion
- joy
- righteous indignation
- anguish

He wept at the tomb of Lazarus.

He was moved with compassion for the crowds.

He became indignant at the merchants in the Temple.

In Gethsemane, He experienced such profound anguish that He sweat blood.

Yet He was never a slave to His emotions.

At the decisive moment, He said:

| ***“Father, not my will, but Yours be done.”*** (Luke 22:42)

Here we see the perfect mastery of the will over the sensitive faculties.



The Dictatorship of “I Feel Like It”

One of the greatest idols of the contemporary world is immediate desire.

If something is difficult...

it is abandoned.

If it requires sacrifice...

it is avoided.

If it demands perseverance...

it is replaced.

This mentality even affects the spiritual life.

Many people abandon prayer because they “no longer feel anything.”

But prayer has never depended upon feelings.

The great saints endured long periods of spiritual darkness.

Faithfulness is worth more than emotion.

Social Media and Emotional Manipulation

Never before has humanity been so exposed to a constant stream of emotional stimuli.

Every notification.

Every video.



Every headline.

Every comment.

Is designed to provoke an immediate reaction.

Anger sells.

Fear generates clicks.

Outrage drives engagement.

The result is an emotionally exhausted society.

St. Thomas would remind us that whoever loses mastery over his passions becomes easily manipulated.

Chastity: An Example of Interior Mastery

Few virtues illustrate this doctrine better than chastity.

The world says:

“If you sexually desire something, you must satisfy it.”

The Church teaches the opposite.

Desire does not determine morality.

Reason enlightened by God discerns the proper use of sexuality.

Chastity does not destroy love.

It frees it from selfishness.



Is Anger Always Evil?

No.

St. Thomas explains that there can be such a thing as righteous anger.

Jesus drove the merchants out of the Temple.

The question is not whether one feels anger.

The question is:

Why?

To what degree?

For how long?

For what purpose?

Ordered anger defends justice.

Disordered anger destroys charity.

Sorrow

We live in a culture obsessed with avoiding every form of suffering.

Yet sorrow is not always negative.

It can lead to repentance.

It can draw us closer to God.

St. Paul distinguishes between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:10).



The former leads to conversion.

The latter leads to despair.

Christian Joy

Authentic joy does not depend upon favorable circumstances.

It depends upon living in friendship with God.

This is why so many martyrs died singing.

Humanly speaking, such a thing seemed absurd.

Theologically, it was the manifestation of a will perfectly united to God.

The Holy Spirit and Self-Mastery

Natural virtue must be elevated by grace.

The Christian does not struggle alone.

The Holy Spirit strengthens the will.

St. Paul lists among the fruits of the Spirit:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

Self-control is not merely the fruit of human effort.



It is also the work of grace in a soul that is docile to God.

Pastoral Applications for Daily Life

St. Thomas' teaching does not belong merely to the classroom or the halls of academic theology.

It has very concrete consequences for everyday life.

In Marriage

Marital love cannot be reduced to a passing emotion. There will be days of enthusiasm and days of weariness, moments of tenderness and moments of misunderstanding. Christian marriage is sustained by a decision of the will strengthened by grace, not by the fluctuating intensity of feelings. Whoever loves only when he "feels like it" will scarcely persevere through trials.

In the Education of Children

To educate does not mean satisfying every desire of a child, but teaching him to govern himself. A child who learns to wait, to obey, to ask forgiveness, and to renounce a passing whim is developing the foundations of self-mastery. True freedom is born when the will learns to choose the good, even when it is difficult.

In the Workplace

Emotions may influence the working environment, but they must not dictate every decision. Prudence, justice, and fortitude help us act with balance in the face of conflict, pressure, or success. A professional who governs his impulses inspires confidence and stability.

In the Spiritual Life

Prayer will not always be accompanied by sensible consolations. There will be dryness, distractions, and moments when God seems silent. Faithfulness during these periods has



immense value because it manifests a love that does not depend on passing emotions, but upon a will that remains united to the Lord.

In the Use of Technology

Before reacting to a news story, replying to a comment, or sharing content, we should ask ourselves: Am I acting out of anger, fear, or vanity—or out of truth and charity? Self-mastery must also be exercised in front of a screen.

Spiritual Exercises for Governing the Passions

The ascetical tradition of the Church proposes concrete means for educating the heart:

- **Daily examination of conscience:** identify which emotions governed our actions and humbly present them to the Lord.
- **Persevering prayer:** ask for the grace to order our affections and grow in the virtues.
- **Frequent reception of the sacraments:** Confession restores the soul, and the Holy Eucharist strengthens our union with Christ.
- **Small voluntary mortifications:** renouncing a comfort, moderating the use of one's phone, or patiently accepting a daily inconvenience helps strengthen the will.
- **Spiritual reading:** meditating on Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the saints forms the intellect so that it may enlighten our decisions.
- **Spiritual direction:** whenever possible, receiving the guidance of a prudent priest fosters discernment and growth in the interior life.

A Profoundly Hopeful Vision

St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine on the passions does not seek to crush the richness of human affectivity. On the contrary, it reveals that God does not desire men and women who are cold, insensitive, or incapable of love. He desires men and women whose hearts are fully ordered toward the good.



The Gospel does not propose a life without emotions; it proposes a life in which emotions, enlightened by truth and sustained by grace, find their proper place. Love ceases to be a capricious impulse and becomes a steadfast self-giving; joy ceases to depend upon circumstances and springs from communion with God; sorrow can be transformed into fruitful repentance; anger can be placed at the service of justice; fear can open the soul to filial trust.

In a civilization marked by immediacy, the exaltation of feelings, and the constant pursuit of gratification, the message of the Angelic Doctor resounds with astonishing relevance. His teaching reminds us that true freedom does not consist in doing whatever one desires, but in coming to desire what is good, true, and holy.

The Christian is not called to be a slave to his passions, but a disciple of Christ. And the more he is conformed to Him, the more he discovers that authentic self-mastery is not a burden but the path to interior peace. As the tradition of the Church teaches, grace does not destroy nature; it heals it, elevates it, and perfects it. In this process, the passions cease to be a battlefield of disorder and become allies of a life fully directed toward God.

May the example of St. Thomas Aquinas encourage us to seek that interior harmony in which the intellect knows the truth, the will embraces the good, and the passions, purified by virtue and strengthened by grace, cooperate in the one end for which we were created: to love God above all things and to attain holiness.