



Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from St. Thomas Aquinas

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From a lifetime of studying the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, popular author Peter Kreeft says that his amazement has continually increased not only at Aquinas theoretical, philosophical brilliance and sanity, but also at his personal, practical wisdom, his existential bite. Yet this second dimension of St. Thomas has usually been eclipsed by the other. Kreeft wrote this book to help bring that sun out from its eclipse. He provides easily digestible samples of the religious wisdom of Aquinas.

Here are 359 pieces of wisdom from St. Thomas's masterpiece, the "Summa Theologiae," which Kreeft says are literally more valuable than all the kingdoms of this world because they will help you to attain the one thing needful, or the greatest good, the ultimate end and purpose and meaning of life. Three of its names are being a saint, beatitude (supreme happiness) and union with God. That was the principle for Kreeft in choosing which passages to use: do they help you to attain your ultimate end - sanctity, happiness, union with God? St. Thomas would have agreed with writer Leon Bloy, who often wrote that in the end there is only one tragedy in life: not to have been a saint.

These 359 gold nuggets have helped Kreeft in the struggles of real life, to live in the real world, to grow closer to the Lord, and he hopes they will do the same for his readers. After each passage directly from Aquinas, Kreeft provides brief spiritual commentary to help explain it and apply it - practical, personal, existential, livable thoughts.

He has framed these readings as answers to questions that people actually ask their spiritual directors. Each answer is taken word for word from Aquinas.

Among the many topics Aquinas and Kreeft cover here include: The problem of evil
Interpreting the Bible
Love vs. knowledge
Reconciling justice and mercy
Human freedom and divine grace
Angels and demons
The need for theology
Predestination and free will
Three kinds of goods"

Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from St. Thomas Aquinas Details

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Peter Kreeft**

From Reader Review Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from St. Thomas Aquinas for online ebook

Anna Elissa says

Okay I cheated. Usually people write a review after they finish reading the book, or if they find that they cannot continue and finish it. Well I haven't finished this one, but this book is SO good I must review it immediately.

So I've been a self-proclaimed little sister of Thomas Aquinas for a while now, to the point that I call him "brother" or "big brother" in my prayers. I feel that other than the Lord and the Blessed Virgin, I can connect with him the best, both intellectually and empathically. Many of his theological elaborations are too hard for me to wrap my head around, but great beauty and fierce devotion are palpable in all his writings. [No, I haven't read the entire Summa and that other underrated Summa, nor will I ever be able to do that, I think.]

The thing with this big bro of mine is that, people respect him and honour him as the Church's and also the world's greatest theologian, and that's it. Brilliant brain, too smart for most. I never believe that. I always know there's a lot more to him. Why, his chastity is exceptional (he was girded by the angels and said to have been granted the grace of not having lust at all), his Eucharistic devotion is incomparable (he wrote five Eucharistic hymns!), and for sure, he has brilliant answers for our most mundane, basic, typical, daily religious concerns.

This book proves it, y'all.

The title says it: *Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from St. Thomas Aquinas*. With this book, it's like having Aquinas himself as your spiritual director. He takes on all kinds of spiritual questions like "Is anger sinful?", "Is military occupation morally acceptable?", "Why are certain sins harder to get rid of?"—you know, the kind you'd ask your parish priest or your religion teacher.

The book is not meant to be read in just one or two sittings. It is written in Q&A format, although the "questions" do not always end in question marks. Each page tackles one question (there are 358 questions), Aquinas's reply in bold followed by Kreeft's helpful explanation. The answers are bite-sized but rich, like small delicious pieces of sushi, and thus more suitable for daily reading.

I highly recommend this book for all Catholics who want to dig deeper into the faith and find answers for their burning spiritual questions, but can't stand or have no time for "formal" theology books.

Todd says

Peter Kreeft has a gift for not only developing a deep understanding of difficult theological concepts, but for articulating them in a very accessible, easy-to-understand method. He uses ample references to books, movies, and other such popular culture, as well as concrete metaphors, throughout his work. If anything, he might sometimes take on a too casual tone for some aspects of his subject, almost coming off as flip. However, one cannot take his work in total and understand that he has anything less than a solid faith and healthy respect for his subject. One need not be a Catholic to benefit from reading this, and even a non-Christian could read it and at least gain an understanding of Christian ideas, though it is not written in a manner than a non-Christian would find convincing or persuasive.

In this work, Kreeft distills parts of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, 5 Vols that he finds applicable to everyday living. Kreeft basically follows the outline of Aquinas' work, so some subjects come up repeatedly or in a somewhat disjointed manner. Kreeft quotes very selectively, even minimally from Aquinas, for perhaps obvious reasons of brevity. He then provides his own very down-to-earth commentary. For instance, "Yes, organized religion is a crutch. You mean you didn't know that you are a cripple?" (location 419)

Kreeft does circle around and between certain key elements distilled from Aquinas. For instance, humankind's reason is a virtue that ought to be developed. God gave people free will. People are not equal to one another, at least not in the observable ways and outcomes, and that reflects the inequality found throughout the cosmos. Love is central to what God wants from us and what is best for us. We are foolish for choosing sin, and we are happier when we don't. He goes through Aquinas' treatment of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.

Clearly, this little book is a lot faster and easier to read than the complete *Summa*, and Kreeft makes it readable even to those unacquainted with the language and methods of philosophers and theologians. I would recommend it for those looking to take a light foray into theology, to expand their understanding of Christian doctrine and belief. For those looking for a deeper dive into the topic, treated with a touch more gravity, I would recommend *Theology and Sanity*. Of course, if you have the time, reading Aquinas' *Summa* for yourself is a very rewarding task, though one that can become tedious with some of Aquinas' detailed treatments of some comparatively obscure questions in his quest for completeness.

Jean says

Spiritual direction has been an essential part of Catholic tradition since the earliest days of the Church when desert fathers were sought out for their wisdom and guidance. Today, a renewed interest in attaining personal holiness and an ever-increasing attraction to monastic spirituality has put spiritual direction in the spotlight. In 2012, Emmaus Road Publishing released *Navigating the Interior Life: Spiritual Direction and the Journey to God* by Executive Director of the National Catholic Register, Dan Burke. In it, Burke emphatically emphasized the importance and necessity of spiritual direction for Catholics in their spiritual journey.

Now Peter Kreeft, a seasoned author whom I greatly admire for his natural genius on topics of faith, has written a book on spiritual direction that Dan Burke describes as "his opus." In *Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Kreeft has combined 358 useful insights from Aquinas' masterpiece, the 4000 page *Summa Theologiae*. Employing Thomas Aquinas as the reader's virtual spiritual director, Kreeft answers the type of questions people ask spiritual directors, with quotes from the *Summa*. He breaks down each quote, explaining it in his own words, using modern language along with his own wit and sense of humor so that it makes perfect sense to the average person in the pew. In other words, the reader does not need to be a theologian or a philosopher to understand the spiritual counsel in this book, as it is both clear and comprehensible.

What is even more impressive is the fact that Kreeft used these 358 quotes from Aquinas to help him in his own struggles to develop a more intimate union with the Lord. His practical, personal, and priceless advice is the fruit of his labors to apply the insights of Aquinas in his own quest for sanctity, happiness, and union with the Lord.

There are a wide range of topics in this book, some of which include typical kinds of questions/concerns that we see asked most often by our Protestant brothers and sisters, such as, "Do Catholics worship Mary?" "Is Jesus really present in the Eucharist?" "What are indulgences and why are they right?" Others are more unique, such as, "Will the resurrected body have everything the present body has, e.g. hair and nails?"

“Should Communion be given to the severely mentally disabled?” Just about any question about the faith you have ever thought of is addressed in this beautiful book.

Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from Saint Thomas Aquinas is not a book that you will want to read quickly, but it is a book filled with fascinating facts and solid information and advice that you will want to meditate and reflect on, savor, and return to long after you have finished it. It makes an excellent reference book for: the home, RCIA classes, the parish/diocesan library, and for spiritual directors/advisors. I highly recommend it for all who desire to learn more about the Catholic faith and to grow in holiness.

~ copyright Jean M. Heimann, January 2015

Joseph Raborg says

An excellent primer on theological topics which most closely affect one's life--as promised by the subtitle. His weakest sections were on the subject of Limbo, but both Kreeft and St. Thomas know that all opinions on Limbo are speculative. I highly recommend this work to anyone who wishes to enrich their spiritual life or wants a good introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas or Peter Kreeft.

B.J. Richardson says

This is a great bathroom book. What I mean by that is that it is the type of book that is great to read one or two pages at a time. It's like the old Reader's Digest we used to keep in the bathroom and would be read one article per trip at a time.

Kreeft takes Thomas Aquinas and turns him into 358 bite sized chunks of Systematic theology. He presents a topic, gives a brief quote from Aquinas, and then writes his own commentary on it. All this in 3-4 pages at a time. When he is presenting basic Christian doctrines that can be Biblically defended, he is great and I really loved it.

And then he gets into catholic doctrines that have no basis in scripture. Then, saying this is a great bathroom book takes on a whole new meaning. When he starts talking about such nonsense as the perpetual virginity of Mary (or her sinlessness) and limbo and purgatory and other such nonsense, well, I wish I had a hard copy rather than a digital one because these pages would have been best put to use as toilet paper.

Skip this one. About a third of it was really good, but you would be better put even for that part reading Aquinas' Summa Theologica yourself rather than this moderately qualified commentary.

Don Browne says

Kreeft's "350+ ways your mind can help you become a saint" tag made me think maybe this is a real shortcut to spiritual understanding and even living happily ever after. A shortcut, no. But spiritual understanding, and living happily "ever after." Maybe a yes.

St. Thomas, a Dominican friar and Catholic priest who died over 740 years ago, is considered the Catholic Church's greatest theologian and philosopher. Kreeft, Professor of Philosophy at Boston College, and

bestselling author has made a masterful analysis of Thomas's classic work, which for me became a sort of study guide. For folks like me with a modest understanding of spirituality, religion, ethic, and philosophy, I was able to daily make my way through some heavy reading with some ease and lots of heavy thinking.

Broken into 358 short (usually one page) summaries of theological topics, it turned out a quick understanding was not to be the rule. After a week, I realized I could take one topic a day, digest and think, and move ahead slowly but steadily towards the end.

I reached the end of the book. But, now I realize it's only the beginning. Highly recommended to all seeking a better and fuller understanding of Christian theology.

Paul says

Whew, alot to get through but well worth it. Aquinas of course is the greatest theologian ever and Kreeft has the right amount of commentary to distill what St. Thomas is trying to say in order to help us be saints.

Ruth says

This is not a book to read in one go. After a while your mind is just full with the great variety of questions and answers. I am now at 62% of the book, plus I skimmed through some chapters at the end that seemed interesting to me. This is what I think of it so far:

This book is a great introduction for me to get an impression of the great amount of things that Thomas of Aquinas wrote in his Summa Theologiae.

Lots of interesting subjects. Each chapter starts with a question and then some quote of what Thomas wrote on the subject, followed by an explanation in modern terminology, if necessary. This was very helpful. Peter Kreeft's writing style is a bit too crisp for my taste, sometimes I feel that he is too sure of himself, and I miss some nuance. But he's also very funny at times and gets to the heart of the matter with a few well chosen words.

Very interesting to learn more of this treasure from church history.

There are 358 chapters, the chapters in the end of the book become more and more typical Catholic issues that are not taught like that in the protestant churches, for example on Saint Mary and on purgatory. I have some difficulties with these, although it is really interesting to read what is *really* taught, as opposed to what I have been told that Catholics think. Another typical Roman Catholic idea that pops up occasionally in the book is the reasons against contraception. He explains it well, and it made me think, but I still don't agree and think that he is taking some ideas too far (need to be natural, as God created us, give yourself completely to your spouse without holding back).

The most important lesson I learned from this book (so far) is on the topic of free will and God's Providence. I think he really explained very well that when we cooperate with God, we use our own will for the full 100%, and God is also working for the full 100%. Not fifty-fifty, but 100-100.

edit on May 15th, 2018:

I don't think I will finish this book.

It was for me a rather nice introduction to systematic Roman Catholic theology, and did really help me

understand a couple of concepts better. Especially how we can have free will and also God guides and helps us. He says it's not 50-50 but 100-100%. I liked the way he explained that, and it really makes sense to me.

But I don't like his very short and crisp style of writing, quite without any nuance. Also it's of course not really a story, but a lot of different issues all handled very summarily. I have grown tired of this.

I think I will just try and remember that I have this book, and then whenever I have a question I can lookup what Peter Kreeft (or Saint Thomas) said on the subject.

Julie Davis says

I've been noting Jeff Miller's progress with this book. Though he is a fast reader, this book's been taking him a while. I've never been interested in reading Aquinas and Jeff's slow progress wasn't inspiring me to get a copy of the book, though I am a Peter Kreeft fan from way back. Then, lo and behold, a review copy came in the mail.

And it happened. Kreeft laid a zinger on me on the very first question ..."Yes, organized religion is a crutch. You mean you didn't know that you are a cripple?" ... and I was hooked. These bits of Aquinas aren't easy. They require slowing down, mulling them over, and really thinking. It's been a while since I've had to do that. But they definitely look worthwhile. I'll be working my way through them at a rate of one per day. So in about a year I may be a little wiser. And maybe (fingers crossed!) a bit closer to heaven.

FINAL

I'm setting this aside. I know it is solid. It's just too solid for me right now. Or is it my brain that is too solid for this book? :-D

Jeff Miller says

For some book reviews I am almost tempted just to mention that some author has a new book out and that should be sufficient to pique your interest.

Case in point is Peter Kreeft's new book Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from St. Thomas Aquinas. This is an author always worth reading. Since he is also a rather prolific author, directing your attention to specific books of his is also worth doing.

Peter Kreeft's books have had a positive impact on my life. His book Handbook of Christian Apologetics coauthored with Fr. Tacelli really helped me in my limbo from atheism to belief. It was the book's format like St. Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologiae with objections and the answering of objections that helped me to get passed some of my doubts. That I didn't have to jettison my reason for faith and in fact required fuller use of it.

In the intervening years I have found his other books to be helpful also. His latest book Practical Theology has quickly become my favorite book of his. The concept of the book is rather simple. Peter Kreeft uses St. Thomas Aquinas works and organizes them in a way beneficial as spiritual direction. As he reminds us this Doctor of the Church wrote his Summa Theologiae for "beginners" and that the same audience this book is intended for. Still it is rather hard for most people without a solid philosophical background to easily read St. Thomas' works. I remember once picking up "The Pocket Aquinas" and being totally lost trying to read it.

Fortunately that is not a problem here. Besides the saints words Mr. Kreeft provides an abundance of clarifications. Even when quoting passages he briefly interjects information to clear up St. Thomas' meaning. After these passages he then further illuminates it.

Another aspect of this book that I enjoyed was just how focused it was. For the most part the topics are contained to just one page with few going beyond that. Combined with Peter Kreeft's playfulness you have a nice touch of humor that doesn't intrude on the topic. When I first received this book I figured at 366 pages I could read it in a week and then prepare a review. That plan was quickly wrecked as I more slowly read through the book and let it marinate in my mind. This was not a book I wanted to rush through. In fact I think I will shortly read it again. Only this time I will limit myself to reading just one or two chapters a day. With 358 topics this book is a good candidate for a topic a day to read through in a year book. Flannery O'Connor use to spend at least 15 minutes with the Angelic Doctor each night.

One aspect of St. Thomas Aquinas' writings that really spoke to me was not just the answers he gave to questions, but the questions he asked. This really brought to my mind this comment from G.K. Chesterton.

Catholic doctrine and discipline may be walls; but they are the walls of a playground. - Orthodoxy, Chapter 9

I have no doubt the saint would have totally agreed to this comment as his theological output was a playing in this playground. There are many who can't see the forest for the trees and can't see the playground because of the boundaries. There were questions he asked that I times I had wondered about, but figured nobody would have giving them any serious attention. So the best thing about "Practical Theology" is that it helped me to play in this playground and to remember that spiritual direction and spiritual reading can really fill you with joy.

Paul says

"One does not simply stroll into [St Thomas Aquinas's theological masterwork, the Summa Theologiae]." It requires a guide. At least at first. At least in my opinion.

This is the book I always wanted but didn't know existed. It's not a "how to read the Summa". Rather, it's a masterful summary and comment on about 150 different articles of the Summa. Dr. Peter Kreeft shows how the thought of Aquinas is not only profound, beautiful, and intensely Christian, but also how it is still relevant today.

My one critique is that this book should have a topical index.

Highly recommended for anyone interested in discovering what many consider the greatest work of the greatest theologian who ever lived.
