
1225-1274, Thomas Aquinas – Epistola de Modo Studendi

A Letter on the Method of Study
trans. Steve Perkins, 2004.

Because you have asked me, John, my dearest friend in Christ, how you should study to amass the treasure of knowledge, such is the advice I give to you. You should choose to enter not immediately into the ocean depths, but rather through small streams, for one should reach more difficult matters by going through the easier ones first. This is, therefore, my admonition and your instruction. I bid you be slow to speak and slow to approach the chat-room¹. Embrace purity of conscience. Do not fail to have time for prayer. You should frequently choose your own room if you wish to be led into the wine cellar. Present yourself as amiable to all. Do not look for deep, hidden meanings in the deeds of others. To no one should you show yourself to be too familiar, because too much familiarity gives birth to contempt and provides from its eagerness the raw material for backsliding. You should in no way involve yourself concerning the words and deeds of worldly people. Above all else you should flee from common conversation. You should not fail to imitate the steps of the saints and all good people. You should not consider the source from which you hear something, but whatever good is spoken, commit it to memory. Those things that you read and hear, make sure that you understand them. Make yourself certain about doubtful matters, and make it your business to shelve in the bookcase of your mind whatever you can, as if desiring to fill a vase. Do not seek the matters that are above you. Following those well-known paths you will bring forth and produce, as long as you have life, branches and fruits useful in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts. If you eagerly follow these points, you will be able to attain that which you are striving after.

¹ I have for the most part kept this a fairly literal translation, attempting where reasonable to keep if not precise word order, at least the order of clause arrangement as close as possible to the original. My choice of “chat-room” for *locutorium*, however may seem a bit too colloquial, but there was a reason for this decision. Aquinas’ metaphors are quite vivid and, for the most part, come across well into modern expression without significant change. The word *locutorium* refers to a parlor, or place to gather for conversation, so “chat-room” is not altogether inappropriate. Of course, it also suggests the modern connotation of the Internet chat-room, and while Aquinas certainly could not have intended this, I think the modern reader who has this in mind will receive in a more personal way the admonition that Aquinas intended.

We thank Prof. Steve Perkins who gave the written permission for us to post this translation on our site.