

Article

Thomas Aquinas and the Qualification of Monastic Labor

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Abstract: Early monastic communities in Egypt were veritable laboratories for the practice of Christian virtue; perhaps surprisingly, they were also large-scale coordinated communities of labor. That manual labor should have been part of anchoritic life is not obvious; given that hermits were leaving the cities and the usual occupations of life in the world, there might be a question as to why they would seemingly return to such occupations having sought the purity of living alone in the desert. Combining Platonic thought with radical Christianity, the monks found a way to make the maximally spiritual life also a worker's life. The architects of this form of life saw manual labor as a means for achieving self-sustenance, an effective weapon against temptation, a resource for the support of the needy, and a vital component in the monks' ascetic program. The argument of this paper is that this powerful cultural consensus on the centrality of work to monastic life endured for almost a thousand years before it came to be qualified, by Thomas Aquinas among others. When Thomas Aquinas writes on the purposes of manual labor he is entirely traditional. However, Aquinas ends up diminishing the extent to which the pursuit of the traditional goods gained by the practice of manual labor is obligatory for monastics. Aquinas's discussion of manual labor as an element of monastic life is a definite departure from the tradition. In the typically polite fashion of a scholastic theologian, Aquinas shifts away from Augustine and re-interprets St. Paul in unprecedented fashion. His argument is influenced by his own commitment to a new form of monastic life, which was changing not just theologically but as a result of the evolving backdrop of the social and economic realities with which religious life necessarily interacted.

Keywords: Aquinas; labor; monasticism



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1. Manual Labor in the Early Monastic Tradition

Early monastic communities in Egypt were veritable laboratories for the practice of Christian virtue; perhaps surprisingly, they were also large-scale coordinated communities of labor. That manual labor should have been part of anchoritic life is not obvious; given that hermits were leaving the cities and the usual occupations of life in the world, there might be a question as to why they would seemingly return to such occupations having sought the purity of living alone in the desert. George Oviatt Jr. frames the question as “how does one reconcile monastic asceticism with worldly attitudes and material achievements?” (Oviatt 1987, p. 90). Indeed, as Birgit van den Hoven points out, that some ascetics rejected labor “should not be regarded as disinclination or caprice on their part. Rather, these pious people vowed to obey a divine command and, moreover, their hands were not idle but constantly raised in prayer. They found a justification for their way of life in countless Bible texts, the best known of which are ‘Pray without ceasing’ (1 Thess. 5:17) and ‘Mary hath chosen the good part’ (Luke 10:42). Whoever understood these words to be a command could read in them that prayer was a duty and work ‘forbidden’” (Van den Hoven 1996, pp. 119–20).

These two texts are indeed under constant discussion in monastic sources. The former, the injunction of St. Paul to the Thessalonian church, inspired a long tradition of debate and discussion as to exactly how it was to be implemented but was taken so seriously by all parties that it can be said without exaggeration that monastic life as a whole was largely

motivated by an attempt to be faithful to this command. The latter is the conclusion to a short episode told by Luke of one of Jesus's visits to the Bethany home of his friends, the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Mary sits at Jesus's feet and listens to his instruction, while Martha busies herself in the kitchen with the tasks necessary to show hospitality to their guest. When Martha appeals to Jesus to compel her sister to assist her, Jesus asserts that Mary has chosen the better path. This vignette came to be understood very early on as an allegory for the relationship between the contemplative and active lives, with the predominant interpretation being that despite the seemingly obvious conclusion that Mary's preference for contemplation is validated by Jesus himself above the preoccupation with worldly matters exhibited by Martha, the two are in some fashion complementary or both needful.

The legacy of Scripture seems ambivalent to the question of the work: on the one hand, there are counsels from Jesus himself exhorting believers to a kind of carelessness about self-sustenance and freedom from worry about the provision of even basic needs. The appeal to imitate the simplicity and purity of the lilies and the birds in the Sermon on the Mount seems to stand in contrast with St. Paul's example of working for his own necessities. Paul, in the second letter to the Thessalonians, makes it clear that he as a spiritual worker is entitled to the support of the community but his own decision, consciously pursued, was to practice his craft of tent-making so as to meet his own needs and thereby not be a burden to the community.¹

The genius of early monasticism was to think of these two heritages together. Naturally, the monastic life is called foremost to prayer and contemplation and this was the ideal to which all monks aspired but at the same time, there was a keen awareness that a monk is still a human being. The goal to become like God was not inhibited by the limits of humanity.² According to one oft-reported apothegm that represents this balance, a young monk chided Silvanus, who was hard at work, with the counsel of Christ cited above: "Do not labor for the food which perishes. Mary has chosen the good part.". Upon being so corrected, the old and wise Silvanus instructed his disciple Zacharias to give the young monk a book and retire him to his cell with no other provision. When the hour for the evening meal had come and gone, the young monk emerged and asked Silvanus if the brothers had eaten. When Silvanus replied that they had, the young monk inquired further as to why he was not called to supper and Silvanus answered, "Because you are a spiritual man and do not need that kind of food. We, being carnal, want to eat, and that is why we work. But you have chosen the good portion and read the whole day long and you do not want to eat carnal food.". Upon repenting of his folly, the young man receives the final verdict from Silvanus that "Mary needs Martha. It is really thanks to Martha that Mary is praised" (Van den Hoven 1996, pp. 121–22; see also Metteer 1999, p. 172).

Combining Platonic thought with radical Christianity, the monks found a way to make the maximally spiritual life also a worker's life.³ Charles A. Metteer gives a helpful taxonomy of the purposes of work affirmed by early Egyptian monasticism, arguing that the architects of this form of life saw manual labor as a means for achieving self-sustenance, an effective weapon against temptation, a resource for the support of the needy, and a vital component in the monks' ascetic program (Metteer 1999).⁴ Arthur T. Geoghegan meanwhile names three purposes: "The monks worked to acquire virtue, to support themselves, and to provide for others" (Geoghegan 1945, p. 169). The exact place of labor was a source of some division between the cenobitic form of monastic practice associated with Pachomius's Upper Egyptian communities, which were populated by sometimes staggering numbers of men and women devoted to an expressly communal form of spiritual discipline and the anchoritic form of monastic practice, normally associated with Antony in Lower Egypt, which was eremitic and thus stressed solitary life, interrupted only for corporate worship on the weekends. Both forms were of course devoted to poverty, chastity, and obedience to God as well as a spiritual superior. Work therefore permeated cenobitic practice, though it was not absent from the anchoritic life.

Work was certainly brought to a higher level of organization and diversity of aims in the Pachomian tradition. Palladius records that in just one offshoot of Pachomius's original community at Tabennesi, the 300-strong monastery at Panopolis, "(In the monastery I found fifteen tailors, seven smiths, four carpenters, twelve camel-drivers, and fifteen fullers.) But they work at every kind of craft and with their surplus output provide for the needs both of the women's convents and the prisons. . . . One works on the land as a laborer, another in the garden, another at the forge, another in the bakery, another in the carpenter's shop, another weaving the big baskets, another in the tannery, another in the shoemaker's shop, another in the scriptorium, another weaving the young reeds" (Geoghegan 1945, p. 167).⁵ Similarly, Jerome's personal witness of his time among the Pachomians testifies that "the brothers of the same trade are assembled in one house under the direction of the same superior. For instance, those who weave linen are together, those who braid mats form one family, the tailors, carpenters, fullers, shoemakers are separately governed by their own priors. Every week they render an account of their labors to the superior of the monastery" (Geoghegan 1945, p. 167). All in all though, taking both eremitic and cenobitic communities into account, Metteer is able to provide a shocking number of sources for his assertion that "recent scholarship overwhelmingly defends the positive contribution of manual labor in early Egyptian monasticism", citing numerous accounts that clarify its role as "a fundamental aspect of monastic life" and as many more that explain its importance to the duty of "self-support" (Metteer 1999, p. 164 n3; see also Ovitt 1987, p. 95: "The commitment to manual labor in both the eremitic and cenobitic communities was, therefore, substantial.").

The argument of this paper is that this powerful cultural consensus on the centrality of work to monastic life endured for almost a thousand years before it came to be qualified, by Thomas Aquinas among others. By the high Middle Ages, the philosophy of work was drawing on a multiplicity of traditions. Contemporaneous with the culmination of the Augustinian tradition of reflection on work and the reappraisal of the value of the mechanical arts exemplified by Hugh of St. Victor was a new and divergent trend: the retrieval of Aristotle. Eventually, this belated recovery of the complete Aristotelian corpus entailed the incorporation of Aristotle's view on theory, defined in sharp distinction from practice, which, combined with changing economic and social realities, fractured the consensus, achieved in practice by the Desert Fathers and Mothers and articulated in theory by Augustine, that work had an indispensable role to play in monastic life. Aquinas, doubtless unwittingly, helped to open the door to later developments, which would turn a durable cultural consensus—that a monk *must* do manual labor—into its opposite: that manual labor is not for spiritual adepts at all but should be reserved to a different class entirely.

2. Aquinas on the Purposes of Labor

With respect to the issue of monastic labor, we can turn to no less an authority than Thomas Aquinas to perceive how attitudes toward work had changed from the early monastic era. Despite his citations of Augustine's *The Work of Monks*, the late ancient world's only dedicated treatise on manual labor, Aquinas significantly qualifies without discounting his predecessor (a strategy perfectly in keeping with Aquinas's scholastic methodology). Aquinas's teaching on the relationship of labor to the monastic life is consistent across his major and minor works (Killeen 1939). Labor, of some kind, is obligatory for human beings, in as much as the capacity for it, the natural endowments of body and mind ordered toward labor as the means of securing the necessities of life, are present in all human beings and are ordered for rightful use toward their end (Killeen 1939, pp. 70–71). In defending this general point, Aquinas draws on Avicenna and Aristotle in making another use of the perennial theme of humanity's naturally defenseless condition and their attendant requirement of labor for survival.⁶ Aquinas contends that "the very constitution of our bodies, teaches us, that nature intends us to labour. We are not provided with raiment, as other animals are furnished with hides. Neither has nature given us weapons, like the horns which she has bestowed on cattle; nor the claws wherewith lions

defend themselves. Nor is any food, save milk, supplied naturally to us, as Avicenna remarks. In lieu of the gifts bestowed upon other animals, man is endowed with reason, which teaches him to supply his needs, and with hands, wherewith he can carry out the dictates of reason, as Aristotle says" (Aquinas 1902, p. 158).

This explanation relies strictly on reason and what nature teaches and cites two of Aquinas's favorite interlocutors. Interestingly, Aquinas does not straightforwardly repeat the equally classic formulation according to which the authority of Scripture is introduced to support the thesis that works belonged to even the Edenic life of Adam. When considering the question of "Whether Man Was Placed in Paradise to Work It and Keep It?" in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas entertains his first imagined objection, one that has been raised in the literature before, but he answers it in an unfamiliar fashion. In accord with his usual method, Aquinas first proposes an answer that he intends to defeat, suggesting that "It would seem that man was not placed in paradise to work and keep it" in the first instance because "what was brought on him as a punishment of sin would not have existed in paradise in the state of innocence. But the cultivation of the soil was a punishment of sin" (ST I, q. 102, a. 3. (Aquinas 1952, vol. 1, p. 526)).

Citing Genesis 2:15 as proving the opposite conclusion, that indeed the first man was placed in paradise to work and keep it, Aquinas responds by relying on a curious (and curiously figurative) hypothesis from Augustine's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*: "I answer that, as Augustine says, these words of Genesis may be understood in two ways. First, in the sense that God placed man in paradise that He might Himself work in man and keep him, by sanctifying him (for if this work cease, man at once relapses into darkness, as the air grows dark when the light ceases to shine), and by keeping man from all corruption and evil" (ST I, q. 102, a. 3. (Aquinas 1952, vol. 1, p. 526)). Given that Augustine is insistent that Adam did work in the Garden of Eden, it is a bit of a departure for Aquinas to refrain from asserting this commonplace observation right up front and to prefer instead a rather more strained interpretation, one which Augustine puts forward as a concluding thought to his treatment of this question in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (Augustine 2002, p. 360). Aquinas instead reverses the priorities, handling second what would seem to be the most obvious and foremost point: "Secondly, that man might work and keep paradise, which working [*operatio*] would not have involved labour [*laboriosa*], as it did after sin, but would have been pleasant on account of man's practical knowledge [*experientiam*] of the powers of nature" (ST I, q. 102, a. 3 (Aquinas 1952, vol. 1, p. 526)). Augustine was emphatic that Adam did work, only that his work was without pain or difficulty before he sinned; indeed, he developed much of his theology of work from this very basic point. Aquinas's repetition of this point seems fairly terse and undeveloped.

Similarly, when he treated the same idea in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, he was comparably cursory, again citing Augustine. There though, in this dissertation-type composition written to secure a theology degree and teaching license, he leads with what would seem to be the more obvious point. Responding to imagined objections once more, Aquinas asserts first "that in the state of innocence agriculture would not have been laborious—just as it is in the state of sin—but delightful, due to the consideration of divine providence and natural virtue]" (Aquinas 1929, p. 439, translation my own). There is only a hint of an Augustinian commendation of agricultural work as uniquely affording the opportunity to contemplate the providence of God and the wonders of divine creation and nothing more is made of the admission that Adam labored in the Garden but without the strain of effort (that the latter was an effect of fallenness is not even mentioned by Aquinas). He then went on to apprise the more figurative suggestion of Augustine to the effect that the first man was placed in Paradise not to "keep" or defend it against outward invaders but to guard against his own loss of its privileges and blessings due to sin: "Or we could say that this is not to be understood as if man was placed in Paradise to work or keep it but that he was placed in Paradise so God could work on and keep him; such that just as man works the earth in order to make it fruitful, so God works on man that he might be just, and keeps

him, because without His assistance he cannot be secure, as Augustine says" (Aquinas 1929, p. 439, translation my own).

When he speaks of the purposes of manual labor, however, Aquinas is entirely traditional. In the *Summa Theologica* he names four purposes for manual labor:

First and principally to obtain food; hence it was said to the first man: *In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread*, and it is written: *For thou shalt eat the labours of thy hands*. Secondly, it is directed to the removal of idleness from which arise many evils; hence it is written: *Send thy slave to work, that he be not idle, for idleness hath taught much evil*. Thirdly, it is directed to the curbing of concupiscence, in so far as it is a means of afflicting the body; hence it is written: *In labours, in watchings, in fastings, in chastity*. Fourthly, it is directed to almsgiving, and so it is written: *He that stole, let him now steal no more; but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have something to give to him that suffereth need*. (ST II-II, q. 187, a. 3., co. (Aquinas 1952, vol. 2, p. 667))

All of these reasons are quite familiar from the long and established justifications provided by centuries of early medieval monasticism as well as by the Scriptures that Aquinas cites in every case (Genesis 3:19; Psalm 132:2; Ecclesiasticus 33:28–29; 2 Corinthians 6:5–6; and Ephesians 4:28). That manual labor is valuable for self-sustenance, for the avoidance of idleness (Aquinas could have cited the Rule of Benedict's oft-quoted opening sentence on labor: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul" (Benedict of Nursia 1981, p. 249)), for the mortification of the flesh and inculcation of virtue, and for the provision of alms to the needy is a commonplace by now in medieval thought.⁷ But Aquinas ends up significantly diminishing the extent to which the pursuit of these goods through manual labor is obligatory for monastics.

The occasion for his first argument to this effect was an attack on innovations in monastic life undertaken by the ascendant mendicant orders, which controversially eschewed the more traditional insistence on self-sustenance through labor and accepted alms from supportive communities. Strict devotion to poverty was the hallmark of the Franciscans of course, while the very name of the Dominican order bespeaks their dedication to preaching. Monks practicing the ministry of the word had previously been very rare (Aquinas 1902, pp. 10–14), and this explains why Aquinas grouped his treatment of monastic manual labor with questions defending the fittingness of monks preaching and teaching (ST II-II, q. 187, a. 1.). Naturally, our interest is in the question of work rather than preaching but the two issues are of a piece, in as much as the mendicant orders took as their ideal a harmonization of the active and contemplative lives; such had, to some extent, been the goal of monasticism all along, yet the changing social dynamics of the high middle ages inspired a new variation on the theme. In John Procter's words, "both Orders were to be actively engaged in apostolic and external work for souls. They were to come out of their churches, their sacristies, and their cloisters. They were to work in the world, as well as to pray in their monastic cells, for the spiritual welfare of their fellow-men" (Aquinas 1902, p. 12).

3. Aquinas's Qualification of Labor

The specific attack that precipitated Aquinas's reflections on this issue came from William of St. Amour's 1255 pamphlet *De periculis novissimorum temporum*, which argued the case that the mendicants were, in fact, obligated to work for their own support and were not entitled to rely on donations from the public. Aquinas was asked by his superior to respond to William's charge, which he did in an early work entitled *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem*. This work exerted some influence toward the eventual condemnation of William's position by papal bull in 1256 (Aquinas 1902, pp. 30–36; see also Killeen 1939, pp. 93–94). Aquinas's case rests on a nuanced discussion of the extent and character of the duty to labor. Saint Paul's exhortations to the Thessalonian church and how to interpret them are obviously and crucially at stake, as is the legacy of Augustine's *The Work of Monks*, which is cited by both Aquinas and William of St. Amour. Rehearsing these and others

as part of a lengthy set of authorities for the view that monks are obligated to perform manual labor, Aquinas introduces his own view by observing that “It is noticeable that on this point those who have once forsaken the beaten track of truth have, in their efforts to avoid one error, fallen into a contrary mistake” (Aquinas 1902, pp. 148–49). It is thus in the spirit of navigating a middle way that Aquinas sets off to make his case, sailing between one historic error that refused manual labor to monks and the current error of William that insisted monks must work at manual labor.

Aquinas admits that “There was, anciently, among certain monks, an erroneous idea, that manual labour was detrimental to religious perfection, because it hindered religious from casting all their care upon God and thus from fulfilling our Lord’s behest: ‘Be ye not solicitous for your life, what you shall eat, nor for your body, what you shall put on’ (Matt. vi. 25)” (Aquinas 1902, p. 149). The price to be paid though for this ancient error (and presumably he has in mind here the Messalians or those monks in Carthage whom Augustine reproved) was that if manual labor is forbidden to monks, then it would appear that one would have to deny that the Apostles labored with their hands, which is clearly an absurdity in the face of the plain language of Scripture. A more ingenious stratagem might be to “interpret the words of St. Paul, ‘if any man will not work, neither shall he eat’, as referring not to physical, but to spiritual labours. Otherwise, the Apostolic precept would be opposed to the evangelical command. St. Augustine in his book *De opere monachorum*, which was written to confute this error, (as he tells us in his book of *Retractations*), clearly proves, that it is contrary to the teaching of Holy Scripture” (Aquinas 1902, p. 149). Aquinas, with one gesture, puts to bed the old Messalian argument and pays proper homage to the most important patristic text on manual labor: that of the revered Augustine. As anticipated though, Aquinas now moves to what he takes to be the more pressing error of his day, which falls into the opposite extreme: “On the strength of this verdict, other captious men have disseminated an error of a precisely contrary nature, teaching that religious are, unless engaged in manual labour, living in a state of damnation” (Aquinas 1902, p. 149). There is some hyperbole here—as polemical as William is, he is not so bold as to assert that a monk who does not engage in manual labor is certainly in a state of damnation—but this is Aquinas’s target in what remains of this chapter of his *Apology*. Again, Aquinas aims at the truth between extremes: “In order to defend the servants of God from persecution of this nature, we shall now prove that religious are not, except perhaps occasionally, bound to manual labour; nay, that those who do not work with their hands are in a state of salvation” (Aquinas 1902, p. 150).

The latter point, rescuing non-working monks from a sentence of damnation, is less striking in as much as Aquinas is here tilting at a bit of a strawman. The prior point though, modest as it sounds, is the more dramatic one. To claim that a person living a religious life is only “perhaps occasionally” bound to perform manual labor is a significant revision of the tradition. In an irony that should not go unnoticed, Aquinas proceeds to write his main work on labor in defense of the very sort of monks whom Augustine combatted with his main work on labor. Aquinas asserts that the monk who dedicates himself entirely to contemplation fulfills Jesus’s exhortation to imitate the birds of the air and thus soars above the earth and its mundane concerns, including “external work” (Aquinas 1902, p. 150). Considering the key Scriptural example of Martha and Mary, Aquinas concedes that some come to the defense of monastic labor on the grounds “that this is an obligation imposed on them by brotherly love; in order, that, by their work, they may have something to bestow in alms” (Aquinas 1902, pp. 150–51). This classic rationalization though Aquinas associates with “the murmur of Martha”, while “the Lord made excuse for the idleness [*otium*] of Mary” (Aquinas 1902, p. 151). The experience of the Desert Fathers is not monolithic either, according to Aquinas. He points out that Benedict himself “lived for three years in a cave, not working with his hands” and indeed that “in the lives of the Fathers, we find many other examples of saints, who have passed their lives without working with their hands” (Aquinas 1902, p. 151).

Having thus dealt with the *loci classici* of Scripture and tradition, Aquinas introduces one of his more creative contributions to the debate, asserting that manual labor must be understood either as a “precept, or a counsel” (Aquinas 1902, p. 151). These are technical terms, the precise meaning of which must be understood to follow Aquinas’s argument here. A precept is a binding command, while a counsel is a directive not universally binding.⁸ A precept must be obeyed in order to remain in conformity with moral law, while a counsel might or might not be followed out of an impulse to supererogation. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas assigns precepts and counsels to both the human and divine will, saying of the latter that God declares his will “either by insisting upon it as necessary by precept. . . or by persuasion, which is a part of counsel” (ST, I, q. 19, a. 12, co. (Aquinas 1952, vol. 1, p. 119)). Precepts then pertain to “good that is necessary and counsel to good that is beyond what duty requires” or the realm of the supererogatory (ST, I, q. 19, a. 12, co. (Aquinas 1952, vol. 1, p. 119)). In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, it is even clearer that the primary counsels are directed toward the specific, supererogatory callings of the religious life. The counsels of divine law, he argues there, are given to promote the aim of detaching oneself from earthly matters and binding oneself more closely to God but conformity with the counsels is “not so necessary to man for justice that its absence makes justice impossible” (SCG III, 130, 1 (Aquinas 1975, p. 165)). So one does not need to abide by the counsels in order to be just, which is why they are called “*counsels*, not *precepts*, inasmuch as man is *urged* to renounce lesser goods for the sake of better goods” that is, “urged”, rather than “required.” The three primary counsels he has in mind are the calling to poverty, which reduces concern with material things; virginity, which deprives us of concern for family, and obedience, which blunts solicitude for one’s very own self (SCG III, 130, 4 (Aquinas 1975, pp. 165–66)). Clearly, then, the counsels have mainly to do with callings to the highest kind of life, one devoted as fully as possible to nothing but detachment from all worldly care for the sake of God; they are also therefore not regarded as universally obligatory, since the monastic life is not universally obligatory.

When Aquinas therefore claims that manual labor is either a precept or a counsel, he is trying to articulate the exact force of the perceived obligation upon monks to labor with their hands. “If it be a counsel, no one is bound to observe it, unless obliged thereto by vows. Hence, manual labour is no duty for religious, whose rule does not prescribe it” (Aquinas 1902, p. 151). So if manual labor is a counsel, it is not universally obligatory, much less obligatory for all monks. On the contrary, it is only obligatory if the monk has pledged himself to a rule that demands manual labor in the same way it demands poverty, celibacy, and obedience. If the rule does not make such a demand, then the monk is not obligated to it. “If, on the other hand, manual labour be a precept, it is incumbent alike on seculars and religious; since both laymen and religious, are, equally bound to obey the Divine and Apostolic precepts. Hence, if a layman, before his entrance into religion, were free to live in the world without work, he would, on becoming a religious, be equally exempt from the necessity of labour” (Aquinas 1902, p. 151). So if manual labor is a matter of precept, then everyone is obligated to it, monk and layperson alike. If a layperson then were at liberty to live without laboring, nothing about becoming a monk would make him any more obligated to work than he was before.

Returning then to St. Paul’s declaration, so vital to these discussions, that “If any man will not work, neither shall he eat”, Aquinas points out that at the time this was written, there was no distinction between the monk and the layperson, such that “the rule of labour was established for all Christians alike” (Aquinas 1902, p. 151). All believers were on his reading referred to as “brother” in those days, so if the professed religious were bound to labor then so was every layperson. Yet, Aquinas turns Augustine’s concessions on this score into the basis of a claim that, in fact, not everyone was bound to manual labor. In *The Work of Monks*, Augustine allows that those of delicate health and those who were wealthy and did not labor before entering monastic life but who donated their substantial financial resources to the monastery had done their part and were not up to the task of performing manual labor. Citing Augustine’s assertion that a donation given to one monastery is

tantamount to a gift to all, since “all Christians unite in one commonwealth [res publica]” (Aquinas 1902, p. 152), Aquinas further qualifies the supposition that all persons are bound to work. “When a precept is only given under certain conditions or circumstances, it is only binding in the event of such conditions or circumstances arising to necessitate its observance.” And this qualified claim is the one that Aquinas maintains that St. Paul actually put forward that the apostle’s exhortation to work was only given “in particular cases, as a safeguard against sin. When such sin can be otherwise avoided, manual labour is not a duty” (Aquinas 1902, pp. 152–53).

Placing St. Paul’s teachings on work in connection to his related ethical exhortations, Aquinas tries to show that in every case that Paul encourages his readers to work, he does so because work is being laid down not as a general obligation on all but as a remedy for temptation to sin. Specifically, Aquinas argues that “there is no duty of manual labour incumbent on either laymen, or religious, who can maintain themselves without either theft, covetousness, or dishonesty” (Aquinas 1902, p. 153); these are the three vices that Aquinas claims St. Paul seeks to correct by the practice of honest work. He makes the same claim about Augustine, namely, that for him to work is not a “precept to be obeyed by all. If we examine his words, we shall see, that he only urges the fulfillment of the Apostolic precept”, which concerns not working as such but “manual labour under certain circumstances” (Aquinas 1902, p. 153). Those circumstances turn out to be (perhaps surprisingly) numerous. Those who do not need to work to sustain themselves are not obliged to work, since otherwise all men of means, both the secular and the monastic, would be in a state of damnation, which, Aquinas asserts, “is, of course, an absurd hypothesis” (Aquinas 1902, p. 154). Similarly, any monk whose livelihood is secured by benefactors’ alms or by preaching is also exempt. The same goes for those who assist in the divine office of the church, another concession that Augustine allows. Aquinas again goes further, now citing Jerome for support, in contending that professed religious people who devote themselves to the study of Scripture also do not need to perform manual labor (Aquinas 1902, p. 154). Depending on the principle that “Spiritual profit is always to be preferred to temporal advantage” (a maxim with which the Desert Fathers and Mothers would surely agree), Aquinas extends its application to all those who “minister to the spiritual necessities of the state” and especially those who preach, allowing these groups to be relieved from physical labor (Aquinas 1902, p. 155).

Aquinas really clinches his case though with yet another distinction relevant to the question of precept. “As the precepts of the natural law regard all men without distinction, the law of manual labour does not apply more to religious than to others” (Aquinas 1902, p. 158). This much should be clear from what has been already said but now Aquinas makes a plainer and more sweeping assertion than he has so far:

Nevertheless, it is not true, that all men are bound to work with their hands. There are certain laws of nature, which, in their observance, are of profit to none, save to him who obeys them. Such is the law obliging man to eat. These laws must be obeyed by every individual man. Other natural laws, e.g., that of reproduction, regard not only the man who obeys them, but are advantageous to the whole human race. It is not necessary that all these laws should be obeyed by every individual; for no single man is competent to perform all the activities which are needed for the continuation of the human race. One individual would not suffice for the different works of reproduction, of invention, of architecture, of agriculture, or for the other functions which must be exercised for the continuance of the human race. (Aquinas 1902, p. 158)

This is the nub of Aquinas’s final contention. Recall from above (in a passage immediately preceding the one just cited in fact) that everyone is bound by natural law to work. Now, however, it is clear that not everyone is obliged to work *with their hands* and this is perforce true of monks, who, in Aquinas’s view, are only obliged to do so if the rule of their order compels it. The necessity to work is a precept without qualification: Everyone must work and this obligation is rooted in our nature, which requires us to eat (ST, II-II, q. 187, a.

3, co.). Every individual person has to eat and so every individual person is obligated to provide for their own needs through any available licit means. Such means could (though they do not have to be, as we will see momentarily) be pursued with the result that they benefit only the individual herself, that is to say, one's work might suffice only to provide their own food. Other laws, though, can be fulfilled in such a way as to benefit not just the individual but "the whole human race". So it is obligatory for human beings to reproduce and rear their young but this obligation is incumbent on *no one in particular*. Everyone has to work because everyone has to eat but not everyone has to have a family, though *someone* does. These obligations are of the sort in Aquinas's analysis that in fact have to be pursued corporately because no one individual could possibly satisfy them all. Someone has to be a parent, an inventor, an architect, or a farmer but nobody in particular can be *all* of these things and nobody in particular *must* be *any* of them.

Killeen's discussion of this point is valuable. As he notes, Aquinas's view here implies that not everyone has to do manual labor but that some people have to do manual labor because we are bound to sustain our own lives and manual labor is one effective means to that end. However, it is only one such means. There are many ways that the necessities of life might be procured and, conversely, it is possible for many to benefit from the labor of one individual. In Killeen's words, "a precept which is directed to the relief of a certain need has binding force only in as much as the end has binding force, and in as much as it (the precept) is a means necessary to the attainment of that end. Therefore, because man has an obligation to preserve his life he is bound to work with his hands, if manual labor is the means necessary to accomplish this end. But if he could live without food, for instance, he would not be bound by the precept of eating and *a fortiori* he would not be obliged to work with his hands" (Killeen 1939, pp. 86–87).

In this case, of course, the end is essential: we must eat to live. The means, however, is not. Manual labor would be the necessary means to the end of sustaining life only if no other licit means were available. This seems to be part of what Aquinas argues in his exegesis of St. Paul, according to which the apostle's admonitions are motivated less by an insistence on the indispensable good of work *per se* and more about the elimination of illicit means to achieve the necessary end of sustaining life. As Killeen puts it, "It is clear then that it is the *end*—the securing of the necessities of life—that is a matter of precept, not a particular means—as manual labor. The latter only becomes a matter of precept with respect to this particular end when no other means is available" (Killeen 1939, p. 87). For Aquinas, when the end is a matter of precept, then a particular means to that end has force only when no other means is available to achieve the end.⁹ If, then, the natural law did demand that human beings work with their hands in order to secure the necessities of life, then manual labor would be obligatory for all and no other means could satisfactorily replace manual labor. But this is not the case according to Aquinas's argument. All that is demanded by natural law is that we work in some way and that we do so with our hands when no other licit means is fit and available. In Aquinas's example, "if a man be constrained by necessity to dwell in a house which no one will build for him, he must build it for himself. With regard, therefore, to manual labour, I maintain, that it is not incumbent upon anyone, unless he be in want of something which must be produced by such labour, and which he cannot, without sin, procure from any other man" (Aquinas 1902, p. 159; see also Killeen 1939, p. 89).

In the course of replying to the no fewer than a dozen potential objections Aquinas raises to this conclusion, he deftly reinterprets the classic texts on work by St. Paul and Augustine's authoritative use of them. We have seen that Aquinas pays homage to Augustine and so he would have been more or less bound to do, given his predecessor's stature; but, in the end, he can be seen to be politely disagreeing. When first outlining the apparent meaning of St. Paul's writings, he concedes that the apostle cannot be read as simply advocating for spiritual labors as opposed to physical labors and he does not qualify that reading at first (keeping in mind that this was the interpretation put forward by those against whom Augustine composed *The Work of Monks* in the first place).¹⁰

According to Augustine in his *The Work of Monks*, the monks he is writing against abstained from manual labor.

They assert that when the Apostle says “If any man will not work, neither let him eat”, he does not refer to bodily labor at which farmers or artisans work. For, they maintain, St. Paul’s attitude cannot be in contradiction to the Gospel where our Lord Himself says: “Therefore I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat; nor yet for your body, what you shall put on.” . . . They say “Behold the passage where the Lord bids us to be free from care in regard to our food and clothing. How, then, can the Apostle, opposing the direction of the Lord, command us to be solicitous about what we are to eat and drink and wherewith we are to be clothed and thus burden us with the arts [*artibus*], the cares, and the labors [*laboribus*] of workmen? (Augustine 1952, pp. 331–32)¹¹

The non-working monks then imagine themselves as being faithful to both Jesus and Paul, by taking no thought for the morrow as Jesus commands and busying themselves instead with spiritual labors of prayer, recitation of psalms and hymn-singing, and mutual edification, activities that they regard as fulfilling the Pauline mandate (Augustine 1952, p. 333). Aquinas also, following Augustine, rejects this line of interpretation. He too disagrees that St. Paul is commending only spiritual and not manual labor but he departs from Augustine by arguing that the Pauline injunction is not universal in its application. Returning to this point after having made his main argument and clarifying the sense in which St. Paul’s command to the Thessalonians is to be understood, Aquinas asserts that if we read 2 Thessalonians 3:10 as compelling manual labor universally, then a contradiction would result within St. Paul’s own teaching, indeed, within the same chapter of his epistle. For, therein, St. Paul admits that he himself had the power of supplying his own needs by *not* working and that this power he exercised under certain circumstances (particularly when he was preaching every day and not merely on the Sabbath as was his custom in some places). Given that once more in the exact same chapter St. Paul explains that he is concerned that there are some among his readers who “walk disorderly”, Aquinas concludes that it is to this group specifically that verse 10 is directed. It is the disorderly who are commanded to work with silence and eat their own bread, “For”, in Aquinas’s words, “one accustomed to gain his living in an unlawful manner, ought not to eat, if he will not work”.

Aquinas then carries the interpretation of St. Paul in a new and untraditional direction, concluding in the end that “labour is not to be imposed upon the servants of God as a necessity; but that it is proposed to them, as a means of avoiding the evil of compulsory mendicancy” (Aquinas 1902, p. 160). The same innovative reading is performed on Augustine, whom Aquinas claims “denounces only those religious who apply themselves to spiritual exercises, in such a manner as to transgress the Apostolic precept”, that is, those who are bound to perform manual labor by the dictates of the rule to which they have committed their lives, not those who are doing spiritual exercises simpliciter, since that is, after all, what monks do. “Neither do *they* disobey it, who, instead of working with their hands, devote themselves to the exercise of contemplation”, for this too is what a monk is called to pre-eminently and not essentially to the performance of physical labors (Aquinas 1902, p. 160; many of these same points can be found also in Aquinas’s Quodlibetal Questions VII, Question 7).

When the apostles did work, they did so either because they had to or as an act of supererogation (Aquinas 1902, p. 162). Furthermore, it must be remembered that manual labor is only one way to achieve a desired end. The provision of self-sustenance is one such end but Aquinas has also acknowledged that manual labor is valuable for the disciplining of the body and the avoidance of idleness and here again, he has a strong precedent, which he cites approvingly. Nevertheless, while it is imperative to promote virtues and avoid vice, these aims can be achieved through other means than manual labor, like spiritual exercises and fasting and keeping vigils (Aquinas 1902, p. 163). Even more noteworthy, Aquinas even, at one stage, lets an unusual claim slip that implies, in some cases, that manual labor

is at least an obstacle to the spiritual life. “Manual labour is, naturally, a greater hindrance to modern preachers, than to those of the Apostolic age. For, the Apostles were taught by the immediate inspiration of the Holy Ghost; whereas in our time, preachers must prepare themselves for their office, by constant study” (Aquinas 1902, p. 164).

As a member of the Dominican order himself, Aquinas can be relied upon to defend the prerogatives of the mendicant order and especially the call to preach, which he spends more time and energy expounding than other sorts of spiritual callings. At the same time, Aquinas defends a plurality of ways of living. While, clearly, he does not assign so high a value to manual labor as the early generation of monastics did, Aquinas does agree that it is one possible way of life, though he defends the legitimacy of living from donated alms as well (which the Desert Fathers discouraged, sometimes even impugned).¹² The assumption of his discussion in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is that the “ways of life” he discusses are pursued in a monastic context, which is established by an initial donation of worldly goods from the individual entering the monastic life. Aquinas defends the rationality of giving away possessions and then working in order to support yourself in the future, since riches provoke solicitude, while one can work comparatively little and with not much investment of care in order to secure the minimal necessities of life. This is consistent, Aquinas continues, with the command of Jesus to not be solicitous for necessities because Jesus does not prohibit work but “anxious concern for the needs of this life” (SCG III, 135, 10 (Aquinas 1975, p. 184)). If human beings were to have no solicitude or concern for necessities then we would not even step out of the way of impending danger, which would be a totally irrational policy (SCG III, 135, 24 (Aquinas 1975, p. 189)). Besides, manual labor does not interfere much with the doing of spiritual works (SCG III, 135, 12 (Aquinas 1975, p. 185)) and it is practicable for most people, barring only a few cases of those who are significantly impaired (SCG III, 135, 11 (Aquinas 1975, p. 184)). And while idleness can, as we have seen for Aquinas, be combatted in more than one way, manual labor is certainly one effective way of doing so (SCG III, 135, 13 (Aquinas 1975, p. 185)).

At the same time, Aquinas argues at length in favor of the suitability of monks accepting alms as a means of satisfying their needs. The main reason for this is that, in his view, a monk has set aside concern for his own good in favor of service to the common welfare and is thus entitled to be supported by those whom they serve, much like a soldier lives off a publicly funded stipend. By example and by other means, monks “return” so to speak an investment and thus, by devotion to the gospel, are deserving of getting their living from the gospel (SCG III, 135, 16 (Aquinas 1975, pp. 186–87)). Many advocates of early monasticism argued that adopting the work of a servile person was an express means for identifying with what the world considers disgraceful and rebuking and redeeming that worldly value system. Interestingly, Aquinas seems more confident that accepting alms will chasten pride than doing manual labor. He admits that there is a sort of humiliation involved in the accepting of alms but that humility is ready to accept humiliation if it is necessary.

Acknowledging that, of course, only “stupidity” would accept every humiliation, Aquinas gives a few possible situations where it might not be rejected if required for a good end. First, if humiliation has to be undergone for the development of virtue, like if doing charitable work for a neighbor entails something humiliating, then the humble person will not abstain for the sake of charity. Second, sometimes a humiliation can be willingly undergone to set a strong example, like when a general does the work of an ordinary soldier to spur on the whole troop (SCG III, 135, 23 (Aquinas 1975, p. 188)). Finally, without putting it this way at all, Aquinas seems to suggest that the early monks’ practice of adopting “servile” jobs is a species of the willing acceptance of humiliation he has been discussing. Aquinas concludes this part of his argument by saying that humiliations, whether self-imposed or caused by others, can have a therapeutic value for someone with a “tendency to pride, provided that through bearing these things he puts himself on a level, as it were, with even the lowliest men who perform low-grade tasks” (SCG III, 135, 23 (Aquinas 1975, p. 189)).

4. Conclusions

We have to conclude that Aquinas, here, concedes a fairly minor point to a sizeable and more elaborately developed tradition, while his discussion of manual labor as an element of monastic life is otherwise largely revisionist. In the typically polite fashion of a scholastic theologian, Aquinas shifts away from Augustine and re-interprets St. Paul in unprecedented fashion. Some of this is surely a result of his own commitment to a new form of monastic life, which was changing not just theologically but as a result of the evolving backdrop of the social and economic realities with which religious life necessarily interacted. Ovitt, for one, lays out a convincing case (and here he is opposing Ernst Benz and Lynn White, Jr.) that “the church reacted to changes in the social and productive order by removing labor and the mechanical arts from their association with the life of the spirit” (Ovitt 1987, p. 143). He makes his case by appealing to the example of the Cistercians among other orders that were founded in this era and “whose charters and practice specifically addressed the issues of labor and the wealth it created” (Ovitt 1987, p. 142). If he is right about this, though, we might read Aquinas as having made his own contribution, albeit indirect, to what Ovitt calls “The Secularization of Labor” (Ovitt 1987, pp. 137–63). For Aquinas, manual labor begins to be non-compulsory for those who are dedicated to the highest form of spiritual calling. Conversely, you might imagine that Aquinas’s rationalizations for why a monk might not have to work with his hands would serve equally well as an explanation for why a layperson might not have to either, such that the church retreated to some degree from taking an active interest in regulating ordinary people’s labor practices and the ways those were regulated and constrained by burgeoning urban industries. Similarly, the Thomistic argument that not everyone has to do manual labor but some people have to could be read as just another version of an emerging cultural consensus around the famous three-fold division of class that emerged in the high middle ages.

Jacques LeGoff explains the development of this schema, which is usually attributed to Adalbero of Laon in the 11th century, though as he points out, does have some other contemporary or near-contemporary anticipations (LeGoff 1982, pp. 53–55). The schema found its final form in distinguishing society between orders of clerics, warriors, and workers or, more colloquially, between those who pray, fight, and work—*oratores*, *bellatores*, and *laboratores* (Duby 1980). Like medieval classifications of knowledge, this is not a merely disinterested tabulation but an expression of perceived worth, categories “worthy of representing fundamental social values, which were religious, military, and, for the first time in medieval Christendom, economic” (Duby 1980, p. 57). The reason for this newly perceived value to labor is a change in the way agricultural labor in particular was being esteemed thanks to technological improvements and increased efficiency. Agricultural work was no longer regarded as necessarily subsistence-level only but was proving adept at land-clearing and extracting maximum yield from the soil, which was increasingly perceived as an elite set of skills responsible for tangible results (LeGoff 1982, pp. 56–57).

Eventually, the *laboratores* would be viewed as a potentially disruptive class, particularly as their lives were subjected to increasing organization under political and economic powers. This change is commented upon astutely by LeGoff in connection with the much-discussed shift from ecclesiastical time, governing the hours of the daily office, to secular time, which in his view had its beginning in marking the limits of the working day. The proverbial “standard laborer” in the medieval mind shifted from a subsistence-level farming peasant first to an increasingly sophisticated and productive agricultural worker and it continued to track with economic changes, then becoming an urban employee by the 13th and 14th centuries, not an agricultural worker at all. Correlating to this change and no doubt contributing to it was a transition from regarding the day from sunup to sundown as the normative working interval to a more rigidly structured schedule governed eventually by the mechanical clock (LeGoff 1982, p. 44). The former arrangement was unending and relaxed, the latter being fixed and enforceable according to a new mood that would be familiar to any shift worker today (also having their beginning in this era, as LeGoff’s

numerous examples show, were contests between employers and employees as to exactly when and for how long one was to show up for work. . .) (LeGoff 1982, pp. 44–47).

While not overstating the case, LeGoff nevertheless shows that by the 13th century and with the application of an escapement system for ringing bells at regular intervals, the day had been successfully divided into 24 h of 60 min each; by the second quarter of the 14th century, this technology was in wide use across the major European urban centers, quite possibly with special concentration on cities where the textile industry, frequently subject to labor disputes, was most firmly established, such that by this time, the mechanically marked-off hour became the fundamental unit of working time, not the day of the rustic farmer who began at dawn and stopped at dusk and not the ecclesiastical hours of the daily office (LeGoff 1982, p. 49). LeGoff’s conclusion is worth noting: “Whether the *laboratores* are seen as an elite group of land-clearing pioneers, or, by contrast, as laborers as a whole, then primarily rural, and later encompassing the world of urban craftsmen, the new schema did, in any case, consecrate the ideological breakthrough of laborers, who had already become established in the economy and society. The semantic aspect of this ideological breakthrough brings a certain process to light: after the eighth century, *labor* and its derivatives and compounds (especially *conlaboratus*) developed a new meaning, centered on the idea of acquisition, profit, and conquest” (LeGoff 1982, p. 86).

Needless to say, such an outcome could never have been envisioned by Aquinas or the earlier generations of monastic communities and their spiritual architects. For Aquinas himself, both the contemplative and active lives spring from and gain the merit of charity, the queen of the virtues (ST II-II, q. 182, a. 2, co. (Aquinas 1952, vol. 2, p. 622)).¹³ An increasing tendency to separate the forms of life, however, meant that a closer alliance between the refined height of spiritual life and the practice of manual labor would be harder to sustain. This assumption that different tasks are appropriate to different types of people has become increasingly widespread. We find it, for example, in the work on the division of the sciences by Robert Kilwardby, whose 13th-century *De ortu scientiarum* declared openly that “Physical activity is more suited to insignificant and common people, the peace of meditation and study to the noble elite; in this way, everyone has an occupation fitting his station of life” (Robertson and Uebel 2004, p. 7). The very idea that one could have such a station, that one could be fit for certain kinds of work and not for others, is a radical departure, one that would have a lasting impact on modernity and beyond.

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Notes

- ¹ 2 Thessalonians 3, a passage that comes up constantly in these discussions and in numerous rules of monastic life.
- ² For Aristotle, the philosophical contemplator becomes godlike but he does so at the price it would seem of something of his humanity. See (Aristotle 1984, 1177b-c). The early monks acknowledged that their enterprise, while aimed at God, remained human.
- ³ I have documented the development of Christian Platonic thought on labor in (Hanson 2022).
- ⁴ Another even more extensive taxonomy is provided in two companion publications of extraordinary scholarly value by (Bonnerue 1993a, 1993b). The former is an index of over two dozen monastic rules that organizes numerous references to manual labor under an admirably detailed list of subtopics that ranged, in turn, under the broad headings of “la raison et la destination du travail, l’attitude au travail, place et quantité, les cas particuliers, l’artisanat, les activités agricoles, les services, le matériel” (Bonnerue 1993a, pp. 69–70). The latter is a concordance of the same rules, tabulating over 700 occurrences of the terms “opus” and “labor” (Bonnerue 1993b, p. 282). As Bonnerue himself admits, “The ancient monastic rules form a relatively homogeneous set of texts”, (Bonnerue 1993b, p. 286, translation my own) so there is much repetition here, too much to even try to distill in this article but scholars interested in delving more deeply into the particulars can do no better than avail themselves of Bonnerue’s thorough and detailed resources.

- ⁵ Geoghegan concludes from testimonies like this that “a Tabennesiot monastery was a veritable beehive of industry, with each monk busily engaged in his own craft and all contributing to the common good through a well-ordered division of labor” (Geoghegan 1945, p. 167).
- ⁶ This venerable tradition is traced by (Whitney 1990, p. 94), who studies Hugh of St. Victor’s treatment of the trope as invoked at (Hugh of St. Victor 1961, pp. 55–56): “But it is not without reason that while each living thing is born equipped with its own natural armor, man alone is brought forth naked and unarmed. For it is fitting that nature should provide a plan for those beings which do not know how to care for themselves, but that from nature’s example, a better chance for trying things should be provided to man when he comes to devise for himself by his own reasoning those things naturally given to all other animals. Indeed, man’s reason shines forth much more brilliantly in inventing these very things than ever it would have, had man naturally possessed them.” Hugh’s meditation on how the human being alone among animals is born without their own natural defenses but is equipped with the reason and practical ability to artifice the means of their own survival fits into a long tradition, beginning at least with Plato’s “Protagoras” and running straight through the Renaissance. Among other thinkers belonging to this line of thought, Whitney names Galen, Cicero, Epictetus, Nemesius of Emesa, Gregory of Nyssa, Pliny, and more. See (Whitney 1990, p. 94).
- ⁷ In his commentary on Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians, Aquinas contents himself with three justifications for manual work; he uses the same Scriptures for support but he leaves out almsgiving. See (Aquinas 2012, pp. 295–96): “Notice that three motives for manual labor are given. Primarily, it is to obtain necessary food: *in the sweat of your face shall you eat bread* (Gen. 3:19). Therefore, anyone who does not lawfully have the where-with-all to live is bound to work with his hands. *If any man will not work, neither let him eat*, (2 Thess. 3:10) seems to affirm: just as he who does not eat when necessity demands it sins, so likewise he who does not work when necessary. This is put here to exclude stealing. Sometimes, however, work is urged in order to dispel idleness since *idleness has taught much evil* (Sir. 33:29). Hence, those who lead an idle life are bound to work with their hands: *for we have heard there are some among you who walk disorderly; working not at all, but curiously meddling. Now we charge them that are such and beseech them by the Lord Jesus Christ that, working with silence, they would eat their own bread* (2 Thess. 3:11–12). At other times work is recommended to discipline and control the flesh. In this sense it is included among the acts of continence: *in labors, in watchings, in fastings* (2 Cor. 6:5).”
- ⁸ On this distinction, see (Davies 2016, p. 181). As Davies notes, both in Aquinas’s own writings and according to the consensus of the time, the episode of the so-called rich young ruler from Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18, was illustrative of the difference between a precept and a counsel. Jesus’s summation of the commandments, which the rich young ruler asserts he has kept throughout his life, is a rehearsal of precepts, since these are incumbent upon all and must be obeyed. His final charge, made to the rich young ruler individually, that he has to sell all he has and give it to the poor, is a counsel, for it is not obligatory for all but supererogatory.
- ⁹ See also (ST II-II, q. 187, a. 3, co. (Aquinas 1952, vol. 2, p. 667)). There, Aquinas is clear about how each purpose for manual labor he mentions relates to the issue of what does or does not have the force of precept. First, “in so far as manual labour is directed to obtaining food, it comes under a necessity of precept in so far as it is necessary for that end, since that which is directed to an end derives its necessity from that end, being, in effect, so far necessary as the end cannot be obtained without it. Consequently he who has no other means of livelihood is bound to work with his hands, whatever his condition may be”. Contrariwise, “In so far as manual labour is directed to the removal of idleness, or the affliction of the body, it does not come under a necessity of precept if we consider it in itself, since there are many other means besides manual labour of afflicting the body or of removing idleness, for the flesh is afflicted by fastings and watching, and idleness is removed by meditation on the holy scriptures and by the divine praises”. Finally, “But in so far as manual labour is directed to almsgiving, it does not come under the necessity of precept, save perhaps in some particular case, when a man is under an obligation to give alms, and has no other means of having the wherewithal to assist the poor: for in such a case religious would be bound as well as seculars to do manual labour” (ST II-II, q. 187, a. 3, co. (Aquinas 1952, vol. 2, p. 667)).
- ¹⁰ It is possible that these dissenting monks, targeted by Augustine at the request of his friend and bishop Aurelius, were influenced by or even identified with the sectarian and frequently censured Messalians, though this is debated. The thesis was raised first by (Folliet 1957). The Messalians, whose name derives from the Syriac for “one who prays”, were known in Greek as Euchites. See also (Steinhauser 1993). Steinhauser raises the possibility that the recalcitrant monks were more influenced by Cynic philosophy than Messalian sectarianism but cautions that, in neither case, can a firm historical connection be made (459). Finally, see (Doerfler 2014). She maintains that “a spate of recent scholars has argued convincingly, however, that we might speak rather of a strand of asceticism running through many of the more highly Christianized areas of the fourth and fifth centuries” (Doerfler 2014, p. 82 n7). See also pp. 86–87, where she concludes that speculation about influence, whether Cynic or Messalian, is “of limited value” (Doerfler 2014, p. 87). Whatever their influence or self-identification, the monks targeted by Augustine seemed to have interpreted St. Paul as requiring spiritual working only, not bodily labor. Aquinas also rejects this interpretation. See (Aquinas 1902, p. 145): “But, even if the verse, ‘If any man will not work neither let him eat’, be understood as referring to manual labour, it does not prove that everyone who desires to eat, is bound to work with his hands.”
- ¹¹ It should be borne in mind throughout that just about everything we know about the monks that Augustine is criticizing comes to us from his pen, which he of course wields against them. His own attribution of views to his opponents is not necessarily altogether suspect but it is surely not dispassionately objective.

- ¹² As Geoghegan observes, “it is remarkable how often in Palladius’ account of the Egyptian monks, and in other reports, too, special mention is made of the fact that the person described earned his living with his hands”. This was by no means exceptional; on the contrary, it is a constant refrain and it is repeated to underscore time and again the monastic’s “utter abhorrence of receiving support from another and their unswerving determination to earn their own sustenance until the end of their days”, in some cases those days being quite numerous. The literature furnishes instances of men who worked into their eighties and on their deathbeds contented themselves that they had, like St. Paul, never “eaten another’s bread for nothing” (Geoghegan 1945, p. 170).
- ¹³ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer.

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