

***Pondering the wisdom of St. Thomas
Aquinas on immigration
The Angelic Doctor distinguishes
three kinds of foreigners and three
kinds of treatment.***

October 8, 2025 John M. Grondelski, Ph.D.



Detail from "Saint Thomas Aquinas" (1605) by Adam Elsheimer [WikiArt.org]

Leo XIII became pope in February 1878. Within 18 months of his election, he issued his encyclical **Aeterni Patris**,

recommending St. Thomas Aquinas as bearing “golden wisdom” and promoting the renewal of Thomistic studies as the standard for Catholic philosophy. Alongside *Rerum Novarum*, *Aeterni Patris* is among the Leonine encyclicals with the most lasting influence.

Serious study of St. Thomas has, however, seen its ebbs and flows. Like *Humanae vitae*, more people have likely talked about the Angelic Doctor’s works than actually read them.

That’s why I want to highlight a neglected text: *Summa theologiae* I–II, question 105, article 3. The question is: “whether the judicial precepts regarding foreigners were framed in a suitable manner.” His answer: Yes.

The subject is more serious than the question might suggest at first glance. Too often, Catholic intellectual sloppiness is content to proof-text Exodus 23:9 regarding non-oppression of aliens ([see James Martin SJ, on X](#)). **Thomas’s treatment is far more subtle and in line with the Catholic theological tradition**, though one wonders how many bishops have read and pondered it.

St. Thomas examines **how the Old Testament addressed foreigners in contact with Israel and, crucially, does not lump all “aliens” together**. He distinguishes **three kinds of foreigners and three kinds of treatment**:

- **Passers-through:** Aliens merely traveling through Israel. We might call them “in transit.” They were to be protected so they could pass unmolested—and eventually leave—Israel.
- **Resident aliens:** Those wishing to settle permanently. Thomas does not treat Exodus’s “be-nice-to-aliens” as the whole story. **Their presence was conditional and gradual, dependent on integration into Israel**. Most aliens could not be immediately integrated because they

were idolaters. Israel could not endanger the true worship of Yahweh, as the Jews learned from Solomon's harem or Ahab's Jezebel. **Syncretism was a constant threat—and the Achilles' heel—for Israel.** Foreigners could be received only "after a certain time, and generation, so that the customs of the Jews might be firmly rooted in them before they came to have a share in their fellowship." Assimilation—above all religious, but also cultural—was essential to the common good.

- **Hostile nations:** The Ammonites, Moabites, and Amalekites. They would be kept at arm's length; even **peaceable individuals from these peoples might be admitted only after generations and after a positive demonstration of an "act of virtue."** Some were excluded "in perpetuity." Even allowing for Semitic exaggeration in the Bible, Thomas recognizes that **justice does not demand immediate openness.** The gravamen of proof is not openness until there's a reason to close the door, but a closed door through which admission might occasionally come by dint of "dispensation." Ruth the Moabite is an example: "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

Central to Thomas's thought is that the **assimilation of aliens serves the common good: "if foreigners were allowed to meddle with the affairs of a nation as soon as they settled down in its midst, many dangers might occur, since the foreigners not yet having the common good firmly at heart might attempt something hurtful to the people."**

Thomas's nuanced treatment stands in sharp contrast to the statements—and practice—of some U.S. bishops. While they pay lip service to state sovereignty and border control, in existential

practice, the “demands” of the immigrant almost always trump these theoretical commitments. Constant exceptions become perverse incentives, stoking ever greater illegal immigration.

Perhaps the new Leo on the papal throne is needed to recall what the former Leo wrote about the ongoing relevance of the Angelic Doctor. **It might also be the time for some remedial education for the episcopal class, so that the Church’s teaching on justice, the common good, and prudence in integrating foreigners is taken seriously once more.**

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