

# **Astrology: A Faithfully Catholic Perspective**

An essay by Kelli Ann Wilson for AroundtheYear.org

*And God said,  
“Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night;  
and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years,  
and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth.”  
And it was so.*

—Genesis 1:14-15



*God Creating the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars in the Firmament* by Jan Brueghel II (ca. 1650)

The mere mention of astrology will have some Christians running for the hills, but is that fear warranted? In this short essay, I will use the words of some of the Church's greatest theologians and apologists to show that astrology, as a field of study, is not in conflict with the Christian faith, with a few important caveats.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly states that "All forms of *divination* are to be rejected . . ." including astrology.<sup>1</sup> However, contemplating the mysteries of the Cosmos by learning about constellations and planets is not the same as attempting to predict the future or abdicating responsibility for one's actions, which are the real dangers cautioned against in the Catechism.

To examine what the Christian faith does permit, regarding the study of astrology, it is helpful to consult the words of her own "experts." Let's look at what some renowned theologians have to say about the influence of the heavenly bodies on earthly life:

### **St John Damascene**

St John Damascene, the last of the church fathers and Doctor of the Church, discusses the influence of the heavenly bodies on those living in the world below in his eighth century work, *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, writing:

*"It was into these luminaries that the Creator put the primordial light . . . He arranged them 'for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years . . . [T]hey say that there are also twelve signs of the zodiac, made up of the stars in the heavens . . . [and] the sun completes one month for each sign of the zodiac and in twelve months passes through the twelve signs.*

*We say that the stars do not cause anything to happen. . . One might possibly say, however, that, although they do not cause wars either, they are signs of them; and that the condition of the atmosphere, which is determined by the sun, moon, and stars, in various ways favors various temperaments, habits, and dispositions. Nevertheless, habits are something under our own control, for, in so far as they are subject to the reason, they may be controlled and cultivated by it."<sup>2</sup>*

## Hugh of St Victor

Writing four centuries later, mystical theologian Hugh of St Victor also discusses the role of astrology in human life. To St Victor, astrology has two components: The natural and the superstitious.<sup>3</sup> He sees the only valid application of astrology to be in the realm of the “temper or ‘complexion’ of physical things” and cautions against reading too much into “chance happenings or things subject to free choice.”<sup>4</sup> He rightly condemns astrological fortune-telling for being both exploitative and superstitious.<sup>5</sup>

## St Thomas Aquinas

And, Hugh of St Victor is not alone in his opinion—many scholastic works of the twelfth and thirteenth century discuss the role of astral influences on humanity and events on earth, with a common thread being the belief that free will cannot be nullified by the movement of the stars.<sup>6</sup>

In one of these works, the famous *Summa Theologica*, St Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval theologian and Doctor of the Church, writes that celestial forms can “. . . make an impression on the human body, and consequently on the sensitive powers which are acts of bodily organs having an inclination for human acts . . . [However,] man is able, by his reason, to act counter to the inclination of the heavenly bodies.”

In other words, the sun, moon, planets, and stars do possess unique qualities and they can imbue us with certain characteristics or tendencies, but they can’t override or direct our will. Aquinas further discusses the influence of the heavenly bodies on human beings, writing,

*“The majority of men follow their passions, which are movements of the sensitive appetite, in which movements of the heavenly bodies can cooperate: but few are wise enough to resist these passions. Consequently astrologers are able to foretell the truth in the majority of cases, especially in a general way. But not in particular cases; for nothing prevents man resisting his passions by his free-will.”<sup>7</sup>*

Here Aquinas states very clearly that the stars can influence our temperaments and make us pre-disposed to certain patterns of behavior. But he is firm in his assertion that the

heavenly bodies cannot *cause* us to do or not do something, and they can't control our fate. Our God-given free will makes us ultimately responsible for our own actions.

### **C.S. Lewis**

The author and Christian apologist C.S. Lewis references these words by Aquinas in a letter to the English writer Dorothy L. Sayers in 1957. He writes of astrology,

*“The orthodox position, as you know, is summed up in sapiens dominabitur astris: [the wise man will be master of the stars] i.e. just as we shd. say about physical, economic, or psychological causes for behaviour ‘Yes, these are operative but they always leave room for free will. They dispose but do not determine.’ Hence [for] Aquinas . . . [a]strological predictions often in fact come true because most men don’t use their free will but obey the natural pre-dispositions.”<sup>8</sup>*

Lewis affirms Aquinas’s belief that fortune tellers could be right at least some of the time because most human beings lack the fortitude to overrule their own nature. And, if there was any confusion about whether astrology can be a permitted field of study for Christians, Lewis clears it up with his use of the phrase “the orthodox position,” in relation to his admission that the heavenly bodies are “operative,” or have an effect.

### **Master of the Stars**

The Latin phrase *sapiens dominabitur astris*—cited by both C.S. Lewis and St Thomas Aquinas—has a long history of use in conversations regarding the relationship between astrology and religion. In a recent article in the journal *Humanities*, Justin Niermeier-Dohoney discusses this phrase and the way it was used to delineate the accepted applications of astrology from those that were forbidden by the Church, especially during the period of the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries. Niermeier-Dohoney writes,

*“The question was not so much one of free will versus fatalism nor any other binary. Rather, it was a question of how free will existed within a larger framework where some things were, in fact, predetermined and a question of how natural cause and effect existed in a cosmos where both people and God possessed agency.*

*For most European Christians of all religious denominations between the late thirteenth and late seventeenth centuries, astrology, when practiced appropriately, offered convincing answers to these questions.”<sup>9</sup>*

## **The Zodiac in Medieval Christian Art**

Just as they can be found in scholarly works of the time period, the signs of the zodiac also feature prominently in medieval religious art and architecture, appearing on everything from illuminated manuscripts to the stained-glass windows of Chartres cathedral. In her paper “The Zodiac on Church Portals: Astrology and the Medieval Cosmos,” Shelley Morwenna Williams discusses the relationship between the seasonal rhythms of agriculture, the constellations of the zodiac, and church decoration.

Williams writes, “The connection between the stars and seasonal work is critical because tracking the movement of the stars was an essential timekeeping method for farmers . . . [and] the unification of zodiacal signs with the Labors of the Month conveys a close association.”<sup>10</sup> She notes that many medieval churches feature sculpted zodiac signs on their exteriors, a common motif being “a series of zodiac and labors systems” above their portal entrances.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most beautiful examples of the labors of the months depicted in tandem with the zodiac can be found in the *Très riches Heures* of the Duke of Berry. This illuminated Book of Hours was crafted in the fifteenth century by the Limbourg brothers for the Duke of Berry, but it was never completed as the Duke died in 1416.<sup>12</sup>

While it isn’t common to see the zodiac portrayed in a private prayer book, the twelve signs were a widely accepted element of medieval natural science and were included in many cosmological and medical diagrams. The medieval church also used complex tables that tracked the movement of the stars—to calculate moveable feasts in the Church year (including Easter)—and which were first worked out by the Venerable Bede.<sup>13</sup>

Having established, in the words of some of the Christian faith’s greatest theologians and apologists, as well as through a brief examination of works of medieval Christian art, that astrology can rightfully co-exist with the faith, it is my hope that you will find ways to engage with the subject that will not only be interesting and personally fulfilling, but will

give you a greater appreciation for your own place in the Cosmos and a greater love for God, who created the stars for all to see.

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[Editor's Note: For a much more in-depth look at astrology from a Catholic perspective, I highly recommend Tracy Tucciarone's series at <https://www.fisheaters.com/zodiac.html>]

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Church, "Divination and Magic," in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), paragraph 2116

<sup>2</sup> St John of Damascus, *Saint John of Damascus Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), 216-219.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh of St Victor, *The Didascalion of Hugh of St Victor*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1961), 68.

<sup>4</sup> St Victor, 68.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Shelley Morwenna Williams, "The Zodiac on Church Portals: Astrology and the Medieval Cosmos," *Peregrinations* 7, no. 3 (2021): 65.

<https://digital.kenyon.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1400&context=perejournal>

<sup>7</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St Thomas Aquinas, Part I*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, NY: Benzinger Brothers, 1912), 517.

<sup>8</sup> C.S. Lewis to Dorothy L. Sayers, July 4, 1957, in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume III*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 865.

<sup>9</sup> Justin Niermeier-Dohoney, "Sapiens Dominabitur Astris: A Diachronic Survey of a Ubiquitous Astrological Phrase," *Humanities* 10, no.4 (2021) <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/4/117/htm>

<sup>10</sup> Williams, 70.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>12</sup> Harry Bober, "The Zodiacal Miniature of the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duke of Berry: Its Sources and Meaning," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 11, no. 1 (1948): 1.

<sup>13</sup> Bober, 6.