



## Internal Affairs Lessons from Saint Thomas Aquinas

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Internal affairs investigators, police leaders, and veteran officers can attest to the fact that certain types of police misconduct tend to appear again and again over time. These types of misconduct damage careers, compromise the public trust, and lead to substantial legal liability. Even with all of the distinct details that may be involved in a particular case, there are 4 common pitfalls that lead to investigations, terminations, and convictions. These 4 pitfalls are not unique to law enforcement, or to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

These 4 pitfalls were identified long before the existence of American policing. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), whose feast day was celebrated last month by the Catholic Church, is widely recognized as one of the greatest theologians in the history of Christianity. Whether or not you adhere to Christianity, it is important to note that he was also a philosopher, widely recognized in Western culture by more than just religious believers. A suitable summary of Aquinas' work and contributions to the studies of theology, civics, and ethics is not something that can be provided in a short article. You probably are not reading this for that purpose anyway. What is important to know, for our purposes, is that 800 years after his death, Aquinas' observations about human beings and their common paths to self-destruction are as relevant today as they were then.

**The 4 pitfalls that Aquinas identified involve the *excessive* pursuit of wealth, pleasure, power, and status.<sup>1</sup>** Aquinas' 4 pitfalls were more recently summarized by Bishop Robert Barron:

*One of the most fundamental problems in the spiritual order is that we sense within ourselves the hunger for God, but we attempt to satisfy it with some[thing] that is less than God. Thomas Aquinas said that the four typical substitutes for God are wealth, pleasure, power, and honor.<sup>ii</sup>*

Many readers may be uncomfortable with the notion that *honor*, even in excess, could be a bad thing, as this term is so often tied to a law enforcement officer's integrity or honesty. A plausible alternative for *honor* may be *prestige*, *status*, or *reputation*. As the legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden said, "Be more concerned with your character than with your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what people think you are."<sup>iii</sup>

**A law enforcement leader does not have to share Aquinas' Christian faith to see that the replacement of the police officer's mission undertaken by police officers—that of preventing crime and disorder and serving the public—in favor of something less than that mission is a proven path to liability and public trust disasters. Today's news headlines, internal affairs files, and court dockets pertaining to police misconduct exemplify these 4 pitfalls.**

The excessive pursuit of wealth is possibly the simplest pitfall to spot. "Double-dipping" scandals involving financial fraud, overtime fraud, and other forms of theft by officers are all clearly rooted in an excessive pursuit of wealth that blinds them to the oath that they took when they became police officers. We must also consider officers who pursue a promotion, not out of a desire to take a position of formal leadership in the department, but rather *simply and solely* out of a desire to increase their salaries. The reality of officers' need to provide financially for their families is undeniable. But so is the damage done to a department when officers work off-duty or overtime to the point of exhaustion, or leadership roles are filled by individuals who are completely uninterested in the vital task of supervision but are, instead, focused only on a pay increase.

The excessive pursuit of pleasure is all too easy to find in the headlines of alleged sexual misconduct involving members of the public or sexual harassment involving members of the

department. The agency mission has clearly been supplanted when sexual misconduct is prioritized over public service in the field. Public complaints of an agency being understaffed and overworked tend to fall on deaf ears with the public when it is revealed that officers found time for sex on duty or rampant sexual harassment.

The excessive pursuit of power is found in the various instances of “badge heavy” behavior, sometimes classified as “uniform courage.” In these instances, the authority of a law enforcement officer is abused in a way that diminishes the people an officer encounters and, they seem to believe, elevates them to a position of superiority. Furthermore, cases of sexual misconduct, in which vulnerable individuals are victimized, inevitably involve this pursuit of power as well as pleasure.

The excessive pursuit of status can be seen in cases of fabricated arrests made to win agency accolades, or in response to inappropriate pressure from supervisors to “hit numbers” in terms of tickets written or arrests made without regard for quality as well as quantity. But other kinds of misconduct also fall into this category—such as supervisors and executives ignoring underlying misconduct problems to protect their own standing and advancement. In other words, some police leaders are more concerned with the potential fallout associated with identifying problems—as that fallout pertains to their own reputation and position—than they are concerned with the actual underlying issue of misconduct.

**For internal affairs operations, it would seem to make common sense to first recognize the 4 pitfalls, as they serve as a comprehensive summary of countless IA cases, viral videos, and lawsuits. Furthermore, all agency leaders should be cognizant of these 4 pitfalls in the hiring and training process. An applicant or new hire who demonstrates that he or she was attracted to law enforcement because of an interest in wealth, pleasure, power, or status should be scrutinized with an eye to the long-term ramifications of ignoring these traits.**

The defining feature that these four pursuits have in common, as evidenced by every history book in the library, by every file of an internal affairs division “frequent flier,” and by our own experiences, is that there is never enough of the wealth, pleasure, power, or status when we chase these things. In making this critical point, Aquinas cited the Gospel story of Jesus and the woman

at the well, in which Jesus speaks to the unquenchable nature of these kind of thirsts, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again.”<sup>iv</sup>

There is never enough money to quench the thirst of the deputy who engages in overtime fraud. There is never enough sexual gratification for the trooper who engages in sex on duty. There is never enough personal satisfaction for the officer who abuses police powers by verbally or physically abusing citizens. There is never enough recognition for the sergeant who prioritizes accolades and prestigious assignments over the fundamentals of supervision.

Agency leaders should recognize that the 4 pitfalls are all derived from a failure to focus on public service, a mission that is greater than an individual, and the honorable motivation of well-intentioned men and women entering a career in law enforcement in the first place.

Lastly, and without making any excuses for individual officers who violate the public trust in the pursuit of wealth, pleasure, power, and status, it is imperative that agency leaders do their best to place guard rails and safeguards in place to limit the likelihood that officers will fall into one or more of the 4 pitfalls.

If the agency does not regularly scrutinize overtime and secondary employment work to ensure that fraud is not occurring, the temptation to abuse the system for financial gain becomes greater.

If allegations of sexual misconduct or sexual harassment, on or off duty, are not investigated fully, the temptation to engage in these acts becomes greater.

If complaints ranging from officer demeanor to constitutional violations are not investigated promptly and thoroughly—regardless of the apparent trustworthiness of the complainant based on their past convictions, mental health disorders, substance abuse issues, etc.—the temptation to abuse police power becomes greater.

And if supervisors are not compelled to regularly “inspect what they expect” to identify problems early, the temptation to actively ignore or even cover-up wrongdoing in order to protect their own standing and reputation becomes greater.

**Internal affairs investigators, supervisors, and law enforcement executives are in the business of leading human beings. So, the recognition of timeless and common human**

**failings should be at the forefront of their minds in order to prevent, identify, and address the excessive pursuit of wealth, pleasure, power, and status by members of their agency.**

**These 4 pitfalls are every bit as present in law enforcement today as they were in the people who Saint Thomas Aquinas observed 800 years ago. Recognizing these pitfalls should guide agency leaders as they seek to improve agency operations, maintain the public trust, and do all that they can to protect their people from themselves**

### **About the Author**

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Matt Dolan is a licensed attorney who specializes in training and advising public safety agencies in matters of legal liability, risk management, and ethical leadership. His training focuses on helping agency leaders create ethically and legally sound policies and procedures as a proactive means of minimizing liability and maximizing agency effectiveness.

A member of a law enforcement family dating back three generations, he serves as both Director and an instructor with Dolan Consulting Group. He has trained thousands of law enforcement professionals over the last decade.

In December of 2024, he published his first book, [\*Police Liability: A Guide for Law Enforcement Leaders of All Ranks.\*](#)

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*Disclaimer: This article is not intended to constitute legal advice on a specific case. The information herein is presented for informational purposes only. Individual legal cases should be referred to proper legal counsel.*

## References

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, First Part of the Second Part, Question 2

<sup>ii</sup> Bishop Robert Barron, *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* (New York, NY: Random House / Image, 2014), 43.

<sup>iii</sup> Pat Williams and Jim Denney, *Coach Wooden: The 7 Principles That Shaped His Life and Will Change Yours* (Revell, 2011).

<sup>iv</sup> *The Holy Bible*, John 4:13