

[Summa Theologica by St. Thomas Aquinas](#) ^[1]

By: Brind'Amour, Katherine Keywords: [Catholicism](#) ^[2] [Human development](#) ^[3] [Fertilization](#) ^[4]

The principal work of [St. Thomas Aquinas](#) ^[6], the [Summa Theologica](#) ^[5] is divided into three parts and is designed to instruct both beginners and experts in all matters of Christian Truth. It discusses topics central to Christian morality, ethics, law, and the life of Christ, providing philosophical and theological solutions to common arguments and questions surrounding the Christian faith. The views presented in this body of writing are currently upheld in large part by the modern doctrines of the [Roman Catholic Church](#) ^[7]. Interesting references to and insights on [ensoulment](#) ^[8] and [embryology](#) ^[9], as well as other topics discussed in [Summa Theologica](#) ^[5], indicate a strong Aristotelian and Augustinian influence.

The [Summa Theologica](#) ^[5] focuses on religious matters pertinent to the [organization](#) ^[10] and doctrine of the Catholic faith, discussions of virtues and the Sacraments, and the nature of the Christian triune God and His creation. [St. Thomas Aquinas](#) ^[6] felt called to serve the Church through scholarship in writing and preaching, and worked on [Summa Theologica](#) ^[5] until shortly before his death. It is said that after a period of ecstasy during mass on 6 December 1273, Aquinas declared he would write no more, as anything he wrote would pale in comparison to what had just been revealed to him. Upon his death on 7 March 1274, Aquinas left his chief theological handiwork incomplete. The third and final section of his writings was later completed by his close friend, Fra Rainaldo da Piperno.

In Aquinas's discussion on murder, in Question 64, he mentions that human gestational life progresses from "first a living thing, then an animal, and lastly a man." This view of life echoes that of [St. Augustine](#) ^[11] and [Aristotle](#) ^[12], who both defended a delayed hominization theory for the life cycle of [humans](#) ^[13]. Such a cycle claims that upon [conception](#) ^[14], something along the lines of a vegetable life is present; non-sentient, incognizant, and as yet without a human soul. Soon after, it is believed that the being gains the characteristics of animal life, still without a human soul but with human or animal form and features. Finally, at about forty days for males and eighty days for females, this theory states that the life in the [womb](#) ^[15] becomes human; for past theologians, this point of [ensoulment](#) ^[8] was often selected to indicate the first presence of a human life. There is no direct discussion of procured [abortion](#) ^[16] or [embryology](#) ^[9] in Aquinas's section on murder, though he does write that the intentional killing of an animated [fetus](#) ^[17] with a rational soul is considered homicide.

Aquinas's theories on [ensoulment](#) ^[8] in [Summa Theologica](#) ^[5] do reveal more about the understanding of [embryology](#) ^[9] during the period. His segment on souls indicates that while he believed souls were immediately united with the body, he believed that upon [fertilization](#) ^[18], human life begins with a vegetative soul. This vegetative entity was credited with having nutritive, augmentative, and generative powers, according to Aquinas, but would require further development before it would gain sensitive and intellectual capacities. The document does, however, argue for the immediate [ensoulment](#) ^[8] upon the [conception](#) ^[14] of Jesus Christ in Question 33, wherein Jesus was instantaneously given a rational, perfect soul, as opposed to the imperfect soul of the vegetative or animal stages, and a human form. [Summa Theologica](#) ^[5] indicates that even scientific understanding of [embryology](#) ^[9] was limited at this time, as there is very little accurate content in the document's description of development *in utero*.

Currently, the [Roman Catholic Church](#) ^[7] relies heavily on the [Summa Theologica](#) ^[5] in its discussions on theology, philosophy, and morality, though it has since parted ways with Aquinas when it comes to the ideas of delayed hominization, vegetative souls, and the Aristotelian view of [embryology](#) ^[9], among others. Overall, the [Summa Theologica](#) ^[5] provides great insight into the prevalent Christian views on human development and [ensoulment](#) ^[8] during the Middle Ages, though it is less representative of today's scientific and theological beliefs on these matters.