

Thomism after Vatican II

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I

By the end of the Second Vatican Council, it had become customary for many attending the event to speak of the “minority” party and the “majority” party. This terminology is employed unselfconsciously, for example, in the journal of Yves Congar as he writes in 1964 and 1965.² Both “parties” if there really were such, where no doubt each numeric minorities within the larger whole, but they represented ideological tendencies vying for influence. In retrospect, we can say that they were divided by a common question: How should the Church understand herself and her mission in the modern world, in the wake of the decline of ancient monarchical regimes and the rise of modern secular democracies? Both sides were, in a certain sense, seeking to preserve the fullness of Catholic teaching and to promote that teaching in the modern world. Both longed for the reunion of the Church with the predominant culture, but with differing points of emphasis. One tendency was to see this aim in primarily defensive terms, the minority emphasizing the preservation of authentic intellectual and spiritual traditions, over against an errant, modern secularism. The other tendency, the seeming majority, was to see this aim in dialogical or primarily optimistic terms, seeking opportunities in the signs of the times for a way to bring the Church’s message to modern man.

Neither side in this engagement wanted to do away with the privileged study of Aquinas in the life of the Church, but they tended envisage that study in fairly different terms. Here one might consider two of the most balanced voices, one from either side. First, then, consider Cornelio Fabro. The renowned Italian Thomistic scholar was asked to compose a *votum* in the early 1960’s as part of the commission on seminary education that would eventually produce *Optatam Totius*.³ Fabro predicted that in the coming years there would continue to develop in

¹ Delivered at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., July 1, 2013, for the symposium of the Order of Preachers, “Dominicans and the Renewal of Thomism: The Doctrine of God, One and Triune.”

² Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. M.J. Ronayne, and M. C. Boulding, ed. D. Minns (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012). The terminology is commonly employed throughout these years of notes.

³ Cornelio Fabro, “De Doctrina S. Thomae in Scholis Catholicis Promovenda,” *Acta et Documenta* IV/II/1 (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 196?), 177-89. See the commentary by Joseph A. Komonchak in “Thomism and the Second Vatican Council,” in *Continuity and Plurality in Catholic Theology: Essays in Honor of Gerald A. McCool, S.J.*, ed. A. J. Cembra (Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 1998), 53-73.

European civilization a post-religious subjectivism that he denoted by the term “immanentism.”⁴ This cultural tendency would lead to a two-fold error: on the one hand, an extreme form of skeptical rationalism that takes any appeal to absolute revelation to be an imposition upon the freedom of human consciousness to derive for itself the content of personal truth claims. On the other hand, an extreme fideism: a theology that takes refuge in the integrity of traditional forms of thought without due reference to metaphysical realism, the philosophical study of nature, ethical objectivity or a healthy confidence in the positive relation between supernatural faith and natural reason. To remedy this two-fold tendency of subjectivism and fideism, which Fabro warns will enter deeply into the life of future clergy as well as Catholic laity, he councils the study of St. Thomas in both seminaries and Catholic universities: the consideration of the first principles of speculative and practical reason, study of metaphysics and of the constitution of the human person in Thomistic terms, knowledge of the arguments for the existence of God, consideration of the relation of creation to the modern sciences, and so forth.

Second, consider Yves Congar. Interestingly, Congar saw the Council as a kind of vindication of Thomism, at least in its spirit or method of procedure. (Note that this is quite different from Joseph Ratzinger, who thought the event signaled a return to older patristic models of engagement with culture, rather than those represented by scholasticism.) In an essay published in 1967 Congar contrasted two visions of Thomism at the Council, one particularly focused upon “a system of abstractions and of prefabricated solutions” to intellectual problems.⁵ Congar associates this form of Thomism with Charles-René Billuart as a paradigmatic example. He claims that it developed out of the longstanding rivalries between religious orders and their theological schools, and is more interested in inter-ecclesial quarrels than in real engagement in evangelization.⁶ Catholic intellectual life is most healthy, by contrast, when it engages with the real problems of its age and helps to make the Gospel most accessible to those both inside and outside the Church. In other words, Catholic theology should be missionary in nature. Congar claims that the Council follows the example of Aquinas in this regard: “Saint Thomas was not a man who repeated categories and conclusions supposedly formulated once and for all. He spent

⁴ “Immanentism” is a larger analytic theme in Fabro’s work that he treats with depth and insight. See *God in Exile. Modern Atheism. A Study of the Internal Dynamic of Modern Atheism, from Its Roots in the Cartesian Cogito to the Present Day*, trans. A. Gibson (New York: Newman, 1968/Italian edition 1964), especially pp. 1061-1153.

⁵ Yves Congar, “La Théologie au Concile. Le « théologiser » du Concile,” in *Situation et Taches Présentes de la Théologie* (Paris : Cerf, 1967), 41-56. Citation p. 55.

⁶ Congar, “La Théologie au Concile. Le « théologiser » du Concile,” 54.

his life seeking out new texts, in overseeing the production of new translations...in dialogue with all the “heretics” of his time, those who did not think like him, either within or outside of the Church.” “The Council is right,” Congar adds: “we should not repeat his theses but rather place ourselves in his school of thought.”⁷ In other words, we should do today what Aquinas did in his own age, by engaging with the thought-world and questions of our time. Congar then gives a succinct list of the main theological issues of the day, as he sees them in 1967. What is his list, incidentally? How should theology engage with modern exegesis, the tasks of ecumenism with the Orthodox and the Reformed, and the questions posed by Marxism, depth psychology, the birth control bill and the atomic bomb.⁸

Nothing transpired after the Council precisely as anyone had expected it to, and great changes occurred. To give but a partial list: 1968, the sexual revolution, the decline of religious practice in Europe and North America, the expansion of Catholicism in the southern hemisphere, the fall of Marxism, the victory of secular liberalism and capitalism, the post-modern critique of philosophical modernity, the effects of computer technology on modern communication. But also: the pontificate of John Paul II, who offered an intellectually plausible and spiritually profound vision of Catholicism in the midst of the modern world.⁹

Without seeking to evaluate here the many facets of the Council and its aftermath, I would simply like to say at this juncture that Fabro and Congar are both right, but each under a different aspect. For one, Thomism is above all an integral way of seeing the world, rightly. It is a science and a form of wisdom. For the other, it represents an intellectual stance of the Catholic intellectual life: a vitality of engagement with the contemporary issues of one’s age, in the service of evangelization. So you have two poles of emphasis: Integrity of principles, vitality of engagement. Evidently, no opposition between these two is required, but there is the need to understand them in a proper order. Toward that end, let me reflect briefly on each point, with a view toward answering the question posed implicitly by the title of this essay: what should Thomism aspire to do, after Vatican II?

⁷ Congar, “La Théologie au Concile. Le « théologiser » du Concile,” 55.

⁸ Congar, “La Théologie au Concile. Le « théologiser » du Concile,” 56.

⁹ See in this respect the insightful analysis of George Weigel in “Rescuing *Gaudium et Spes*: The New Humanism of John Paul II,” *Nova et Vetera* [English edition], Vol. 8, No. 2 (2010), 251-67. Weigel emphasizes the continuity between the pontificate of John Paul II and the aspirations of *Gaudium et Spes*, but also shows how those aspirations had to be translated into a very different context than that which was anticipated by the Council Fathers.

II

Toward the first point, then, let's consider the integrity of Thomism. What is it? First we must say that it is simply painfully minimalistic to say that Thomism should represent to us merely the valid aspiration to do in our own time what Aquinas did in his. To create out of the dialectical web of opinions that currently occupy our own cultural space a unique Christian vision: That might be an aspiration inspired by the example of Aquinas (or perhaps Hegel!), but it certainly is not a stable or integral form of thought. It is nothing like the "perennial philosophy" that is alluded to in recent ecclesial documents like *Optatam Totius* and *Fides et Ratio*, and which advocate explicitly for the study and transmission of the philosophical and theological patrimony of Thomas Aquinas.¹⁰

On the other extreme, it seems like it is a danger to define Thomism merely by reference to Aquinas' most unique philosophical and theological theses, those teachings which set him apart even in the 13th century, from his scholastic contemporaries. I am alluding to theses like those of the real distinction between *esse* and *essentia* in all created beings (dear to Étienne Gilson), his particular doctrine of participation (emphasized by Cornelio Fabro), his affirmation of the soul as the subsistent form of the body such that the person is one composite substance composed of body and soul (which Joseph Ratzinger underscored), or his teaching on the agent intellect as the natural principle of human cognition (in differentiation, say, from Duns Scotus).¹¹ Or in theology: his treatment of the persons of the Trinity as subsistent relations, his doctrine of infused virtues, the theology of transubstantiation, his particular theory of the character of priestly ordination, and so forth. Surely these insights are part of the Thomistic heritage, but taken in themselves, they would represent too narrow a definition, and a psychologically insecure and negative one: how is Aquinas originally not like anyone else.

Instead, perhaps we might say the following. First, philosophically speaking, Thomism is, broadly conceived, a Christian Aristotelianism based in the classical philosophical patrimony, expanded organically and developed insightfully in the light of Christian revelation. Now surely

¹⁰ *Optatam Totius*, para. 15-16; *Fides et Ratio*, para. 85 and 87.

¹¹ Étienne Gilson, *L'Être et l'Essence*. 2nd ed. Paris: J. Vrin, 1972; Fabro, Cornelio, *Participation et causalité selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris-Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1961); Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology. Death and Eternal Life*, translated by M. Waldstein and A. Nichols (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), especially 178-180. On the unique character of Aquinas' doctrine of the agent intellect, see Fernand Van Steenberghen, *La Philosophie au XIIIe Siècle* (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 1991).

it is controversial to say this. What could it mean, after all, to call Aquinas “Aristotelian”? Is this not ahistorical? Aquinas’ philosophical interpretation of Aristotle is itself deeply informed by a long tradition of Stoic and Neoplatonic ideas, the philosophy of Boethius, the Arabic interpreters of Aristotle such as Avicenna and Averroes, Aquinas’ deeply Augustinian and Dionysian theological principles, and his dialogue with his contemporaries such as Bonaventure and Albert the Great, to say nothing of the influences of other Fathers of the Church and 12th and 13th century scholastics.

This is certainly all true. However, it is also the case that Aristotle distinguished fields of philosophical study that Aquinas himself basically accepted: logic, philosophy of nature, philosophy of the living being and of the soul, metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Furthermore, and more to the point, these fields are themselves defined in great part by the discovery of the “proper principles” of the philosophical sciences. Thus, the Thomistic heritage typically transmits core principles of Aristotelian derivation that are held not only by Aquinas but which are common to the broader scholastic community as well: The epistemological distinction between the speculative and practical intellect, the study of the categorical modes of being and the four causes, the hylomorphic theory of matter and form as the co-constituent principles of nature, the understanding of the soul as the form of a living body, the distinction between substance and accidents, actuality and potency, a teleological theory of human agency, a virtue-based account of morality.

In stating things thus, one need not deny that significantly diverse interpretations of Aristotle remain possible. Averroes is not Aquinas. In fact, that is just the point. To call Aquinas an Aristotelian realist, one need not affirm the so-called “identity thesis”: that Aquinas simply does teach the same thing as Aristotle, or interpret him correctly. Rather, following Serge-Thomas Bonino, one might speak of the work of Aristotle’s principles as being in “obediential potency” to a diversity of subsequent historical interpretations, through the long course of the complex influences noted above.¹² Aquinas’ philosophy has its original character, then, precisely

¹² See Serge-Thomas Bonino, “Thomistica,” in *Revue Thomiste*, Vol. CXI, n. 2, 204-308, particularly p. 308, in the conclusion of a review of Ralph McInery, *Praeambula Fidei. Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

as a more comprehensive form of thinking that *presupposes and develops from within* certain key insights of Aristotelian derivation, *in an original and ingenious way*.¹³

We may also say, then, that Thomism indisputably is marked radically to its very depths by the Christian tradition, and by Aquinas' original genius and insight in interpreting that tradition. However, it also develops organically out of a developmental reading of Aristotle's own principles. We can consider in this light, then, the kinds of distinctly Thomistic doctrines that were mentioned above: the metaphysics of the real distinction, Aquinas' influential interpretation of the transcendentals, his philosophical treatment of creation, the arguments for the incorruptibility and subsistence after death of the human rational soul (itself the subsistent form of the human body), Aquinas' own very original account of the human emotions, his theory of various moments of human free action and the treatment of moral objects, ends and circumstances.

Why have I dwelt upon this issue of the Aristotelian foundation of Aquinas' thought? The reason is the following. Aquinas' philosophy does have a complex historical genesis, but it has an identifiable *essence*. Thomism *does contain*, philosophically speaking, a coherent body of doctrine, an account of the structure of reality, even while it also has historical roots in the larger tradition of European philosophy. If the Aristotelian science of Aquinas remains normative for a proper understanding of his thought, the study of the disciplines of the philosophy of nature, metaphysics, ethics, and so forth, remain essential to a real grasp of the doctrine of Aquinas. His philosophy cannot be reduced to a sociological motif or a merely formal intellectual aspiration. To understand what Aquinas is arguing about *the nature of reality*, one must develop a habit of consideration of principles that characterize *reality itself*, seeking to

¹³ To take one significant example: Consider Aquinas' commentary on *Post. Analytics* II, 7, 92b10 ("...but what a man is and the fact that a man exists are different..."): "But what a man is and the fact that man exists are different. For essence and existence are one and the same only in the first cause of being, which is being by its every essence; in all other things, essence and existence are different, since things other than the first cause have existence by participation. Therefore, we cannot demonstrate by what a thing is and the fact that it exists by the same demonstration." (*Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics* II, 6, b 2, trans. R. Berquist (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 2007).) Aquinas' appeal to participated *esse* and the doctrine of the real distinction to interpret Aristotle is not based on any form of historical naiveté on his part. Consequently, one must take seriously the idea that Aquinas thinks himself that these later doctrines are contained somehow implicitly in things that Aristotle himself is saying. For a historically nuanced discussion of this point, see Cornelio Fabro, "Intorno al fondamento della metafisica tomistica," *Aquinas*, n. 1 (1960), 83-135; Lawrence Dewan, "St. Thomas and the Distinction between Form and *Esse* in Caused Things," in *Form and Being. Studies in Thomistic Metaphysics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, (2006), 188-204.

understand if the analysis given by the Thomist tradition makes sense, is defensible, is organically unified, and not. The truth is at stake, not mere procedure.

At the same time, based on the reading I have been offering, Aquinas' thinking is rooted in a larger tradition of conversation. It does not emerge from nowhere, to be interpreted only in a hermeneutic of discontinuity with his forebears, or successors. In saying this, I am not seeking to separate Aquinas out from all other thinkers by a kind of historical nostalgia for the 13th century. On the contrary, I think that certain readings of Aquinas in the 20th century, especially those offered by Étienne Gilson and Henri de Lubac (despite their potential merits), have risked to portray Aquinas as so starkly original as to mark him off in radical discontinuity with the Dominican commentators who came after him, but also from the broader scholastic community of thinkers of his own time. If we read Aquinas as I am suggesting above, we are not wed to some kind of stark Heideggerian meta-narrative wherein everyone forgets the essential, except Aquinas and some privileged modern interpreters.¹⁴ A more historically-nuanced Aristotelian reading of Aquinas makes room for a greater conversation with more interlocutors—ancient, scholastic and modern—and does not restrict points of contact. It does so, however, without sacrificing definition and identity.

Second, theologically speaking, Aquinas' theology takes its point of departure from the teaching of Christ and the apostles, as transmitted and understood by the Church. Aquinas as a theologian is a model in his own right, as he is constantly seeking to understand the principles of divine revelation, and the order intrinsic to these principles. His thought is, in this respect, both historical and analytic, Biblical and Patristic, but also scholastic, rational and demonstrative...and at times also very intuitive and mystical. Reading Aquinas teaches one how to think theologically. To say that Aquinas is a great theologian is not to deny that he is a great philosopher. As he himself points out, *sacra doctrina* ordinarily makes use of a number of philosophical, historical and scientific theories that are not derived immediately from revelation, but which enter into the speculative habit of theology, just because theology can and must make

¹⁴ I am referring here, for example, to Martin Heidegger's treatment of the history of metaphysics in his 1929 lecture course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (trans. W. McNeill and N. Walker [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001], 41–57), which lays the foundations for what he would subsequently say concerning onto-theology. Authors who follow this line of thought typically seek to “save” Aquinas from the accusation of onto-theology, against the background of a sea of medieval error. Consider, for example, Jean-Luc Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin et l’onto-théo-logie,” *Revue Thomiste* 95 (1995): 31–66. See the recent criticisms of Heidegger's approach to medieval philosophy by Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought. From Philip the Chancellor to Francesco Suárez* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); especially pp. 6-7, 631-34, 674-77.

use of them.¹⁵ A clear example would pertain to the humanity of Jesus Christ. God has become human, but then, what does it mean to be human? What should we believe about the body and soul of Christ, his human intellect and will, the nature of his human death, and resurrection? Here, inevitably, philosophical views impact our particular exposition of the theological mystery. (And simultaneously, the consideration of the mystery of God continually invites every person qua philosopher to adjust or rethink his or her views.)

When we speak of a Thomistic theological tradition, then, we are denoting something complex. Certainly it is a kind of robust scholastic theology, historically well informed, at the service of the magisterium. It is affected in distinct ways by Aquinas philosophical choices. But it is also characterized by Aquinas' distinctly theological insights and acumen. Fr. Norbert Del Prado made this argument many years ago in his famous work on Thomism as a Christian philosophy.¹⁶ He argued there, for example, that Aquinas' metaphysics of the distinction in creatures of *esse* and *essentia*, and of divine simplicity, contributed in important ways to his articulation of the divine persons of the Trinity as subsistent relations.¹⁷ God is simple, without composition of *esse* and *essentia* or composition of any kind, and simultaneously, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each the one God, the Creator.¹⁸ Therefore there is nothing that distinguishes the persons of the Trinity with respect to essence, or existence and each person must be considered in his subsistence to possess the simple plenitude of the divine being.¹⁹ Consequently, the persons are distinguished only by their relations of origin, which are interpreted in light of the processions of the Son from the Father, and of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. The persons are then "subsistent relations": each one is from another in all that he is, and each one contains in himself the perfection of the divine essence, the Father giving the Son to be, by way of generation, the Father and the Son giving the Spirit to be, by way of spiration.²⁰ In his notion of the persons as subsistent relations, Aquinas offered the Church, then, a particularly balanced form of Trinitarian monotheism because he managed to acknowledge in a very profound way simultaneously both the absolute primacy of the divine unity and the absolute

¹⁵ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

¹⁶ Norbert Del Prado, *De veritate fundamentali philosophiae christianae* (Fribourg: Consociatio Sancti Pauli, 1911), especially pp. 493-640.

¹⁷ Del Prado, *De veritate fundamentali philosophiae christianae*, 516-44.

¹⁸ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 3, aa. 4 and 7; q. 39, aa. 1-2.

¹⁹ Del Prado, *De veritate fundamentali philosophiae christianae*, 530-37.

²⁰ ST I, q. 27, aa. 1-2. See the study of this idea by Emmanuel Perrier, *La Fécondité en Dieu. La puissance notionnelle dans la Trinité selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris : Parole et Silence, 2009).

primacy of the distinction of divine persons. Arguably, this articulation of the mystery of God has not been surpassed by any other exponent of the doctrine.

My point in giving this example is not to claim that Aquinas' theology is special because of his metaphysics. Nor is the point to claim that all Catholic theologians need to be Thomists. To affirm that is to mistake Thomism for the doctrine of the Church, which it clearly is not. Instead, the point is simply to underscore by these limited examples, that Thomism has an essence. It constitutes an identifiable intellectual patrimony that deeply affects the long term health and stability of the Catholic intellectual heritage in the dual domains of philosophy and theology. If Thomism has a role to play in the age we live in since the Second Vatican Council, this is clearly due to the integrity of the principles of Thomistic thought, as a way of thinking about reality.

III

Meanwhile, Congar is concerned to categorize the contribution of Thomism in terms of dialogue with the thought world of one's age, and I have recast this categorization in terms of "vitality." A living Thomism must not only transmit the integral knowledge of principles, but also engage contemporary issues in the service of evangelization. Here we should be careful: being in dialogue should not be confused with authentic vitality. In fact, dialogue is not always the sign of vitality. It is sometimes the sign of decline and capitulation. But what Congar is rightly denoting, it seems to me, is the following: you don't win over the culture of your age unless you can solve its internal intellectual problems. This includes, of course, the culture of the Church. At the time of the Second Vatican Council the Church was faced by a number of important modern theological difficulties. Whether or not one is satisfied by the solutions that were offered by the likes of Henri de Lubac and Joseph Ratzinger or Karl Rahner and Marie-Dominique Chenu (whether by *Communio* or *Concilium*), it is clearly these people who were offering solutions. It is not enough to have all the right ideas, and to harbor them defensively, unless you can also communicate a renewed sense of their vitality and helpfulness in a context in which they are needed. In other words, we need articulations of Thomism sufficiently concentrated and integral so as to be real and useful, but also accessible, and pertinent, evangelical and hopeful, so as to be missionary.

We might argue that in the past 50 years it has become painfully apparent that many of the influential theologies of the post-conciliar period *are not* today in any position to attempt to replace Thomism in the post-conciliar period as a normative guide to modern Catholic intellectual life. The theological anthropology of Karl Rahner which greatly influenced the life of the Church in the 1970's presumed a kind of modern European intellectual consensus, a post-Kantian intellectual culture with influences from G. W. F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger.²¹ That consensus has since perished in the flames of post-modernism, aided by the rise of analytic philosophy and the return of scientific positivism (influences that do not of course always overlap). Students in the contemporary university do not suffer from over-commitment to the categories of an intellectually stifling metaphysics, but from the lack of any normative philosophical orientation or basic formation.²² Typically they are offered no unifying account of reality that spans across the diversity of their intellectual disciplines. And indeed, where would they get one? University culture today is characteristically dominated by constructivistic post-modernism and scientific positivism (which both offer very truncated visions of reality, and which are in fact profoundly incompatible with one another). Students often long for some way to make sense of the unity of philosophical experience, so as to see how the world might have some analyzable, over-arching meaning. And if they are Catholic, they want to see how the various disciplines of learning, whether scientific, philosophical or literary, relate to the theological tenets of their faith. Strangely, in this context, the Thomism that was viewed by many as a cultural impasse at the time of the Council increasingly can be understood to be of a unique relevance. Strangely, a book like Jacques Maritain's *The Degrees of Knowledge* is perhaps of the most critical import just in the juncture in which we live today.²³

I am not saying that Thomism should be presented under a triumphalistic banner as the solution to all life's intellectual problems, or that the twenty-four Thomistic theses are the readymade response to the thought of Michel Foucault. (Though the latter is perhaps true.) I'm saying something more measured. In our own age, Thomism has become one of the only plausible contenders left that offers an authentic vision of the sapiential unity of human knowledge amidst the diversity of university disciplines. Politically, our situation is one of

²¹ C.f.: R.R. Reno, "Rahner the Restorationist: Karl Rahner's Time Has Passed," *First Things*, May 2013.

²² See the diagnosis of Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

²³ Jacques Maritain, *Distinguer Pour Unir ou Les Degrés du Savoir* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1932); *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. G. B. Phelan (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

cultural disenfranchisement, to be sure. We are complete outsiders, an underground movement frequently unwelcome in the university. But the rivals who today are offering either the Church or the modern world a plausible narrative of the intellectual life are diminishing and are not having such an easy time themselves. As a Dominican friar of the Toulouse province said in the 1970's during an episode of particular turmoil: "Brothers, things are bad here, but by the grace of God, they are worse elsewhere." If your goal is to win over the larger culture today, inside the Church or outside of it, it is not much easier today to be a Kantian, a Balthasarian, a Marxist, a logical positivist or a Derriddian, than to be a Thomist. In this heterogeneous landscape, there is an increasingly level playing field, and in that case its not bad to have Aquinas on your team.

So what central issues does the Catholic Church face within our larger culture today? I've mentioned one above, which is the problem of the unity of the sciences in the modern university. We might briefly add a selective list of three others. First, no Catholic theology in the 20th century seriously engaged with modern cosmology and evolutionary biology. Today, these disciplines vie to stand at the center of academic culture, and those who would advocate for a militant secularism—a "new atheism"—commonly claim to be the true advocates of science. But at the same time, it is quite unclear within the larger university culture at large what philosophy might be employed to rightly interpret the discoveries of the modern scientific revolution. 20th century Thomists of the River Forest school claimed that Thomism could offer a needed grounding to the study of modern physics, as well as an appreciation the role of evolutionary biology and psychology for an understanding of the human being, and still underscore the uniqueness of the spiritual principle in the human person, and the importance of metaphysics and a philosophical understanding of doctrine of creation.²⁴ Modern analytic philosophers typically want to see themselves as the key philosophers of the scientific age, but they also struggle incessantly to understand problems of causation, natural kinds, cosmic order, the unity of living forms, animal sentience, intentionality, and human rationality.²⁵ In the spirit of River Forest Thomism, there is a wonderful opportunity for a younger generation of Thomists to weigh in on

²⁴ See, most notably, Benedict Ashley, *The Way toward Wisdom. An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), and William A. Wallace, *The Modeling of Nature. Philosophy of Science and Philosophy of Nature in Synthesis* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

²⁵ See the contemporary discussions in the context of analytic philosophy by David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007) and Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

these topics philosophically and theologically, for the good of the Church and the health of the greater culture at large.

Second, sexuality and gender. The teachings of the Church that will remain most contested in modern western culture are those that challenge directly the lifestyle changes that have emerged from the sexual revolution. Increasingly they mark out Catholic Christians as unintelligible subjects in the modern secular state, and even as potential enemies. Here we have only to name fundamental teachings that we know are frequently misunderstood or dismissed: The dignity of human life from conception to natural death, marriage as the morally appropriate context of sexual love, the heterosexual and procreative character of marriage, the intrinsically problematic character of contraception, the celibate priesthood, the all male-priesthood. In addition, we might note the expanding set of bio-ethical issues where the culture embraces practices that the Church cannot condone: in vitro fertilization, same-sex adoption, the day-after pill, pre-natal eugenics. Such practices are becoming statistically normal.

These neuralgic issues are all related in some way to the theme of sexuality and gender. They touch upon the very nature of the human person as an animal who is capable of serving God in his or her body, as an inherently political animal who is born into and cared for by a family, and as a fallen human being, in many ways wounded and weak, capable of sexual godlessness and selfishness, but also in need of mercy and compassion. We need to discuss them, but also resituate their consideration within a deeper treatment of the human person, human happiness, the virtues, God, and the spiritual character of human love. Clearly we cannot simply ignore such topics, either individually or as an Order, and hope that they disappear or that someone else who is braver than us will deal with them. As Dominicans we often like to say in regard to such questions that we bring an air of nuance to them. However, the Church is also in need of clarity on these issues today. We might make it our goal to bring to bear on the discussion a nuanced clarity, in the service of the Church. It used to be a question of how Catholic intellectuals could effectively change the dominant views of the mainstream culture by appeal to our ethical tradition, but today it is increasingly a question whether the dominant culture will even allow Catholics to articulate and practice what they believe.

It may seem that on these difficult subjects, we lack sufficient allies in the larger culture. That is true to be sure. However, the permissive world we live in also gradually gives rise to many profoundly disillusioned, wounded people, who are looking for a deeper moral formation

on all the controversial issues. If we provide a framework that is at once coherent and demanding but also rationally accessible and compassionate, we will be preparing a counter-alternative to the predominant culture, a kind of potent intellectual remnant. We have at our disposal in this regard the great resources of Aquinas' account of the human person, as body and soul, spirit and sense, and his accompanying teleological conception of freedom, eudemonistic ethics and virtue theory. If this is articulated in a way that is accessible, rationally sensible and authentically spiritual, it is powerful and compelling.

Last, theology today lacks unity in the way that it explains the central mysteries of the Christian faith. Marie-Dominique Chenu sought to remedy this by referring to Aquinas' *exitus-reditus* schema: all comes from God and all returns to him.²⁶ Chenu sought to read Aquinas so as to procure a theology of the divine economy and of human history. This is meant to provide a framework for the tasks of theology in the historically minded, hermeneutical age in which we live. Theology is a kind of meta-history. Now it should be said that historical studies in scripture, patristics, medieval and modern thought, and in the domain of Thomism itself, have greatly enriched the intellectual patrimony of our time, and such studies I believe personally are essential to a healthy theology. They give us intellectual orientation so that we perceive better the intellectual conditions of the historical time in which revelation was composed, and in which the tradition developed, as well as the intellectual landscape of our own era. All this can readily lead to speculative knowledge, since the recovery of the past opens us up to a principled, profound analysis of reality as it has been rightly understood by our forebears. Historical study is not at enmity with speculative theology, when rightly understood. But we do live in a time when the study of the structure of the mystery of the faith is itself neglected. Just what does it mean to speak about creation? What is the meaning of the Old Law as related to the New? What is justification and how does it relate to merit? How ought we to understand the ontology of the Incarnation, or the instrumental causality of the sacraments? We can study these questions in a historical optic, to be sure, and we can do so in the service of a Catholic Thomistic theology as such. But at some point we have to answer the questions, and if I may say so, academic theology today is largely in the habit not of answering the questions, but of merely rehearsing the historical opinions. It is a mistake to try to overcorrect in the other direction. What we need is a

²⁶ See Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. by A.-M. Landry, and D. Hughes (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964), 304-314.

historically sound approach to the Bible, the Fathers, the medievals, and the moderns, but one which also seeks to find the speculative answers to the deepest theological questions, and to present those to persons of our time. This is especially the case when it comes to teaching seminarians, Dominicans, future priests, those who need a grounding in authentic theology and in the contemplation of the mystery of God. In saying all this, I'm only repeating what one finds in *Optatam Totius*, para. 16: "Ultimately, in order to throw as full a light as possible on the mysteries of salvation, students should learn to examine more deeply, through speculative labor, and with St. Thomas as [master], all aspects of the [Christian] mysteries, and to perceive their interconnection." One thing we can do as a service to the vitality of theology in our own age, then, is to preserve the classical practice of theology as a science that peers into the mysteries of the faith. This scientific and contemplative or sapiential character of theology is most essential to the intellectual life of the Church.

IV

Pope Paul VI is purported to have said that there may come a time in the modern age when people will believe in the Gospel only when they see people giving their lives for it. There can be little doubt that we live in an age that gives more importance to witness of life than to intellectual argument. (Let us note in this respect the initial popular reaction to Pope Francis.) This can seem in many ways like a fundamental problem for the revival of Thomism. Doesn't the study of Thomism—due precisely to its involved and abstract character—act to cut us off from a life of concrete witness to the Gospel? While this viewpoint is understandable, I think it is fundamentally mistaken. In fact, historically speaking, it is the inverse that is the case. Scholasticism was a form of thought that developed in large part in religious communities, and which was employed not only to sustain the life of those communities, but also their missionary activity across the span of the world. When Franciscans were formed in the thought of Bonaventure or Scotus, and Jesuits in the thought of Suarez or Vasquez, this formation was meant to equip them to engage with all facets of reality in the religious life in Europe and abroad. What was aimed at was an integrated life of religious witness that also was accompanied by a profound speculative analysis of reality understood in light of God the most Holy Trinity. That integrity of spiritual life and intellectual vision, then, is something precious, and, it must be said,

increasingly rare. You don't see today many Scotist Franciscans or Suarezian Jesuits. And yet, amazingly, what I am referring to still subsists in the Church in a particular way in the life of the Dominican Order, where the speculative study of Thomism can still be found as something integrated within an evangelical witness of religious life. This is something of tremendous existential vitality and import in our world today.

The era of post-Conciliar opprobrium regarding Thomism is long gone. It is time to engage anew, without trying to return to the now sterile debates about Thomism that took place in the immediate aftermath of the Council. Our context is different. We are called upon to serve the Church and to evangelize in a largely de-Christianized world. In this task, we as Dominicans have a certain responsibility for the intellectual life of the Catholic Church that we cannot really delegate to others. But that responsibility is also a blessing: it has the power to shape our Order in wonderful ways. It can be a source of new life within our own communities, and for those to whom we preach. By moving forward into renewal, we should hope in the providence of God and his intrinsically effective grace which our own intellectual tradition so rightly underscores. Remember the physical promotion. If we seek with God's grace to promote the wisdom of the Angelic doctor, God will fructify our meager efforts. It is to us act with hope and to find inventive ways to do so together, now and in the future. The revitalization of Thomism in the Order today will succeed best where it is lived out within the context of a dynamic Dominican fraternal life and evangelical preaching. First, then: the integrity of the principles. Second: the vitality of contemporary engagement with the thought-world of our age. Third: the aspiration to live this out within the context of a dynamic community life. Those are plausible aims for a Dominican Thomism after Vatican II.