

Presenting the Chalice of God
*A Theological Manifesto for the Contemporary Church,
where I ask, what is theology, what form should it take,
what content should it have?*

AIDAN NICHOLS, O.P.
Blackfriars
Cambridge, England

WHAT FOLLOWS was my attempt, in 2012, at an explanation of this recently published work, with a view to introducing it to possible readers in three Australian cities. I'd always wanted to write a book like this one, but I've taken a long time to getting round to it: about forty years.¹ It started when I was a Dominican student, when I realized, owing to the somewhat bitty character of our studies in the rather disoriented immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, that there were such things as options in theology. Theology is not a catechism. Theology has room for variety: Thomas's theology is not Newman's, Athanasius's theology is not Augustine's. On the other hand, as a convert who, though nominally an Anglo-Catholic, had been exposed to a very wishy-washy Anglicanism (because there was no Anglo-Catholic parish anywhere near my home town) and living in a city and university as proudly Anglican as the Oxford establishment was and to a degree still is, I also realized that not just anything can count as soundly Catholic theology: the variety, which is historically undeniable, co-exists, surely, with certain constants—or should do.

Perhaps as a Dominican student I ought to have set myself not to be a Catholic eclectic, which I suppose is what I am, but instead to master the specifically Thomist tradition in theology, which after all is not only recognized as a legitimate member of the family of Catholic theologies but has

¹ See Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Chalice of God: A Systematic Theology in Outline* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012).

also been singled out by popes and a recent ecumenical council (Vatican II) for especially favorable mention. But though Thomas was highly spoken of in the English Dominican study-house, a consistent Thomist approach was not on offer, and, to be honest, when one opened the pages of some of the manuals of philosophy and theology “according to the mind of the divine Thomas” which the library there contained, they did seem extraordinarily uninspiring. It was not easy to imagine them giving anyone much in the way of spiritual nourishment, which the major theologies of the past—including there Newman, Athanasius, Augustine—have done, and were in fact doing for me when I looked at their writings.

Few people then were reading Thomas’s biblical commentaries, or his commentary on *The Divine Names* of the Syrian father who wrote under the pseudonym of St. Paul’s Athenian disciple Denys the Areopagite (a classic of mystical as well as philosophical theology). Nor, except for some outstanding teachers, at Toulouse and in Rome, for instance, did they read the major historic commentators on Thomas’s own *Summa theologiae*. It was in the manuals, which the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar said made him angry because they had reduced the glory of revelation to dust and ashes, a dish of dry dog biscuits, that Thomism as a system seemed to have ended up. So for better or worse I started to piece together a theological mosaic of my own.

By the time of my ordination to the priesthood in 1976, I already knew a few things about it: that it would be Christ-centered, that it would seek to marry theology and spirituality, that it would draw on the spirit of worship, that it would learn from the Christian East as well as the Christian West, and that it would try to be cosmic or all-encompassing. Those were only intuitions, or aspirations, though they were given some concrete form in my first book, *The Art of God Incarnate*, in 1980.

What were otherwise rather vague musings had to become more focused, though, when in 1983, in the middle of writing a doctoral thesis on Russian Orthodoxy, while also being chaplain to students in Edinburgh, I was asked to go to the Angelicum in Rome and take over the lengthy course entitled “Introduction to Theology,” given, as its name indicates, to first-year students: certainly “lengthy” because I think it was fifty-six lectures in one semester, or if it wasn’t it definitely felt like it! It was a very useful experience because it meant sitting down and thinking out what are the constants that should be present in any Catholic theology simply as such, whether Thomas’s or Newman’s, Athanasius’s or Augustine’s. The result was my book *The Shape of Catholic Theology*, published in 1991. There, after defining theology as the disciplined exploration of revelation, I proposed that there are seven main constants in all Catholic theology worth the name.

The first is a role for philosophy in the preamble of faith—the build-up toward Christian belief, where a spot of philosophy is needed so as to show the congruence of the initial act of faith with rational reflection on the world around us. That is not, however, the only way philosophy enters the set of constants. It would generally be agreed that philosophy, or at any rate rationality, also has a role to play in helping theology to organize its own materials, once the human subject has got beyond the initial act of faith and has started exploring the revealed content of faith. That was the second constant, which I called the philosophical “principle of order” in theology.

Next, an absolutely irreplaceable constant is Holy Scripture, which is the primary source for all that revelation teaches. Just how Scripture enters into theology can seem quite a complex question; there are so many different exegetical tools in the modern academy, and some of them can be used with inappropriate philosophical presuppositions: for example, when the historic-critical method is combined with a philosophical prejudice against there being any possibility of direct divine action in history. Catholic theology cannot in any case be restricted to the literal sense of Scripture, what was going through the hagiograph’s mind at the time he sat down to write. So I also had something to say about the spiritual sense of Scripture, found in the first instance by placing the literal sense in the context of the canon of Scripture as a whole. So Scripture was the third constant.

Then again, and here we come to a fourth invariable, for Catholics as for the Orthodox and for Anglo-Catholics too, for that matter, Scripture has to be read within Tradition, so an appeal to Tradition will have to join the series of constants at this point. Tradition, I explained in *The Shape of Catholic Theology*, doesn’t come neat. We find what it has to say by scanning a whole range of different monuments, from the Creeds and the writings of the Fathers to the Liturgies and sacred art.

So far, then, among our constants or invariables, we have two sets of two: two roles for philosophy, and two sources for revelation. Now comes a third set of two. The constants in my last duo were what I termed “aids to discernment” in interpreting the sources of theology, Scripture and Tradition, to which we have access through a faith for which philosophy has prepared the way and helped to organize the disciplined exploring of the sources.

These aids to discernment I described as, first, Christian experience, the fifth constant, which I equated in effect with the “sense of the faithful,” the *sensus fidelium*, and second, the magisterium of the Pope and bishops, whose task it is to (as it were) discern the discernment carried out by Christian experience, so as to ensure that the sources of revelation are not

distorted by the claims of such experience but really illuminated by it. The Holy Spirit makes possible Christian experience, but he also gives the bearers of the magisterium a charism to judge the deliverances of that experience: what people say by virtue of their own account of it.

The final constant I identified was what I called a theological principle of order, paralleling at its own level the philosophical principle of order already described. Just as different philosophies are more focused on some aspects of reality than are others, so different theologies seem to be more interested in some aspects of revelation than are others. All philosophies should seek to do justice to the whole of reality, of course, just as all theologies should seek to do justice to the whole of revelation. But somehow one gets the impression that this is a counsel of perfection: total coverage may be aimed at but it is never fully achieved, nor, one supposes, will it be until, like Dante at the end of the *Divine Comedy*, we see all things in the light of the Beatific Vision.

So that was in 1991. In *The Shape of Catholic Theology*, I had identified, to my own satisfaction at least, the set of constants that any Catholic theology should have. But of course that left open the question of the variables, which is equally important, or indeed, more important if we are thinking of the concrete character of theology as distinct from its abstract form. Where was the flesh and blood to go on this skeleton? In one sense the answer to that is straightforward; it is found at its most readily accessible in any good Catechism, and one very good one got the seal of approval of Pope John Paul II in 1992. But as I said at the start, a theology is not a Catechism. Instead, it is a way of conceiving—and here “conceiving” should not be counterposed to “imagining”—what the disciplined exploration of revelation should look like if it is to be systematically coherent and (think of Balthasar’s fury at the manuals) engagingly attractive as an expression of the everlasting Gospel here and now. How best to do this, each would-be theologian has to decide for himself or herself: there is no alternative.

So I wanted to make my own attempt to produce a theology, knowing—aware as I was of my own limits as a thinker—that it would not be on the grand scale: not an ocean-going liner like Thomas’s or the German theologian Karl Rahner’s, but only a little tug. However, though modest, it could make a contribution to the regatta of vessels, the fleet of Catholic theologies, not all of which are at parity in terms of performance, though in terms of aspiration they may well be. *Chalice of God* is a very short book, so short that the first publishers I approached said it fell below the required minimum limit for publishing a book as distinct from a pamphlet. But I wanted it to be short because I wanted its overall vision

to come over to the reader, which was more likely to happen if it took only a few hours to read it through. And to be honest with you, if it takes only a few hours to read it, it took me only a few days to write it. I actually felt quite inspired when doing so, although I know that is a dubious thing to claim, and no doubt any lingering sense of afflatus I still have will soon be deflated by the first reviews!

I also wanted it to be in large print that was easy to read, in hardback and printed on fine paper so it was good to handle, and illustrated with icons, so it was beautiful to look at. The reason for that is, divine revelation deserves the best. I was proposing to give my own reading of the truth, goodness, and beauty of divine revelation. Hence I had a responsibility it should emerge as well as possible even as an object, never mind as an act of thought. Fortunately, the publisher I eventually found agreed with me.

Anyway, the main thing is of course not the craft object but the act of thought. So what is distinctive about my approach? The easiest way to answer this question is to go through the chapters, which are only six in number, and as I said, this is a *very* short book.

So by way of conclusion I'd like to draw your attention to a couple of things in each chapter. In the first chapter, which begins with an icon of the fourth-century Church father St. Gregory Nazianzen, called by the Greeks *ho theologos*, "The Theologian," under whose patronage I put this project, I set out the main constants of sound theology at large, which I've already described to you. But I add emphases that imply an option for a theology of a specific kind: thus I stress how theology should use both concepts and images, should be, then, both rational and imaginative, thus feeding not only our minds, through conceptual clarification, but also our hearts, through eliciting emotional response and in that way sparking spiritual effort and moral action. Under the heading of Christian experience, I give a privileged place to the spirituality of *the saints*, which suggests theology should be devout and make people want to pray. Then again, a very different point this time, I take from the German Catholic theology of the mid-nineteenth century the key idea that in systematic theology everything should be related to everything else, which is why I adopt a system of numbers so as to be able to refer forwards and backwards in the text to do just this. And above all, I make my option for philosophical and theological principles of order, reflected in the title of the book, *Chalice of God*: philosophically, I see the world's being as what I call a receptacle for divine action to fill up in appropriate ways, and theologically, I see the divine action recorded in Scripture as doing just that.

Then in the second chapter, which starts with the icon of the Old Testament Trinity (the visit of three "angelic" strangers to Abraham at the

Oak of Mamre, where the angel figures, representing Father, Son and Spirit, gesture toward a chalice on a table spread for guests), I outline my basic metaphysics, which I would call a concrete metaphysics, taking as key ideas cosmos, history (the extension of the cosmos in the story of man), form (the different configurations that entities, including human beings, have at various stages of their existence), and person (since by personhood human beings go beyond cosmic nature and signal their unique place in the world). These four topics—cosmos, history, form (in the special sense I give this word), and person—sum up, it seems to me, what people care about when they seek to reflect as widely as possible on life, but I also add that thinking about them needs to be underpinned by Thomas's account of sheer being: the wonder of the gift of being as such, simply existing, in dependence on an ultimate Source (and that is where I situate my claim to be, as a Dominican, still in the Thomist tradition). And I frankly admit that, in outlining this philosophical principle of order, I've also been thinking ahead to what a specifically Christian metaphysic will look like, when in the light of revelation it comes to consider creation, salvation, transfiguration, which are new forms for cosmic and, in the case of human beings, historical and personal existence.

Then in the third chapter, which opens with an icon of the Transfiguration of Christ, I say how the divine activity unfolds through what I call the 'Christological determination of biblical history': in other words, when the Bible is read as the book of the new Israel, the Church, and not just as a haphazard collection of texts from the ancient world, it is seen to have Christ as its center, and when it is read realistically, that is, as an account of real events and not just some people's religious projections onto reality, the Christ who centers the Bible can also be seen to center the narrative that attests what the Source of all being is doing with the beings that are in the world. I set out my Christology as a Christology of the mysteries of life of Christ, as St. Thomas does in the third part of his great *Summa*, but unlike him, I offer my account of the divinity of the One sent by the Father *afterwards*, as a reflection on what it is that enables us to say that his mysteries, from the Annunciation to his Ascension, sitting at the Father's right, and sending of the Holy Spirit from the Father, bring about the definitive salvation and prospectively the transfiguration of the world.

Chapter four, initiated by an icon of Pentecost, deals with Tradition, where I emphasize the primacy of the Liturgy as the chief monument of Tradition, the way the meaning of the biblical revelation is passed down in all its wonderful novelty over time. And I portray the Church as essentially the bearer of Tradition. We love the Church because, as the Tradition-bearer, she alone can give us access to the full meaning of the events

which saved and will transform, by transfiguration, the world. This she could not do of course unless more than human powers were at work in her, thanks to the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit, moreover, that Tradition points us forward to the consummation of all things in Christ: above all, through the Liturgy, which habitually looks forward to the life of the Kingdom.

Chapter five opens with a fresco image of St. Basil (Gregory Nazianzen's great friend) celebrating the divine Liturgy, and this chapter is the most original in format. The title I give it is "the mysteric pattern of Christian existence," and my basic idea is this: the entire Christian life, which covers everything from leading a life of prayer to having friendships or starting a family, from practicing politics to writing poetry or practicing natural science or just trying to live out the virtues day by day, takes its distinctive character from what I call the "transposition of the mysteries": when the mysteries of the life of Christ become transposed into our lives and have a transforming effect there. So my theology of grace—how grace is about redeeming and completing our human nature, and yet is itself freely given and unexpected—is based on how suitable it is, yet also how amazing it is, that the mysteries lived out by the incarnate Word should also enter our own lives.

The last chapter ends with the Holy Trinity, introduced by a Russian icon of the kind called in the West the Trinity as "Throne of grace": the Son sitting on the Father's lap with the Dove of the Spirit between them. Whereas most theological expositions of doctrine would prefer to locate the Trinity close to the beginning, I end with the Trinity, because it's only when we have reminded ourselves of the full range of what the triune God has done, is doing, and will do that we can do most justice to his being.

I call the Trinity the "matrix of persons and the world," because, so it turns out from Scripture and Tradition, persons and the world issue from this all-encompassing Source. (In creation the entire Trinity is at work, each Trinitarian person in his own mode.) And I call the Trinity, further, the "goal of persons and the world": the goal *of the world* because through history issuing in the Age to come, when the Spirit will complete the work of the Son on the Father's behalf, the cosmos is to receive a new form in what we call the general Resurrection; and the goal *of persons*, with their more than cosmic or physical powers of understanding and love, because for them, uniquely, this goal has an enhanced meaning: it is the Beatific Vision when we shall, we hope, see all things in the triune God and in no other way.

That cosmic yet personal end is summed up in the concluding icon, of the kind called "The Mother of God in whom all creation rejoices."

It shows the ingathering, the homecoming of creatures in God, with the Bearer of the incarnate Word holding out her Child, the Mediator between God and man, Mediator between God and the world, as the center of the praise of the saints and of all creation.

So that's my message to the Church, and I hope it may do something to enliven the Christian minds of others, and also to encourage other people to "have a go" at formulating insights of their own—tutored of course by the constants of sound reason; Scripture, read in Tradition; Christian experience; and the magisterium of the Church. This we can do best if we position ourselves, as a medieval writer put it, as dwarves sitting on the shoulders of giants—like the quartet of Thomas, Newman, Athanasius, Augustine, that I mentioned. This is how we make sure that, like theirs, our theology will not damage the communion of the Church but be at its service: at the service of understanding her faith a little better, loving it a little more. **N-V**