

Theological Indebtedness to Jacques and Raïssa Maritain: A Testimony to Their Contribution to My Theological Vocation

†MATTHEW L. LAMB

Ave Maria University

Ave Maria, FL

ROBERT CARDINAL SARAH'S IMPORTANT *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* shows the fundamental significance of monastic contemplation and silence for a God-centered renewal of society and culture. Before I would teach at Catholic theological faculties, I realized that I should draw upon an intellectual and contemplative formation I had received previous to any teaching.¹

Just before my fifteenth birthday, in May of 1952, I was graced with a vocation to enter the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia. This gave me the advantage of being in a contemplative monastery where an intellectual asceticism was linked with quests for wisdom and worship. Steeped in the Biblical Word of God and the Divine Office, the intellectual, moral, and religious formation invited the monk to an in depth study of the philosophical and theological writings of the Greek and Latin Fathers, as well as the Medieval monastic and scholastic saints and scholars.

I drew upon those fifteen years of study because they were foundational for a much needed renewal of Catholic theology in our times. A serious shortcoming in Catholic circles after Vatican II was a severing of a genuine *ressourcement* from *aggiornamento*. This rupture relegated the great intellectual achievements of the biblical, conciliar, patristic, medieval, and

¹ The occasion of this essay was the Lifetime Achievement Award Fr. Lamb received in 2016 from the American Maritain Association.

Renaissance periods to historical museums. They were fine for visits, but had little or no relevance to modern issues and questions. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI warned, a hermeneutics of rupture made a hermeneutics of reform and renewal dead, leaving Catholics with nothing more than the swirling, ever-changing cultural fashions of the day.

The writings of Jacques Maritain were studied and read in the Trappist monastery I had entered. The essay he wrote with Raïssa on “Liturgy and Contemplation” was published in the Carmelite journal *Spiritual Life* and was important in its relation of the Divine Office to the contemplative life. A most important aspect of Maritain’s many writings is how, during the 1920s through the 1960s, he forged in philosophy the importance of recovering the great intellectual achievements of the past in order to provide adequate answers to contemporary questions. He saw clearly that major problems in modernity are due to the failure to keep alive the intellectual, moral, and religious traditions of Catholic Europe. He saw clearly the universal validity of the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas as inviting the reader to discover the natural reason of humanity.²

It was common in the monastery to read Maritain’s writings on an array of issues: natural law, the state and democracy, Christian existentialism, art and scholasticism, and the art of Rouault, as well as his contributions to the United Nations charter. His wonderful *Reflections on America* were read aloud during meals in the monastic refectory. Indeed, it was Jacques Maritain who illustrated in his philosophy how only by recovering human reason (*ressourcement*) through a thorough study of the ancients could one bring renewal and reform to modern times (*aggiornamento*). Thus the philosophical recovery of Aquinas by Maritain prepared the intellectual groundwork for a proper understanding of the biblical and patristic renewals, even though this had been unfortunately overlooked by some proponents of *la nouvelle théologie*.³

Decades before the 1960s, Maritain was recovering important theoretical writings of the Fathers, especially St. Augustine, and the works of St. Thomas Aquinas and his commentators, especially John of St. Thomas.

² See Maritain’s *Antimoderne* (Paris: Desclée et Cie., 1922), 15, 71–192.

³ See the corrections of the oversights in the following excellent essays: Aidan Nichols, “Thomism and the Nouvelle Théologie,” *The Thomist* Vol. 64, no. 1 (2000): 1–19; René Mougel, “The Position of Jacques Maritain Regarding *Surnaturel*: The Sin of the Angel, or ‘Spirit and Liberty,’” in *Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth Century Thomistic Thought*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia, 2009), 59–83; Jörgen Vijgen’s critical review of J. Mettepenningen’s *Nouvelle Théologie—New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* in *The Thomist* 76, no. 1 (2012): 125–29.

Maritain realized the importance of this recovery not only to counteract the baneful consequences of nominalism and voluntarism on modern thought and life, but also to provide more adequate perspectives on major issues facing modernity. His philosophical *ressourcement* was decisive for his philosophical *aggiornamento*. When he saw the failures of many Catholic intellectuals after Vatican II to live up to the demands of the theoretical recoveries of the Fathers and Aquinas, he wrote the blunt positive and negative assessments of post-conciliar life and thought in *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*.

Nevertheless, when I entered the monastic contemplative life in the 1950s and 1960s, Maritain's writings provided a guide to appreciate the biblical and patristic depth of Aquinas's *Catena Aurea* and his commentaries on the Old and New Testaments. These suffused his theoretical writings on philosophy and theology. What was fascinating was the ways in which Maritain could approach contemporary problems and issues and enlighten them by references to Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas.

The distinguished Ralph McInerny wrote: "*The Degrees of Knowledge*, better than any other single work of Maritain, displays the comprehensiveness and range of his interests. Its author takes his inspiration from Thomas Aquinas, reargues his basic positions in the light of the problems posed for them in the twentieth century, and ends by writing a profoundly original work."⁴ It was to this work that I turned for guidance as I began studying the philosophy of Aquinas.

From the opening chapter on the majesty and poverty of metaphysics I saw the incisive appropriation by Maritain of how the acquisition of metaphysical wisdom heuristically integrated in an open and ongoing fashion mankind's quest for knowledge. He saw how the ancient emphasis upon the mind's quest from physics through metaphysics could be capable of integrating the very different modern emphasis upon empirically verifiable sciences. The three degrees of abstraction moving from physical through mathematical to metaphysical knowing did not impoverish knowing, but enriched it. The intelligible causes the sensible. Maritain transposed Aquinas's reflections on sensible experience giving rise to the first act of the mind, raising the *quid sit* questions, seeking the form or quiddity in the material object that moved human senses. This then evoked the *an sit* questions of the second act of the mind in judging. The chapter on philosophy and experimental science concludes by affirming that Thomism can provide the sciences "with metaphysical frameworks" that "guarantee the

⁴ Ralph McInerny, introduction to Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), xx.

autonomy and specific character of each of the sciences” because of ontological realism.⁵

The chapter on critical realism turns the tables on the subjectivism of both empiricism and idealism. Descartes, Kant, and Husserl were all caught in the nets of nominalism that failed to grasp, as Aquinas had, that knowing is within being. Humans know being, and only within the ontological realism of that knowing do we distinguish subjects and objects. Real objects move the mind so that verified intellectual knowledge is knowledge of the objects as they really exist. Maritain understood how for Aquinas real objects and real acts of knowing occur within human conscious experience.⁶ Later both Bernard Lonergan and Karol Wojtyła affirmed this ontological realism of Aquinas as indeed capable of criticizing the subjectivism of modernity.

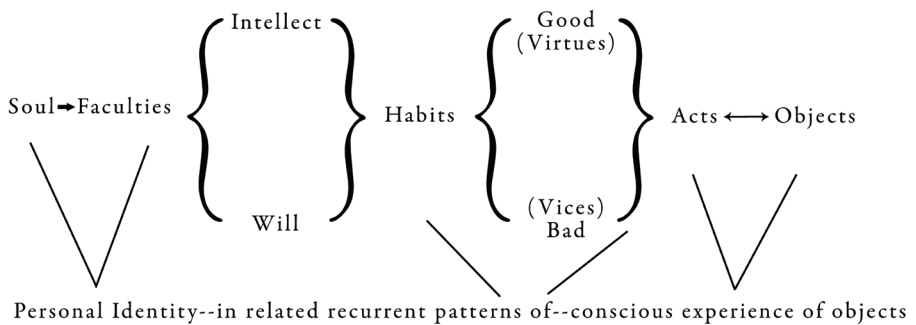
Similar to Maritain, Lonergan and Wojtyła saw in Aquinas how all human beings experience acts of sensing, of perceiving, and of imagining, as well as acts of inquiring, understanding, conceiving, weighing the evidence, and judging the truth of something understood, along with acts of deliberating what is good, of deciding, of acting, loving, and so on. The acts are moved by all the sensible objects in the world around us, as well as by persons and realities that go beyond our senses. The universality of reason is oriented into the universality of being. Thus there is an implicit metaphysics in all human acting.

Rendering metaphysics explicit requires a collaborative attuning of mind and heart to the whole of being and its causes down the ages. Lonergan termed his position, as Maritain had, “critical realism,” since he saw clearly, as Maritain had, that Aquinas articulated the related and recurrent operations of human reason common to all men. Wojtyła’s use of Aquinas was an effort to relate the rational soul and faculties to personal identity, and the habits to the related and recurrent patterns of acts and objects consciously experienced by the person.⁷

⁵ Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 23–72, 42, 58–60.

⁶ *Ibid.*, esp. 124–36.

⁷ See Matthew Lamb’s “Lonergan’s Transpositions of Augustine and Aquinas,” in *The Importance of Insight*, ed. John Liptay and David Liptay (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 3–21; “Fr. Bernard Lonergan, S.J.: The Gregorian Years” in *Lonergan’s Anthropology Revisited*, ed. Gerald Whelan, S.J. (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2015), 57–80; and “St. John Paul II’s Thomism,” in *Thomas Aquinas: Teacher of Humanity*, ed. John Hittinger and D. Wagner (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015), 17–40.



I found that Maritain's efforts to transpose Aquinas's philosophy of nature in his analysis of common-sense description and the various levels of mathematical, mechanical, biologic and ontological explanation—as he dealt with the new Physics and Biology—were more differentiated and expanded in Lonergan's analysis of common sense, along with classical, statistical, and genetic methods.⁸ This in turn enabled Lonergan to transpose Aristotle's and Aquinas's four causes in metaphysics more thoroughly in terms of emergent probability, metaphysics as science and as dialectics. This enabled me to do justice to Maritain's reflections on perinoetic, dianoetic, and ananoetic intellections in ways that furthered Maritain's concern to integrate the sciences by means of the open and ongoing heuristic patterns of ontology.⁹

Maritain's insightful relation of dianoetic knowing to ananoetic knowing enabled him to spell out the three wisdoms. There is metaphysical wisdom that is acquired by careful and long study culminating in an analogical natural theology of the uncaused cause of all that is. Then there is properly theological wisdom whereby a theologian, graced with faith in God's revelation in the Old and New Testaments, through long study and prayer acquires the theological habit of supernatural wisdom. Maritain explores this in his chapter on Augustinian wisdom in which he articulates, despite some differences, profound complementarities between Augustine's and Aquinas's theologies. This is especially the case in their

⁸ Compare Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 145–214, with Lonergan's *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 57–269, 456–510.

⁹ Compare Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 215–59, with the references to Lonergan's work in Matthew Lamb's "Towards a Synthetization of the Sciences," *Philosophy of Science* 22, no. 2 (April 1965): 182–91.

analogical Trinitarian theologies.¹⁰

The concluding chapters of *The Degrees of Knowledge* reflect on infused mystical wisdom, exploring this in the works of St. John of the Cross. Among the many insights in these pages, there stands out how, in the final chapter on “Todo y Nada” Maritain sees how, similar to Augustine and Aquinas, John of the Cross articulates the immediacy of the Triune God in the divine indwelling of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the graced minds and hearts of those caught up in a most wise and holy spiritual marriage with the Triune God:

Thus, the espoused soul loves and gives by infinite love itself; it is by infinite love that the soul operates according to the intentional being of love, the while it operates according to the entitative being by its own finite acts. . . . It is remarkable and of the greatest consequence that, at this summit of the spiritual life and of mystical experience the soul emerges expressly into the depths of the holiest mystery of Christian revelation, “transformed in the flame of love, wherein the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit commune with it.” . . . “The knowledge of the Trinity in unity,” says St. Thomas Aquinas, “is the fruit and end of our whole life.” And St. Augustine: “The realities we will one day enjoy are the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

This profound and prayerful Trinitarian spirituality can also be found in Bernard Lonergan’s long ascent up to the mind and heart of Aquinas. It may be a fitting conclusion to our theological indebtedness to Jacques Maritain to conclude with a passage on the Trinitarian indwelling from Lonergan that resonates profoundly with the spiritual life of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain:

¹⁰ See: Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 263–82, 310–28. D. Juvenal Merriell, *To The Image of the Trinity: A Study in the Development of Aquinas’ Teaching* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), shows how Aquinas’s Trinitarian theology in the *Summa theologiae* I, qq. 27–43, differs from his earlier writings. Merriell puts forth the hypothesis, still not refuted, that Albert the Great and the early Aquinas did not carefully study Augustine’s *De Trinitate*. All their quotes can be found in Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*. Then, in the later *De veritate* and the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas quotes texts of Augustine not found in Lombard. Foundational to Aquinas’s later theology, as Lonergan indicates, is that Aquinas drew from Augustine that in the divine processions *actus perfecti*, i.e., act generates and spirates act. It is wrong to think of them as *actus imperfecti* moving from potency to act. See Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 110–16.

¹¹ Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 398 and 403.

Once this is grasped, it follows that the divine persons, the blessed in heaven, and the justified here on earth are mutually present in each other as the known is present in the knower and as the beloved in present in the lover. Attention is to be given to this knowing and loving both with respect to its ultimate goal which is that good that is the good through its essence and with respect to its proximate goal which is a common good of order, the kingdom of God, the Body of Christ, the Church. Moreover, the consequent mutual indwelling differs in accord with the nature and state of each individual: for the divine persons are mutually present in each other on the basis of consubstantiality; the justified are present in God and in each other on the basis of intentional act of existence and on the basis of the kind of identification proper to love; we are in the Word as known to him and beloved by him both on the basis of his divine nature and on the basis of his human nature; the Word is in us in our knowledge and love for him as a sensible man as we are reaching toward a knowledge and love of God who dwells in inaccessible light (1 Tim 6:16).

And because the prior knowledge and love is easier for us in that it includes our sensitive memory of the past and our imagination of the future, we are led by it to that higher knowledge and love in which we now no longer know Christ in the flesh but our own inner word proper to the divine Word is spoken intelligibly in us on the basis of an emanation of truth and our own love proper to the divine Love is spirated on the basis of an emanation of sanctity. For the divine persons are sent on the basis of their eternal processions so that they may meet us and dwell in us on the basis of similar processions that are produced in us through grace. But those who proceed from and are sent by the Father do not come without the Father to whom all glory belongs through the Son and the Spirit.¹²

N.V.

¹² *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, trans. M. Shields, vol. 12, *The Triune God: Systematics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 511–13 [originally *De Deo Trino*, vol. 2 (Rome: Gregorian University, 1964), 255–56].