

Only the Truth Has Grace: A Tribute to Father Romanus Cessario, O.P.

RYAN CONNORS

*Our Lady of Providence Seminary
Providence, RI*

God's providence arranged that I was first to meet Father Romanus Cessario, O.P., during my studies as an undergraduate at Boston College. One of the first occasions in which I was privileged to learn from him transpired at the 2005 priestly ordination of my friend and his student, Father Kevin Bordelon of the Diocese of Lafayette in Louisiana. After I had driven to the ordination Mass and then to the lunch reception with the newly minted priest, I encountered Father Cessario who noticed my apparently stunned demeanor. In response to his inquiry about my well-being, I explained only that I was struck by the morning's events: "On the ride to the Cathedral Kevin was not a priest. But on the ride to the reception, he was." In his eminently imitable way, Father Romanus instructed: "Ryan, that is called a sacrament in which something really happens."

Romanus Cessario is a realist. Indeed, what his *Introduction to Moral Theology* calls "moral realism" captures the decades of teaching and scholarship of our honored theologian.¹ Various forms of idealism, illusions all, render Catholics unable to pass on the faith effectively and unprepared to confront the challenges that invariably arise. In point of fact, moral, sacramental, and ecclesial realism are the only expressions of Catholic theology that serve the Church's mission and do not cause harm to her members.² In

¹ Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Introduction to Moral Theology*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 1.

² For the term "sacramental realism," see Colman E. O'Neill, O.P., *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments* (Strongsville, OH: Scepter, 1998). For an account

what follows, I offer five areas of Catholic theology necessary for flourishing ecclesial life today. A fulsome understanding of each of these aspects of Catholic faith presupposes the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas and benefits from the teaching of his noted—and much beloved—contemporary interpreter.

Satisfaction

At the age of thirty-three, six years after solemn profession as a Dominican friar of the Province of St. Joseph, Father Romanus Cessario set out for the University of Fribourg to complete a doctoral dissertation under the direction of the Irish Dominican Colman O'Neill.³ The subject of this work, satisfaction in Aquinas, has remained a frequent theme of Father's writing in the ensuing decades. Put simply, sin requires a divine solution. People need redemption. Confessors do not stand as attorneys seeking the minimal punishment for their penitent defendants. There is no guiltless sin. Rather, the sacramental realist recognizes that sin carries its own consequence. The unfortunate state of original sin means fallen man stands in need of satisfaction. Christ's sacrificial love through his Passion and death enables the restoration and perfection of the *imago Dei*.

The theme of Christian satisfaction relies upon the realism that grace does not merely cover over sin, but instead really heals and elevates the human person. Man requires—and in Christ can receive through the sacraments of the Church—divinely accomplished restoration.⁴ Pope Leo XIII, initiator of the Thomist revival of the late nineteenth century, observed: "Nothing is

of "ecclesial realism," see the 2000 *Dominus Iesus*, Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), as well as their 2007 *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church*.

³ For a description of the theological milieu that he encountered at the Swiss university, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., "Theology at Fribourg," *Thomist* 51 (1987): 325–66.

⁴ In various forms, this dissertation has been published three times. See Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Christian Satisfaction in Aquinas: Towards a Personalist Understanding* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982); Cessario, *The Godly Image: Christ and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas*, Studies in Historical Theology 6 (Petersham, MA: St Bede's, 1990); and, most recently, Cessario, *The Godly Image: Christian Satisfaction in Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020). On the same topic of satisfaction and its important connection to the practice of the granting of indulgences, see his "St. Thomas Aquinas on Satisfaction, Indulgences, and Crusades," *Medieval Philosophy & Theology* 2 (1992): 74–96.

more useful than to look upon the world as it really is.”⁵ In the words of Pope Paul VI: “Only the truth has grace.” The ultimate error of casuistry lies in its inability to recognize the consequences of defective action.⁶ Pastoral practice today benefits from the knowledge that a parishioner’s ignorance of moral truth does not provide consolation. The ignorance of many young persons, for example, about the defective nature of unchaste activity of whatever kind does not mean they are not harmed by such actions. Rather, the moral realist who observes St. Thomas’s teaching, especially with the help of his authentic interpreters, comes to see that bad acts never perfect persons. Sinners stand in need of satisfying assistance. Only Christ provides such a divine remedy.⁷

Virtue

The return to virtue-based moral reasoning in Catholic theology stands as a happy fruit of the post-conciliar period. In particular, Pope John Paul II’s 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* remains among the most lasting intellectual contributions of his long pontificate. This much-maligned and misunderstood document has required explanation, especially to the English-speaking world. The United States, in particular, bears a long legacy of the misunderstanding of human freedom. Recall Pope Leo XIII’s 1899 encyclical *Testem Benevolentiae*. The circumstances of the day required this Thomist Pope to remind American Catholics not to fall into the error of “the confounding of license with liberty.”⁸ Historians note that Leo

⁵ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, Encyclical Letter on Capital and Labor (1891), §18. For reflection on this matter, see also Russell Hittinger, “The Three Necessary Societies,” *First Things*, June 2017, firstthings.com/article/2017/06/the-three-necessary-societies.

⁶ See Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, Encyclical Letter regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church’s Moral Teaching (1993), no. §63. On the defects of the reduction of moral theology to mere casuistry, see Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology*, 219–32.

⁷ See Romanus Cessario, O.P., “On Bad Actions, Good Intentions, and Loving God,” in *Theology and Sanctity*, ed. Cajetan Cuddy, O.P. (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2014), 172–95. See also the CDF’s *Dominus Iesus*. For a reflection on the place of Christ in the moral life, see my “The Incarnate Word in Catholic Moral Theology: The Christocentric Visions of Pope John Paul II and Robert Imbelli,” in *The Center is Jesus Christ Himself: Essays on Revelation, Salvation, & Evangelization in Honor of Robert P. Imbelli*, ed. Andrew Meszaros (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 189–204.

⁸ Pope Leo XIII, *Testem Benevolentiae*, Encyclical Letter concerning New Opinions, Virtue, Nature, and Grace, with Regard to Americanism (1899), §8. For a sustained reflection on the nature of liberty, see Pope Leo XIII, *Libertas*, Encyclical Letter on the Nature of Human Liberty (1888).

promulgated *Testem* on January 22, 1899, seventy-four years to the day—22 January 1973—from when the United States Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* confirmed Leo's pronouncement. Put simply, Americans have struggled to define liberty properly. According to the 2022 Supreme Court majority in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health*, the *Roe* decision was indeed an "egregious" error. Liberty is not easy to get right.

In any event, the Church today stands in need of the truth about liberty. The necessary task of explaining the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* has fallen to theologians steeped in the Thomist tradition. Father Cessario's instruction on freedom in the moral life takes its foundational place in this revival of virtue-based moral reasoning.⁹ Theologians committed to moral instruction centered on the virtues avoid both the self-defeating laxism prevalent in our culture and the voluntarist error which leads inevitably to frustration. Habitual sinners benefit from the knowledge of the power of infused virtue to supply the resources necessary to live in a rectified manner. Those in the Thomist tradition commit themselves to recognizing and cultivating the virtues necessary to pursue the good promptly, easily, and joyfully. Grit-your-teeth Christianity may work for a time, but long-lasting holiness requires inner transformation at the appetitive level, not mere behavioral modification.

Through his essays and book-length treatments of the history of Thomism, Father Cessario has demonstrated that attention to history need not relativize dogmatic or moral truth.¹⁰ Indeed, explaining moral truth in reference to historical narrative highlights the intricacies relevant to prudential judgments—as well as the complexity of many ethical questions. Moral instruction in Catholic seminaries has undergone considerable

⁹ See Father Cessario's many publications on the moral life: *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001); *The Virtues, or the Examined Life* (New York: Continuum, 2002); *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); *Christian Faith and the Theological Life* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

¹⁰ See Romanus Cessario, O.P., and Cajetan Cuddy, O.P., *Thomas and the Thomists: The Achievement of Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017); as well as Romanus Cessario, O.P., *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005). For a recent account of the need for attention to history without relativization of eternal truth, see Thomas Joseph White, O.P., "The Precarity of Wisdom: Modern Dominican Theology, Perspectivalism, and the Task of Reconstruction," in *Ressourcement Thomism: Sacred Doctrine, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life*, ed. Matthew Levering and Reinhard Hüter (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 92–122.

development in the last century. One reasonably opines that the contemporary challenges the Church in the United States faces result in part from the inadequate instruction of future priests. Happily, the promulgation of *Veritatis Splendor* has borne fruit in sound moral instruction in priestly formation.¹¹ Seminarians across the United States and other countries find in Father Cessario's publications a helpful guide for understanding *Veritatis* and, more basically, for comprehending—and preaching—the truths contained in the *secunda pars* of St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*. Along with his Dominican confreres Fathers Servais Pinckaers and Benedict Ashley, Father Cessario's contribution to this renewal of moral thinking in the English-speaking world—and for that matter in French, Spanish, and Italian circles (in fact, even in Mandarin)—means that believers today may be spared the eclipse of the full truth of the moral life offered in either casuistry or revisionism.

Sacraments

In gatherings of New England diocesan priests ordained in the last thirty years, it is customary to hear the Reverend Fathers trade impressions of their St. John's Seminary (Brighton, MA) professors.¹² By an enormous margin, the most imitated instructor taught, among other things, sacramental theology for two generations. How many priests came to learn the important truth that has shaped the exercise of their priesthood: "In a word, the sacraments really do something."¹³ Indeed, as Pope Francis has reminded us, "a baptized child and an unbaptized child are not the same."¹⁴ The Church

¹¹ The most recent edition of the *Program of Priestly Formation* issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations) and having received the *recognitio* of the Holy See requires that seminarians in the United States study the moral life in light of *Veritatis Splendor*. The sixth edition of the program reads: "Moral theology should be taught in a way that draws deeply from Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium, in particular *Veritatis Splendor*" (§331).

¹² For the history of St. John's Seminary, see John E. Sexton and Arthur J. Riley, *History of St. John's Seminary, Brighton* (Boston, MA: Archdiocese of Boston, 1945).

¹³ For his treatment of the sacraments of the Church, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).

¹⁴ Pope Francis, General Audience of January 8, 2014. On the need for careful attention to the valid administration of the sacraments, see the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Gestis Verbisque*, Note on the Validity of the Sacraments (February 2, 2024). From the same dicastery, see also "Responses to Questions Proposed on the Validity of Baptism Conferred with the Formula 'We baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'" (2020).

knows of no other way than the sacrament of Confirmation to equip a baptized person to witness to Catholic faith in the world. By the divine constitution of the Church, grave post-baptismal sins are remitted through the sacrament of Penance. No substitute exists for the grace conferred in holy anointing. Priestless parishes stand in need of men to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders to draw people together in charity. And as married couples can testify, unions benefit from the grace that the sacrament of Matrimony alone bestows. Most of all, only in the Eucharist validly confected does one meet the God of the universe this side of Heaven. All in all, the sacramental economy stipulates the rhythms of Catholic life.¹⁵

The Church suffered a great deal in the middle part of the last century from inadequate explanations of what transpires in the administration of the sacraments. The substitution of liturgical, ecumenical, or sociological reflection for a sustained theological explanation of what happens in the sacraments has left many persons unable to appreciate and to express their need for the reception of the sacraments of the Church.¹⁶ The Church herself turns to St. Thomas Aquinas to explain what the sacraments accomplish. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches:

This is the meaning of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: "by the very fact of the action's being performed"), i.e., by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that "the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God."¹⁷

Alternative theories abound about how best to express the grace the sacraments confer. Sadly, contemporary discussion remains far from the erudite

¹⁵ Here one recalls the teaching of the CDF in *Dominus Iesus*: "If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation" (§22).

¹⁶ On this matter, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., "The Sacraments of the Church," in *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 129–46. In addition, interested believers have welcomed recent publications in sacramental theology, especially Lawrence Feingold, *Touched by Christ: The Sacramental Economy* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021), and Roger W. Nutt, *General Principles of Sacramental Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017).

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1128, citing St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 68, a. 8.

debates of another age when proponents of moral, physical, and dispositive causality debated the relative merits of their respective accounts.¹⁸ Today, the Church needs theologians able to express with clarity the unique graces the sacraments afford believers who avail themselves of their reception.

For many decades, students and scholars have benefited from Father Cessario's instruction on sacramental efficacy. Even if at times contemporary sensibilities find themselves at odds with sacramental realism, sound Catholic theologians continue to fulfill their duty when they teach clearly the indispensability of the administration of the sacraments. As the decrees of the Council of Trent make plain, the Church invokes the wisdom of the Common Doctor when she seeks to explain the unique graces the sacraments bestow.

Priesthood

For some four decades, Father Cessario taught aspiring priests as his principal educational apostolate. Both at the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC, and at St. John's Seminary in Boston, seminarians benefited from his clear instruction about the irreplaceable and indispensable place of priests in God's plan of salvation.¹⁹ In some ecclesial circles, an egalitarian approach to vocation holds sway. Fair enough, the Second Vatican Council rightly spoke of a universal call to holiness.²⁰ For his part, the great Dominican commentator of the last century, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., taught insistently that the life of the virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit is not reserved for a privileged few, but supplies the resources necessary for the ordinary life of every Christian.²¹ However, the truth that every Christian is called to the full flowering of the theological life does not mean that priestly—and, for that

¹⁸ See, for example, the treatments of this matter in Bernard Leeming, S.J., *Principles of Sacramental Theology* (New York: Longmans, 1957), 283–381, and Nutt, *General Principles*, 99–137.

¹⁹ On this matter, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Grace to Be a Priest* (Providence, RI: Cluny, 2018).

²⁰ See chapter 5 of the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964).

²¹ See, for example, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Christian Perfection and Contemplation: According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, trans. Sister M. Timothea Doyle, O.P. (Rockford, IL: Tan, 2003), and Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, trans. Sister M. Timothea Doyle, O.P. (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1989).

matter, religious—vocations do not hold a particular place in the economy of salvation.²²

Priests teach authentically. Priests consecrate validly. Priests, and only priests, absolve effectively. Priests, and no one else, anoint sacramentally the gravely ill and dying. The scandal of this particularity does not lie in a miserly will for salvation. On the contrary, because God's love is real and effective, it is also specific and concrete. He saves us in the loving and personal encounter of a sacrament, by and large, administered by priests. The decades of teaching and scholarship of the Adam Cardinal Maida Chair of Theology at Ave Maria University demonstrate that he stands as the best contemporary exponent of this aspect of Catholic faith. The list of homilies delivered at First Masses of Thanksgiving or collection of persons whom he has vested as a priest or transitional deacon witnesses to the spiritual paternity of this priest of Jesus Christ.²³

The Church in the United States faces the enormous challenge of ensuring that dioceses and religious communities ordain—and retain—a sufficient number of priests to tend to the pastoral needs of the Catholics of this country. Bishops and vocation directors do well to heed the wisdom of the Church about what constitutes the unique dignity of the priestly office. Men will respond generously when the grace of the priestly office is made clear to them. The possibility that one may be called to the priesthood is not in the first place an invitation to discern. A young man who thinks he may be called to the priesthood should first off say thank you. Gratitude for the call of God should mark every priest, young and old. John Paul II's first word about the priesthood, after all, was "gift," as in *Gift and Mystery*, the title of his reflections on the fiftieth anniversary of his priestly ordination.²⁴

Here again the Church invokes the teaching of St. Thomas to explain the identity of the Catholic priest.²⁵ The *Catechism* affirms: "Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the old law was a figure of Christ, and

²² On the objective superiority of the consecrated life, see Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World (1996), §18.

²³ For a partial list of those for whom he has preached First Masses of Thanksgiving, see the dedication in Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Seven Sorrows of Mary* (New York: Magnificat, 2014).

²⁴ See Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

²⁵ For essays on the salutary place of St. Thomas Aquinas in the various dimensions of priestly formation, see the recent volume of *The Thomist* (88, no. 2 [2024]) dedicated to priestly formation.

the priest of the new law acts in the person of Christ.”²⁶ Catholics do well to heed this Thomistic maxim recalled frequently in our day by his authentic interpreters.

Consecration

The year 2024 marks the seventieth anniversary of the first Marian Year. Pope Pius XII wished to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by his predecessor *Pio Nono*.²⁷ The reigning Pius XII declared 1954 a year for Mary, the Mother of God. The 1950s, you may recall, witnessed a religious revival in the United States. Akin to the Great Awakening or the Catholic Reform of the Counter-Reformation, this period saw monasteries and convents flooded with applicants in the post-war period. Consecration takes its place as the fifth theme of Father Cessario’s corpus worthy of our reflection.

Many persons today labor under the illusion that they stand independent of God and his providence. They don’t. As Father Cessario never tires of repeating: there are no self-starters in Christianity. God is not man’s rival. God’s law does not impinge on man’s freedom. This truth of physical pre-motion consoles.²⁸ This essential element of Catholic faith comes to fruition, as it were, in the various permanent consecrations the Church celebrates. Consecrations manifest the reality of God’s grace at work in the human community.²⁹ For example, what God accomplishes in the dedication of a church can never be undone. Recall the specification of the Code of Canon Law that, once consecrated no place can ever revert to sordid use.³⁰ Along

²⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1548, citing St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 22, a. 4.

²⁷ See Pope Pius XII, *Fulgens Corona*, Encyclical Letter Proclaiming a Marian Year to Commemorate the Centenary of the Definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception (1953). For the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception, see Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, Encyclical Letter, on the Dogmatic Definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1854).

²⁸ For an excellent treatment of divine grace and human freedom, see Steven A. Long, “Providence, Freedom, and Natural Law,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 4, no. 3 (2006): 557–606. See also the edited volume, *Thomism and Predestination: Principles and Disputations*, ed. Steven A. Long, Roger W. Nutt, and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017).

²⁹ For his reflections on contemplative life, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Dominican Contemplative Life: Inside the Cloister* (New Hope, KY: New Hope Publications, 2024).

³⁰ See the 1983 *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 1222, §1: “If a church cannot be used in any way for divine worship and there is no possibility of repairing it, the diocesan bishop can relegate it to profane but not sordid use.”

similar lines, once validly ratified and consummated, no power on earth can declare null a sacramental marriage. In regard to the sacrament of Holy Orders, the *Catechism* offers stark wisdom for any priest wavering in his ordination promises:

It is true that someone validly ordained can, for a just reason, be discharged from the obligations and functions linked to ordination, or can be forbidden to exercise them; but he cannot become a layman again in the strict sense, because the character imprinted by ordination is forever. The vocation and mission received on the day of his ordination mark him permanently.³¹

As each of these examples demonstrates, no sin trumps God's action. Neither religious indifference (in the case of a church seeking closure) nor marital or priestly infidelity change the fact that, once conferred, a gift of God is not revoked. Consecrations—baptismal, marital, priestly, or religious—stand as the clearest sign of the primacy of God's grace. God acts first. His grace envelopes our freedom.³² The truth of predestination rightly understood remains an essential truth of Catholic faith. Catholics rejoice in the wisdom of the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on these delicate matters, especially under the guidance of his authentic interpreters.

To the Catholic mind, the most apparent sign of predestination remains the Mother of God. What God accomplishes in and through the Blessed Virgin Mary makes evident the primacy of God's grace.³³ Catholic theologians cannot fulfill their important task without frequent recourse to Our Lady's maternal care. Indeed, a personal devotion to the Mother of God, Queen of All Saints, marks the teaching and scholarship of faithful theologians of the Church—a truth evident and deeply appreciated in our Reverend Father.³⁴

* * *

³¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1583.

³² On the relation of physical premotion to the moral life, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., "Promotion, Holiness and Pope Benedict XIII, 1724–30: Some Historical Retrospects on *Veritatis Splendor*," in Cuddy, *Theology and Sanctity*, 236–56 [originally published in *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 4 (2013): 1115–35]. On the same matter, see also his "Molina and Aquinas," in *A Companion to Luis de Molina*, ed. Matthias Kauffman and Alexander Aichele (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

³³ See Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Perpetual Angelus: As the Saints Pray the Rosary* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1995).

³⁴ For his meditations on the lives of notable Dominican saints, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Compassionate Blood: Catherine of Siena on the Passion* (San Francisco: Ignatius,

Allow me to close with a personal reflection. For the last two decades, I have learned from Father Romanus the relation—and distinction—between nature and grace, the truth about the sacraments, especially Christ’s priesthood, and the joy bestowed in a life-long consecration. It will fall to some future historian to chronicle the extent to which the teaching and scholarship of our mentor and friend is responsible for the restoration of sound Catholic theology in the United States and beyond. For my part, I can say that the pastoral challenges the Church has faced—and it appears will continue to face—are in large part the result of theological errors. The great gifts of theological clarity in the last half century have been the magisterial teachings of Pope John Paul II grounded in the perennial wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas.³⁵ That fulsome magisterium, including its Thomistic foundations, has required exposition. Father Cessario remains the justly recognized contemporary exponent of this theological renewal. Although confusion may reign in some corners of ecclesial life, the Church continues to flourish in those places where Catholics, and especially their pastors, have adopted what might be termed a “realist” conception of Christ, the sacraments, and the moral life. Few theologians have contributed more to this happy renewal than Father Romanus Cessario. On the occasion of his eightieth birthday, his friends the world over give thanks for this gift of God’s providence.³⁶ N·V

2017), and his *Sanctifying Truth: Thomas Aquinas on Christian Holiness* (New York: Magnificat, 2022).

³⁵ See what John Paul II called “the enduring originality of the thought to St. Thomas Aquinas” in *Fides et ratio*, Encyclical Letter on the Relationship between Faith and Reason (1998), §43. In the same encyclical, John Paul II declared in regard to St. Thomas: “Rightly, then, he may be called an ‘apostle of the truth.’ Looking unreservedly to truth, the realism of Thomas could recognize the objectivity of truth and produce not merely a philosophy of ‘what seems to be’ but a philosophy of ‘what is’” (§44).

³⁶ The author is grateful to Roger Nutt, Provost of Ave Maria University (Ave Maria, Florida) for his invitation to speak at the conference “Fr. Cessario at 80 & St. Thomas Aquinas at 800,” April 14, 2024, as well as to Father Cajetan Cuddy, O.P., for reviewing a draft of this text.