

Introduction

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ONE WAY OF HONORING the work and memory of John Paul II, John Paul the Great, is to call attention to his relationship to the great saints and doctors who have gone before him and with whom he is now rejoicing. Thus by way of celebrating the philosophical and theological contributions of the pope, we wish to draw special attention to his relationship to one of his teachers and friends in Christ, St. Thomas Aquinas.

The question that interests us is not whether the pope was a “Thomist,” but rather how the pope’s teachings have instructed the new movements in Thomistic theology that took shape during his papacy. In a book that has important affinities with the pope’s approach to Aquinas, Aidan Nichols has recently suggested that “a new Thomistic renaissance” may be underway.¹ Nichols states that this “new renaissance (if the phrase be not premature) proceeds most characteristically by laymen and laywomen finding out certain qualities of St. Thomas for themselves. In search of intellectual, moral, and spiritual coherence, they find that his writing has a winning power to keep together things that most people either separate or confuse.”² He names four examples of this “winning power” of integration: theology and spirituality (united in Aquinas’s *exitus-reditus* pattern), revelation and ethics (integrating the natural and the supernatural in virtue theory), the social and the individual (through the account of charity and justice), and philosophy and doctrine (metaphysical clarity). As regards the fourth, Nichols comments, “Its clarity is refreshing in a post-modern world where parodistic allusiveness, randomness and incoherence are frequently erected into pseudo-virtues that make reflective life an intellectual mess.”³

¹ Aidan Nichols, OP, *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to His Life, Work and Influence* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002): 142.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 143.

Why is a “renaissance” needed? The neo-scholastic theology that predominated before the Second Vatican Council came under criticism for deficient attention to biblical themes, lack of interest in the theology of the Fathers, lack of practical relevance because of over-sophisticated philosophical structures, failure to discern any insights in the work of modern philosophers, and the inadequate pedagogy of the theological manuals. On all counts, Nichols observes that familiarity with the actual texts and practice of Thomas manifests that Aquinas himself embodies the opposite. As regards theological integration of biblical themes “Thomas himself passes such a test with flying colours”; as regards the Fathers “[i]n large part Thomas’s output had been patristic synthesis”; and as regards inspirational relevance Aquinas’s “key notions” possess a “liberating and evangelical charge.”⁴

The new Thomistic theology thus seeks to draw out Aquinas’s biblical, patristic, and evangelical profundity, and thereby to contribute constructive and contemporary Thomistic theology. For Nichols, such theology remains indispensable because:

Thomas constitutes the classic theological moment of Latin Christendom. This is not only because he had a pre-eminent gift of synthesising the materials of Scripture and patristic Tradition, revelation’s witnesses. It is also because he honed a metaphysic that was up to the job of being that revelation’s philosophical instrument—in the traditional language, its serviceable “handmaid.” It is hardly surprising, then, that any major derogation from Thomas’s achievement (to be carefully distinguished from enrichment of it by the provision of complementary insights) will tend to create difficulties for the articulation of Catholic faith.⁵

Nichols here agrees, as we will see, with the insights of John Paul II regarding the contribution of St. Thomas Aquinas.

We might begin with John Paul’s bestselling 1994 book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Here he places Aquinas within the tradition of Christian mysticism.⁶ For the pope, Aquinas’s theology develops not only an account of intellect, but also an account of will and of the affective desire for God, that serves the pattern of mystical ascent to God inscribed in the structure of *exitus-reditus*. He explains, “I think that it is wrong to maintain that Saint Thomas’s position [on God] stands up only in the realm of the rational. One must, it is true, applaud Etienne Gilson when he agrees

⁴ Ibid., 140–42.

⁵ Ibid., ix.

⁶ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori, trans. Jenny and Martha McPhee (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 87.

with Saint Thomas that the intellect is the most marvelous of God's creations, but that does not mean that we must give in to a unilateral rationalism. Saint Thomas celebrates all the richness and complexity of each created being, and especially of the human being."⁷ The view of neo-scholasticism as a rationalism, lacking appreciation for the richness of the person, does not hold up as regards Aquinas's writings. Because of Aquinas's insight into God and into the human being, Aquinas's thought has far more than historical value. As John Paul II remarks, "It is not good that his thought has been set aside in the post-conciliar period; he continues, in fact, to be the *master of philosophical and theological universalism*."⁸ Earlier the pope regrets the fact that "today, unfortunately, the *Summa Theologica* has been somewhat neglected."⁹

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul II points especially to Aquinas's metaphysical profundity. After discussing the anthropocentric thought of Descartes, the pope writes, "How different from the approach of Saint Thomas for whom it is not *thought which determines existence, but existence, 'esse,' which determines thought!* I think the way I think because I am that which I am—a creature—and because He is He who is, *the absolute uncreated Mystery*. If He were not Mystery, there would be no need for Revelation, or, more precisely, there would be no need for *God to reveal Himself*."¹⁰ The entirety of *sacra doctrina* depends, in short, on recognizing this metaphysical point (Creator-creature) that Aquinas explicates most profoundly, just as Aquinas's account of the human being exposes the depth of "richness and complexity" that characterizes the human creature.

The pope wrote these words just as he was promulgating what is widely recognized, by admirers and detractors alike, as among the most significant of his encyclicals, *Veritatis Splendor*. That encyclical, it could be argued, marks a transition in his body of encyclicals toward a deeper appropriation and use of the theology of Aquinas. The profound engagement with Aquinas's theological perspective in *Veritatis Splendor* is incontestable.¹¹

⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰ Ibid., 38; cf. the same point on 51. See also John Paul II's *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of the Millennium* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 7–12, where the pope makes this point regarding the significance of Aquinas's metaphysics for the future of the West, and of the world, in even stronger terms. This book unfortunately appeared too late for us to include a full discussion of it here.

¹¹ See, e.g., the articles collected in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, ed. J. A. DiNoia, OP and Romanus Cessario, OP. (Chicago, IL: Midwest Theological Forum, 1999); Servais Pinckaers, OP, *Pour une lecture de Veritatis splendor* (Paris: Mame, 1995).

Of the encyclicals that followed—*Evangelium Vitae* (1995), *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), *Fides et Ratio* (1998), and *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003)—only *Ut Unum Sint* does not draw significantly from Thomas. Furthermore, *Fides et Ratio* and *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* owe a heavy debt to Aquinas's thought. The themes treated in these encyclicals have a long tradition in earlier papal and conciliar documents, which themselves bear the strong mark of Thomistic approaches (Vatican I in the background of *Fides et Ratio* and Trent in the background of *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*).¹² Thus it is not particularly surprising that John Paul II's analyses of faith, reason, and the Eucharist, like his account of the moral life in *Veritatis Splendor*, follow Thomistic argumentation at so many crucial points.

In these encyclicals the pope takes pains, as we have seen him do also in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, to reject the notion of Aquinas as a rationalist. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, for instance, concludes with Aquinas's poetry: "Let us make our own the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an eminent theologian and an impassioned poet of Christ in the Eucharist, and turn in hope to the contemplation of the goal to which our hearts aspire in their thirst for joy and peace: *Bone pastor, panis vere, / Iesu, nostri miserere. . .*"¹³ John Paul recognizes that Aquinas's writings on the Eucharist flow from a mystical desire for Truth, faith seeking understanding. Thus he writes, "*Adoro te devote, latens Deitas*, we shall continue to sing with the Angelic Doctor. Before this mystery of love, human reason fully experiences its limitations. One understands how, down the centuries, this truth has stimulated theology to strive to understand it ever more deeply."¹⁴ Similarly, John Paul's remarks in the penultimate paragraph of the encyclical take up Aquinas's panoramic view of the Eucharist, easily forgotten by those who reduce his contribution solely to the doctrine of transubstantiation: "There can be no danger of excess in our care for this mystery," the pope writes, since, as Aquinas makes clear, "in this sacrament is recapitulated the whole mystery of our salvation."¹⁵

Along with countering the notion of a rationalist Aquinas, the pope's encyclicals resist the move that some have made to contrast Aquinas the metaphysician with Aquinas the theologian, as if metaphysical analysis were in some way opposed to the evangelical expression of the gospel. Thus,

¹² On *Fides et Ratio* see, e.g., the articles collected in *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on Fides et Ratio*, ed. David Ruel Foster and Joseph W. Koterski, SJ. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

¹³ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, §15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §61. He later cites a similar text from Aquinas: "the Eucharist is 'as it were the summit of the spiritual life and the goal of all the sacraments'" (§38).

whereas some commentators have sought to draw an opposition between the more philosophical second part of *Veritatis Splendor* and its more theological first and third parts, the pope unites the three parts by appealing to the integrative (evangelical and metaphysical) wisdom of Aquinas's account of law: "Going to the heart of the moral message of Jesus and the preaching of the Apostles, and summing up in a remarkable way the great tradition of the Fathers of the East and West, and of Saint Augustine in particular, Saint Thomas was able to write that *the New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ*."¹⁶ The New Law does not displace the natural law, but rather heals and elevates our soul so that we may live out the self-giving life of love required by the ten commandments, thereby fulfilling (not negating) in Christ the gift to Moses. Similarly, *Evangelium Vitae*, with its biblically centered argumentation, draws upon Aquinas's theology of law at the very hinge of its discussion: "The doctrine on the necessary *conformity of civil law with the moral law* is in continuity with the whole tradition of the Church. . . . This is the clear teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who writes that 'human law is law inasmuch as it is in conformity with right reason and thus derives from the eternal law. But when a law is contrary to reason, it is called an unjust law; but in this case it ceases to be a law and becomes instead an act of violence.'¹⁷

The same approach characterizes *Fides et Ratio*. Arguing that both the relationship of faith and reason, and the nature of each, find superb expression in Aquinas's theology, John Paul affirms, "This is why the Church has been justified in consistently proposing St. Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology."¹⁸ But in thus presenting Aquinas as "a model of the right way to do theology," John Paul emphasizes Aquinas's stature as a mystical theologian:

Another of the great insights of St. Thomas was his perception of the role of the Holy Spirit in the process by which knowledge matures into wisdom. From the first pages of his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas was keen to show the primacy of the wisdom which is the gift of the Holy Spirit and which opens the way to a knowledge of divine realities. His theology allows us to understand what is distinctive of wisdom in its close link with faith and knowledge of the divine. This wisdom comes to know by way of connaturality; it presupposes faith and eventually formulates its right judgment on the basis of the truth of faith itself.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Veritatis Splendor*, §24.

¹⁷ *Evangelium Vitae*, §72.

¹⁸ *Fides et Ratio*, §43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, §44.

Having discarded the rationalist Aquinas, the pope in the same paragraph resists any supposed antinomy between the philosophical modes of discourse in Aquinas and Aquinas's contemplative theology: "Yet the priority accorded this wisdom [the gift of the Holy Spirit] does not lead the Angelic Doctor to overlook the presence of two other complementary forms of wisdom—philosophical wisdom, which is based upon the capacity of the intellect, for all its natural limitations, to explore reality, and theological wisdom, which is based upon revelation and which explores the contents of faith, entering the very mystery of God."²⁰

It comes as no surprise that the pope made the very same points in his personal memoir, *Gift and Mystery: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination*, published two years before *Fides et Ratio*. Discussing the importance of study for the Christian, John Paul first recalls Aquinas's theology of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As he notes, "Saint Thomas Aquinas explains how, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a person's whole spiritual being becomes responsive to God's light, not only the light of knowledge but also the inspiration of love. I have prayed for the gifts of the Holy Spirit since my youth and I continue to do so."²¹ In the very next paragraph he adds, "But of course Saint Thomas also teaches that 'infused knowledge,' which is the fruit of a special intervention by the Holy Spirit, does not free us from the duty of gaining 'acquired knowledge.'"²² Ultimately there will not only be no contradiction between the two, but indeed each will deepen the other. This integrative wisdom, that neither conflates nor opposes the gifts of nature and grace, is the path of a *sacra doctrina* adequate to the creating and the redeeming God. Summing up his perspective on Aquinas's theology, the pope writes in *Fides et Ratio*,

Profoundly convinced that "whatever its source, truth is of the Holy Spirit". . . St. Thomas was impartial in his love of truth. He sought truth wherever it might be found and gave consummate demonstration of its universality. In him, the Church's Magisterium has seen and recognized the passion for truth; and precisely because it stays consistently within the horizon of universal, objective and transcendent truth, his thought scales "heights unthinkable to human intelligence." 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

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 92–93.

²² Ibid., 93.

produce not merely a philosophy of “what seems to be” but a philosophy of “what is.”²³

The descriptions of Aquinas as scaling unthinkable heights and as an “apostle of truth” come from Popes Leo XIII and Paul VI, respectively, but John Paul II gives them his own stamp by means of his call for the renewal of theology that employs a metaphysical philosophy.

In sum, with a particular emphasis beginning in the early 1990s, but reaching back into his doctoral work on Aquinas and St. John of the Cross, the pope’s depictions of Thomas’s theology consistently return to three points: (1) Aquinas is not a rationalist, but rather a contemplative spiritual theologian whose work is profoundly evangelical; (2) Aquinas’s theology has particular value especially because of his metaphysical profundity in apprehending the Creator-creature relationship; and (3) Aquinas provides an integrative wisdom that avoids the false antinomies, reductions, and conflations that lesser theologians fall into and that fail to do justice to the triune God as both Creator and Redeemer. It will be noticed at once that these are essentially the same points made by Nichols in his account of the demise of neo-scholastic theology and of the ongoing “new renaissance” of Thomistic theology.

John Paul’s three programmatic points may provide significant inspiration to theologians who discern in Aquinas’s thought crucial resources for the work of contemporary constructive theology. The question that arises today, after a generation in which the study of Aquinas’s thought has largely (outside moral theology) been relegated to the provinces of historical theology, is how to develop anew Thomistic modes of theologizing about the central mysteries of faith. Various recommendations are emerging as regards this project, ranging from J. A. DiNoia, OP’s account of the dialectical and metaphysical strength of Aquinas’s approach to *sacra doctrina*, to Fergus Kerr, OP’s emphasis on how the tensions and ambiguities present in competing readings of Aquinas may both validate and serve the outlook and goals of postmodern theological ventures, to Thomas O’Meara, OP’s presentation of Aquinas’s theology as a set of medieval thought-forms now transposed by Karl Rahner into anthropocentric forms suited to the “modern mind.”²⁴

²³ *Fides et Ratio*, §44.

²⁴ See J. A. DiNoia, OP, “Thomism after Thomism: Aquinas and the Future of Theology,” in *The Future of Thomism*, ed. Deal W. Hudson and Dennis W. Moran (Mishawaka, IN: American Maritain Association, 1992), 231–45; Fergus Kerr, OP, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Fergus Kerr, OP, ed., *Contemplating Aquinas: On the Varieties of Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 2003); idem, “Ambiguity in Thomas Aquinas: Reflections after Aquinas,” *Providence* 8:

In light of such alternatives, the present collection of essays—originally written in honor of the pope’s Silver Jubilee and now published in the midst of our grieving for the pope’s death and our praising God for his wonderful life (so well expressed by Father Anthony Akinwale in his homily that opens the collection)—asks whether the extensive theological contribution of John Paul II might serve as a model and an impetus for contemporary systematic reflection on the realities of faith. The essays model the three points that, according to John Paul, characterize the keystones of Thomistic thought: Aquinas as a contemplative theologian whose work has its roots in the Gospels; Aquinas’s metaphysical profundity in apprehending the creature–Creator relationship; and Aquinas as providing an integrative wisdom that avoids false antinomies, reductions, and conflations. Inspired and renewed by the thought of John Paul II, perhaps indeed the future holds in store a “new renaissance” of Thomistic theology, in service of the new evangelization to which John Paul the Great has called believers. 

(2003): 1–19; Thomas F. O’Meara, OP, *Thomas Aquinas Theologian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997). See also Serge-Thomas Bonino, OP, ed., *Thomistes, ou de l’actualité de saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2003).