

How to Bring Theology Back to Its Unity

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IN HIS UNFINISHED BOOK *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) pointed to fragmentation as one of the symptoms of the crisis experienced by European sciences in the early twentieth century. Fragmentation is manifest in the innumerable fields of specialization into which most disciplines have been divided in the modern era, something that prevents them from being brought back into a unitary vision. When this happens, one consequence is the accumulation of an incredible amount of data that can be managed only in very restricted areas of speculation and by a few specialized scholars or scientists for each area. Sciences thus become a matter of working on small segments of knowledge while losing sight of the shape of reality as a whole. Husserl adds that such an accumulation of parceled information, since it cannot be governed effectively, also becomes prey to pragmatism. According to the German thinker, the crisis of the sciences has its roots in the crisis of philosophy. And we can in fact add that, in the present technocratic world, philosophy is not considered an interesting subject unless it provides a “practical” outcome somehow.

Theology has not been preserved from such a *Zeitgeist*. In the last century, Christian theology, in all its denominations, has experienced a wide process of renewal, but also a process of specialization in different areas, which represents certainly an enrichment in many cases but has also contributed to its fragmentation. The process, anyway, is not completely new. It dates back, at least in a germinal way, to the fifteenth century. Up to the Scholastics, every theologian would have been a comprehensive scholar. He could teach and write

biblical commentaries and about dogmatics, morals, spirituality, and what we now call fundamental theology. The great *summae* would develop many of these subjects without the anxiety for specialization that theologians acquired later. In the fifteenth century, the tendency to separate fields began: from that moment on, dogmatics would be studied by dogmaticians and moral theology by specialists of that area. Still, up to the last century, a dogmatician could teach and write about every topic of dogmatics, such as the Trinity, Christology, Mary, and so on. This is true of moral theologians as well. In the twentieth century, this has often been considered not possible anymore: one can be an expert on the Trinity, or on Christ, or on Mary, but not on all of the above. Specialization and fragmentation have not stopped here, though. Within every one of these topics, other distinctions have been made. Up to a few decades ago, a scholar could have claimed to know Christology very well. Now, he would probably describe himself as an expert in the Christology of the eleventh century or in the “third quest” about the historical Jesus.

Priestly intellectual formation is now provided through many small courses (in Italy, for a bachelor's degree in theology, one needs to pass roughly sixty exams, about twenty-four of which are in philosophy). Every professor is an expert in a precise sector. In addition, the method in theology has changed greatly. Catholic theology has always had different views and stances about what is freely disputable, but in the past, the Scholastic method would have dominated theological teaching and writing. In the twentieth century, the renewal of Christian theology has seen the introduction of a large variety of methods that turn out to be present not only at the highest level in academic disputes but also in theological teaching at the lowest degree.

To state this more clearly, every professor uses the method that he prefers and teaches (almost) what he likes. The positive consequence is that the most talented students can compare different lines of thought and receive more information. The negative outcome is that the average student, after years of theological classes, usually does not possess a comprehensive, synthetic view of the science of the faith into which he has been introduced. Theological institutions are aware of the problem and try to contain it by offering seminars of synthesis at the end of each stage of studies. Also, for the bachelor's degree and for the licentiate, comprehensive exams must be taken by the candidates. In my opinion, what these seminars and exams do in most cases is simply have the student repeat what he has learned in the

previous years without really providing a unitary view of theology. Though *repetita juvant* (repeating does good), nothing new is added to the students' mind through this kind of repetition: they will merely be asked to explain themes or theses, recalling what each different professor has taught them about those topics in the previous years.

Another aspect of the problem is that, since the mid-twentieth century, many theologians have refused to write handbooks. The monograph has become the preferred literary genre, probably among most scholars. These theologians have considered it not only their duty but also the only reasonable thing to do to write about a short segment of a topic, but never about the matter as a whole. In recent times, though, the trend is slowly changing, and we can see, at least in Italy, but also in some other places, more than one publisher sponsoring a series of handbooks in theology. This change in the trend should be welcomed as a positive sign. What I notice, nonetheless, is that, though there are some remarkable works among the most recent textbooks, the series in which they are issued often lack a unitary view. These series try to cover all the topics that are currently taught in theological institutions, but one could hardly find a *fil rouge* (common thread) to unite the different books that make up the series. So, far from being solved, the problem of fragmentation finds only yet another way to manifest itself, and maybe even to reinforce itself.

For this and for other reasons, I decided to write a one-volume comprehensive dogmatic theology in which the principle of unity could be easily visible for most people. The decision to write such a book took me a while. As I mentioned, in our time, it is commonly believed that no one can achieve a sufficient level of specialization in all fields of theology so as to be in a position to write a comprehensive theology. Besides, I am only forty-three years old!

On June 9, 2017, Vittorio Messori presented my book to the public in the beautiful town of Verona. In his enthusiastic presentation of my work, he said that he was surprised also by the fact that an author of such a young age could demonstrate an erudition that is usually achieved only at sixty, or beyond. Despite this impressive compliment, I do not think that personal knowledge (whether I really possess it or it is just Messori being kind) is the key point of a comprehensive treatise. In the end, as erudite as one can be, that is never enough! The unity of theology cannot be based on what a scholar knows, though he should be well-informed. The unity of the science of faith should rest on a much more solid and objective ground. I am convinced that such a ground exists and that it is both

philosophical and theological. My proposal consists basically in developing the inner bipolar or “synthetic” character of Christianity in all its forms and elements.

First, we need a philosophy that professes objective knowledge. It is possible to choose among different systems, because Thomism, though the preferred and probably the best one, is not a mandatory philosophy for Catholics. But the philosophy that one chooses as his or her intellectual mindset for doing theology should always be a system of thought that acknowledges objectivity, as Jacques Maritain recalled on more than one occasion. This implies that, in theology, we need a philosophy that respects logic and is open to truth and reality. Skepticism is not allowed in Christian theology, nor indeed in any form of Christian thought. We need to have recourse to a philosophy that considers the apprehension of truth as something that stays within the possibilities of the human mind. Truth is reality insofar as it has entered into a human mind, as the epistemologies of correspondence show. So, truth and reality are always connected, and yet they are not exactly the same thing. This prevents us from falling into ideology (the claim to be able to incorporate everything into an intellectual system, up to the point of denying the existence of whatever does not fit into the scheme) while keeping our mind open to what exists in reality.

A sound philosophical approach is “synthetic” because it puts together objectivity and subjectivity: the reality existing out there and my personal “I” that grasps it through the processes and categories of human understanding. The two elements stay together in the same act of comprehension without annulling each other: distinct and yet united at the same time, forming a harmonic synthesis. Let us just recall here that, according to St. Thomas, the faculty of judgment, the highest point in the human process of knowing, is a synthetic faculty: the ability to conjoin (in a positive judgment) or disjoin (in a negative one) a being and an attribute in an affirmation such as “this is/is not red.” The synthetic character of a sound philosophical approach will impress its mark on theological reflection too, but in ways that cannot be explained here.

Second, a “synthetic” approach to theology should find also and foremost a theological foundation. Such a foundation is actually very strong and clear when we look at the very center of the faith that we call “Christian,” Jesus Christ being both its foundation stone and, permanently, its very center. Jesus Christ is in fact the real Synthetic Principle of the faith. It is well known that, for all the more

important Christian denominations, Jesus is both God and man. The ecumenical councils of the first millennium, facing many Trinitarian and Christological heresies, shaped accurately the way in which we express categorically the mystery of Jesus Christ, true God and true man. The councils availed themselves of the reflections of the Fathers of the Church. The terminology of synthesis has been developed by some important authors in the sixth and seventh centuries. The context is the wide discussion about the reception of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), which condemned the Monophysites, who believed that Christ had one nature, the divine. Chalcedon, while of course affirming the full divine nature of Christ, stressed the importance of his whole humanity, specifying also the way in which the two natures of Christ are related: united and distinct at the same time.

Problems in accepting the teaching of Chalcedon put the Church under stress for about 100 years thereafter. Influential theologians of the time, known now as “neo-Chalcedonians,” strove to develop an interpretation of Chalcedon that could be acceptable for different theological parties. Among other aspects, the neo-Chalcedonians interpreted the hypostatic union in Christ (“hypostasis” meaning “person” at Chalcedon) as the “synthetic union” of the two natures, divine and human, in the one Person of Jesus. This synthetic Christology was received by the following Council, the fifth ecumenical Council and the second one held at Constantinople, in the year 553. So, the Church has approved that, in Christ, the personal union of the two natures is a synthesis: the synthetic union of God and man, simultaneously both united and distinct in the one Person of the Son of God (Second Person of the Trinity, the *Logos*). For reasons that we will consider later, it is important to notice that the Second Constantinopolitan Council also stressed that, though the two natures persist intact in the one Christ, they should not be understood as having the same value. God is greater than man, and so, in Jesus Christ too, the divine nature is ontologically superior to the human essence. But this does not imply that the human nature of Christ is optional.

Christ is the Foundation and the Center, or the Principle, of the Christian faith, and therefore the latter must retain the imprint of its Principle. The Christian faith is synthetic. Christ is also the Truth (see John 14:6), and therefore the Truth is synthetic.

How are we to express theologically what has been stated above? Actually, this part of the work in writing my latest book was easier than I had imagined, since there is already in the Catholic Tradition a theological principle that has been identified through the centu-

ries. This classic principle is expressed in Latin with the words *et-et* (“both–and”). The *et-et* principle marks the very nature of Catholic doctrine (both dogmatic and moral, but also Catholic canonical discipline), as opposed to the classic Protestant principle of the *aut-aut* (“either–or”). It is well known that Martin Luther had a passion for the Latin word *solus* (“only”; “alone”). For him, justification is *sola fide*, “by faith alone,” while for Catholics, it is *et-et*: by both faith and works. For Luther, the Word of God comes to us through the Bible only (*sola Scriptura*), while for Catholics, both the Scriptures and Apostolic Tradition are the channels through which we receive God’s Revelation. For the German Reformer, the liturgical celebration of the Lord’s Passover can have only one meaning, according to the *aut-aut* principle: it will be *either* the Sacrifice of Christ *or* the congregation of the faithful (*convivium*; “meal”). For Catholics, though, both aspects are true. And so on.

The ontological constitution of Jesus Christ teaches us that the Truth is synthetic, that there is what we can call a fundamental “bipolarity,” due to which most Christian doctrines are made up of two elements that can sometimes even appear as opposing each other but that stay harmoniously together in synthesis. For example, that Mary is both mother and virgin could appear at first sight impossible. And in fact, on a purely natural level, it is. We should not forget, nonetheless, that here we are dealing with revealed mysteries in which things that are naturally impossible become possible because of God’s grace: “Nothing will be impossible for God” (Luke 1:37). This does not entail that we can have a synthesis of contradictory elements. What is opposed can be put into synthesis, which is not true for elements that are in logical contradiction.

Theology is a science, a human science that treats a supernatural object (Revelation). The fact that the content of this science goes beyond human reasoning implies that theology cannot provide her object by herself. She receives it from above, from God. But theology remains a science: human reasoning that uses and respects logic. Therefore, though theology is a science *sui generis* (of its own kind), the principle of non-contradiction should always be respected, or theology will end up making no sense or will end up in relativism and—applying to the Church’s life what Husserl said of sciences in general—theology will become prey to pastoral pragmatism. Truly, we cannot say that, in theology, twenty plus twenty makes fifty instead of forty. Jesus used human logic while debating with his opponents, and he defeated their arguments through sound human

reasoning. That is why they could not find any way to answer him, and people were amazed at His teaching. Though the Lord never taught rationalism, he did not allow fideism either!

A synthetic theology is a theology that respects all this. It respects first of all the Synthetic Principle of the faith: Christ. Note that such a principle is not created by the theologian; the theologian finds it both in reality and in the Word of God. Far from crafting it as one of the many existing ideological structures, the theologian learns the *et-et* principle from what is out there, both in nature and in the history of salvation. As a consequence, a Catholic theologian can and should notice the *et-et* wherever he finds it (and it shows up at almost every corner!), but he has no right to impose this principle when it is not present. Synthetic theology is not ideology. It is a way to foster the *intellectus fidei*, a rational and defensible understanding of what Catholics believe.

Since it is a traditional principle, we do not need to create the *et-et*: we receive it and try to hand on what we have received. And we can say that we want to retrieve it from a period of oblivion. But is there anything original in my own treatment of this principle? Though in none of my books and articles have I looked for originality as my first aim, perhaps here and there something new can be found. In the case of the *et-et* principle, I can say that I have not found anywhere else such a systematic treatment of the principle as that which I propose in the first chapter of my book, which is also the longest chapter, at about 100 pages. At least, I have not found it in recent literature.

Two other points are more important. (1) The *et-et* principle is present in almost every dogmatic doctrine of the Catholic Church, and though I do not treat the matter in my book, I am confident in saying that the same is true for morals and discipline too. Therefore, almost every Catholic doctrine harmoniously unites two elements that stay together in an inseparable way without losing the distinction between them, as is the case with the two natures in Christ. The individual chapters of my book document the *et-et* in the individual dogmatic areas such as creation, redemption, Grace, the Trinity, Mary, the Church, the sacraments, and so on. (2) I recall what Constantinople II said about the different value of the two natures in Christ by noticing that, in the harmonic synthesis of every *et-et*, there is always one element that is primary and another that is secondary. Just as, in Jesus, human nature is secondary but is in no way whatsoever optional, so it is wherever the *et-et* appears in doctrine. Of the two elements that synthetically make up a doctrine, one is principal

and the other comes second, though the latter could never be canceled or ignored. Maybe this second point is the most original observation and application that I offer about the *et-et*, something that I have not found even in those authors who have written about the *et-et*.

This latter point leads us to notice something that is both true and, at the same time, very relevant. Heresy is first of all the negation of the synthesis. As is well known, heresy comes from Greek *hairesis*, which means “choice.” A heretic is somebody who chooses between the two elements of a doctrine, someone who breaks the harmonic synthesis of the *et-et*. In the ecumenical context, it is important to notice that “heretic” designates a doctrinal status and is not to be understood as a personal offense. If I observe that my sister is ill, this does not imply that I hate my sister or that I want to humiliate her. Though she is in bad health, I love her very much (maybe even more). A heretic is anyone who says, “this, but not the other.” For Catholics, such way of choosing is heretical. We cannot say, for instance, that Mary is *either* Mother *or* Virgin.

This is clear in our Tradition. But, using my observation about the internal order of the elements that make up the *et-et*, we can understand something more: heresy can occur also when the synthetic principle is not denied, but simply inverted in its inner hierarchy. Yes, there is a hierarchy between the two elements that combine in every doctrinal and moral bipolarity. And an error in the faith can also arise by merely inverting the order of precedence, by considering as primary what is secondary, or vice versa. This form of doctrinal error is very common in our time, in which only a few churchmen would deny directly and formally doctrinal elements as such, but when many of them often invert the internal hierarchy of Catholic doctrine.

For example, probably no Catholic would say today that Jesus is not really present under the appearances of the consecrated Host and Wine, but many would simply skip the subject by not wasting many words on it, focusing their homilies and catecheses rather on the symbolic aspect of Christ Who accompanies his Church in this life, or on the proximity of Jesus to those who suffer, even stressing his presence in the suffering flesh of the poor. Not that all this is false; rather, it is true. The problem is that all this is secondary when compared to the dogma of the true, real and substantial presence of the Body and Blood of Christ under the Eucharistic species. Simply to invert the hierarchy, even without denying bipolarity, is enough to commit error—and to teach error—in the faith.

It is very common to make such a mistake about morals. In the evaluation of moral cases, objective and subjective elements come into discussion: objective elements such as the law of God, *intrinsece malum* (intrinsic evil), and actions performed or omitted and subjective elements such as the circumstances (which, by the way, can be not only mitigating but also aggravating), the weight of cultural background, and the real consent given to an action. If this is true, it is also true that there is a hierarchy in which the objective elements play a more important role than do the subjective ones when it comes to judging a moral act. In order to fall into error or to teach an error in morality, it is not necessary to break completely the *et-et*; it is enough to say that personal conscience, special circumstances, or the present culture have a greater weight than the objective law of God on the scale of moral theology and in the practice of hearing confessions and of accompanying the faithful in their moral and spiritual discernment. Therefore, in my book, I have tried to give attention to the internal hierarchy of the synthetic principle: along with identifying many doctrinal bipolarities, I have also signaled the order of importance of the two elements of every doctrine.

For all these and other reasons, we need to train future priests especially and the Catholic faithful in general according to a unitary vision of doctrine, and this can be done with the help of a synthetic theology, though I do not pretend that synthetic theology is the solution to all problems. The fragmentation at present in the intellectual formation of both priests and pastoral coworkers has shown its fruits abundantly, especially in what it is said daily through preaching and weekly through catecheses in a large number of Catholic parishes and communities worldwide. The lack of a comprehensive vision encourages priests and catechists to share fragments that show no connection with each other, making the preaching of the Gospel much weaker. In addition, fragmentation does not put Catholics in the position of accomplishing what St. Peter asked for when writing that we should be always “ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Pet 3:15). Where there is no unitary vision, but just a communication of feelings and personal experiences of life (which is the content of many, many homilies and catecheses in our time), there can be an exchange of sentiments but not of arguments, and so there is no room for real and sound discussion and debate.

Speaking of debate, I would like to conclude with a last point about dialogue, proclamation, and ecumenism. The Church has decided, after the Second Vatican Council, to walk the path of dialogue. It

was Paul VI who introduced the new terminology in the Church and fostered the new practice, especially through his first encyclical letter, *Ecclesiam Suam*, issued in 1964, when the Council was not yet concluded. Since then, dialogue has become a sort of rallying cry for almost everything in the Church. Not that dialogue is wrong in itself, but it is important to remember that dialogue goes hand in hand with proclamation, as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue recalls in its 1991 *Dialogue and Proclamation*: “It is 25 years since *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Church’s relationship to other religions, was promulgated. The document stressed the importance of interreligious dialogue. At the same time, it recalled that the Church is duty bound to proclaim without fail Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, in whom all people find their fulfillment” (§1). This is said about interreligious dialogue.

The reader has probably noticed that what I have been saying in this article expresses the traditional Catholic view much more than that of other Christian denominations. This could lead to the false impression that I am not interested in ecumenical dialogue. Synthetic theology is absolutely interested also in ecumenism from the original Catholic perspective, of which many have lost sight lately. It will be sufficient to quote the Second Vatican Council’s decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §11, a text often quoted by ecumenical theologians. First of all the Council states: “The way and method in which the Catholic faith is expressed should never become an obstacle to dialogue with our brethren.” These words are often interpreted as if the Council wanted us to transform our doctrine into a form that is acceptable to our interlocutors. So, for instance, if Catholics enter into dialogue with Protestants, they should not maintain that the Holy Mass is the sacrifice of Christ, or that there are two distinct priesthoods in the Church, because these doctrines obviously represent an obstacle. But the Council immediately continues: “It is, of course, essential that the doctrine should be clearly presented in its entirety. Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false irenicism, in which the purity of Catholic doctrine suffers loss and its genuine and certain meaning is clouded.”

According to the Council, then, the real obstacle to the ecumenical dialogue is not saying clearly what we believe, but avoiding saying it. A synthetic theology has an ecumenical sensitivity because it likes clarity of argumentation and of speech. Real ecumenism is that in which we dialogue and also debate (yes, debate!) while having

esteem for each other. Nor is it a sign of appreciation for our separated brethren to hide our faith from them, rather it is an obstacle. Clarity, if respectful, is never an obstacle; ambiguity, even when polite, is an obstacle. In the ecumenical discussion, we need to say clearly what we think and believe. Only then do we talk like brothers. Another mistake would be that of considering ecumenism just a matter of fraternal sentiments and/or of doing things together. While these aspects are worthy of our attention, they are not the most important ones. We want to share the same faith, not just to perform some social work together. Working together is not excluded, but here comes another *et-et* with its hierarchy: faith and work stay conjoined, but the primary element is faith, while the secondary element is action.

The purpose of the present article has been to offer a brief presentation of the content and the aim of my latest work, a dogmatic theology in one volume (of nearly one thousand pages), published under the title *Truth is Synthetic* (*La Verità è sintetica: Teologia dogmatica cattolica*, published by Cantagalli in Siena, Italy, in 2017 and now, 2018, in its second revised reprinting). In doing so, I have tried to explain why I consider a “synthetic” approach to theology important—indeed, necessary—in our time.

Synthetic theology reminds us that the future of the Church has much to do with the place that we give to truth. In a view determined by the *et-et*, truth comes always first and charity—never excluded—comes next, as a consequence of truth. Doctrine, so much set aside lately, should come back triumphantly, for only the triumph of truth can mark the beginning of a real renewal of the Church both in people’s souls and in our society. Though some say that “doctrine” is a bad word because it brings with it the image of the hardness of stone, this is exactly why we need it. Jesus did not say that he would build his Church upon soft, chaotic, ambiguous ground, but that he would build it on the rock of Peter and his profession of solid, clear, undoubted faith: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). N&V