

Introduction to the Symposium on Aquinas and the Environment

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THE IMMEDIATE context of the following eleven essays was a conference in October 2009 entitled “Renewing the Face of the Earth: The Church and the Order of Creation,” held at The Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity and co-sponsored with the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.¹ Approximately fifty participants from philosophy, theology, law, and the social sciences gathered to reflect on issues of environmental concern, with a special focus on the intellectual tradition inspired by St. Thomas Aquinas. To our knowledge, it was one of the first of its kind—Thomists gathering to discuss environmental issues—and we hope these efforts encourage others to take up the conversation from here.

The proximate context for these essays is more complex and reaches into the many eddies and currents of the Catholic intellectual life. In the year prior to our gathering, Pope Benedict had alluded frequently to the problems of environmental stewardship facing us and stated in his World Day of Peace message that we need “to rediscover those values which can serve as the solid basis for a brighter future for all.”² This call to re-establish a “solid

¹ Special thanks to Mr. James Ennis, Executive Director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, and Monsignor Aloysius Callaghan, Rector of The Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity, for their support of this effort.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI: For the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 2010: If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* (online at the Vatican website). Though the Holy Father’s comments came a few months after the conference, the remarks provide much of the ecclesial context in which our overall project was situated.

basis” upon which a sound, Catholic stewardship of the earth could be built was, in many ways, the *desideratum* of our meeting and supplied the necessary catalyst.

No less significant, the conference was animated by the Church’s repeated request to turn to St. Thomas and draw from his perennial wisdom the resources to form an intellectually astute and ecclesially centered response to challenges we have met over the years—indeed, the centuries. Environmental stewardship strikes us as especially apt for consideration for, despite its uniquely contemporary profile, it raises a series of questions that Thomism in particular is especially suited to address. From many vantages, the questions surrounding our care for the environment quickly evolve into some of the most important questions about the meaning of existence—creatures, the universe, our place, and the call to responsible living. For Thomists at the service of the Church, here is a vital opportunity for evangelization, for an engagement with the culture in its efforts toward self-transcendence, for the re-engagement of perennial philosophical and theological principles that lie at the foundation of any responsible, practical solution to these problems. The time seems apt for a “green Thomism,” if you will, to provide the outlines of a Spirit-filled, prudential counsel on matters of stewardship.

There are many deformations in any project that enjoys such broad and popular support as the “environmental movement.” (Recall St. Thomas’s opening remarks in his *Summa theologiae* about the inadequacy of human reason and the need for divine revelation.) But at the core of the movement, it seems, lies an essential principle vital to our intellectual heritage: that the created order is intelligibly arranged, and to live in a manner that ignores that order is to do so at one’s own peril. Environmental awareness has arisen as an unthematic revolt of conscience against the reductive philosophies of nature that emerged in the Enlightenment and have dominated our imaginations ever since.³ Many scholars have chronicled the impact of reductivist methods concerning our approaches

³ Two years following our conference, speaking to Germany’s lower house of Parliament in September 2011, Pope Benedict echoes a similar sentiment. “I would like to say that the emergence of the ecological movement in German politics since the 1970’s, while it has not exactly flung open the windows, nevertheless was and continues to be a cry for fresh air. . . . Young people had come to realize that something is wrong in our relationship to nature, that matter is not just raw material for us to shape at will, but that the earth has a dignity of its own and we must follow its directives.” Benedict XVI, “The Listening Heart: Reflections on the Foundations of Law,” online at www.zenit.org/article-33495?l=english.

to nature; significantly fewer have noted the promise of Thomism in addressing these questions in light of our vocation as stewards.⁴

The convertibility of being and goodness, the teleological ordering of creation, the existence of God as First and Final Cause, the concepts of form, of substance, of secondary causality, of providence, the capacity of reason to grasp the meaning of things and its dependence upon sensible substances, the natural law, our vocation to beatitude and the meaning of embodiment—these and many other topics read like chapter headings in an “Introduction to St. Thomas.” They could just as easily serve as points of departure for a Catholic consideration of environmental stewardship. The happy convergence here is rooted, we believe, in the fact that the projects are in many ways the same—an apprenticeship in Thomas is a primer in stewardship.

To be sure, the project of St. Thomas was about so much more, as is the vocation of every Catholic, than merely the mundane considerations of the care of creation in this life. Yet, he was insistent that the beatitude made perfect by God’s grace in the life to come extends into the vicissitudes of this one, albeit imperfectly, and that the promise of infused contemplation of the *beati* does not nullify the participated life of the *viatores*. Thomas’s account of the fulfillment of redemption does not render the care of creation meaningless, as some have suggested,⁵ even if that order of creation will be spiritually transformed. Indeed, one may argue that the principal contribution of Thomas to a Catholic environmental ethic is precisely his comprehensive vision, a vision that extends beyond the horizons of our presently configured ecological diversity, however beautiful it

⁴ A few have taken up the task in engaging ways, with varying degrees of success: Willis Jenkins, “Biodiversity and Salvation: Thomistic Roots for Environmental Ethics,” *Journal of Religion* 83 (2003): 401–20; idem, *Ecologies of Grace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Fr. Robert Grant, *A Case Study in Thomistic Environmental Ethics: The Ecological Crisis in the Loess Hills of Iowa* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007); Jill LeBlanc, “Eco-Thomism,” *Environmental Ethics* 21 (1999): 293–306; Jaime Ehegartner Schaefer, “Ethical Implications of Applying Aquinas’ Notions of the Unity and Diversity of Creation to Functioning in Ecosystems” (Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 1994); Pamela A. Smith, “Aquinas and Today’s Environmental Ethics: An Exploration of How Vision and the Virtue Ethic of ‘Ecothomism’ Might Inform a Viable Eco-ethic” (Ph.D. dissertation, Duquesne University, 1995); related, Judith A. Barad, *Aquinas on the Nature and Treatment of Animals* (Lanham, MD: International Scholars Press, 1996); also William French, “Natural Law and Ecological Responsibility,” *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 5.1 (2008): 15–36.

⁵ Francisco Benzoni, “Thomas Aquinas and Environmental Ethics: A Reconsideration of Providence and Salvation,” *Journal of Religion* 85 (2005): 446–76.

seems to us. His gift lies in leading us to see how our attentiveness to what is surely passing can nonetheless have eternal significance.

Nor will it be sufficient simply to repeat Thomistic aphorisms, to re-enact as in a living history museum the life of a thirteenth century mendicant. Newer formulations of perennial truths will be called forth in the light of contemporary circumstances; nothing less could be expected of a living tradition.

Nonetheless, the near-universal call for a more circumspect use of earthly goods, the collective examination of conscience concerning our lifestyles of consumption, the increasing receptivity to the importance of creatures, their species and their habitats, and the impress of our obligations to others, all point to a cultural moment in which the foundations of our attitudes toward “nature” are being re-examined. The reductive scientisms of modernity seem to have run aground on the blighted shores of the contemporary landscape. What vision of nature, of the person, of technology, of creation or cosmos will replace it? The essays of this symposium address these questions.

The questions not addressed in this collection are too numerous to identify. There is a marked lack of applied considerations, case studies, concrete solutions to specific problems. To offer these would have taken us away from what we considered to be the central focus of this first “go-round.” It also would have run the risk of a too hasty engagement of practical reasoning without the proper attention to the necessary speculative *preambula* that must frame every responsible exercise of prudence.

Even in speculative matters, an epistemic stance of humility is warranted here, as the many questions raised only point in the direction of the need for a much deeper and profound set of reflections on the implications. To what extent, for example, does the so-called the “teleological grammar” of nature extend to our consideration of lower creation—plants, animals, organisms—and thus to what extent can we appropriately engage in the technological manipulation of organic life? What kinds of social relations will need to emerge in the light of these newer stances toward the use and development of created goods? As Christopher Franks poignantly remarks, “Thomas understood that by resisting some practices of a developing profit economy, he was defending the very notion that reality is penetrated by divine reason.”⁶ Also, virtually no mention is made of the work of the likes of Catherine de Hueck Doherty and Madonna House, of Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement. The intersection of the

⁶ Christopher A. Franks, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas’ Economic Teachings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 184.

speculative and practical lines of this Thomism-in-action is begging for further articulation—yet for this original meeting, a bridge too far, but one that needs to be crossed.

Still other lines of inquiry need to be pursued, especially by those taken with the “theology of the body” and the more recent reflections of John Paul II. So much light has been shed on the importance of the body and the human being’s “gift of self” to another in embodied love. Much less, it appears, has been said about the body as that medium of receptivity—not simply of another, but of the world. There is nothing in the intellect that does not first come through the senses, St. Thomas asserts, a principle essential not only to a realist epistemology, but to a theology of the body—of embodiment—within a nexus of intelligible creatures. Who could become a gift for another who is not first a recipient of a gift received—the world of intelligible creation? As the threshold of the soul *and* the world, the body is the medium through which creation is received, tilled, kept, and given.

With all of these occasions for intellectual ferment, one would think that the Church’s engagement with environmental issues would be voluminous; but this, too, is a matter for further research and reflection—namely, the somewhat distant regard the Catholic magisterium has given to environmental concerns until recently.⁷ Milestones in environmental efforts came and went with rather scant attention from the Catholic theological community. It’s not unfair to say that Catholicism, broadly conceived, seemed to be in a position of “catching up” to what was a developing consensus in the cultural sphere. One possible line of reasoning points to the notion that “nature” was undergoing something of its own transformation within Catholic circles, independently of secular venues, as the extended debates concerning “nature” and the “supernatural” occupied the energies of theologians immediately preceding and following Vatican II. Devotees of the *nouvelle théologie*, as well as their interlocutors, might do well to revisit the status of the natural *ordo* within these probative, theological debates.

All of these remarks are offered by way of invitation to those of us in the academy whose business it is to consider such things. By default, and no doubt with some hubris, they have a distinctively academic character to them. But this, too, might be a bias worth addressing in still later conversations. Consider the very rich reflections taking place outside of

⁷ Perhaps it is time to consider, in light of the systemic issues raised by a consideration of these and other questions, the establishment of something along the lines of a Pontifical Institute on Agriculture and the Environment, dedicated to faithfully discerning the original, common vocation to till and to keep the earth.

the academy, indeed well outside the academy, in the verdant fields of Catholic farmers who participated in the work of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. Established in 1923 at the rise of the industrialization of our food production, the conference was committed to thinking through the implications of this revolution for Catholic rural life, especially Catholic family life. Members of the conference often turned to the principles of St. Thomas to guide their reflections. Many began to see then what we are now more willing to admit: that our practices regarding our care of the earth are out of sync with our convictions about the dignity of creation—especially in matters of food—and that a re-evaluation of our stance toward the meaning of our vocation to steward the earth is necessary.

It may surprise some to discover that the widespread embrace of “local, organic food” that characterizes the most contemporary of cultural postures these days was, in fact, long supported and defended by the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. When the history of the organic food movement within Catholicism is written, its intellectual pedigree will extend into the social traditions of Leo XIII and his successors and thus into the aquifer of Thomistic principles. There’s a remarkable déjà vu to be had as one reads the earliest documents of the Conference and then the recent editions of *Mother Earth News* or the postings of the Organic Consumers Association.

All of which is to say that for those who are seeking to reflect more deeply on the principles that are to guide our conscience in the prudential matters of stewardship, now is the time to renew our commitment to the study of St. Thomas, not only out of devotion to this saintly sage, and certainly not out of some nostalgia for an age long past, but in service to our brothers and sisters and the promotion of the common good of all, in praise of Him from whom all good things come. N.V