

Theology in the School of St. Thomas^{*}

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ST. THOMAS practiced and taught theology with unabated vigor. He wrote a great deal of theology. Yet he spoke very little about theology. This makes it all the more important for Thomas's disciples to give an account of this discipline as practiced in his school, in order to clarify its nature, its characteristics, and the conditions under which it is practiced *in medio Ecclesiae*.

Sacred Doctrine

For St. Thomas, the crucial reality is not theology in the modern, specialized sense of the word, i.e., a reasoned reflection on the content of the faith. Rather, it is something that he, like his contemporaries, indiscriminately calls *theologia*, “sacred doctrine (*sacra doctrina*),” “the doctrine of the faith (*doctrina fidei*),” “Sacred Scripture (*sacra scriptura*),” “Catholic truth (*catholica veritas*),” “Word of God (*Dei verbum*).” Sacred doctrine is none other than the Word of God revealed in history, the teaching that God transmits to men so that they may know and partake in the truth of salvation. This communication of divine truth culminated in Christ and his doctrine as received by the apostles. So that it would perdure throughout history concretely and without alteration, God first consigned it especially to the Bible, the book of canonical Scriptures. Then he entrusted to the Church the task of explaining its content to all, so that every human being in every time and place may hear Christ's doctrine, believe in Christ, and grow in faith informed by charity, until the fullness of truth

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is revealed to him in the beatific vision. Desiring to reach each of us according to our own individual capacities, God himself willed that sacred doctrine be communicated to us through a large and very concrete hierarchy of mediators. In fact, his Word ceaselessly diffuses itself through history, beginning from Christ, the Incarnate Word and “Doctor of doctors,” through the ministry of all the other doctors: the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, the pastors, preachers, catechists, parents, and even the whole body of the faithful, to the extent that each one participates in his own way in the prophetic mission of the Church.

St. Thomas’s first concern is to demonstrate the absolute and universal necessity of this sacred doctrine (not theology), since sacred doctrine alone reveals to us a salvation that we could never conceive and attain on our own, but that is obscurely inscribed in our nature as the true end for which we long. He then proceeds to show that sacred doctrine is a true science, since we can uncover the causal links uniting its disparate elements, through a subordinate, yet real, foretaste of and participation in the perfect divine science by which God knows himself as well as all things in their ultimate cause of being. Next, Thomas shows that sacred doctrine is perfectly unified by its revealed origin, and is founded not on the light of human intelligence but on the light of grace divinely infused into our hearts. Finally, he shows that sacred doctrine is the perfect wisdom which rules and integrates into its own service all the other human sciences, bringing all created realities back to the One who is sacred doctrine’s own subject: God known in himself and in his own light.

As it unfolds concretely throughout the ages, sacred doctrine fulfils several roles, employing a multiplicity of different methods. Its first and most basic role is to transmit to us knowledge of the mysteries of the true God and his salvation. To prepare us for eternal contemplation, it gives birth to and strengthens faith in us. For the sake of the same contemplation, it transmits to us the articles of faith (conveniently assembled in the Symbols), prayers (psalms and liturgical texts), and the historical narratives attesting the authority of the prophets and apostles; to this same end, it employs parables and metaphors suited to represent divine realities before our still-blinded eyes. Moved by its closely connected practical objective, and using precepts and interdictions, promises and warnings (such as the law of Moses, Jesus’ new commandment, the proclamation of the last Judgment), it teaches us to act well.

The doctors accomplish this first and most basic role of sacred doctrine—giving birth to and strengthening faith in the hearts of men—primarily by explicating the canonical Scriptures. In fact, the book of the Bible is above all the place where God has consigned his Word in the

most complete and certain manner. Whether they be pastors, theologians, or catechists, the principal task of all ministers of sacred doctrine is that of commenting on the Bible, just as Jesus did with the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24:27) or Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:35). Their task is to disengage its multiplicity of meanings, from the literal sense to the different spiritual senses, so that the Word of God itself in its fullness may penetrate into the souls of the faithful. In this work, their first guide must always be the living Tradition of the Church, particularly the Fathers and the Magisterium, for the Spirit of Christ supernaturally assists his Body in the infallible interpretation of the Word. But all the exegetical techniques, especially those acquired from the historical-critical method, must also be used in order to disengage the literal sense, which is the foundation of all the others, from all its conditionings.

Two other functions, secondary but still indispensable to the Church, have always belonged to the ministers of sacred doctrine; to refute the errors of those who alter or destroy its truth; and to grow in contemplation of this truth. Here, only arguments prove to be effective, whether in appealing to the authority of the canonical texts accepted by the opponents, or in presenting lines of reasoning whose logic bears witness to the truth of the faith. These kinds of arguments were used by Jesus himself as well as by St. Paul, to prove the resurrection of the dead (Mt 22:23–33; 1 Cor 15:12–20). In the same way, in imitation of St. Paul addressing the Athenians before the Areopagus (Acts 17:28), it is permissible and even useful for doctors and preachers of the faith to have recourse to the arguments of philosophers, as well as to rhetoric and the other profane sciences. In its work of dispensing truth, sacred doctrine has nothing to fear from the light of reason which is God's gift to our nature, nor from the various elements of truth which men have been able to discover on their own; rather, it should gather them all into its service.

The Questions of Faith Seeking Understanding

If defending the truth directly pertains to the Magisterium of the pastors of the Church, contemplating the truth is the role of the theologian, not exclusively, but in a special way. In fact, Thomas earnestly identifies contemplation as the *raison-d'être* of that which today we call speculative or contemplative theology. Within sacred doctrine, speculative theology is defined as the activity by which the Church grows in the contemplative understanding of that which she believes. Thomas locates its origin specifically in the mystery of the obscure clarity of the theological virtue of faith. The light of this grace makes us adhere with absolute certitude to the Word of God proposed to us. But because the command of faith proceeds from

the will rather than the intellect and the intellect has not yet reached fullness of vision, this adherence leaves the soul radically unsatisfied, "restless" (*inquietus*), since it can find its rest only in the full understanding of truth. Torn between the certitude of faith-adherence and the persistent obscurity of our faith-knowledge, our intellect by nature perpetually strains toward an ever greater perception of that which it believes. Thus, without waiting for the beatific vision and already divinely impelled by the love of perfect truth, it immediately begins to appropriate all the elements of the truth at its disposal; it scrutinizes them and pursues them in order to draw from them the maximum light possible. This is charity itself, unfolding in the soul in search of understanding: "For when a man's will is ready to believe, he loves the truth he believes, he ponders and takes to heart whatever reasons he can find in support thereof."¹

On the rare occasions when Thomas speaks of theology, his vocabulary is very limited. He uses certain specific phrases to refer to theology: with respect to its origin, theology is "the questions of sacred Scripture (*quaestiones sacrae scripturae*)"; with respect to its method, it is "the enquiry of reason (*inquisitio rationis*)" or "investigation by reason (*investigatio ratione*)"; with respect to its end, it is "the contemplation of truth (*contemplatio veritatis*)," "the explication of truth (*explicatio veritatis*)," or "the manifestation of the hidden realities of faith insofar as is possible to wayfarers (*occulta fidei manifestare quantum in via possibile est*)." The very notion of theology as "questions" directly refers to the obscurity of faith: as he welcomes and studies the Word of God, the believer encounters difficulties, since the truths of faith provide only partial illumination. In fact, the more they enlighten the soul, the more new problems they raise. For instance, a firm belief in the hypostatic union of the human and divine natures in Christ does not resolve, but rather raises, the question of Jesus' human knowledge: on the Cross, did he enjoy the beatific vision? Theology's first task is to provide answers to the multitude of new questions that faith elicits in us. Grounded as much upon the certain truths of the Word of God (Scripture, dogma, tradition of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church) as on reasoned arguments, theology can thus answer the questions, "What is the importance of this fact?" and, "Is this really the case?" (*an sit*). Thomas uses this procedure in the *sed contra* part in the thousands of articles of his work.

Still, the soul is not satisfied with merely acquiring new truths included in the faith; rather, it also seeks their *raison-d'être*, their "how" and "why" (*quomodo or quid sit*). Armed with faith-enlightened reason and all the

¹ *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 2, a. 10 corpus.

other instruments of Christian philosophy developed for this purpose—especially analogy—the theologian plunges into a quest for intelligibility, properly speaking. True demonstrations help him to understand these newly disengaged truths from within, by connecting them to other prior, more explicative, and more fundamental truths as to their proper causes. Thomas takes this approach in each response of his article. Finally, with respect to the “contemplation of truth,” the theologian discovers the multitude of links interconnecting all the truths of the faith. He must therefore reproduce in his soul something of God’s own perfect science of himself and of all things, like a “seal (*sigillum*)” or an “imprint of the divine science (*impressio divinae scientiae*).” Here we find the ultimate meaning of any theological synthesis: not only to attempt to answer each of faith’s questions, but to reproduce to the greatest extent possible the perfect order of the divine wisdom we will contemplate as our eternal beatitude.

No theological synthesis—especially not Thomas’s, by his own admission—can claim perfection. On the contrary, every healthy theological enterprise needs to be continually perfected. Theology’s essential progressivity primarily derives from the emergence of questions seen with a new insight which calls for a new investigation, such as, for instance, today’s question of inter-religious dialogue: can God save human beings by the mediation of non-Christian religions (*an sit*)? If so, how, and by what means (*quomodo sit*)? Theological progress is likewise mandated by the development of new epistemological instruments, which enable us to grasp certain aspects of sacred doctrine more accurately, as in the case of the historical sciences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which have made it possible to understand better the temporal conditionings of Revelation and its expression in the Church. But the inherent perfectibility of theology derives above all from the infinite depth of the divine mysteries, which our concepts and even our most precise demonstrations can never fully explain. Theology—just like the faith which it can never surpass, as long as we continue as wayfarers—will always be marked by incompleteness, obscurity, and restlessness.

Nevertheless, since it is always progressing, theology proceeds by assimilation, not by surpassing. Because it works on the interior of sacred doctrine, under the divine light of faith and the infallible guidance of the Church, it can rely on an ever-increasing ensemble of principles, rules, instruments, and even definitively true and certain conclusions. The irreversible truth of sacred doctrine does not apply only to the text of the Bible, its supreme norm, to dogmas, and to the infallible Magisterium. It also extends, in a lesser but real way, to the ordinary Magisterium of the Church, as well as to the philosophy that the latter has recognized as

“Christian” because of its ability to give an adequate account of the real, and thus, by extension, of the mysteries of the faith. Opposing relativist ideology, the Church bears solemn witness to human reason’s ability to attain, on its own, absolute and definitive truths, particularly in metaphysics. The exceptionally authoritative place that Thomas occupies in the Church’s teaching results largely from his great gift of discernment, which enabled him to organize the definitive contribution of Christian philosophy at the heart of sacred doctrine, and in its service. Enrolling in the school of Thomas does not mean introducing all the latest philosophical fads into sacred doctrine so as to distill new theologies from them. Rather, it consists in perfecting the living organism of the school’s doctrinal tradition by a more studied application of its philosophical and theological principles to the endless questions raised by faith seeking understanding. Like faith, theology fundamentally strives toward unity, in the image of God’s own science in which both theology and faith—the former in the latter—are already an inchoate participation. Even though the Church recognizes theological pluralism as a legitimate consequence of the diversity of philosophical tools employed within the unity of the faith, this pluralism still remains a mark of provisional weakness, never to be sought for its own sake and always to be overcome.

Theology’s Ecclesial Vocation

Since the end of the Middle Ages, one of the besetting sins of theologians has been their tendency to elevate their knowledge to the status of an autonomous and corporate-minded organism. But theology can exist only as a pious, believing, and ecclesial discipline. Its specific function in the Church is not to constitute a vanguard of professionals whose teaching operates parallel to or in competition with that of the pastors. Rather, theology should infuse the whole of sacred doctrine in every instantiation and in every age with the call for intelligibility inherent in the baptismal faith. Theology is not in itself a particular ministry but a task incumbent on all those who teach in the Church, each according to his own charism. Over and above the expertise they develop through their personal abilities, theologians have no magisterial authority other than that which the pastors of the Church bestow on them, such as the right to teach in canonical faculties. While this principle explains why theologians cannot act in opposition to the living Magisterium of the Church, the only authentic interpreter of sacred doctrine, it also leaves intact theology’s specific function, which is exploratory rather than authoritative.

The sacred authors, particularly St. Paul, demonstrate by their foundational example how the teaching mission in the Church includes a

number of elements that transmit and build up the faith, as well as defend it against opponents and seek to understand it. As a result, this teaching mission is an incessant synergy working in Church doctrine, the defense of the faith, and theological research, helping the Magisterium of the pastors to explain the truth of the faith authoritatively to all. The inevitable specialization of tasks, as techniques, questions, and conclusions progress through the ages, cannot change the organic and ecclesial unity of the role of theology at the heart of sacred doctrine. An example will further illuminate this point.

As an inspired theologian contemplating the truth of our redemption in the Paschal mystery, St. Paul understood that Adam's sin, from which Christ liberated us, had until then plunged all of humanity into death and sin. Similarly, as a theologian, Augustine deduced the doctrine of original sin from this tenet of the Church's primitive faith. Many centuries later, the Council of Trent formally stated that this doctrine belonged to the faith of the universal Church and recognized it as a dogma. Since then, theology has no longer had to question whether a sin was committed at the origin of human history whose punishment falls on every man born into the world. The response to this question (*an sit*) is no longer to be sought, since sacred doctrine proposes it as a certain and definitive fact, a received principle, through the theological faith of the Church and the science of God himself.

Theological work on this subject, however, is not over. Building on the best-grounded conclusions of the human sciences, the theologian seeks the proper way to read the preliminary account in Genesis without claiming that Adam sinned around 4000 B.C. somewhere in an eastern garden. He uses philosophical anthropology in order to refute the opponents who do not recognize the authority of the Catholic dogma: humanity, as a formally constituted state, necessarily began to exist on a particular day in time, even though no historian was present to record the fact, since the metaphysical leap from animal to person could only happen concretely at one unique moment within history. Furthermore, the theologian continues to question the why and the how of the original sin (*quomodo sit*). In particular, he asks how we should understand the way in which death, introduced for all creatures as a punishment for Adam's fault, can be reconciled with the fact of mortality which the human sciences demonstrate as inherent in biological life.

The teaching of the Church can develop only if theology asks such questions—but also only as long as the answer is articulated from within sacred doctrine by a well-illuminated reason, drawing from and operating according to the light of faith. For the Church, by its faith, is the sole mother and mistress of sacred doctrine. Theology is one of its daughters,

impatient and zealous, whose free maturity can fully bloom only when the pedagogy of faith comes to an end in the beatific vision.

This brings us to the spirituality of theology. Because theology's role at the heart of sacred doctrine places it by definition at the crossroads of questions, difficulties, and obscurities, the theologian can progress toward greater light only to the extent that his charity grows ever more lively. We have noted that the roots of theological research are entrenched in the love of divine truth, a truth believed though not seen. Thomas further specifies that the supernatural merit proper to theological labor unfolds from the patient strength that prevents it from retreating before the trials of contradiction. More than any other believer, the contemplative theologian is familiar with the arguments that dissuade souls from adhering to a particular truth of the faith; he magnanimously welcomes in spirit the most virulent objections from "philosophers and heretics against the faith";² he has a deep insight into the semblances of reason they present and he even recognizes the elements of truth they may harbor. It is precisely from the theological love of the Word of God, loved for its own sake in the specific way that the Church has historically transmitted it to him, despite a thousand paradoxes, that the theologian derives the strength not to give up his faith, not to renounce his search for understanding in the integrity of truth. Without the charity that configures him ever more to Jesus in the Pascal mystery, the theologian's science, like his faith, is dead. The superabundance of charity that flows from such conquered trials, however, is transfigured into a new light for the Church and its doctrine. Thus the theologian finds his most fruitful place *in medio Ecclesiae*. N V

² ST II-II, q. 2, a. 10, ad 3.