

The Future of Catholic Systematic Theology

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I AM PLEASED AND HONORED to have been asked by the editors of the English edition of *Nova et Vetera* to contribute an essay on the topic of the future of Catholic theology. Catholic theology, founded upon divine revelation and faithfully understood, interpreted, and enriched by reason, gives life to the Church and to the world at large. To my mind, there is no greater academic vocation than to be a Catholic theologian, for such a theologian employs his or her mind and heart, and even body, to contemplate and expound, in communion with the Holy Spirit, the divine mysteries of faith. Because I am a historical and doctrinal theologian by training, and have subsequently taught and written, for many years, on doctrinal issues within patristic, medieval, and contemporary theology, I will limit myself to examining the future of Catholic systematic theology. I will do so by emphasizing what I consider to be those elements necessary for a future vibrant Catholic doctrinal theology.

Faith

Faith is the foundational theological virtue, the *sine qua non*, necessary for the undertaking of Catholic theology. Without faith in what God has revealed, theology in the authentic Catholic sense cannot be achieved, for Catholic systematic theology is, by definition, the elucidating and expounding of the divinely revealed mysteries of faith. Thus, Catholic doctrinal theologians begin their task by laying hold in faith of what is professed in Scripture as traditionally understood since apostolic times and universally taught within the living ecclesial tradition.

Catholic doctrine is but the traditional distillation of God's revelatory acts and words that are narrated within the biblical texts. As Vatican

II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, states: "Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together. . . . Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence. Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church" (§§9–10).¹ Systematic theologians, if they are to be genuinely Catholic, are to make an act of faith in what has been entrusted and taught by the Church, and thus enact the theological virtue of faith. Cardinal Avery Dulles forcefully declared: "If one wishes to be Catholic, theology adheres to the faith professed by the Catholic Church. In the absence of the subjective attitude of faith—*fides qua creditur*—the theologian would lack the spiritual attunement needed to grasp the latent meanings of Scripture and tradition, and thus interpret them according to their divinely intended sense."² I am, therefore, convinced that this act of faith is essential to the future of Catholic dogmatic theology, for theology is itself, as Augustine and Anselm attested, faith seeking understanding. In treating whether theology is a science, Thomas Aquinas stated: "As other sciences do not argue in proof of their principles, but argue from their principles to demonstrate other truths in these sciences: so this doctrine (Christian doctrine) does not argue in proof of its principles, which are the articles of faith."³ Thus, theology is not the seeking out of what is to be believed, as if it were yet to be known, but rather, having come to faith in what has been divinely revealed and made manifest, theology seeks a fuller knowledge of and love for what has been revealed.

¹ All passages from the documents of the Second Vatican Council are taken from *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 1975).

² Avery Cardinal Dulles, "Criteria of Catholic Theology," *Communio* 22 (1995): 303–15, at 304.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 1, a. 8. English translation is taken from *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947). Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998) states: "Reason in fact is not asked to pass judgment on the contents of faith, something of which it would be incapable since this is not its function. Its function is rather to find meaning, to discover explanations which might allow everyone to come to a certain understanding of faith" (§42). In §65 of the same encyclical, John Paul II similarly states: "Theology is structured as an understanding of faith in the light of a twofold methodology: the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei*. With the first, theology makes its own the content of revelation as this has been gradually expounded in sacred tradition, sacred Scripture and the church's living magisterium. With the second, theology seeks to respond through speculative inquiry to specific demands of disciplined thought" (see also §§66 and 73).

I would argue, nonetheless, that much of what has passed as systematic theology within the post-Vatican Church is superficial and specious. The reason for this negative judgment is that some of those who profess to be doctrinal theologians appear to have not fully grasped, in faith, the scriptural and doctrinal truths, “the articles of faith,” that comprise the Church’s faith. Rather, they have sought to proffer an understanding of the Gospel that does not comport with the living theological and magisterial teaching of the Church.⁴ Moreover, many, but hardly all, present Catholic theology faculties, I believe, while presenting themselves as institutions of academic rigor, fail in their education of future theologians precisely because they do not educate their students within a Catholic academic milieu of faith.⁵ Theology is not seen as the fruit of a scriptural and ecclesial faith, but as the free expression of one’s own idiosyncratic theological creativity. In the end, one creates one’s own “faith,” that is, a “gospel” of one’s own theological making. One *believes in* one’s latest book.⁶ Such a theological enterprise has no future, for it is not moored to the perennial unchanging faith of the Catholic Church.

In this light (or darkness) the future of Catholic systematic theology demands and is dependent upon faith-filled theologians who glory in the truth of what has been revealed, and to which Scripture testifies and to which the living theological tradition and ecclesial magisterium bears witness. Only as theologians who love the mysteries of faith will they be able to profess, defend, and advance the truth that they contain for the benefit of the Church and all of God’s people. Here, again, a living faith is needed. Catholic theologians must not only be sharp of intellect and competent in their respective fields of learning, but they must also be men and women of prayer who strive to live holy lives. Only within the lives of holy theologians can the Holy Spirit foster anointed theology,

⁴ For a fuller examination of the relationship between faith and theology and their relationship with the scriptural and magisterial teaching and tradition, see the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, May 24, 1990.

⁵ In critiquing some present theological faculties, I do not want to imply that I am criticizing all of their members.

⁶ Aquinas states concerning faith: “Now it is manifest that he who adheres to the teaching of the Church, as to an infallible rule, assents to whatever the Church teaches; otherwise, if, of the things taught by the Church, he holds what he chooses to hold, and rejects what he chooses to reject, he no longer adheres to the teaching of the Church as to an infallible rule, but to his own will. . . . Therefore, it is clear that such a heretic with regard to one article has no faith in the other articles, but a kind of opinion in accordance with his own will” (*ST* II-II, q. 5, a. 3).

that is, theology that not only expresses the truth, but also engenders and strengthens the faith of those who read and study it. The mysteries of faith are to be articulated in a manner such that they are borne to hearer and reader on the wings of the Holy Spirit. It is not by chance that all of the Doctors of the Church are Saints. At least to some extent, the future of Catholic theology is, therefore, contingent upon future “saintly doctors” of the Church. Only such men and women can foster an authentic renewal in Catholic systematic theology.⁷

Thus, I would also argue that the future of Catholic theology is partially reliant upon a renewal of Catholic theological education within our Catholic theological faculties and universities. Catholic theology faculties, in communion with their students, are to create a culture of living faith, a faith that gives birth to a living Catholic theology. Without a culture of living faith, Catholic faculties might graduate students who are academically trained, but their graduates will be less likely to engender, through their future teaching and writing, a knowledge of and love for Jesus and all the mysteries that he, literally, embodies.⁸

Sacred Scripture

Catholic dogmatic theology, prior to Vatican II, has often been criticized for not being fully scriptural in its argumentation and content. Following the rise of Scholastic theology in the Middle Ages, with its use of *quaestiones disputatae* as the dominant philosophical and theological manner of education, post-Tridentine theology assumed a syllogistic, a text-bookish, method of explicating Catholic doctrine. In so doing, systematic theol-

⁷ Again, Cardinal Dulles states: “The best theology has always been nourished by personal and ecclesial prayer and by holiness of life” (“Criteria of Catholic Theology,” 310–11). In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II states that St. Bonaventure, in his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, “invites the reader to recognize the inadequacy of ‘reading without repentance, knowledge without devotion, research without the impulse of wonder, prudence without the ability to surrender to joy, action divorced from religion, learning sundered from love, intelligence without humility, study unsustained by divine grace, thought without wisdom inspired by God’” (§105). While I am unable, in this essay, to treat more fully the theological and philosophical importance of John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*, I am compelled to note that its thought and spirit should permeate the heart and mind of every Catholic systematic theologian.

⁸ I have treated, in previous essays, the importance of faith in relation to systematic theology. See: “Doing Christian Systematic Theology: Faith, Problems, and Mysteries,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 5, no. 1 (2002): 120–38, and “Faith and the Ecclesial Vocation of the Catholic Theologian,” *Origins* 41, no. 10 (2011): 154–63.

ogy, while preserving its clarity and conciseness, lost the vibrancy of its anointed biblical foundation and expression. While such a critique is often unfairly exaggerated (few theologians were better acquainted with Scripture than the Scholastics), *Dei Verbum* reaffirmed and so emphasized that “sacred theology relies on the written Word of God.” “Therefore, the ‘study of the sacred page’ should be the very soul of sacred theology” (§24). In the light of Vatican II’s exhortation, much contemporary doctrinal theology has returned to the sacred text so as to enliven anew the mysteries of faith. However, I think that if future systematic theology is to flourish, more still needs to be achieved. I hold this for two reasons.

First, in accordance with Vatican II, doctrinal theologians need, with the utmost vigor, to reclaim Sacred Scripture as the life-giving source of their theological enterprise. Too often in the past, particularly immediately following the Council, Scripture has been commandeered by Scripture scholars who have subjected it to their own methods of study and interpretation. Many Scripture scholars have, then, enslaved scriptural interpretation to their own, often dubious, methods of analysis. In so doing, it frequently becomes impossible, so it appears, to ascertain what Scripture is actually proclaiming and professing. Because of this obfuscation, Scripture, as the soul of theology, becomes problematic. This situation has, in turn, so intimidated systematic theologians that they often became hesitant to employ Scripture within their own doctrinal sphere. They felt incompetent to engage adequately such erudite dissection of the scriptural text so as to ferret out its true and authentic meaning. In the end, the Church itself was robbed of her own book. The irony is that much scriptural scholarship has made itself irrelevant, for it has become tedious and dull. Some of the major scriptural commentaries written from the 1960s into the new millennium actually possess minimal life-giving theological content.⁹ This state of affairs can only be rectified when systematic theologians fearlessly liberate Sacred Scripture from the interpretive shackles in which it is still bound, and so reclaim it for the good of their own theological endeavors and the future of their discipline. Only then, can the sacred text be the soul of theology, for only then will Scripture be allowed to enliven the mysteries of the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Church, and

⁹ Happily, this situation is changing. Many of younger Catholic Scripture scholars have themselves abandoned, at least in part, the historical-critical method as the primary hermeneutical means for interpreting Scripture. They perceive Scripture for what it truly is—the well-spring of divine revelation which gives life to all theological endeavors. Thus, they have become accepted guides and welcomed friends of systematic theologians.

the sacraments—those mysteries that God has revealed through his Son in the Holy Spirit, the very mysteries that the Bible clearly proclaims and faithfully professes.

Second, within the reclaiming of Scripture, systematic theologians must not only engage the Bible in order to enhance their own dogmatic studies, but more so, they must teach and write in a more scriptural manner. While maintaining all the proper philosophical and theological distinctions that must be made within the doctrines of the Church, theologians, nonetheless, must learn to undertake their specialties anew, that is, within the context of scriptural language and concepts. The use of scriptural language and thought is important for that language, and the revelation contained within it is the inerrant and inspired language in which the mysteries of the faith were first understood, defended, and proclaimed. It is the language of Jesus, the apostles, and the evangelists. In the course of the Church's history, later theologians and councils employed language and concepts that are not found in Scripture. They did so in order to ensure that Scripture was understood and interpreted properly—in accordance with the mind of its authors. For example, theologians and councils distinguished between "person" and "nature" with regard to the Trinity and the Incarnation. The most unmistakable cases are the use of *homoousion* at the Council of Nicaea, and the use of "transubstantiation" at the Council of Trent. The first assures the biblical truth that Jesus, as the Father's Son, is God as the Father is God, and that together they are the one God. The second affirms and confirms the words of Jesus himself, that the Eucharistic bread and wine are actually changed into his risen body and blood—Jesus is present as he exists now in the full reality of his risen glory. Thus, these dogmatic declarations protected the proper reading of the scriptural texts. The point here is not simply that past dogmatic theology came to the aid of protecting the authentic reading of Scripture, but that presently systematic theology must, for the sake of its own future relevance, newly utilize these past doctrinal statements so as to enliven the biblical text themselves. Systematic theologians do so not simply by recasting biblical language and concepts in more abstract theological terms and dogmatic concepts, though that may be important, but by remolding dogmatic and creedal statements once again into biblical language and recasting them into scriptural concepts. This once-more recasting of biblically founded doctrines into biblical language and concepts brings forth the fuller meaning and beauty of these inspired texts themselves. The inspired texts will assume more fully the force of the truth that they proclaim, and so will more readily be grasped and appreciated, in faith, by others—by both the non-believer and the faithful. While the Church's living theological and

conciliar tradition is essential for the future of systematic theology, the doctrinal theologian must always remember that Sacred Scripture holds primacy of place as the original Spirit-inspired text. In this remembrance, Scripture becomes the life-giving soul of theology. In short, systematic theologians, for the future good of their own discipline, must learn to think biblically, to speak biblically, and to write biblically.¹⁰

The Fathers of the Church

The principal examples of doing doctrinal theology biblically are the first of the Church's theologians—the Fathers of the Church. These men addressed doctrinal issues, often in refutation of heretical positions, and they did so by mining Scripture. Irenaeus's refutation of Gnosticism and his positive presentation of the faith, for example, was entirely biblical in nature. One of his prevailing arguments was that Scripture needed to be interpreted from within the tradition out of which it arose, a living tradition that resided in a "canon of truth" of the true Church. Similarly, Athanasius's primary defense of the full divinity of Jesus again relied on the proper understanding of the sacred texts, texts that were often being misread and so misconstrued by those who denied that Jesus was the Father's eternal divine Son. Yes, new distinctions and novel concepts, as noted above, were made within Athanasius's, and later defenders of Nicaea, dogmatic exegesis of Scripture. Yet, it was Scripture itself that prompted such distinctions, and these innovative scripturally founded developments enlivened biblically proclaimed truths, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation. Thus, the Fathers of the Church offer an excellent example of doing doctrinal theology biblically as well as how doctrine, in turn, aids in the interpretation of Scripture. The Fathers thought and spoke biblically. For them Scripture and doctrine form, by necessity, a hermeneutical interpretative circle—each theologically enriching the other. Thus, I believe, the example of the Fathers of the Church offers a path forward for the future of systematic theology.

Moreover, the Fathers of the Church also bear witness to the necessity of refuting erroneous theological positions. In the face of heresy, many of them are noted for their strong, confrontational, and even

¹⁰ I think this new perichoretic conjoining of doctrine and Scripture is what Pope Benedict XVI encouraged systematic theologians to do, by way of example, when he wrote his trilogy *Jesus of Nazareth*. I have attempted to follow and further Benedict's example in my *Jesus Becoming Jesus: A Theological Interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels*, and in my forthcoming two-volume work, *Jesus Becoming Jesus: A Theological Interpretation of the Gospel of John*.

bellicose language—Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Jerome, and John Chrysostom are examples. Their forthrightness may be jarring to the ears of the contemporary reader, but their very belligerent language manifests their resolute concern for the truth of Gospel. For them, theology is not a game of academic sparring. What was at stake was the integrity of God's revelation, and so the salvation of humankind. They did theology, therefore, in a manner that I have come to call "High Noon Theology." They were not afraid to step forward and confront specious theological positions even when their ecclesial, academic, and, at times, their very lives were at stake.

Because of the doctrinal confusion that the Church presently experiences, and, I believe, will continue to experience in the foreseeable future, systematic theologians are called, whether they like it or not, to be ardent and courageous defenders of the faith. This promotion of the faith may be done in a manner that is less pugnacious than their forefathers, though not less candid and compelling. Their fighting the good fight of faith is primarily done for the sake of the faithful, of confirming them in the faith, the faith that they perceive as under attack, an attack wherein they are unsure as to how to respond with confidence, clarity, and peace. In doing theology at high noon, contemporary and future theologians, as did the Fathers, may place their ecclesial advancement and academic reputations on the line. They may not be "ecclesiastically correct" or "academically approved," but they do maintain, as Catholic theologians, the integrity of their vocation and that of their discipline—which presently is no small achievement or honor.

The Scholastics

As intimated above, Scholasticism, particularly Thomism, after Vatican II appeared to have no future. For all intents and purposes, it was tossed into the dustbin of theological history. Its days had come to an end. Happily, this is now recognized as a false, though by some a still wished-for, prophecy. Instead there is presently a revival within Scholastic theology not only among a new generation of Thomists, but also a resurgence of interest in the thought of Bonaventure. Such a renewal bodes well for the future of dogmatic theology. I would, nonetheless, offer few encouraging comments.

Historically, in the aftermath of Pope Leo XII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of 1879, there was a renewal of Thomistic philosophy. Such a restoration is exemplified in the mid-twentieth century work of such philosophers as Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson. However, there was not a corresponding revival in Thomistic theology. Over the last thirty or so years, this lacuna has been rectified. Thomistic thought with regards to the

Trinity, the Incarnation, salvation, the sacraments, and doctrinal theology in general has been creatively rejuvenated. Such a renewal is all to the good and will, hopefully, contribute to the future of systematic theology. Nonetheless, in keeping with what I have already suggested, I think Thomists, among whom I would include myself, must continue to place Aquinas's thought within a more biblical setting. This would not only breathe new life within his thought, but it would also make it more accessible to the clergy and especially the laity. While the truth of which Thomas speaks would be maintained, it would also now achieve a linguistic and conceptual scriptural beauty that would be more attractive to the contemporary student and reader.

Moreover, and this is a small tiff I have with my fellow Thomists, we must ensure that we affirm Aquinas's thought because we, as did he, hold it to be true, rather than we hold it to be true because Aquinas said it. Thomas would be pleased with the former, but he would be dismayed at the latter. For Thomas, the acceptance of a position on authority is the least acceptable of all arguments, except in the case of God and the Church's ecclesial magisterium. More importantly, to be of the mind that absolutely everything that Thomas held is settled, stymies theological corrective development, even if that development would be a continuance of his thought. Likewise, such a mindset does not allow further theological creativity, the undertaking of new theological issues that Thomas did not address or did not address adequately due to the theological and cultural milieu in which he lived. To think that Aquinas properly addressed every possible question, though he did address more than most theologians will ever address, is to relegate theology simply to providing Thomas's already available answers to every conceivable issue. Aquinas may give us the philosophical and theological principles and the foundational means for addressing a multiplicity of contemporary questions, but he cannot possibly provide the full answers, and sometimes the correct answers, which will meet the needs of present and future doctrinal theology. What I am suggesting, which all my Thomistic friends would agree, is a faithful, but creative, and sometimes corrective, use of Thomas. In other words, on behalf of systematic theology, theologians need to be Thomists as Aquinas was a Thomist.

I would be remiss, as well as being accused of not being a loyal Franciscan, if I did not make a few comments concerning Bonaventure. Bonaventure's thought, on the whole, is not as metaphysical or philosophical as that of Aquinas's, or at least in the same manner. There is truth in Thomas being designated "the Angelic Doctor" and Bonaventure being titled "the Seraphic Doctor." Yet, this difference provides its own appeal and

strength, for Bonaventure addresses theological questions from within what is perceived as a more “mystical” context. Moreover, he is suspicious of using a philosophy that appears to be independent of theology. For Bonaventure, philosophy is always at the service of revelation. For many, Bonaventure brings to light the beauty of the mysteries of faith, a warmth that touches the inner heart of its students and readers. Because of this charm, I notice, especially among a new generation of younger scholars, a resurgence of interest in Bonaventure’s theology, which, I believe, will also rightly contribute to the future of doctrinal theology. The interplay between the theology of Aquinas and that of Bonaventure cannot but help further the good of the Church and the people of God.¹¹

Apologetic and Evangelistic

All that I have discussed above concerning the future of systematic theology can be reduced to its end—to be apologetic and evangelistic. Only as doctrinal theology promotes and defends the Gospel of Jesus Christ as found within the Catholic Church will it have a future. Equally, and, maybe more so, only as doctrinal theology is evangelistic, aimed at the conversion of non-believers and the strengthening of the faith of those who believe, will it serve the ever present and future commission of the Church, that of proclaiming the Gospel to all nations and people. Both the apologetic and evangelical nature of doctrinal theology often come together, both in the classroom and on the written page, but, for the sake of clarity, I will treat them separately.

More and more, Western secular culture comprises a virulent animus against Christianity and particularly against the Catholic Church. More so, within a significant number of countries there is a persistent persecution of Christians. This is especially witnessed within Muslim countries and their bordering countries wherein they maraud. China also provides a glaring example of Christian persecution. All of these, and other situations, need to be adequately addressed from a doctrinal perspective. Although secular Western culture may not be convinced by the arguments, yet, for the sake of the faithful, doctrinal theologians are to provide appropriate apologetic arguments in defense of Christianity and its beliefs, and thus affirm its rightful place within society. This defense is to be made not only within Western countries, but equally within Islamic countries and countries such as China. Religious freedom must be acknowledged as

¹¹ While, in recent years, I have come to a greater appreciation of Bonaventure, I have customarily found that Aquinas approaches doctrinal questions and theological issues in a manner more in keeping with my metaphysical and philosophical interests.

a good and not as a threat—even if it continues to be perceived as such by religious and secular totalitarian regimes.

Moreover, there is a growing movement that wishes to relativize all religions and religious founders. Such an effort is more insidious than outright persecution, for it is often encouraged and fostered in the name of fraternal love among people of all faiths. While peoples of all faiths are to respect one another and foster peace among themselves, yet truth is of the utmost importance, especially if it involves the truth that God himself has revealed through his words and actions. Thus, Catholic doctrinal theologians cannot, nor can those in ecclesial authority, undermine the singularity of the Catholic faith or the uniqueness of the Catholic Church. Rather, they are to teach that the fullness of the Father's salvific revelation is found in the Incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ, who has, through his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection, obtained forgiveness of sin, victory over death, and eternal life. Jesus is the universal Savior and definitive Lord, and only through faith in him, in communion with the Holy Spirit, are men and women once more recreated in his image, and so become children of his Father. Not to confirm and profess these truths is to denigrate Jesus, making him simply one of many founders of a religion, and ultimately such a denial is an insult to God his Father, who gave him the name that is above every other name whether in heaven or earth. Every knee is to bend and every tongue is to proclaim that Jesus alone is Lord to the glory of God the Father (see Phil 2:9–11). The fullness of this faith is found and is most fully made present within the Catholic Church. All of the above may have the appearance of Catholic triumphalism, but it is an honor that she has not bestowed upon herself, but one that Jesus, her Savior and Lord, has bequeathed to her in his love. Systematic theologians should never, then, be ashamed of or embarrassed by promoting these truths.¹² Rather, the future of Catholic theology is dependent upon forthrightly making them known—such a making-known is to the glory of doctrinal theologians.¹³

¹² For an explanatory defense of the singularity of Jesus and the Catholic Church, see the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith's declaration *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, August 6, 2000. Also, on the uniqueness of Jesus in relation to other religious founders, see my "The Will of God the Father: To Unite All Things in Christ," *Catholic World Report*, June 3, 2019, catholicworldreport.com/2019/06/02/pope-francis-the-uniqueness-of-christ-and-the-will-of-the-father/ This was written in response to the Abu Dhabi statement co-signed by Pope Francis and Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb on February 4, 2019.

¹³ The above does not rule out the authentic need for dialogue with various Christian denominations or other religions. Rather, it is within such authentic dialogue that

Obvious from the above, systematic theologians, if they are to enact properly their vocation, are called to be evangelists. Since the pontificate of Pope Paul VI, there has been a renewed emphasis on evangelization. His groundbreaking *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Encyclical Letter on Evangelization in the Modern World) is a clarion call to preach the entire Gospel to all peoples and nations (see §§25–39 and 49–58). He notes that “Jesus himself” was “the very first and the greatest evangelizer,” and, therefore, “evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize” (§§7 and 14). John Paul II popularized the notion of a “new evangelization,” a revitalized effort of offering the Gospel to those who do not believe, and also a renewed preaching, a re-evangelization, of the Gospel within the Church herself.

The notion that systematic theologians are to be evangelizers may, at first, appear to be beneath *their paygrades*. They are theologians after all. They teach in respected colleges and universities, and hold prestigious chairs. They write articles for esteemed academic journals and author books dealing with sophisticated theological issues. Most of them are not missionaries or catechists in far-flung lands where the Gospel has yet to be heard. Yet, to my mind, if doctrinal theologians do not evangelize within their classrooms, if they do not, at least to some extent, transform the classroom podium into an evangelizing tool, they are failing in their vocation, especially at a time when the students who sit before them know little or nothing about the Catholic faith. Likewise, although they may, in their writings, be treating the theological intricacies of the faith, yet even here they can do so in a manner that manifests the truth and beauty of what is believed. Dulles notes that to call Catholic theology evangelical, that is, an evangelizing theology, may appear odd, for such an understanding is associated with evangelical Protestantism or Pentecostalism. However, he declares that the call for a new evangelization demands “a renewal of Catholic theology, so that it may contribute to, rather than retard, the evangelical effort.”¹⁴ To foster and enhance the faith of one’s students and

the truths can be more clearly expressed and in a manner that can be more fully appreciated.

¹⁴ Avery Dulles, “Evangelizing Theology,” *First Things*, March 1996, firstthings.com/article/1996/03/002-evangelizing-theology. This article should be read in full by all doctrinal theologians and graduate students, for it discusses how such an evangelizing theology can be achieved, as well as the obstacles that it faces. To my pleasure, he writes that “in seeking the right principles for an evangelically oriented theology that is fully consonant with Catholic Christianity, we could not do better than look to the New Testament. The Gospels, the Acts, and the letters of Paul are permeated by such a theology.” In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II writes that one of

readers is the supreme end of all theology. To offer one's audience the gift of Jesus is to give them the greatest of "free handouts."

Conclusion

I hope this essay is a worthy and helpful contribution so as to further the future of Catholic Systematic Theology. I have attempted to note some of its past and present weaknesses, as well as to offer positive suggestions going forward. I will conclude by making one last point. Catholic doctrinal theologians must always remember that the future of their discipline is an eschatological future. In all that they teach and write, they are advancing the coming of Jesus, for all doctrine is subsumed in him and all doctrine finds its completion only when he comes at the end of time, and so fully becomes who he is—the fully enacted universal Savior and definitive Lord. Presently theology is the contemplating of doctrine as "in a mirror dimly," but when Jesus comes in glory, theologians, and all the faithful they have taught, will see him "face to face." Now, theologians "know in part," then they will "fully understand" (1 Cor 13:12). Until the knowing and loving of Jesus is fully consummated, Catholic theology will have a future.¹⁵ **N.V**

the charges entrusted by Vatican II to theology is "the task of renewing its specific methods in order to serve evangelization more effectively" (§92).

- ¹⁵ Having said that, I believe that in heaven people will continue to engage their same grace-filled talents that they exercised here on earth, though now in a "heavenly" manner. Such an understanding is in keeping with everyone contributing to the heavenly life of the body of Christ. Thus, doctrinal theologians will continue to expound upon the mysteries of faith, mysteries that they now contemplate in their fullness. Thus, doctrinal theology truly has an eschatological future. The great spinoff of this is that all of the heavenly faithful will be extremely interested and will pay the utmost attention; and there will be no papers to correct or exams to mark—something of which we teachers have always dreamed.