

***The Trinity* by Thomas Joseph White, O.P.: A Model of Living Thomism**

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“The human being naturally seeks wisdom.” From the very first line of the magisterial work we are dealing with, Fr. Thomas Joseph White’s 2022 *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God*, it is all about wisdom. Wisdom was already at the heart of a previous work by Fr. White devoted to the natural theology of St. Thomas, his 2009 *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*. Wisdom is more than the accumulation of information or the juxtaposition of knowledge. It is an eminent form of knowledge that, on the one hand, involves the person of the thinker in all its dimensions, intellectual, emotional, existential, and on the other, seeks to understand its object in the light of the most fundamental causes, which are simultaneously the most enlightening and explanatory principles because they are the most universal. *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* is undoubtedly a work of wisdom. Fr. White grasps the entire Christian mystery from its Trinitarian source, since, as we shall see, the entire Mystery (in the Pauline sense of the economy of salvation in Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Father’s benevolent purpose) is at the same time rooted in the eternal mystery of the triune God and makes it known to us as it unfolds its truth and saving power in time.

But the sapiential nature of the object studied has some effect on the form of the work itself. Indeed, if Fr. White were not Rector Magnificent of the Angelicum, he would be a magnificent architect, because he possesses a sense of order to the highest degree and knows how to introduce unity in diversity. The presentation of *The Trinity* is perfectly structured, and therefore very

clear and didactic. Among many other factors that create its unity, I was especially interested in the highlighting of what the philosopher André de Muralt calls “structures of thought”: similarities of proportionality between the ways in which authors from even very different theological epochs have treated a problem.¹ I am thinking for instance of how Fr. White shows the strong structural similarities between contemporary Trinitarian theologies and the three types of medieval Trinitarian theology (the Franciscan, the Thomist, and the Nominalist). “My claim here is that the modern Trinitarian tradition tends to reproduce various elements of the medieval traditions, . . . albeit in creative and unexpected ways” (399). So it is a conceptually well-unified work, and where there is unity, there is being, goodness and beauty.

The introduction, as I said, is placed under the sign of wisdom. Fr. White takes up there the neo-Scholastic theme of the “three wisdoms”: philosophical wisdom, theological wisdom, and mystical wisdom.² The book’s perspective is explicitly that of theological wisdom, as a scientific form of the intelligence of faith, but (we shall return to this point in connection with the place given to philosophy) it puts into practice in an exemplary manner the collaboration, without confusion or separation, between the three wisdoms.³

My purpose, of course, is not, nor can it be, to “summarize” the contents of a book of more than seven hundred pages, which manages to be both a comprehensive handbook for higher theological education and a true personal theological essay. I will therefore limit myself to highlighting three partial but significant aspects.

(1) The first is the explicit and overt Thomistic character of the book (see 6–7). *The Trinity* is in fact a vibrant plea in favor of the relevance of the theology of St. Thomas, as indicated by the very last sentence:

The Church today can and should still have recourse to the theology of Thomas Aquinas, and to the living Thomistic tradition, as a privileged means of interpreting and advancing her own understanding of the mystery of God. (690)

¹ André de Muralt, *L'unité de la philosophie politique, De Scot, Occam et Suarez au libéralisme contemporain*, (Paris: Vrin, 2002), ch. 3 (“La méthode d’analyse structurelle et de compréhension analogique des doctrines philosophiques”).

² John Paul II, encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998), §44.

³ See White, *Trinity*, 690: “The study of Trinity is a distinctively theological enterprise, one that is not philosophical as such, nor identical with the mystical life of participation in the Trinity. However, it presupposes and makes use of a philosophy of the divine nature, within itself and without becoming alienated from itself. It also assists the mystical life, without pretending to constitute it or substitute for it.”

The Trinity is the demonstration *in actu exercito* of the truth of this concluding statement. I therefore propose to reflect, in the first part of my paper, on the nature of Fr. White's Thomism, which depends, as we shall see, on his general conception of theology

(2) In the second part, I will point out what seems to me to be the fundamental thesis of *The Trinity*: it concerns the articulation between, on the one hand, what is commonly called the immanent Trinity and, on the other hand, what Fr. White resolutely refuses to call the economic Trinity (578–86).⁴

(3) Finally, in the third part, I will show how *The Trinity* exemplarily implements the relationship between philosophy and theology as defined by *Fides et ratio*.

An Avowedly Thomist Work

Thomist Tradition and Doctrine of the Faith

Fr. White's Thomism can be understood only in the light of his general view of what Catholic theology is (or should be). Now, the nature of theology results from its place in the broad and dynamic Thomist conception of *sacra doctrina*—the sacred teaching—conceived as a great stream of salvific light that starts from the Trinity and by degrees reaches out to men, leading them back to the Trinity. The notion of *sacra doctrina* makes it possible to highlight the essential continuity between the Source—divine Wisdom that generously communicates itself—then Sacred Scripture as the place where this communication is objectified, and finally the transmission and dynamic unfolding of the light of revealed wisdom in the Tradition of the Fathers and in the teaching of the Church. Christian theology as the search for rational understanding of faith takes its place within this movement. Through theology, the light of divine Wisdom comes to illuminate and nourish the intelligence of believers. This vision of *sacra doctrina* is expressed not only in question 1 of the *prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae* [ST], but also in Aquinas's famous inaugural lecture in Paris, *Rigans montes*.

From the highest clouds rain flows forth by which the mountains and rivers are refreshed and send themselves forth so that the satiated earth can bear fruit. Similarly, from the heights of divine wisdom the

⁴ See White, *Trinity*, 583: "It is inevitably misleading even to refer to 'economic Trinity' as a subject of history who can be distinguished in any way from the eternal Trinity, and it makes little sense even to raise the question how this Trinity differs *or is identical with* the immanent Trinity."

minds of the learned, represented by the mountains, are watered, by whose ministry the light of divine wisdom reached to the minds of those who listen.

The theologian's research cannot be isolated from this general context. Consequently, for Thomas, there is no theology except in strict dependence on the word of God, received, contemplated, lived and transmitted in the Church. The Thomasian thesis of theology as subalternate to the science of God and the blessed has no other meaning. Unfortunately, certain developments in the late Middle Ages led (also in the Thomistic tradition) to the detachment of "speculative" or systematic theology, not from Revelation as such, but from its concrete and vital biblical and patristic ground. One of the challenges of contemporary Thomism, brilliantly accepted by Fr. White, is to re-root Thomistic theology in this nurturing ground. It is significant that *The Trinity* is published in a series (of which Fr. White himself is coeditor with Matthew Levering) entitled *Thomistic Ressourcement*, the ambition of which is to reconcile two enemy brothers: on the one hand, the broad and very fruitful "return to the sources" movement that marked twentieth-century theology (but whose results have often been used to fight against neo-Thomism), and on the other hand, Thomism (long too suspicious of the risks of historicism present in this movement). In order to bring about the desired reconciliation, it is necessary not only to show how Aquinas himself was deeply immersed in Tradition (such is the purpose of "biblical Thomism" and of the studies, flourishing today, on St. Thomas and the Fathers), but also, as Fr. White does in *The Trinity*, to practice a Thomist theology that remains in permanent vital contact with the sources of Revelation. Hence the importance not only of the first part of the book, explicitly dedicated to the development of Trinitarian doctrine in the Bible and Tradition ("Principles and disputations: on the development of trinitarian doctrine"), but of the way in which, in the rest of the book, speculative reflection is never disconnected from the scriptural datum, which irrigates the entire work.

The first consequence of this comprehensive view of theology is to set as a basic epistemological principle the existence of substantial continuity, "organic development" (667), on the Trinitarian question, among the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Fathers, the councils, and theology.

There is a fundamental intellectual and historical continuity between the New Testament revelation of the apostolic age and the subsequent doctrinal definitions of the Catholic Church. (110)

The more “philosophical” approach we will see in the New Testament, and subsequently in the Greek and Latin patristic theologians, as well as the Catholic scholastic tradition, should not be seen as something alien to the divine revelation of the scriptures, but as something developing organically within Jewish and Christian tradition out of a more profound study of scripture itself. (64)

For Fr. White, the Trinitarian doctrine of the Church Fathers and councils is truly and explicitly present in the New Testament. It is not one interpretation among many others possible, valid only for a certain era or culture. Even the psychological analogy of the Trinity highlighted by St. Augustine (whose “centrality and essential importance” for Trinitarian theology Fr. White defends [13]) can claim its biblical character. All this raises the formidable epistemological problem of the articulation between historical research (in the biblical or patristic sphere) and dogmatic theology. We know that, unfortunately, these two continents do not cease to drift away from each other, to the point that the dogmatic theologian (like Fr. White) is forced to work out on his own the biblical theology he undoubtedly needs, while exegetes often refuse to subject the so-called “rebellious diversity” of biblical texts to syntheses that are always considered premature or simplifying. However, without ever neglecting the demands of rational argumentation on the level of historical science, the dogmatician starts from the methodological theological *a priori* of the existence of continuity, which helps him to find it (one finds best what one knows is already there):

If the mystery is real (God became human), then only a person who is so illuminated by faith and sacred tradition can study the historical reality with a sufficient objectivity, so as to be capable of understanding adequately the subject under investigation. (66)

There remains the risk that this theological and teleological approach to history occasionally leads the theologian to neglect historical diversity and marginalize contingencies. Such criticism will certainly be leveled at Fr. White. For example, it is a little strange to say about the presentation of historical events by a biblical scholar that it is “moderately conservative” (51). The historical presentation aims to be neither conservative nor liberal: it seeks to be as true and accurate as possible.

Be that as it may, Thomist theology, like all theology, must take its place within this continuity of *sacra doctrina* and seek to update the understanding of the one faith transmitted once and for all.

Thomism is a form of thinking that develops not adjacent to or over and against patristic understanding of the Trinity, but in profound intellectual continuity with the deepest impulses of pro-Nicene Trinitarian speculation, itself a reflection on the inner meaning of the New Testament. (111)

This reference of all theologians to the common faith of the Church prevents a particular theological school from becoming parochial and self-referential and allows it to remain open to dialogue with other theological traditions.

Without the unity that underlies the schools, theology become insular, sectarian, and narrow. Without the spirit of debate, argument, and engagement, theological culture becomes excessively individualistic, subjectively therapeutic, and intellectually superficial. (7)

What Thomism?

Fr. White's Thomist option fits into this framework. But which Thomism is it? Because, viewed closely, Thomism is anything but monolithic. It is many families within the clan. In the past, they were distinguished according to specific doctrinal theses. Today, the distinction is more in the style and methods used. So, what is the Thomistic style of Fr. White? In several chapters of the book, in parts 2 and 3, he follows in the footsteps of the great Dominican commentatorial tradition (although he quotes little from the ancient commentators) in offering a clear and up-to-date commentary on questions 2–43 of *ST* I. To do so, he reconstructs the internal logic of the Thomasian texts and explains their theses, but he also knows how to take advantage, without sinking into archaeologism, of the impressive contribution of medieval studies to our knowledge of St. Thomas and his historical-doctrinal context. For example, the comparison with the Franciscan Trinitarian tradition (St. Bonaventure, Bl. Duns Scotus), whereby the person of the Father as Father somehow precedes the generation of the Son, allows him to highlight the originality of the Thomasian doctrine of the divine persons as subsistent relations.

To enrich his reading of Aquinas, Fr. White also takes advantage of his personal position at the crossroads between “continental” Thomism, on the one hand (i.e., a Thomism that is attentive both to the historical contextualization of Thomas's work and to the dialogue/confrontation with the continental philosophical tradition: Kant, Hegel, Heidegger), and on the other hand, analytical Thomism, which is certainly less present in this

book but not neglected, for example in relation to the hotly debated issues concerning simplicity or divine eternity.

All in all, the Thomism practiced by Fr. White is a “living Thomism.”

This book aspires to be a work of Thomistic *ressourcement*, a study that contributes to living Thomistic tradition, through its engagement with contemporary theology, and that contributes to contemporary theology through its engagement with Thomistic Tradition. (8)

It corresponds to the Thomism the Holy Father called for in his address to the participants of the Eleventh International Thomistic Congress in September of 2022:

It is necessary to promote, according to Jacques Maritain’s expression, a “living Thomism,” capable of renewing itself in order to answer today’s questions. Thus, Thomism moves forward following a vital movement of “systole and diastole.” Systole, because one must first concentrate on studying the work of St Thomas in its historical and cultural context, in order to identify its structuring principles and grasp its originality. Then, however, comes the diastole: to turn in dialogue to today’s world, to critically assimilate what is true and right in the culture of the time.

The image is biological, which should come as no surprise for a tradition of thought inspired by a philosopher-biologist (and not mathematician) such as Aristotle. Living Thomism is thus an organism that grows, among other things, through the critical assimilation of the elements of truth contained in the thought and culture it encounters. Critical assimilation has a negative side. In the very first chapters of the *Summa contra gentiles*, St. Thomas explains that the office of the wise man is not only to establish the truth, but also to refute opposing errors, because a truth is fully justified only when it is established that its negation cannot be true. Fr. White has courageously made Aquinas’s intention his own: “In the name of the divine Mercy, I have the confidence to embark upon the work of a wise man, even though this may surpass my powers, and I have set myself the task of making known, as far as my limited powers will allow, the truth that the Catholic faith professes, and of setting aside the errors that are opposed to it.”⁵ Thus, several chapters (e.g., those on divine simplicity and impassibility) have a clear apologetic

⁵ *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 2, trans. Anton Pegis.

intention. They begin or end with an evaluation of objections and criticisms of classical Thomistic doctrines. For instance, chapter 13, on simplicity (256–59: “Can God know and love us if his nature is simple?”), or chapter 16 on divine immutability and impassibility (292–97: “Some objections to divine immutability in contemporary theology”).

But Fr. White *plays fair*. He does not act as a grand Inquisitor of the errors in contemporary Trinitarian theology, but tries to understand the legitimate intentions behind the theses he has to criticize. Indeed, he strives to show how Thomism is able to respond much better to these right intentions. For example, the traditional but much contested idea of God’s impassibility is, according to him, able to respond to man’s desire for salvation, much better than the passible God, carried away by the flow of becoming and suffering:

Contrary to the objection that divine impassibility renders God insensitive to human suffering or incapable of love, it is therefore precisely the divine impassibility that enables God to victoriously triumph over suffering and death without taking it into himself. In fact, it is only divine impassibility that allows God to truly leave suffering and death definitively behind in the eschaton. (305)

Which brings me to my second point.

The Immanent Trinity Precedes the Economic Trinity

If I had to identify the fundamental thesis—dare I say the *Grundaxiom*?—that underlies the entire work and gives it its profound speculative unity, I would say that it is that: The eternal and immanent Trinity precedes the “economic Trinity,” that is, the Trinity as it is manifested in creation and history. In other words, the mystery of God, although revealed to us through creation and history, especially in the Passover of Jesus, is not intrinsically dependent on his creative and salvific activity; it is neither constituted in itself, nor intrinsically modified by this activity. As Fr. White says about St Augustine: “The economy of salvation reveals but does not produce the immanent Trinity” (169). The Trinity is known in and through history, but the Trinity is not in itself “history.”

In saying this, Fr. White knows that he opposes the mainstream in contemporary Trinitarian theologies. Therefore, it is necessary for him to show the limits of these Trinitarian theologies, and the best way to do this is to expose their genealogy. Where does this historicization of the Trinity come from? Decisive, according to him, is the Kantian ban on all

metaphysics. It not only leads to the abandonment of natural knowledge of God (see ch. 2), but also closes off access to analogical knowledge of the immanent life of the Trinity (by means of psychological analogy).

If one wants to understand the Trinitarian persons in their distinctiveness without doing so by reference to immanent activity of an immaterial kind, one will do so inevitably by appeal to transitive activity. (423)

Consequently, from now on, it is only from history that it is possible to think the Trinity.

The typical tendency in post-Kantian theological paradigms since Hegel is to seek to find God above all or exclusively in history, rather than as one who is understood metaphysically as transcendent of it. (607)

Although contemporary theologies have often reacted against the Hegelian reduction of the Trinity, they remain captive to its problematic:

It is true that the modern trinitarian revival does entail a reaction against key premises of Hegel's depiction of the Trinity. However, there are central points of continuity that exist between Hegel and the main protagonist of modern trinitarian theology. (553)

This continuity entails, on the one hand, the substitution of the metaphysics of dialectical becoming for the metaphysics of the act of being as perfection and, on the other hand, the concomitant promotion of freedom as the true sense of being and consequently as the primary foundation of all other attributes in God:

Divine freedom is elevated by Hegel above any logic of identity or of essence, and in a sense then, freedom replaces nature as a more fundamental category of ontology. (555)

For Moltmann, freedom becomes the category of being that is utterly fundamental in God, such that other attributes (infinity, omnipresence, eternity) are subject to freedom and can be suspended. The deity is subject by divine freedom to a dipolar state in which God

can elect to become his seeming contrary, through the motivations of love. (593)

This last observation seems decisive to me. In my opinion, the intrinsic limits of many contemporary theologies (not only on the Trinitarian issue) result from the insufficiently critical, and often univocal, assumption of the specific categories of modern philosophies of the Subject (personhood, freedom, relationality, etc.) at the expense of the more universal categories of the metaphysics of the act of being. The model of the human Subject with its properties is projected onto God and the divine persons with the risk of anthropomorphism and even, in Trinitarian theology, of tri-theism with the reduction of Trinitarian unity to mere moral or inter-subjective unity resulting from the operations (love, obedience., etc.) of persons already constituted in themselves. For instance:

Balthasar tends to speak of the Trinitarian persons as if they are distinct, pre-constituted personal subjects who choose freely to engage by self-surrender with one another, both in eternity and in economy. (402n47)

Instead, Fr. White repeatedly emphasizes that the notion of personhood does not apply univocally to God and creatures and that, consequently, the communion of divine persons cannot be thought of on the simplistic model of human intersubjectivity.

The communion of persons in God is not one that results from a free decision on the part of the persons, as if the Father, Son, and Spirit were to first decide to love one another in a reciprocal love of free choice, so that only then would their perfect communion result. (508)

This is the fundamental point: what is the metaphysical dimension of reality that can serve as the basis and starting point for the process of analogical knowledge of God? In order to respect the transcendence of God with respect to any kind of creature and to respect the apophatic trend of Christian theology, it is necessary that this basis has a maximal universality and indeterminacy, which is offered not by the too narrow and too determinate categories of human subjectivity, but by the act of being, which embraces both the physical order and the order of spiritual subjectivity.

Be that as it may, Fr. White rightly links today's orientations of Trinitarian theologies to the post-Kantian philosophical shifts mentioned above. Some,

like Zizioulas (508 n6), reducing being to freedom, imagine a free eternal self-constitution of the Trinity through the free acts of each of the persons. Others attribute the intimate constitution of the Trinity to the divine operation in the world, and especially to God's history with us in Christ.

In modern continental Trinitarian theology, . . . God's history of being with us in Christ is crucial to our understanding of the immanent life of God and is in some sense constitutive of God's Trinitarian life in itself. (402)

Trinitarian persons engage in new divine free acts in and through the economy of Salvation, so that their properties and their inner life of communion are seen to develop in and through the economy. (15)

At that point, Fr. White develops a systematic Chalcedonian critique—"Christ's divine nature is truly distinguishable from his human action and suffering" (402)—of what he terms "inverted monophysitism" (607–17), the idea that the *acta et passa Christi* directly and unambiguously reveal the properties of the divine nature of the Son as such, the Trinitarian being of the Son being identified with his human being.

Having said this, Fr. White intends to safeguard, but within the parameters of orthodoxy, the idea that salvation history is the place par excellence of Trinitarian Revelation.

The activity of the Trinity in the economy does truly reveal the Trinity, most especially in virtue of the incarnation, life, obedience, suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. How can we affirm this central truth of modern theology while taking account of the unity of the three persons in one divine nature and the distinction of the two natures of Christ in one divine person? (559)

The solution must be sought in Thomasian theology of the divine missions (chapter 30), which acts as a point of articulation between the immanent Trinitarian mystery and the economy of creation and salvation. The divine missions economically disclose the formerly hidden inner life of God. But Fr. White goes even further and pays great attention (more than classical Thomism) to the way Christ's very behavior in his human nature makes us contemplate—but *analogically* not univocally—the mystery of the immanent life of the Trinity.

The “icon” of Jesus’ human nature both manifests and conceals his divine nature, because it is only analogous to the divine nature. (647)

For instance:

The Son’s love for the world, exhibited in his human endurance of suffering, does manifest, by analogy or similitude, the eternal love of self-communication that is present in the Father, Son, and Spirit. . . . It is like it, participates in it, and is expressive of it, in an human form.” (645)

However, the fact remains that the Trinitarian mystery precedes any divine operation *ad extra*. This transcendence of the triune God is guaranteed by the so-called *De Deo ut uno*, questions 2–26 of *ST I*, in which St. Thomas treats of the essence common to the three, of the one substance that is the three. Indeed, on the one hand, the divine perfections presented in *De Deo ut uno*, beginning with absolute simplicity, guarantee the transcendence and aseity of the one divine substance with respect to creation. On the other hand, the affirmation of the simplicity of the indivisible divine substance makes consubstantiality the unbreakable framework of reflection on the distinction of persons. But the strong philosophical density of this *De Deo ut uno* leads us to say a few words, in our third and final part, about the place of philosophy in *The Trinity*.

Philosophy and Theology

Fr. White—and I certainly would not contradict him⁶—is convinced that *De Deo ut uno* is a thoroughly theological treatise. In fact, the distinction between *De Deo ut uno* and *De Deo ut trino* results from theological reasons and not, as is too often believed, from the epistemological distinction between a philosophical treatise on God, which would present as a prolegomena what human reason can know about God, and a theological treatise reserved for that which is totally beyond the grasp of reason.⁷ It does not. *De*

⁶ See S.-T. Bonino, *Dieu, ‘Celui qui est’ [De Deo ut uno]* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2016), 85–107.

⁷ Therefore, it is a bit clumsy to say “Aquinas’s *de Deo ut uno* treatise (*ST I*, qq. 2–26), then, is indeed concerned with what can be known of the nature of the one God by means of natural reason operating at its summit” (White, *Trinity*, 193). It is enough to consider q. 23 on predestination to understand that *De Deo ut uno* is not limited to what natural reason can know about God.

Deo ut uno is theological through and through and has structural theological links with the treatise on the Trinity (e.g., the study of divine processions in *De Deo ut trino* presupposes the doctrine of the divine immanent operations of knowledge and love presented in *De Deo ut uno*).

Having said this, theology, as the search for scientific *intellectus fidei* by means of reason illuminated by faith needs philosophy and uses it as a privileged tool, provided that philosophical doctrines are accepted and judged in the light of the specific principles of theology, which is by no means philosophy applied to religious matters.

The assimilation of philosophy is inevitable because men can only think of God revealing himself to humanity by using the natural knowledge they have of God and human nature. (4)

It is a “marriage” for good and evil. We have already mentioned the “evil”: the negative influence of certain philosophies on theology. But let us conclude on the good. What are the conditions of a happy and successful marriage? That it be an alliance, not a fusion. The philosophy that theology needs must not be a crypto-theology. It must retain its autonomy. Therefore, Fr. White is right to criticize post-modern Thomists who reduce the metaphysics of *De Deo ut uno* to the mere “internal exploration of the grammar of theology” (189) or those who directly introduce the specifically Trinitarian categories into the metaphysical explanation of reality. That said, autonomy does not mean independence, and Fr. White knows that natural philosophical knowledge of God can best unfold in the environment of faith. As grace does with nature, *De Deo ut uno* assumes, heals, and brings philosophical theology to fruition.

I conclude this introduction (but I bet that the symposium sequel will not disprove me) by thanking Fr. White for this masterful work of wisdom. *The Trinity* is undoubtedly one of the most convincing demonstrations of the Thomist theological tradition’s aptitude for renewal and engagement in contemporary “conversation.” In short: a living Thomism. N·V