

Thomism and Ecumenism^{*}

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THE OFFICIAL goal of ecumenism is to “[restore] unity among all the followers of Christ”¹ by overcoming the divisions which have arisen in the past. In this essay, I will address three essential elements of ecumenical dialogue:

1. What is the visible unity among the followers of Christ which ecumenism seeks to reestablish?
2. In ecumenism, one must begin from commonly held truths in order to understand divergences. For instance, what are the issues surrounding the truth which all Christians accept, that is, the necessity of preaching the Word of God?
3. What criteria are used to select themes for dialogue, and how are these themes addressed? I will propose the hierarchy of truths as a criterion for choosing themes, highlighting by way of example how one theme can be addressed with the help of St. Thomas: the philosophical presuppositions of the various confessional positions.

Visible Unity among Followers of Christ

Visible unity among the followers of Christ is the goal of ecumenical dialogue, at least as understood by the Catholic Church. Moreover, the

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¹ Vatican II, *Unitatis redintegratio* [UR], §1, in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello, 1998), 453.

ecumenical movement, like any other movement, cannot orient itself without knowing its goal.

Acceding to certain understandable but deplorable dynamics of conflict, the respective theological positions of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation have long been expressed in polemical terms.

The classic example of the limitations of Counter-Reformation theology is St. Robert Bellarmine's definition of the Church. Attempting to respond to the Protestant insistence on the invisible aspects of the Church, he unilaterally upholds the visible ones: "The Church is a human society as visible and tangible as the society of the Roman people, or the kingdom of France, or the Republic of Venice."² This vision of the Church has had a major cultural and theological impact: ever since then—and still today, more often than might be thought—the word "Church" has designated a visible structure, more or less stripped of spiritual significance. This idea thus embodies the very Reformation presuppositions which it was supposed to combat. Were dialogue to be established between two different visions of the Church, neither of which could quite connect the visible component with the spiritual reality, what would happen? Ecumenism would be interpreted as an effort to reestablish unity in terms of structures which were obviously useful but without much effect on the relationship of believers with Christ, a relationship which might very well be lived out (as it had been for centuries) within different structures. The urgency of the need for visible unity would thus not be really recognized.

Since he lived before the Reformation, St. Thomas Aquinas was not tainted by its atmosphere, and his ecclesiology is much broader than that of Bellarmine, as well as closer to that of Eastern Christianity. According to Thomas, the Church is the gathering of Christ's faithful; these faithful are united by faith, hope, and charity; they are sanctified by the blood of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the indwelling of the Trinity; the Church is universal as regards its "geographical" extension (on this earth and reaching up into Heaven), the status of its members, and its extension through time; finally, the Church, built on the foundation of the Apostles, is indestructible (all these elements are summarized in his commentary on the *Credo*). One might get the impression that St. Thomas is merely listing an assortment of features with no clear interconnection, to be studied individually in succession, as is usually done in ecumenical dialogue.

But in reality, for Thomas, all these characteristics of the Church are gathered into one single view unified by the concept of relationship to Christ.

² Robert Bellarmine, *De controversiis*, II, Lib. 3.

In fact, this relationship, recognized by all Christians, forms the foundation for ecumenical dialogue. Moreover, St. Thomas addresses the Church's relationship with Christ from the point of view of salvation, taking an approach that is less different from Luther than one might think. All those whom salvation concerns are related to the Church. But Christ came to save all, and therefore everyone belongs to the Church in a certain way:

It is written: "Who is the Savior of all men, especially of the faithful" (1 Timothy 4:10), and: "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). Now to save men and to be a propitiation for their sins belongs to Christ as Head. Therefore Christ is the Head of all men . . . the body of the Church is made up of the men who have been from the beginning of the world until its end.³

Thomas specifies that this membership may be more or less complete: for some it never becomes membership-in-act, and others lose it entirely. Thomas never strays into the type of Christocentrism that neglects the Holy Spirit and that the Orthodox are concerned about finding in the West (whenever Catholic theologians speak of the action of the Spirit outside the Church). For Thomas, union with Christ in the Church is the work of the Spirit: "[I]f anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him" [Rom 8:9]. For the unity of the Holy Spirit produces unity in the Church.⁴ In the same passage, Thomas specifies that the same Spirit is in Christ and in us: the Spirit forges the unity between Head and members, from which flows a more-than-human unity among the members.

Does the unity of the Church, flowing from her relationship to Christ the Head and effected by the Spirit, imply a visible unity? Thomas answers that when God enters into relationship with men, not only does He act according to His own spiritual nature, but He also takes into consideration the corporeal dimension of humankind. God chose the path of the Incarnation in order to unite us to Himself, because human beings understand other humans most easily; thus a God-man is a particularly appropriate way to make God known to the human being. This is what Thomas says regarding the necessity of the sacraments, in a passage that can be applied to the whole life of the Church:

Since the death of Christ is, so to say, the universal cause of human salvation, and since a universal cause must be applied singly to each of its

³ ST III, q. 8, a. 3, sed contra & corpus.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on John*, trans. James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher, Aquinas Scripture Series 4 (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1980), no. 202, p. 98.

effects, it was necessary to show men some remedies through which the benefit of Christ's death could somehow be conjoined to them. It is of this sort, of course, that the sacraments of the Church are said to be. Now remedies of this kind had to be handed on with some visible signs. First, indeed, because just as He does for all other things, so also for man, God provides according to his condition. Now man's condition is such that he is brought to grasp the spiritual and intelligible through the senses. . . . Second, because instruments must be proportioned to their first cause. But the first and universal cause of human salvation is the Incarnate Word, as is clear from the foregoing. Therefore, harmoniously the remedies by which the power of the universal cause reaches men had a likeness to that cause; that is, the divine power operates in them under visible signs. Third, because man fell into sin by clinging unduly to visible things. Therefore, that one might not believe visible things evil of their nature, and that for this reason those clinging to them had sinned, it was fitting that through the visible things themselves the remedies of salvation be applied to men. Consequently, it would appear that visible things are good of their nature—as created by God—but they become damaging to men so far as one clings to them in a disordered way.⁵

By choosing the Incarnation and, according to the same pattern, instruments both visible and invisible for the transmission of salvation, God shows His consideration for the human being. To underestimate the Church's visible dimension would be to postulate an angelic Church.

The principles for unity, then, are the following:

- Salvation is offered to all in Christ.
- All those who participate in this salvation are one in Christ, Who is made present by the Spirit.
- One becomes a member of Christ's Body by entering into relationship with Him, according to varying degrees of membership (linked to participation in the sacraments, holiness, etc.).
- The Body of Christ is at once visible and invisible, like Christ Himself, because in working with us God takes into account our humanity, which is not pure spirit.

Unity in the Proclamation of the Word of God

A few years ago an Orthodox metropolitan, speaking of his extensive ecumenical experience, made this observation: all Christians agree that the Word of God must be proclaimed, but for us, the proclamation of the

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. Charles J. O'Neil (New York: Hanover House, 1956), IV, c. 56.

Word culminates in the constitution of the Church gathered around the bishop and celebrating the Eucharist, and when Protestants speak to us about proclaiming the Word, they do not understand it in the same way. In fact, the Reformation tends to assume that the Word is addressed, not to the Church for the sake of communion, but to each individual, who also constitutes the ultimate interpretative norm.

What does Thomas say about this point, which should already be held as a common object of faith for all Christians: namely, the proclamation of the Word of God?

First of all, Thomas does not deny that Scripture provides theology with its most decisive arguments:

Sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable.⁶

But what happens when interpretations of Scripture collide? The answer to this question lies in the very mode of transmitting the faith, as witnessed by Scripture.

What are the conditions for faith? In order for one to believe, he must hear someone speak of the truth which he may or may not believe; and he must acquiesce to it in faith:

Two things are requisite for faith. First, that the things which are of faith should be proposed to man: this is necessary in order that man believe anything explicitly. The second thing requisite for faith is the assent of the believer to the things which are proposed to him.⁷

Grace is operative throughout the whole process, but there is a human element in it as well; in the dispensation of the Gospel, faith is normally proposed by the disciples of Christ, that is, by the Church, not by direct contact with God or the Bible alone.

Commenting on Thomas on this point, his disciple Cajetan (1469–1534) highlights the risk inherent in the human being's participation in the proclamation of faith: someone can be mistaken in his preaching. Did God not foresee to provide for this risk? It would be strange if He had not, since the very goodness that impels God to reveal Himself makes Him watch over the transmission of this Revelation (as Vatican II states in *Dei Verbum* 7). Faced with this question, which has accompanied

⁶ ST I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

⁷ ST II–II, q. 6, a. 1.

Christianity throughout its whole history, Cajetan provides the following commentary on his master, Thomas:

Concerning the things proposed for belief, faith can depend on angels and human beings, by whose mediation God proposes certain things which ought to be believed. . . . And so that no error should emerge in the proposition and explication of that which ought to be believed, the Holy Spirit has provided an infallible rule, that is, the meaning of the doctrine of the Church. Thus, the authority of the Church is the infallible rule of the proposition and explication of the things which ought to be held by faith.⁸

He further specifies that the authority of the Church is a “minister,” that is, servant, of Revelation.

Beginning thus from the New Testament evidence—Jesus sending His disciples to preach—St. Thomas and Cajetan arrive at a question which impacts all Christians: how can the faith be safeguarded against the errors or uncertainties of preaching? History shows that the Bible itself cannot prevent the rise of deviations from its true interpretation. Even if elements of Tradition (such as the early councils) are added to the Bible, one cannot avoid all deviations—this would require a currently-existing authority. An authority which guarantees preaching in a positive way (by evangelization) and a negative way (by correcting errors) is imperative, not only because every human society tends to organize itself, but because of the very nature of the Christian faith as Thomas describes it: Revelation comes from God, but according to His will, it reaches us through human beings.

Here again, God acts in consideration of our human nature. He wants to work through us, but He knows that if this is to happen, He must help us.

Selecting Themes for Dialogue

The Thomist in Dialogue

Ecumenical dialogue proceeds by comparing different formulations of Christian faith, in order to end in a common formulation.

This exercise is not unknown to Thomas. Confrontation between different points of view was part and parcel of the Scholastic method, whether in public dispute or in the very structure of Scholastic writings such as the *Summa theologiae*. Reading Thomas prepares the mind to engage in theological dialogue, which is already a benefit in itself, especially if, like Thomas, one uses dialectical tools, while seeking for truth and believing that it can be found, in a way which corresponds to the nature of the object.

⁸ Cajetan, *Commentary on the IIa-IIae*, q. 1 a. 1, no. X.

In dialogue, the Thomist has nothing to fear, even if he cannot immediately resolve all the questions himself. Indeed, what is there to lose, in dialogue on questions of faith? One could risk losing one's faith. But the arguments that could threaten it are not definitive:

Since faith rests upon infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is clear that the arguments brought against faith cannot be demonstrations, but are difficulties that can be answered.⁹

Having confidence in dialogue is one thing, but selecting its themes is entirely another. If the goal of dialogue is full visible unity among Christians, it should examine all the themes of faith and of Christian life to detect the seeds of division, beginning with the most sensitive points, which are at the heart of divisions. The fate of dialogue depends to some extent on the choice and ordering of its themes. One criterion for determining which themes to address is the hierarchy of truths.

The Criterion: The Hierarchy of Truths

Vatican Council II set forth a criterion that serves to rank the themes of dialogue:

It is, of course, essential that the doctrine be clearly presented in its entirety. . . . Furthermore, in ecumenical dialogue, Catholic theologians, standing fast by the teaching of the Church, yet searching . . . into the divine mysteries . . . should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.¹⁰

Thus although dialogue must discuss everything, it needs to keep in mind the mutual relationship among themes and begin with the most important ones, or at least those which are held in common. For example, Marian dogmas should be discussed with Protestants from the starting point of Christ, and not the reverse. This order corresponds to the historical proclamation of these dogmas and the logical order which makes them intelligible. It also corresponds to Thomas's method of explaining less significant points beginning with more fundamental principles.

Thomas was well acquainted with the hierarchy of truths. He notes that the articles of faith, as their name indicates—relating them to the articulations, or members, of one body—all mutually fit together.¹¹ In this body,

⁹ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8.

¹⁰ *UR*, §11, in Flannery, p. 462.

¹¹ Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 6.

certain articles belong to faith directly and others indirectly; examples of the former are the articles relating to the beatitude which is the goal of human life,¹² or those relating to the central mysteries of faith like the Trinity or the Incarnation.¹³ This hierarchy of truths does not release anyone from the obligation of acquiescing to all the articles of faith shown by the Church: he who picks and chooses among them is receiving his faith no longer from Revelation but from his own judgment.¹⁴

Thomas here strikes a surprising balance: the articles of faith do not all hold the same rank, but they must all be believed. If the first element can be easily integrated into ecumenical dialogue, what about the second? In fact, here Thomas articulates the goal of dialogue: real unity in faith. But how can I dialogue with someone who confesses positions which my Church has condemned (thus precisely proving the necessity for dialogue)? Here we must keep in mind a distinction based on Thomas by his disciple Cardinal Charles Journet, between an assertion and the state of the one who professes it believing that he receives the true faith from the Church:

Heresy and schism are personal sins, personal vices. These are not inherited. For them to become sins among succeeding generations, each generation must consciously renew the sin of heresy or schism . . . ratifying in turn the mother heresy, the original sin, in a manner that involves true culpability.¹⁵

Journet applies a fundamental principle of Thomistic moral theology: a sin is necessarily an act for which one can be held responsible—that is, a conscious and voluntary act. Whoever does not wish to deviate from the faith is not, properly speaking, guilty of the sin of heresy.

Choosing Themes for Dialogue

The hierarchy of truths helps to rank themes in the right order. Ecumenical dialogue begins by emphasizing the points of faith on which Christians are already united. There is another aspect to the hierarchy of truths: it provides a starting point from which to understand all other articles, even the most difficult, because in this hierarchy even the last and least remains a truth. The sluggishness with which certain areas in dialogue progress is caused by the fact that difficult questions are not

¹² See *ibid.*, ad 1.

¹³ See *ST* I, q. 31, a. 4.

¹⁴ Cf. *ST* I–II, q. 5, a. 3.

¹⁵ Charles Journet, *L'Église du Verbe incarné*, vol. 3 (St. Maurice: Editions Saint-Augustin, 2000), 1199.

readily addressed and consequently cannot be surmounted. Moreover, the doctrinal expression of Christian faith is like a body, in which each part is linked to all the others. It can be fatal to underestimate a pain in the toe just because the toe is not the heart.

A Theme for Dialogue: Philosophical Presuppositions

Among the questions that are often overshadowed yet are crucial in determining the whole, I would like to highlight one which dialogue never addresses as such: the philosophical presuppositions of the different denominations. In dialogue between Catholics and various Eastern Churches (Coptic, Syrian-Orthodox, etc.), it has been recognized that non-theological factors, especially those related to vocabulary, have provoked misunderstandings. Each word—even those agreed upon by both sides—entails a multitude of non-theological ingredients: philosophical, historical, socio-political, psychological, and so forth. Although in the past Thomists have not always developed the historical, political, and psychological dimensions of theological doctrines as much as they should have, they *can* do so, according to the principles of their own system of thought, whose realism is open to all that is true. As for the philosophical dimension, it has been paid abundant homage by Thomas in his own theology. Thomism by nature is fully cognizant of philosophy.

In dialogue with the various Protestant confessions, the need for addressing philosophical factors is not always evident. In fact, in order to reserve true authority for Scripture alone, Luther rejected philosophy with such vehemence that Catholic theologians likewise tend to stifle metaphysics in dialogue. The first document of the International Lutheran-Catholic Commission, “The Gospel and the Church,” published in 1972, stated: “To avoid a unilateral metaphysical interpretation, many Catholic theologians today highlight a more clearly functional conception, which is thereby more acceptable to Lutherans.”¹⁶ It is understandable that in dialogue no one wants to start with a point that the other side rejects. But sooner or later these points must also be investigated, and it really should not be such a problem to do so: today it is commonly enough accepted that no one can gain absolutely immediate access to a text—even an inspired one—in total detachment from all presuppositions. But to apply this principle to the philosophical foundations of the Reformation violates a taboo.

Here, Thomism may be able to help. In fact, Thomism proposes itself as a synthesis of the Catholic faith integrating a metaphysical vision. But

¹⁶ International Lutheran-Catholic Commission, “The Gospel and the Church,” no. 60.

does this mean that it subordinates faith to pagan philosophical principles? St. Thomas recognized the danger, and on certain points (such as creation), he corrected Aristotle. This integration of faith and metaphysics can be seen in a positive light. We must seek out the meaning which the Gospel has for all of reality and integrate the positive contribution of philosophical thought, whatever its origin: all truth, discovered by natural reason or received from Revelation, comes from God.¹⁷ If we do not put faith in touch with a global vision of the world, we risk creating an inner dichotomy within the believer between religion and the rest of his thought and life.

Let us examine an example that touches the very roots of the Catholic and Protestant positions. In 1999, Catholics and Lutherans signed the Joint Declaration on Justification, which highlights the consensus on both sides that God saves by grace. But they did not address the philosophical issues underlying the way in which each side understood this agreement. The crucial question, then, is this: why did Luther think it necessary to place an opposition between the actions of God and those of human beings? For him, anything attributed to us is necessarily subtracted from God:

You recognize that all that is good in us must be attributed to God. But if you recognize this, you should also realize that the mercy of God does everything and that our will does nothing, but rather limits itself to an act of submission. If you do not see this, then you are not attributing everything to God.¹⁸

Calvin takes the same approach: “man cannot claim a single particle of righteousness to himself, without at the same time detracting from the glory of the divine righteousness.”¹⁹ This way of thinking emerged again in 1985 in the Message to the Churches of the Permanent Lutheran-Reformed Council of France regarding the document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* from the Commission on Faith and Order: “The Church and its ministers are never dispensers or masters of grace. Every action of the Church and its ministers must be transparent to the action of God alone.” In fact, underlying these texts is an unconscious metaphysical presupposition: the univocity of being (there is only one level of being). If God and human beings are on the same level of being, so that God is infinitely greater in the same order, the whole of an action cannot be

¹⁷ Cf. ScG I, c. 7.

¹⁸ *De servo arbitrio*, Weimar ed., p. 614.

¹⁹ *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. III, 13.2.

attributed to each, just as when two children are squabbling over which of the two is carrying more of the weight of a table. Forced to choose between God and the human being, the Reformers denied the weight of human action out of respect for God, whereas later—based on the same premises—philosophers such as Feuerbach or Marx would abolish God in order to make room for the human being.

For Thomas, such a dilemma is simply absurd:

It is also apparent that the same effect is not attributed to a natural cause and to divine power in such a way that it is partly done by God, and partly by the natural agent; rather, it is wholly done by both, according to a different way, just as the same effect is wholly attributed to the instrument and also wholly to the principal agent.²⁰

Who would say that the hammer pounds in ten percent of the nail, and the carpenter wielding the hammer, ninety percent? Both pound in one hundred percent of the nail, but they are operating on different levels of being, one in the service of the other. This elementary Thomistic metaphysical distinction, which does not depend on any specific system of physics, eliminates the need to conceive of the relationship between God and the human being in terms of rivalry and could substantially help to clear up the remaining misunderstandings between Catholics and Protestants. Without these clarifications, the 1999 Declaration on Justification runs a serious risk of not bearing fruit, because it will be understood on the basis of different ideas which have stubbornly persisted through almost five centuries.

Thomistic metaphysics stands in the service of the Gospel. For instance, it helps us to understand how Jesus can send his disciples to forgive sins. In fulfilling Jesus' command, the disciples are not seizing for themselves what belongs to God alone. Rather, Jesus acts in them without suppressing their own action: the disciples themselves are acting. The whole life of the Church is at stake here: does she really act, or does she only set the stage for a divine act in which she does not participate? It is true that to cooperate with God on the level of salvation necessitates grace. But the human being still truly acts, even on the level of salvation. To cite Cajetan, speaking of Luther in 1532: "It belongs to the dignity of the member of Christ to cooperate with his Head in attaining eternal life. The most divine thing of all is to be made a cooperator of God, as Dionysius says."²¹ Once more, at the center of the question stands God's

²⁰ ScG III, c. 70.

²¹ *Faith and Works: Against the Lutherans*, c. 9.

respect for human dignity. Here, this dignity is furthered by a metaphysics which affirms that God shows His greatness by founding the being of the world, not by destroying it.

Conclusion

St. Thomas Aquinas can make many contributions to ecumenical dialogue. This essay has examined a few features which I believe are essential.

First, ecumenical dialogue aims toward full and visible unity among the followers of Christ. In his vision of the Church as a gathering together of all human beings in Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit, Thomas proposes an ecclesiology that makes full unity possible without becoming enmeshed in the reductionist mentalities of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. By accomplishing a unity that is both visible and spiritual, God takes into account what we are and thus shows us His love.

Second, ecumenism ought to reunite the disciples of Christ, who proclaim the Word of God. What can be learned from this very proclamation, ordered as it is toward faith and the edification of the Church? The proclamation of the faith, according to the dispensation of the Gospel, implies human action. But every human action is liable to error, even in reading the Bible. God, Who knows this better than we do, has made provision to remedy our weakness, by assisting the Church so that the faith can be proclaimed throughout the centuries. Again, by involving us in the transmission of the faith, God shows us his love.

Third, how should themes be selected for dialogue? Determining the order of the questions is crucial. Thomas is thoroughly familiar with dialogue as such, since it forms part of the Scholastic method. He also knows that faith is an articulated body in which the articles are of differentiated importance, though none are insignificant: this is the true meaning of the hierarchy of truths. In dialogue, certain themes are in danger of being cast aside, as in the case of the philosophical presuppositions of various confessional groups. Dialogue—particularly between Catholics and Lutherans or Presbyterians—can greatly benefit from the consideration of Thomistic metaphysics on the topic of the relationship between divine and human action (even more, although the value of metaphysics has not been recognized, it really should be included in all dialogue, out of religious respect for the truth). Thomas shows how human action is completely subordinate to divine action without ever opposing divine action or losing its own value. Far from obscuring the Gospel, his metaphysics makes it possible to account for the mission which Jesus confides to human beings, who have a real role to play in the transmission of salvation—a role that shapes the whole life of the Church. Moreover, the

harmony between philosophy and Revelation avoids creating an inner dichotomy within believers. Here again, by calling human beings to be His collaborators by their whole lives, without an interior division, God supremely demonstrates His love and the depth of communion to which He calls everyone. **N.V**