

Dei Filius* IV: On Theological Method and the *Nexus Mysteriorum

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From the point of view of Church history, chapter 4 of *Dei Filius* might seem like dull terrain. *Dei Filius* as a whole has been regarded as the “forgotten decree” of the First Vatican Council,¹ and the principal controversies during its passage through the Council were, for the most part, proxy battles over papal infallibility.² Of the whole document, the fourth chapter, on the relationship between faith and reason, provoked the fewest interventions from the Council fathers.³ On April 24, 1870, the day the constitution was passed unanimously by the Council fathers, an American bishop, John McQuaid of Rochester, described *Dei Filius* in a letter:

¹ John W. O'Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2018), 176. For other accounts of the genesis and development of the constitution, see the relevant sections of the following: Jeffrey A. Allen, “A Commentary on the First Vatican Council's *Dei Filius*,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2016): 138–51; Roger Aubert, *Vatican I* (Paris: Orante, 1964); Christopher Butler, *The Vatican Council, 1869–1870* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962); Hermann-Josef Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube vor dem Anspruch der Wissenschaft: Die Konstitution über den katholischen Glauben Dei Filius des Ersten Vatikanischen Konzils und die unveröffentlichten theologischen Voten der vorbereitenden Kommission* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1968). For a detailed theological commentary on *Dei Filius*, see Jean-Michel-Alfred Vacant, *Études théologiques sur les constitutions du Concile du Vatican: la constitution Dei Filius*, 2 vols. (Paris: Delhomme et Briguët, 1895).

² See, for example, Bishop Josip Strossmayer's intervention and the intense response it provoked (Aubert, *Vatican I*, 185–86).

³ Aubert, *Vatican I*, 187.

“There are some obstruse [*sic*] metaphysical points which few can fathom and certainly will never trouble the brains of any but a German philosopher for whose especial benefit they seem to have been made. The rest is quite simple theology.”⁴

Whether McQuaid regarded chapter 4 as “obstruse” or “simple theology” is anybody’s guess, but it is clear that it was indeed composed with German thinkers in mind, especially the rationalists Georg Hermes (1775–1831) and Anton Günther (1783–1863),⁵ and its composition and passage through the conciliar process was also largely the work of Germanophone theologians: Johann Baptist Franzelin, S.J. (1816–1886), Joseph Kleutgen, S.J. (1811–1893), and Bishop Vincent Gasser (1809–1879).⁶ It may not have provoked much debate on the floor of the Council, but its careful pronouncements on faith and reason were a vital antidote both to rationalism and fideism. More than that, *Dei Filius* outlines key points of theological method, making explicit what had long been implicit in the work of theologians. As we shall see, these insights are of enduring relevance to the wise practice of theology.

Reason’s Work and the Mysteries of Faith

What is the role of reason in relation to the mysteries of the faith? Or, to put it another way, how does theology proceed? Rationalism and fideism both answer these questions badly. Speaking very broadly, we can say that rationalism, in its more extreme variety, claims that reason can actually construct the whole edifice of faith. God has revealed mysteries of the faith, like his triunity, for example, but reason can—so claim the rationalists—arrive independently at the same mysteries of faith (rendering them, one might add, somewhat less mysterious).

Fideism, in its extreme forms, gives hardly any role to reason at all: we receive revelation, and we repeat and transmit it, with little room for reflection and growth in understanding. The light of faith, according to

⁴ Henry J. Browne, “The Letters of Bishop McQuaid from the Vatican Council,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 41 (1956): 408–41, at 423.

⁵ For brief summaries of their thought, see Alan Vincelette, *Recent Catholic Philosophy: The Nineteenth Century* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2009), 49–67.

⁶ For a description of their respective roles in the development of the text that became the second paragraph of *Dei Filius* IV, see Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 372–92. For a more detailed consideration of Franzelin’s work at Vatican I, see Bernhard Knorn, S.J., “Johann Baptist Franzelin (1816–86): A Jesuit Cardinal Shaping the Official Teaching of the Church at the Time of the First Vatican Council,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 7 (2020): 592–615.

this view, makes redundant the natural light of reason, at least in the realm of the revealed truths.

Dei Filius rules out these two extremes: reason does not independently reconstruct the mysteries of faith, nor does it merely repeat these mysteries. But the constitution does not limit itself to ruling out extremes. In chapter 2 it affirms the capacity of human reason to know God's existence independently of revelation, and in chapter 4 it develops a positive account of the role of reason within faith, enunciating basic principles of sound theological method. Having affirmed in this final chapter a "twofold order of knowledge," accessible by natural reason and faith, respectively, and having affirmed the existence of truths "which, unless they are divinely revealed, are incapable of being known," the constitution outlines the kind of work human reason can carry out on these mysteries:

Reason, enlightened by faith, when it seeks persistently, piously, and soberly, does achieve by God's gift some understanding—a most profitable understanding—of the mysteries, both by analogy from what it knows naturally, and by the connection of these mysteries with one another and with the final end of humanity; but reason is never rendered capable of penetrating these mysteries in the way in which it penetrates those truths which form its proper object.⁷

Avoiding any hint of rationalism, *Dei Filius* indicates here two methods or paths⁸ by which reason can gain "some understanding" of the mysteries revealed by God. By these paths reason "develops [excolat] the science of divine things."⁹ The first path proceeds by analogy (*ex analogia*) with what we naturally know, connecting the mysteries of the faith with natural and social phenomena. The second path, on the other hand, proceeds by considering the connections between the mysteries of the faith ("e mysteriorum ipsorum nexu inter se"), and their connection with our ultimate end.

⁷ *De Filius* [DF] IV: "Ratio, fide illustrata, cum sedulo, pie, et sobrie quaerit, aliquam, Deo dante, mysteriorum intelligentiam eamque fructuosissimam assequitur, tum ex eorum, quae naturaliter cognoscit, analogia, tum e mysteriorum ipsorum nexu inter se et cum fine hominis ultimo; nunquam tamen idonea redditur ad ea perspicienda instar veritatum, quae proprium ipsius obiectum constituunt" (Latin from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner, vol. 2, *From Trent to Vatican II* [Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990], 808; trans. mine).

⁸ *Art* and *Weg* are the terms used by Pottmeyer in his major study of *Dei Filius*: "The Council names two ways or paths by which to gain an understanding of faith" (Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 385; trans. mine).

⁹ Tanner, *From Trent to Vatican II*, 809–10.

What should be clear from this, but is worth underlining, is that *Dei Filius* uses the phrase *nexus mysteriorum* not principally to assert the fact that the mysteries *are* connected, but in order to outline a way for theology to gain insights into the mysteries, taking this fact as a starting point. This section of the constitution, after all, is indicating what reason can *do* in the face of revealed truths. The *nexus mysteriorum* is presented as the foundation of a method in theology, a method which Aidan Nichols has appropriately dubbed “criss-crossing the mysteries.”¹⁰

Much of what *Dei Filius* IV affirms concerning faith and reason is familiar to readers of St. Thomas Aquinas, and that pedigree is made explicit in the first stage of the document’s development, the *votum* prepared by Franzelin.¹¹ In the section of the *votum* outlining “the functions of reason concerning revealed truths,” Franzelin appeals repeatedly to Thomas’s commentary on Boethius’s *De Trinitate*,¹² but he could equally have pointed to the opening chapters of the *Summa contra gentiles* to bolster many of his affirmations: that faith and reason represent a twofold approach to God, that reason can arrive at the knowledge of God’s existence, that there are truths about God which are inaccessible to reason,¹³ and that reason can fruitfully gather analogies between supernatural and natural realities.¹⁴

What is absent from Thomas’s writings on faith and reason, though,

¹⁰ Aidan Nichols, *From Newman to Congar: The Idea of Doctrinal Development from the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 263.

¹¹ The text of the *votum* is found in Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 28*–89*.

¹² Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 59*–61*.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 3.

¹⁴ See SCG I, ch. 8: “Sensible things, from which the human reason takes the origin of its knowledge, retain within themselves some sort of trace of a likeness to God. This is so imperfect, however, that it is absolutely inadequate to manifest the substance of God. For effects bear within themselves, in their own way, the likeness of their causes, since an agent produces its like; yet an effect does not always reach to the full likeness of its cause. Now, the human reason is related to the knowledge of the truth of faith (a truth which can be most evident only to those who see the divine substance) in such a way that it can gather certain likenesses of it, which are yet not sufficient so that the truth of faith may be comprehended as being understood demonstratively or through itself. Yet it is useful for the human reason to exercise itself in such arguments, however weak they may be, provided only that there be present no presumption to comprehend or to demonstrate. For to be able to see something of the loftiest realities, however thin and weak the sight may be, is, as our previous remarks indicate, a cause of the greatest joy” (*On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, trans. Anton C. Pegis [New York: Image, 1955]).

and is present in *Dei Filius* and in its various stages of development,¹⁵ is the phrase *nexus mysteriorum*,¹⁶ and the elaboration of the second path, alongside that of analogy, by which reason can gain insight into the mysteries of the faith. It is this second path or method which we will investigate in what follows. Is it a novelty? To answer this question, we turn first to the immediate historical context of *Dei Filius*, before considering the Christian theological tradition synoptically.

The Nexus Mysteriorum in the Nineteenth Century

Since Franzelin's *votum* is considerably more detailed in its exposition than the resulting constitution, it is worth analyzing its treatment of the *nexus mysteriorum* and the associated theological method. The relevant passages are as follows:

[The mysteries of the faith] can, supposing faith and under the magisterium of the Church, be developed towards a certain more distinct understanding both of the dogmas in themselves and their mutual connection, so that one can be illuminated by, and understood to follow on from, another.¹⁷

It is the task of reason illuminated by faith to conceive of a certain knowledge (notitia) of super-rational truths and to develop this knowledge towards a certain, more distinct, understanding. This understanding is nevertheless only analogical or, as St Thomas says, "those things which are of faith may be made known by likenesses." Also, according to this analogical knowledge [cognitio], reason can perceive the connection between the dogmas and their congruence with rational ideas, and make explicit what is implicit, and deduce from them their consequences.¹⁸

¹⁵ It is worth noting that not all the schemata drafted in preparation for *Dei Filius* include reference to the *nexus mysteriorum*: it is absent from the relevant section of schema 3, Kleutgen's revision of Franzelin's earlier work (see Allen, "Commentary," 142), but reinserted in schema 4 (Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 485). This reinsertion appears to have been done at the initiative of Bishop Gasser (Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 377).

¹⁶ Or equivalent phrases: *connexio mysteriorum*; *nexus dogmatum*; etc.

¹⁷ "Haec ipsa notio mysterii, quam revelationis radius secundum modum nostrum ad nos perveniens suppeditat, potest fide supposita et sub Ecclesiae magisterio excoli ad distinctiorem aliquam intelligentiam tum dogmatum in se, tum mutuae eorum connexionis, ut unum ex alter consequi intelligatur ac illustretur" (quoted in Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 60*; trans. mine).

¹⁸ "Rationis per fidem illustratae munus est ut de ipsis veritatibus superrationalibus

Reason could never deduce the mysteries of the faith themselves, but by considering these dogmas in their connectedness, reason can deduce many other truths. Thus the organic structure or system of revealed truths yields, by the operation of reason, an even larger structure of interconnected truths. In this way the mysteries themselves become known “more distinctly.”

It is worth noting that those responsible for reworking Franzelin’s *votum* quite deliberately prescinded from the scientific tone of these passages, leading to the simpler and more general phrasing found in *Dei Filius*. The language redolent of syllogistic *Konklusionstheologie* was abandoned in favor of a broader conception of how the practice of connecting the mysteries might yield understanding.¹⁹

The idea that the mysteries of the faith are intricately connected was not, of course, original to Franzelin. The conception of revealed truths as a system or organic structure was a striking feature of much nineteenth-century Catholic theology, especially in the German-speaking world. The Tübingen School was particularly inclined to speak of theology as an architectonic or organic system, under the influence of thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, and Friedrich Schelling.²⁰ Already in 1819, the Tübingen theologian Johann Sebastian Drey was keen to underline, in a book written for beginners in theology, that there was no randomness (*Zufälligkeit*) in the mysteries of the faith.²¹ Beginners might

aliquam concipiat notitiam eamque excolere possit ad distinctiorem quamdam intelligentiam, quae tamen non potest esse nisi analogica seu, ut loquitur S. Thomas, “ad notificandum per similitudines ea, quae sunt fidei”; atque ut secundum hanc analogicam cognitionem et dogmatum nexum inter se et aliquam cum notionibus rationalibus congruentiam perspicere, et implicita explicare, et consequentia alia ex aliis deducere queat” (quoted in Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 60*–61*; trans. mine).

¹⁹ See Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 386: “Above all, Franzelin has the model of conclusion theology in mind, based on the Aristotelian concept of science. Progress in knowledge means, for him, that the implicit is made explicit and conclusions are drawn from the truths of faith. As already mentioned, a consultant of the preparatory commission drew attention to the problems of applying this scientific concept to theology. In fact, the Council did not commit itself to this model and there is no longer any mention of the development of the implicit and of logical conclusions in the drafts that followed the vote” (trans. mine).

²⁰ See Bernhard Casper, “Der Systemgedanke in der späten Tübinger Schule und in der deutschen Neuscholastik,” *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 72 (1965): 161–79, at 162.

²¹ Johann Sebastian Drey, *Die Apologetik als wissenschaftliche Nachweisung der Göttlichkeit des Christentums in seiner Erscheinung*, 3 vols. (1838–1847). For a helpful introduction to Drey’s thought, especially as influenced by Schelling, see Thomas O’Meara, O.P., *Romantic Idealism and Roman Catholicism: Schelling and the Theologians* (Notre

have the impression, he noted, that Christian dogmas are like dry leaves on a forest floor which happen to have been brought together by the wind. It is the task of the scientific theologian to show that this randomness is only apparent.²² “System” became a leitmotif in Drey’s writing and teaching, although by this he did not intend to compare theology to a deductive system like mathematics. The system of theology is organic; it accounts for unity and diversity in the same way that the system of a living body does.²³ The unity of this system is, of course, grounded in the unity of God himself, and the unity of revelation. As Bernhard Welte explains, for Drey:

First of all Christian teachings are a living ideal unity and therefore a system in the eternal understanding of God, but then the historical series of deeds, i.e. the history of revelation, through which God gradually communicates his “system,” is also a system. In contrast to this objective, divine, and historical system of revelation, is the derivative but necessary system of theology.²⁴

Far from being a pile of disconnected dry leaves, the mysteries of faith, in their revelation in history and in their articulation in theology, are profoundly interconnected for Drey, and for those under his influence at Tübingen and elsewhere (including, for example, Bishop Gasser²⁵ and Franzelin²⁶ himself).

Hermann-Josef Pottmeyer points out that this interest in systematicity was typical also of the Roman School in the nineteenth century, naming figures like Carlo Passaglia and Clement Schrader.²⁷ Franzelin was also, of course, a major figure in this intellectual community. Among the greatest theologians produced by formation in Rome at this period, including substantial study under Franzelin, is Matthias Scheeben. His writing, even before the Council, consciously adopts the method proposed in *Dei Filius* IV:

Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 94–108.

²² See Bernhard Welte, “Beobachtungen zum Systemgedanken in der Tübinger Katholischen Schule,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 147 (1967): 40–59, at 40–41.

²³ Welte, “Beobachtungen,” 43.

²⁴ Welte, “Beobachtungen,” 44–45. This insistence on the dependence of theology on revelation is, of course, key to distinguishing Drey’s understanding of the systematicity of theology from that of the rationalists.

²⁵ Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 380.

²⁶ Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021), 8.

²⁷ Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 380.

We must look upon the various mysteries as members of a great whole, in which the purpose of any one mystery is determined not only by its individual character, but also by its bearing on the whole. We must observe how the members of this whole are designed for one another in God's plan, how they are built up on one another, how all the mysterious works of God are connected with the mystery of the Godhead as their principle, and how they are strung together for the communication of God to the creature and for His own glorification. In a word, we must gain an insight into the wonderful plan of the supernatural order, and so endeavour to appreciate the significance of the individual mystery in terms of its relationship with the whole, and the whole in its harmonious unity as resulting from the proportion and correlation of the several parts.²⁸

As [the mysteries] are intimately connected with one another, so that the one invariably appears as the prolongation and continuation of the other, they not only must be in accord with one another as regards their supernatural meaning, purpose, and operations, but must mutually support, promote, and explain one another.²⁹

In the case of the Eucharist, for example, Scheeben illuminates the mystery by tracing its connections to the mysteries it presupposes: the Incarnation and the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. He then goes on to connect the Eucharist with the life of grace and the mystery of the Church.³⁰

Scheeben points out too what happens when this method is not followed:

[The] mysteries involve one another, [so] that one supernatural mystery can keep its meaning, and hence vindicate its nature and reality, only as a link in a chain, as a member in an organism of related species. Wrested from this chain, deprived of their position in the supernatural organism, the mysteries, as we have insisted over and over again, turn into obscurities, and can scarcely be detected by blind faith, despite the most earnest searchings of reason. But when strung on this chain, when integrated in an organism, the dead members spring to life, the darkness turns into light, and, as though

²⁸ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St Louis, MO: Herder, 1951), 758.

²⁹ Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 479.

³⁰ Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 477–79.

an electric current were suddenly switched on, brilliance and life stream from them.³¹

Just like the final version of *Dei Filius*, Scheeben's understanding of the "criss-crossing" task of theology does not limit itself to syllogisms; rather, each mystery is variously illuminated by reference to many other mysteries and to all together.

Criss-Crossing the Mysteries: Universal Best Practice

Thus described, connecting the mysteries is not a novel project, or a nineteenth-century development; it is simply the principal part of the intellectual work of the Church on earth. This is especially so if we adopt a broad definition of "mystery," referring not only to a short list of defined dogmas but also to, for example, the sacraments, the saving events recounted in Scripture, and all of moral theology considered as the mystery of life in Christ.³² And with this broad understanding, we can easily see that the activity of connecting mysteries is simply the warp and weft of Christian theology in every generation, so evidently *what theologians do* that it was unnecessary to make it explicit until modern developments undermined traditional theological method. The explication of this task is, to use Bishop McQuaid's terms, *both* for the "especial benefit" of German thinkers, *and* "quite simple theology."

As a foundational example, we might consider, for example, Our Lord on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), explaining to the despairing disciples the significance of the suffering and entrance into glory of Christ by connecting this mystery with the mysteries found in Moses and all the prophets and all the Scriptures.

Saint Paul, for his part, is a virtuoso in the connecting of mysteries. Just in 1 Corinthians, for example: he considers moral questions in light of the mystery of the Church ("Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?" [1 Cor 6:15]); he thinks about marriage in light of the Second Coming (1 Cor 7); he interprets the present moment of the Corinthian Church in terms of the Exodus story ("Do not be idolaters as some of them were, we must not indulge in immorality as some of them

³¹ Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 481.

³² This broad understanding of what is included in the *nexus mysteriorum* is found, for example, in Vacant, *Études théologiques*, 221–22.

did" [1 Cor 10:7]); he considers extraordinary spiritual gifts in light of love ("If I have prophetic powers . . . but have not love, I gain nothing" [1 Cor 13:2]); and he thinks through our resurrection by connecting it with the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15).

We might consider also the great patristic works of theology addressing particular heresies. The constant refrain in these works is that heretics reduce Christian faith to a selection of favorite biblical verses and doctrines and refuse to do precisely the work of connecting each mystery with other mysteries. They thus end up making central in their systems what is not truly central.

Tertullian, writing against Praxeas and his party, who had denied any distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit, makes this form of argument with wonderful clarity:

I must take some further pains to rebut their arguments, when they make selections from the Scriptures in support of their opinion, and refuse to consider the other points, which obviously maintain the rule of faith without any infraction of the unity of the Godhead, and with the full admission of the Monarchy. For as in the Old Testament Scriptures they lay hold of nothing else than, "I am God, and beside me there is no God" (Isaiah 45:5) so in the Gospel they simply keep in view the Lord's answer to Philip, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30) and, "He that has seen me has seen the Father; and I am in the Father, and the Father in me" (John 14:9–10). They would have the entire revelation of both Testaments yield to these three passages, whereas the only proper course is to understand the few statements in the light of the many. But in their contention they only act on the principle of all heretics. For, inasmuch as only a few testimonies are to be found in the general mass, they pertinaciously set off the few against the many.³³

Praxeas, in other words, has failed in the task of connecting the mysteries. He has failed to consider his favorite few doctrines in light of the whole organism of revelation, and so the mysteries of the faith become for him, to borrow Scheeben's term, obscurities.

Many other Fathers present arguments of this form, appealing to the fullness of revelation in the face of reductive heretical sloganizing. One

³³ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 20, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 6 vols., ed. and trans. Alexander Roberts et al. (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 3:615.

example will suffice. Alexander of Alexandria, who had the pleasure of being Arius's bishop, claims the Arians have made their selection of verses and ignore the rest of Scripture:

And having collected all the passages which speak of his plan of salvation and his humiliation for our sakes, they endeavour from these to collect the preaching of their impiety, ignoring altogether the passages in which his eternal divinity and unutterable glory with the Father is set forth.³⁴

The Arians, like the modalists, neglected to adequately connect the mysteries of the faith.

It seems to me that it is in the thirteenth century that Christian theologians as a body most assiduously engage in the task of criss-crossing the mysteries. As they commented on a particular book of the Bible, for example, Scholastic theologians would begin with a prologue opening with a verse from another biblical book entirely, interpreting the whole book to be commented upon in light of that verse. Thus Aquinas's commentary on John begins with a discussion of Isaiah 6:1, his commentary on Romans begins with Acts 9:15, and so on.

This could perhaps be dismissed as a token gesture, but consider too the Scholastic practice of disputation. Is there any more intense example of the work of connecting mysteries? A particular theological question is illuminated, in a disputation, in light of a dozen or more other mysteries.

In the case of St. Thomas, we have noted already that the phrase *nexus mysteriorum* is not found in his works, but when Franzelin's *votum* expands on this theme, it nevertheless makes reference to *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 8. There Thomas explains that, in debates with those who deny one article of faith, one may make appeal to another article.³⁵ In other words, in order to clarify the problematic mystery, one considers it in light of another. In less controversial contexts too Thomas practices the method of connecting the mysteries. One need only consider, for example, the many and various ways in which he analyzes and connects the twelve (or

³⁴ Alexander of Alexandria, *Letter to Alexander of Constantinople*, in Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 6:291.

³⁵ *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 1, a. 8, resp.: "Disputamus . . . per unum articulum contra negantes alium." I follow here the Latin text of the ST as given in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Dominican Fathers, 5 vols., 3rd ed. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1961–65).

fourteen) articles of faith.³⁶ The connection of the mysteries is particularly vivid in his *De articulis et ecclesiae sacramentis*. In the first part of this *opusculum*, Thomas outlines twelve articles of faith—six associated with the divinity of Christ (along with the Father and the Spirit), and six associated with his humanity—and briefly refutes errors against each article. The second part treats of the seven sacraments, but (crucially for our purposes) it is not an independent treatise; it is presented as an expansion of the fourth article of faith, on the effects of grace.³⁷ The sacraments might not be mentioned in the Creed, but they are understood here as being organically connected with its affirmations.

Thomas's explanation of the meaning of the word "article" shows once again his awareness of the interconnectedness of the mysteries. This word, he explains, refers to a certain "fit" (*coaptatio*) between various distinct parts, as in the limbs of a body: "For this reason the *credibilia* of the Christian faith are said to be distinguished into articles in that they are divided into parts which fit with one another."³⁸ And just as Drey grounds the unity of theology's "system" in the unity of God himself, so Aquinas insists that the *scientia* of holy teaching is established on the *scientia* of God and the blessed.³⁹

It is surely this strong sense of the unity and coherence of the mysteries of faith which led Thomas and so many of his contemporaries to compose theological *summae*, organized expositions of Christian doctrine no longer following the structure of a biblical book, for example, but structured, as Thomas says in his prologue to the *Summa theologiae*, as the *ordo disciplinae* requires.⁴⁰ In the age of the *summa*, the selection and arrangement of

³⁶ See Joseph Goering, "Christ in Dominican Catechesis: The Articles of Faith," in *Christ Among the Medieval Dominicans*, ed. Kent Emery Jr. and Joseph P. Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 127–38, esp. 131.

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De articulis fidei et ecclesiae sacramentis*, no. 612: "Now the sacraments of the Church remain to be considered, which can nevertheless be taken together under a single article, since they pertain to the effect of grace" (*Opuscula theologica*, vol. 2, ed. Raimundo Verardo, O.P. [Turin: Marietti, 1954]).

³⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 6, resp.: "Unde et credibilia fidei Christianae dicuntur per articulos distingui in quantum in quasdam partes dividuntur habentes aliquam coaptationem ad invicem."

³⁹ " *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2, resp.

⁴⁰ *ST* I, prol.: "We have considered that beginners in this doctrine have been greatly hampered by those works which others have written: partly on account of the multiplication of useless questions, articles, and arguments; partly because those things which are necessary to beginners to know are not handed on according to the order of teaching, but following the order of exposition of books, or according to what disputation offers; partly too since frequent repetition generated both fatigue and confusion

topics became a major task of the theologian, since any given arrangement connects and elucidates the mysteries of the faith in a particular way. The resulting concern for the systematic arrangement of topics in theological *summae* is not limited, of course, to medieval Catholic theology, but is found also in Protestant theologians like Philipp Melanchthon in his *Loci communes*, and John Calvin in his *Institutes*, which he edited and reorganized on multiple occasions precisely out of a concern to connect the mysteries of the faith in a congenial fashion.⁴¹

We can discern the importance of the *nexus mysteriorum* in more recent theology too. When twentieth-century theologians critiqued the theology of the manuals and proposed a renewal of theology, it was precisely, once again, on the basis of reconnecting mysteries that had become disconnected. As Karl Rahner famously claimed in the case of the doctrine of the Trinity:

The treatise on the Holy Trinity remains rather isolated in the structure of dogmatic theology as a whole. To put it crudely . . . : once this treatise has been dealt with, it does not recur again in dogmatic theology. Its general function with regard to the whole is only vaguely seen. The mystery appears to have been revealed merely for its own sake.⁴²

When Rahner complains about the isolation of Trinitarian doctrine and insists that “in *all* dogmatic treatises . . . the realities of salvation with which they deal cannot be made comprehensible without recurring to this primordial mystery of Christianity,” such that “the intrinsic connection between the various mysteries [appears],” he is doing no more, in terms of theological method, than what *Dei Filius* IV recommends.

Contemporary Restatement: Webster, Schoot, Williams

Even if it is clear that healthy Christian theology instinctively carries out the task of seeking understanding by assiduously connecting the mysteries

in the minds of the hearers. Seeking to avoid these and similar things, we will attempt, with confidence in divine assistance, to set forth those things which pertain to sacred doctrine, briefly and clearly, as the subject itself permits.”

⁴¹ Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118–39.

⁴² Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 82.

of the faith, we have already seen that unhealthy theology typically fails to do so. More fundamentally, rationalism sets aside this task altogether, seeking to construct by reason alone the edifice of faith, rather than engaging in the humbler task of comparing and re-arranging the given mysteries in the hope of new insight. The spread of this methodological malady is why *Dei Filius* needed to give explicit statement to an aspect of theological method that had long remained implicit, but it would be foolish to think that *Dei Filius* solved the problem. The wounds inflicted on Christian theology by rationalism are, in many cases, still open, and several theologians in recent decades have felt the need to recall the discipline to the task of humbly connecting the mysteries.

John Webster's inaugural address as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford in 1997, for example, traces the "history of the alienation of theology from its own habits of thought," especially in the tendency of theologians in post-Enlightenment universities to speak about God in terms of "generic theism" without reference to doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation.⁴³ He points also to the rise in prominence of the doctrine of revelation in modern Protestant theology, under the pressure of epistemological challenges to faith, and notes that such treatments, as sophisticated as they might be, "threaten to sever the ties [between the doctrine of revelation] and the loci that follow: Trinity, Incarnation, Spirit, Church."⁴⁴ Similarly, apologetic strategy brought the question of Christ's resurrection to the fore in modern theology, but theologians tended to "extract [this doctrine] from its proper Christological home."⁴⁵

All of these developments, Webster argues, bespeak a "certain forgetfulness of the inner structure and dynamic of Christian doctrine."⁴⁶ Because of this forgetfulness of what lends unity to the theological enterprise, its various sub-disciplines become vulnerable to the gravitational pull of related (non-theological) disciplines:

The theological disciplines have . . . been pressed to give an account of themselves in terms drawn largely from fields of enquiry other than theology, fields which, according to prevailing criteria of academic propriety more nearly approximate to ideals of rational activity. And so the content and operations of the constituent parts of the

⁴³ John Webster, "Theological Theology," in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 11–31, at 18.

⁴⁴ Webster, "Theological Theology," 19.

⁴⁵ Webster, "Theological Theology," 20–21.

⁴⁶ Webster, "Theological Theology," 20.

theological curriculum are no longer determined by specifically theological considerations, but by neighbouring disciplines. . . . This process of assimilation means that, for example, the study of Scripture, or doctrine, or the history of the church draw their modes of enquiry from Semitics, or the history of religions, or social anthropology, from philosophy, or from general historical studies.⁴⁷

We could add to this list: moral theology becomes ethics, ecumenical theology becomes peace studies, and, most globally, theology becomes religious studies. Webster makes no reference to Vatican I, but his principal insights in this lecture resonate powerfully with the appeal of *Dei Filius* to the *nexus mysteriorum*.

In a more recent inaugural lecture, Henk Schoot (University of Utrecht) offers a similar analysis, referring not only to Webster's inaugural lecture but also to *Dei Filius* itself. He outlines the method of connecting the mysteries, illustrated with examples, and points then to the vulnerability of such a method in the contemporary university:

When the relationship between [Christ's resurrection] and [the general resurrection] is studied, this results in greater insight into each of the two mysteries of faith. Theology is not able to provide a generally acceptable proof for one of the two mysteries alone, but the detailed examination of the connection between them can certainly make a contribution to the plausibility of both. . . . A theology based on the *nexus mysteriorum* is vulnerable. It has few pretensions to meeting the challenges posed to theology by modern science [since it] often takes the form of searching for conformity, for fittingness.⁴⁸

Christian theology, Schoot insists, is more receptive than constructive, more interested in coherence than proof. He recognizes that the theological task conceived in this way is unlikely to be understood or appreciated in the modern university, but he mounts a stout defense for such a "theological theology," faithful and ecclesial in the face of pressure to secularize and disintegrate.

Finally, the Anglican theologian A. N. Williams offers a book-length

⁴⁷ Webster, "Theological Theology," 22.

⁴⁸ Henk Schoot, "Holy, Holy, Holy: A Plea for the Holiness of Theology," *Jaarboek Thomas-Instituut te Utrecht* 26 (2007): 7–33, at 11.

exploration of the proper systematicity of Christian theology in her work *The Architecture of Theology*.⁴⁹ For her, reason plays a vital role in theology not by “generating doctrines,” but by “extrapolating from other givens and modulating the final shape of doctrines in light of their compatibility with each other.”⁵⁰ Without referring to *Dei Filius*, Williams shows how theologians as diverse as Anselm, Calvin, Luther, and Leonardo Boff make use of precisely the mystery-connecting theological method proposed in the constitution. The opening page of her book sums up her understanding of the systematic nature of Christian theology:

[Theology] exhibits an impetus towards coherence and comprehensiveness. Theology may in this sense be said to be systematic when it traces links between discrete theological loci, or when the treatment of a single locus or issue is shaped by the awareness of its potential to interlock with other loci, indeed in some cases, its dependence on them for its own shape. Theology that is in this sense systematic may be likened to a jigsaw puzzle: even if one does not have all the pieces, the shape of any one of them reflects its orientation towards others as parts of a larger pattern. When there are enough such pieces to hand, a complete picture forms, but even in the absence of a whole, unified image, a solitary piece displays by its very shape its trajectory towards linkage.⁵¹

Williams thus adds her voice to that of Schoot and Webster in the defense of the practice of theology as a unified discipline. She, with them, stands against the disintegration of theology into its sub-disciplines, not by appealing merely to an intellectual tradition, but by pointing to the “trajectory towards linkage” inherent in the very mysteries themselves. A theology which neglected to connect the mysteries, and to be comprehensive in its attempt to connect *all* the mysteries, would fail, on this account, to honor the unity of the triune God.⁵²

⁴⁹ A. N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, & Ratio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵⁰ Williams, *Architecture*, 7.

⁵¹ Williams, *Architecture*, 1.

⁵² See Williams, *Architecture*, 4: “The fact that Christianity holds that all that exists is either the Trinity or necessarily related to the Trinity grounds and precipitates systematic theology: Christian theology cannot help but trace connections, since they exist by divine will as a consequence of the very act of creation.”

The Nexus Mysteriorum and the Task of Theology Today

The very fact that these defenses have been necessary in recent decades shows that the mystery-connecting habit of Christian thought made explicit in *Dei Filius* is at risk in the contemporary practice of theology. One of the things *Dei Filius* asks of theologians today, then, is whether we are practicing and transmitting this habit even when our professional environments make it awkward for us to do so.

Do we give in to modularization, for example, making student choice, rather than some carefully discerned *ordo disciplinae*, the organizing principle of theological studies? Is it possible, for example, for students in our programs to become “qualified theologians” while successfully avoiding courses on the Trinity and Christology (as I did in my first degree)?

Do we accept the disintegration of theology as a unified discipline, or do we work to sustain a genuinely theological conversation across sub-disciplines? When we teach, do we think long and hard about the structure of our courses? Do we cultivate the habit in our students of tracing the connections between the mysteries by enacting it in our teaching? Would we dare, for example, to develop a point about moral theology in a class on eschatology? Or to give a lecture on the mystery of the Church in a course on the Trinity? Or a lecture on the Mass in a course on John’s Gospel? Or to discuss providence in a course on Church history? (I’m reminded here of one of my teachers of dogmatic theology at the University of Fribourg, Benoît-Dominique de la Soujeole, O.P., who would punctuate his classes with *la minute pastorale*). We are perhaps afraid of stepping on our colleagues’ toes, or going beyond our expertise, especially if our own formation as theologians has not been as well-rounded as it might have been, but it seems to me that *Dei Filius* challenges us to take these risks.

And with the Final End . . .

“[Reason achieves some understanding] by the connection of these mysteries with one another *and with the final end of humanity*.” This final phrase we have so far largely ignored, and it is fitting to turn to it in conclusion. This addition seems to have been the original contribution of Bishop Gasser, accommodating the concerns of the Council fathers who feared what they saw as the overly-scientific language of the earlier drafts.⁵³ These

⁵³ Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube*, 386–88.

few words help avoid an unhistorical understanding of reason's task in the face of revelation: the mysteries of faith are not truths in an abstract system; they are saving truths, revealed to us by God so as to lead us to God. The insistence of *Dei Filius* that we connect the mysteries of faith with the final end of humanity reminds us that our study of these mysteries is not an intellectual game, but that the little glimpses of truth which theology permits can truly transform minds and hearts, and lead our students, readers, and colleagues closer to the end they desire.

It reminds us too that, while faith enlightens reason here and now, the veil of faith will one day give way to vision, and the work of reason will eventually cease, as the mind rests at last in the simple vision of the truth it ever sought. Theology is provisional, and the theologian ought to yearn for the end of theology.⁵⁴ As Williams points out, "theology is not a mason's enterprise, but an architect's,"⁵⁵ and all the blueprints of this age, all our subjective reception and articulation of the mysteries revealed by God, will ultimately be set aside and the long-desired sight will be unveiled: the glorious simplicity of the triune God in whom all mysteries cohere. Until then, reason enlightened by faith seeks persistently, piously, and soberly.

N.V

⁵⁴ The "Episcopal Ghost" of C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* is a salutary warning in this regard.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Architecture*, 12.