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Why Study Aquinas Today?

Po co studiować św. Tomasza z Akwinu w obecnych czasach?

ABSTRACT: This essay offers an evaluation about the future of Catholic theology. It argues that those interested in approaching the study of theology will benefit from a close reading and study of the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). Appropriate help also comes from consultation of the Thomist Commentatorial Tradition. The author lists five reasons that should persuade the attentive reader to the rightness of the article's central thesis. Aquinas is then presented as the Safeguard of Catholic Orthodoxy, Defender of Cognitive and Ontological Realism, Integrator combining faith and reason and presenting a coherent synthesis of the entire *depositum fidei*, Spiritual Master, and Guide for the Theologian Today. The opportuneness of this essay becomes evident when one considers how much Catholic theology, worldwide, has become diversified in the period that followed the close of the Second Vatican Council (1965). In the majority of places where theology is taught, especially the major universities, the study of theology has, in fact, become a survey of what different theologians, both Catholic and others, have said or written. Aquinas, on the other hand, sees Catholic theology as a science, mainly speculative, that develops from God's own knowledge of himself. The Church's repeated commendation of Aquinas as a sure guide for doing Catholic theology, including in the post-conciliar period, provides the best grounds for choosing Aquinas's works over those of other authors, both medieval and modern. Indeed, Popes have praised Aquinas as a Doctor of the Church (the first after the patristic period to be so identified) who enjoys a certain preeminence over the other learned men and women who also enjoy the same designation.

KEYWORDS: Thomas Aquinas, *Aeterni Patris*, theology today, Catholic theology, Catholic orthodoxy, spirituality, cognitive realism, ontological realism, science (Aristotelian)

ABSTRAKT: Niniejszy esej jest próbą oceny przyszłości teologii katolickiej. Autor zachęca osoby zainteresowane studiowaniem teologii do uważnej lektury i badania dzieł św. Tomasza z Akwinu (zm. 1274) oraz zapoznania się z tomistyczną tradycją komentatorską. Wymienia pięć powodów, które mają przekonać czytelnika do słuszności głównej tezy artykułu. Święty Tomasz ukazany zostaje kolejno jako apologeta

katolickiej ortodoksjii, obrońca poznawczego i ontologicznego realizmu, łączący wiarę i rozum twórcy spójnej syntezy całego *depositum fidei*, duchowy mistrz oraz przewodnik współczesnego teologa. Stosowność tego eseju staje się oczywista, gdy weźmie się pod uwagę narastające zróżnicowanie teologii katolickiej na całym świecie po zakończeniu Soboru Watykańskiego II (1965). Na większości uczelni, gdzie wykłada się teologię, zwłaszcza na głównych uniwersytetach, studium teologii stało się w rzeczywistości przeglądem prac teologów, nie tylko katolickich. Natomiast Akwinata postrzega teologię katolicką jako naukę głównie spekulatywną, budowaną na wiedzy Boga o sobie samym. Docenienie Akwinaty przez Kościół jako wiarygodnego przewodnika w uprawianiu teologii katolickiej, również w okresie posoborowym, stanowi najlepszą rekomendację wyboru jego dzieł w miejsce prac innych autorów, zarówno średniowiecznych, jak i współczesnych. Uznany przez papieży jako doktor Kościoła (pierwszy teolog po okresie patryczycznym, który otrzymał taki tytuł), św. Tomasz cieszy się autorytetem zdecydowanie większym niż inni mężczyźni i kobiety obdarzeni tym samym tytułem.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Tomasz z Akwinu, *Aeterni Patris*, współczesna teologia, teologia katolicka, ortodoksjia katolicka, duchowość, realizm poznawczy, realizm ontologiczny, nauka (arystotelesowska)

Blessed Ceslaus Odrowaz died on July 15, 1242, in Wrocław, Poland, of natural causes. He was interred in the church of Saint Adalbert, where his grave remains to this day. While he and other Polish priests were visiting Rome, Ceslaus received the religious habit from Saint Dominic himself. Among the companions of Ceslaus was a relative, possibly a brother, who became better known than he. Saint Hyacinth (d. 1257) receives recognition for his wide scale evangelization of Northern Europe.¹ As an American Dominican, I was fortunate to visit Blessed Ceslaus's sanctuary in Wrocław during a visit to Poland in the late twentieth century. The Church in Wrocław must wait a few more years before she can celebrate the 800th anniversary of this saintly Dominican priest's death. However, the Church worldwide honors another early Dominican, one born after the death in 1221 of Saint Dominic, namely, Thomas Aquinas. The year 1225 brings then a celebration of the 800th anniversary of his birth.

One may justly opine that Thomas Aquinas has gained greater recognition than all other members of the Order of Preachers, including the Founder, Saint Dominic Guzman. The reason for the popularity of the Angelic Doctor flows from his enormous contribution to the stabilization of Catholic theology. He accomplished this goal by his many writings, but especially by his well-known

¹ Mary Jean Dorcy, *St. Dominic's Family: The Lives of Over 300 Famous Dominicans* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1983), 34, 35, 56, 57.

Summa Theologiae.² His status as the Common Doctor of the Catholic Church also arises from the attention that Popes and others have paid to the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Nonetheless, today Aquinas's position among Catholic theologians has been questioned as a result of a welter of new proposals, which mostly appeared after the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. These alternative proposals purport, among other objectives, to serve better the purposes of Catholic evangelization.³

In order to respond to some of the proposals that have been made to renew Catholic theology apart from the legacy of Thomas Aquinas, I propose here below to raise some issues that may help perplexed young students of every land to avoid some of the dead-ends that an overly anxious pursuit of innovation may lead unwary students to encounter. In short, it is my intention to set forth five reasons that, in my judgment, should urge interested students of all chronological ages to apply themselves to the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas.⁴ I have chosen five reasons that, again in my judgment, also address some of the present issues in Catholic theology that require some clarification. Of course, each of these reasons assumes that the students' interest in philosophy and theology finds at least some motivation in their desire to possess the truth. For, as Aquinas says, "Truth is a divine thing, a friend more excellent than any human friend."⁵

Of course, those who have been baptized already possess the gift of supernatural Truth. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes the *Apology* of Justin Martyr, a second-century Christian philosopher: "This bath," he writes, "is called enlightenment, because those who receive this [catechetical] instruction are enlightened in their understanding. . . ."⁶ Baptism then brings

² For a general introduction to this work, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Aquinas's Summa: Background, Structure, & Reception* (Washington, DC: The CUA Press, 2005).

³ Some of the proposals came from theologians who espoused causes that fell far short of Catholic social teaching. For example, see the very interesting article, Lucia Scherzberg, "Catholic Systematic Theology and National Socialism," *theologie.geschichte. Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kulturgeschichte* 2 (2007), 13–33, <https://doi.org/10.48603/tg-2007-art-1>. The author shows how certain German theologians who either influenced or served at the Second Vatican Council were also supporters of National Socialism in Germany.

⁴ The standard reference work in English for the life and work of Saint Thomas Aquinas remains Jean-Pierre Torrell, *The Person and His Work*, vol. 1 of *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Revised edition (Washington, DC: The CUA Press, 2023).

⁵ *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, lect. 6. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Philosophical Texts*, ed. and trans. Thomas Gilby (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1982), 36, no. 96.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM> (hereafter: CCC), no. 1216, quoting *Apologiae* 1, 61, 12 (PG 6, 421).

enlightenment. Only truth enlightens our understanding. Revealed truth raises our understanding to matters “above reason.”⁷ As Pope John Paul II affirmed at the start of his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves (cf. Exod 33:18; Ps 27:8–9; 63:2–3; John 14:8; 1 John 3:2).”⁸

Aquinas, Safeguard of Catholic Orthodoxy

So the first answer to the question, “Why Study Aquinas Today,” exposes, as Pope Paul VI (d. 1978) once put it, how the Common Doctor supplies effective means for “safeguarding the foundations of the faith.”⁹ Or, why Catholics everywhere, especially those involved in education, should study Aquinas to ensure their personal hold on Catholic orthodoxy.

In its index of Ecclesiastical Writers, the *Catechism* lists some sixty-one references to the works of Aquinas. This statistic suggests the Catholic Church’s reliance on the teachings of the Angelic Doctor when it comes to her making “a statement of the Church’s faith and of Catholic doctrine.”¹⁰ Only Saint Au-

⁷ CCC no. 159: “Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason.” For a discussion of Aquinas’s teaching on the theological virtue of faith, see Romanus Cessario, *Christian Faith and the Theological Life* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html, “Introduction.” See also, Romanus Cessario, “The Reason for Reason: *Fides et Ratio*,” *Crisis Magazine* 17 (January 1999), 16–19 and Romanus Cessario, “*Fides et ratio. Un appel à la vérité et à la réconciliation*,” *Pierre d’angle* 5 (1999), 32–38, <https://doi.org/10.5840/pda199953>.

⁹ Paulus VI, Epistula apostolica *Lumen Ecclesiae* (November 20, 1974), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19741205_lumen-ecclesiae_lt.html, no. 24. English translation: Paul VI, “Thomas Aquinas, Angelic Doctor for Our Age,” trans. Matthew O’Connell, *The Pope Speaks: The Church Documents Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (1975), 287–307.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum* (October 11, 1992), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jpii_apc_19921011_fidei-depositum.html, no. 3. For a general overview of the *Catechism*, see Romanus Cessario et al., *A Love That Never Ends: A Key to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1996).

gustine appears more frequently. No need to accept my word for this evaluation of Aquinas's presence in the Church's universal *Catechism*. We possess a far more weighty and prestigious authority that supports the claim that Thomas Aquinas provides a sure safeguard for Catholic orthodoxy. On 20 November 1974, the abovementioned Pope Paul VI wrote a Letter to the then Master of the Dominican Order, Vincent de Couesnongle, to mark the seventh centenary of the death of Saint Thomas Aquinas. This Letter, whose Latin title is *Lumen Ecclesiae*, asserts emphatically:

Over the centuries the Church has recognized the perennial value and importance of Thomistic teaching; it has done so especially at certain solemn moments, such as the Ecumenical Councils of Florence, Trent and Vatican I, the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law and in Vatican Council III. . . .¹¹

Note one key word in this text, "perennial." What enjoys perennial value never loses its importance. The Pope goes on to recall how both his predecessors and he himself "have frequently confirmed the authority of St. Thomas."¹² He further assures us that this long history of papal endorsements did not result from papal ignorance about historical development in dogmatic formulation nor from a servile fear of progress in Catholic thought. No. The papal endorsements of Aquinas's work have been, the Pope insists, "based on objective considerations that are intrinsic to the philosophy and theology of Aquinas."¹³ This papal endorsement of Aquinas now stands, it is true, a little more than a half century in the past. Do not let the passage of time, however, distract you. As will become apparent, these ecclesial endorsements of Aquinas have not diminished, not grown fifty-years stale.

Some may recall that the year 1978 was hailed as the "Year of Three Popes." Pope Paul VI died in August of that year. Pope John Paul I's papacy lasted about a month. (He died at the end of the following September.) Then, Pope John Paul II was elected in October of the same year, 1978. Throughout his papacy, he kept emphasizing the importance of Aquinas for Catholic thought and life. Admittedly, various special interest groups have claimed several modern philosophical influences on the writings of this philosophically and literarily gifted Pope. However, the English translation of his Lublin Lectures, delivered at the Catholic University of Lublin in the mid-1950s, leave no doubt about

¹¹ Paulus VI, *Lumen Ecclesiae*, no. 14.

¹² Paulus VI, no. 14.

¹³ Paulus VI, no. 14.

Karol Wojtyła's fundamental Aristotelian orientation.¹⁴ Additionally, one only has to recall, for instance, the important references to the work of Aquinas in two of the major doctrinal encyclicals of Pope John Paul II's reign, namely, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) and *Fides et Ratio* (1998). To cite only two emblematic instances of the Pope's reliance on the thought of Thomas Aquinas, consider the decisive judgment made by the Pope in the 1993 encyclical on moral theory. This encyclical deals, as the Pope says, "with certain fundamental questions regarding the Church's moral teaching."¹⁵ In treating these questions, we find that Pope John Paul II invokes Aquinas's action theory. He says so explicitly when he writes: "The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the 'object' rationally chosen by the deliberate will, as is borne out by the insightful analysis, still valid today, made by Saint Thomas."¹⁶ Or, again, in 1995 when he writes on faith and reason, Pope John Paul II says:

This is why the Church has been justified in consistently proposing Saint Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology. In this connection, I would recall what my Predecessor, the Servant of God Paul VI, wrote on the occasion of the seventh centenary of the death of the Angelic Doctor: "Without doubt, Thomas possessed supremely the courage of the truth, a freedom of spirit in confronting new problems, the intellectual honesty of those who allow Christianity to be contaminated neither by secular philosophy nor by a prejudiced rejection of it."¹⁷

¹⁴ For a discussion of the influence that Aquinas held on the young Polish professor, see Jarosław Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000). Also see Karol Wojtyła, *The Lublin Lectures and Works on Max Scheler: The English Critical Edition of the Works of Karol Wojtyła / John Paul II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023).

¹⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (August 6, 1993), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html, no. 5. For further discussion, see Romanus Cessario and J. Augustine DiNoia, eds., *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology: Studies by Ten Outstanding Scholars* (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1999).

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 78. For further discussion, see Romanus Cessario, "The Light of Tabor: Christian Personalism and Adoptive Friendship," *Nova et Vetera: English Edition* 2, no. 2 (2004), 237–47.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 43. For further discussion, see Romanus Cessario, "Duplex Ordo Cognitionis" in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 327–38.

Note well that the above text falls under a general heading in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* that both affirms and expounds on “the enduring originality of the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas.”¹⁸

What may one conclude from this sampling of both papal endorsements of and citations from the works of Thomas Aquinas? At the very least, the Church perennially relies on the works of the Angelic Doctor, especially when it comes to clarifying doctrinal pronouncements that have arisen throughout the Church’s history.¹⁹ It hardly needs to be mentioned that the few examples that I have given above do not exhaust the contributions, both direct and indirect, that Aquinas has made to the safeguarding of Catholic orthodoxy. A complete account would also have to include how Aquinas’s thought helps us to better understand pronouncements made centuries both before and closer to his birth. The best example of the latter appears in the use of the word “transubstantiation” to describe the Eucharistic conversion that the Fourth Lateran Council employed in 1215.²⁰ Who better than Aquinas explains transubstantiation? At the same time, Pope John Paul II’s two encyclical illustrate Aquinas’s usefulness for two very important discussions that occupy the Church today, namely, the right way to evaluate morally a human action and the right way to understand how human reason can support the givens of faith.

Aquinas, Defender of Cognitive and Ontological Realism

The second reason that should prompt today’s Catholic students to study Aquinas arises from the realization that his works always betray what scholars have called both a cognitive and ontological realism.²¹ One may also refer to Aquinas’s

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, before no. 43.

¹⁹ For discussion of the commentator tradition that has drawn on the thought of Aquinas throughout the centuries since his death, see an early work by the author: Romanus Cessario, *Le thomisme et les thomistes* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999) and the English translation, Romanus Cessario, *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005). Also, Romanus Cessario and Cajetan Cuddy, *Thomas and the Thomists: The Achievement of Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

²⁰ See DS 802. For further discussion, see Romanus Cessario, *The Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023); Colman E. O’Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, reviser Romanus Cessario (New York: Alba House, 1991).

²¹ For one of the best studies on this achievement of Aquinas, see Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A. Wauck (San Francisco, 1986).

critical realism. In the early twentieth century, Pope Pius XI (1922–1939) made this point when he addressed Italian university students.

In Thomism we have what might be called a natural Gospel and a very solid basis and framework for the whole doctrinal structure. For it is characteristic of Thomism to be concerned first and foremost with the objective order. The intellectual structures it builds are not pure abstractions but follow the lead given by reality itselfitself. . . . Thomist teaching will never lose its superiority and power, for that could happen only if reality itself were to lose its superiority and power.²²

Such straightforward papal remarks provide fairly strong support for the cognitive and ontological realism that permeates Aquinas's works. Why is this critical realism important? Consider one alternative: Transcendental philosophy.

The overarching outlook that guides Catholic theology today cannot be said to depend muchly on the work of the Belgian Jesuit thinker, Joseph Maréchal (1878–1944), a twentieth-century promoter of what has become known as transcendental Thomism.²³ Maréchal represents one of several efforts from the nineteenth century on to present the thought of Aquinas as compatible with that of Immanuel Kant. Students of Catholic theology, however, should loathe to pin their thinking on skyhooks. At least, I hope they see that versions of Kantianism support poorly Catholic thought. Those with even a basic understanding of Kantian philosophy recognize that the German Enlightenment thinker favored neither cognitive nor ontological realism. Instead, many Catholic students owe a great deal to the work of another Belgian philosopher who worked most of his life in Quebec, Canada. He, of course, enjoys a solid reputation as a down-to-earth Thomist. I refer to Charles De Koninck (1906–1965).²⁴ The two-volume edition of *The Writings of Charles De Koninck* published by the late Ralph McInerny make the philosophical and theological genius of De Koninck accessible to an English-speaking readership. De Koninck was less concerned with fighting continental transcendentalism and more concerned with addressing the monistic materialism that modern science implicitly or not so implicitly adopts.

²² See Domenico Bertetto, ed., *Discorsi di Pio XI*, vol. 1 (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1960), 668–69.

²³ See for instance, John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003).

²⁴ See Ralph M. McInerny, "Charles De Koninck: A Philosopher of Order," *New Scholasticism* 39, no. 4 (1965), 491–516, <https://doi.org/10.5840/newscholas19653944>.

It remains remarkably difficult to summarize genius in a phrase or a single citation. However, one quotation from an early work of De Koninck, *The Cosmos*, exhibits how he was able to put Aquinas's cognitive and ontological realism up against the findings of the most acclaimed modern scientific theorists. As the title suggests, De Koninck used his Thomist principles to safeguard a view of the universe—*The Cosmos*—one, moreover, that does not force Christians to adopt either monist or pantheist theories. Monism, on De Koninck's account, "wants to take everything back to homogeneous unity. Pantheism . . . pretends that God and the world are one."²⁵ De Koninck's rebuttal: "There is absolute unity in God alone: in His very unity He is absolutely distinct from every creature. But metaphysics also teaches us that by His immensity, God is more intimately in creatures than creatures are in themselves."²⁶ De Koninck concludes by pointing out that without a proper understanding of the God-world relationship, "things too would be deprived of their most intimate link, since God, their most profound principle of coherence, would be dispersed among them. The world would be like an army in disorder without a leader."²⁷ That was written in 1936! Think today of the issues that divide the citizens of the world. Was De Koninck a prophet?

It is well known that, especially after Descartes, many books on the history of philosophy recount diverse challenges to the cognitive and ontological realism that Saint Thomas upholds.²⁸ Today then, Catholic students worldwide enjoy an awesome responsibility. In a world that looks all too much like an army in disorder and without a leader, Catholic students must discover the arguments that put order back into both philosophy and theology. Ideologies, such as those embedded in the once popular (in the USA, at least) diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, abet disorder in human society. Sound philosophy, on the contrary, begins when the human person achieves cognitive contact with the real and upon reflection embraces wisely the real goods of nature and supernature. How does a person know that what he or she embraces brings wisdom? In a small treatise that he composed on the Blessed Virgin Mary, De Koninck gives one answer to this question. In this 1943 publication, "Ego Sapientia: The Wisdom That Is Mary," De Koninck gives us a guideline for identifying wise loves. He says:

²⁵ *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, vol. 1 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 320.

²⁶ *Writings*, 321.

²⁷ *Writings*, 321.

²⁸ For a brief study, see Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (Providence, RI, 2020).

Wisdom may be predicated substantially only of a thing which in its being and operation is of the nature of the first principle from which all things proceed by way of origination. It would not suffice for it to attain the primary root solely according to knowledge because then it would be wise only, but it must substantially possess the nature of the first principle, and know itself as such.²⁹

De Koninck goes on to explain how this definition allows us to call Our Blessed Lady, Wisdom. His argument exhibits a daringly bold approach to Marian spirituality, one however that finds spiritual inspiration in saints such as the seventeenth-century preacher, Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (d. 1716). De Koninck wants to show that Wisdom belongs rightly to Mary on account of the fact that she embodies the kind of first principle that ensures wisdom. He says:

To be truly a first principle would not Mary have to be such a first principle even in her relation to God, would she not have to be so close to God that she would somehow participate even in His nature of first principle, be as the root of the universal order, even, in a way, that from which God Himself proceeds in a certain manner, the origin and genetrix of God?³⁰

It would be difficult to imagine a more robust statement in defense of ontological realism or a better example of reason supporting faith. The mystical Baroque metaphors that one finds throughout the writings of Louis de Montfort escape many people. De Koninck, on the other hand, in a few pages uncovers the philosophical groundwork of de Montfort's Marian spirituality. He also makes a penetrating comment on reality itself. One, accordingly, sees why Pope John Paul II in his 1998 encyclical on faith and reason, ends with this sentiment drawn from the Pope's reading of certain holy monks from Christian antiquity: "In her [Mary] they [the monks] saw a lucid image of true philosophy and they were convinced of the need to *philosophari in Maria*."³¹

²⁹ *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, vol. 2 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 6.

³⁰ *Writings*, vol. 2, p. 7.

³¹ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 108.

Thomas Aquinas as Integrator

A third reason that should persuade Catholic students to study Aquinas stems from the creative way in which he sets out the whole of Catholic teaching, the *depositum fidei*. During the period after the issuance of *Aeterni Patris* in 1879, it was common for scholars to speak about a Thomistic synthesis.³² From a material consideration, this meant that Thomist scholars produced books that contained the elements of Thomist thought, the characteristic features of Thomist thought, and the Thomist resolutions of well-known disputes in both philosophy and theology.³³ Some eager thinkers, however, moved from consulting material collections of Thomist positions to envisaging the same as a self-contained system of thought. Josef Pieper addressed the wrongheadedness of one's presenting Aquinas, especially in his *Summa*, as the creator of a closed system. Pieper explains as follows: It is a misunderstanding to assume "that the *summas* are the most pretentious form of closed system—the closed system in the sense of Hegel."³⁴ In other words, the *Summa Theologiae* is not to be treated as a kind of Enlightenment encyclopedia, only one that may not need updating. Not every Thomist scholar made the "encyclopedic mistake." For instance, consider the Swiss Dominican, Gallus Manser's book, *Das Wesen des Thomismus*.³⁵ This text represents an effort to show that one best approaches Aquinas with an eye for the first principles that govern his work.³⁶ Aquinas can rightly be considered as an integrator. It remains, nonetheless, important to grasp how he proceeds to bring things together by appealing to the first principles of both faith and reason.

I hope that some of you are already familiar with a recently (2023) published work, *The Thomistic Response to the Nouvelle Théologie: Concerning the Truth of Dogma and the Nature of Theology*.³⁷ This impressive volume supplies just what

³² For further information about *Aeterni Patris*, see Victor B. Brezik, ed., *One Hundred Years of Thomism: Aeterni Patris and Afterwards: A Symposium* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, University of St. Thomas, 1981).

³³ To cite one example, see Joseph Gredt, *Elementa philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae*, 2 vols. (Rome: Desclée, 1899–1901).

³⁴ Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 157, 158.

³⁵ Gallus M. Manser, *Das Wesen des Thomismus* (Freiburg: Rütschi, 1935).

³⁶ See the remark by Jörgen Vijgen, "What is a Thomist? The Contribution of John of St. Thomas," December 10, 2018, accessed January 6, 2025, https://thomistica.net/essays/2018/12/10/what-is-a-thomist-the-contribution-of-john-of-st-thomas#_ftn4.

³⁷ Jon Kirwan, ed., *The Thomistic Response to the Nouvelle Théologie: Concerning the Truth of Dogma and the Nature of Theology*, trans. Matthew K. Miner (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023).

the title says. These documents translated for the first time into English may be judged as long overdue, especially for students who recognize the value of Saint Thomas as both philosopher and theologian. From the time that reporters and other observers of the Second Vatican Council began to introduce two theretofore unfamiliar words to Catholics worldwide—one Italian and the other French, *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*—many Catholics and others have been persuaded that the Second Vatican Council ordained dramatic changes in the life of the Catholic Church. These changes included a movement away from Leonine Thomism, a singular renewal of Thomist thought that had guided the Church’s teaching office since 1879. Instead, *ressourcement* theologians sought to establish a new theological approach based on the retrieval of texts, that is, sources, found among the writings of early Christian authors. The initial volume that announced this new approach may be identified with the 1946 publication of Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses* in the Collection, Sources chrétiennes.³⁸ Note well that this movement did not represent merely a renewed interest in patrology. No. The advocates of *ressourcement*, mainly Jesuits at the start, consciously sought to establish a new paradigm for doing Catholic theology.

As the 395 pages of carefully translated and edited documents indicate, *Thomistic Response* exposes what certain mid-twentieth century scholars considered questionable about this bold project. In a word, French Dominican Thomists, mainly centered in Toulouse, raised serious objections to the Jesuits—again Frenchmen, mostly centered in Lyon, France—and their proposal to transform the dominant theological model that had governed the presentation of official Catholic thought from at least the sixteenth century, if not before. This lecture does not allow even a brief exposé of the multi-faceted *ressourcement* debate that continues to this day. Suffice it to remark that the multiplication of sources, mainly authors from Christian antiquity, can easily distract the student of theology from what Pope Paul VI has called “a magnificent, carefully organized edifice of doctrine which is universally valid and makes him [Aquinas] a teacher even for our time [late 1970s].”³⁹

Scholars have observed that whereas the early and medieval theologians valued metaphysics as a paradigm for their doctrinal developments, modern

³⁸ Grégoire de Nysse, *La vie de Moïse; ou Traité de la perfection en matière de vertu*, 2. éd., rev. et augm. du text critique, trans. Jean Daniélou, Sources chrétiennes, 1 bis (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007; réim pr. de la 2e éd. rev. et corr., 1955; 1re éd., 1942). The advertisement explains the purpose of the collection: La collection Sources chrétiennes présente les textes des premiers siècles du christianisme, en y joignant tous les éléments (introductions, notes, index, etc.) qui peuvent en faciliter l’intelligence ou l’étude.

³⁹ Paulus VI, *Lumen Ecclesiae*, no. 19.

theologians have chosen instead to make history and historical investigation the paradigm for theological work.⁴⁰ The problem with this modern turn of events recalls an issue that Aquinas dealt with at the very start of his *Summa Theologiae*. In the very first question, Aquinas responds to someone who wants to make biblical history disqualify Christian theology as a science. The objector argues that the *sacra doctrina* cannot be a science, since sciences do not treat individual events, for instance, “the doings of Abraham, Issac, Jacob and the like.”⁴¹ Fair enough. However, Aquinas recognizes another origin for the *sacra doctrina*. So he replies

Sacred doctrine (*sacra doctrina*) sets out individual cases, not as being preoccupied with them, but in order to introduce them as examples for our own lives . . . and to proclaim the authority of the men through whom divine revelation has come down to us, which revelation is the basis of sacred Scripture or doctrine.⁴²

In other words, the *sacra doctrina* attains its scientific character not from the historical narratives found in the Bible, but from its subordination to a “higher science, namely God’s very own which he shares with the blessed.”⁴³ Something similar can be said about the 623 volumes of ancient sources now translated into French by the editors of Sources chrétiennes. [Cerf advertised a 50% discount for the whole series, an offer that ended in early 2025.] Sound theology always harkens back to God’s knowledge of himself that He shares with the blessed, and not to the endless flow of historical documents that have tried, sometimes successfully, to capture pieces of it.

To say that Aquinas brings integration to the theological discipline means that one can expect to discover not only premises for theological thinking but also conclusions. Given the human mind’s preference for truth, these conclusions prove very useful for the student of Catholic thought. Think of catechetical instruction. Think of priests’ preaching. Think of your own moral

⁴⁰ See Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1989), xi: “When I began the preparatory work for this study in the fall of 1953, one of the questions which stood in the foreground of concern within German-speaking, Catholic theological circles were the question of the relation of salvation-history to metaphysics. This was a problem which arose above all from contacts with Protestant theology which, since the time of Luther, has tended to see in metaphysical thought a departure from the specific claim of the Christian faith which directs man not simply to the Eternal but to the God who acts in time and history.”

⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I^a q. 1, art. 2, arg. 2.

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, ad 2.

⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, *respondeo*.

lives. As edifying as each of the 623 volumes of *Sources chrétiennes* may be, one may be excused for wondering to what extent they satisfy the human desire to embrace divine truth integrally. One is reminded even of the skilled librarian who knows the location of every book in his library but remains ignorant of what the books contain.

Thomas Aquinas as Spiritual Master

So far we have considered three reasons for studying Aquinas: orthodoxy, realism, and integration. The fourth reason that should urge students to follow the thought of Saint Thomas may be placed under the heading of spiritual guide. Of course, his being a guide to one's Catholic life would require that he upholds Catholic orthodoxy. It would hardly do to follow someone who departed from the truth. It should also be someone who recognizes the place that God holds with relation to our whole human beingness. To choose a spiritual guide whose only concern is from the neck up, so to speak, that is, one who thinks that Christian life remains circumscribed by one's mental activity, would leave a person open to all kinds of uncertainties. Conservative uncertainties, such as scruples, and liberal uncertainties, well, such as grave misunderstandings about both the Church and the moral life. Further, a spiritual guide should possess a comprehensive grasp of what the Church holds. Most heresies arise from a person's attaching exaggerated importance to one aspect of the Christian faith. In the United States, New England Unitarianism provides a good example for those familiar with the history of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Charismatic extremism that looks for divine approval almost exclusively outside of the ordinary ways in which God makes his holy will known may be another. Think of those people everywhere who consider internal psychological movements the ultimate arbiter of their religious experiences.

The suggestion that Saint Thomas Aquinas provides sound guidance for living a proper Catholic life is not new. Many continental authors have written extensively on the topic.⁴⁴ I myself once published a brief article on the subject

⁴⁴ For example, see Josef Pieper, *Philosophia negativa: Zwei Versuche über Thomas von Aquin* (München: Kösel, 1953); Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, “La contemplation dans l’école dominicaine,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 2 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1953), 2067–80; Walter H. Principe, *Thomas Aquinas’s Spirituality* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984); Jean-Pierre Torrell, “Thomas D’Aquin,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 15 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1991), 718–73; Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Initiation à saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris – Fribourg, 1993); Guy Bedouelle, *Ad immagine di Santo Domenico*

that drew from some of these earlier sources.⁴⁵ There, I argued that the generative matrix of Aquinas's own mystical experiences lies in the some thirty years of Dominican ministry and community life that this Neapolitan nobleman began in 1244. Aquinas's words before receiving the blessed Eucharist for the last time reveal his deep personal love for Jesus Christ: "I now receive you who art the price of my soul's redemption, I receive you who art the food for my final journey, and for the love of whom I have studied, kept vigil, and struggled; indeed, it was you, Jesus, that I preached and you that I taught."⁴⁶ For a speculative thinker of the thirteenth century, both Aquinas's philosophical and theological treatises provide rich sources of insight about the human experience of transcendence and our a-conceptual bond with God.

Three strains of connatural knowledge appear in the works of Thomas Aquinas. One may identify them as Being-mysticism, Bridal-mysticism, and Knowledge-mysticism. One note of caution: Catholics should approach words like mysticism and spirituality with discrimination. The category of mysticism, for example, enters the Thomist commentator tradition somewhat later than 1274 when Aquinas died. One significant figure of this innovation appears in the seventeenth-century Thomist, Thomas de Vallgornera (1595–1665), a Spanish Dominican, who published in 1662 his *Mystica theologiae divi Thomae: utriusque theologiae scholasticae et mysticae principis*. In the prologue, the author wrote: "The mystical doctrine of St. Thomas is of such great authority, precisely because it is founded on Scholastic doctrine, that it can scarcely be expressed in words."⁴⁷ In other words, Aquinas did not consider mysticism as something that could trump scholastic thought.

First, Being-mysticism. The twentieth-century German theologian Josef Pieper once suggested that Aquinas should have been called Friar Thomas of the Creation (*Thomas a Creatore*).⁴⁸ For while Saint Thomas, as he himself

(Milan: Jaca Book, 1994). English translations of many of the above materials have become available since their original publication.

⁴⁵ A version of what follows in this section has appeared in Luigi Borriello and et al., eds., *Dizionario di Mistica* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), s.v. "Tommaso D'Aquino (santo)." See also, Romanus Cessario, "The Spirituality of Saint Thomas Aquinas," *Crisis Magazine* 14 (July/August 1996), 14–16.

⁴⁶ Kenelm Foster, ed. and trans., "From the First Canonisation Enquiry (Naples, At the Archbishop's Palace; 21 July to 18 September 1319)," in *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents* (London: Longmans, Green, 1959), 110.

⁴⁷ See Tomás de Vallgornera, *Mystica theologiae divi Thomae: utriusque theologiae scholasticae et mysticae principis*, ed. Joachim Joseph Berthier (Turin: Marietti, 1911), Prologue.

⁴⁸ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Saint Thomas*, trans. John Murray and Daniel O'Connor (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), 32.

testifies, did everything out of an unstinting love for the incarnate Son of God, the surpassing riches of Christ never kept him from drawing the full theological implications of Saint Paul's words to the Romans: "Ever since the creation of the world God's invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:20). Since the Catholic faith teaches that the created order witnesses to the existence of a God who entirely surpasses every form of finiteness and contingency, Aquinas can argue that the human experience of transcendence is founded on the causal relationships that bind the created person with the Creator.⁴⁹ By appeal to the real distinction in created beings between their specific identity ("essentia") and their actual existence ("esse"), Aquinas unequivocally excludes all forms of pantheism or panentheism. Rather, he describes an ordering that obtains between intellectual creatures and God and which establishes the basis for a certain kind of justice: Reverence for and submission to an utterly transcendent God fall among the dispositions that religion requires of the human person. Of course, to acknowledge an acquired virtue of religion in no way prejudices the fact that the only perfect worship of God remains that which is revealed by Jesus Christ and is practiced in the Church of faith and Sacraments. Aquinas's appreciation for creation as providing the basis for an analogical knowledge of the supernatural order lies at the heart of his Being-mysticism.

Second, Bridal-mysticism. Aquinas would also have merited the title Friar Thomas of the Incarnation. For as commentary on the magisterial documents that affirm the divinity of Jesus Christ, Aquinas's discussion of the metaphysics of the Incarnation ranks among the best in this genre of Christian literature.⁵⁰ Aquinas locates the supreme moment of alliance between mankind and God in the hypostatic union.⁵¹ In the person of the Logos-Son, a human nature comes together with the divine nature, without either one thereby suffering division or mixture. As the primordial wedding between God and mankind, the Incarnation makes a personal relationship between God and human persons possible. Indeed, each member of the human family becomes an adopted son or daughter of God only in the one incarnate Son. Aquinas's Bridal-mysticism emphasizes the intimate communication with God that Christ's mission opens up for all persons. So while the human person can approach the Creator in

⁴⁹ See Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html, no. 3.

⁵⁰ For further discussion, see Romanus Cessario, "God the Son: Trinitarian Christology: Markers in the Thomist Tradition," *Nova et Vetera*: English Edition 12 (2014), 1233–55.

⁵¹ For further discussion, see Cessario, "The Light of Tabor," 237–47.

a spirit of reverence and submission, only those who are sons or daughters in Christ dare to address God using the familiar name, “Abba, Father.” Aquinas’s explanations about the person and life of Christ, especially his salvific death, his Virgin Mother, his Mystical Body, which is the Church, and the Sacraments all serve to explain how this privileged form of personal communion with God begins and develops in the Christian believer. As Aquinas’s own deathbed prayer witnesses, the blessed Eucharist preeminently realizes his Incarnation-centered mysticism. Why? At the moment of Holy Communion the Christian believer finds union with the person of Christ as present under the sacramental signs of bread and wine. The Sienese Dominican Catherine Benincasa (1347–1380), who, while herself communicating, received a mystical ring as a symbol of her extraordinary spiritual union with Christ, represents Aquinas’s Bridal-mysticism.⁵² Her indefatigable defense of both Christ’s Church and the papacy points up, moreover, the ecclesial aspect of *communio* that Aquinas assumes as the foundation for all *bona fide* Christian mysticism.

Third, Knowledge-mysticism. On Aquinas’s account, the theological virtue of faith perfects the human mind. Under the impulse of divine grace, God moves the human will to assent to truths that surpass reason’s grasp and for which God therefore serves as the only Source and Guarantor. At the same time, theological faith also effects a marriage between the human person and God. In one of his short works, an Exposition addressed to the Archdeacon of Todi, Aquinas cites the Vulgate text, “I will espouse thee to me in faith” (Hos 2:20), in order to emphasize the mystical dimension of Christian belief.⁵³ Thus, Aquinas teaches that this virtue leads the human person not only to a cognitive grasp of revealed truth, but also to an authentic embrace of the divine Persons that such truths represent.⁵⁴ The transformation of the human intellect that faith achieves in the believer remains the beginning of the new life that charity establishes in the believer. By the gracious regard of the divine Goodness, charity makes the human person a lover of God, and this love reaches its earthly perfection in the affective beholding of God that Aquinas calls contemplation.

⁵² The event provided a popular theme for artists of the fifteenth century and beyond. See for example, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine of Siena*, by Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia, a Sienese artist of the fifteenth century.

⁵³ The Vulgate text runs “et sponsabo te mihi in fide.” See *Expositio primae decretalis ad Archidiaconum Tudertinum*.

⁵⁴ For a full discussion of Aquinas’s teaching on theological faith, see Cessario, *Christian Faith*.

For Aquinas, contemplative prayer forms part of the ordinary dynamic of Christian mysticism.⁵⁵ The spiritual elitism that characterizes certain European mystics of the seventeenth century, such as the Spanish priest Miguel Molinos (c. 1640–1697) and the French clairvoyant Madame Guyon (1648–1717), finds no support in the works of Thomas Aquinas. On the contrary, as his teaching about the Gifts of the Holy Spirit makes plainly evident, the theological life of faith and charity develops into a form of habitual connaturality that makes the felt experience of God a swift matter of ease and joy.⁵⁶ Aquinas himself provides a peerless illustration of this Knowledge-mysticism. In 1273, shortly before his death, Aquinas experienced the utter nothingness of his vast literary output. “I can write no more,” he told his secretary, “for all that I have written seems like straw in comparison to what I have seen.”⁵⁷ Perhaps Aquinas’s own biography more forcefully demonstrates how he conceived the immediacy of the mystical experience than do his unsurpassed writings on the Christian life. Or as Thomas de Vallgornera expressed it, words do not suffice.

Trusted Guide for the Theologian Today

It would be difficult to affirm that everything Pope Paul VI said about Aquinas and his teaching has taken hold of the Catholic theological community or of Catholic education. Educational institutions that revere Aquinas as a model for theological instruction occupy but a small position on the landscape of Catholic theological and philosophical studies. So the five reasons that I propose for studying Aquinas today aim to augment the number of students and scholars who regard Aquinas as a *Lumen Ecclesiae*. True enough, in the better schools, Aquinas receives attention for his place in the history of philosophy and theology. Pope Paul VI, however, recalled a more ample place for Aquinas when he wrote: “To put the matter briefly: the Church officially approves the teaching of the Angelic Doctor and uses it as an instrument superbly adapted

⁵⁵ Romanus Cessario, *Dominican Contemplative Life: Inside the Cloister* (New Hope, KY: St Martin de Porres Community, 2024).

⁵⁶ For further discussion, Romanus Cessario, “A Thomist Interpretation of Faith: The Gifts of Understanding and Knowledge,” in *Novitas et Veritas Vitae. Aux Sources du Renouveau de la Morale Chrétienne. Mélanges offerts au Professeur Servais Pinckaers à l’occasion de son 65e anniversaire*, ed. Carlos-Josaphat Pinto de Oliveira (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1991), 67–102.

⁵⁷ Foster, “From the First Canonisation Enquiry,” 109–10, no. 79.

to her purposes, thus casting the mantle of her own magisterial authority over Aquinas, as she does (even if in lesser degree) over her other great doctors.”⁵⁸

To summarize the main points made in this article, allow me to enumerate the following conclusions. (1) Catholic theology today exhibits a pluralism that contrary to some assertions may not serve well what Aquinas calls the *sacra doctrina*, that is, God’s own knowledge of himself that He shares with the blessed. (2) Since the close of the Second Vatican Council, though not by reason of any warrant that appears in the official proceedings of the Council, Catholic theologians have engaged in dialogue with Christian teachings that have developed from within the ecclesial communions that have developed in the West since the sixteenth century. To a lesser extent, Catholic theologians have engaged with the religious teachings and sacred literature of world religions other than Christian. While the engagement itself may be found legitimate in many cases, the impression that the engagement has created can, in several instances, at least, lead to syncretistic distortions of Catholic truth.⁵⁹ (3) Aquinas and his conception of the theological project reminds students of theology that the task of theology is to expound on and defend the truths of the Catholic faith. No warrant is found for changing the truths of the Catholic religion. Popes have praised Aquinas for his modeling of this kind of theological activity. (4) Pope John Paul II, especially in his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, set forth the way that faith and reason lead the human inquirer to the truth about God and creation. Aquinas offers an introduction to the proper use of philosophy in theology. Philosophical realism best serves Catholic theology which must defend such doctrines as those that concern creation of the universe, the nature of the human person, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, and many other features of Catholic life. Catholic believers are assured of a contact with the real and not only with correct thoughts about the real. (5) The Catholic theologian finds in Aquinas a guide as how to ensure that one’s theological efforts remain part of a single science. Theology has not generated stepchildren. The modern penchant to make theological specialties self-standing enterprises that balkanize theology finds no warrant in Catholic or Thomist teaching. As the *Summa Theologiae* makes plain, Aquinas integrates the several topics that theologians consider under one formal object, namely, the truth about God and his Christ. (6) Finally, Catholic theology belongs more in a classical monastery than in a modern university. Theological learning gives way to theological practice,

⁵⁸ Paulus VI, *Lumen Ecclesiae*, no. 22.

⁵⁹ For discussion, see Romanus Cessario, “Miscere colloquia: On the Authentic Renewal of Catholic Spirituality,” *Nova et Vetera*: English Edition 11 (2013), 627–47.

such that distinctive specializations such as spirituality or, still less, mysticism, require no formal distinction from speculative thought. Those who study the truth are drawn to love the truth.

Those who study under the shadow of Blessed Ceslaus, Dominican missionary and teacher, should be proud of the heritage that his Order generated after the death of Aquinas.⁶⁰ Catholic students today can regain their footing by attending to the teaching of the Angelic Doctor. Even when theology entertains topics that were not part of Aquinas's world view, sound Thomists will discover that the principles that Aquinas upholds will help them make right judgment about questions that thirteenth-century theologians did not face. How may one conclude? With a burst of praise for the gift that Aquinas remains for the Church and with an expression of gratitude for this issue of the Wroclaw journal, I say, *Felix, Happy, Wroclaw*. Her theological journal exhibits so much devotion to the teachings of the Common Doctor.

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⁶⁰ For one example of the Thomist contribution to contemporary Catholic thought, see Romanus Cessario, "Sonship, Sacrifice, and Satisfaction: The Divine Friendship in Aquinas and the Renewal of Christian Anthropology," *Letter & Spirit* 3 (2007), 71–93.

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