

1 Introduction

1.1 Faith and Understanding

Christian faith affirms that God wants to share his/her¹ own life with us, through his son, Jesus Christ, and he calls on us to respond, by accepting this gift of new life and allowing it to transform us. Faith is the name of this act of acceptance, but faith itself makes certain demands and it does this because of its connection with life. Life is most fully life when it is conscious, aware of being alive, present to itself in its mystery and beauty. Precisely because faith is the acceptance of a new and wonderful kind of life, it seeks to be aware of the mystery of that life, and, within the limits of the possible, to understand it.² This quest which faith undertakes is called «theology.»³ And because faith is an act of human beings, whose thinking bears the marks of the culture and history which have shaped them, wo/men will always use human styles of thought, the imagery, the legends, folklore, and myths of their own time, the popular and technical philosophy of their day and age, as tools for understanding the content of faith.⁴

1.2 Theology in the New Testament

Faith has engaged in this search from the beginning, and we find the earliest traces of this activity in the New Testament.⁵ Not that we find any theological treatises among the Gospels or Epistles, or even in the book of Revelation. But the Gospel writers (and evidently Jesus himself) made use of Jewish literary forms to confront their readers with the challenge of faith – parables,

¹ Having made this point once here, from now on I will follow the ordinary convention of using the masculine pronouns for God.

² To understand life, of course, is not to reduce it to applied logic or to the production of clear and distinct ideas. Understanding is being present to reality in all of its mystery.

³ Anselm of Canterbury, writing at the end of the eleventh century, defined theology as «faith seeking understanding» — a good definition even today.

⁴ If they are wise, they will always try to be alert to the fact that these human patterns of thought have their own structures, their own inner dynamic, and that these structures and that dynamic may, in some cases, be alien to faith and may attempt to impose themselves on faith and theology. (We will see that that was a problem in the early development of scholasticism.)

⁵ This is true if we restrict ourselves to specifically Christian sources. However, the work of the Jahwist, writing in the book of Genesis in the tenth century B.C., is a remarkable example of the daring and courageous appropriation of the myths, legends, saga, and folklore of neighboring pagan peoples, and using these stories as a vehicle of calling people to faith in Jahweh, the God of Israel.

aphorisms, Old Testament citations, Messianic titles, and many others. And Paul made use of many of the thought-forms and concepts of popular Hellenistic philosophy to talk about the mystery of Jesus, to say nothing of his use of lists of vices and virtues current in the work of authors of his day, in order to sum up the Christian moral challenge.⁶

1.3 Theology in the Early Church up to the End of the Third Century

What distinguished theology in scripture and in the first three centuries from that of later times, and especially from the period treated in these notes – scholasticism – is the fact that theology was not being done *systematically*; that is, there was no attempt to break down the enterprise of understanding into separate areas, each with its own inner unity and with its defined relationships to the other areas (for example, Trinitarian theology, christology, pneumatology, sacramental theology, and ecclesiology). There were first-rate theologians during this period – Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, and Cyril of Jerusalem come to mind – but, in general, they used the resources of neo-platonic philosophy as a tool for commenting on scripture. In the West, Cyprian of Carthage, writing about 250 A.D., laid the groundwork for much later thought in ecclesiology, but again, without any attempt at systematization.

1.4 Augustine

The North African philosopher and theologian, Aurelius Augustinus (354 to 430) was the first to approach theology in a somewhat systematic way. He wrote a treatise (what we might think of today as a textbook) on the Trinity, another on grace, and in his *City of God*, he developed a theology of history. He reflected on the church (although he never worked out a formal ecclesiology), and made two distinctions in regard to the church – one which would have unfortunate consequences in Reformation times (the distinction between the spiritual church and the earthly church), and a second which has unfortunately been largely ignored, although it has great potential for dealing with the tension between the divine and human attributes of the church.⁷

⁶ This might be an example of the resistance, the recalcitrance, of some human patterns of thought, when we try to use them to speak of the Christian mystery. There is nothing specifically Christian about these lists, and they mask, rather than reveal, the relevance of Paul's christology for our moral lives.

⁷ This is the distinction between the church of the present, made up of sinful human beings, and therefore a very ambiguous sign of the enduring presence of Christ in our midst, and the church of the future, which will be the church as God wants it to be. The church of the future is an eschatological reality, which is present only in a hidden way in
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Augustine wanted to base all of his theology on scripture, but two factors stood in the way. The first was the fact that his reading of scripture was both fundamentalistic and allegorical (to say nothing of his fascination with numerology). The second was the fact that he made use of a kind of generalized neoplatonic philosophy as an interpretative tool, and this philosophy, true to its Platonic heritage, contrasted the goodness of spirit with the evil of matter.⁸

Augustine never tried to construct a complete systematic theology, but his achievements would be hard to overestimate. He was the father of medieval theology, and modern revivals of his thought (on the 1500th anniversary of his death in 1930, and the 1600th anniversary of his birth in 1954) have shown his affinities with modern existentialist thought. Citations from his works are omnipresent in the writings of the medieval scholastic theologians we will be talking about later, and, for them, his authority is second only to that of the Bible.

2 Scholasticism

2.1 The Background

After Augustine, theology in the West went into a long period of hibernation, punctuated by a hint of brilliance in the work of the ninth century Irishman, John Scotus Erigena (810 to 877 A.D.). In the East, John of Damascus' work (he died in the year 754) marked the «official» end of the patristic period. But, like others before him, he made no attempt to develop an overall system.

All of this was destined to change toward the end of the eleventh century. Many factors prepared for this new kind of theology: the Germanic invasions had run their course and the tribesmen had been converted, nominally at least, to Latin Christianity;⁹ the restored Empire had brought peace to much of Western Europe; cities were growing; schools were being founded in connection with many of the monasteries and cathedrals,¹⁰ (the graduates of the cathedral

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the church of the present.

⁸ This typically Greek notion of the spirit as non-material, non-corporeal, is very different from the Semitic notion we meet in the Old Testament and New Testament, where «spirit» is the whole reality of a thing, in so far as it comes from God's hands and strives to return to the place from which it came, and «flesh» is the reality of a thing in so far as it is weak and subject to sin.

⁹ Many of the tribes who had invaded the Western Empire had been early converts to Arian Christianity, and this had blocked their assimilation of Latin culture.

¹⁰ One of the more famous of these schools was connected with the court of Otto II,
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schools were being trained to work in the clerical and civil bureaucracy, but that training also gave them the tools needed as they turned to ponder the mysteries of faith); and finally, the Moslem conquest of Spain had brought the thought of Plato and Aristotle, the philosophers of ancient Greece, to the West, in the form of Arabic translations of their works, and the work of Arab philosophers influenced by them – particularly Ibn Sina (usually called Avicenna; he lived from 980 to 1037) and Ibn Roshd (usually called Averroes; he lived from 1126 to 1198, and died in Cordoba, Spain). The terrain for scholasticism had been prepared.

2.1 Early Scholasticism

Scholasticism was a new way of doing what theology had always tried to do: use human intelligence and the tools which popular culture put at its disposal, in order to understand the mysteries of faith. Scholasticism was the product of three currents of thought: the first was the theological heritage of scripture and of the patristic period (particularly of Augustine).¹¹ The second was the philosophy of Aristotle, newly available from Moslem Spain. And the third included two insights which had developed principally in the monastic schools: first, the insight that we understand that data only by raising questions about it, and second, the insight that different answers are usually given to these questions, and that techniques must be developed for evaluating these answers.¹²

Questions have a kind of unbounded and unlimited character about them. Questioning is not at ease with limits, and it will not tolerate a voice that says, «Your questions can go this far but no farther.» There is nothing about which we cannot raise questions, and, in raising them, we are always trying to link what we know with what we do not yet know. For this reason, scholastic method inherently calls for synthesis, for the attempt to discover the universality of truth, for the

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king of the West Franks, in Paris. The school was under the direction of Hugh of St. Victor (1096 to 1141), who was one of the more prominent teachers and writers of what might be called the pre-scholastic period. Another important figure was Anselm of Canterbury, who died early in the twelfth century.

¹¹ Much of this material was available in a document assembled by Peter Lombard early in the twelfth century, and known as the *Sentences*. (The Latin word *Sententiae* meant «opinions.»)

¹² This technique was developed by Abelard (he lived from 1079 to 1142), who created lists of propositions and then proceeded to both prove and disprove them. The title of his major work was *Sic et Non* (Yes and No), and because of the scepticism which this work breathed, Abelard often found himself on the wrong side of church authorities.

writing of the *Summa*.¹³

2.2 The High-Scholastic Period (the Thirteenth Century)

High Scholasticism, or scholasticism's golden age, was characterized less by a change in the methods used, and more by the calm and confident appropriation and adaptation of Aristotle's analysis of reality,¹⁴ and the development of a brilliant concept (the analogy of being), without which it would have been impossible to «baptize» Aristotle.

2.2.1 The Heart of Aristotle's Contribution

There were two aspects of Aristotle's thought which made it appropriate as a tool for sounding the depths of the Christian mystery. First, he took the material world and the bodily side of human life seriously, and this made it possible to use his thought to deal with the revelation of both the Old Testament and the New, which took the material world and the whole human being, flesh and spirit, as well as time, space, and history, seriously. Unless matter, flesh, and the body are important, the incarnation is without meaning.¹⁵ Second, Aristotle asserted that everything real has two components or building blocks: one of them *active*, which makes things what they are, determines them, gives them their actual shape, form, and other qualities; and the other *potential*, which accounts for what things *can* become and be, and therefore offers a way of explaining development and change. Precisely because it took seriously *what* material things are, and *what* makes them the way they are, his philosophy made it possible to break with Platonism's contempt for the material world and for the material side of the human being, and it *suggested* a way of dealing with a fundamental problem encountered at the border of philosophy and theology: how to cope with the fact that, on the one hand, God created the world and that its reality originates entirely with him, and, on the other hand, the fact that an infinite chasm separates God's reality from that of the world. Although the solution to this problem of God's immanence in the world and in everything in it, and his simultaneous transcen-

¹³ By the eleventh century, the Latin word *summa* had come to mean «summary.» The most famous of these summaries was that of Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologiae* (not «*Summa Theologica*») was unfinished at the time of his death in 1274.

¹⁴ This was possible because the Dutch scholar, William of Moerbeke, was busily translating Aristotle's later works into Latin just at the time that Thomas Aquinas began to write. This brought Aristotle's thought to the West in pure form, without its having to pass through the Platonic filter found in the works of the Arab mediators of Greek thought.

¹⁵ And the theologians of the East, with their neo-Platonic background, were never able to come to terms with the enduring meaning of the humanity of Jesus.

dence of the world, had been hinted at by teachers in the early scholastic period, it was Thomas Aquinas (1225 to 1274) who developed the theory which fully «christianized» Aristotle's thought, and made it a useful vehicle for dealing with problems encountered at the threshold of the finite and the infinite.

Thomas proposed to extend Aristotle's actual/potential distinction, which the Greek thinker had used to deal with *what* things are and *what* they can become, and to see that the fact *that* things are is the ultimate *active* element in all that is, including God. This vision of existence as an *act*, made it possible to see that existence is not just a switch which determines whether things are real or possible, but that things exist in different ways and in different degrees, and that their acts of existence are always proportioned to the kind of being they possess, to *what they are*. In all created things there is a real distinction between their act of existence and their potential for existing (the technical term in Thomas' thought was *essence*), but in God, his potential is exhaustively actualized – he *is, fully*, all that he *can be* – and therefore in God essence and existence are identical.

This way of thinking stretched the limits of human thought to the frontier of infinity and it reconciled the total immanence and absolute transcendence of God in a way which named the mystery while respecting it, but it also paid a high price. A God whose potential is totally actualized for all eternity cannot be reconciled with the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who repents of what he has done, and who is always doing something new. A God whose potential is totally actualized is immutable, unchangeable and invariable. But the God of the Old Testament and the New is not.

Scholastic theologians did not ignore this problem. They confronted it again and again, and some of the more notable philosophical *tours de force* after Thomas' time were dedicated to finding a solution.¹⁶ But it seems clear that, in this case, the philosophical framework was imposing unacceptable conditions on theology's attempt to understand, and that the God of the philosophers was not the sovereign Lord, who without foregoing his infinity becomes a real actor on the historical stage, and takes history so seriously that he makes a human life his very own, and in that life tastes suffering and death.¹⁷

¹⁶ The battles between Jesuits and Dominicans, from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth, and the various attempts to reconcile human freedom with divine omnipotence are a classic example of such *tours de force* – that is, brilliant «solutions» to non-problems.

¹⁷ It was this insight that led Karl Barth to his dramatic condemnation of Thomas Aquinas' *analogy of being* (the technical name for Thomas' theory that essence and existence are proportioned to each other in all real things, and that in God this proportion

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Thomas died in 1274, and in the decades following his death there were some theologians of considerable subtlety who continued the scholastic tradition, though in very different directions. However, by the mid-point of the fourteenth century, the heirs of the scholastic tradition were no longer thinking creatively, but were fashioning airy castles in the sky, and devoting their attention to theories about thought, rather than reflecting on reality and its mysteries. And so it was to remain for almost 500 years. During this period there were some excellent commentaries¹⁸ on Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*, but they looked to the past and not to the present or the future. They did not engage the best thought of their own time,¹⁹ and, as a result, secular thought went its own way, notably in the work of Descartes (1596 to 1650) in the seventeenth century, Kant (1724 to 1804) in the eighteenth, and Hegel (1770 to 1831) in the nineteenth. Scholasticism had turned its back on the world and had retreated to an intellectual ghetto.

3 Neo-Scholasticism

3.1 The Background

By the mid-nineteenth century scholasticism's vitality was long gone, and it lived a sad and shadowy existence in the textbooks which were written by practitioners of a decadent version of Thomas' thought – textbooks written for use in the seminaries which had come into existence as a result of the decrees of the Council of Trent, and books which did little more than repeat the tired opinions of their predecessors.

But Catholics could not remain untouched indefinitely by the currents of secular thought which were moving in the nineteenth century, nourished by the discovery of the role of history in human thought and life. In Germany, it was in the work of Johann Adam Möhler (1796 to 1838), at Tübingen, that creative engagement with Protestant and secular thought began (although it did not take

¹⁷ (...continued)
is one of identity) as the anti-Christ.

¹⁸ The works of Thomas de Vio, who lived from 1469 to 1534 (and was known as «Cajetan,» because he came from the Italian city of Gaeta), and of John of St. Thomas (1589 to 1644 – he was the last of the great commentators on the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas) are good examples.

¹⁹ Engaging the thought of his day was precisely what Thomas had done. In fact, he was so daring in this regard that his work was condemned, after his death, by a number of local church synods in France and England.

the form of a revival of scholasticism).²⁰ It was in North Italy, before the middle of the nineteenth century, that some seminary teachers began to advocate a return to the content and method of Thomas Aquinas' philosophical theology, and, in 1857, in a document condemning certain teachings of the German theologian, Günther, the magisterium took favorable note, for the first time, of the return to Thomas.

3.2 Papal Approval

This movement, often called «neo-scholasticism,» quickly gathered momentum, and on August 4th, 1879, it was not only given papal approval in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, but was practically raised to the level of philosophical dogma, so that Catholic theology was to be done exclusively according to the content of the theology of Thomas Aquinas and the method he used. The Jesuit-run Gregorian University in Rome quickly became a center of neo-scholastic thought, as did the Institut Catholique in Paris, and Catholic University in Washington. The work done in these various centers was not of uniformly high quality, and much of it consisted in textbooks only marginally superior to those of preceding centuries. The reason was that many of the practitioners of this neo-scholasticism did not return to the medieval sources after active engagement with contemporary thought, but approached contemporary thought with the certitude that scholasticism had all the answers, and that what was needed was merely a way of persuading their secular contemporaries to see the light.

3.3 The High-Tide of Neo-Scholasticism

This situation changed in the first half of the twentieth century, as a result of the work of two outstanding French scholars – Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson (born, respectively, in 1882 and 1884). Both had a good understanding of contemporary secular thought in France, and they sought to return to the works of Thomas Aquinas himself in order to engage their contemporaries with what they thought of as the *philosophia perennis* (the permanent, always-valid philosophy).²¹ Gilson founded the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto in

²⁰ Those German theologians who belonged to the neo-scholastic camp were generally hostile to the theological work of the Catholic faculty at Tübingen. Most prominent among these German neo-scholastics were Jesuits who, as a function of their fourth vow of obedience to the pope, made their own the defense of Rome's philosophical and theological preferences.

²¹ There were seeds of contradiction here, particularly when permanence was claimed for Thomas' synthesis *as written, verbatim*. The attempt to demonstrate Thomas' relevance to the contemporary world led to MA theses at some Catholic centers, with

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1929, and graduates of that Institute were dominant in the philosophy department of St. Louis University from the 1930's through the 1950's. Maritain taught at universities in the United States and in France, and his books quickly became classics of what was called «Neo-Thomism.»

However, it was the work of the Jesuit, Joseph Maréchal (1878 to 1944), in France in the 1930's, that was to be the inspiration of two theologians who reached theological maturity in the neo-scholastic system, but who transcended its limitations, and whose work survived its demise. Maréchal had studied the work of Immanuel Kant, and had come to the conclusion that Kant's theory of knowledge had more in common with Thomas Aquinas than anyone (including Kant himself) realized. He articulated his conclusions in a work called *The Point of Departure of Metaphysics*, and he became the intellectual godfather of the movement known as «transcendental Thomism,» – a good description of the work of the two outstanding Catholic systematic theologians of the twentieth century: the Jesuits, Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner. In different ways and from different points of departure, both have been inspired by Thomas' fundamental insights, without being caught in an unhistorical, and often anti-historical «Thomism.» Both are true to Thomas' methodology, not because they engage in the sterile repetition of medieval questions, but because they recognize the constructive power of human intelligence and the power of that intelligence to use the imagination in discovering the truth.

3.4 Neo-scholasticism in Decline

Few realized it at the time, but the growth of the biblical movement in Catholic theology, from the late nineties of the last century, through the crisis of the anti-modernist witch-hunt between 1907 and 1910, to its real though limited triumph at the Second Vatican Council, contained the seeds of neo-scholasticism's demise. Two insights of the biblical movement were, in a special way, responsible for this demise: the recognition of history as a fundamental category of Christian existence,²² and the priority of biblical, inter-personal categories over

²¹ (...continued)
titles like «St. Thomas and the Boy Scouts.»

²² Bernard Lonergan's comments on the relationship between scholasticism and historical scholarship are perceptive: «While elements of modern scholarship may be found here and there down the ages, its massive development was the work of the German Historical School of the nineteenth century. First its attention was directed to ancient Greece and Rome and to modern Europe. Gradually it penetrated biblical, patristic, medieval, and later religious studies. Long resisted in Catholic circles, today it
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the objective «thing-categories» of scholasticism in its various incarnations.²³ The encyclical *Humani Generis* in 1950 was the last hurrah of a scholasticism which had lost contact, not only with modern secular thought, but with the most vital currents of Catholic theology as well.²⁴

These developments surprised and disappointed many, but they were inevitable, and they were foreshadowed in the name of the movement itself: «neo-scholasticism.» Those revivals of styles of a bygone age, whether musical, literary, or architectural, and which have the word «neo-» in their titles, are almost always restorative in nature: they search for past glories (which never really existed) but their search is motivated by fear of a truly creative engagement with the present. And by acting in this way, they deprive the present of the contribution which the real past can make, and do so in the name of reverence for the past, but which, in fact, mocks the past.

4 Looking to the Future

The monumental achievement of Thomas Aquinas will never lose its value, but neo-scholasticism, and the specific form known as «neo-Thomism» have already led into blind alleys from which there is no exit. Rahner and Lonergan are the heirs of Thomas' insights, and their work on the frontiers on philosophy and theology has created new models and paradigms for Catholic thought, as it attempts to speak a truly human and thoughtful word, in answer to the word of God in scripture. However, the work of their mature years no longer belongs to the neo-scholastic period.

²² (...continued)

is offered no serious opposition. The era dominated by Scholasticism has ended. Catholic theology is being reconstructed.» (*Method in Theology*, 281)

²³ A serious problem for scholasticism in every period has been allowing its questions to be determined by philosophical considerations. It inherited this tendency from the conciliar theology of the fourth and fifth centuries, which raised questions about the «nature» and «person» of Jesus Christ which were utterly alien to the New Testament.

²⁴ Bernard Lonergan put it well in his *Method in Theology*, p 279: «Scholastic theology was a monumental achievement. Its influence in the Catholic church has been profound and enduring. Up to Vatican II, which preferred a more biblical turn of speech, it has provided much of the background of pontifical documents and conciliar decrees. Yet today, by and large, it is abandoned, partly because of the inadequacy of medieval aims, and partly because of the shortcomings of the Aristotelian corpus.»