

## THEOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION

EVERY MAN LOVES A MYSTERY. According to Frank Sheed, man loves mystery because man is the greatest mystery of all, for what is man but nothingness redeemed by omnipotence? Everything about God is somewhat mysterious and theology is no exception. The mystery of theology is the mystery of a diamond. A diamond is very simple. At its center there is a remarkable oneness where lights and lines converge in radiant coherence. On first glance this unity is not evident: a congeries of merging and confusing highlights obscures the single beauty which is revealed only to the practiced eye. So it is with theology.

A precious gem, a glimpse at whose hidden loveliness has been the goal of mankind's greatest endeavors in the realm of speculation, theology has many sides to it, many facets each of which would take a lifetime to understand fully. Yet the attempt must be made. Some degree of theology should be part of every Christian's mental equipment. It is not just for the professional scholar, not just for the seminarian, but for all who desire while on this earth to approach the center of reality where beauty is truth and truth beauty in the ultimate synthesis—the mind of God.

To get a bird's eye view of the complex which is theology, we must go by a sure way lest we end up in great confusion. First in order is a definition of theology with a necessarily brief look at the elements which go to make it up. Then follows a description of the method used by the theologian with a few examples of theology at work. There is last of all a view of the magnificent setting which has held this jewel for the past seven centuries: the vital synthesis of St. Thomas in his *Summa Theologica*.

### *What Is Theology?*

Reduced to simplest terms theology is the study of God. Though the words are few, the reality implied by this statement is too vast to grasp all at once. We are forced to use more words and to break down this simple and profound reality, the study of God, into parts we can handle more easily. It is quite as accurate and more expressive to say that theology is a type of wisdom, acquired by scientific investigation, proceeding under the light of God's Message to man and concerned with the meaning of this Message.

Wisdom is a word not often used today. "Wise" in its common pejorative sense means a respected cleverness of wit and sharpness of tongue. In its earlier sense it rather described a man who had a vision. In this earlier and proper sense, wisdom is an intellectual vision of all reality. For the wise man, the inner core of things is pierced by the light of a mind holding within itself the underlying meaning of all beings. If men today were to recall this proper meaning, they would more than likely apply it to the atomic scientist probing the depths of matter. But this is surely to limit the wise man's field of vision, unless matter really is the alpha and omega of the universe. In the Middle Ages the acknowledged wise man was the theologian. It was then and it is now the prerogative of the theologian to judge and order, to prove and defend, to contemplate and direct all truth connected with God's vital Message to man. And the seat of his judgment extends through the realm of matter to that of the spirit.

Theology is described as an acquired wisdom so as not to confound it with the infused wisdom which is given by God to His close friends. Infused wisdom, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, commands the summit of the normal way of sanctity and enables one to judge easily and instinctively of divine things. The wisdom of theology, on the other hand, is acquired only painfully and haltingly by man's own efforts. Theology is the fertile marriage of the darkness of faith and the light of human reason, but the light of human reason is a lamp which needs tending and often grows dim. These two wisdoms, the wisdom from above and the wisdom from below, the gift of the Holy Ghost and the result of theological study, are different paths to the knowledge of God, but they must never be thought of as being alien to one another. Indeed, the history of the Church affords a long list of those from whom there radiated outward the double light of these wisdoms. Their common possession is the ideal of every theologian worthy of his vocation, and the realization of this ideal demands a saintly life and great labor.

We recognize God's Revelation, His Message to man, only by faith—a privileged sharing in God's own knowledge. Faith penetrates to the very core of a man's being and demands submission to the pronouncements of his God because God is Truth Itself in Whom there can be no shade of deceit. The principal concern of theology is the study of God as He is in Himself, and who has penetrated the mind of God but His own Spirit. Unless His Spirit communicated to men, there would be no knowledge of God's own life—there would be no theology.

There is no reasoning involved in the assent of faith: mysteries

remain mysteries, although the intellectual acceptance is immediate and unshakable. Faith is above all a clinging to God and through Him to those mysteries, and only those mysteries, clearly revealed by Him. This limit is placed on faith by reason of the very special claim it has on man's mind. The man of faith is convinced solely and simply because of the authority of Truth revealing Itself. On the contrary, the immediate power behind theological conviction is the authority of the truth of human reason guided by faith, not the authority of that Truth Who is God. The theologian may have certitude not only about truths directly revealed but also about whatever new truths he may find by bringing his reason to bear upon the deposit of revelation. His degree of certitude in these other matters depends more upon his human reason than upon the authority of God.

Here lies a problem, the danger of error. Indeed there have grown up systems of theology which are often at odds with one another. Many centuries ago there began a radical move by a few theologians who saw the value of Aristotle's scientific method and philosophical principles. They sought to use his work in the service of theology. Other theologians, less adventurous, feared this change. It seemed to them that Aristotle's philosophy had destroyed the sacramental and symbolic nature of reality and was now about to extinguish the flame of Christian platonism with the ice of logic. Aristotle had replaced the shadows of this passing world with a universe closed upon itself which had no need of a God for explanations. The history of this change and its eventual acceptance by the Church is a fascinating study of the very human side of theological systems. Theological dispute on major matters is usually settled by the teaching authority of the Church, which has the right to judge whatever has any connection with faith and morals. In the Encyclical *Humani Generis*, for example, Pius XII invoked his authority to censure opinions considered dangerous to the faithful. In disputes of lesser moment, the law of charity must prevail.

The matter which the theologian attempts to analyze is Divine Truth as communicated to men through Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Throughout the process of theological penetration these mysterious communications lose little of their mystery, a humbling witness to the supereminence of their divine source and the poverty of human intelligence. Although we cannot completely penetrate these secrets of God, we can increase our understanding of them. The Vatican Council taught with infallible authority, "Reason, enlightened by faith and through attentive, zealous and sober research, acquires with the help of God's grace a very fruitful understanding of the mysteries—

either through analogies with natural knowledge or through the inter-connection of the mysteries with one another or with the supreme end of man." This "fruitful understanding" is the very *raison d'être* of theology. What can this fruit be but greater love? Theology has been called "fertile faith." "What are we believers about if we do not pursue, as did even the pagan philosophers, a contemplation which exalts love in us?" It was to increase this love that Our Blessed Mother "kept all these things in her heart, pondering over them."

The fact that theology differs from both faith and philosophy may be made clearer by the use of an example. We find this revealed truth in the Gospel according to St. John: "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he can not enter the kingdom of God." Theology seeks to answer the question: How is this revealed statement true? In philosophy there are no revealed statements, no given conclusions. Philosophers begin not with conclusions but with evident facts. It is the task of the philosopher to construct a system in accord with these facts and in this construction to discover conclusions of which he formerly was ignorant. For even if he did have an inkling of some conclusion before starting the investigation, still, at that stage, he could not be certain of its truth in the sense of scientific certitude. Not until he isolates the proper causes can he be perfectly sure of his ground.

Let us return to the question we asked of the theologian. How can this statement recorded by St. John be true? There is no problem here of whether it is true or not; it is rather a problem of *how* it is true. When the man of simple faith is asked how this can be true, his answer is that it must be since Our Lord spoke it. This is correct but for the theologian it is not enough. He assumes that the Wisdom of God has accommodated His Message to the nature of man. This means that there is more to His Message than meets the eye. The theologian knows that Our Lord's usage of the words "reborn," "water," "Holy Spirit," "kingdom" is not arbitrary. In particular he finds a profound wealth of meaning in these words which escapes the simple assent of faith. He sees connections and analogies with other truths, natural and supernatural. He marvels at the beauty of God's saving plan which so fits in with the constitution of man and the make-up of his place of exile. It is wonderful to have a simple faith; it is more wonderful to understand this faith.

This in no way implies any opposition between faith and theology, or suggests that theology is higher or more noble than faith. Theology is not a super-gnosis transcending the essential obscurity of faith. It is merely the normal and necessary human reaction to

this obscurity. There is a certain likeness between faith and theology on the one hand and the Most Blessed Sacrament and its tabernacle on the other. When we look at the relative value of the tabernacle in comparison with its content, there is obviously no question of which of the two is primary. Whether a tabernacle to house It exists or not is of little moment when we consider the ineffable Gift which is the Blessed Sacrament. None the less, due to the very magnificence of this Gift, man has always and naturally desired to fashion for It a resplendent resting place showing forth his reverence and love for the Body of Christ under the Sacramental Species. He spares no expense and strains his creativity to its limit in forming a suitable home for the Emmanuel, "God with us." In like manner the theologian, recognizing the absolute transcendence and the primacy of faith in his quest for God, is naturally led to fashion a home in his mind for the truths of faith. He spares no effort to prepare his intellect so as to make it a congenial host to these truths. Just as the great cathedrals are the finest productions of man's artistic talents faced with the challenge of creating a home for the Word under the Sacramental Species, so the systems of theology are the finest products of man's intellectual genius faced with the greater challenge of creating a home for the Word as revealed.

In one of his writings, St. Thomas sums up succinctly the nature of theology. "One of the aims of the teacher of theology is so to instruct his students that they might come to an understanding of the truth proposed. For this reason it is necessary for him to find arguments which get to the root of the truth and which enable the student to see how what is said can be true. If this is not done and recourse is had to simple authority, the student, while he certainly would be convinced that what has been said is true, still, having acquired no science or understanding, goes away empty-handed" (*Quodlibet*. IV, a. 18). Lest this concern of St. Thomas for reasons appear as a sterile intellectualism, he has further written, "In the ardour of his faith the Christian loves the truth which he believes. He turns it in his mind, he embraces it and seeks for all the reasons he can find which will support this meditation and this love" (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 2, a. 10).

It would seem that this intense intellectual activity of the theologian which has been going on for centuries could result in changes in the dogma of the church. Can dogma change? Is there really a development or evolution of the dogma or official teaching of the Church? St. Thomas teaches, "All the articles of faith are implicitly contained in certain first truths believed. . . . As to the *substance* of

the articles of faith there is no increase in the course of time because whatever was believed later was already contained in the faith of those who had gone before, at least implicitly. But as far as the *explanation* is concerned, the number of articles is increased because certain things were explicitly known by those who followed which were not known explicitly by those who had gone before" (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 1 a. 7).

To accentuate the fact that the essence or core of Christian truth, the Revelation as found in the Sacred Scriptures and Tradition of the Church, remains unchanged, the word evolution as applied to the development of doctrine is qualified by the adjective "homogenous." Homogenous evolution does take place. Man is no more able to change the core of doctrine than he is capable of altering the number of the stars: it is God-given, not a product of human ingenuity. For example, though city planners can and do change the course of traffic in their city, it would be ridiculous to suggest that any man or combination of men could alter the course of the sun. But man can use the sun in new ways. Picture windows, greenhouses, solar batteries and stoves are means which man employs to get the most out of the sun's light and warmth. So also in theology, man "harnesses" Revelation so as to get maximum light for his mind and maximum warmth for his heart.

Evolution of dogma is then neither a change in essentials nor a matter of mere extrinsic addition, in Belloc's phrase, "The Theory of the Slowly Accumulating Heap." It is most of all an organic growth particularly evident in times of conflict when the Church is subjected to the assaults of heretics or the encroachments of inimical systems of thought. St. Augustine forged his doctrines on the Trinity and on grace as weapons against the early heresies. St. Thomas met head-on the revolutionary drive of Aristotelian science in the Middle Ages by purifying it and incorporating it into his synthesis of truth. The Council of Trent defined the dogmas of original sin and justification in refutation of the Protestant errors. In our own day with the common rise of pluralistic, democratic societies there may be a development in the Church's teaching on Church-State relations. It is not far-fetched to expect some such development in the forthcoming Second Vatican Council.

The result of historical exigency for the most part, these developments are never corruptions of former teachings but are clearer and profounder views of the same immutable truth. Just as the sunlight traversing the surface of the earth in the course of a day illuminates and points up different aspects of the same old landscape, so the

search-light of historical demand over the centuries focuses on various levels of God's revealed truth! A classical work of Cardinal Newman, *The Development of Christian Doctrine*, bears on this very point and with inexorable logic he shows that the present teaching of the Catholic Church is in perfect harmony with its primitive doctrine though a clear development of it. "The point to be ascertained is the unity and identity of the idea with itself through all stages of its development from first to last, and these are seven tokens that it may rightly be accounted one and the same all along. To guarantee its own substantial unity, it must be seen to be one in type, one in its system of principles, one in its unitive power towards externals, one in its logical consecutiveness, one in the witness of its early phases to its later, one in the protection which its later extend to its earlier, and one in its union of vigour with continuance, that is, in its tenacity." This is his principle of investigation and he applies it with rigor and complete success to all important areas of modern Catholic teaching.

Such a gradual ascent to a fuller and fuller appreciation of the whole truth of Revelation suits the plodding intelligence of man who does not see the whole of a truth at a glance, as do the angels, but who must piece bits of it together like the parts of a jigsaw puzzle. Just as God slowly brought man to a full understanding of His plan of salvation only by many stages, as we see in the Sacred History of the Old Testament, so does the Church act as teacher in the development of doctrine. "As the Master who knows the entire field of his art does not present it entirely to his disciple at the very beginning of instruction because he could not grasp it, but presents it gradually condescending to his capacity, so in like manner, men have made progress in the knowledge of the faith in the course of time. In the manifestation of the faith . . . God is like the Master who has perfect knowledge from eternity; man is like matter receiving the influence of God's action, and therefore it is necessary that the knowledge of faith in men should pass from the imperfect to the perfect state" (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 1, a. 7, ad 2). This slow advancement in the deeper knowledge of the faith which has occurred over the centuries is repeated in miniature in the mind of the student of theology.

### **Method in Theology**

Theology is a science. This means that the theologian is a man looking for reasons, seeking the explanation of God's Revelation. There is a tendency to look upon science as a body of facts, put in some kind of order to be sure, but primarily a vast compilation of data gathered by painstaking research. In reality this is just the be-

ginning of science. Certainly the scientist starts with facts but the important thing is what he does with them, how he furthers his understanding of them. He must have a method, there must be a way by which he puts order into these facts and arrives at new conclusions or gets new insights into old conclusions, otherwise the scientific method would be nothing more than a prodigious exercise of memory.

The method the theologian uses to unearth the riches of Divine Revelation is a very complex one involving the use of many skills. Realizing that any grasp of Revealed truth must be based squarely on the original sources themselves, he must first of all determine the exact wording of these sources: Holy Scripture, the teachings of Tradition contained in the extant works of the early Fathers of the Church, the decrees of Popes and Councils and the emphases of the Liturgy. This requires a familiarity with languages, archaeology, history, etc. A very important study is that of the mentality and environment of those who passed on God's Message, for God in His Wisdom shaped His Word to fit His hearers. When what has been said is at last clearly set out, then arise the questions of what is meant and how it may be explained or accommodated to man's understanding. For this step, a facility in the use of analogy or what may be called the sacramental view of the universe, is called for.

Analogy is a logical device, very useful to man, for putting together things that are not really the same. In this way one word may be said to express a contract between the members of a pluralistic society of concepts. There is an unfathomable distance separating man from God, considered as different realities. Yet we do for example use the word "good" of both God and man: God is good, man is good. It is clearly impossible that both be good in exactly the same way, and still there remains a certain similarity. The word "good" is an analogous term used here to indicate a certain likeness among existents really quite unlike yet sharing somewhat in an ill-definable community of being. Our Lord once said of Lazarus, "He sleepeth," when, of course, He surely knew that Lazarus was dead. There is an essential difference between the reality of death and the reality of sleep but there is at the same time a similarity enabling both to be included under one word.

Because no man has seen God, all words used of God, and indeed of the purely spiritual order, are bound to limp a little. In fact, the words we use must be either negative or analogous. We can either deny that God has some imperfection or other, for instance, deny any limit to His power and call it infinite, or we can affirm some positive perfection in God but only by analogy. Beyond this, the mind of man,



whose ordinary environment is the material sensible world around him, cannot go. Even with this restriction, man can still learn much of God and His ways. All material reality is a faint image of the divine mysteries and we do have a glimpse of Truth "darkly as in a mirror" in the universe which God has made. "From the foundations of the world men have caught sight of His invisible nature, His eternal power and His divineness as they are known through His creatures" (Romans 1, 20).

The Sacred Scriptures abound with striking analogies: God's merciful condescension to the non-Greek, pre-logical mentality of the Semites. The three chief types of analogy—metaphor, connection, and proportion—are all wonderfully exemplified by the ways in which God speaks of His Son. The Messiah is called the "Lion of Juda." Here, Christ, the Man of courage, is compared to the most fearless of beasts. This is the first type of analogy, the metaphor, expressing an essential difference and a purely accidental likeness. Man and beast are essentially unlike but they do have in common great courage. We see the second type of analogy used when Christ is named "Key of David." This is a different type of analogy, the analogy of connection. The key is a symbol of authority and power which Christ has in fullness. There is no direct similarity here between Christ and a key, for the key does not have any authority in itself while the lion did have its own courage, but there is merely a connection by way of sign. The last form of analogy, that of proportion, is illustrated by St. Paul's teaching that Christ is "Head of the Body of the faithful." Here we have the most fruitful of analogies, the analogy of proportion. We can easily see the proportion. Christ is to the faithful as the head of a man is to the other parts of his body. The terms of the two sides of the proportion are so very closely related that we gain a deeper insight into the reality signified in this case than in the previous analogies of metaphor and connection.

Remembering that our knowledge of God is analogical, and this in one of three ways, there is one further precision that we must make about the actual use of analogy. There are two contexts in which we find these analogies or sacramental and symbolic aspects of the world in which we live: the poetic context of literature, the scientific context of the *Summa*. The poet is concerned chiefly with the analogy of metaphor, the theologian with that of proportion. Although the Bible is the foundation of theology and although the writings of the saints are full of poetry, the accent in theology is on the scientific expression of analogy. Why stress science or philosophy as the basis for analogy in theology? Because it is vital that we have clear thinking in regard

to truths that are "spirit and life." "Scientific research and thinking at first seem very cold and dry and obscure. Yet the human reason is at its best only when it is able to attain to the clarity and sureness of science. This does not mean that science can ever replace literature. But science gives us a *clear* and *exact* knowledge about the world which literature cannot give. Both are necessary in our life" (Ashley, *The Arts of Learning and Communication*, p. 126).

The precise meaning of words is important. Orthodoxy has pursued to the very stake those who insisted on using words loosely. This is a simplification surely, but a single word had much to do with the present existence of the schismatic Eastern Churches and a single letter, and that a mere *iota*, loomed large as it grew into the devastating onslaught of the Arian heresy. For all its meaning, its beauty, its importance for a full human life, literature cannot be dogma. Even the great Dante, hailed as theologian up to our very day, was bound to exaggerate by reason of the very demands of his medium. "The image of man eclipses the image of God. Dante's work made man's Christian-figural being a reality and destroyed it in the very process of realizing it. The tremendous pattern was broken by the overwhelming power of the images it had to contain. The coarse disorderliness which resulted during the later Middle Ages from the farcical realism of the mystery plays is fraught with far less danger to the figural-Christian view of things than the elevated style of such a poet, in whose work men learn to see and know themselves. In this fulfillment, the figure becomes independent: even in Hell there are great souls, and certain souls in Purgatory can for a moment forget the path of purification for the sweetness of a poem, the work of human frailty" (Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 176).

Unless it be sheer impressionism, all art by its very nature over-emphasizes or de-emphasizes some aspect or other of reality. The value of the way of philosophy in building a theology is due to its claim to be an *exact* description of the natural world. The highest attainment of man's noblest faculty, his scientific grasp of the world by the power of his intelligence, is put to its finest task in the service of divine Truth. This is why the theologian must immerse himself in philosophy before beginning his theological studies.

This is in no way a demeaning of the richness of the faith, but simply the best human way of understanding it. "Those who use the teachings of philosophy for the understanding of Sacred Scripture, by bringing philosophy into the service of the faith, do not mix water with wine but rather change water into wine" (*In Boet.*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 5). There is no higher gift that man can offer to God than

the service of his mind, and this service will sanctify him. "Since man's perfection consists in union with God, man should by all the means in his power, mount up and strive to attain divine truths, so that his intellect may take delight in contemplation, and his reason in the investigation of the things of God, according to the prayer in Psalm 72: 'It is good for me to adhere to my God'" (*In Boet.*, q. 2, a. 1).

Theology, the intellectual discipline par excellence, deals with principles and conclusions as does every other science. The principles of theology, the basic data which the theologian reasons about and proceeds from, are taken either from faith, e.g., there are three Persons in God, or from philosophy, e.g., every effect must have a proportionate cause. Compelled to ignore the advice of Polonius, "neither a borrower nor a lender be," the theologian is most emphatically a borrower taking freely from human and divine sources and later returning these treasures not as having suffered at his hands but, rather, as having been further enriched by their involvement in the theological process.

In its strictly *scientific* function, theology so orders these principles according to the demands of logic that new truths are discovered—so-called theological conclusions. According to Thomists it is a theological conclusion that with the grace of baptism along with the infusion into the soul of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, there is also given to man a full set of infused moral virtues to complete his supernatural organism. This is not an article of faith, but is in strict conformity with the true notion of supernatural life according to the principles of St. Thomas. If one accepts his principles, there is no way to avoid this conclusion.

In its role as *wisdom*, theology does not derive new truths, new conclusions, but simply offers reasonable arguments for the truths already clearly taught in Revelation. The conclusions arrived at by theology as wisdom are already known by faith and theology shows that this faith is reasonable. There are four types of reasonings under this heading that can be singled out for their value in theology: the argument from cause to effect, the argument from effect to cause, the explanation by pure analogy, the argument of fitness.

The argument from *cause to effect* is the delight of any seeker after truth because it is the peculiar merit of this argument that by it the mind is perfectly conformed to reality. This is so because the order of knowing or the connection made within the mind of the knower is in complete harmony with the order of reality or the con-

nection actually in force outside the mind: things outside the mind do proceed from cause to effect. A series of arguments of this ideal type occurs near the very beginning of St. Thomas' *Summa Theologica* where he shows that the articles of faith dealing with the attributes of God, e.g., God is Almighty, are perfectly reasonable since they can be deduced as "effects" from their "cause." So, just as we can deduce that man is sociable when we consider his very nature as a reasonable being, St. Thomas deduces that God is Almighty because of His very nature as subsisting Existence. Although this argument is hardly convincing for anyone who lacks a philosophical training, it is nevertheless a clear example of the argument from cause to effect. For one who can grasp the force of this argument the phrase of the Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty," means more than the words themselves can directly portray.

St. Thomas uses the second type of argument, that from *effect to cause*, to establish the reasonableness of the existence of the God of Revelation. He examines five different sets of facts which are there for all men to see in the world about them and logically shows how these effects cannot be accounted for unless God truly exists. Monsignor Ronald Knox once wrote that he found his understanding of the proofs for the existence of God a powerful influence in his subsequent moral behavior, for what is sin but a practical denial of God's presence? These are not sheer exercises in logic, but effective insights into reality.

The most fruitful example of the explanation from *pure analogy* is that employed to "explain" the mystery of the Most Blessed Trinity. St. Thomas, following St. Augustine, held up a mirror to the interior life of man, his intellectual and volitional operations, and saw imaged therein the intimate and profound activity of the eternal Godhead—the unceasing processions of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. For as in man the idea or mental word is the expression of his knowledge, so in God the Idea, the Word, is the expression of His knowledge which in God is of such perfection that it is a living being, a Divine Person. And as in man knowledge of good things begets a sigh of love, so in God His knowledge of Himself elicits Love, the Holy Spirit of mutual love between Father and Son, a love of such intensity and perfection that it also is a Divine Person, the Holy Ghost. As St. Thomas clearly states when dealing with this analogy, this is in no sense a rational proof of the Trinity of Persons in God any more than the Ptolemaic Theory is a probative explanation of the motion of the celestial bodies; they are both more or less reasonable hypotheses to account for known facts.

There is finally the argument from *fitness* which the rigid logician looks down upon with derision but which is of special value to the theologian. The reason for this paradoxical qualification is that an assumption is involved in the very fabric of this argument which is beyond the competency of the logician to make or understand but which is quite congenial to the theologian working under the light of faith. This underlying assumption is that God, Master of all science and wisdom, always acts in a supremely intelligent manner and to act in this way toward His creature, man, He must adapt Himself to his particular human needs. Everything that God does for man must fit in with the make-up of man according to his present condition on earth, otherwise God's action would be in vain and consequently unintelligent. The logician has no right to make such an assumption because such knowledge does not lie within his grasp. But the man of faith, the theologian, knows that God is supremely wise and he sees abundant confirmation of this truth of faith in the record of God's manifold dealings with man throughout Sacred Scripture. It follows then that he has a perfect right to make use of this assumption in his theological argument of fitness or "convenience."

Arguments of this last type are scattered in great profusion throughout the third part of St. Thomas' *Summa*, the study of Christ and the Christian sacraments, for it is clearly evident that in this area God acts purely out of gratuitous love for His creatures and not in any sense out of logical necessity. St. Thomas places three reasons of fitness for the necessity of the sacraments as sensible signs of grace for man. Obviously the only adequate reason for the sacraments is the free ordination of God, but by seeing how reasonable this divine ordination is we gain a deeper insight into the significance of the sacraments and a fuller appreciation of their beneficial effects in our own daily lives.

St. Thomas argues that sensible sacraments are necessary for man first of all because man is of a corporeal or bodily nature and can only learn of spiritual things by means of sensible signs. If anything is to impress man's mind and heart it must first of all impress his imagination. It is completely in accord with his nature as a composite being of soul and body that spiritual grace and truth come to him principally through other composite beings such as the sacraments are. In the light of this we see how Pius XI could say, "The liturgy is the most important organ of the ordinary magisterium (teaching power) of the Church." The sacraments are the liturgy. Secondly, St. Thomas says that by sin man subjected himself in his affections to corporeal things. By means of the sacraments he humbly acknowledges his

dependence upon corporeal reality by receiving assistance from it through physical acts of cult. Those proud independents who disavow the need of ritual in religion, insisting solely on inner illumination, have little understanding of the nature of man and must inevitably end up in sterile stoicism. Thirdly, St. Thomas argues that man is prone to direct his activity chiefly to corporeal things and bodily actions. If he were not given an outlet for this natural tendency in the use of the sacraments, his good inclinations would find release in unhealthy and superstitious forms of worship. Man is not an angel, a pure spirit. This is one of the reasons for the popularity of the Rosary that it channels some of man's bodily energy to a useful purpose.

The foregoing summary of theological method, brief as it is, should give the reader some inkling of the complex richness of theology. It is our purpose now in the following section to see the overall framework of the synthesis in which these arguments are found placed to their best advantage—the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

### *The Plan of the Summa*

When John of St. Thomas, a great 17th century Dominican theologian, spoke of the *Summa Theologica* as a "golden circle of theology," he chose his words with care for in this phrase he pointed to the organizing principle by which this greatest of all sum-totals of theology is made a vital, organic and intelligible unity. As a summa-builder, St. Thomas ran into a problem which stands in the way of all who attempt vast syntheses of existent reality, who try to harmonize the historical and the scientific, the necessary and the contingent, who dare impose order on history. Even on a lesser scale than that envisioned by St. Thomas, a satisfactory solution is yet to be found in the realm of secular history. Scholars today claim that Hegel's theory just doesn't fit the facts, that the erudite Toynbee has taken to himself too big a task and that the less ambitious Sorokin has met with only qualified success. Existential moments do not easily yield up to man an intelligible order.

The problem is clear: how to insert a logical order into events whose occurrence depends on free choice. Why did St. Thomas have this problem? The problem arose by the very nature of the goal he had in mind: to explain Sacred History according to man's connatural order of learning. Since God Himself is the principal author of the Bible, the Sacred History unfolded in the Bible must be the primary source for any study of God. But St. Thomas was not only a student; he was above all a *magister*, a teacher, and he well knew that the best

way of learning for man is the way of science. Somehow a scientific framework, an order connatural to man's intellect, must be brought to bear upon Sacred History and this in such a manner as not to distort the free course of events.

The problem did not originate with St. Thomas nor was he the first to propose a solution. Hugh of St. Victor approached it from a primarily historical point of view to the detriment of logical order, while Abelard's abstract approach, though affording a set of handy pigeonholes in which to locate the truths of the faith, ignored the flow of history and left much to be desired in its Biblical underpinnings. It remained for St. Thomas to find the master-key and find it he did in the Neoplatonic principle of "exodus and return."

At first glance the principle of "exodus and return" appears to be one of those mystical dictums that so infuriate modern positivists: an apriori construct which man stretches over the facts—or rather by which he stretches the facts themselves—to make them into a nice tidy system. Such is not the case here. Here we have only a generalized form of St. Augustine's cry of exile: "Our hearts were made for Thee and they are restless until they rest in Thee." The principle of "exodus and return" simply means that all of reality, everything that exists, comes from God as from a cause, and returns to God as to a final goal. This simple but profound truth which relates all of creaturely being and activity to God allows science and history to be united in the *Summa*. "Since theology is the science that studies God, everything can be examined in its twofold relation to the supreme Principle of its being: in its going out from God as Creator; in its coming back to God as End. How natural such an approach, and how fertile a source of intelligibility! Now every creature, every action, every destiny can be set in its proper place in the scale of being; now, too, it can be known and judged in terms of the highest causality wherein its *raison d'être* is fully shown in the light of God, its Beginning and End. Here we have something more than science, really; here we have wisdom in the loftiest meaning of the word" (M. D. Chenu, "Introduction to the *Summa* of St. Thomas" in *The Thomist Reader*, 1958, p. 10).

With this principle of intelligibility in mind, we can now feel the full force of St. Thomas' Prologue to his Master-work. "Because the Master of Catholic Truth ought not only to teach the proficient, but also to instruct beginners (according to the Apostle: 'As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink, not meat' ICor., 3, 1), we intend in this book to treat of whatever belongs to the Christian Religion, in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners. We

have considered that students in this science have not seldom been hampered by what they have found written by other authors, partly on account of the multiplication of useless questions, articles, and argument; partly also because those things that are needful for them to know are not taught according as the order of the subject matter, but according as the plan of the book might require, or the occasion of the argument offers; partly, too, because frequent repetition brought weariness and confusion to the minds of the readers. Endeavoring to avoid these and other like faults, we shall try, by God's help, to set forth whatever is included in this Sacred Science as briefly and clearly as the matter itself may allow." St. Thomas' use of the word "beginner" in the above passage should not mislead us. To begin the study of the *Summa Theologica* one needs a firm foundation in Sacred Scripture and philosophy and a habitual facility in all methods of logical argument.

Using the principle of "exodus and return" and safely steering a middle course between the Scylla of dry formalism and the Charybdis of disorganized pious reflection, St. Thomas achieved a marvel of coherence in the disposition of the three parts of his *Summa*. The first part is a study of God as He is in Himself—as existing, as one, as triune—and as primary source or creator of all other beings. Still within the framework of the first part, the "exodus" of all things from God is the object of the tract on creation and the remainder of the first part studies in great detail the creatures of God, these outpourings of His infinite love. The second part examines the "return" of these creatures to God and the ordinary means whereby this return is effected, the stepping stones man uses in his circular motion back to God—the virtues, grace, law, etc. The third part deals with the very special way God has freely ordained for man's safe return to Him—the life of Christ, the Church, the Sacraments.

"Thus, the over-all thesis of the *Summa* is really an account of how every created being (especially the human being) and every movement of history (especially human history) is ontologically closed and sealed at both ends by two causes which are actually one and the same: God, as Author and Conserver of all things (part I); God, as universal Goal, and more particularly as Giver of eternal bliss to men who are faithful to His graces (part II). Pushing this thought a step further, the production of creatures, or their procession from nothingness when God brought them into existence with stable natures, is now seen as the very reason of their final return to Him. For, once something produced has effected its emanational movement from the source of its being, it straightway manifests a *natural* tend-



ency to go back to the principle of its origin. Procession and conversion in this case, are not really distinct and separate movements (demanding different modes of handling and different treatises in the disposition of the subject matter of theology) but a single continuous circuit, the oneness and intelligibility of which is lodged in the very essence of contingent beings, whose *final* cause is in perfect harmony with their *formal* cause, according to the wise designs of Him Who is their *efficient* cause" (Chenu, p. 19).

The remarkable unity of this plan is nowhere more evident than in the connection between "dogmatic" and "moral" theology in the *Summa*. There is today an unfortunate division of the oneness of the whole of theology. In modern textbooks of theology the unity of theology is destroyed when "dogmatic" theology is seen as an independent study dealing with truths to be believed and "moral" theology is seen also as a separate field primarily involving things to be avoided—sins and vices. There is no such division in the nature of things, for they are two sides of the same coin, two arcs of the same great circle. Such a divisive and fragmentary treatment of theology has serious repercussions in man's outlook on the moral life. Nothing could be further from the truth than to look upon moral theology as a negative thing or to see the commandments as restrictions on man's freedom. In reality, as in the *Summa*, moral theology is simply the scientific study of the return segment of the curve of creaturely motion, a positive ascent back to the supreme source and goal of life. It is the study of the progressive conformation of man to the image of God as a free intelligent being possessing an array of natural and supernatural virtues and illumined and moved by God's grace and guided by His laws towards his final happiness.

By reason of this *leit-motif* embodied in the *Summa* there is some light thrown on a problem which has troubled both the opponents and the followers of St. Thomas for a long time. The problem is to explain the position of the third part of the *Summa*, the treatment of Christ and the sacraments. The Christian economy of salvation appears to be relegated to a place of least importance, as somewhat of an afterthought. Throughout parts I and II of the *Summa* there are no more than passing references and brief allusions to Christ and his institutions, the means par excellence of our union with God. Surely to include Christ in the first part would deepen our appreciation of God's attributes, His mercy and love, and in the second part our knowledge of grace would be inestimably enhanced by a consideration of the source of grace, Christ in his Passion.

It is precisely in the location of the III part that the validity of

St. Thomas' scheme proves itself. "To St. Thomas' way of thinking, our knowledge of God must be examined first in its own inner structure and demands before we can appreciate all the precious and manifold Christlike ways in which it may manifest itself. The Word, made Flesh for our ransoming, is the heart and soul, so to say, of the economy of our Christian redemption; yet the basic source of the understandableness of this economy (to minds such as ours, at any rate) is precisely its property of being a *via* or means. To see it thus inserted within the ontological framework of grace is not to lessen its inestimable value as a fact of history, unfolding in time" (Chenu, p. 25). St. Thomas was scarcely unaware of the fact that the Incarnation is the greatest single event in the history of mankind. But he was also very much aware that the most important thing about Christ in himself is that he is God and that the most important thing about Christ in relation to men is that he is the Way. Both of these facts make it impossible to put the study of Christ as the foundation and center of a scientific theology. We cannot possibly understand Christ until we have understood "God," until we have understood "way." By any other approach to Christ in theology than that of St. Thomas, we run the risk of building our knowledge of him on shifting ground and prepare the way for possible dislocations in our Christian intellectual and devotional edifice.

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This ends our brief introduction to the study of theology. For the theologian—lay or religious, professional or non-professional—the study and analysis of the Bible, the Revealed Word of God, remains the primary goal and theology merely a means to this goal. The richness of the mysteries of the Christian faith can never be constrained within the formulae of human expression but these formulae do gain for us a fruitful understanding of the faith. We have no choice but to plunge in. The life of a Christian is not a safe, stable, inert existence but a pilgrimage, a continually ascending adventurous movement toward the final joyful vision of Truth. Theology is a necessary part of this wholly engaging adventure.

"To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot (of orthodoxy) flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect" (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*).

—Thomas LeFort, O.P.