

ST. THOMAS AND THE RENEWAL OF METAPHYSICS

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1. Metaphysical Renewal as a Perennial Project

Let us begin by noting that there are here two considerations: (1) renewal of metaphysics, and (2) Thomas's ability to aid us. The renewal of metaphysics is a *perennial* problem. The *Republic* of Plato testifies to the need for metaphysical renewal in the Athens of the Fourth Century B.C. We might recall Protagoras's doctrine of man as the measure of all things, the teaching of Gorgias entitled "On Not-Being, or on Nature," whose first thesis is that "nothing is," and the traditionalist pragmatism of Isocrates.² However, far more serious is the larger situation described by Plato's Socrates in the *Republic*:

...I suppose that if the nature we set down for the philosopher chances on a suitable course of learning, it will necessarily grow and come to every kind of virtue, but if it isn't sown, planted, and nourished in what's suitable, it will come to all the opposite, unless one of the gods chances to assist it. Or do you too believe, as do the many, that certain young men are corrupted by sophists, and that there are certain sophists who in a private capacity corrupt to an extent worth mentioning? Isn't it rather the very men who say this who are the biggest sophists, who educate most perfectly, and who turn out young and old, men and women, just the way they want them to be?

¹ This paper first appeared in print in *Spirit et Esprit* 61 (2009): 5-17.

² Cf. Joseph Owens, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), on Protagoras of Abdera, 490-420 B.C., 157-60; on Gorgias of Leontini, ca 480-380 B.C., 160-65; Isocrates of Athens, 436-338 B.C., 178-82.

Socrates is speaking of the general culture of the society; that is the sophistry which rules the roost in Athens, and produces the "philosophers" who give philosophy a bad name.³

There really does seem to be a permanent war about being (as Plato suggested in the *Sophist*).⁴ We should expect to have to battle concerning purpose in nature, concerning substantial form and matter, concerning the immateriality of cognition, concerning the immortality of the human soul, and the existence of God, and creational causality, concerning our very ability to know being and truth. The Presocratics are always with us.⁵

If Plato has a bad theory of the state (as he has),⁶ he is nevertheless right in seeing the need for an appropriate cultural setting for the well-being of the human spirit, the philosophical spirit. He is right in seeing the need for a turning of the soul from becoming to being.⁷

2. St. Thomas and Perennial Metaphysical Renewal

What does St. Thomas say about this situation? *Summa Theologiae* I, 1.1 should be our controlling text. There we learn why there is need for a teaching which *transcends philosophy*. Firstly and most important, human dignity, human nobility, the goal which the author of mankind

³ Plato, *Republic*, VI, 492A-B, trans. Allan Bloom, in *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). The whole of 489D-497A bears on the deformation of those having a nature fit for philosophy, thus giving philosophy a bad name.

⁴ Plato, *Sophist*, 249D.

⁵ Cf. also Aristotle on what is *always* the subject of controversy: "And indeed the question which was raised of old and is raised now and always, and is always the subject of doubt [*aei aporoumenon*], viz. what being is [*ti to on*], is just the question, what is substance [*tis he ousia*]? For it is this which some assert to be one, others more than one, and that some assert to be limited in number, others unlimited. And so we also must consider chiefly and primarily and almost exclusively what that is [*ti estin*] which is in *this* sense [*tou houtôs ontos*]." Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.1 (1028b2-7) [Ross translation].

⁶ Cf. Charles De Koninck's essay on patriotism, "L'Amour de la patrie est-il donc dépassé?" in his book *Tout homme est mon prochain* (Quebec: Laval University, 1964), 109-11.

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, VII, 518B-D.

has assigned for us, is beyond our investigative powers.⁸ Yet the human being is meant to pursue known goals. Accordingly, God had to reveal to us what to pursue.

But secondly, as we remember, Thomas does not stop with that. There is truth about God, who is our goal, which human reason can discover. However, it is known only to a few, after a long time, and with an admixture of error. There is need for revelation by God even about such truth! The importance of that truth, "...the truth about God investigated by reason...," what we can call "philosophical truth," is strongly put by Thomas: "On knowledge of that truth [philosophical truth!] the entire salvation of man, which is in God, depends..."⁹ This is where I take my beginning, and in so doing I am imitating Jacques Maritain,¹⁰ as I will eventually show. We begin with faith in revelation, even as regards the philosophical truth implied by our ultimate goal.

We are speaking of the renewal of metaphysics. I mean by "metaphysics" what St. Thomas means, viz. the highest natural human knowledge, meriting the title of "wisdom:" a public knowledge, most difficult of access, but known on the basis of principles naturally known to all.¹¹

Immediately we say "human," we must take into account the condition of the human being. That condition enters into this very first article of Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*. The picture of the human being as philosopher is very discouraging, as we begin to read St. Thomas.

Or rather, the picture of the human being as philosopher, considered strictly as to his own nature, is bleak, but the good news is

⁸ The magnitude of human dignity is properly grasped only in the light of our true destiny. Cf. e.g., *ST* III, 57.6, ad 3: "...Christ, by ascending once into heaven, obtained for himself and for us the perpetual right and *dignity* [*ius et dignitatem*] of the heavenly dwelling." Cf. also III, 58.4, ad 1-2; I, 12 and I-II, 1-5, on beatitude; and I, 93.4 on the three levels of man's being "in the image of God."

⁹ The Latin is: "...veritas de Deo per rationem investigate ... a cuius ... veritatis cognitione dependet tota hominis salus, quae in Deo est" [Ottawa ed., 2b11-17, in part].

¹⁰ Henceforth "JM" for "Jacques Maritain."

¹¹ Cf. e.g., St. Thomas, *In Metaph.*, prologue.

that there is *revelation* of the very things which philosophy can know and seeks to know. Thus, with revelation, and with Thomas, we begin with wonderful *assurance* of the *truths* which philosophy seeks.

And how very *fruitful* is that situation, because, as St. Thomas later says, discussing the theological virtue of faith: "...when a man has a *prompt will to believe*, he loves the believed truth, and he thinks about it and looks at it from every angle, to see if some reasons for it can be found."¹² This surely applies not only to the revealed truths which are beyond philosophical demonstration but to those which reason can demonstrate.

We find Thomas speaking again of this *prompt will to believe* when he describes the contemplative life. Does that life have an affective dimension? Indeed, it does. One lives that life because one *intends* to do so. That intention, that vital drive, is an act of will, a *love* for the *truth*. As Thomas says:

The appetitive power moves [us] to *inspect* something, whether sensibly or intelligibly, sometimes because of the love of the thing seen: because, as Matthew 6 [21] says: "where your treasure is, there also is your heart"; but sometimes because of a love of the knowledge itself which results from such inspection. That is why Gregory places the contemplative life in *charity toward God*: inasmuch as someone from love of God burns with desire to look upon his beauty. And because everyone delights when what is loved is possessed, the contemplative life also terminates in delight, which is in the affections, from which, again, the love is intensified.¹³

¹² Cf. *ST* II-II, 2.10: "Cum enim homo habet promptam voluntatem ad credendum, diligit veritatem creditam, et super ea excogitat et amplectitur si quas rationes ad hoc invenire potest."

¹³ *ST* II-II, 180.1: "Movet autem vis appetitiva ad aliquid inspiciendum, vel sensibiliter vel intelligibiliter, quandoque quidem propter amorem rei visae, quia, ut dicitur Matth. VI, ubi est thesaurus tuus, ibi est et cor tuum, quandoque autem propter amorem ipsius cognitionis quam quis ex inspectione consequitur. Et propter hoc Gregorius constituit vitam contemplativam in caritate dei, in quantum scilicet aliquis ex dilectione dei inardescit ad eius pulchritudinem conspiciendam. Et quia unusquisque

It is surely the Christian philosopher's hope that his prompting, his call, arises from the charitable love of God.¹⁴ The love for the knowledge itself pertains ultimately to our love of ourselves, a love which we hope, likewise, has the perfection of charity.¹⁵

We begin, then, in faith, and, as we hope,¹⁶ in charity. However, we realize that with respect to naturally knowable truths, the goal is to *know them naturally*. Here there is no substitute for philosophical work. Some have worried about this step, as it seems to be a step away from

delectatur cum adeptus fuerit id quod amat, ideo vita contemplativa terminatur ad delectationem, quae est in affectu, ex qua etiam amor intenditur.”

¹⁴ In his more youthful *In Sent* III, 35.1, arg. 2 [ed. Moos, solutio 1, p. 1177, para. 32], Thomas provides more explanation concerning the twofold love: “Sed cum operatio sit quodammodo media inter operantem et objectum, velut perfectio ipsius operantis, et perfecta per objectum, a quo speciem recipit; ex duplici parte potest operatio cognitivae affectari. Uno modo in quantum est perfectio cognoscentis; et talis affectatio operationis cognitivae procedit ex amore sui: et sic erat affectio in vita contemplativa philosophorum. Alio modo in quantum terminatur ad objectum; et sic contemplationis desiderium procedit ex amore objecti: quia ubi amor, ibi oculus; et Matth. 6, 21: ubi est thesaurus tuus, ibi est et cor tuum; et sic habet affectionem vita contemplativa sanctorum, de qua loquimur. [But since operation is in a way in the middle, between the one operating and the object, thus being the perfection of the one operating, and being perfected by the object, from which it receives the specific likeness, the operation of the cognitive power can arouse affection from both sides: in one way, inasmuch as it is the perfection of the knower, and such affection for the cognitive operation arises from love of oneself: and the affection of the philosophers for the contemplative life was of that sort; in another way, inasmuch as (the cognitive operation) has its terminus at the object; and thus the desire for contemplation proceeds from love of the object: because where is love, there is the eye; and as Matth. 6.21 (says): ‘where your treasure is, there also is your heart’; and the contemplative life of the saints, about which we are speaking, is such.]” Perhaps in his maturity he did not choose to conjecture concerning the hearts of those “philosophers” he distinguished from the “saints.”

¹⁵ On the charitable love for oneself, cf. *ST* II-II, 25.4; see also 25.7.

¹⁶ Cf. *De Veritate* 10.10, that we cannot know with absolute certitude that we possess charity.

faith. Obviously, if we come to full intellectual vision of the truth, we can no longer merely believe that truth. And faith is a meritorious action (meritorious for eternal life!). Will we not lose precious merit by philosophizing about such truth? Thomas reassures us: if we do come to understand the demonstration of such a truth, this does not imply that we lose the merit of belief, as long as we have, in charity, the “will ready to believe.” As St. Thomas teaches:

...demonstrative arguments leading to those [truths] which the faith holds, but which nevertheless are preambles to the articles, though they diminish the note of faith, because they make *apparent* what is proposed, still do not diminish the note of charity, through which *the will is ready to believe* those things even if they were not apparent. And so the note of merit is not diminished.¹⁷

3. The Difficult Human Condition: “A Wounded Nature”

These things I have recalled only as regards our situation in starting out as Catholics called to philosophize. Now I would repeat that our project is not new with the Christian. A primary interest of Plato in the *Republic* is precisely how to *breed* philosophers, how to *turn the soul towards being*.¹⁸ Even before the issue of the philosopher is raised, Plato speaks of the importance of education, sound rearing. Later, as you remember, a whole course of studies is outlined, meant to turn the whole soul around, away from becoming and towards being.¹⁹

I am not here praising everything in Plato’s particular answers, but wish to notice that this is the subject of discussion. The most apt students are seen as seduced by the society, which is *the greatest of all sophists*, for its own inferior ends. But if there is a hope, it is in good

¹⁷ Cf. *ST II-II*, 2.10, ad 2: “...rationes demonstrativae inductae ad ea quae sunt fidei, praeambula tamen ad articulos, etsi diminuant rationem fidei, quia faciunt esse apparens id quod proponitur; non tamen diminuunt rationem caritatis, per quam voluntas est prompta ad ea credendum etiam si non apparerent. Et ideo non diminuitur ratio meriti.”

¹⁸ Cf. *Republic VII* (518B-519B).

¹⁹ Cf. *Republic VII* (521C).

home formation and good intellectual guidance (Plato also explicitly mentions the need and possibility of divine help²⁰).

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, carefully notes the condition of the auditors suitable for his lectures.²¹ He was a man of few words,²² and so it is all the more notable when he says the same thing three times in succession. We read: "It makes no small difference ... whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference."²³

St. Thomas teaches the dispositive role of the moral virtues relative to the contemplative life. The virtue of chastity is especially underlined, since the sexual inclination is judged to interfere most with rational judgment.²⁴

²⁰ *Republic*, VI, 492A-B, quoted above, at n. 2.

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3 (1094b28-1095a12).

²² Thomas calls Aristotle "*breviloquus*," a man of few words; cf. *In De caelo*, 2.17 (457 [8]).

²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1 (1103b24-25) [trans. W. D. Ross]. Cf. Thomas, *In Eth.* 2.1.10: "Et ideo ulterius concludit quod non parum differt, quod aliquis statim a iuventute assuescat vel bene vel male operari; sed multum differt; quin potius totum ex hoc dependet. Nam ea quae nobis a pueritia imprimuntur, firmiter retinemus."

²⁴ Cf. *ST II-II*, 180.2, ad 3: "Ad tertium dicendum quod pulchritudo, sicut supra dictum est, consistit in quadam claritate et debita proportione. Utrumque autem horum *radicaliter* in ratione invenitur, ad quam pertinet et lumen manifestans, et proportionem debitam in aliis ordinare. Et ideo *in vita contemplativa, quae consistit in actu rationis, per se et essentialiter invenitur pulchritudo*. Unde Sap. VIII de contemplatione sapientiae dicitur, amator factus sum formae illius. In virtutibus autem moralibus invenitur pulchritudo *participative*, in quantum scilicet participant ordinem rationis, et *praecipue in temperantia, quae reprimit concupiscentias maxime lumen rationis obscurantes*. Et inde est quod virtus castitatis maxime reddit hominem aptum ad contemplationem, in quantum *delectationes venereae maxime deprimunt mentem ad sensibilia*, ut Augustinus dicit, in libro *Soliloquiorum*. [...beauty...is found in a clarity and a due proportion. Both of these are to be found as to their root in reason, to which pertains a revealing light and a putting of other things in due order. And therefore beauty is found intrinsically and essentially in the contemplative life. Hence, *Wisdom* 8.2, speaking of the

In this same line, one should not neglect Thomas's teaching on the vice of pride [*superbia*], and the harm it does to us as beings who by nature desire to know. Why does the vice of pride, which has its seat in the irascible appetite or in the will, not in the intellect, nevertheless cause *blindness to the truth*? Thomas answers:

...knowledge of truth is twofold. One [is] purely speculative: and pride impedes this indirectly, removing the cause: for the proud person does not submit his intellect to God, so as to receive knowledge of truth from Him (in accordance with Matthew 11: "You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent," i.e. from the proud who consider themselves wise and prudent, "and you have revealed them to the little ones," that is, to the humble); nor [does the proud person] deign to learn from human beings (whereas it is said, in Ecclesiasticus 6: 34: "If you will incline your ear," that is, humbly listening, "you will receive a teaching.")

The other knowledge of truth is affective, and pride directly impedes such knowledge of truth: because the proud, while experiencing delight in their own excellence, disdain the excellence of truth (thus, Gregory says, in *Morals* 23, that "the proud, while they perceive by the understanding some hidden things, are unable to experience the sweetness of those things; and if they know how they are, they remain oblivious to how they taste"). Hence, 11.2 says: "Where there is humility, there is wisdom."²⁵

contemplation of wisdom, says: 'I have become a lover of her form.' Beauty is found in the moral virtues by participation, inasmuch as they participate in the order of reason, and most especially in temperance, which represses those desires which most obscure the light of reason. And thus it is that *the virtue of chastity most of all renders a person apt for contemplation*, inasmuch as sexual delights most of all drag the mind down to sensible things, as Augustine says in the book *Soliloquies*."] Cf. also II-II, 182.3 on the role of the moral virtues, and so of the active life, in forming the interior person for contemplation.

²⁵ ST II-II, 162.3, ad 1: "Ad primum ergo dicendum quod cognitio veritatis est duplex. Una pure speculativa. Et hanc superbia indirecte impedit, subtrahendo causam. Superbus enim neque Deo suum intellectum subiicit, ut

The difficulty we have with metaphysics is traced by Aristotle to the nature of the human mind, its inferiority to divine mind. Our mind is naturally ordered towards low-grade intelligibles, even to merely potential intelligibles.²⁶ While this is true, St. Thomas, in accordance with revelation, can appreciate another source of difficulty, located in the domain of our inclination. Our action is ordered by our natural inclination, that is, by natural law. As St. Thomas teaches, that law includes the inclination “to know the truth about God,” i.e. the inclination to metaphysics.²⁷ Indeed, the very first sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* testifies to the existence of this inclination.²⁸ Even more deeply, the inclination common to all substances is to love God more than themselves, and this inclination is found in the rational creature in the mode of willing, i.e. as natural law.²⁹ However, sin

ab eo veritatis cognitionem percipiat, secundum illud *Matth.* xi: ‘Abscondisti haec a sapientibus et prudentibus,’ idest a superbis, qui sibi sapientes et prudentes videntur, ‘et revelasti ea parvulis,’ idest humilibus. Neque etiam ab hominibus addiscere dignantur, cum tamen dicatur, *Eccli.* vi, ‘Si inclinaveris aurem tuam,’ scilicet humiliter audiendo, ‘excipies doctrinam.’ Alia autem est cognitio veritatis affectiva. Et talem cognitionem veritatis directe impedit superbia. Quia superbi, dum delectantur in propria excellentia, excellentiam veritatis fastidiunt, ut Gregorius dicit, xxiii *Moral.*, quod ‘superbi et secreta quaedam intelligendo percipiunt, et eorum dulcedinem experiri non possunt, et si noverint quomodo sunt, ignorant quomodo sapiunt.’ Unde et *Proverb.* xi dicitur: ‘ubi humilitas, ibi sapientia.’”

²⁶ For Aristotle, cf. *Metaph.* 2.1 (993b7-11). Cf. Thomas, *ST I*, 79.3, ad 3: “The intelligible in act is not something existing in the nature of things, speaking of the nature of sensible things, which do not subsist apart from matter. [Intelligibile autem in actu non est aliquid existens in rerum natura, quantum ad naturam rerum sensibilibus, quae non subsistunt praeter materiam.]”

²⁷ *ST I-II*, 94.2 (1226a3-14).

²⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.1 (980a21).

²⁹ *ST I*, 60.5, *sed contra* and the entire discussion. On our natural love having the mode of willing, cf. *I*, 60.1 (362b14-16): “...hence, in the intellectual nature the natural inclination is found in function of ‘will [*secundum voluntatem*].” On this “mode of willing” as presupposing the intellectual vision of the idea of goodness, cf. 1.59.1 (358a41-51): “Some are inclined towards the good with a knowledge by which they know the very idea of the good, which

weakens, though it cannot eradicate, the natural inclination.³⁰ The result is that without the help of supernatural divine grace the human being is not able to love God, even at the natural level of loving, more than its own self. The will of the human being is wounded to the extent of ordering things towards oneself rather than towards God.³¹ In that way, one does not love one's true self, but is ordered towards the sensual self.³²

If the love we ought to have for God is not there, we will not have that "prompt will" we saw Thomas mention, to seek the reasons for affirming those truths pertaining to our relation to God, i.e. *the properly metaphysical quest*. (As St. Thomas says: The whole of metaphysics is

[knowledge] is proper to intellect. And these are most perfectly inclined towards the good.... And this inclination is called "will.""

³⁰ ST I-II, 85.1-3.

³¹ Cf. especially ST I-II, 109.3, in its entirety; note especially: "...man in the state of integral nature related his love of his own self towards the love of God as towards an end, and similarly the love of all other things. And thus he loved God more than himself and above all. But in the state of corrupt nature man falls short of this as regards the appetite of the rational will which because of the corruption of the nature pursues its own private good unless it is healed by the grace of God. And therefore it is to be said that man in the state of integral nature had no need of the gift of grace added over and above the natural benefits in order to love God naturally above all; though he needed the help of God moving him towards this. But in the state of corrupted nature man needs even for this the help of grace healing the nature."

³² Thomas, in explaining the love that a sinner has for himself, sees sinners as loving a view of themselves which gives primacy to the sensitive and corporeal nature. Cf. ST II-II, 25.7 (1548b6-16). How does this fit a person such as Aristotle? One should consider that, in Thomas's view, no one is certain of actually having supernatural charity: cf. *De veritate* 10.10. Cf. *In Sent.* II, 21.2.3, ad 5: our affective habits are much more obscure than our cognitive habits. On the one hand, this gives us pause as to our own spiritual well-being. On the other hand, it should give us pause as to a conjecture, one way or the other, about e.g. Aristotle's spiritual well-being. Perhaps he had that divine help which Plato's Socrates mentions in connection with the philosophical vocation: *Republic* VI 492A.

ordered towards knowledge of God.)³³ The wounded nature of the human being adds a serious problem as to the rarity of metaphysics.

4. Maritain and the Role of Faith Relative to Philosophy

If I have insisted that the metaphysical vocation finds its full health only in the economy of grace, and thus that the Christian philosopher, partaking of the properly Christian virtues, is the best hope for the perennial task of metaphysical renewal, I am gratified to find similar observations from Jacques Maritain. He did, of course, address the topic of Thomism and renewal all through his career. In his book, *Antimoderne*, first published in 1922,³⁴ the third chapter, entitled "Some Conditions for a Thomistic Renaissance," is a paper read at Louvain in 1920. Maritain sets forth the reasons for the degeneration of scholasticism in order to prescribe the conditions which a Thomistic renaissance requires. Metaphysics is front and center in the prescription.³⁵

Again, in 1924, JM published a short piece hailing the start of a magazine, *La Gazette Française*, and entitled: "The Return to Metaphysics." He sees this "return" as something already going on, but which is tending, particularly in Germany, towards a Buddhist irrationalism, and he seeks to give it the right direction. He says:

It is up to Latin and Catholic intelligence to save the heritage of civilization, by restoring true wisdom. The spiritual mission of France is here very clear. Cured of the rationalist disease, and all the more faithful to reason, she has wonderful energy for bringing into the light of the *philosophia perennis* all the precious

³³ Cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 25.9 (ed. Pera et al, Rome\Turin, 1961: Marietti, #2063).

³⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne*, Paris, 1922, Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes; new edition, reviewed and enlarged in 1926. Chap. III [in the collected works, 1009-1046] is entitled: *De quelque conditions de la renaissance thomiste*, and is the text of a talk given at the Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de Louvain, Jan. 26, 1920. Cf. Jacques et Raïssa Maritain, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II (1920-1923) (Fribourg, Suisse/Paris: Éditions Universitaires/Éditions Saint-Paul, 1922). (Henceforth I will simply refer to "OC" and the volume number.)

³⁵ Ibid. OC II, 1027: "History shows us, lastly, that the Thomistic intellectual breed [race] is before all else a metaphysical breed."

fruits of ancient and modern reason. It is to this work that *the constructive minds of the new generation are convoked by history*. They will succeed, I am confident, if they take for guide the one whom the Church has chosen as its *Common Teacher* —a master whose thought and heart are fixed in pure truth —who disowns nothing pertaining to reason and nothing pertaining to grace, —who shows us how true spirituality crowns and elevates, far from destroying, the edifice of rational virtues, both speculative and moral, and of science properly so called, —who teaches us, finally, the true wisdom by which all that the West has found without knowing how to make right use of it is put in order, and by which we are given all that the East seeks without being able to find it. They [the new generation] will thus serve the sacred interests of the Universe.³⁶

He never left off fighting this fight himself.

I might mention many other works of Maritain, but I will note only what might be called a preparation for *Le Paysan de la Garonne*. In December of 1964 Pope Paul VI sent Jean Guittou and Mgr. Pasquale Macchi (Pope Paul's personal secretary) to submit to JM a series of questions to discuss, looking towards the last period of the Second Vatican Council. One element of reply became JM's paper entitled: *On Truth*. He begins, writing to Pope Paul:

It seems to me that what would answer to the most urgent needs of the Christian people today would be an encyclical on *Truth*. Because it is the significance [*le sens*] of truth which today is obliterated and menaced for a great number of people. I would certainly not presume to propose some sort of preliminary text for such an encyclical. I would like simply to indicate, in my style of "the old philosopher", a few thoughts which have come to my mind in reflecting on the needs of us, the poor faithful, concerning truth.

This is the introduction, published only in 1999 as a "memorandum" in the last volume [XVI] of OC.³⁷ The rest of the text had already been

³⁶ "Le Retour à la métaphysique," in OC XVI, 296-98, and dated May 3, 1924.

³⁷ Cf. OC XVI, 1085. The visit of the Papal emissaries occurred Dec. 27, 1964.

published in volume XIII because it had appeared as part of *Approches sans entraves*, as a paper read to the Little Brothers of Jesus, at Toulouse March 31, 1965, and entitled "On Truth".³⁸

In it JM stresses that it is the very meaning of truth, the "sens," which is obliterated or threatened among many people. He sees this obliteration as also happening to the "sens" of the divine transcendence and of mystery. Here, it seems to me that "sens" is "sense" (a *feeling* for truth?). One has to do with *obliviousness* to these things, as to what they mean for authentic human living: truth, divine transcendence, mystery.

The beginning of JM's presentation is magnificent. He speaks of the importance of beginning with the *supernaturally revealed* truth, and this, as he puts it, "lived in act," *in actu exercito*. He says:

In our reflections on truth I believe that it is appropriate to begin from on high, by the supernaturally revealed Truth [JM's capital "T"]. That is normal in the perspective of Christian thought. It is normal, for someone who has received the grace of faith, to begin these sorts of reflections with the faith, with what is most elevated and most precious in our intellectual equipment. The Christian has the privilege of being placed facing the *Absolute Truth*, the Truth who is God himself, and God himself revealing himself. In adhering to this absolute truth, he will set to work, spontaneously and in lived act, *in actu exercito*, the great things that philosophy discovers on its own concerning truth when it understands, for example, that truth is the adequation of the intellect and the real, or that being is the proper object of the intelligence, which finds its life and liberty in adherence to it.

[514] Those things philosophy knows *in actu signato*, in signified act or by way of conceptualization. But there is an enormous advantage to have *lived*, experienced in exercised act, these great themes concerning truth *before* one has conceived them philosophically.

³⁸ Cf. OC XIII, 513-35.

And it is in the faith in God who is subsisting Truth, in faith in the uncreated Truth and in the incarnate Truth, that we live them in a sovereignly eminent degree [513-514].

Accordingly, coming to St. Thomas and the renewal of metaphysics, I started with the first article of the *Summa Theologiae*.

5. St. Thomas and the Future of Metaphysics

In his encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II spoke of the demands that the word of God makes on philosophy today. First, it requires philosophy to recover its sapiential fullness [*sapientialem amplitudinem*] as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life. Secondly, it must put on display the human capacity to know the very essence [*ipsam essentiam*] of things. Thirdly, and indeed the two previous demands themselves require it, there is need for a philosophy of a truly metaphysical nature [*opus est philosophia naturae vere metaphysicae*], one which is able to go beyond the merely empirical indications in such a way that, pursuing the truth, it arrives at some ultimate and fundamental absolute.

That the doctrine of St. Thomas already takes us along these three lines of work, there is no doubt. A philosophical ethics not having as principle the true ultimate end of the human being is unthinkable in his perspective, and such an ethics receives its principle from the metaphysician.³⁹ Moreover, as he teaches, the proper conception of the human intellect takes us beyond the objects of sense as such, to the “within” of things.⁴⁰ I will limit myself in the present talk to the third requirement, an ontology, which carries us to an “ultimate and fundamental absolute,” the metaphysics of divine transcendence.

I once was asked (there was a shortage of “card-carrying” theologians at the moment) to give a short night-course on the Mystery of the Incarnation. At the conclusion, one of the rather mature students presented me with a little book, whose author I forget, but whose title

³⁹ Cf. my “St. Thomas, Our Natural Lights, and the Moral Order,” in *Maritain Studies/Études maritainiennes* vol. 2 (1986): 59-92 [reprinted in *Angelicum* 67 (1990): 285-307].

⁴⁰ Cf. e.g. *ST* II-II, 8.1.

made my student's point: "Your God is too Small!"⁴¹ Well, yes, I am sure most of us would admit that our poor efforts do not do justice to the Almighty. However, it is crucial that our metaphysics indicate the way our notions are both appropriate and infinitely inadequate.

Because there is general recognition of this need, metaphysicians in the Thomist fold have regularly worked to make the point. Fr. A. D. Sertillanges sometimes spoke of a "definitional agnosticism," so strongly did Thomas stress our ignorance relative to God.⁴² Still, Thomas himself insisted that "then only does one know God truly when one knows that he is beyond anything one can conceive."⁴³ Nevertheless, that is part of the prescription for "*knowing God truly*".

In this context I wish to bring to Thomists' attention once more a teaching of the master that I think has been treated with insufficient seriousness (one thinks of Bañez's celebrated complaint: "Thomistae nolunt audire!"). In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* we read,

...those things which in creatures are divided are unqualifiedly one in God: thus, for example, in the creature essence and being [*esse*] are other; and in some [creatures] that which subsists in its own essence is also other than its essence or nature: for this man is neither his own humanity nor his being [*esse*]; but God is his essence and his being.

And though these in God are one in the truest way, nevertheless in God there is whatever pertains to the intelligible role [*ratio*] of the subsisting thing, or of the essence, or of the being [*esse*]; for it belongs to him not to be in another, inasmuch as he is subsisting; to be a what [*esse quid*], inasmuch as he is

⁴¹ Google advises me that it is by J.B. Phillips, published in a Touchstone Edition, New York, 1997.

⁴² Cf. Étienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, 6th ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1965 [3rd printing, 1979]), 125 and n. 69, referring to the notes contained in Fr. Sertillanges's translation of Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* (Paris: Desclée and Co., 1926), t. II, 379-88.

⁴³ SCG I, 5.3: "Tunc enim solum deum vere cognoscimus quando ipsum esse credimus supra omne id quod de deo cogitari ab homine possibile est: eo quod naturalem hominis cognitionem divina substantia excedit, ut supra ostensum est."

essence; and being in act [*esse in actu*], by reason of being itself [*ipsius esse*].⁴⁴

This is to say that even in the divine simplicity, or rather, especially in the divine simplicity, there are three ineluctable metaphysical dimensions or contributions. Since what pertains to them is found in the divine simplicity, they clearly name pure perfections. This is so even though in our mode of being, one has priority of perfection over another. Thus, if essence, as we know it, is potential with respect to the act of being, this is something which belongs to essence, not precisely as *essence*, but as *such* essence.⁴⁵ My point is that our metaphysics will benefit by intense interest in all three of these ineluctable and distinct contributions: the subsisting thing, the essence, and the act of being.⁴⁶

The second point I wish to make about “metaphysics of transcendence” concerns another set of texts of Thomas that have not, to my knowledge, been taken seriously enough. Obviously, John Paul II was encouraging an interest in the metaphysics of creation and the Creator. Thomas, in that regard, presents God as the cause of being as being. Because that is presented by Thomas very much as the unity of a field of participants in the act of being, standing under the subsistent act of being, one may lose sight of how complete, how full, the divine product

⁴⁴ SCG I, 4.11 (para. 12-13; ed. Pera #3472-3473): “Ostensum est autem in primo libro ea quae in creaturis divisa sunt, in deo simpliciter unum esse: sicut in creatura aliud est essentia et esse; et in quibusdam est etiam aliud quod subsistit in sua essentia, et eius essentia sive natura, nam hic homo non est sua humanitas nec suum esse; sed deus est sua essentia et suum esse. Et quamvis haec in deo unum sint verissime, tamen in deo est quicquid pertinet ad rationem vel subsistentis, vel essentiae, vel ipsius esse: convenit enim ei non esse in aliquo, in quantum est subsistens; esse quid, in quantum est essentia; et esse in actu, ratione ipsius esse.”

⁴⁵ Cf. *ST I*, 26.1, ad 2 on how beatitude is found in God, even though it is not there “the prize for virtue”; and cf. *De substantiis separatis* 7 (Leonine ed., lines 91-110): form is found in matter, not precisely because it is *form*, but because it is *such* form.

⁴⁶ I touched on this somewhat in my paper: “Nature as a Metaphysical Object.” This paper was written for and read at the Summer Thomistic Institute, Maritain Center, University of Notre Dame (Indiana), July 13-20, 2001. It has been published only on their web page.

is. One may consider it as essentially relational, relative to the subsistent act of being. This is not quite correct. As Thomas explains, the relation to the first cause is a *property* of the creature, flowing from it as from a being by participation.⁴⁷ I.e. the doctrine of participation is not essentially relational, but entails a relation. This is important for an appreciation of the fullness of the divine effect, being as being.

So “full” is this effect that Thomas describes the Creator as the cause of “*totum ens*,” being in its entirety. Were it not for a doctrine of analogy of being, there would be no room for calling the Creator “a being.”⁴⁸

That this is not an accidental aspect of Thomas’s metaphysics of transcendence emerges very strongly in discussions of providence and the power of God as providence. It is well known that Thomas presents human free choice as inconceivable without the prior divine moving causality. However, it is not sufficiently stressed, I would say, that this prior causality is conceivable only inasmuch as God is the cause of being as being. Thomas regularly appeals to this doctrine to present God as the cause of the proper differences of being as being, viz. the possible or contingent, and the necessary.⁴⁹ I.e., it is being as a nature or essence that has the Creator and Universal Providence as its origin and constant source of events.

It is not enough to appeal to causal hierarchy in order to present God as prior to human freedom and to all contingent causality. No

⁴⁷ Cf. *ST I*, 44.1, ad 1.

⁴⁸ Cf. *ST I*, 45.1, speaking of creation: “...emanatio totius entis universalis a primo principio...” [...the emanation of the whole of being, taken universally, from the first principle...]. And cf. my “St. Thomas and Creation: Does God Create ‘Reality’?,” in *Science et Esprit* 51 (1999): 5-25.

⁴⁹ Cf. Thomas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics* 6.3 (1218-1220), and cf. my “Thomas Aquinas and Being as a Nature,” *Acta Philosophica* 12 (2003): 123-35. Notice, for example, *Expositio libri Peryermenias* 1.14 (ed. Leonine, t. 1*1, Rome\Paris, 1989: Commissio Leonina\Urin: “...the divine will is to be understood as standing outside the order of beings [ut extra ordinem entium existens], as a cause pouring forth being in its entirety [totum ens] and all its differences. Now, the possible and the necessary are differences of being [differentie entis], and so it is from the divine will itself that necessity and contingency in things have their origin...”

causal priority other than that which pertains to the cause of being as being will satisfy the mind in that respect.

I present these reflections on Thomas's metaphysics as calling us to look ever more carefully into what he has already seen. That is the way to any future for metaphysics.