

A GOOD SHEPHERD? THOMAS AQUINAS ON THE NAMES OF GOD IN
THE *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE* (I, Q. 13, AA. 1-7)

Timothy Valentine, S.J.

The door opened to the hospital room of a 70-year-old man recovering from a heart attack, and a 22-year-old chaplain wearing a Roman collar entered. The young man was a seminarian learning how to administer “pastoral” care to Catholic patients, among whom was the heart attack victim. The older man, named Pete, sporting a black beret, reacted with a combination of amusement and mild disdain when his visitor offered to pray with him. The seminarian began by reciting the text of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want...” The response was immediate and contentious: “Now hold it right there. Why in the world would I ever address God as a shepherd? Does that mean that I'm a sheep? Just think what a shepherd does! He makes sure those stupid, dirty creatures are fattened up so that he can deliver them safely to some butcher, who kills them, guts them, and carves them for others to eat. No thank you—I have no intention of praying to such a God.”

The startled trainee, who had previously not found this particular religious image problematic, compounded what was already an unfortunate situation by suggesting, perhaps somewhat presumptuously, that God is not just “any old shepherd,” but rather the “Good Shepherd” who loves and saves his people. This attempt to justify divine imagery failed even more miserably than the first. Pete, it turned out, was a writer whose novel had been made into a relatively successful, if somewhat maudlin, Hollywood film. He understood the power and purposes of language, and was not going to let some kid ameliorate his offended aesthetic sensibilities with so much pious speculation. “Good Shepherd, Strong Shepherd, Wise Shepherd: Bah! How do I know that God is good? I don't. I'm sitting in this damned hospital recovering from a life-threatening illness, which God, if he *does* exist, gave me. How is that good? My wife, on the other hand: she is good. She visits me, comforts me, loves me. A Good Shepherd? Don't be absurd. A good wife? That's another story. Now get out.”

I mention this embarrassing, if chastening, episode from my own life because it underscores the difficulties of using language to understand God. Pete's negative reaction was due, at least ostensibly, to the limitations of words like "shepherd" and "good," with which I was trying to pray. The first is a metaphor, a word that explains the unknown in terms of the known. The notion of a divine shepherd is drawn from one's knowledge of actual human shepherds, whose motivations (to say nothing of their actions) may be less than impeccable. There must be criteria, then, by which to judge how "shepherd" conveys useful information about God in one sense (that he feeds, protects, and, in the case of Christ, dies for his sheep), but not in another (that he fattens up, leads to slaughter, abandons). The second word refers to a quality found within persons who are good to some extent. We are tempted to believe that the goodness of God (whom we do not experience as we do other human beings) is rooted in imperfect, limited examples of human goodness. Hence, the notion of "God's goodness" is at best limited, and, at worst, meaningless. Indeed, all talk of God is misleading when we overlook what Richard Viladesau calls its "transcendental" basis, because "God is not an 'object' which can be known within the sphere" of ordinary beings.¹

As Thomas Aquinas states, "Everything is named by us according to our knowledge of it" (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 13). Our natural knowledge of God (that he exists, what he is not, how he is the source of all perfection) is dependent upon our knowledge of created things, which we perceive through our bodily senses. Since these are by their very nature limited, they do not allow us to comprehend the infinite God in himself, that is, in his essence (I, q. 12, a. 12). This is not to say, however, that talk of God is without value. In the following pages, I will argue that St. Thomas Aquinas' position is an attempt to preserve the Christian notion of God's transcendence, while demonstrating that language about God is still meaningful.

For the purposes of this essay, I will limit my discussion to the first seven articles of question 13, in section I of the *Summa Theologiae*, i.e., "on the names of God." Other questions concerning God's existence

¹ Richard Viladesau, *Answering for Faith* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 38.

(question 2) and intelligibility (question 12), while important, must be taken for granted.

The essay proceeds as follows. First, I will discuss the ways in which statements about God, both positive and negative, may be considered true. Next, I will present St. Thomas' doctrine of analogy, which distinguishes between various kinds of speech, and how they convey meaningful information about God. Finally, I will explain how words bear primary and secondary meanings, and how these apply to God and to creatures.

Pete's detailed job description of the shepherd hints at something we realize intuitively: we come to know (i.e., we begin to comprehend the essence of) finite creatures because we can perceive them, observe them, analyze them. The same cannot be said of God. Our senses are not aware of any color, taste, smell, feel, or vision of God, precisely because God is incorporeal. Cruel, greedy shepherds notwithstanding, Pete's diatribe implies that the things we say about creatures can be verified. It is as if God, who has no physical components and thus no way of being known directly, must be somehow less than a body.

In the first article of question 13, Thomas disputes the idea that having a body (i.e., any kind of material composition) ought to be the standard of perfection. Indeed, our normal way of speaking hints at the limitations that bodiliness imposes. A creature is either here or there, now or then, this or that, so high or wide or tall, and only so good or wise or loving. Speech of this sort is entirely inappropriate in the case of God, who by "his" very nature is bound by neither time nor space nor even quality (understood relatively). Thus, when Thomas speaks of God's "simplicity" (I, q. 3, a. 7), he means that God is neither changeable, nor composite, nor created.² Creatures are given names that express their dimension, time, observable qualities, etc., all of which indicate their composite mode of being. Copleston writes that God's incorporeality does "not mean that God is less than body, that he lacks the perfection involved in being body, but rather that he is more than body, that he possesses none of the imperfections necessarily

² Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 45.

(question 2) and intelligibility (question 12), while important, must be taken for granted.

The essay proceeds as follows. First, I will discuss the ways in which statements about God, both positive and negative, may be considered true. Next, I will present St. Thomas' doctrine of analogy, which distinguishes between various kinds of speech, and how they convey meaningful information about God. Finally, I will explain how words bear primary and secondary meanings, and how these apply to God and to creatures.

Pete's detailed job description of the shepherd hints at something we realize intuitively: we come to know (i.e., we begin to comprehend the essence of) finite creatures because we can perceive them, observe them, analyze them. The same cannot be said of God. Our senses are not aware of any color, taste, smell, feel, or vision of God, precisely because God is incorporeal. Cruel, greedy shepherds notwithstanding, Pete's diatribe implies that the things we say about creatures can be verified. It is as if God, who has no physical components and thus no way of being known directly, must be somehow less than a body.

In the first article of question 13, Thomas disputes the idea that having a body (i.e., any kind of material composition) ought to be the standard of perfection. Indeed, our normal way of speaking hints at the limitations that bodiliness imposes. A creature is either here or there, now or then, this or that, so high or wide or tall, and only so good or wise or loving. Speech of this sort is entirely inappropriate in the case of God, who by "his" very nature is bound by neither time nor space nor even quality (understood relatively). Thus, when Thomas speaks of God's "simplicity" (I, q. 3, a. 7), he means that God is neither changeable, nor composite, nor created.² Creatures are given names that express their dimension, time, observable qualities, etc., all of which indicate their composite mode of being. Copleston writes that God's incorporeality does "not mean that God is less than body, that he lacks the perfection involved in being body, but rather that he is more than body, that he possesses none of the imperfections necessarily

² Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 45.

involved in being a corporeal substance.”³ On the level of finite being, complexity is a sign of greater perfection (I, q. 13, a. 1 ad. 2), and so, for instance, we refer to more complex creatures as “higher” forms of life.

But to say that this is *not* true in the case of God is to affirm the validity of negative statements about God. Language itself (I, q. 13, a. 1 ad. 3) is designed to convey information about substance and quality (nouns), and time (verbs and participles). On the other hand, it is powerless to “define” God, who is not restricted as creatures are, but who is rather their cause. Consequently, the use of apophatic language, such as Dionysius’ claim, “Of God there is no name,” does not mean that we cannot speak meaningfully about God; it merely implies that words fail to capture the essence of God, i.e., what he is in himself. For Pete, any kind of language one might use to describe God is offensive. And so, when he denied that God is a shepherd, I could have been a bit more tolerant of his reasons for saying so, for there is considerable truth in this denial. If being a shepherd means exploiting one’s flock, I should have been the first to acknowledge that God is *not* a shepherd, or at any rate, that he is *unlike* a shepherd in some sense.

Thus, we see that negative statements work somewhat differently than do positive assertions, especially with respect to God. For instance, it is true that human beings are not winged, or four-footed, creatures, but does this provide a lot of meaningful information about them? And yet, we can still compare human beings with birds and horses, for all of these are contingent, material, animate, and sensate creatures. If the only truth I can utter about God is that these words do not apply to him, have I really said very much about God? Indeed, this is more than enough evidence for the troublemaker kid in the back of my religion class to conclude that God does not exist. Hence, Thomas disagrees with the opinion (which he attributes to Moses Maimonides in *Guide to the Perplexed*) that what appears to be a positive statement (e.g., “God is good”) is in reality a negative one, that God is not bad. Such a statement, according to Thomas, is simply the “removal” of something from God (I, q. 13, a. 2), just as the statement “God is *infinite*” is the

³ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, part 2 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 68.

equivalent of "God is not finite." He also dismisses the argument that "God is good" is just another way of saying that he is the cause of goodness.

Thomas spells out three problems with apophatic God-language in the second article. First, it does not explain why "God is the cause of all good things" is the equivalent of "God is good," but "God is the cause of all bodies" is not interchangeable with "God is a body." Next, it suggests that the word "good" applies to God only in a secondary sense, not as the basis upon which a finite thing is said to be good. Finally, it reduces talk of God (e.g., that he is living) to triviality (that he is not an inert thing).

Instead, Thomas contends that positive assertions about God have value in their own right. When we say that creatures represent him, we do not mean that God is one entity alongside others (as "something of the same species or genus"), but rather that he possesses the perfections in a "super-eminent way." Rather than say that God merely causes goodness, as one element in some longer causal chain, we say, "he diffuses goodness into things,"⁴ i.e., he is the ultimate foundation for our saying that anything is good.

Nevertheless, one must distinguish between various forms of positive assertions, namely, those that are said to be literally true, and those that are true, but only in some derived sense. Is God really a shepherd, and is he really good? Thomas disputes the belief that all names applied to God are derived; rather, some can be said of him in a straightforward manner. Ralph McInerny writes that "the limitation of metaphor (an overt simile) is that it tells us what something is like, not what it is."⁵ To say that God is a shepherd is to relate the word's ordinary meaning to some new reality, which is like it in some respects, but unlike it in others. Hence, people come to understand what God is like because of their direct knowledge of the human shepherd, but the usefulness of the metaphor breaks down at some point, just as the word "father" can be a problematic term for referring to God for people who

⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

⁵ Ralph McInerny, *A First Glance at St. Thomas: A Handbook for Peeping Thomists* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 137.

have a difficult relationship to their own fathers.⁶ And so, were one to say that “shepherd” does not exhaustively capture what it means to be God, Thomas would likely concur. He would not agree, however, that such a word is meaningless, for it does point to some divine attribute, e.g., God’s power.⁷

But is God really good? Yes, according to Thomas, and in this case, a name can be “properly” said of him (I, q. 13, a. 3). Unlike metaphors, which are inadequate because they say what something is like and unlike, a perfection (e.g., good, wise, etc.) refers to attributes which are absolute, and therefore literally true of God. The word “goodness” is a descriptive word pointing to a signified reality (*res significata*—in this case, the divine substance), and is properly said of God.⁸ In other words, God is good by virtue of his being God. On the other hand, finite things are “good,” albeit in a deficient way. For instance, a “good shepherd” refers to a different mode of signifying (*modus significandi*) goodness than, say, a “good king.” The youthful David may have been a good shepherd, but he was not always a good (i.e., exemplary) king (cf. 2 Samuel 11:1-27; 24:1-9).

In short, creatures are good but, because of their composite nature, they may vary in their degree of goodness. Working backwards from these, we know something about God (i.e., he is good) “from the perfections which flow from him to creatures” (I, q. 13, a. 3). Hence, we might say that Pete’s wife is good, but in a localized, limited way, whereas God is the source of her goodness. By recognizing the goodness of his wife, Pete unwittingly affirms God’s goodness.

In the unlikely event that someday Pete might concede the truthfulness of the assertion “God is good,” he might still object that it is no different from saying that God is wise, powerful etc., and so to say one is to say them all. He would do this because of God’s simplicity. If each of the perfections points to the essence of God who is supremely

⁶ Cf. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1962), pp. 123-25.

⁷ Brian Davies, op. cit., p. 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

one, it appears as if wisdom, goodness, and the others refer to different “parts” of God. Consequently, in order to preserve the unity of God, I would have to admit, “names applied to God are synonymous names” (I, q. 13, a. 4).

Thomas would respond that the problem lies in us, not in God, in whom “the perfections pre-exist unitedly and simply” (I, q. 13, a. 4). Wisdom, goodness, and power all signify one reality, namely, “the divine substance.” Nevertheless, our only way of understanding these attributes is through imperfect creatures. Hence, we grasp the meaning of goodness when we contemplate, say, the life of St. Francis of Assisi. In him, goodness is accidental; he did in fact continue preaching to birds, embracing lepers, and giving alms to the poor, but theoretically he could have ditched the scene and become a high-rolling gambler in some medieval version of Las Vegas. Moreover, other perfections, such as power and wisdom, may not apply to Francis at all. One might look to the example of St. Thomas Aquinas to apprehend the meaning of wisdom that one wants to apply to God, *not* St. Francis (whom some consider anti-intellectual).

As we established above, God has no accidents because he is not restricted the way corporeal beings are.⁹ St. Francis’ accidental goodness and St. Thomas’ accidental wisdom therefore point to, but do not encompass, what in God is essential, and so does not fluctuate, namely, his essence. Words like “goodness,” “power” and “wisdom” are assorted ways of expressing (*modi significandi*) what is ultimately a single reality (*res significata*). But our talk of “many and diverse aspects” is significant, at least with respect to human knowledge of God. We mean something different when we say “God is good” and “God is wise,” because wisdom and goodness are different attributes when observed in creatures. If Pete were to say that “God is a Strong Shepherd” after I declared that “God is a Good Shepherd,” I might agree, but I would insist that we mean something different by the two terms.

The thought of extending my conversation with Pete to this point is an exercise in sheer fantasy; if I had attempted to do so in real life, he

⁹ Frederick Copleston, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

would have sent a tray full of hospital food hurtling in my direction. Still, if cooler heads had prevailed, he might have inquired how I can shift so confidently between the ordinary meaning of words and the special way they apply to God. I would launch into Thomas' doctrine of analogy, which he explains in the fifth article of question 13.

To apply a descriptive word like "good" to two things in exactly the same sense is to use it univocally. Thus, after reading *The Brothers Karamazov* and Pete's tome, analyzing their structure and use of language, and considering their artistic merit, I conclude that the former work is good and the latter is not (although I would not inform the author). This is not what I do, however, when comparing the assertions "God is good" and "Pete's wife is good." If "good" were meant univocally here, then of course God is not good, i.e., in the way that Pete's wife is good. But, when saying that he is not good, we mean that God is more than good in the human sense.¹⁰ We remember that a human being is distinct from his or her nature and existence, and so "good" modifies what this particular human being is here and now. By contrast, essence and existence are the same in God, whose goodness resides, simply and unitedly, with his wisdom and power.¹¹ Thomas therefore insists that "no name belongs to God in the same sense that it belongs to creatures" (I, q. 13, a. 5), thereby ruling out the possibility that they apply univocally in the case of God.

If "good" does not apply to God and to creatures in a univocal sense, then we must assume that it is used in some other sense. Perhaps the word is used equivocally. Equivocation can be the subject of flexible or strict interpretation. In the former case, equivocal simply means that the term is "predicated of various things under the same name but not in the same sense" (I, q. 13, a. 5). For instance, the word "head" can refer to numerous entities, and most people would agree that I mean something different when I speak of the head of the FBI, the head of a pin, and the head on which Pete's beret sits. These are not entirely unrelated, however, because "head" conveys the meaning of "highest" or "most important," whether in terms of power and prestige (the FBI),

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 115.

¹¹ Brian Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

an extreme point (the pin), or human endeavor (the seat of Pete's intellectual activity).

On the other hand, a term is said to be "strictly equivocal" when it is used in a completely different sense. This is why we laugh (or cringe) at the anecdote according to which King Arthur commands his two servants: "Bring me my mail!" One delivers a suit of armor, while the other hands him a stack of letters and an L.L. Bean catalogue.¹²

Early on in article 5, Thomas states that, if univocation is the only other possible way of understanding how something can be predicated of God, then "whatever is said of God and of creatures is predicated equivocally." A little later on, however, he makes an important qualification, that "neither are names applied to God and creatures in a purely equivocal sense." If they were, the problem of relevance would arise. Elsewhere (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 1:33:6), Thomas states the predicament succinctly: if names are "said of God and creatures in a purely equivocal way, we understand nothing of God through those names; for the meanings of those names are known to us solely to the extent that they are said of creatures." Pure equivocation undermines the very possibility of saying anything meaningful about God. Accordingly, when I say that "God is a Good Shepherd," Pete might respond, "Fine; God is also a leaky steam pipe; and God is a five-ounce avocado; and God is tenured professor of philosophy; and God is a 'knopke.'" The first three words are no more helpful in understanding anything about God than the fourth, which is entirely artificial. Once terms have been divested of their ordinary associations, gleaned from our experience of actual creatures, they cease to convey useful information, and so Pete's brand of God-talk is no less legitimate than a passage in Scripture. In that case, the project becomes vain, and we rightly ask: Why speak about God at all?

As a solution to the dilemma, Thomas introduces a third alternative: the notion of analogy. Martin D'Arcy calls a term analogous which "is used for what is partly the same and partly different. It stands,

¹² Ralph McInerny, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

therefore, between the univocal and the equivocal."¹³ The fact that analogy has one foot planted in both kinds of speaking leads McInerny, citing Aristotle, to call analogy "controlled equivocation."¹⁴

Thomas explains the metaphysical basis for analogical language (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 1:34:3) by examining the meaning of the word "being" when variously predicated of finite entities and God. For instance, Pete's wife is good; in addition, she is (in no particular order) educated, hypochondriacal, a registered Independent, glamorous, patient, and even-tempered. She is all of these things accidentally, as we said above, because the situation could be otherwise. She could very well be bad, uneducated, healthy, Republican, homely, and moody. On another level, existence must be predicated of the woman to the extent that we speak of her as an actual being. Nevertheless, she is a contingent being; there is no reason to believe that she must exist.

When we say that God (who has no accidents) is good, however, we are speaking about his substance, to the effect that goodness is part of what it means to be God. Furthermore, the assertion "God is" does not mean that he happens to exist, but rather that existence itself is of the essence (the "whatness") of God. Thus, we employ language of "being" in different, but related, ways when speaking of ordinary creatures and of God.

At this point, Pete would most likely want to table the discussion by coming down on the side of "realism." That is to say, he sees no reason for my claim that certain things are said more properly of God than of contingent entities. Perhaps in some alternate universe, he maintains, "God is good. But, as everyone agrees, and you yourself admit, we only come to know goodness because we encounter this or that thing which is good, for example, my wife. And so I must conclude that the real meaning of a word like 'good' is the sense in which it applies to a particular good."

¹³ Martin C. D'Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1953), p. 94.

¹⁴ Ralph McInerny, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

It might be helpful to retrace our steps to article 3, wherein Thomas distinguishes between the notions of *res significata* and *modus significandi*. Thomas might agree with Pete about applying a name properly to creatures, but only to the extent that the name “implies corporeal conditions” (I, q. 13, a. 3). This would be the case when we employ metaphors, such as “the arm of the Lord” or “the face of God,” or even the image of God as a shepherd. To be sure, God does not have an arm or a face, nor does he look like David the shepherd, precisely because he does not have a body. Still, we know what these expressions are getting at, namely, the divine attributes of power, graciousness and mercy. A name that refers, strictly speaking, to bodiliness is said properly of creatures because it is bound up with creaturely finitude. “Arm,” “face,” and “shepherd” are merely the “ways of signifying” something about God, and as such, are said properly of contingent reality.

When speaking of goodness, however, we are not referring to corporeal conditions. There is nothing about goodness that requires the existence of a beautiful, patient woman, even though I may have gotten my idea of goodness from the knowledge of such an individual. Goodness points directly to “what is signified” in God, and its association with finite entities does not in any way limit it. According to Thomas, therefore, goodness is an example of a name that can be properly attributed to God. In the case of “being,” we mean the perfection of all perfections that “flow from God to creatures.” God is not simply our first cause, but rather the one who sustains us in existence.

This brings us to the central idea in article 6, regarding the “primary” and “secondary” meanings of names. Thomas is willing to allow that, in one sense, all names are said primarily of creatures (I, q. 13, a. 6, obj. 1) if, by primary and secondary, we mean the chronological “order of knowledge,” for, in fact, “we know creatures before we know God.”

A name may apply to God secondarily because he is the cause of attributes like goodness and wisdom in creatures (I, q. 13, a. 6, obj. 3). This is where Thomas employs the “many to one” analogy of health (cf. also SG 1:34:2), according to which “health” refers primarily to one

being, say, an animal, and only secondarily to its cause (medicine), its preserver (food), and its sign (urine).

Still, Thomas suggests that there are other, more significant criteria by which to judge the primary and secondary applications of a name. True, metaphorical names apply to creatures primarily in the "order of knowledge." Hence, we may think of God as a shepherd in a secondary, derived manner. But this says nothing about what things are in reality, i.e., the "order of nature." If God were merely the cause of goodness in things, then truly goodness is predicated of him in a secondary manner. Thomas contends, however, that "goodness" indicates what God is essentially, whereas creatures, as we discussed above, are good accidentally. In this more profound sense, goodness is predicated primarily of God, and only secondarily of creatures.

Pete might want to make a last ditch effort to diminish the importance of God-talk by making God somehow dependent upon the existence of creatures. He does so by pointing to a name that denotes an affiliation between two realities. "Oh, very well, if you insist: 'The Lord is my Shepherd.' But what if I, or other creatures, do not exist? If there are no sheep, then for whom is God a shepherd—or Lord, for that matter?"

This opens up the question of names implying a temporal relationship between God and creatures (I, q. 13, a. 7). We speak differently about what God is in himself and what he is in relationship to contingent beings. We have already discussed names that point to God's essence (being, goodness, etc.) and are true of him from eternity. But what about other names, like "Lord," which imply a real relation between two things? Thomas lists three kinds of relation. There is the purely logical relationship involving only an idea ("the same is the same as itself"). Next, there is the relationship between two realities that are in a sense "dependent" upon each other to be what they are. Thus, the 70-year-old patient is called the "older man" in relation to the 22-year-old seminarian, but not in relation to his 71-year-old physician. Finally, Thomas proposes the situation in which "a relation in one [entity] may be a reality, while in the other [entity] it is only an idea" (I, q. 13, a. 7). For example, sense perception and science are directed at those things which can either be grasped by the senses, or

whose essences can be known by the intellect. Something that cannot be apprehended in either of these ways may in fact be real (in the case of God, he must be real), but its essence would be unknown to the human mind. Consequently, it makes no difference with respect to God's existence that there is a world; God is, with or without creatures. This is what it means to say that a real, though "one-sided" relationship exists between God and finite entities; insofar as creatures exist, they are dependently related to him, but, being independent of them, God's relation to creatures is only in idea.

According to Thomas, the appellation Lord "includes the idea of a servant and vice versa.... Hence God was not Lord until he had a creature subject to himself" (I, q. 13 a. 7, ad. 6). Thomas recognizes that there would no such thing as "Lord," were it not for the existence of a creature, and says so. Nevertheless, for him it is a mistake to think that a name said of God temporally in any way undermines his self-sufficiency.

I have often wondered how my conversation with Pete might have turned out had there not been such an abrupt dismissal. If there were one thing I would have done differently, it would be this. When Pete said, "God is not good," I wish I had had the presence of mind to respond, "You're right. We should not say 'God is good'; we should say, 'God is goodness.'" That is, a word that describes an accidental quality in human beings functions differently when we direct it at God, because it points to the divine essence. In so speaking, I could respond to Pete's misgivings without making God-talk trivial.

In this respect, I believe St. Thomas' treatment of the names of God is of great help to those of us who find ourselves speaking about God, to God, and in the name of God, especially in these troubled times. As my students and I watched helplessly from our window at Fordham University in Lincoln Center as the World Trade Center collapsed, we could not help but invoke the name of God: the Source of all goodness, compassion, wisdom, and love. At that moment, we needed no abstruse justification for the language we used; we knew that what we were saying—"Oh God," "Dear God," "Merciful God"—meant something very important. Our ability to use language is precisely what makes us human. Among the sayings attributed to Confucius, we read, "Without

knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men." In light of the tragedy that occurred at that time, we believers might amend this to read, "Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know God."