

## THE THESIS FORM AS AN INSTRUMENT OF THEOLOGICAL INSTRUCTION

### I

If the question before us concerns merely the value of a particular pedagogical technique, it is neither important nor interesting. The value of pedagogical techniques is a matter for practical judgment. Arguments pro and con will be arguments of a practical order. And arguments on this level are not likely to come to conclusions that would be important by reason of their universal bearing, or interesting by reason of their implications of principle.

The question of the thesis-method only becomes interesting and important in so far as it is related to much more fundamental question—the famous historical question, what is the *ordo disciplinae* proper to Christian theology—the right order, form, and method of learning and teaching it.

This question is not subject to arbitrary solution, nor to solution purely in terms of practical pedagogical values. In the case, the *ordo disciplinae* is essentially related to the *natura disciplinae*. The right order, form and method of learning and teaching Christian theology must emerge from the nature of Christian theology itself. Immediately the difficulty appears; it is inherent and obvious, and it has occasioned much discussion in the history of Scholasticism.

The Christian religion is first and foremost a sacred history, a series of historical facts, all of them the issue of free divine initiatives, all of them contingent, and irreducible to necessary principles. On the other hand, the Christian religion is a sacred doctrine, which theology undertakes to transform into the state of science, a body of knowledge that is reflectively constructed out of factual material, and organized in accord with certain architectonic principles of intelligibility (e.g., hypotheses in scientific disciplines, first principles in philosophy). The problem of the *ordo disciplinae* therefore is the problem of finding an order of teaching and learning the sacred doctrine that will be scientific in itself, and suited to an exposition, likewise scientific, of the sacred history.

The earlier Scholastics found the problem baffling. Hugh of St Victor, for instance, was content to follow a purely historical order, the order of the facts themselves, the "narrationis series," divided into two parts: first, from the beginning of the world to the Incarnation; second, from the Incarnation to the consummation of all things. In these terms he effected an exposition of the historical economy of salvation. But the exposition lacked the mode of generalization and organization proper to a science.

Abelard, in contrast, attempted a systematic order constructed in terms of the three categories, *fides, caritas, sacramentum*. Faith included the primal mysteries (Trinity, Incarnation, creation, original sin); charity included the whole Christian life (virtues, moral precepts); and the "sacrament" included the Church and the means of grace. Here indeed was systematization, but of an abstract, arbitrary, purely practical kind. And in the course of the systematization the element of the historical disappears.

Everyone is familiar with the solution conceived by St. Thomas through his utilization and adaptation of the Platonic concepts of emanation and return (*exitus, reditus*). In terms of these concepts the order of the discipline becomes universal in its scope, inclusive of all nature. And the discipline itself acquires unity from a principle interior to it, namely, God, who is the common root of the intelligibility of all things that proceed from Him and return to Him. At the same time, this systematic order is also historical; the *exitus* begins a history which the *reditus* concludes.

This was a genial solution to the problem of the *ordo disciplina* in its broadest structural lines. St. Thomas also made a further contribution—his perfecting of the method of the "question" as the technique for the exposition of individual truths within the larger framework. We need not here delay on the details of the historical evolution of the method of the "question" out of all the prior Scholastic techniques—*glossa, littera, expositio, sensus, sententia, disputatio*. The point here is the change this method effected in the role of the teacher. Earlier on he had chiefly been the exegete of texts (all medieval pedagogy was based on the *lectio*, the reading of texts, *auctoritates*). Now his major function became the *determinatio*. He was the master who "determined" problems, and en-

gaged in personal elaboration of the doctrine itself through the composition of *articuli*, the "article" being a developed unit of thought containing all the material necessary for the position of a question, its discussion, and the solution of difficulties.

The question occurs here, whether and in what sense St. Thomas brought a definitive solution to the problem of the *ordo disciplinae* in theology. There is also the minor question, whether and in what sense the *Summa theologica* is the permanently definitive theological textbook. Perhaps some of the gathering will wish to speak to these questions. As John Stuart Mill suggested, positions are best defended by those who are committed to them and who can therefore best "make the case" for them.

Whatever may be the answers to these questions, it remains true that the achievement of St. Thomas illuminates the principles and values that should serve as criteria for a reasonable critique of the thesis-method and its correlate, the "manual." These principles and values are methodological; but precisely for this reason they are necessary principles and high values. A right understanding of the method of theology is essential to a theological education. Only this grasp of method gives an insight into the nature of the theological enterprise as such, and thus guarantees both a present understanding of it and a permanent interest in it.

I should not wish to maintain that all the pertinent methodological principles and values received their full development at the hands of St. Thomas and the medieval Schoolmen. In any event, they were known and—what is more important—they were used. The following list does not pretend to be well organized; but perhaps it will serve our purposes here.

(1) The method of theology is essentially the method of the "question," the method of inquiry. The inquiry is twofold—into the existence, and into the intelligibility, of some theological reality. There are the two questions: "An sit?" and "Quid sit?"

(2) The method of theology is essentially the method of the "lectio," the reading of texts that are, in one way or another, "authorities." These texts furnish the basis of the theological inquiry.

(3) The theological inquiry is pursued in two phases, doctrinal

and historical. Their distinction corresponds to the nature of the discipline itself, which is both historical and doctrinal.

(a) The major Scholastic emphasis has been on the doctrinal inquiry. What the Scholastic chiefly questions is the intelligibility of the sacred doctrines and his understanding of them. Traditionally, this doctrinal inquiry has centered on two aspects of the matter. The more narrow inquiry centers on the intelligibility of the individual truths, regarded in the mature and developed formulation that they have assumed at the historical moment when the inquiry is made. The question therefore regards the present state of the Church's knowledge of her faith. The broader inquiry centers on the internal constitutive order of revealed truth, as an ordered body of knowledge. The question here regards the "relations of the mysteries with one another and with the final end of man" (Vatican).

(b) The minor Scholastic emphasis has been on the historical inquiry. It seeks to understand the varying states in which Christian truth is found in the sources of revelation and in subsequent elaborations. It consequently seeks to understand the influences that bore on the shaping of the truth—heresy and error, the philosophical ambience, literary forms of composition, etc. Several comments on this historical inquiry are necessary.

First, its method is regressive. It starts from the developed understanding of the faith, possessed in the present; hence it moves backward, as it were, into the scrutiny of sources. Second, the historical inquiry proper to Scholasticism is limited. The limitation is necessary if one is to preserve the distinction between Scholastic (speculative) theology and positive (historical) theology. The distinction is indeed only material; and it is not easy to explain. But it does impose a limit—itsself not easy to determine—on the historical inquiry which the Scholastic as such undertakes. His enterprise must include a topological survey, a study of the sources. This study is conducted for its own sake, in pursuit of an understanding of faith in its historical dimension: "quod ubique, quod semper." But this study will have limits set to it by the nature of his enterprise. Third, the historical inquiry undertaken by Scholasticism does not center on the problem of the development of doctrine, as this problem is understood today (if indeed it is understood today). The primary

concern of the Scholastic is the intelligibility of the truths of faith as they are proposed by the Church in the present. He cannot overlook or neglect the fact that this present proposition of the truth has a long history behind it. But his concern with the history is secondary and limited. Nonetheless, it is real; in theology the *ordo disciplinae* must essentially include a moment of historical inquiry.

To say this much is to raise the difficult problem of the place which a theological education today must accord to that enlargement of the historical inquiry which is known as positive theology. This further manner of inquiry is characteristic of the modern development, and its importance has been officially recognized by the Church. The problem is difficult not least by reason of the fact that positive theology has not yet found its theorist, in the sense in which St. Thomas is the theorist of Scholasticism. Here I should be content to say that the student should receive at least that measure of initiation into positive theology—its methods and its purposes—which will enable him to acquire a sense of the problem of development. It will probably be sufficient if he comes to understand the problem itself, in its generality and in its concrete mode of position in one or other area of theology—say, for instance, the doctrine of the Trinity.

(4) The last principle to be noted regards the role of the teacher. His essential function is the "determinatio," the position and discussion of "questions." His office is debased, if he becomes a mere exegete of texts, even when the texts are magisterial or papal. The temptation to equate theology with exegesis of ecclesiastical texts seems to be felt particularly strongly today.

The question now is, whether the thesis-method satisfies the requirements of these principles and values, which are basic to the *ordo disciplinae*. It should, of course, be borne in mind that the student never encounters the thesis-method in the abstract. He meets a textbook and a teacher. And probably the decisive encounter is with the teacher. Our question therefore becomes concrete: does this encounter with the thesis-method in the concrete, as represented by a teacher and a textbook, serve to make the student a theologian? The student is subjected to the art of education, which, as an art, looks to a "making"—in our case, the "making" of

the kind and quality of mind proper to a theologian. When the teacher employs the thesis-method as the instrument of his art, does he achieve the end of his art?

This question resolves itself into three more particular ones. First, does instruction by the thesis-method oblige or induce the student to a sufficient amount, and a right quality, of *lectio*, reading of texts? Second, is the student made conscious of the fact that he is embarked on an inquiry—a particular kind of scientific inquiry? In this sense, is he really “theologizing,” and does he consciously get caught up in the theological enterprise? Finally, does the thesis-method assist the student rightly to understand the two essential phases of the theological inquiry—the historical and the doctrinal—in themselves and in their relations? Upon your answers to these questions will depend your judgment on the validity and value of the thesis-method. I shall append three personal judgments of my own.

First, underneath the schematization of the thesis-method (statement of the thesis, state of the question, “note” of the thesis, adversaries, the array of “proofs,” so called, and the solution of objections) it is possible to discern the methodological principles that control the teaching and learning of theology. Hence the way to an appreciation of these principles is not per se blocked by the use of the thesis-method, when it is used by both teacher and student in a way that is intelligent, flexible, and illuminated by a common understanding of right methodology. Even when he uses the thesis-method, it is altogether possible for the teacher to fulfill his eternal hope, which is to do no positive harm to the minds of his students. Major harm is done when the *ordo disciplinae* is perverted or adulterated or simply missed.

Second, as a formal method of instruction, the thesis-method is liable to the danger that threatens any form—the danger of formalism. Damage is done when the living processes of theological inquiry and understanding are crippled or killed by rude confinement within the categories of exposition associated with this form of instruction.

Third, the most notable failure of the thesis-method is likely to be in the line of the historical inquiry. The topological survey

proper to Scholasticism is usually done under the rubric of "proof" (also to some extent under the rubric of "adversaries"). Therefore the point and purpose of this survey are likely to be misunderstood; the survey itself is likely to be truncated; and the right method of conducting it is likely to be lost from view. There is the further disadvantage that this study of the sources is conducted after the thesis has been stated and the state of the question defined. More correct method would transpose this order. Normally it is the study of the sources that gives rise to the theological problem, the "question" (e.g., the celebrated patristic problem of the human knowledge of Christ). Therefore this order of teaching and learning gives greater reality to the method of theology as a method of inquiry based on the reading of sources.

Fourth, given the ordinary limitations of time, and the hardly less ordinary limitations of knowledge, to which the teacher is subject, the best hope would seem to be that the teacher should intersperse pieces of genuine theologizing with stretches of what really amounts only to indoctrination in theses.

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## II

IN presenting an exposition of the thesis method I should, first of all, make clear those things I am not attempting to do.

First: I am not undertaking to defend all the manuals as such nor their specific method of employing the thesis method. All too often they have misused and abused the method and have helped to bring it into undeserved disrepute.

Secondly: I am not as such concerned with the use of the thesis method in presenting a particular theological system. It may be, and I think often is, a pedagogical necessity. But here I am confining myself to dogmas and theological certitudes.

Thirdly: I do not intend to deal directly with the thesis method as a pedagogical need for seminarians in order to cover the matter clearly and accurately in the time allowed. However, I must add that I am convinced that this is the case.

These things being said, I may state my intention which is to

deal with the place of the thesis method in the transmission of theology to the seminarians as a *scientia fidei*—with particular reference to dogmatic theology. To put it into question form: Is it, as has been charged, a pedagogical technique that has developed purely as a technique and has in turn fragmentized the organic character of theology; or, is it, as I believe, an integral part of the theological process? Now to answer these questions we must first of all formulate some notions about the theological process in dogmatic theology.

The light of theology is *ratio illustrata fide* and so theology views its formal object (OBJECTUM UT SCIBILE) from this standpoint and in this light. This thus distinguishes it from faith. For the precise role of faith is to guarantee a definite corpus of supernatural truths revealed by God and transmitted to us by the Church. Neither our science nor our experience is able to verify or refute these truths and it is faith that enables us to hold them as absolutely certain.

When we come to theology, however, a distinct element is added. The propositions and concepts held by faith as guaranteed by God are considered by theology as objects of an intellectual process (subject to faith and the light of faith). The theological process thus introduces rational considerations which endeavor to explicitate the proper intelligibility of these revealed concepts and propositions. Theology is the response of a living mind to the object of faith not merely in order to assent but for the purpose of understanding so as to come to what the Vatican Council describes as "*mysteriorum aliquam intelligentiam eamque fructuosissimam.*"

Because the theological process introduces and employs rational considerations it, of necessity, introduces a process of abstraction—of what is pejoratively described as "essentialism." But it must be remembered that in the discursive process this is an exigency of the human intellect. If you are to have order and intelligibility then it is to be achieved by abstraction whether it is the order of the *Summa* or such terms as "person," "nature," "relation," "procession," "subsistence" and so on. To dismiss this as merely "a deductive process of Aristotelian philosophy" is to forget this fact. For there is only one normal and ordinary manner of developing our intellectual knowledge and that is to analyze the concepts in which



revealed truth has been presented by God—to deduce from them essence and properties—to relate effects and causes. This is to organize and seek to understand in the light of rational considerations.

Theology, then, as the *fides quaerens intellectum*, the *ratio illustrata fide*, has as its work the understanding of the truths in the deposit of revelation. However it takes its certitude from faith which is its indispensable principle as a source of light and truth. Moreover the objects it seeks to understand are received by faith and so accepted on the authority of God revealing. It receives, it does not discover the propositions and concepts which it seeks to explicitate in the order of intelligibility. They are given by revelation and received with certitude by divine faith.

In the light of this I submit that the thesis is the theological formulation of these concepts and propositions on which theology as an intellectual process will exercise its critical and reflective powers. I also am of the opinion that the use of the thesis in this way is part of the living development of theology itself. It is a development crystallized in the last century and precisioned as a result of Modernism. From the time of Melchior Cano when positive theology first begins to take scientific form until Perrone and Franzelin the most striking part of the development of the theological process is the recognition of the place and role of the magisterium in the establishment of the *auctoritas*—the *traditio activa* as distinguished from the *traditio objectiva*. Playing no small part in this are the doctrinal interventions of Pius IX in the question of faith and reason to explain the primacy of the magisterium. Many of these papal teachings were in turn incorporated into the Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution "*Dei Filius*." In the Modernist crisis this is even more sharply accentuated by Bainvel and particularly by Billot who show that the proximate rule of faith is the living magisterium. For it is the magisterium which "*de jure divino*" proposes, explains and imposes truths to be believed if we wish to hold the doctrine transmitted by Christ and the apostles.

It is, therefore, through this medium that the theologian comes into proper relation with the first principles of his science. For it is here that he deals with the totality of revelation as indefectibly con-

served, proposed, explained and developed. As the Vatican Council defines: "the deposit of faith is faithfully kept and infallibly declared by the Spouse of Christ." It is in the light of this that Pius XII declares in *Humani Generis*:

This sacred office of teacher in matters of faith and morals must be the proximate and universal criterion of truth for all theologians since to it has been entrusted by Christ the Lord the whole deposit of faith both Sacred Scripture and Tradition—to be preserved, guarded and interpreted. (NCWC trans, p. 9, n. 18.)

Theology then has for its proximate rule and criterion the deposit of revelation as taught by the magisterium. And what I maintain here is that the theological thesis is the scientific elaboration of revelation as proposed by the Church.

In using this phrase "scientific elaboration" I am viewing this effort as a theological process and therefore an intellectual process. It is not simply the statement of a proposition of the Church for assent but for understanding. Accordingly an exercise of critical intelligence is essential—as a scientific process "it must" to use Father Labourdette's phrase, "verify its data" i.e. determine accurately and exactly what has been revealed and so proposed by the Church. For these propositions to be the first principles of theology they must be formulated in the proper light of theology. "A bare fact is not a scientific fact—a fact concerns science only when viewed in its light and subjected to its critique." So the data must be verified even though assent is by faith and faith itself is an organic part of the light of the science of theology.

Now it seems to me that it is this area of critical evaluation that the thesis method has been most often misunderstood, misapplied and abused. For the proper and effective use of the thesis method calls for a competent, exacting and critical use of the *status quaestionis* which is essential to the intellectual and discursive process of theology. For by the *status quaestionis* we first of all relate the proposition we are treating to the matter immediately preceding and to the tract as a whole. This is, in part, negative (at least in purpose) to prevent the treatment from becoming fragmented, but,

positively, it looks to achieving that unity which is a primary law of intelligibility—for we are showing why we take this step at this particular and point and what part this step plays in the whole.

The second step in this critical framework which is set up by the *status quaestionis* is of the essence in the order of understanding. It is the formulation and clarification of what Gilson has called the "pure position"—what exactly is the issue—the problem; and why is it a problem? For pedagogically as Newman has pointed out no answer means anything until the question has been raised as a personal question in our own minds.

The next step is to make use of the resources of history to set up the proposition of the Church. This means: an exact understanding of the errors not only in their speculative content but in their historical context; secondly: the gathering of the authentic declarations of the Church in the matter; thirdly: a study of the definitions of the Church either solemn or ordinary. Such a study entails a careful and exact presentation of the proposition in the context of its historical situation and development. It also requires, I believe, an effort to arrive at the purpose and intent to be derived from a study of the documents particularly in relation to an ecumenical council e.g. why *cognosci potest* rather than *demonstrari potest* in the Vatican Council's definition that man can know naturally the existence of God. Lastly is the case of a proposition by the ordinary and universal magisterium. This process involves a whole study of consent on the part of theologians and Fathers as witnesses to the magisterium. It also calls for a study of the indications given by the ordinary magisterium through such sources as the liturgy, catechisms and condemned propositions.

As is evident much of this process is modelled on history but it must be kept in mind that it is not simply a historical approach. It is a theological process subject to the theological criteria furnished by the Church and so is controlled by the assent of faith. Equally, however, if it is to be properly theological it presupposes the best of historical resources carefully and accurately employed.

I realize, of course, that this is or can be a very lengthy process and that in many manuals it is only schematically done even when it is not eviscerated into a purely superficial exercise in memory. I

am also aware that the teacher of theology will only gradually be able to master all the tools and sources that he needs. But is not this part of the development of the teacher of theology into a theologian possessed of a fully actualized habit of theology? I am convinced that this full process is essential to any truly scientific theology—otherwise you have only bare facts not theological facts. Only in this way does the proposition become a first principle of theology. Only this way do you have an accurate and exact statement of the proposition assented to by faith and now formulated in terms of intelligibility and represented scientifically in the *status quaestionis* and the thesis. And it is thus that the thesis formulating the teaching of the Church sets up the norm that has primacy in the theological process.

All this does not mean that the magisterium is the only source of positive theology as Charlier maintained. For the search for intelligibility looks to the totality of the content of revelation with the magisterium as the rule and criterion of this search for intelligibility. Pius XII formulates it this way in *Humani Generis*:

It is also true that theologians must always return to the sources of divine revelation: for it belongs to them to point out how the doctrine of the living teaching authority is to be found either explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures and in Tradition. Besides each source of divinely revealed doctrine contains so many rich treasures of truth, that they can never really be exhausted. Hence it is that theology through the study of its sacred sources remains ever fresh; on the other hand, speculation which neglects a deeper search into the deposit of faith proves sterile as we know from experience. But for this reason even positive theology cannot be on a par with merely historical science. For, together with the sources of positive theology God has given to His Church a living Teaching Authority to elucidate and explain what is contained in the deposit of faith only obscurely and implicitly. This deposit of faith our Divine Redeemer has given for authentic interpretation not to each of the faithful, not even to theologians but only to the Teaching Authority of the Church. But if the Church does exercise this function of teaching, as she often has through the centuries, either in the ordinary or extraordinary way, it is clear how false is a procedure which would attempt to explain what is clear by means of what is obscure. Indeed the

very opposite procedure must be used. Hence Our Predecessor of immortal memory, Pius IX, teaching that the most noble office of theology is to show how a doctrine defined by the Church is contained in the sources of revelation, added these words and with very good reason: "in that sense in which it has been defined by the Church." (NCWC trans, p. 10, n. 21.)

In commenting on this return to the sources I should like to single out two points made by the Holy Father.

First: In this return the theologian looks to showing how the doctrine of the living teaching authority is to be found explicitly or implicitly in the scriptures and tradition. Thus presupposed here is the theological criterion that there is present a homogeneity in substance between past and present. So it is not a restoration of the past but a clarification, a justification and enrichment of the living thought of the present.

Secondly: This return to the sources by the theologian *qua* theologian is not merely a historical science. He has as his norm a living teaching authority to elucidate and explain what is contained in the deposit of faith only obscurely and implicitly and this deposit of faith is given for authentic interpretation only to the teaching authority of the Church. So this return involves a different set of criteria than the historian *qua* historian is able to use. For the implicit is explained and clarified and understood by the explicit because there is homogeneity and indefectible continuity.

To these two points I should like to add a third which is not so much a criterion as a positive object of this return. For positive theology as theology does not look to these things as proofs but as an integral element of intelligibility and understanding. So it seeks to ascertain not only that they have been revealed but how they have been revealed. Thus what it seeks is a living communion with the totality of revelation both as constitutive and explicative. And this work it accomplishes under the direction and control of faith so it is properly theological. But as theology distinguished from faith it must employ the resources of historical reason as speculative theology uses philosophy. It uses them to see the teaching of the Church in its totality but it uses them when it has carefully formulated the thesis which stands as its guide for this return. With this

as its point of departure it uses and must use the resources gathered and organized by biblical and patristic theology—which themselves recognizes as normative the definitions of the Church, the authentically interpreted texts, and the analogy of faith.

Biblical and patristic theology are therefore used here not for their own sake but in order to give as full an intelligibility of the total content as is possible. For this is not history but theology “the regressive method” to use Gardeil’s phrase—and specifically dogmatic theology looking to use every resource to understand and communicate the totality of revelation as proposed and explained by the Church. Hence neither biblical theology nor patristic theology can be substituted for dogmatic theology. They are necessary and essential elements of any soundly conceived dogmatic theology and any properly employed thesis method. For the effectiveness and integrity of the thesis method depends on the care and fullness with which these resources are used. The work is done under the light of faith and the proximate rule of faith and so it is theological but if the work is to be intellectual and scientific and not simply devotional then the proper use of these resources alone maintains objective contact with the evidence. The theological judgment is not soundly exercised without an equally sound biblical and patristic theology.

There is, finally, one other aspect to the use of the thesis method that must be treated here since it is also an integral part of the *scientia fidei*. It is the body of theological certitudes that have been incorporated into the science of theology over the centuries. These represent another element in the discussion of the thesis method because they too constitute principles of the theological process and so it is once again a matter of formulating them scientifically in keeping with the nature of the theological process. Moreover they too have come under fire as being part of the “essentialist” process because of the fact that they employ philosophical notions.

As we know the Church has condemned as erroneous an extensive list of propositions. Technically this means that they are opposed to theologically certain truths and not to formally revealed ones. Logically, in the light of these magisterial actions, we can see that in the range of Catholic teaching there is a body of truths set up

by theological deduction which limits the range of free discussion and sets up principles to guide further work. This body of truths is arrived at not by a formal proposition of the *revelatus* but by a discursive process. To achieve this corpus the theological process employs analogies from the created world to draw out the virtualities of revelation—the *revelabilia*. For it is clear that if the human mind is to be applied to revelation to its fullest then the discursive process must be employed since it is the mind's proper medium for arriving at understanding. By way of authority for such a position we have its continued and effective existence in the magisterial documents and its use and approbation in the theological tradition of the Church itself. In the description given by John of St. Thomas: "Theology is a scientific or certain knowledge proceeding from what is formally revealed and inferring those things which are virtually or mediately revealed inasmuch as they are deduced from and connected with the formally revealed." (*Cursus Theologicus*, T. I, 443.)

Since the use of the natural objects of our knowledge to arrive at many of these conclusions has been criticized as "essentialist" or an Aristotelian dialectic opposed to "the existential nature of the biblical revelation" it might be well to say a few words about this point. (The reason for introducing this point here is that so many theological theses are involved with just this area.) The basic principles here are formulated by Pius XII in *Humani Generis*:

Everyone is aware that the terminology used in the schools and even that employed by the Teaching Authority of the Church itself is capable of being perfected and polished; and we also know that the Church itself has not always used the same terms in the same way. It is also manifest that the Church cannot be bound to every system of philosophy that has existed for a short time. Nevertheless, the things that have been composed through common effort by Catholic teachers over the course of centuries to bring about some understanding of dogma are certainly not based on any such weak foundation. These things are based on principles and notions deduced from a true knowledge of created things. In the process of deducing, this knowledge, like a star, gave enlightenment to the human mind through the Church. Hence it is not astonishing that some of these notions have not

only been used by the Oecumenical Councils, but even sanctioned by them, so that it is wrong to depart from them.

Hence to neglect, or to reject, or to devalue so many and such great resources which have been conceived, expressed and perfected so often by the age old work of men endowed with no common talent and holiness, working under the vigilant supervision of the holy magisterium and with the light and leadership of the Holy Ghost in order to state the truths of faith ever more accurately, to do this so that these things may be replaced by conjectural notions and by some formless and unstable tenets of a new philosophy, tenets which, like the flowers of the field, are in existence today and die tomorrow; this is supreme imprudence and something that would make dogma itself a reed shaken by the wind. The contempt for terms and notions habitually used by scholastic theologians leads of itself to the weakening of what they call speculative theology, a discipline which these men consider devoid of true certitude because it is based on theological reason. (NCWC trans., p. 8, nn. 16-17.)

These theological conclusions and consequent certitudes are an integral part of the theological effort to organize and explain through rational considerations the *revelabilia*. In this particular area these rational elaborations have been drawn from the created things which constitute the objects of our natural knowledge. But it must be kept in mind that these notions take their theological validity from the fact that they have been guaranteed as representations of the divine mysteries. They are not simply philosophical analogies applied by various men solely on their own initiative. For in this matter of theological certitudes the notions of reason are made use of by theology to express the virtualities of revelation in a rational and scientific manner. These notions, however, as the Holy Father makes clear, have been submitted to the analogy of faith and are not purely philosophical notions. Rather they have been judged, corrected and measured in the light of faith and the rule of faith and so approved and assimilated to the dignity of theological analogies. Hence and only on this condition do they become the certain objects of theological reason.



It is by this process of judgment and extrinsic approbation that these certitudes become part of the corpus of scientifically articulated principles which form the science of theology. Hence in stating them in the thesis once again we are beginning where the theologian must begin in theology—with authority. In communicating them in teaching then we follow the same process that I have outlined in regard to formally revealed truth. Here however the *status quaestionis* is concerned with showing how and why this conclusion is drawn and specifically the manner in which it has achieved the guarantee by which theologically we know that it is certain. This will be done either by explaining the magisterial action involved or by adducing the evidence for unanimity of consent on the part of theologians. In this case too Scripture and the Fathers are used not only to enrich our understanding but to show coherence with the totality of revelation as well as the intimate or necessary connection it has with it.

So much then for the thesis method as I understand and use it myself. I might add to this formal presentation my own personal conviction that in view of the matter to be covered and the time actually available the thesis method properly used is pedagogical necessity also. For if we hope to transmit a clear organically articulated framework that will enable the students to theologize themselves and to state accurately what is the teaching of the Church I know of no better system. The key to sound teaching here is the *status quaestionis* honestly and properly done; but if we are to have an ordered and intelligible body of theological principles communicated to our students then I think the thesis method which is integral to the theological process is by that very fact equally necessary to the teaching process.

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**Digest of the Discussion:**

*Brother Luke, F.S.C.*, of Manhattan College, ventured the first question by asking Father Murray whether he thought that the consideration of heresies in the traditional thesis served a polemic or a strictly theological purpose. Father Murray replied that the heresies were considered for a theological purpose, that they would be part of what he had referred to as the viewing of a truth in its various historical states.

*Father Decker, O.M.I.*, of San Antonio, then asked the panel whether or not they thought formalism could be avoided by using the theological question as St. Thomas had, that is, by first formulating the question and then coming to the thesis only at the conclusion, rather than at the beginning as is now customary. Father Burke was not inclined to favor such a new approach, although he insisted that the question as formulated by St. Thomas was actually the first step in the *status quaestionis* as he had described it in his paper. To this, Father Decker objected that the reason for the lack of interest on the part of the students was precisely that they had the answer at the very beginning. Father Murray then indicated that he would like to speak to the question. He pointed out that in a sound theological method the topical survey is antecedent to theologizing, that is, to the scholastic exposition as such. It is at this point that the danger comes. The tendency here is to say "This is it," whether it be a dogma or the subject of unanimous theological consent, and then to be content with that. This is the greatest weakness and danger of the thesis method. Father Murray remarked that Father Burke had given a fine and sophisticated exposé of what the thesis method ought to be, but he wondered whether it actually were that. That, he said, was the burden of his saying *if* by the thesis method you mean this. . . . Father concluded by saying that he favored, therefore, a thorough survey of the sources before the formulation of the dogma.

*Father Leonard McCann, C.S.B.*, of Windsor, Canada, was recognized next and he asked whether a different method should be used in teaching laymen, a method, that is, that would differ from that of the seminary. Specifically, he wondered which of the two methods proposed by the panelists would be more suitable for laymen. Father Burke replied that it was his practice in the teaching of college women to do most of the things he had outlined in his paper, but not in that manner. He said that the skeleton of the thesis method was used but that it was somewhat concealed. He was principally concerned that the students should know what the Church teaches and not measure religious truth by how they feel.

In replying to the same question, Father Murray stressed that it would be well here to avoid traps in words and that the word "theology" was a particularly invidious trap. Although he admitted that he could see why the word would be used to describe college courses, he thought that

it could be misleading. He indicated that when he used the word "theology" he meant scholastic theology, theology *par excellence*. He did not think that theology in this sense should be taught in college on a large scale for a variety of reasons. Among these, he mentioned the fact that college students lack the philosophical instrument for such a study. He thought that the college course basically should teach two things: first, the dogmas, or what the Church teaches; secondly, some acquaintance with the sources, notably Sacred Scripture. He thought that educators who had an idea of what they wanted to turn out of college would thereby have a norm for the college theology course. Theology should, however, have mental quotation marks around it when used to describe college courses, he said. At this point, the imminence of the business meeting served to bring the discussion to a close.

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