

Creation as Existential Contingency: A Response

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Donald Keefe has consistently provided a trenchant critique of traditional Thomism. His paper for this conference focuses this critique on the question of contingency in Thomas's thought and the necessity ingredient in the Aristotelianism on which it is built. There are more resources in the thought of Thomas himself that is supportive of Keefe's project than is generally recognized. I would also agree with Keefe's observation that Thomas's system is an incomplete transformation of Aristotelianism.

Thomas's act-potency understanding of Christ is isolated from the rest of his Aristotelian-based system. It is awkwardly understood in terms of the classic Thomistic correlations: form-matter, accident-substance, existence-essence. Thomas is silent on this point as well as on the freedom required of the act-potency correlation of divinity and humanity in Christ. This brings us back to the question that Keefe has raised with regard to the issue of contingency, necessity, and freedom.

Three years ago at a conference on natural law held at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit I was asked to respond to a paper by Romanus Cessario entitled "The Location of Natural Law within the *Sacra Doctrina*." Early on in my comments I owned up to my own Keefian roots and then proceeded to take considerable delight in pointing out that accepting a location of natural law within the context of *sacra doctrina*, which was Cessario's point, necessarily entailed a Christological context for that law. This was more radical than Cessario was really willing to countenance even though he was arguing that the location of natural law within *sacra doctrina* necessitated locating "the regulative pattern for all right human conduct ultimately . . . within the blessed Trinity."¹ Not surprisingly, given his own more traditional Thomism, Cessario was resistant to the more radical reading of Thomas that I proposed. His reluctance to take the further Christological step in his line of argumentation is symptomatic of Thomism as it is generally practiced and on which Donald Keefe has commented on more occasions than is easily countable.² The paper before us in this conference is a further elaboration of that theme developing in particular, over previous discussions, the themes of contingency in Thomas's thought and the necessity ingredient in the Aristotelian correlations on which Thomism is built.

If I then raised up to Cessario, the traditional Thomist, various Keefian perspectives, I feel honor bound, in turn, to offer up to Keefe various elements of Thomas's thought. I must of

¹ Papers from this conference, "St. Thomas and the Natural Law Tradition," will be published by Catholic University Press in late 2004. Both Cessario's paper and my response will be included.

² It is symptomatic in the sense that the traditional Thomist will look to a God who transcends history rather than to the Christ who is in history for the fundamental cause (formal, final, and efficient) of everything, including natural law. Cessario is rather bold in locating natural law in the context of *De Deo Trino* rather than exclusively in *De Deo Uno* but it is still a Trinity which transcends history that is in view.

necessity reprise some of the material I presented at that earlier conference since my procedure there was to present my various Keefian points in the voice of Thomas rather than in Keefe's own voice. My contention here is that there are more resources in Thomas himself supportive of Keefe's project than Keefe has to date taken full advantage of. Having said this I would agree with his overall observation that Thomas's system represents only a partial transformation of Aristotelianism that, as it stands, is not adequate for the Christian faith. In the remarks that follow I will first sketch some aspects of the history of the interpretation of Thomas, then set out some of those elements of Thomas supportive of Keefe's overall theological project. This will set the stage for quickly highlighting the fundamental incoherence that remains in Thomas's system precisely because the transformation of Aristotle has not been carried through on all the necessary levels.

It is hard to overestimate the influence of Marie-Dominique Chenu's characterization of the structure of Thomas's *Summa Theologica* on the way Thomas has been understood in the last sixty-four years since the appearance of his article, "Le plan de la Somme théologique de S. Thomas."³ His fundamental point was reprised in his *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* which came out eleven years later: "Beyond the scientific world of Aristotle, Saint Thomas appeals to the Platonic theme of emanation and return. Since theology is the science of God, all things will be studied in their relation to God, whether in their production or in their final end, in their *exitus et reditus*."⁴

No less a light than Étienne Gilson enthused over Chenu's exposition: "pages littéralement sans prix dans leur simplicité."⁵ Gilson, with Chenu, explicitly rejected the possibility of a Christological metaphysics. I quote from my earlier response:⁶

Grace, for instance, treated without explicit reference to the Incarnation by Thomas, "has its own nature, its own structure, its own laws, beyond the temporal conditions of its realization."⁷ This is, to their minds a necessitarian structure to which the concrete manifestations of the economy of salvation conform: "Here as elsewhere," Gilson writes, "history presupposes nature, from which it is not deduced, but to which it conforms."⁸ Grace follows on and conforms to nature. Their contention is that the Incarnation in its gratuitous historicity is not

³ M.-D. Chenu, O.P., "Le plan de la Somme théologique de saint Thomas," *R. Th.* 47 (1939): 93-107.

⁴ M.-D. Chenu, O.P., *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Thomas d'Aquin, reprint, 1950 (Paris: Vrin, 1954)*. The English translation included authorized corrections and additions under the title *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964). The quote is from p. 304 of the translation.

⁵ He does this in his review of Chenu's *Introduction* in *Bulletin thomiste* VIII (1951), p. 7.

⁶ "A Response," p. 2.

⁷ Chenu, "Le plan," pp. 104-5; *Introduction*, p. 270; *Understanding*, p. 314-15. Cf. Gilson, p. 9.

⁸ "Ici comme ailleurs, l'histoire présuppose des natures, don't elle ne se déduit pas, mais conformément auxquelles elle arrive." Gilson, p. 9.

minimized by being “inserted” into such an ontology of grace.⁹ “Humanity,” Chenu likewise wrote, “is encountered in the *Summa*, not primarily as the mystical body of Christ, but as part of a cosmology.”¹⁰

The *exitus-reditus* covered in the first two parts of the *Summa Theologica* sets out “the order of the necessary,” the *Tertia Pars* sets out “the order of the historical.” “Theology ‘as a science’ is thus understood to be concerned primarily with these necessary structures and only secondarily with the concrete events of salvation. . . . Human nature is understood to participate, not in the God-man Jesus Christ, but in the eternal Word considered apart from the Incarnation.”¹¹

All of this, of course, threatens to minimize the place of the Incarnation. Thomists who follow Chenu contest this, as noted above, but the effort they must put into affirming a significant place for the Incarnation is itself revelatory of the problem. Chenu himself recognized the problem in noting the objection that “redemptive Incarnation appears to have been added *post factum* to the whole, as if the real story of salvation were an unforeseeable contingency superimposing itself on a system of abstract metaphysics dealing with God, grace, and the virtues.” In the face of this sort of objection he insists that the Incarnation is “a contingent event, and it enters in the *exitus-reditus* cycle only as an absolutely gratuitous work of God’s absolutely free will.”¹² This contingency is contrasted to the structure of grace as such which is anything but contingent: “Grace is studied in itself as a sharing in the life of God, and the adjective *Christian* is not added to it. This is because grace, as such, has its own nature, its own structure, its own laws, beyond the temporal conditions of its realization.”¹³ Countering Edward Schillebeeckx’s contention that the *Summa Theologica* is mainly Christological¹⁴ Chenu cites A. Patfoort to the effect that “the subject-matter of theology and the formal object of faith and of the virtues, is God, while ‘things pertaining to the humanity of Christ and to the sacraments of the Church, or to any creatures whatsoever, come under faith inasmuch as by them we are ordained to God.’”¹⁵ Theology, in the last analysis, is not about Jesus, the Christ. It is about the divine Son. Grace does not conform to the Christ, the Christ conforms to grace.

Keefe’s contention is that this is fundamentally backwards. The structure of grace is the Father sending the Son to give the Spirit; accordingly, the human experience of grace conforms to this filial mission and not vice-versa. It is at this point that Keefe’s analysis of contingency and freedom are especially telling. The divorce effected, at least by implication, between grace as such and the temporal mission of the Son, between the divine Son and Jesus, the Christ, can but only have dire consequences for theology. The persistent temptation for Aristotelian based

⁹ Chenu, “Le plan,” p. 105; *Introduction*, p. 270; *Understanding*, p. 314-15. Cf. Gilson, p. 9.

¹⁰ Chenu, “Le plan,” p. 104; *Introduction*, p. 269; *Understanding*, p. 314.

¹¹ Muller, “Response,” p. 2.

¹² Chenu, *Understanding*, p. 314.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 314-15.

¹⁴ H. Schillebeeckx, *De sacramentele Heilseconomie* (Anvers, 1952).

¹⁵ A. Patfoort, in *BT*, VIII (1947-1953), 1161-62, n. 2198.

theologies, as was demonstrated in the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, is to divide the Christ. Mary is not really the mother of God; the human passion of Christ is not really, at least in principle, the source of salvation and of all grace. Keefe, in contrast, keeps the “one and the same” of Chalcedon constantly in mind as a constant drum beat in the background of his theology.

More recently scholars have recognized that there is little textual support for seeing a Neoplatonic *exitus-reditus* pattern in the *Summa*. The expression only occurs in the earliest of Thomas’s works, his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, and Thomas quickly abandoned this approach. More typical today is the approach taken by Ghislain Lafont in his *Structures et Méthode dans la Somme Théologique de Saint Thomas d’Aquin* which was originally published in 1961.¹⁶ Simply put, Lafont translated Chenu’s pattern into more Aristotelian terms. Thus, instead of an *exitus* there is efficient causality; instead of a *reditus* there is final causality. The end result is the same. The *Prima* and the *Secunda* of the *Summa* are understood as providing the general principles that can be the object of a science while the *Tertia* is understood as the concrete historical application.

Some variant of these views still dominates Thomistic interpretation to this day. A decade ago Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P. surveyed the work on the structure of the *Summa Theologica* and concluded that there was “no reason to give up the *exitus-reditus* scheme.” But it was clear that some tinkering was needed. Thus, the scheme only applied to the “economic” portion of the *Summa* (everything after I.43). “Theology” proper is confined to the beginning of the work (I.2-43).¹⁷ Thomas F. O’Meara, O.P. engages in considerably more tinkering. “If the *ST* intends to give order to realities in creation and grace . . . nonetheless, this approach does not completely eliminate history. It is not simply a neo-Platonic emanation but includes the history of salvation.”¹⁸ In other words, it is *at least* a Neoplatonic emanation and return. He is well aware that a pure Neoplatonic *exitus et reditus* could only be, in its fundamental structure, ahistorical. Science deals primarily with the general and only secondarily, and by way of concrete examples of general principles, with the concrete, the historical. “The ‘Third Part’ of the *ST*,” according to O’Meara, “presents Jesus Christ as the model for the journey.”¹⁹ Now O’Meara’s treatment is more nuanced than can be set out in these brief notes. He presents the *Summa Theologica* as a “multi-layered” reality and there is much I would be in full agreement with. Still, he has fundamentally accepted Chenu’s characterization of the structure of the

¹⁶ Ghislain Lafont, O.S.B., *Structures et Méthode dans la Somme Théologique de Saint Thomas d’Aquin*, Reprint with new preface, original edition published in Paris-Bruges by Desclée de Brouwer, reprint, 1961 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1996).

¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *L’Initiation à Saint Thomas d’Aquin: Sa personne et son oeuvre* (Fribourg, Suisse: Editions Universitaires and Paris: Editions Cerf, 1993), translated by Robert Royal as *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1: *The Person and His Work* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), pp. 152-53.

¹⁸ Thomas F. O’Meara, O.P., *Thomas Aquinas Theologian* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Summa and is left trying to provide correctives that save the Incarnation as somehow important in the economy of salvation even if it is not determinative of the general structure of grace.

There have been contrary voices who have insisted on the centrality of the Christology in Thomas's master work. This theme was already touched on in the works of Yves Congar, O.P.²⁰ Congar, in the end, accepted Chenu's characterization of the *Summa*. Still, in an article on the idea of the Church in Thomas produced the year after Chenu's ground breaking article he concluded that the *Secunda*, which was the totality of the order of return to God, was about the Church.²¹ Later in the article, after considering the grace of Christ as head of the Church, Congar again touched on this last point—"Nothing exists in the economy of return to God, that does not spring from Christ, that is not caused in us by Him and first known and willed by Him, that has not in Him its pattern and is not a likening to His perfection as image of the Father." He pointed to humanity's creation in the image and likeness of God as one instance of this. That imaging is dynamic and moves the creature toward God. Thomas has three levels of that imaging which corresponds roughly to the three types of presence of God in the world: an image in power, in grace, in glory.²² Congar developed the economy of God's presence in the world some thirteen years later in "Le Mystère du Temple de Dieu et l'économie de sa Présence dans le Monde." There, after setting out the three types of presence—power, grace, and hypostatic union—in a footnote he suggested a scheme for the *Summa* that complemented his earlier remarks: "Sans doute ne serait-il pas exagéré ou étranger à l'intention de S. Thomas de retrouver les trois modes ou degrés d'union à Dieu et de présence, respectivement dans les trois parties de la *Somme*: I, présence par la puissance créatrice, selon la similitude; II, présence par la grâce, selon l'union à Dieu comme object connu, aimé et possédé; III, présence par l'union hypostatique, selon l'être. Ou encore: immanence générale de Dieu à sa création, immanence à sa creature raisonnable et libre, immanence singulière et suprême en Jésus-Christ."²³ As I indicated above, Congar in the end accepted Chenu's characterization of the *Summa Theologica* in many particulars but he was also an early voice suggesting the possibility of another, more Christological understanding of the *Summa*.²⁴

²⁰ In "L'idée de l'Église chez saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue Des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 29 (1940): 31-58. This article exists in English translation—"The Idea of the Church in St. Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 1 (1939): 331-59.

²¹ "L'idée," pp. 36-37, 39; "Idea," pp. 337, 339.

²² "L'Idée," pp. 43-44; "Idea," pp. 343-45.

²³ *L'année Théologique Augustinienne* 13 (1953): 2, n. 1.

²⁴ One could also mention Alphonsus van Kol, S.J.'s *Christus' Plaats in S. Thomas' Moraalsysteem: Een Onderzoek van de Prima Secundae*, Bijdragen-Bibliotheek (Roermond-Maaseik: J. J. Romen & Zonen, 1947). Van Kol argued that all the elements necessary to construct such a theology could be found in Thomas, and indeed, in the *Summa theologica*. An obvious problem for such an inquiry was the place of Christ Himself in that *Summa*, specifically, the location of the treatise on Christ after that on morality. Relying principally on Martin Grabmann and Chenu he sketched the issues involving the *ordo disciplinae*, the unity of theology in its subject, God, and the *exitus-reditus* scheme proposed by Chenu. His overall conclusion was that in the *Prima Secundae*, which was not constructed according to a Christological plan as such, there is sufficient evidence in various essential aspects of Thomas's moral system of a Christological perspective such that Thomas ought not be overlooked in the modern Christological renewal of moral theology.

The first extensive response to Chenu's position was provided by André Hayen in his *Saint Thomas d'Aquin et la vie de l'Église*. He noted that the theme of the *editus et reeditus* or circulation, as used by Chenu, is only found in the *Sententiae*, and, quoting Gilson, argued that the thirteenth century was characterized by "le triomphe de la cause efficiente sur la cause finale."²⁵ Thomas did indeed make use of such Neoplatonic themes but left them behind in his later works. If Chenu found inspiration in the *Sententiae*, one of Thomas's earliest works, Hayen found it in the *Compendium* and in the prologue of a work contemporaneous with the *Summa Theologica*, *In Evangelium Joannis*. There, in discussing "l'élévation, l'ampleur et la perfection du quatrième évangile" Thomas set out the ways in which Christ is treated: *Dominum sedentem super solium excelsum et elevatum . . . in principio erat Verbum, omnis terra est plena maiestate eius. . . omnia per ipsum facta sunt*, and the temple is filled because *Verbum caro factum est*.²⁶

Hayen's main point, which is independent of his reliance on the *Compendium* and the commentary on John, was that the *Summa Theologica* is Christologically structured. Divinity, humanity, and their union all pertain to Christ: "Ce qu'on vient de dire permet de préciser avec exactitude la place du Christ dans la pensée de saint Thomas. Cette place est totale. Plus totale que ne le veut le P. Chenu . . . Plus totale aussi que pour le P. Rondet."²⁷

Hayen did not have a great influence on subsequent discussion. The principle reason is that the division of the *Prima* and *Secunda* from the *Tertia Pars* really does not cohere very well with Hayen's scheme of altitude, amplitude, and perfection, as Ghislain Lafont later made clear.²⁸ There is a further problem with Hayen's own proposal. He had accepted the thesis that there was a caesura such as Chenu had noted between the first two parts of the *Summa* and the third.²⁹ Rejecting Chenu's Neoplatonically inspired distinction between essence and history (understood either as a distinction between principles and their application or between the essential and the existential) he proposed instead a distinction between the abstract and the concrete: "L'ensemble de la *Prima* et de la *Secunda* où il n'est pas parlé de Jésus-Christ ex professo s'oppose à la *Tertia* qui nomme Jésus par son nom, comme l'exposé *abstrait* de ce qui, en Dieu, 'est' *ab aeterno* s'oppose à un exposé *concret* de ce qui, dans le temps, 'commence' *in aeternum*."³⁰ However, the terms "abstract" and "concrete" are not understood in an Aristotelian

²⁵ André Hayen, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin et la vie de l'Église* (Louvain/Paris: Publications universitaires, 1952), p. 75; cf. also p. 88. He is referring to Étienne Gilson, "Maimonide et la Philosophie de l'Exode," *Medieval Studies* 8 (1951): 223-25. Cf. *La vie*, pp. 80-81 for the former point; he cites *S.T.* II-II 27.4.r2 et *De Pot.* 9.9.c. for examples of changed meanings.

²⁶ *La vie*, pp. 82-84.

²⁷ *La vie*, p. 95. Cf. Chenu's response in his review of this work in *Bulletin thomiste* 8 (1947-53): 771-72, no. 1346. Hayen reiterated this Christological focus in a subsequent article, "La structure de la Somme théologique et Jésus," *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 12 (1960): 61: "Jésus-Christ n'est pas seulement le point central de la Somme théologique. Il en est la substance même." Cf. also p. 68.

²⁸ *Structures et Méthode*, pp. 30-33.

²⁹ *La vie*, pp. 81-82.

³⁰ *La vie*, pp. 84-85. The later article, "La structure," reiterates this point as well and provides a more detailed textual analysis.

but rather in a Platonic fashion!³¹ This distinction, for all practical purposes, reduces to a distinction between the inaccessible and the accessible. Christ concretely makes accessible to us what is otherwise inaccessible. There is, however, nothing in the *Summa* which prepares us for such a distinction between the abstract and the concrete. Moreover, the latter distinction, if not as immediately recognizable as cosmological, is nonetheless as Platonic as the Platonism that Hayen objects to in Chenu's description. It is a distinction that seems at best marginally distinguishable from Chenu's distinction between essential structure (which in a Platonic world view is concretely inaccessible) and its free, historical manifestation.

Of course, Chenu and Gilson understand Chenu's distinction, Neoplatonic though it be, in more Aristotelian terms! Nature is the substantial power or the "laws" of which operations (here, actions in history) are a manifestation; this is true whether one is speaking of human nature or the nature of grace. This passing of Chenu and Hayen in opposite directions in this fashion is only one example of the systematic difficulties encountered whenever Platonic and Aristotelian elements are thus mingled together. The result is any number of systematic ambiguities found in both Augustinian as well as in Thomistic thought. Keefe, throughout his work, is at pains to point out this sort of systematic incoherence.

In addition to the critique of Chenu and the suggestion of a Christological focus in the *Summa* Hayen made other useful observations that would emerge with fuller force in the later literature. He suggested, for instance, as a confirmation of his own position, that the presentation of God in the *Prima* and the *Secunda* as efficient and final cause corresponds far better to the distinction between *esse* and *operari* than to an emanation and return.³² This foreshadowed Lafont's own suggestion and, as we have seen, does not really speak to the problem created by Chenu's approach to the *Summa*.

Hayen also raised the issue of the relative silence of Thomas, even in the tractate on grace, about Christ, and for that matter the Spirit. One can note that Thomas is not completely

³¹ *La vie*, pp. 85-86: "Nous appelons connaissance abstraite la connaissance de ce qui est vrai indépendamment de nous et que nous n'avons pas encore fait nôtre par le consentement de notre liberté—ici de ce qui nous reste inaccessible à cause des limites de notre nature et de la blessure du péché . . . Est concrète, au contraire, la connaissance de la réalité que nous avons faite nôtre par notre libre consentement, ou de ce qui nous permet d'atteindre réellement cette réalité inaccessible aux seules forces de notre nature—c'est-à-dire, ici, la connaissance de *l'unique Médiateur*." Ghislain Lafont would later suggest that the distinction should be read against Hayen's reliance on Maréchal.

³² F. Cayré, A.A., in his article "Saint Augustin et l'esprit de la Somme Théologique," *L'Année Théologique Augustinienne* 14 (1954): 9, seems to split the difference between Chenu and Hayen on this point: "saint Thomas les [faith and reason] associe partout en les situant à la place qui leur revient, en tant qu'être ou fin ou moyen; d'où la division tripartite." The *Prima* studies God Himself and as the source of being and as provident, the *Secunda* follows the movement of the return of spiritual creatures, the *Tertia* concerns Christ and the sacraments as the means for union with God. Hayen's distinction between being and operations will be developed in considerably more detail by Michel Corbin.

silent³³ but the relative silence requires that some account be made. Hayen contents himself with pointing out that a number of these discussions are incomprehensible without some reference to the trinitarian generation of the Word, to the procession of the Spirit in the same Trinity, and to the missions of the divine Persons.³⁴ In a later article he also raised the possibility that Thomas's purpose shifted between the composition of the *Prima* and the rest of the *Summa* and that the prologues need to be used "with prudence."³⁵ Secondly, he noted the uniqueness, compared to earlier works, of the *Secunda*. Humanity is there distinguished from God only to be concretely united to God in the *Tertia*.³⁶

Henri Rondet also reviewed Chenu's *Introduction* at about the same time that Gilson had and was quite critical of Chenu's "characterization of the Incarnation as merely the concrete historical manifestation of an ontological structure otherwise independent of it."³⁷ "Christ is the way [Chenu's view]," he wrote, "but he is also the term; one is not able, without discussion, to oppose the mystery of Christ to the mystery of God; it is in Christ that God reveals Himself to man, everything, in fact, has been created for Christ."³⁸ He thought that the whole structure of science, in Thomas's understanding, would "culminate in the affirmation of one fact: the primacy of Christ in whom, by the divine will, all things find their consistency."³⁹ Theology is indeed about God but God is only revealed to us in salvation history.⁴⁰

One of the most insightful studies of Thomas's three major summas is Michel Corbin's *Le chemin de la théologie chez Thomas d'Aquin*.⁴¹ Corbin looked first at what Thomas says he is doing in each case and then assessed whether he actually followed through with what he claimed to be doing. In the case of the *Summa Theologica* he examined the first question in detail and concluded that the three parts are strictly parallel—God and His works, man and his works, Christ and His works. Christ, the God-man, is composed, a suggestion already made by Hayen some twenty years earlier. That which actualizes the composite is Christ's divinity which is

³³ There is mention, for instance, of our filial adoption in *S.T.* I-II.110.1.corp., of the instrumentality of Christ's humanity in I-II.112.r1, the role of the Holy Spirit as principle cause of grace in the sacraments in I-II.112.r2.

³⁴ "La vie," p. 90.

³⁵ "La structure de la Somme théologique et Jésus," *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 12 (1960): 62. He follows here Dondaine's study on the turning point in Thomas's thought represented by the *De Malo*.

³⁶ "La structure," p. 63-64, 68-69.

³⁷ Muller, "Response," p. 3.

³⁸ "Bulletin de théologie historique: Études médiévales," *Recherches de science religieuse* 38 (1951): 154: "Le Christ est la voie, mais il est aussi le terme; on ne peut, sans explications, opposer le mystère du Christ au mystère de Dieu; c'est dans le Christ que Dieu se révèle à l'homme, pour le Christ que, de fait, tout a été créé."

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155: "Si bien que, finalement, tout l'édifice du savoir, s'il est cohérent avec lui-même, si chaque science particulière n'usurpe pas la place des sciences supérieures, tout cet édifice culminera dans l'affirmation d'un fait: la primauté du Christ en qui, de par la volonté divine, toutes choses trouvent leur consistance: *Christus, in quo omnia constant* (*Col.*, I, 17). Entrer dans ces perspectives ne sera nullement renoncer à la théologie comme science, ce sera seulement reconnaître que la fonction théologique a de multiples aspects."

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁴¹ Michel Corbin, *Le chemin de la théologie chez Thomas d'Aquin*. Bibliothèque Des Archives de Philosophie, Ns, vol. 16 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974).

considered in the *Prima Pars*. That which stands in potency to that divinity is Christ's humanity which is treated in the second half of the *Prima* and all of the *Secunda*. The substantial union of this act and potency is Christ Himself which is explored in the *Tertia*. The *Summa Theologica* in its entirety is simultaneously theocentric and Christocentric. "The subject of *sacra doctrina* is God, not as the philosopher considers Him, i.e. as being qua being, but in His concreteness. God is concretely the Trinity; God is concretely Jesus Christ. It is this twin affirmation that is necessary for salvation and Thomas demands that even those who precede Christ must believe explicitly in the Incarnation if they were to be saved."⁴²

With this basic orienting perspective in view let us look again at the *Summa Theologica*. The following comments will of necessity have to be abbreviated given the constraints of time.

In his prologue Thomas informs the reader that he will be presenting his material in the "order of the subject-matter." What this means concretely, among other things, is that Thomas will proceed from the simple to the complex, to the extent possible. One ought not, certainly for "beginners," talk of compound objects before one has discussed the elements that make up the compound object. Christ is a compound reality. Before talking about Christ, therefore, Thomas will first talk about those realities that make up the Christ, first the divinity, then the humanity.

Thomas sets out his understanding of *sacra doctrina* in the first question of the *Prima Pars*. He contrasts *sacra doctrina* to philosophy and defends the need for a separate discipline both because there are some things that cannot be known through philosophy which are needful for salvation and because even those things that could be known through philosophy are often obscured either because of the limitedness of the intellect of the less educated and the tendency toward imperfection even among the learned. For these reasons divine revelation is necessary. This is a key point and it will be necessary to keep track of what Thomas means by divine revelation. The second thing to note is that Thomas is claiming to be expounding *sacra doctrina*, not philosophy, and he is making this claim prior to those questions which are usually understood to be merely philosophy, i.e., the proofs for God's existence.

It is useful at this point to skip ahead and look at those proofs since they serve to underline the point being made here. In most discussions of these proofs the tendency is to jump immediately to the philosophical "meat" of the argument. At this point, however, we need to make note of the overall structure of Thomas's argument throughout the *Summa Theologica*. At the beginning of the article various objections from varying viewpoints are presented. These are followed by some authoritative statement that serves to cut through the objections and provide a basic orientation to the investigation of the matter. That investigation is then set out in the body of the article and responses are formulated for each of the earlier objections. Relatively rarely are the authoritative statements drawn from a philosopher and then for clearly more philosophical points of discussion. Most often they are drawn from Scripture; a little less often

⁴² Muller, "Response," p. 4.

from the Fathers of the Church. In short, they are drawn from divine revelation or from the tradition that has handed that revelation on. How do we know that the existence of God is not self-evident? Because Scripture tells us that there are fools who do not believe in God. How do we know that a philosophical demonstration for the existence of God is even possible? Because Scripture, in the person of the apostle Paul, has all but told us that such a demonstration is possible. Does God exist? Scripture, in the person of God, declares “I am Who am.” At every step of the way Thomas is casting the light of divine revelation on the philosophical enterprise. He is engaged in *sacra doctrina*, not, as such, philosophy, though, in the light of revelation, he is more than willing to take up the tools of philosophy to aid him in his exposition.

On a first reading what emerges is that divine revelation is, for Thomas, predominantly Sacred Scripture. On a second reading more is going on. This becomes evident article ten of the first question. Sacred Scripture, particularly in its spiritual senses, finds its integration in Christ.

For as the Apostle says (Heb. x. 1) the Old Law is a figure of the New Law, and Dionysius says (*Cael. Hier. i*) *the New Law itself is a figure of future glory*. Again, in the New Law, whatever our Head has done is a type of what we ought to do. Therefore, so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are types of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. But so far as they signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the anagogical sense. Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Writ is God, Who by one act comprehends all things by His intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says (*Confess. xii*), if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses (*ST I.1.10.corp.*).⁴³

One needs to keep in mind here that the Son is preeminently the Word of God and that in comprehending all things “by His intellect” God is comprehending all things by His Word. Divine revelation is God’s self-communication. That self-communication is preeminently about Christ and through Christ, as Richard Nicholas writes in a recent Marquette University dissertation comparing the theological methodologies of Donald Keefe and Thomas Aquinas—“On account of the Incarnation, there is a change that occurs on the side of creation. This change is the realization that while sacred doctrine is centered on God, it is centered on Him through and in Jesus Christ. Christ is the means by which humanity comes to know God and learns those things that are necessary for salvation.”⁴⁴

Let us look at a single issue. In question twelve of the *Prima Pars* Thomas asks how God is known by us. Up until this point Thomas has been proceeding primarily by the *via*

⁴³ The translations are those of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

⁴⁴ Richard Nicholas, *The Eucharist as the Center of Theology: A Comparative Study*, a 2002 Marquette University dissertation, p. 170.

negativa, setting out what God is not. If anything positive is to be said of God, however, then Thomas must face the question of whether a created intellect can see the essence of God because only this can ground a positive knowledge of God. But this vision of the essence of God is the beatific vision which cannot be seen by natural powers. A created light is required. Thomas writes:

I answer that, Everything which is raised up to what exceeds its nature, must be prepared by some disposition above its nature; as, for example, if air is to receive the form of fire, it must be prepared by some disposition for such a form. But when any created intellect sees the essence of God, the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect. Hence it is necessary that some supernatural disposition should be added to the intellect in order that it may be raised up to such a great and sublime height. Now since the natural power of the created intellect does not avail to enable it to see the essence of God, as was shown in the preceding article, it is necessary that the power of understanding should be added by divine grace. Now this increase of the intellectual powers is called the illumination of the intellect, as we also call the intelligible object itself by the name of light of illumination. . . . By this light the blessed are made *deiform*—that is, like to God (*ST I.12.5.corp.*).

The third objection is of interest. Since anything created “can be natural to some creature” it would follow that “that creature would not need any other light to see God; which is impossible” and so not every creature needs such a super added light. Thomas replies that “The disposition to the form of fire can be natural only to the subject of that form. Hence the light of glory cannot be natural to a creature unless the creature has a divine nature; which is impossible. But by this light the rational creature is made *deiform*, as is said in this article.” This is complemented by article eleven which asks whether anyone in this life can see the essence of God. Thomas answers that “God cannot be seen in His essence by a mere human being, except he be separated from this mortal life.”⁴⁵ The reason is that our soul in this life “has its being in corporeal matter” (*ST I.12.11.corp.*). Thomas is studiously avoiding direct references to Christ but he has seeded his discussion with Christological references. A “mere human being” cannot see the divine essence in this life; but Christ is not a “mere human being.” This created light is natural only to a creature who has a divine nature; but Christ has a divine nature. Christ, even in this life, had the beatific vision (*ST III.9.2*).

There is more than this. Thomas writes:

Now man is in potentiality to the knowledge of the blessed, which consists in the vision of God; and is ordained to it as to an end; since the rational creature is

⁴⁵ Thomas makes an exception to this rule in the case of Paul in *ST II-II.175.3*. This was by way of transitory passion rather than abiding form which makes it akin to prophecy. Cf. *ST II-II.171.2*. Cf. also Nicholas.

capable of that blessed knowledge, inasmuch as he is made in the image of God. Now men are brought to this end of beatitude by the humanity of Christ (*ST* III.9.2.corp.).

Now that is an amazing statement. If divine revelation is grounded ultimately in the beatific vision, and Thomas is reasonably clear about this—in *ST* III.171.2 he writes that “since then prophecy pertains to a knowledge that surpasses natural reason, as stated above, it follows that prophecy requires an intellectual light surpassing the light of natural reason” and this is compared to Paul’s transitory vision of the divine essence in *ST* III.175.3.r.o.2. “by way of a transitory passion, as stated above of the light of prophecy . . . Consequently this rapture pertains somewhat to prophecy”—if, as I said, divine revelation is grounded in the beatific vision and that vision is available to men “by the humanity of Christ” it follows that *sacra doctrina* is possible only because of the humanity of Christ. The *Summa Theologica* as conceived by Thomas is possible only on the basis of the humanity of Christ.

Thomas cannot really say this at the beginning since he has set himself the task of treating topics in the order of the discipline and before he can treat of Christ he must first treat of divinity and of humanity. This order, of course, is not really possible since Christ, and the revelation mediated by him, must be presumed from the very beginning of the project.

We must rapidly run through several other points since time is pressing. The tractate on the Trinity is, as it were, interrupted after the article on the missions of the divine Persons. There is a simple reason for this. Those missions make no sense apart from the world of humans to which the Son and the Spirit are sent. The mission of the Spirit is described in the second part of the *Summa*, the mission of the Son in the *Tertia*. Why, given the fact that the Spirit is given by Christ (*ST* I.43.8.corp. and III.57.2.r.o.3), is the mission of the Spirit treated before the mission of Christ? There are two reasons for this. First, the Spirit is not a compound reality while Christ is. Thomas consistently treats the simple before the compound. The second reason has to do with the sort of humanity that Christ assumed. That humanity is endowed with the Spirit. This provides an important clue as to how the tractates on man in the *Summa* should be understood.

The order of creation in the *Summa Theologica* is not a Neoplatonic order. There are fundamentally three ways of setting out a Neoplatonic order: one can begin at the top of the system and work down—the first topic would be God, the last would be prime matter; one can begin at the bottom of the system and work up in which case the order of the topics would be reversed; one can begin in the middle and work out to either extreme—this is the order one finds in Plotinus’s first tractate in the first Ennead which is a rather late lecture summarizing his system. None of these orders are found in the *Summa Theologica*. There God is treated first (I.44-45) and then general topics related to God’s creative activity (I.46). This is followed by the distinction of things in general (I.47) and then the distinction of things in particular with special reference to evil (I.48-49). Pure spirits, the angels, are then discussed (I.50-64) and then corporeal creature are treated in general (I.65) and then in particular beginning with formless matter (I.66) and proceeding to the things created during the seven days of creation (I.67-74).

The focus then turns to man. The first topic treated is the human soul (I.75-90) and then the human body (I.91-92). This is followed by a discussion of various aspects of man's original state (I.93-102). What one observes consistently is, on the one hand, a passage from the general to the particular and, on the other, a treatment of that which is in act to that which is in potency—first pure spirits, then pure matter; first the soul, then the body; first the individual components, spirit and body, then the union of those components. If one takes this as providing the overall structure of the *Summa Theologica* then it follows that, in its totality, the *Summa* is about Christ. That which is act in him is treated first, his divinity; that which is potency in him is treated second, his humanity; then the union of divinity and humanity in the Christ is treated. This cannot be stressed enough. *The humanity treated in the second half of the Prima and in the Secunda is no pure nature humanity. It is humanity as it as been assumed by Christ—created good, fallen, and redeemed.* There is no pure nature humanity in the *Summa Theologica*. Most Thomists are wrong in insisting that there is one. Keefe is correct in rejecting the conceptuality of a pure nature humanity; he could (but does not) cite Thomas in this matter against the Thomists. All one has to do to verify this is to note how many topics covered in the *Secunda* make absolutely no sense apart from this presupposition: the theological virtues (I-II.62); the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit where Christ is explicitly mentioned (I-II.68-70); the Law of the Gospel called the New Law (I-II.106-8); grace (I-II.109-114) where Thomas all but explicitly states that grace is mediated through the humanity of Christ (I-II.112.r.o.1-2);⁴⁶ and finally things pertaining to the episcopal state (II-II.185). The examples can be multiplied many times over. Keefe, in note 26, writes that “there are instances in the later part of the SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, in which he [Thomas] recognized the ontological primacy of Christ to creation—an insight that seems never to have entered into his theological synthesis, and one that plays no part in the Thomism of the schools.” He is certainly correct in his assessment of much of past and contemporary Thomism. It is my contention that he is very wrong about Thomas himself. The reference to the union of the man and woman in Gen. 2:24 as applying to Christ via Eph. 5:32 is not an incongruous exception to Thomas's overall procedure in the *Summa Theologica*. The humanity that Thomas is talking about is *humanity as seen in the light of divine revelation which is centered in Christ*. He is engaged in *sacra doctrina*, not philosophy. The humanity of the *Summa* is *humanity as assumed by Christ*. Thomas does not speak of any other humanity.

Having said this I think in the last analysis Keefe is correct. Thomas may well have configured his *Summa Theologica* according to an Christological act-potency schema as I have argued; it remains true that this act-potency understanding of the Christ remains somewhat isolated from the rest of his Aristotelian based system. How is this relationship between this divinity that is act in Christ and humanity that is potency in Christ to be understood? Is the divinity an “accident” of the human substance (even if this is understood as not being a proper accident)? This seems inappropriate on the face of it; it is certainly more inappropriately said of

⁴⁶ “Hence Christ's humanity does not cause grace by its own power”—but, apparently, it does cause grace—“but by virtue of the Divine Nature joined to it, whereby the actions of Christ's humanity are saving actions.” “As in the person of Christ the humanity causes our salvation by grace . . .”

the divine nature as such than it is said of created grace. Is the divinity the “form” of the Christological substance, that which actualizes Jesus as the Christ? Thomas does describe the divine essence as being the form of the intellect in the beatific vision (*ST I.12.5.corp.*). It is not clear that this will work in the case of Christ himself since the Christ is also *actually* human. Is the divinity the *esse* of the human *essentia* of Christ. This has as much to say for it as the move by some Thomists to describe grace as existential rather than accidental. It also has all of the problems of such a solution. In point of fact, Thomas does not examine this question *at all!* All we are given is the structure of the *Summa* which sets Christ’s divinity as act with regard to the potency of his humanity. There is no explanation or exploration of this move.

Far more problematic is the question that Keefe has raised with regard to the issue of contingency, necessity, and freedom. Clearly, however the act-potency relationship between Christ’s divinity and humanity is to be understood, that relation must be understood to be a relation in freedom rather than a merely contingent relationship and certainly rather than any necessitarian relationship. Thomas has proposed a correlation that breaks out of the Aristotelian categories altogether and that is inadequately handled by his own *esse-essentia* adaptation of Aristotelianism. And he has seemingly not noticed that he has done this. One could point to his treatment of the Eucharist as well, where the accidents persist even though there is no substance in which they inhere (*ST III.77.1*). It is certainly true that this is by a miracle of God but it is also true that “accident” here takes on a meaning that has no meaning within the Aristotelian framework. The only meaning that accidents have in that conceptuality is inherence in substance. And this Thomas has flatly denied. Whatever else can be said of these accidents it is clear that we are no longer operating in the context of an Aristotelian metaphysics. Thomas does not reflect on this.

What I find stimulating about Keefe’s thought, whatever is finally said of his more thorough adaptation of the Aristotelian framework as evidenced in his redefinition of the form-matter, accident-substance, existence-essence categories in a Christological direction,⁴⁷ is that he is one of the very few theologians alive who is asking the relevant questions. And with that I must end these remarks.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Covenantal Theology: The Eucharistic Order of History*, 2 vol. in 1 (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1991, 1996), ch. 5: “The Thomist Covenantal Theology.”