

On the Need to Focus on a Catholic Theologate

OCTOBER 24, 2024 BY [DAVID FRANCIS SHERWOOD](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



At the *Catholic World Report* in May and June of 2023, there was an exciting exchange between Drs. Larry Chapp, Matthew Miner, and Richard DeClue. ¹ They discussed the need for an alliance of sorts between the “Neo-Scholastic” and “Communio” schools of theologians — alongside all orthodox Catholic thinkers and theological-philosophical academic schools — due to the ongoing cultural and religious progressivism across the globe and in the Catholic Church. They did this while also considering the history between these two academic schools over the last century. During that history, the academic debates and contests between these schools and their diverse parts became famous and even public, though their disagreements were not carried out by each adherent in the popular public sphere — such as on social media. This history of disagreement pales in comparison, however, to the present need for all orthodox theologians and philosophers (and all the Faithful) to acknowledge that their siblings in the orthodox faith are not the enemy. Heretical and heterodox theologies and philosophies are the enemy of orthodox teaching. Dr. DeClue puts it well in his contribution “Making Common Cause”:

In truth, *Communio* and Thomist theologians and philosophers alike — despite past animosities — have common enemies today: progressives and radical traditionalists. Thomists and *Communio* theologians are both committed to orthodoxy and lament the ways the Church’s teaching is being distorted by both of those other camps. It is imperative that they join forces against such falsifications of the faith.

In comparison to this contemporary issue, the truly academic differences between various stripes of scholastics and different “Communio” thinkers — important as they have been and remain — are not more important than the common stream of the Church’s tradition *that all must do their best to hand on to new generations of the Faithful*. I primarily speak here of the Catholic Church’s dogmas and doctrines, the truths of the faith which are necessary for salvation. Based on their writings, I wonder about a related question directed at professional theologians, clerics, teachers, and everyone else who has entered more extensively into theology, notably, “Why publicize professional inter-school fighting between Thomism, Communio, etc.?”

The value of theological-philosophical schools — Thomism, Communio, Scotism, etc. — in and of themselves as separately identified schools seems more limited in the contemporary world. These theological-philosophical schools are, at their core, the group identifications of a collection of private individuals who happen to agree on a certain set of conclusions, principles, and methods — perhaps in discipleship to a certain historical figure or figures. The same could be said of various academic journals or blogs which have similar focuses in their research and teaching. These group identifications do not need to have *social force or cohesion* any stronger than the will of a few people to work together in certain ways, to publish in certain academic journals, or to go to certain conference; maybe focused on a Scholastic topic, the writings of Card. Henri de Lubac, S.J., or on continuing lines of inquiry raised by the late Pope Benedict XVI. Thus, the school identification, in itself, is rather limited as a contemporary force. This is especially true insofar as these academic schools have no true inherent being or force as if they were real canonical requirements or as if they had any quasi-legislative enforcement. There was a time in the Middle Ages and even down to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when this was not the case. Now, however, it seems that many only speak of these schools for an ease of personal identification, general categorization, and debate — despite the example of the Church’s repeated elevation of St. Thomas Aquinas and recommendation of discipleship to him. ²

As there is no societal force to these groups and no actual power embodying one or the other, it seems odd to publicize any inherent conflict between these schools in and of themselves. Is a Thomist not allowed to read any of Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s writings with approbation? Or cite the work of Fr. Jean Daniélou approvingly? To whom must a Thomist go to for permission to read and be pleased with a work from Fr. Francisco Suarez? Are thinkers who identify themselves with the “Communio School” allowed to read the Thomas De Vio (Cardinal Cajetan) of the “Thomistic Commentatorial School” or to agree with anything that Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange wrote? It is true that certain speculative principles or conclusions held by these thinkers are incompatible with

each other. However, such incompatibility in certain principles and conclusions does not mean that there is some organism of “Communio” in the world which is at odds with its counterpart in Neo-Scholasticism where no man may cross between them.

This is especially true when, as pointed out by Dr. Minerd in his article “Catholic Theology Yesterday and Today,” there are distinct realms of theology where real continuity exists between the “old” schools, like the Thomists, and the “new” Communio school. Admitting such continuity and common cause for the orthodox faith does not mean that

[T]he “old” should replace the “new” but, rather, that if faithful Catholics were to take seriously people coming from different theological traditions — Thomists (even quite strict ones like myself) not presenting themselves as sole alternatives to the current malaise, and Communio theologians not presenting themselves as unqualified victors at the Council — we would find that contemporary theology would be all the richer.

While accepting this cooperation that Dr. Minerd speaks of, it remains true that these theological-philosophical schools each claim to identify the authors, methodologies, and speculative principles that rightly express the truth of God and His creation. When I say that combating heresy and heterodoxy is more important than the disagreements of these schools, I do not claim to say that truth is not real, that it is not truly knowable, or, again, that defending the absolute truth is unimportant. Indeed, such truth-claims by these schools are more important than their own self-identity as groups. Yet because these truth-claims and the identities of academic schools overlap, to identify with one of them for clear professional or educational reasons is a reasonable judgment for those who are versed in these claims and who use care to pass on the truth. Therefore, for these different schools to debate in academic settings, or in similarly structured and informed contexts, remains a good and useful activity. These actions serve the truths discussed or debated within these schools.

For one school to be set up against another school, however, where each claims *inherent contemporary social or public authority* as a group-identity seems to approach real division in the Church by turning to an “us versus them” mentality and slowly moving away from the work of investigating the truth or teaching the truth. This danger is especially real in an informal public forum, like social media, informal blogs, newspapers, etc. where many common members of the faithful will not understand the principles, methods, and conclusions well enough to enter a debate about truth between these schools and instead will primarily see division. Perhaps not everyone has experienced such interactions, but many others may have, as well.

When a priest, theologian, or anyone else is writing for the general public, it is fine to follow the methods and principles of St. Thomas Aquinas, of Cardinal Ratzinger, or of Blessed John Duns Scotus (or as a member of any other school). But it is a different thing altogether to publicize controversy and division between the academic schools when heresy and heterodoxy — cultural and religious progressivism being special examples of, at least, this heterodoxy — are already confusing and dividing people. Therefore, I restate my question. Why should these theological-philosophical schools — and a large amount of debates between them — be publicized for all to see and be confused about when the public work of orthodox Catholic learning and education should be to combat the *present* extremes of heresy and heterodoxy that have become so common? Would it not be better for them, rather, to teach the orthodox Faith, including proofs of how contemporary heretical ideas or common heterodoxies are to be combated?

The important theological and philosophical divides between schools, alluded to above, are *academic* debates — a matter of theological and philosophical sciences and contemplation — not a matter of current canonical standing in the Church or of the Faith. That the Catholic must hold to the teachings of the Church as handed down through history as they were revealed by God is an imperative with social force (or, at least, this is supposed to be an imperative within the Church). The Church’s teachings belong to all the Faithful. This kind of “imperative” is not applied to the Church’s academic schools. Care should be taken to prevent elevating these schools to a similar level of ecclesial-social importance which could easily set up a sect against another sect among the faithful. To be clear, the truths of the Faith — both in and of itself and insofar as they are truly explicated in theology — belong to the Church and the faithful. The former truths of the Faith in and of itself must never be denied, as by heretics, or compromised on, as by heterodox authors or speakers. Debates or controversies about the latter — the truths of the Faith insofar as they are explicated in theology — are extremely important for the sake of the Church and are carried out by those qualified to serve the Church by *charitably* entering into this scientific work and these corresponding debates. Inter-fighting between different “schools” of theologians who strive to work on this explication, however, should strive to not bleed over into the common life of the Church and, instead, the public face of the whole theologate should strive to protect the faithful from heresies and heterodoxies running rampant in the world! Recall the words of then-Cardinal Ratzinger:

The highest ranking good, for which the Church bears responsibility, is the faith of the simple. Reverence for this faith must also be the inner criterion of all theological teaching as well. Whoever does not pursue purely private research, but teaches in the name of the Church, must be cognizant of this. ³

Here, I would add that Catholics who publicly teach have an analogous duty to those who teach under mandate from the Church. They must, therefore, take care to not increase unnecessary controversy — for example, the controversies over finer points of theology and philosophy between academic schools — especially when turning to informal forums of writing. This is not to say that some external authority should regulate theological discussion, professional and popular, but theologians and philosophers should regulate themselves in prudence and humility. Further, the faithful who read these same discussions should act in similar prudence and avoid the ill version of curiosity. “Seek not what is too difficult for you, nor investigate what is beyond your power” (Sirach 3:21 RSV-CE). In different ways this particular difficulty affects everyone, though it is perhaps a particular concern of theologians and philosophers!

Perhaps Drs. Chapp's, Miner's, and DeClue's eminent discussion is, also, a reason to ask why we theologians do not instead publicize our *cooperation* as orthodox Catholic theologians — i.e., that we do not need to *publicize* ourselves in the Church or online, on Facebook and X, as "Thomist," "Communio," or any other school divided from another. And orthodox theologians of these various schools do not need to *publicly* fight amongst ourselves. Thus, the *public face* of the orthodox theologate would resist heresy, heterodoxy, and all lack of charity. Here, Catholic theology would be united against all flux of debate within itself and would better resist the flux of debate with novel errors, as found in current forms of liberalism and progressivism as Dr. Chapp spoke of in his article "Progressive Revolution's Continued Control" — which began the series in the *Catholic World Report* — will prove to be true. "[A] Church in a constant state of flux and suspension, a Church that is an endlessly open debating society, will eventually define itself into irrelevance." The teaching of the Church's dogmas and doctrines, inclusive of how contemporary errors fail in comparison to them, would be the best popular work of the Catholic Theologate. The properly academic differences between Thomism, Communio, and other schools can, then, be left to their own spheres.

1. See, in order of publication, Larry Chapp, "The Progressive Revolution's Continued Control of the Ecclesial Narrative," *The Catholic World Report*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2023/05/18/the-progressive-revolutions-continued-control-of-the-ecclesial-narrative/>; Matthew Miner, "Catholic Theology Yesterday and Today: A Thomist's Response to Dr. Larry Chapp," *The Catholic World Report*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2023/05/25/catholic-theology-yesterday-and-today-a-thomists-response-to-dr-larry-chapp/>; Larry Chapp, "Catholic Alliances Today and Tomorrow: A Response to Dr. Matthew Miner," *The Catholic World Report*, May 30, 2023, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2023/05/30/catholic-alliances-today-and-tomorrow-a-response-to-dr-matthew-miner/>; Richard DeClue, "Making Common Cause: A Contribution to the Chapp-Miner Dialogue," *The Catholic World Report*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2023/06/05/making-common-cause-a-contribution-to-the-chapp-miner-dialogue/>.
2. As far as current canonical force to Thomism, there is only a loose recommendation of St. Thomas in seminary formation in the *Code of Canon Law* (CIC 252 §3) and in the "Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties: *Veritatis Gaudium*," though here St. Thomas is only spoken of relative to Philosophy (Norm 64 § 1). Pope Saint Pius X's 1914 *motu proprio*, *Doctoris Angelici*, and the 24 Thomistic Theses of *Postquam Sanctissimus* which he also approved are powerful examples of the Church's demand that the philosophy of Thomism be taught and accepted. These documents were never repealed, though the force of their demands have not been repeated in the *Code of Canon Law* and *Veritatis Gaudium*. Moreover, the magisterial authority and timelessness of these documents is disputed. For example, was *Doctoris Angelici* promulgated more insofar as Pius X was the Vicar of Christ speaking to the Catholic Church in its entirety, or as the Latin Patriarch only speaking to the theologians and philosophers of the Latin Catholic Church, or as the Primate of Italy — since the *motu proprio* was addressed to Italy and the few islands within its sphere. Examples such as these discussion-points come and go depending on the disputants and cannot be answered here. All told, however, there does not seem to be sufficient authoritative force to canon law to necessitate Thomism with social prejudice to any other Scholastic group or the "Communio" school. For a contemporary example of an argument for the particular authority of Saint Thomas but admitting that Thomism is not canonically enforced with prejudice to other theological-philosophical schools, see Jörgen Vijgen, "The Contemporary Authority of St. Thomas Aquinas: A Reply to Otto-Herman Pesch," *Divinitas* 49 (2006): 3–26.
3. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Spiritual Basis and Ecclesial Identity of Theology," essay, in *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding Its Role in the Light of Present Controversy*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), 68.

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