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## SCHOLASTICISM AND THOMISM<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Originally a video presentation to IVE members in the Province of the Immaculate Conception, April 2020.



THE TOPIC I WOULD LIKE TO PRESENT is “Scholasticism and Thomism” as found in Chapter 7 of Fabro’s *Brief Introduction to Thomism*.<sup>2</sup> My presentation, as both a summary and a partial commentary on some aspects of this work, may be helpful as we wait for the English translation of Fabro’s book.

The title of this chapter says exactly what Fr. Fabro wants to do. He wants to relate Scholasticism and Aquinas in two senses: 1) from a historical point of view, so that we may understand the origins, context and later fortune of the doctrine of St. Thomas, and 2) from a doctrinal point of view (which is the most important) so that we may clearly distinguish St. Thomas’ doctrine from the rest of Scholasticism. This is very important because some people have tried to understand the Church’s invitation—or, rather, instruction—to study St. Thomas as simply a broad invitation to study Scholastic philosophy and theology. This is clearly not the case. The Church wants us to study the principles of Thomistic doctrine which, many times, are substantially different from other scholastic doctrines.<sup>3</sup>

Our presentation will be divided into two main parts, the first is a general introduction to Scholasticism and the second, a historical part divided in turn into three: 1) Medieval Scholasticism, 2) the “second” Scholasticism, that is to say the centuries of Cajetan and the Jesuits and, finally, 3) very briefly, regarding the sources of Neo-Scholasticism, before the *Aeterni Patris*.

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<sup>2</sup> Cornelio Fabro, *Breve introduzione al Tomismo*, ed. Marcelo Lattanzio, Opere complete 16 (Segni: EDIVI, 2007), 84-108.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, September 8, 1907, 45; Paul VI, *Lumen Ecclesiae*, November 20, 1974, 1-3, 26-27; St. Paul VI, *Apostolic Code of Canon Law* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 252, par. 3; John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, September 14, 1998, 57 and 61. We thank Fr. Pablo Bonello, IVE, for the precise references.

## I. INTRODUCTION TO SCHOLASTICISM

### 1. Notion of Scholasticism

In a wide sense, Scholasticism indicates Medieval philosophy but, in a more precise sense, it refers to that doctrinal movement which claims a systematic conception of the world and human being in agreement with revelation and faith. *Chronologically*, Scholasticism extends from the end of the Patristic Period to the beginning of the Renaissance, if we want to oppose Scholasticism to the modern era. With regards to the *content*, Scholasticism is the victorious affirmation of Christianity in human culture. The universities promoted by the Church explore all of the branches of human science, and the complex structure of knowing is organized with due regard to the transcendent conception of truth and life, preparing human beings to penetrate and develop theological truth.

Classical thought, developed outside the faith, was a prisoner of human reason's immanence. The Patristic Period, for its part, intended to preserve dogma, in its integrity, from the attacks of heresies. Scholasticism represents, as it were, a positive reconciliation of classical reason and dogma. Medieval culture is particularly characterized by this harmony between nature and grace, between reason and faith.

I would like to put it this way: Revelation has put human beings in a different situation. Revelation has not supplanted the natural approach of human beings to reality, but human reality *in fact* is no longer the same once God has intervened in history. Creation has not changed, but God has entered creation; he has spoken to human beings and has changed radically the meaning of human existence. Medieval culture is keenly aware that we cannot abstract from Revelation in our approach to reality precisely because Revelation has entered our reality. There is certainly an autonomy of the natural but not a contradiction nor an opposition to the supernatural.

As Fabro indicates, to welcome this harmony between faith

and reason and to try to explain it is the basic characteristic of Scholasticism. *Reason can help faith* insofar as it can prepare the ascent of human beings to the object of faith and clarify the meaning of the terms of that same object. *Faith, in turn, helps reason* in the most difficult moments, filling in the blanks, explaining its requirements, satisfying the longings which reason cannot actuate. Scholasticism is, in this sense, the most accomplished form of Christian wisdom.

## 2. Division and Characteristics

According to Fr. Fabro, Medieval Scholasticism can be divided into three. First, the *preparation*, from the seventh to twelfth centuries; second the *High Scholasticism*, with the great systems of the thirteenth century and, finally, the *decadence* during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Afterwards, we have the two comebacks of Scholasticism, first during the Baroque Period (especially in Italy and Spain) and, second, towards the end of the nineteenth century after Leo XIII and his *Aeterni Patris*.

Even if the term Scholasticism seems to be so broad, it nevertheless indicates the decisive period of maturity of Christian consciousness. Fr. Fabro makes an interesting point regarding the possibility of speaking of a Jewish Scholasticism and even an Arabic Scholasticism, but still, he says, it seems legitimate to restrict it to Christian Scholasticism.

The concept of Scholasticism, even if it has a prevailing historical cultural meaning, refers in the end to a doctrinal centre (the harmony between reason and faith) which governs Scholasticism and serves precisely as criterion for the differentiation of the periods and of the schools.

Because of this, it can be said that Scholasticism contains, as it were, three moments which correspond to the nature of philosophy, of theology and of the relationship between philosophy and theology, between faith and reason. 1) First, the philosophical moment is characterized by the *scientific rigor* in



the ordering of the various fields and objects of the knowable, in the determination of the proper method of each science and in the adequate systemization of the knowledge thus obtained. The critical point here has been the discovery of Aristotle with the assumption of his doctrines in logic, physics, metaphysics and morals. 2) Second, theology, as a consequence, tends gradually to present itself in a scientific form by means of the use of syllogisms and the division of the subjects into parts, questions, and articles. 3) The third moment is the reconciliation in man of reason and faith achieved by Scholasticism, an encounter which has led to the doctrinal expansion of both theology and philosophy.

Both from the viewpoint of the method and of the result, Scholasticism achieves a complete cycle of development that the Patristic (which did not imply a systematic conception either from the philosophical or theological points of view) could not have. Abelard, St. Anselm, Hugh of St. Victor already in the eleventh and twelfth centuries know the mastery of the use of reason in theology, a mastery which the thirteenth century will carry to perfection.

In modern thought, however, reason absorbs theology and revelation. On the one hand, modern thought has a direct relationship with Scholasticism and with Christian thought in general, insofar as it conceives the relationship between God and human being in a positive way. On the other hand, modern thought is the explicit antithesis of Scholastic thought in its fundamental principles because of the *dissolution of the infinite* in the finite, as if nature and history were the self-realization and development of the Absolute Spirit itself. This dissolution of the infinite in the finite implies the negation of the transcendental realm of faith. For Scholasticism, reason leads to faith as a preparation whereas, for the idealistic rationalism of modern philosophy, faith is simply an imperfect and preliminary stage of the absolute development of reason.

## II. HISTORY

### 1. Medieval Scholasticism

The quick development and uncontested dominion of Scholasticism in Medieval Europe, has also been allegedly the cause of its main defects, made more evident since the fourteenth century. For example, the multiplication of useless and tasteless questions, the invasion of logical subtleties in metaphysical reflection, the lack of historical critical sense in the use of texts, etc..

Nevertheless, Scholasticism in its most important figures must be acknowledged as one of the most consistent historical actuations of the universality of Christian truth, and constitutes a valid point of reference for any research regarding the fundamental problem of human existence, which is precisely the agreement between faith and reason.

#### a. First Scholasticism (V-VI century to XIII century)

The relevant masters at this time are the great St. Augustine of course, pseudo-Dionysius and Boethius as ecclesiastical sources; and some Platonic dialogues, the Aristotelian *Organon* commented on by Boethius and others as philosophical sources. As may be seen, this first Scholasticism is strongly Platonic or neo-Platonic.

This is also the time of certain doctrinal errors or heresies. Scotus Eriugena is accused of pantheistic monism and other things; Berengar of Tours incurs errors regarding the doctrine of Transubstantiation, etc..

The most relevant figure of this era is St. Anselm of Aosta: he is the first systematic theologian in that he moves from Scriptural and Magisterial data to theological reflection and contemplation according to the motto, "I believe in order to understand."

In the twelfth century, schools of grammar and logic flour-

ish. The arts develop and the famous school of Chartres emerges with many important figures: Gilbert de la Porrée, among others, with the controversy of the universals. It is also the time of Peter Abelard and of the Parisian monastery of St. Victor with the first treatises of systematic theology and mystics (Richard and Hugh of St. Victor).

### **b. High Scholasticism (XIII century)**

In the thirteenth century, the synthesis of reason and faith achieves its complete and definitive form in Christian thought. The first half of the century is characterized by the entrance, in the West, of Latin translations of Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Averroes, Avicbron (Ibn Gabirol) and, above all, of Aristotle's natural philosophy and metaphysical writings.

The entrance of Aristotle has produced the most important revolution of Christian thought in the West, especially thanks to Aquinas' work, but the beginnings were very tumultuous. I cannot dwell on the history, but Aristotle went from being forbidden under excommunication (1210) to being forbidden without mention of excommunication (1215) and, later, to being examined by a theological commission instituted by the Pope (1231) with unknown results. Aristotle was, by then, studied and commented on everywhere. Basically, the ecclesiastical prohibitions ceased and lost their value by desuetude: the reason for which those laws were established and the situation referred to by the law had ceased.

The main schools in this period can be grouped into two: Augustinism (or Augustinianism) and Aristotelianism. Augustinism includes those more fearful of any novelty and Aristotelians those more welcoming of Aristotle and assuming him into the Christian worldview.

**Augustinism:** regarding this school, St. Augustine is certainly the main master but not the exclusive source (keep in mind that St. Augustine is the common source of all other masters in this period, but his doctrine is incorporated into differ-

ing types of metaphysics.) The metaphysics of the Augustinians comes from a Neo-Platonic exaggerated realism related to Avicbron. Some of the most important Augustinians are Alexander of Hales and St. Bonaventure. Some of the Augustinian doctrines which differ from Aquinas' doctrines are the following: the gnoseological doctrine of illumination, the anthropological doctrine of the identity between soul and faculties of the soul, the doctrine of the seminal reasons, the doctrine of the plurality of forms in human being and, finally, the universal hylomorphism. Duns Scotus, born 1266, could be ascribed to this Augustinian school.

**Thomistic Aristotelianism:** the success of Aristotle in the West is mainly due to St. Albert the Great's authority and St. Thomas' insight in the interpretation of Aristotle. Aquinas discovers without uncertainties the genuine Aristotelian principles and adopts them confidently in Philosophy and Theology. However, to say that St. Thomas has opted for Aristotle against Plato is to forget that Aquinas' notion of participation, which is Platonic in its origin, is key to the Thomistic solution of fundamental problems, and that Aquinas' doctrine is therefore an original synthesis.

**Averroistic Aristotelianism:** Averroes, "the Commentator" (of Aristotle), had certainly as his main concern absolute fidelity to the Aristotelian text. This concern passed into a group of courageous professors in the Paris Faculty of Arts who, with the excuse of interpreting Aristotle, raised serious concerns for Catholic orthodoxy. They were known as "Averroists" and their relative success was due greatly to the leadership of a strong thinker, Siger of Brabant (1240-1284). St. Thomas did not hesitate in calling Averroes the corruptor rather than the commentator of Aristotle (despite obvious agreements with him in certain matters). Averroism's culminating episode was the repeated condemnation of several of its principles in 1277 by the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier.

**c. The Decline or Last Scholasticism (XIV-XV centuries)**

To speak about decline does not mean that Scholastic Philosophy is not prevalent during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The term “decline” is rather related to the anti-Thomist polemic mainly led by the secular masters such as Henry of Gand, but especially by the Franciscan order in which the old Augustinian school declines and the new school arises with Duns Scotus. Scotus follows the steps of the aforementioned Henry. According to Fabro, the reason for this wide opposition to Thomism must be found in the innovative nature of Aquinas’ doctrines, which left scholars feeling obligated to return to the substance of the traditional positions.

The term “decline” applies also to Nominalism with the same reservations, that is to say regarding the abandonment of the Thomistic synthesis of reason and faith, of physics and metaphysics ...to the advantage of the prevalence of subjectivity and “intuitive experience” regarding both the knowledge of the natural and of the supernatural. In particular, we could mention not only William of Ockham but many theologians and philosophers, among them Peter of Ally and Niccoló of Ultricuria, who deny the demonstrative value of the principle of causality.

Nominalism penetrated almost everywhere even among religious orders. There was in these centuries in the Church a large measure of freedom regarding doctrinal approaches: in the great universities there was besides the Chair (*cathedra*) of St. Thomas, and with the same rights, the Chair of Scotus, Gregory of Rimini, Durando, etc.. Thomism as such never had the advantage over the other schools.

There are, however, two beneficial consequences of this decline, particularly because of Nominalism’s search for concreteness. One of them was the fostering of scientific research. There were great developments in this field, even if we cannot

say that they had any direct influence on the new physics of the sixteenth century. In any case, the achievements were remarkable: without doubt, those results which discredited Aristotelian physics gave rise to the restlessness which put the science of the modern age on its new path.

The other beneficial consequence of this late Scholasticism was the exceptional development of Mysticism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially in the Netherlands and in Germany. This development is caused by the tiredness of the exasperating dialectic discussions among the various schools, producing rivalries and divisions even in Christianity's external life. The *Imitation of Christ* is a fruit of this era. Dominican Mysticism is developed particularly in Germany with Meister Eckhart and others, but let me make a clarification about Meister Eckhart which might be beneficial to those who hear about him in their own field of study. The name, Meister Eckhart, comes up very often but his name is many times abused. Fabro says first of all that the polemic arisen around Eckhart refers not so much to his theological writings as to his preaching: that is why he ended up at the ecclesiastical tribunal by which he was later condemned with a bull in March 27, 1329. But the problem regarding the orthodoxy of Eckhart, for Fabro, is far from being resolved. It is not possible, as Denifle wants, to reduce Eckhart's thought to "pure Thomism", because Thomism at that time had already so many nuances; but it is also anachronistic and exaggerated to try to make of Eckhart the founder of modern pantheism, whatever Hegel may say (Hegel cannot be presented as an authority in this regard). Even if someone showed that there is a continuity of motives in German spirituality from Eckhart to the heterodox mysticism of Franck, Weigel, and Böhme and through them to the idealistic pantheism, this at the most would suggest an atmosphere of vague spiritual affinity and does not prove the rigorous derivation of the doctrines.

## **2. The Second Scholasticism (XVI to XVII centuries)**

The Renaissance does not do away with Scholasticism but Scholasticism is rather limited and restricted for the most part to the ecclesiastical schools. During the period of the decline, the crumbling of Scholasticism arrived at a true chaos. Such crumbling is certainly related to the fight against Thomism. The most characteristic theses of Thomism were the first to be abandoned: the moderate realism in the question of the universals with the doctrine of the agent intellect and abstraction, the concept of potency, the distinction between essence and act of being; denied also was the demonstrative value of the proofs of the substantial union between body and soul, of the soul's immortality, and of God's existence, to make of those doctrines the exclusive object of faith (as opposed to objects of demonstration). No internal force could stop the decline. Only with the hurricane of the Reform, admittedly connected with Nominalism, was understood the importance of the unification of the spiritual forces of Christianity. In other words, only the Protestant Reformation convinced Christianity about the importance of the unification of its spiritual forces. This "renaissance" of Scholasticism is mainly due to the guiding position of Thomistic thought in Catholic schools. The main cause of this "renaissance" of Thomistic thought was the Dominican order; but we must also remember the initial doctrinal approach of the Jesuits, the Society of Jesus (then founded to fight heresy). These are the two centres of the new Christian springtime whose fruits will mature with the Council of Trent (1545-63).

### **a. Dominican School**

After a period of uncertainties in the fourteenth century, the doctrinal synthesis of Aquinas is affirmed in the Dominican order with greater adherence to its original inspiration. We have in the first half of the fifteenth century John (or Jean) Capreolus, who knows almost all the writings of Aquinas and

maintains a firm polemic against the legion of adversaries of Thomism.

The great revival of Thomism has two centres of expansion: Italy and Spain. The greatest Italian Thomists are Cardinal Cajetan (Thomas Cajetan or Thomas de Vio, 1469-1534), Francis Sylvester of Ferrara, called Ferrariensis (1474-1528), and others. In Spain, at the University of Salamanca we have among others Vitoria, Domingo de Soto, Bañez, John of St. Thomas and Melchor Cano. Also in Spain a particular mention goes to the Carmelite Order who in the sixteenth century adopted an integral Thomism.

### **b. Jesuit School**

If the Dominicans in this period researched the Thomistic doctrines in their complex synthesis, the masters of the Society of Jesus were the main cause of the spreading of Scholasticism in the most important European universities of the sixteenth century. St. Ignatius had understood the importance of Aquinas' doctrine against the error of the Reform and asked explicitly that the doctrines of St. Thomas be followed. But later a broader concept of "Thomism" snuck in which resulted in doctrines that were far from St. Thomas. The greatest name in this period is certainly Francis Suarez but many others could be mentioned. The Jesuit approach could be referred to as "Moderate Thomism," but it is not difficult to see how in the key points of theory of knowledge, metaphysics, and psychology these Jesuit Masters abandon St. Thomas to adhere to positions of Aquinas' adversaries from Augustinism, Scotism, or Nominalism. In this way even if we cannot deny in Suarez a great respect for St. Thomas, it is clear that his disagreement with Thomistic metaphysics is profound.

Fabro makes also an interesting reference to Protestant Scholasticism which, due to lack of space, I will have to omit. And he concludes that section with the following statement: "A methodical study of modern philosophy would show how it



is often inspired and stimulated in various ways by topics and ideas deriving from Scholasticism's main directions but, particularly, its directions of Nominalism and Mysticism."

### 3. Neo-Scholasticism

From the end of the eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century, the Catholic schools did not follow a precise doctrinal direction. This uncertainty led to the ecclesiastical condemnation of a continuous series of theological and philosophical errors by Gregory XVI and Pius IX.

Fabro underlines in this section that even if the official beginning of Neo-Scholasticism is with Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, this "renaissance" is the result of multiple and strenuous previous efforts.

Fabro stresses two important instances that regarding the historical sources of the Neo-scholastic movement. The first is located in Piacenza in the middle of the eighteenth century, although the main figures are somehow posterior: Vincenzo Buzzetti (1777-1824) and Angelo Testa (1788-1873). In this city at the Alberoni College, directed by the Priests of the Mission, these two great scholars studied and later taught. From them we have received the "Philosophical Institutions," two volumes presenting us with the Thomism of Buzzetti elaborated by Testa. In these "Institutions" we are offered a Thomism which is recognized as too mature to be considered incipient, and which must derive from that philosophical movement which the Priests of the Mission had initiated in Piacenza with the opening of the Alberoni College. The originality of this work lies in its particular speculative vigor in metaphysical problems, as can be seen for example in the explicit defense of the real distinction between essence and being by means of the notion of participation.

But, for Fabro, the prince of this Thomistic "renaissance" is without doubt the Neapolitan Canon Gaetano Sanseverino. He projects a complete plan: a Thomistic academy at the Uni-

versity of Naples, the publication of the disputations of the academy and of original studies in the magazine "Science and Faith" (which he founded in 1840) and the foundation of the "Catholic Library," a collection of modern works. Most of all, Sanseverino gathered around himself a great group of courageous young people to help him in this daring enterprise. The principal fruit of this incomparable architect was the *Christian Philosophy Compared with Both the Ancient and the New* of which seven thick volumes were issued (beginning in 1852), only half of the envisioned complete work. This work, the fruit of twenty years of untiring preparation, cannot compare with the production of Buzzetti, because of the clarity and depth of the discussion, the historical information, both for antiquity and for the Christian Scholasticism and also the information regarding modern philosophy itself, with its wealth of references in the modern original languages. The work of Sanseverino was praised by the Jesuit M. Liberatore as the "triumph of Scholasticism's cause." Fabro notes that Scholasticism inspired by a good Thomism is defended in various cities by several professors in this second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in Perugia by G. Pecci (brother of Leo XIII).

### CONCLUSION

I think it is clear that Scholasticism and Thomism do not mean the same thing. Abandoning St. Thomas' doctrine has meant, for the Church, losing the possibility of finding the harmony between faith and reason, between philosophy and theology, between the *real* truth of reason and the *real* truth of faith. The popes have always been divinely inspired to instruct the Church about studying St. Thomas. The holy doctors of the Church have followed wholeheartedly and with conviction this instruction, but human pride and the devil's deceptions have often made us lose the way to finding the real Thomas. God has granted us to meet in person the "Dumb Ox," St. Thomas, and this Dumb Ox wants to cry out his findings to the world. We

are today his only voice. We, and all those who go directly to St. Thomas, have the mission of enlightening again the mind of the Bride of Christ and giving her once again the joy of encountering and embracing the Truth which is Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word.

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