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**RETHINKING THE CIRCULARITY**  
**BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON**

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### Abstract

In this article, I focus on the circular relationship that, in his 1998 encyclical, Jean Paul II argued there is between faith and reason. I first note that this image of circularity needs some explaining, because it is not clear where exactly the process begins and ends. I then argue that an explanation can be found in Aquinas' reflection on the gift of understanding. Aquinas referred to the virtue of faith as caused by God, which promotes human reason, and this in turn strengthens the certainty of faith.

### Introduction

At the heart of the Encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998) is a *distinction without separation* between faith and reason: "Each contains the other, and each has its own scope for action" (Jean Paul II 1998, 17). Saying that "each contains the other" means that neither of them reaches fullness without the other. This is echoed in the use of the Augustinian expressions "*credo ut intellegam*" and "*intellego ut credam*", which respectively title two of the seven chapters into which the encyclical is divided. One can therefore conclude that the image of "circularity" between faith and reason is at the center of the magisterial document.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I intend to explore how exactly this image of circularity should be taken. It is clear that, for John Paul II, it should be taken in the sense of a distinction without separation and of mutual support. It is not equally clear, however,

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<sup>1</sup> On closer inspection, the word "circularity" is used only twice (see Jean Paul II 1998, 73), and only with regard to the relationship between philosophy and theology; this, however, does not prevent us from employing it with regard to faith and reason.

where this process begins, and exactly what steps it is made of.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it cannot be said that such a circular process paves the way for gaining access to God, as the Encyclical clearly suggests.

In order to investigate how exactly the process in question takes place, I will first refer to a well-known theory of the relationship between faith and reason, the one proposed by J. Maritain. This theory is widely known and is adopted by the very *Fides et ratio* (at least in regard to some topics) as well as by some of the most recent reflections on the subject (I will limit myself to mentioning J. Wippel and R. McInerney). It aims at explaining how faith can influence reason without compromising reason's autonomy. This kind of relationship between faith and reason is a synonym of circularity. On the one hand, in fact, faith influences reason; on the other, reason is able to support faith to the extent that reason's autonomy is preserved. The relationship at stake, however, can plausibly be accepted only if a distinction between faith and reason, such as the one elaborated and argued by Thomas Aquinas, is previously adopted. According to this distinction, in fact, the activity of reason is caused by humans, whereas the cause of faith is God.<sup>3</sup> And only if faith it is due to God, its influence on reason without limiting reason's autonomy can plausibly be accepted. That is why, in the second part of this essay, I will focus on Aquinas's view of faith, to which Maritain constantly referred.<sup>4</sup> Once Aquinas has preserved the abovementioned distinction between faith and reason, he can make it clear how the circular process between them unfolds and whether or not ends up in access to God.

### **A widespread conception of the relationship between faith and reason**

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<sup>2</sup> If someone objects that, literally taken, circularity does not indicate any process, we should answer that this literal reading is manifestly denied by the encyclical. In fact, believing to understand and understanding to believe are employed to maintain that the believer who reasons should think more acutely and believe more firmly. Furthermore, the word in question is explicitly used to mean a motion (“*circularis processio*” and “*circularis motus*”).

<sup>3</sup> From the fact that God is the cause of faith does not follow that God is the *only* cause. According to Aquinas, God is the “chief and proper cause of faith” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 6 a. 1 ad1. The Latin text of Aquinas's works, when not otherwise indicated, is that of the Leonine Edition [Rome 1888-1948]). This means that there is no faith if God does not cause it to be, which does not exclude that the faithful are, in a different way, cause of faith, as Aquinas's definition of faith allows for understanding (see below, note 18).

<sup>4</sup> In the footsteps of Aquinas, I take here *reason* as a cognitive faculty that seeks *evidence*, and *faith* as the experience which leads the person who lives it to firmly believe the revealed truths though they lack the evidence mentioned above. In regard to the concept of evidence, let me point out that, in accordance with a position that other medieval thinkers shared at least until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas used the concept of “*evidential*” by analogy to mean that which “marks the domain both of certainty and of *scientia*” (Pasnau 2017, 189). Aquinas made use of a number of expressions among which “*visus*”, “*apparens*”, “*manifestus*”, “*per se notum*”, and “*cognitus*”. He rarely employed “*evidential*” and its corresponding adjective “*evidens*”. However, his intended meaning was always “those things...which, of themselves, move the intellect or the senses to *knowledge* of them” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 1, a. 4, emphasis added).

The conception of the relationship between faith and reason on which I intend to focus was elaborated by J. Maritain in the context of the so-called *querelle* on Christian philosophy.

This *querelle* took place in the 1930s, and its protagonists were mostly philosophers and historians of French-language philosophy (see Sadler 2011). It concerned only one aspect of the circularity here under consideration, that is, if faith could exert a constructive influence on reason without limiting reason's autonomy, or, to put it another way, if it could give rise to a Christian philosophy and not just theology. However, the other aspect of circularity was also involved. The persuasion defended by one of the main protagonists of the *querelle*, E. Gilson, was that, under the influence of faith, reason could achieve unexpected success, also in regard to how to support the truth of Christian revelation—first of all the conception of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*<sup>5</sup>. (The phrase ‘truths of Christian revelation’ is employed here as a synonym for ‘Christian beliefs’ as well as ‘revealed truths’, ‘truths of faith’ and ‘the object of faith’, namely, all of the statements that the faithful are expected to assume to be true and revealed by God.)

Consequently, although the *querelle* concerned mainly the possibility for reason to maintain its autonomy even if influenced by faith, this ended up including the possibility for reason, once enlightened by revelation, to make faith more certain.

Gilson's position was an interpretation of how faith, theology and philosophical reflection had related to each other in the course of history, especially the medieval one. Although with some difference, Maritain supported such a position by offering a more specifically theoretical perspective. In his opinion, we must distinguish “between the order of specification and the order of exercise” (Maritain 1955, 11), namely, the distinction “between the *nature* of philosophy, of what philosophy is in itself, and the *state* in which it is found factually, historically, in the human subject”.<sup>6</sup> In other words, philosophy is to be conceived of as follows: on the one hand, “considered in its pure *nature*, or essence”, philosophy “depends only on the evidence and criteria of natural reason”; on the other hand, “taken concretely, in the sense of being a *habitus*”, philosophy “is in a certain *state*”, which can be Christian or a-Christian and “has a decisive influence on the way it [philosophy] exists and develops” (Maritain 1944, 78).

Maritain's proposal for the harmonization of faith with reason, as I have already said, exerted considerable influence. Some elements of it are included in the

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<sup>5</sup> It may be said that the *querelle* was entirely devoted to the concept of “Christian philosophy”, which had been proposed especially by Gilson in the early 1920s (see for example Gilson 1924)). He explored the thought of several representatives of the history of Christianity—especially Augustine, Bonaventure, and Aquinas. His conclusion was that they had given rise to authentic philosophies, and not only theologies, as in Gilson's time was usually maintained (especially E. Bréhier, a known historian of philosophy, who took part in the 1931 meeting with which the *querelle* started, opposed Gilson's view that philosophy had achieved new heights precisely because it had been exercised under Christian influences). Among Gilson's works, see especially Gilson 1936 as well as an essay, which stands for clarity and synthesis, that Gilson wrote more than twenty years later: Gilson 1957.

<sup>6</sup> *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, 31 (1931) no. 2, 59. See also Maritain 1955, 11f.

very Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. This can easily be seen when, in regard to the concept of Christian philosophy, John Paul II mentions its *subjective aspect*, that is, the "purification of reason by faith", which takes place in the condition of the individual believer, and the *objective aspect*, i.e., "the intellectual contents", which derive from divine revelation and open new ways to philosophical reflection. It can also be seen when the Pope claims that it is "the reality of sin, just as it appears in the light of faith" that "helps to philosophically appropriately set the problem of evil" (Jean Paul II 1998, 76), which corresponds to Maritain's view of "moral philosophy adequately considered".<sup>7</sup> In regard to the influence Maritain's view was able to exert over philosophical reflection, let me mention only two examples. First, J. Wippel, who, while reflecting on the concept of Christian philosophy, offers a version that is partly different but fundamentally coinciding with that of Maritain. In Wippel's opinion, we need to distinguish the *moment of discovery* from the *moment of proof*: "In the moment of proof his [the Christian's] procedure cannot be described as Christian philosophy"; by contrast, "since in the moment of discovery it was his religious belief that first suggested this particular issue to him as a possible subject for philosophical investigation, one might refer to such a procedure as Christian philosophy in the order of discovery" (Wippel 1984, 280). Thus the *moment of discovery*, constituted by traditions, cultures, opinions and personal preferences of the philosopher who happens to be a believer, does not coincide with philosophy. In it, some persuasions, including the religious ones, can suggest ways to philosophical exploration, which otherwise may never emerge. By contrast, the moment of proof coincides with the rigor of the arguments, that is, the nature of philosophy, which is equal for all, believers and non-believers. An analogous revival of Maritain's distinction can be found in the work of another philosopher of our time, the late R. McInerny. In one of his last publications, while referring to Gilson, he wrote that the French historian of philosophy "has persuaded everyone of the historical fact of the influence of faith on philosophy". But this "is far from suggesting that there is a continuous, formal and objective dependence of philosophy on faith" (McInerny 2006, 106).

Let us focus now on Maritain's distinction between the nature of philosophy and the state in which the philosopher finds himself. This distinction is rooted in a classical conception of philosophy as a critical and systematic assessment of the traditions, cultural productions and personal beliefs with which the philosopher happens to get into contact. Philosophy is seen as the criterion employed to distinguish the true from the false and consequently to accept, amend or reject what emerges from the abovementioned traditions, cultures and personal beliefs.

This, however, applies to all possible convictions except those of faith, which, for a believer like Maritain, cannot be rejected by philosophy. For him, "faith guides and orientates philosophy, *veluti stella rectrix*, without thereby violating its autonomy" (Maritain 1955, 29).

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Maritain's conception of moral philosophy, see Maritain 1955, 38-49, 61-100; Maritain 1944, 137-214.

Maritain's theory of nature and state of philosophy, therefore, applies only in part to faith. It emphasizes the autonomy of reason with respect to any subjective state, including that of faith. Nevertheless, it still remains to be explained why faith, unlike other states, can influence reason without compromising reason's autonomy.

An explanation could be offered by Aquinas's thesis that faith is more certain than reason. In Aquinas's opinion, faith is caused by God, who can neither err nor deceive, whereas rational activity is the work of humans, and is therefore susceptible of error.<sup>8</sup>

On the basis of this distinction, one can argue that faith is *orientation* and *criterion* of rational activity. Let us first focus on why faith is orientation. For Aquinas, the believer, being certain of the truths of faith, desires to confirm them also from a rational viewpoint (see Di Ceglie 2016, 144). He supports this view while treating the arguments "consequent to the will of the believer". He wonders whether the arguments in support of faith diminish the merit of those who believe. In answering, he distinguishes two types of arguments: those "preceding the act of the will; as, for instance, when a man either has not the will, or not a prompt will, to believe, unless he be moved by human reasons; and in this way human reason diminishes the merit of faith"; and those that are "consequent to the will of the believer. For when a man's will is ready to believe, he loves the truth he believes, he thinks out and takes to heart whatever reasons he can find in support thereof; and in this way human reason does not exclude the merit of faith but is a sign of greater merit".<sup>9</sup> Obviously, the second type of argument must be that which Thomas approves of and puts into practice, since, for him, faith is not caused by arguments. As a consequence, arguing, as in the first case, in order to decide whether or not to believe is a possibility that Thomas rejects from the outset. Faith then appears to be a criterion of rational activity, in the sense that the conclusions of reason must be rejected if they are not consistent with the truths of faith, and reason must start anew its reflection from the beginning. This is also confirmed by a well-known passage in which Aquinas argues that, if reason comes to conclusions conflicting with faith, it is certainly mistaken:

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<sup>8</sup> See Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 4, a. 8. Aquinas is well aware of the distinction between faith and reason, and the difference between the kinds of certainty that characterize them. For him, "on the part of its cause ... faith is more certain than those three virtues, because it is founded on the Divine truth ... on the part of the subject ... faith is less certain, because matters of faith are above the human intellect". Aquinas's conclusion, however, is that, "since, however, a thing is judged simply with regard to its cause, but relatively, with respect to a disposition on the part of the subject, it follows that faith is more certain simply".

<sup>9</sup> "Ratio humana inducta ad ea quae sunt fidei dupliciter potest se habere ad voluntatem credentis. Uno quidem modo, sicut praecedens, puta cum quis aut non haberet voluntatem, aut non haberet promptam voluntatem ad credendum, nisi ratio humana induceretur. Et sic ratio humana inducta diminuit meritum fidei [...]. Alio modo ratio humana potest se habere ad voluntatem credentis consequenter. Cum enim homo habet promptam voluntatem ad credendum, *diligit veritatem creditam*, et super ea excogitat et amplectitur si quas rationes ad hoc invenire potest. Et quantum ad hoc ratio humana non excludit meritum fidei, sed est signum maioris meriti" (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 2, a. 10).

If anything is found in the teachings of the philosophers contrary to faith, this error does not properly belong to philosophy, but is due to an abuse of philosophy owing to the insufficiency of reason. Therefore also it is possible from the principles of philosophy to refute an error of this kind, either by showing it to be altogether impossible, or not to be necessary<sup>10</sup>.

Thomas is so sure of the truths of faith that, for him, any rational conclusion that apparently proves to deny them, must be considered false.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, it is the distinction between, on the one hand, faith as caused by God and, on the other hand, reason as caused by humans that can offer an answer to the question posed by Maritain, that is, whether or not faith, while influencing reason, deprives reason of its autonomy. In fact if faith is caused by God, it is not impossible for it to be capable of this.<sup>12</sup> In the same vein, the distinction at issue could provide an answer to the question I have posed in these pages, i.e., where to start in the synergistic process that unites faith and reason. In fact, if faith is caused by God, it is plausible that the process in question begins from faith. But how exactly should this be understood? Can Aquinas's reflection provide us with a sufficiently precise assessment of the synergistic process in question? This is that which I intend to clarify in the course of the next section.

Before proceeding, however, let me consider an objection, which one may address to what I have said so far. One may argue that Maritain's position *as a believer* should not be taken into consideration. Philosophical reflection, in fact, only concerns the outcome of the arguments, as well as their use based exclusively on evidence and demonstration. The French philosopher, as a believer, may believe that

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<sup>10</sup> “Si quid [...] in dictis philosophorum invenitur contrarium fidei, hoc non est philosophia, sed magis philosophiae abusus ex defectu rationis. Et ideo possibile est ex principiis philosophiae huiusmodi errorem refellere vel ostendendo omnino esse impossibile vel ostendendo non esse necessarium” (Aquinas 1946, q. 2, a. 3).

<sup>11</sup> It is true that, as Jean Paul II appropriately points out, this confidence that a certain thesis is true does not characterize only the faithful. As a matter of fact, “this is what normally happens in scientific research. When scientists, following their intuition, set out in search of the logical and verifiable explanation of a phenomenon, they are confident from the first that they will find an answer, and they do not give up in the face of setbacks. They do not judge their original intuition useless simply because they have not reached their goal; rightly enough they will say that they have not yet found a satisfactory answer” (Jean Paul II 1998, 29). For the believer, however, the starting point of his or her reflection should be the *firmness* concerning what s/he believes. The hypothesis that, even remotely, his or her pre-philosophical position can be proven false, should not be part of his or her view, and this, in light of Aquinas's doctrine of faith, seems to be valid only for the faithful. For them, in fact, faith, and the corresponding firmness, comes from God, and is, therefore, stronger than any human conviction. In this connection, see the abovementioned reflection (see above, note 9) on the need that the arguments in support of faith be sought by the believer not to *achieve* the certainty of faith but to *confirm* it.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas employs the expression “non-impossible” to show how the truths of faith, except the preambles, can be rationally understood. For him, arguments in support of such truths “are persuasive arguments showing that what is proposed to our faith is not impossible” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 1, a. 5 ad3).

faith can guide reason without limiting reason's autonomy, but this should remain a matter of faith and shouldn't have anything to do with our reflection.

I have already implicitly answered this objection by noting that, if the cause of faith is considered to be God, this does exert an influence on philosophical debates. For a philosopher who happens to be a believer, the truths of faith, at least the crucial and fundamental ones like the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity or the existence of God, seem to be *a priori* undeniable and not susceptible of being rejected as false or contradictory by philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the attitude of a philosopher who is also a believer must be different from that of a philosopher who does not believe. Once confronted with opposing arguments, the former, unlike the latter, will continue believing that faith is true and will start his or her philosophical reflection anew from the beginning. (I have already argued that this is a position typically held by Aquinas when I have shown that faith can play the role of a criterion of philosophical activity. See note 10.)

### **Promoting a convincing circularity between faith and reason**

Focusing on Aquinas's work, to whom Maritain constantly made reference, may help respond to the question where exactly the circularity here under consideration starts and whether or not it allows for gaining access to God.<sup>14</sup>

While treating the gifts of the Holy Spirit—more precisely, the gift of understanding<sup>15</sup>—Aquinas considers the thesis whether faith, among the fruits, responds to the gift of understanding. This thesis seems to contradict Aquinas's doctrine of the gifts of the Spirit, according to which these gifts presuppose the theological virtues, including faith. Thus, if faith precedes the various gifts, including that of understanding, it cannot at the same time follow them. Let us consider how the question is proposed to Aquinas: "Understanding is the fruit of faith, since it is written: 'If you will not believe you shall not understand,' ... Therefore faith is not the fruit of understanding". Thomas's response, as often occurs, shows that the thesis proposed is partly acceptable. In this case, he agrees that faith precedes the gift of understanding; at the same time, he notices that "faith" may have more than one meaning, and, therefore, may also follow the gifts in question: "Understanding is the

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<sup>13</sup> From this does not follow that, for Aquinas, the faithful cannot be wrong. He is well aware that they may mistake their own conjectures for the Christian revelation. According to him, "it is possible for a believer to have a false opinion *through a human conjecture*, but it is quite impossible for a false opinion to be *the outcome of faith*" (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3, emphasis added).

<sup>14</sup> This should be no surprise, given the fact that Aquinas's reflection can appropriately be seen as "the dominant Western tradition of thought on the subject", susceptible of being "accepted today by many both Catholic and Protestant Christians, as well as by the agnostic and atheist critics of Christianity" (Hick 2009, 12). More recently, G. Dawes claimed that "few Christians will have read Aquinas, but since his view is widely shared by theologians they may have absorbed it "by osmosis"" (Dawes 2015, 80).

<sup>15</sup> This is included in Aquinas's Treatise on faith (Aquinas 1920, II-II, qq. 1-16). See also Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 8.

fruit of faith, taken as a virtue. But we are not taking faith in this sense here, but for a kind of certitude of faith, to which man attains by the gift of understanding”.<sup>16</sup>

In this passage, Aquinas argues that faith, taken as a theological virtue, which is a gift of God, precedes the gift of understanding, which is the work of human beings and is made more acute by divine grace. The gift of understanding, in turn, strengthens the certainty of faith. Consequently, the circular process should not be understood as an eternal return. It does not literally respond to the image of circularity, because faith taken as having a certain meaning is followed by the gift of understanding, which is in turn followed by faith taken as having another meaning.

Answering some objections can now help me to make indispensable clarification about what I have just argued.<sup>17</sup>

A first objection is that, on closer inspection, the poles of the circularity between faith and reason are now three and not two, since in the abovementioned passage faith has two meanings. In response, it must be said that the meanings in question are different aspects of the same definition of faith. For Thomas, faith is a theological virtue that consists in the willingness to firmly believe God’s revelation, which corresponds to the first meaning ascribed to faith in the passage under consideration. It is also a complex of revealed truths, about which the believer can be certain or uncertain, which corresponds to the second meaning faith has in that passage. To put it otherwise: on the one hand, by faith we mean the adhesion of the person to Christ, motivated mainly by the love for God in which, by divine grace, the Christian participates; on the other hand, by faith we mean the noetic content, i.e., the adhesion to Christ implies *beliefs* around his person and his message. According to Aquinas, faith is “an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine Truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God”.<sup>18</sup> Faith consists not only of the work of the intellect and will, but also the intervention specifically granted and the support gratuitously offered by God. This resembles another of Aquinas’s tripartitions, on the basis of which faith means “believing in a God” (*credere Deum*), “believing God” (*credere Deo*), and “believing in God” (*credere in Deum*).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “Intellectus est fructus fidei quae est virtus. Sic autem non accipitur fides cum dicitur fructus, sed pro quadam certitudine fidei, ad quam homo pervenit per donum intellectus” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 8, a. 8, ad1).

<sup>17</sup> This appears to be necessary especially if we consider that Aquinas’s texts are often susceptible of various and sometimes mutually contrasting interpretations. This is probably due to the fact that, as R. te Velde has noticed, “only superficially is he [Aquinas] clear, but on analysis one discovers that he does not at all offer us a decently confined ‘Anglo-Saxon’ lucidity” (Te Velde 1995, ix-xiv, cited in Milbank and Pickstock 2001, 18). In this regard, a scholar of Aquinas such as F. Kerr has even devoted an entire book to “the very many ways of contemplating Aquinas”, which are “rival, conflicting, even incommensurable” with each other (F. Kerr (ed.) 2003, 40).

<sup>18</sup> “Actus intellectus assentientis veritati divinae ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 2, a. 9).

<sup>19</sup> “The object of faith can be considered in three ways. For, since ‘to believe’ is an act of the intellect, is so far as the will moves it to assent, as stated above, the object of faith can be considered either on the part of the intellect, or on the part of the will that moves the intellect. If it be considered on the part of the intellect, then two things can be observed in the object of faith.



From this tripartition follows that faith is not limited to human activity. In the case of faith, the object (*credere Deum*) is also the source of knowledge; it is so *exterius* because “those things which are of faith surpass human reason. Hence, they do not come to man’s knowledge unless God reveals them” (*credere Deo*). *A fortiori*, it is so *interius* because “since man, by assenting to matters of faith, is raised above his nature, this must needs accrue to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God”.<sup>20</sup> That God is also the source of faith can be viewed as an aspect of *credere in Deum*. God is the good, by definition, since he is the end of all things. At the same time he is the principle of everything. Thus, the faithful tend to God because of what he has revealed (*exterius*), and love him thanks to the work he does in their interiority (*interius*) to move them to assent. From the disposition to believe in God (*credere in Deum*), which is the virtue that Aquinas identifies with the starting point of the circular process under consideration, follows a refinement of the intellectual capacities that leads to consolidating the certainty with which the believer gives the assent to revelation (*credere Deo* and *credere Deum*).

A second objection regards the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It may be argued that they concern only supernatural truths, which natural reason is unable to attain. For Thomas, in fact,

the natural light of our understanding is of finite power; wherefore it can reach to a certain fixed point. Consequently man needs a supernatural light in order to penetrate further still so as to know what it cannot know by its natural light: and this supernatural light which is bestowed on man is called the gift of understanding.<sup>21</sup>

It follows that truths such as the preambles of faith, which are customarily taken into consideration in debates on faith and reason, should be excluded from the present reflection. Making reference to the gifts of the Holy Spirit would therefore help enlighten only part of the reflection on faith and reason.

An effective answer may be offered by reflecting on how, for Aquinas, the revealed truths can be known. Let us consider that which he says while wondering

...One of these is the material object of faith, and in this way an act of faith is ‘to believe in a God; because, as stated above nothing is proposed to our belief, except in as much as it is referred to God. the other is the formal aspect of the object, for it is the medium on account of which we assent to such and such a point of faith; and thus an act of faith is ‘to believe God’, since, as stated above the formal object of faith is the First Truth, to Which man gives his adhesion, so as to assent to its sake to whatever he believes. If the object of faith be considered in so far as the intellect is moved by the will, an act of faith is ‘to believe in God’. For the First Truth is referred to the will, through having the aspect of an end.” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 2, a. 2).

<sup>20</sup> “Ea enim quae sunt fidei excedunt rationem humanam: unde non cadunt in contemplatione hominis nisi Deo revelante. ... Quia cum homo, assentiendo his quae sunt fidei, elevetur supra naturam suam, oportet quod hoc insit ei ex supernaturali principio interius movente, quod est Deus” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 6, a. 1).

<sup>21</sup> “Lumen autem naturale nostri intellectus est finitae virtutis, unde usque ad determinatum aliquid pertingere potest. Indiget igitur homo supernaturali lumine ut ulterius penetret ad cognoscendum quaedam quae per lumen naturale cognoscere non valet. Et illud lumen supernaturale homini datum vocatur donum intellectus” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 8, a. 1).

whether or not the truths of faith can be the object of science (see Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 1, a. 5). Someone points out that what is unknown is ignored, and that ignoring the revealed truths is incompatible with faith. As a result, the faithful know the truths in question. The answer of Thomas, as usual, implies a fine distinction, and completes rather than simply rejecting the opposing argument. He claims that

unbelievers are in ignorance of things that are of faith, for neither do they see or know them in themselves, nor do they know them to be credible. The faithful, on the other hand, know them, not as by demonstration, but by the light of faith (*per lumen fidei*) which makes them see that they ought to believe them, as stated above<sup>22</sup>.

That said, “seeing that something ought to be believed” means to know the truths in question only *in a certain sense*. One knows that they should be believed, which means that they are to be *believed* because they are not *known*. This distinction between knowing, on the one hand, and knowing that something is to be believed, on the other hand, can be clarified by having recourse to another distinction, that between the *object* and the *signs* of faith. Aquinas mentions this distinction while reflecting on the thesis that believing and seeing coincide. For him,

those things which come under faith can be considered in two ways. First, in particular; and thus they cannot be seen and believed at the same time, as shown above. Secondly, in general, that is, under the common aspect of credibility; and in this way they are seen by the believer. For he would not believe unless, on the evidence of signs, or of something similar, he saw that they ought to be believed.<sup>23</sup>

In short, while in regard to the object of faith there is no evidence, and consequently we either see or believe—*tertium non datur*—things are different in regard to the reasons for which we believe. Thomas argues that what we see is that there are things—the object of faith—that are to be believed, in that there are reasons for believing. These reasons, so Aquinas says, are evident, which is why he employs the word “sight”.<sup>24</sup> If they can be seen, this is due to the fact that they can be attained by way of natural reason. In conclusion, the phrase “knowing supernatural truths” stands

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<sup>22</sup> “Infideles eorum quae sunt fidei ignorantiam habent, quia nec vident aut sciunt ea in seipsis, nec cognoscunt ea esse credibilia. Sed per hunc modum fideles habent eorum notitiam, non quasi demonstrative, sed in quantum per lumen fidei videntur esse credenda” (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 1, a. 5, ad 1).

<sup>23</sup> “Ad secundum dicendum quod ea quae subsunt fidei dupliciter considerari possunt. Uno modo, in speciali, et sic non possunt esse simul visa et credita, sicut dictum est. Alio modo, in generali, scilicet sub communi ratione credibilis. Et sic sunt visa ab eo qui credit, non enim crederet nisi videret ea esse credenda, vel propter evidentiam signorum vel propter aliquid huiusmodi” (Aquinas 1920, II-II q. 1 a. 4, ad 2).

<sup>24</sup> Not everyone, however, is able to grasp this evidence. While speaking of the causes of faith (see Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 6 a.1), he says that the main cause is God, whereas the arguments (the *signs*) are secondary causes, since believers and non-believers as well see them, yet some believe and others do not.

for the attainment of those truths, which are attainable by reason, and constitute a sign of the truths that, since they are supernatural, can only be believed. As a consequence, if Thomas in the passage in question treats the supernatural truths, this involves the knowledge of the natural ones. The passage in question, therefore, does apply to the reflection on faith and reason, which also concerns the truths that natural reason is able to achieve.

A third objection underlines the fact that in this section I have shifted my attention from “reason” to “understanding”. As a result, I have reflected on the relationship between faith and understanding, and have abandoned that between faith and reason, from which my reflection had started. Thomas implicitly offers me an answer to this objection. While reflecting on the thesis that there should be a gift of reason, he argues as follows: “The mode of human nature is to know the truth, not simply (which is a sign of understanding), but discursively (which is a sign of reason ... Therefore the Divine knowledge which is bestowed on man, should be called a gift of reason rather than a gift of understanding”. Thomas says that the understanding is the beginning and end of the discursive activity and that it cannot coincide with the supplement of grace, which would inevitably mean that grace derives from the natural activity of reason:

The discourse of reason always begins from an understanding and ends at an understanding; because we reason by proceeding from certain understood principles, and the discourse of reason is perfected when we come to understand what hitherto we ignored. Hence the act of reasoning proceeds from something previously understood. Now a gift of grace does not proceed from the light of nature, but is added thereto as perfecting it. Wherefore this addition is not called “reason” but “understanding”, since the additional light is in comparison with what we know supernaturally, what the natural light is in regard to those things which we know from the first<sup>25</sup>.

This answer helps me reply to another objection that may be raised. The circularity between faith and reason, which, on the basis of what I have just proposed, is part of Aquinas’s reflection, does not seem to preserve the autonomy of reason and therefore the distinction that I have championed so far. If the faculty of understanding is a gift and presupposes faith, how can we say that it is autonomous? In reply, let me note that, as I have already pointed out while answering the previous objection, Thomas says that the discursive activity is the work of natural reason, which is in no way touched by the influence of faith and the gifts of the Spirit. It is true that, as Thomas maintains, the discursive activity in question arises from the gift of understanding,

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<sup>25</sup> “Ad secundum dicendum quod discursus rationis semper incipit ab intellectu et terminatur ad intellectum [...] Quod ergo ratiocinamur ex aliquo praecedenti intellectu procedit. Donum autem gratiae non procedit ex lumine naturae, sed superadditur ei, quasi perficiens ipsum. Et ideo ista superadditio non dicitur ratio, sed magis intellectus, quia ita se habet lumen superadditum ad ea quae nobis supernaturaliter innotescunt sicut se habet lumen naturale ad ea quae primordialiter cognoscimus” (Aquinas 1920, II-II q. 8 a. 1, ad 2).

and that, if this is due to divine grace, then it would seem that the discursive activity in question also depends on grace. But the discursive activity, beyond the contents from which it starts, must be justified step by step on the basis of the evidence for it. And this—proceeding through evidence—is precisely the rational discourse, which is autonomous from any influence of external authority. Moreover, this autonomy cannot even be understood as mere *solitude*. The faculty of sight allows one to see certain objects, and nevertheless, if there is no sufficient light, it cannot work. Light is necessary, though from this does not follow that sight does not work autonomously, that is, according to its own nature. In the same vein, reason is autonomous to the extent that it works according to its own nature. But from this it does not follow that it must work as if, outside of it, there was nothing. Reason must have received, from someone or something, a structure that allows it to function autonomously, as well as suitable conditions in which such functioning may occur. While referring to the Jewish people, Jean Paul II says: “On the basis of this deeper form of knowledge [the divine revelation], the Chosen People understood that, if reason were to be fully true to itself, then it must respect certain basic rules” (Jean Paul II 1998, 18). Even if we set aside the persuasion that there is a God who created everything, reason would still derive from something else and would therefore act in accordance with a certain nature and its laws. This perspective, according to which the cognitive faculties cannot be considered in isolation, as if they did not derive from anything else or did not coexist with anything else, also belongs to contemporary philosophical reflection. A. Plantinga has successfully developed an epistemological theory based on the conviction that a true belief can also be called knowledge if certain conditions occur, such as the fact that cognitive abilities are not defective and work in appropriate conditions.<sup>26</sup>

Something similar, however, may be said about faith and the impossibility for it to emerge without previous intellectual contents. Faith necessarily presupposes some knowledge, especially the belief that a God may exist, which makes revelation understandable. To put it otherwise, I have to possess beliefs that allow me to get a sense of divine revelation. I wouldn’t even understand that a God is revealing himself to me if I didn’t believe that a God may exist. Obviously, this seems contradicted by the idea of circularity championed here, which starts from faith granted by God.

In reply, I agree that the necessity of such a presupposition is unquestionable. However, it is not part of the circularity between faith and reason here under consideration. In fact, this circularity concerns the possibility for its poles *to perfect each other*. According to Aquinas, the virtue of faith promotes the faculty of understanding, which in turn strengthens the arguments in support of faith. By contrast, the necessary preamble mentioned above only makes faith possible. As Aquinas says in regard to God’s existence, it may be held *with some hesitation*,

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<sup>26</sup> For more on this, see Plantinga 2000.

which does not have anything to do with the perfection that the circularity at issue should allow its pole to achieve.<sup>27</sup>

### Conclusion

In this essay, I have wondered how exactly to understand the process of circularity between faith and reason, which is championed by Jean Paul II in *Fides et ratio*. Such a circular process should provide access to God, since the synergy of faith and reason should aim at strengthening both. However, such access does not seem to be possible if a previous clarification of where the circular process in question begins is offered. I then turned to the well-known and still widespread theory of the relationship between faith and reason that goes back to the reflection of J. Maritain on Christian philosophy. But this theory, which is aimed at understanding how faith can influence reason without compromising reason's autonomy, although acute and apparently convincing, seems explainable only in the light of a distinction between faith and reason elaborated and argued by Aquinas. According to this distinction, the activity of reason is due to humans, whereas the cause of faith is God. Only if faith is due to God, its influence on reason without limiting its autonomy turns out to be *non-impossible*.

I have then turned to Aquinas's thought, based on which the abovementioned distinction between faith and reason is accurately preserved, and to which Maritain constantly referred. From Aquinas's reflection on faith and the gift of understanding, a circularity emerges, whose beginning and end are clearly identified. They are the virtue of faith as caused by God and its human strengthening, which is caused by the gift of understanding. In other words, the circularity in question is not to be understood *literally*, that is to say, their poles do not act on each other endlessly. Rather, it is born of God's grace, it gives fullness to the natural cognitive abilities of man ("grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it"<sup>28</sup>), and achieves a new and

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<sup>27</sup> Aquinas argues that "someone can begin to believe what he did not believe before but which he held *with some hesitation*." (Aquinas 1953, q. 14 a. 9 ad 9). This is consistent with his conviction that humans are by nature able to see "generally and confusedly" that God exists (see Aquinas 1920, I, q. 2, a. 1, ad1). Furthermore, this seems to provide an answer to how for Aquinas faith presupposes the preambles. Some note that, if this presupposition is *by faith*, then it implies a circular argument (see Penelhum 1977, 141). Others note that, if the presupposition at issue occurs by demonstration, then it is openly inconsistent with Aquinas's thought. For J. Wippel, Aquinas "cannot mean that every Christian must first have demonstrated one or more of the preambles, such as the existence of God, before making an act of faith" (Wippel 2012, 199). A more convincing response is therefore the one that, as C. Rosental notices, Aquinas seems to provide when he argues that, in order to believe in God, "one can accept that God exists with some hesitation (*existimatio debilis*)" (see Rosental 2011, p. 229).

<sup>28</sup> "...gratia non tollat naturam sed perficiat..." (Aquinas 1920, I, q. 1, a. 8, ad2).

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higher goal, i.e., a greater certainty of faith, thus guaranteeing a step forward in gaining access to God.

### Notes

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