

St. Thomas Aquinas and the Revision of Catholic Philosophy

*Jovito V. Cariño**

Department of Philosophy, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

Abstract: In one of the key passages of his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, philosopher, pope, and now saint, John Paul II, asserted that: “The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others.” (49). This claim which is at once magisterial as it is radical represents both a departure from and continuity with the Catholic philosophic tradition. In the light of this apparent withholding of a philosophic imprimatur, one is compelled to ask: *What are the prospects now for Catholic philosophy?* This question is framed against the background of, on one hand, the perennial acclaim of St. Thomas Aquinas as the paradigm of Catholic philosophic praxis and, on the other, the crisis of intelligibility characteristic of the contemporary post-modern, post-metaphysical civilization. This two-dimensional philosophic context is addressed by the paper’s title “St. Thomas Aquinas and the Revision of Catholic Philosophy.” Only by confronting this fragmented intellectual milieu, I shall argue in this paper, can one delineate the new directions of Catholic philosophy pointed out by *Fides et Ratio* and, in the same vein, understand why the legacy of St. Thomas Aquinas remains relevant until today.

Keywords: Catholic, philosophy, faith, reason, Thomas Aquinas

*Jovito V. Cariño can be contacted at jvcarino@ust.edu.ph.

Introduction

Two significant events prompted enthusiasts and scholars of medieval philosophy to turn their minds once more to St. Thomas Aquinas and think with him the current tensions confronted by Catholic philosophy: these were the 20th anniversary of the John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* in 2018 and in 2019, the 140th year of Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris*. These two occasions are likewise taken up by this paper as starting points of a philosophic reflection on the constitutive elements of Catholic philosophy against the background of contemporary intellectual environment. Adding an extra layer of nuance to this project is John Paul's II minimalist attitude, via the aforementioned encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, towards adopting an institutional philosophy. In claiming that the Catholic Church does not espouse any official philosophy of her own, John Paul II seems to have deviated from the more polemical stance suggested by Pius X's *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* and the aforementioned Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris*. This reflection follows the lead of the new understanding of the ancillary function of philosophy, aptly described by John Paul II as the “*diakonia* of truth.”¹ To carry out this intellectual ministry, John Paul II underscored the crucial role of philosophy which he considered as part of the “array of resources for generating greater knowledge of truth.”² Guided by his insight, I will proceed to carry out my discussion in two parts. In the first part, after the preliminary remarks, I will discuss the centrality of revision in the evolution Catholic philosophic tradition and show how, since the middle ages, St. Thomas Aquinas has been inextricably linked with such endeavor. In the second part, I will address the challenge to carry on this activity of revision within the context of what has been invariably described as “postmodern condition” and demonstrate how St. Thomas' philosophic practice, although medieval in provenance, can actually find a place in this new intellectual setting. My conclusion comes in the form of a re-statement of *Fides et Ratio*'s recognition of St. Thomas Aquinas' contribution to the evolution of Catholic philosophic thought via his creative fidelity to tradition.

¹ Pope John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, Par. 2 in http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html#-11. 5 March 2019.

² Pope John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, Par. 3 in http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html#-11. 5 March 2019.

Medieval Philosophy and the Task of Revision

Medieval philosophy is a fiercely contested terrain and the popular notion equating Catholic philosophy with medieval thought often takes this for granted. The intellectual culture of the middle ages is so thickly forested that Catholic philosophy accounts for practically but a fractional, albeit significant, episode of a cultural transformation which stretched from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the early stages of the modern period. The often convenient although hazardous tact of using scholasticism as a descriptive code for either medieval philosophy or Catholic philosophy likewise poses a problem. John Scotus of Eriugena would probably admit to being a philosopher but he was not a scholastic. St. Bonaventure was a scholastic but he would not be comfortable with the label philosopher. Avicenna was a philosopher among others but he was neither Catholic nor scholastic. Robert Grosseteste was both Catholic and scholastic but, for all intents and purposes, was one already modern in his intellectual temperament.

To say hence that medieval philosophy is a complex tapestry is a gross understatement. It was, more fittingly, a site of intense intellectual conflicts generated by the tension among currents and crosscurrents of various cultural influences streaming into a civilization at the juncture of a dramatic transformation. By choosing to describe the middle ages and its philosophy in this manner, I am at once putting myself at odds with the depiction of those who maliciously deride them as though they were the domain of the dark side. This description is of course a caricature peddled by Francesco Petrarch and the Renaissance humanists who labeled the transitional period between late antiquity and modern era as the “dark ages.” It was a foreboding yet magnetic caption such that until today, even those who can hardly identify or spell Petrarch’s name casually use the phrase when referring to that part of history as though it was indeed the vast, barren wasteland that Petrarch wanted us to imagine. The irony is that, despite the lopsided account, medieval world never fails to inspire amazement and attraction. Consciously or unconsciously, people are drawn to the *Game of Thrones* or *Harry Potter*, the transcendent beauty of Gothic Catholic churches and marble Islamic mosques, the aura of the old universities, the nostalgia of European cities, the gallant epics or legends about swordsmen and knights all because of their medieval appeal.

These, among others, like the charting of new trade routes, the closer interface between Eastern and Western cultures, the development of money

economy, the beginnings of modern science, the evolution of mathematics, and the democratization of literacy are but some of the things which give us reason to think of the medieval ages differently. None of these medieval gains really fit the sinister ascription imputed by the label “dark ages.” I am not suggesting here that the chronicle of medieval history has nothing but tales of glory and triumph. I am merely presenting another dimension to balance the monochromatic or, worse, zero-chromatic picture created by those who only have shadows to see when they set their eyes on medieval world. I have long been convinced that the term “dark ages” is a misnomer. If the privilege is mine, I would shelve the reference “dark ages” permanently and call medieval history instead the “ages of light.”

There is neither fancy nor farcical in this suggestion. Unpopular as it may seem but light indeed is the feature most characteristic of the medieval ages. One could in fact consider the entire contour of medieval philosophy as a thematic exploration into the metaphysics of light. There are enough textual evidences to prove this point but before I veer to that direction, allow me to indulge your imagination by inviting you to think of something larger, something grander: I am here referring to the famous Cathedral of Chartres. Constructed almost near the threshold of the thirteenth century, this great piece of Gothic architecture was built precisely both as a testament and monument to the richness and majesty of lux, that is, light. As the architecture historian Philip Ball described it: “Although the scale of Chartres’ stone cliffs is unforgettable, it is not unique. One may be equally overwhelmed at Reims, Strasbourg, Cologne, at a dozen or more of the great Gothic churches. But what one will find nowhere else – what inspires people to speak of Chartres with hushed awe and reverence whether they are believers or not – is its light.”³ Within its walls, Napoleon Bonaparte was reported to have said, an atheist would have difficulty being himself.⁴

This medieval fascination with light radiated by the cathedral windows of Chartres finds a different yet with comparable expression in the studies on optics by one of the most influential English medieval thinkers, Roger Bacon. Optics in the medieval ages is the study of light, or more specifically, of visibility and light. While the scientific interest on light dates back as early as the time of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, it was only during the 11th century, with the publication of *Kitab al-Manāzīr* or “Book of Optics” by the Arab scholar Ibn al-Haytham or Alhazen

³ Ball, Philip. *Universe of Stone: A Biography of Chartres Cathedral*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2008, p. 238.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 24.

that there came to be a major breakthrough. Deviating from a theory established by Ptolemy nine centuries earlier, Alhazen proposed a theory that posited the visibility of things due no longer to the visual flux radiated by the eye (Ptolemy's extramissionism) but by the radiation emitted to the eye by the things themselves (Alhacen's intromissionism).⁵ Around the 13th century, Alhazen's work reached the Western world and was translated into Latin with the title *De Aspectibus* which became the principal resource of Roger Bacon's optical studies. Bacon had an illustrious lineage, having been born to a rich English family at around 1220 (1210 or 1214 according to other sources)⁶ and was already an accomplished intellectual before he joined the Franciscan Order in the year 1257. Prior to his Franciscan profession, he had been lecturing at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Paris on Aristotle's natural sciences at around 1240's.⁷ Bacon's intellectual interests branched out of Aristotelian literature afterwards and he began to immerse himself in various Greek and Arabic sources due in no small measure to the influence of a fellow English great mind, Robert Grosseteste.⁸ It was around this time, one may safely assume, that Bacon encountered Alhazen's work on optics among other Greek and Islamic sources. There are a handful of significant works attributed to Bacon but nothing compares perhaps to the historical relevance and lasting impact of the works commissioned by Clement IV, namely, *Opus Maius*, *Opus Minus*, and *Opus Tertium*. An important part of these studies, specifically of *Opus Maius*, is his discussion of the then emerging medieval interest in *perspectiva* or the study of light, color, and vision. David Lindberg, a noted ancient sciences scholar, acknowledged Bacon's effort as a demonstration of his commitment to the Augustinian vision of putting all forms of secular learning which by that time included natural sciences and mathematics, besides philosophy, at the service of faith. The study of *perspectiva* matters as it shows how the clarity of one's vision of natural objects ultimately leads to the ever increasing clarity of one's vision of God.⁹ As Bacon put it: "Knowledge of this science prepares the mind and elevates it to sure knowledge of all things, so

⁵ Smith, Mark A. "What is the History of Medieval Optics Really about?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Jun., 2004), pp. 181-182.

⁶ Lindberg, David C. *Roger Bacon and the Origins of "Perspectiva" in the Middle Ages: A Critical Edition and English Translation of Bacon's "Perspectiva" with Introduction and Notes*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p.xvii.

⁷ Grant, Edward. *A History of Natural Philosophy: From The Ancient World to the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 152.

⁸ Marrone, Steven. "Metaphysics and science in the thirteenth century: William of Auvergne, Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon" in Marenbon, John. (Ed.) *Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume III: Medieval Philosophy*. London, Routledge, 2004, pp. 218-221.

⁹ Lindberg, David C. *Theories of Light from Al-Kindi to Kepler*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 95.

that if one grasps the basics of wisdom concerning this science and applies them correctly to knowledge of other sciences, one will be able to know all things that follow, without error or doubt, easily and powerfully.”¹⁰

Bacon is a key medieval figure but by no means the only one captivated by the new interests on the study of vision and light.¹¹ This collective fascination with clear sight, as I argue in this paper, is induced not just by the novelty of the experimental sciences but by the faith tradition which finds a close kinship between one’s search for God like and the journey into the light. This tradition goes as far back as the early ages of Christianity as attested by the works of an unknown Syrian monk known to history merely as Pseudo-Dionysius.¹² Quite unpopular to many, the name which has been commonly associated with negative theology is in fact partly responsible for the transmission of a faith discourse which builds around the recognition of the divine reality as light. In the early sections of one of his works entitled *Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius prefaces his entire treatise in this manner:

‘Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of Lights.’[James 1:17]

Moreover, every divine procession of radiance from the Father, while constantly bounteously flowing to us, fills us anew as though with a unifying power, by recalling us to things above, and leading us to the unity of the Shepherding Father and to the Divine One. For from Him and into Him are all things, as is written in the holy Word.

Calling then upon Jesus, the Light of the Father, the Real and True, ‘Which lights every man that comes into the world, by whom we have access to the Father,’ the Origin of Light, let us raise our thought, according to our power, to the illumination of the most sacred doctrines handed down by the Fathers, and also as far as we may let us contemplate the Hierarchies of the Celestial Intelligences revealed to us by them in symbols for our upliftment: and admitting through the spiritual and unwavering eyes of the mind the original and super-original gift of Light of the Father who is the Source of Divinity, which shows to us images of the all-blessed Hierarchies of the Angels in figurative symbols, let us through them again strive upwards toward Its primal ray. For this Light can never be deprived.¹³

¹⁰ *ibid.*, Lindberg, 1996, p. xxii.

¹¹ Denery II, Dallas G. *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World: Optics, Theology, and Religious Life*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp.8-11.

¹² Marenbon, John. *Medieval Philosophy: A Historical and Philosophical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 50-51.

¹³ Pseudo-Dionysius. “Celestial Hierarchy” in http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_13_heavenly_hierarchy.htm. 1 March 2019.

Pseudo-Dionysius is an important figure in the evolution of medieval philosophy as he represents, besides St. Augustine, one of the earliest Christian appropriations of Neoplatonism. In his other works, namely, *Mystical Theology* and *On the Divine Names*, there is undeniably a conscious attempt to bring the Neoplatonic discourse he adopted from Proclus closer to Christian thought. What one reads in this important passage is Pseudo-Dionysius' identification with God and his self-diffusion as light which finds its brightest manifestation in Jesus, the Light of the Father, who by shining upon the world likewise opens up a path back to God, the Origin of Light. Succeeding medieval thinkers like John Scotus of Eriugena, who translated and wrote a commentary on *Celestial Hierarchy*¹⁴ and Robert Grosseteste, who himself obtained significant recognition on account of studies on light¹⁵ would further extend up to the outset of the high middle ages such tradition of discoursing about God using the imagery of illumination. This was the same tradition received and revised by St. Thomas Aquinas via his appropriation of Aristotelian philosophy.

It is important at this point to clarify that St. Thomas Aquinas did not have the scientific or experimental temperament of the likes of Robert Grosseteste or Roger Bacon but hardly can one consider this as a handicap when one weighs his contributions to the themes of light and vision as central features of medieval philosophic discourse. In other words, he approached the matter sought by the scientists of optics by asking not so much the question, "What enables one to see?" but "What lies beyond our seeing?" In revising the question in this manner, St. Thomas did not necessarily position himself against science but merely raise an issue which might have escaped the scientific worldview. The question, "What lies beyond our seeing?" animates the pursuit of wisdom which for St. Thomas is inextricably linked with what he described as "true beatitude." As St. Thomas himself put it:

Among all human pursuits, the pursuit of wisdom is more perfect, more noble, more useful, and more full of joy. It is more perfect because, in so far as a man gives himself to the pursuit of wisdom, so far does he even now have some share in true beatitude. And so a wise man has said: "Blessed is the man that shall continue in wisdom" (Sirach 14:22). It is more noble because through this pursuit man especially approaches to a likeness to God Who "made all things in wisdom" (Ps. 103:24). And since likeness is the cause of love, the pursuit of wisdom especially joins man to God in

¹⁴ Rorem, Paul. Eriugena's Commentary on the Dionysian Celestial Hierarchy in <http://www.pims.ca/pdf/st150.pdf>. 4 March 2019.

¹⁵ See Grosseteste, Robert. *On Light*. Clare C. Reidl (Trans.) Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942.

friendship. That is why it is said of wisdom that “she is an infinite treasure to men! which they that use become the friends of God” (Wis. 7:14).¹⁶

In his *Summa Theologiae*, St Thomas referred also to “true beatitude” as the “final and perfect happiness” which is achieved through “the vision of Divine Essence.”¹⁷ It can be argued hence that while St. Thomas did not share with his fellow medieval thinkers their scientific inclinations, he nonetheless was one with them in their inquiry into the reality of light and vision albeit in a different plane. Without him explicitly saying, St. Thomas, via this initiative, was essentially hinting at the universality of truth and the complementarity of different ways by which this truth is sought. Pope John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio* might have been thinking along the same line when he claimed that: “The unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning... Revelation renders this unity certain, showing that the God of creation is also the God of salvation history. It is the one and the same God who establishes and guarantees the intelligibility and reasonableness of the natural order of things upon which scientists confidently depend...”¹⁸ The process of revision of the Catholic philosophic thought during the medieval ages happens within the context of this convergence among competing traditions which included among others the Augustinian appropriation to the Platonic theory of illumination, the Christian translation of the Neo-platonic celestial hierarchy by Pseudo-Dionysius and John Scotus of Eriugena, the distillation of the Islamic theories of light in the studies of Grosseteste and Bacon, and St. Thomas’ application of Aristotelian philosophic language on Catholic theology. Revision in this sense speaks of the continuity and discontinuity which necessarily ensues in the aftermath of the multiple traditions’ interface. St. Thomas contributed to this intellectual process and consequently earned a dominant recognition on account of his articulation of the synthetic relationship between, on one hand, the natural human desire to know and the fullness of human flourishing in seeing God. This achievement defines, in my perspective, St. Thomas’ rendition of medieval philosophy as a study of sight and light which finds its comparable expressions in the stained glass windows of the cathedral of Chartres and in the theories of optics by Bacon and Grosseteste. For St. Thomas, true vision is to see God and to see God is to see all things in Him as known.¹⁹ The question we need to confront now and to which we shall now turn in

¹⁶ Aquinas, St. Thomas. *Summa Contra Gentiles* 2.1 in <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles1.htm#1.4> 4 March 2019.

¹⁷ Aquinas, St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.IIae.3.8 in <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/summa/FS/FS003.html#FSQ3OUTP1> 4 March 2019.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Par. 34 in http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html#-II.4 4 March 2019.

¹⁹ Aquinas, St. Thomas. *Summa Theologiae* I.12.8, *Reply to Obj. 3* in <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/summa/FP/FP012.html#FPQ12OUTP1> 5 March 2019.

the next segment is whether this kind of discourse can still find an adequate space in an intellectual atmosphere that has spurned all the traces of medieval thought.

St. Thomas Aquinas and the Post-Metaphysical Culture

In the preceding discussion, I disputed the notion which caricatured medieval ages as the “dark ages” and in its place suggested the alternative description “ages of light.” I advanced this claim by using the medieval science of optics as an illustration and in the process demonstrated how the revision of Catholic medieval philosophic thought was carried out by its adherents, most notably, by St. Thomas Aquinas. In his own way, St. Thomas contributed to the medieval discourse on the problematics of sight and light by adopting the categories not of the experimental sciences and mathematics but of Aristotelian philosophy. This Christian domestication of Aristotle finds its best expression in St. Thomas’ best known major works, namely, *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologiae*. In ushering Aristotle into the Catholic theological architectonics, St. Thomas succeeded in revising the complexion of Catholic philosophic thought which up to that point was heavily steeped in Augustinian and Neo-platonist traditions. Despite its merits, this ingenious attempt at fusion between Aristotle and Catholic theology, that is, between the pagan and the religious, was not without its share of controversies and yet these mishaps notwithstanding, Catholic discourse was able to move forward via the paradigm of which St. Thomas himself was the prime exemplar. With the transition however of worldviews and civilizations, one is compelled to ask whether the philosophic orientation which St. Thomas represented can still measure up with the contemporary intellectual order given its post-modern, post-metaphysical prejudices. This is the problem I wish to address in the ensuing part of the paper.

One of the things that burdens St. Thomas as thinker is his complicity with metaphysics. For the scholars and enthusiasts of his philosophy, St. Thomas and metaphysics have become almost synonymous, a claim which enjoys the backing of reputed commentators of Thomist thought like Jean-Pierre Torrell, Eleonore Stump, and John Wippel to name a few. To be precise about it, according to Torrell, St. Thomas’ metaphysics of being was one aspect of his philosophic legacy that he acquired from Aristotle but something that he developed solely on his own.²⁰ Eleonore Stump describes Thomist metaphysics as St. Thomas’ “theory of things” which roughly account for his view on the nature and existence of individual objects.²¹

²⁰ Torrell, OP, Jean-Pierre. *Aquinas’s Summa: Background, Structure, and Reception*. Benedict M. Guevin, OSB. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005, p.77.

²¹ Stump, Eleonore. *Aquinas*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 35.

For John Wippel, understanding St. Thomas' metaphysics provides a ground for understanding his notion of a Christian philosophy.²² Based on their testimonies, one may get the impression that the link between St. Thomas and metaphysics is almost unimpeachable. Granted however that it is, it remains a question whether St. Thomas' philosophic thought is exhausted by his adherence to metaphysics. I suppose there is a need to confront this matter to determine whether or not St. Thomas can find a space in the post-modern, post-metaphysical intellectual terrain.

My take on this issue is that St. Thomas adopted metaphysics for its conceptual utility or more properly, for its ancillary function. In other words, St. Thomas did metaphysics not to secure the orthodoxy of Aristotelian legacy like the Averroists of his time nor to establish metaphysics as a science like Francisco Suarez sought to do. He studied and appropriated it and with a considerable degree of liberality, certain as he was that metaphysics was but a mistress to all the sciences and arts as he stated in the Prologue of his *Commentary on Metaphysics*.²³ As a mistress, its main function was to minister to the different domains of human interest. In the case of St. Thomas, he relied on metaphysics since it provided the necessary grammar that would make the Biblical injunction on creation intelligible. It was this dogged theological interest on creation and the pedagogical demand for intelligibility that drew St. Thomas to metaphysical inquiry. Aside from the aforementioned treatises, testaments of this metaphysical exploration could also be gleaned from his two earlier works, *De Ente et Essentia* and *De Principiis Naturae*. While definitely a lot shorter and less systematic than his more magisterial works, these two pieces were demonstrative of the kind of metaphysical groping that St. Thomas would sustain throughout his teaching career. At this juncture, I wish to raise two important points to underscore the independence and originality which characterized St. Thomas' engagement with Aristotle: first, that creation never figured in any of Aristotle's works given his predilection towards the notion of an eternal world; second, St. Thomas' distinction between metaphysics as divine science²⁴ and the sacred science that one studies based on Divine Revelation.²⁵ Concerning the first point, it is tempting to think that St. Thomas was siding with Aristotle on the question of the eternity of the world given his explicit theoretical accommodation of the possibility of a world that had no origin in time. St. Thomas said the world might have always existed but the

²² Wippel, John F. *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II*. Washington, DC.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007, pp. 22-23.

²³ Aquinas, St. Thomas. Prologue of *Commentary on Metaphysics* in <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/Metaphysics.htm#02>. 6 March 2019.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Aquinas, St. Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.1 in <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/summa/FP/FP001.html#FPQ1A5THEP1>. 6 March 2019.

fact that it might have does not in any way diminish the creative power of God. The more urgent issue for him in fact was not whether God could have created an eternal world but whether there are sufficient rational grounds to argue for or against it.²⁶ In reference to the second point, the distinction offered by St. Thomas concerning the two kinds of “sacred science” is of crucial importance as it shows, as I have already intimated earlier, the ancillary function of metaphysics and more importantly, St. Thomas readiness to deviate from Aristotle whenever necessary.²⁷ On two separate occasions, St. Thomas dared to think differently from Aristotle; on two separate occasions, St. Thomas raised the urgent demand for intelligibility.

These intellectual dispositions – the intellectual grit to think differently and the rigorous insistence for intelligibility – are for me the two fundamental scholarly traits which sustain St. Thomas’ continuous relevance as a thinker despite our post-modern and post-metaphysical cultural environment. Because he thought differently, St. Thomas devised *Summa Theologiae* to push theological studies beyond the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard; because he thought differently, he improved standard missionary manuals with his *Summa Contra Gentiles*; because he thought differently, he was at home in the company of highly diverse pagan and religious minds as shown by his ease to navigate his way through Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides, and other influential thinkers whom we have learned to appreciate better thanks to St. Thomas’ unabashed readiness to learn from them. The intellectual world which takes pride in being post-modern and post-metaphysical entice us to become suspicious of any grand narrative and it has repeated the same admonition again and again to the point that the rejection of a grand narrative has become a grand narrative itself. I personally consider nothing dangerous with the attitude of suspicion; with a healthy dose it can in fact provide the first impulse of critique. But once suspicion becomes a cultural paradigm and a template for conformity, it kills the instinct of genius or what I call earlier the intellectual grit to think differently. If St. Thomas were alive today, he would

²⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: “... it is neither false nor impossible that God could have made something that has always existed, and it will be an error to say otherwise. For, if there is no contradiction, we ought to admit that God could have made something that has always existed, for it would be clearly derogatory to the divine omnipotence, which exceeds every thought and power, to say that we creatures can conceive of something that God is unable to make. (Nor are sins an instance to the contrary, for, considered in themselves, they are nothing.) In this, therefore, the entire question consists: whether to be wholly created by God and not to have a beginning in time are contradictory terms.” See Aquinas, St. Thomas. “On the Eternity of the World” in <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/english/DeEternitateMundi.htm>. 6 March 2019.

²⁷ On a curious note, the same first philosophy, said St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, must be “the last part of philosophy to be learned” being the most demanding and comprehensive of all. See *ibid.*, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.4.3 in <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles1.htm#4>. 6 March 2019.

probably be against post-modern or post-metaphysical thinking not because it is against his intellectual attitude but because of its proclivity to take our mind away from what is worthy of thought.

This brings me to the other point I raised earlier, that is, St. Thomas' emphasis on the rigor of intelligibility. Besides *Summa Theologiae*, there is perhaps no other literary testament that could give credence to St. Thomas' partiality towards intelligibility than his disputations as well as his Biblical and Aristotelians commentaries. As a theologian, he was committed to the task of making faith understandable following the tradition propounded by St. Augustine; as a philosopher, he was also a stickler for the rules of rational demonstration laid down by Aristotle. Today, these are the very things taken for granted by the prevailing culture of suspicion propagated by the so-called post-modern, post-metaphysical trend. As a consequence, we are faced today with a crisis of intelligibility or as others would describe it, a climate of anti-intellectualism, as shown by the increasingly dwindling space for any form of public discourse. Instead of engagement, what we see around us is a widespread displacement of meaningful conversation by our penchant to withdraw into the seclusion of an enclosure which Plato once referred to as "cave" before we learned to call it "social media." Within this virtually public, virtually private domain, we are led to think that we are free to vent our opinion, share our comments or spread anything expressive of ourselves – from meme to throwback photo to gif to video clip – and believe that we are reaching out to the world when in fact we are merely peddling digital bits and pieces of manufactured information. In a way, there is a difference between Plato's cave and ours: in the famous allegory, the cave dwellers are captivated by the shadows of the puppets they do not see; within our digital cave, our amazement comes from the fact that the shadows have been removed; everything is bright and glitzy and we revel at the magic cast by the spell of electronic algorithm, unaware that we have become the puppets ourselves.

This phenomenon is really far from St. Thomas' university days when disputations can animate the imagination of professors and students alike and everyone can take part in it as it was in fact a public academic affair. One cannot read the disputations *De Veritate* or *De Malo* without sensing the palpable collective enthusiasm for discourse and intelligibility. In those transcripts of actual intellectual exchange, hardly one would find invectives, name calling, or any kind of ad hominem arguments. There was a shared recognition of the value of inquiry and reasoned debate for the sake of questions whose conclusions everyone had a stake. Imagine if Thomasians can be trained to think like St. Thomas did and immerse themselves in the public sphere armed with their discursive prowess and intelligent faith. I wonder

what words can be heard from them when a clown masquerading as president begins insulting God, women, violation of human rights victims, dissenters, the pope, to name a few. I wonder if they would be disturbed if they feel we are beginning to lose our sense of truth. I wonder if they would be bothered if we are prevented to inquire, to dissent, and to think differently the way St. Thomas did. I wonder if they would care if things like public policies, Church and State relations, ethical norms, citizenship, the prophetic dimension of faith, among others become less and less intelligible.

As an institution, the academe, in particular, the University of Santo Tomas, has the preserve to promote intellectual grit and the adherence to intelligibility, two important elements of St. Thomas philosophic legacy, via public discourse be it in written form through research or in oral mode through actual or virtual exchange. As long as we believe in the lifelong significance of these pursuits, the philosophic legacy of St. Thomas will remain as valuable and as relevant as ever.

Conclusion

What I have tried to demonstrate up to this point is the philosophic practice of St. Thomas Aquinas which I chose to describe by using the term *revision*. In the context of Catholic philosophy, *revision* here is taken positively and is suggestive of the efforts taken up by St. Thomas to exercise creative fidelity to the theological and philosophic traditions bequeathed to him. Thanks to such creative fidelity, St. Thomas succeeded in showing that both faith and reason could be mutually operative without conceding each other's autonomy. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, affirmed anew St. Thomas Aquinas' singular contribution to the cultivation of Catholic philosophic thought. He was right however in not naming a specific philosophic system worthy of Catholic name. It belongs to the ancillary function of philosophy to remain nameless so that in its anonymity, the splendor of truth can manifest itself more brightly. It should be underscored however that creative fidelity as exemplified by St. Thomas Aquinas does not refer to the alteration of the fundamentals of the Catholic philosophic tradition but only to the alternate manner by which such fundamentals are approached and articulated so as to sustain their enduring freshness and relevance. On this account, due credit must be given to generations of adherents of St. Thomas Aquinas who in different ways and contexts have tried to uphold the angelic doctor's intellectual legacy as they themselves strive to enrich Catholic philosophic thought with their continuous hermeneutic engagement. This is a stance that acquires special urgency today amidst

the “post-modern” or “post-metaphysical” temper of the contemporary civilization with its exaggerated valuation of suspicion, the flattening of the notion of truth, and the subordination of faith to power or ideological structures. As it did in medieval past, Catholic philosophy today finds once more the need to renew itself as it renews as well its basic commitment to its diaconal role vis-à-vis the truths of Catholic faith. This is task of which St. Thomas Aquinas remains the primary exemplar.^{PS}

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En el año de mil e quatrocientos e sesenta e tres años
el día de San Juan el Rey e Reyna mandaron
que se faga una misa por el alma de la Reyna
doña Juana la primera en el día de San Juan
de cada año.

En la salve Regina. *Quanto*

Ellue te ois reyna yma
de de misericordia. vida
dulçura y esperança nra. Dios
te salue atillamamos los desle
rrados hijos de Eva. El suspi
ramos gimiendo y llorando en
aquelte valle de lagrimas. Ea
pues abogada nra. buelue
nosotros a Dios tus misericor
diosos ojos. y despues de a. 3.