

The Style of the Catholic Intellectual and the Church's Recommendation of Aquinas

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How does a Christian intellectual utilize secular knowledge, be it philosophical or scientific, in such a manner that one's Christian faith is not compromised or distorted? This concern is an old one, yet for all that it is no less perennial. It seems that every intellectual generation must learn it for itself.¹

Nor is this concern no less important. As Pope Leo XIII remarked in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879): "For since it is in the very nature of man to follow the guide of reason in his actions, if his intellectual tradition, the Catholic Church has been sensitive to the above concern and the conditions for the well-being both of philosophical and theological life."² This sensitivity is best expressed in the Church's long history of recommending St. Thomas Aquinas to her intellectuals.

My topic is to express some *apropos* points from these recommendations. In chapter four of his *Thomism in an Age of Renewal*, Ralph McInerny provides us with a fine distillation of these recom-

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¹In the auto-biographical context of his *The Philosopher and Theology*, Etienne Gilson describes the effort that was necessary for this century's Catholic intellectuals to sort out the correct relations between philosophy and theology. A process that would have been less grueling if everyone had read *Aeterni Patris* (ch.6).

² Pope Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, as edited by Victor B. Brezik, *One Hundred Years of Thomism* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1981), p. 174.

mendations. In sum, there is a minimal recommendation and a more substantial one. I would like to cover only the first — adding some reflections of my own.³

I.

McInerny explains that the Church asks us all to consider Aquinas as a symbol of the goal and purpose of the Christian intellectual life, viz., the manifestation of the harmony between faith and reason.

According to McInerny, the Church asks her intellectuals to consider Aquinas as the model to follow in their work of integrating faith and reason. The Church sees that Aquinas did this in an exemplary way. Here is very little, if anything, with which one can argue. The Church is not asking us to buy Aquinas, to become Thomist, to proselytize Aquinas. She is merely asking us to adopt the ideals of Aquinas and to strive to integrate them into our work.

To McInerny's first point I add this reflection. When the Church speaks of integrating faith and reason in the style of Aquinas, she asks of her intellectuals a particular attitude toward their faith. This attitude is clearly described again in Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. After incisively explaining the importance of philosophical truth for the human condition, Leo turns to the issue of the context best suited for the attainment of philosophical truth.

Leo says that a Catholic ought to do his philosophizing in openness and in deference to his Christian faith. Instead of looking upon his faith as opposed to reason, the wise man will regard it as a friendly star indicating where the harbor of truth lies. Implicit here is the traditional idea that faith is an extrinsic norm in one's philosophizing. Where one's reason contradicts the faith, one has a sure that an error has been made in reason. The thinker has an indication that he is off-course in his voyage to truth. Faith is called an extrinsic norm because it evaluates the philosophical position from outside philosophy. That is, if a contradiction appears between reason and faith, one knows an error exists in reason. But that knowledge of error is not a knowledge of the refutation that addresses the posi-

³ For McInerny's substantial recommendation, see *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 191-200.

tion as philosophical. For example, if a Catholic philosopher claimed a proof that God does not know all things, he should know on the basis of this faith that this proof is erroneous. Yet such knowledge is not the philosophical rebuttal to this argument. Rather, such knowledge would be an invitation to him to scrutinize the premises of his argument and to see where a slip or oversight has been made. Somewhat similarly a mathematics student is guided and helped in his understanding of mathematics by textbooks that their back contain answers to problems raised in the text.

So in our attempts to harmonize faith and reason, we should also allow our faith to play a critical role. In other words, the harmony should not be affected at the expense of the faith. This would mean not only a loss of faith but a loss of truth. This pre-eminent role for the faith was, as Leo's encyclical goes on to point out, recognized and acted upon in an exemplary way by Aquinas. In the face of severe and intense opposition to the faith from Aristotelian philosophy, Aquinas never once, as far as I know, said the faith was wrong and reason right. Rather, for Aquinas each confrontation was an invitation to give glory to the truth of the faith by uncovering the error in reason. In passing, I should also mention that Aquinas' attitude toward reason was not always, or for the most part, corrective. It was also conforming. That is, he showed repeatedly that the ancient philosophers had reached many of the truths proclaimed by the faith. In these cases faith confirmed what reason asserted.

But in this equation of faith and reason what is meant by "faith"? As the opening lines of *Aeterni Patris* make clear, it is the message of Jesus Christ faithfully preserved and expounded in the teaching of the Church. In short, what has come to be known as the *magisterium*. This source for our knowledge of the faith is not some idiosyncrasy of Leo. Rather, he is reiterating Vatican I and the history of the Church.⁴ That matter is again found in Vatican II's document on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, section 25. Since a correct understanding of the *magisterium* seems to be involved with the style of intellectualizing the Church recommends to its thinkers, we have no choice but to become clear on the nature of the *magisterium* and where it can be found. Let us look, then, at *Lumen gentium* section 25.

⁴ Leo XIII, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-182.

II.

The first three paragraphs of section 25 describe three forms the Church's *magisterium* takes. First is the ordinary *magisterium* of particular bishops and especially the Pope.

A "loyal submission of will and intellect" is owing both to bishop's teaching on faith and morals and to the ordinary, i.e. not *ex cathedra*, teaching of the Roman Pontiff. In other translations this submission is called "a religious submission of will and of mind." As we will see, in his theology of dissent, Charles Curran makes great ado about the "conditional" nature of this submission of will and intellect. In any case, this is one form the *magisterium* takes.

Second is the universal *magisterium* of the bishops.

The magisterial form has been commented upon in detail by John C. Ford and Germain Grisez in their "Contraception and the Infallibility of the Ordinary *Magisterium*." They find our text detailing four main conditions for this *magisterium*.⁵ If these conditions are actualized, the teaching is "infallible" and, as our text will say a few lines later, "...must be adhered to with the loyal and obedient assent of faith." The first condition is that the bishops remain in communion with one another and with the Pope. In other words, the bishops must not be those of the separated brethren. Implicit in this first condition is the denial that the teaching must take the explicit form of a collegial act. The second condition is that the bishops be officially teaching and not merely expressing personal theological opinion. The third condition is the unanimity of the bishops in one judgment. Our authors make three sub comments on this third condition. First, they reiterate that the unanimity is of truly Catholic bishops. Second, past unanimity is not undone by future discord. Third, evidence of the unanimity need not be exhaustive and may include authorized theologians and the faith and practice of Christians generally. The fourth main condition is that the bishops propose their judgment as one to be held definitively.

⁵ John C. Ford and Germain Grisez, "Contraception and the Infallibility of the Ordinary Magisterium," *Theological Studies*, 39(1978), pp. 272-77. Also, Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), I, "Christian Moral Principles," pp. 842-845.

Section 25 of *Lumen gentium* goes on to specify an extra-ordinary form for the universal *magisterium* of the bishops, i.e., when they are assembled in an ecumenical council.

The teachings of bishops at ecumenical councils will provide a rich source for divinely guaranteed extrinsic norms for our philosophizing. These teachings are truly norms, for owing to them is not just religious assent but an assent of faith. It is unbelievable that a Catholic intellectual should seriously go about his work in ignorance of the past workings of this magisterial form.

The third paragraph of section 25 goes on to specify still another locus in the Church for infallibility in teaching. That locus is the Roman Pontiff when he proclaims in an absolute decision a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals.

So in the ordinary and extra-ordinary forms of the *universal magisterium* of the bishops and in the *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the Pope, Catholic thinkers have decisive extrinsic norms to guide their reflections.

III.

Today little notice is taken of the ordinary universal *magisterium* of the bishops. For instance, it seemed to be completely passed over as a binding theological source in the early debates on *Humanae vitae*. Hopefully Ford and Grisez's mentioned article has corrected this oversight.⁶ On the other hand, the *magisterium* of

⁶ In his *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), Francis A. Sullivan critiques the Ford-Grisez conclusion that contraception has been infallibly taught. Sullivan's main critical points are: no analogy between the teaching against contraception and the definition of the Assumption (p. 144); the major difficulty-Ford and Grisez's position would allow the *magisterium* to say anything about anything, i.e., magisterial "absolutism" (p. 144), the "necessary" connection with revelation is not shown (p. 145); the "to be held definitively" character of the teaching is not established (pp. 145-148); finally, Sullivan lists reasons from the "majority of Catholic moral theologians" who do not see it like Ford and Grisez (pp. 148-152). In my opinion, Grisez has ably answered Sullivan point for point.; see Grisez's "Infallibility and Specific Moral Norms: A Review Discussion," *The Thomist*, 49 (1985), 148-187. In his 1992 work, *Witnesses to the Faith: Community, Infallibility and the Ordinary Magisterium of Bishops* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992) ch. 6, Richard R. Gaillardetz merely repeats Sullivan's criticisms without any of acknowledgment of Grisez's replies in the above noted 1985 article from *The Thomist*.

particular bishops and the ordinary *magisterium* of the Pope have been deprecated. Great effort has been expended to show that the religious assent of mind and will owed to such teaching is not unconditional, is not absolute. Hence, we have in Volume 16 of *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* Charles Curran's elaboration of a "theology of dissent."

Yet Curran is unfortunately vague on the nature of the condition(s) the Pope's ordinary *magisterium* must fulfill to command assent from Catholics. Curran is vague, too, on the "sufficient reasons" allowing dissent as "a legitimate option." Nevertheless, in a number of ways the precise meaning of the phrases is obtainable.

First, one can take an in-detail look at some of Curran's listed historical instances of dissent to papal teaching. Curran mentions the widespread dissent to certain Christological teachings by Popes Liberius (352-366), Virgilius (540-555), and Honorius (625-636). Supposedly, Liberius claimed that the divinity of the Son is "like that of the Father" (*homoi-ousios*), not the "same nature" (*homo-ousios*). Virgilius purportedly refused to condemn the *Three Chapters* of the Nestorians, who led that there were two persons in Christ. And Honorius I appeared to deny the two wills in Christ and so was condemned by the Third Council of Constantinople. In other words, dissent to the above was made on the basis of these papal teachings not satisfying the Christological doctrines of the Church formulated at the First Council of Nicaea (325). This is an important point to catch. Expressed in terms of the categories of Vatican II, the teachings of particular bishops and the ordinary *magisterium* of the Pope are to be judged by their fidelity to the infallible forms that the *magisterium* of the bishops and the *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the Pope.⁷ Philosophical problems, psychological or sociological find-

⁷ Pope John Paul II has been insistent that bishops, himself included, teach from this context of the Church's universal *magisterium*. For example, at Chicago in his address to the U.S. Bishops, he remarks: "One of the greatest rights of the faithful is to receive the word of God in its purity and integrity as guaranteed by the magisterium of the universal Church: the authentic magisterium of the Bishops of the Catholic Church teaching in union with the Pope. Dear brothers: we can be assured that the Holy Spirit is assisting us in our teaching if we remain absolutely faithful to the universal magisterium." Edited in U.S.A. *The Message of Justice, Peace and Love* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1979), p. 186.

ings, personal feelings, one's heart-felt stirrings, are not to count as grounds for dissent. If the ordinary papal teaching has manifested its fidelity to the larger infallible *magisterium* of the Church, then assent becomes binding. The more clearly this is done, the more authoritative the teaching becomes. But also the more fruitful. A bishop or pope who teaches in fidelity to the Church's infallible *magisterium* is an undoubted great benefit to all the faithful, intellectuals included. He extends the light of Christ and so provides the intellectual with further extrinsic norms by which to guide his intellect.

Another example of protest to the ordinary *magisterium* of particular bishops is the events surrounding the removal of Aquinas' teachings from the *Condemnations* of 1277. The *Condemnations* were issued by the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, seemingly with Papal approval. But as Petitot points out in his *The Life and Spirit of Thomas Aquinas* (ch. 2), the defense of Aquinas was made in terms of his *de facto* orthodoxy. It was not that Church teaching had to come around to Aquinas' viewpoint but rather that Aquinas was in actual agreement with the Church's viewpoint.

Hence, hypothetically speaking, John Paul II may have incorrectly removed the title of "Catholic theologian" from Hans Küng. But any correction will not involve the teaching of the Church. Rather, the correction will consist in realizing that Küng is in fact saying what the Church has always taught. In short, the case for Küng's reinstatement must be made on the basis of his unperceived orthodoxy, rather than error in Church teaching.

Finally, in this way we have the correct interpretation of another historical instance of dissent mentioned by Curran. The case is 13th century dissent to episcopal and papal bans against the use of some works of Aristotle. In fact, the dissent was made not on the basis of Aristotle being right and Church teaching wrong, but on the basis of a perceived agreement between what Aristotle was saying and what the Church was teaching.

In any case, again note the general procedure. Dissent is not from orthodoxy but on the basis of it. Traditionally, dissenters have had to show that they are more orthodox than those from whom they dissenting. Far from moving away from Church teaching, true dissent means moving more deeply into it. Church teaching is normative for all parties involved. This attitude is lost in Curran's the-

ology of dissent. There the basis for the dissent is extra-magisterial. Curran fails to realize that papal teaching in its ordinary form is scrupulously done in fidelity to the infallible magisterial forms. If it is to be critiqued, the critique should come from the angle. Philosophical, psychological, sociological, theological critiques do not really come to grips with the source of the teaching.⁸

In summary, the Christian intellectual taking seriously the Church's recommendation to synthesize reason with faith in the manner of Aquinas should have a deep sensitivity (1) to the universal episcopal *magisterium*, both ordinary and extraordinary, (2) to papal infallible teaching, and (3) to particular episcopal and papal teaching as it reiterates or expounds the previous magisterial forms.⁹

⁸ A closing word on Curran. Much of Curran's position is culled from an article by Joseph Komonchak entitled, "Ordinary Papal Magisterium and Religious Assent." Curran edited the article in his *Contraception: Authority and Dissent*. It is Komonchak who provided the survey of 19th and 20th century theologians on the conditional nature of the religious assent owed the Pope's ordinary teaching. I was unable to double check the entirety of this survey. Yet I was able to obtain copies of the earliest and latest theologians cited, Palmieri and Sullivan. As far as I can tell, both view licit dissent in the way I have presented it. As examples of fallible ordinary papal teaching both refer to the mentioned cases of Honorius, Virgilius, and Liberius. Their understanding of dissent should, then, be typified by those cases. But the cases exemplify a dissent from the *magisterium* on the basis of the *magisterium*. Hence, Sullivan in speaking of the condition contained in religious assent, "In hoc assensu ergo sublatet conditio quaedam: nisi Ecclesia aliquando aliter decernat, vel nisi contrarium fiat evidens." (*De Ecclesia*, p.348) If one realizes that the "aliquando" can refer to a past time, there is no difference between my position and Sullivan's.

⁹ A brief note on the Council's "Declaration on Religious Liberty." This document has often been utilized in support of a theology of dissent. In fact, though, the document remains within the forms of magisterial teaching demarcated in *Lumen gentium*, section 25. In other words, Catholic conscience is to be true to the *magisterium* even when criticizing the *magisterium*. I see no support for dissent on the vague basis of Curran's "sufficient reasons." Here is the document speaking of the obligation of Catholic conscience: "However, in forming their consciences the faithful must pay careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself." (Sec. 14) An excellent essay on the senses of freedom in this document is Ralph McInerny's, "The Meaning of Christian Freedom" in *Proceedings of the Fourth Convention of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars*.

It is this magisterial context that provides the best conditions for assuring, though not guaranteeing, that philosophical concepts and conclusion do not obscure, diminish, or destroy the distinctiveness of Christian revelation. In the above sketched fashion, the Church's recommendations of Aquinas address my opening concern.

To cap these pages I close with a quote from John Paul II:

It is not possible to review all the reasons that induced the Magisterium of the Church to choose St. Thomas as a sure guide in theological and philosophical disciplines; but one is doubtless this: his having set the principles of universal value which bear out the relationship between reason and faith. *Faith contains the values of human wisdom in a superior, different, and eminent way: therefore it is impossible for reason to be in disagreement with faith, and if in disagreement, it is necessary to look at and reconsider the conclusions of philosophy: In this sense, faith itself becomes a priceless aid for philosophy.*¹⁰ □

¹⁰ "Method and Doctrine of St. Thomas in Dialogue with Modern Culture," edited by D. Gallagher and R. Masiello, *Two Lectures on St. Thomas Aquinas* (Niagara University), pp. 270-271.