Synthesis of Faith and Reason in the Middle Ages:
Further Considerations
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If by the Middle Ages we take the High Middle Ages as paradigmatic, the period roughly spanning the last seventy-five years of the thirteenth century, then we must be struck by what indeed is a remarkable historical fact. There is no irrationalism whatsoever to be found either in the universities or in the Church. In an age in which Faith dominates the mind and sensibility of everyone; in a time in which the things of God are almost palpable to an imagination soaked in grace; when the Gothic spires seem pointed like arrows at the God above and chapels choke the narrow streets of Paris, Rome, and the burgeoning market towns mushrooming into history all over Europe; when wayside shrines mark the roads and pathways and thus guide travelers to their destinations; when the great streets—as they were then called—throng with pilgrims seeking solace and salvation in Compestelo and Canterbury—there is no contempt for reason and no denigration of its powers. A man born into our secularized modern world might imagine, if he be but a man quarter educated in the media of our time, that Faith would cancel out Reason. He might think this because he senses vaguely that reason somehow is hostile to faith and that the advances of modern scientific rationality are marked by a progressive decline in religion and in any confidence in the supernatural. This typical product of modern education would find the harmony existing between faith and reason in the High Middle Ages incomprehensible.

The theological issue was settled centuries earlier when the Caesars still governed from Rome and later from Milan. The Donatism of Tertullian, the partisan of that sour and fanatical sect bent on the destruction of civilization and on the classical rationality that had made it, was rejected by the Church. Tertullian’s famous taunt, “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens”? was an ambitious attempt to drive a wedge between the Faith of the one and the Philosophy of Antiquity of the other. His “credo quia imposibile”—”I believe because it [the Resurrection] is impossible”—was a calculated slap in the face of reason. But for all his brilliance and early service to orthodox Christianity, Tertullian and his school failed to gain the day.

The early Church’s refusal to condemn philosophical reason, despite the plethora of supposed philosophical reason that denied this or that doctrine of the Faith, reposed—so it seems to me—upon two fundamental truths, themselves both Revealed and pertaining hence to the depositum fidei:

(1) The affirmation in Genesis that God upon creating the world, looked on that world and saw that it was very good; this fundamental optimism about the goodness
of all creation encountered in the Hebrew Scriptures was transfigured by the uniquely Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

(2) If God became Man and thus took on the whole human condition, *sine* sin, Divinity Itself reaffirmed the worth of Its own creation. Not only the likeness of God, but created in his image, man’s reason—consubstantial with his nature—was fundamentally good, sound, even though wounded and crippled by sin and all those defects that flow therefrom. If creation is good, man is good; if man is good, his reason is good. If his reason is good, then that heightened exercise of reason, philosophy, is—or at least can be—good. And in what does the good of reason consist? It consists in moving from truths already known about reality to new truths thanks to synthesizing propositions and thus rendering them premises within the structure of the syllogism. There was nothing in Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* that could not be appropriated by the Faith. In fact there were some Christian thinkers who saw in both Rome and Greece—here, for our purposes, in Greek philosophy—a *preparatio evangeli*. This “preparation for the Gospel, The Good News,” was known and willed into existence by God through the eternal present of all three moments of time in His knowledge “of vision” as subsequent theologians were to put it.

It is very good to reason and if you do not reason you will probably not get out of your room in the morning. Today in the United States the school of Leo Strauss has hardened the distinction between faith and reason into an opposition. In so doing, that school has identified reason with philosophical reason. This last would be sad were it not comical. Philosophical reason is possibly the apex within the total range of issues about which all men reason. But that men reason in order to survive is an elemental fact of human existence. Unless I could link the proposition asserting that “door knobs exist in order to open doors” with the proposition “this is a doorknob,” I could never open a door. But I want to open the door! Behind all reasoning is an *eros*, often humble and practical such as getting out of a room, often sublime, as desiring to know God. The condemnation of philosophical reasoning carries with it implicitly the awful condemnation of all reasoning. Driven to its extreme, mankind would perish in a week. The Reformation’s attack on philosophical reason never went this far nor has any attack on reason because if reason is condemned then mankind is condemned to oblivion—not over the long-haul but right now, in a few days! More intelligible—dare I say reasonable?—is Karl Barth’s insistence that everything man does is sinful and hence his own theologizing, which involved plenty of philosophizing for good or for evil, is sinful. This existential guilt in simply being at all was fingered brilliantly by Kierkegaard who suffered in his own life its hideous consequences. By a sinister analogy I am reminded of the Albigensian condemnation of sex along with its condemnation of all matter. But if this is the way we are, then sin along merrily because you can’t do anything else anyhow! Luther’s *pecca forte*, “sin strongly,”
before his own time in the Albigensians and after his own time in his follower, Karl Barth. "Philosofari est rationari, rationari est peccare, Vivere implicat rationem. Vivere, ergo, est peccatum." The world is a sink of sin and at the bottom is that worm, man.

It follows that earlier attacks against reason which swept within itself philosophical reason were launched historically on religious grounds. The flaw has been indicated. Philosophy does not exhaust reason. It is rather a heightened instance of reasoning. If philosophy is evil in itself, then so too is the act—better yet, the network of acts—of reasoning constituting philosophy and much else as well. Throw out the one and you throw out the other. Hence all attacks on philosophical reason are at least occult attacks on civilization which is the work, not only of man’s imagination and will, but of his reason.

None of this hatred of philosophical reasoning disturbed the thirteenth century. The hatred is pre-medieval and post medieval. It leaps through the centuries from Tertullian and the Donatists to Luther, although there are intermediate stages. The medieval problem was quite the contrary. As a result of the introduction of Aristotle into western Europe in the late twelfth century, Christendom faced a movement, the Averroist, which claimed to interpret the Stagirite accurately and which taught the preeminence of Reason at the expense of Faith. Typical Aristotelian teachings such as the eternity of the world, the non-existence of God as Creator and Provider preached by Christianity, and the denial of personal immortality, were joined to the specifically Averroistic contention that the agent intellect is eternal, not personal, and that Reason has nothing to do with Faith. The Averroists seized control of the major faculties of philosophy in the West. Soon enough Bishop Tempier of Paris was complaining that his seminarians lost their faith before they began their study of theology. The situation was intolerable and could not endure for long. Well known is St. Thomas Aquinas’s confrontation with the Averroist Siger de Brabant on the question of the unicity of the intellect and the subsequent issue of personal immortality. Rampant Averroism was a dagger aimed at the jugular vein of Christianity. The famous Condemnation of 1277 by Tempier in Paris and by his co-ecclesiastical authority in Canterbury saved Christianity from being reduced to an epiphenomenon hanging on in pockets of the faithful in villages and castles, adhered to by peasants and knights who could neither read nor write, cut away from the mainsprings of Western civilization. Averroism did not die but it was halted by the Church and Averroism failed in its attempt to install its pagan vision of existence in the universities, the intellectual centers of Western culture at that time. 1277 is an epochal date in the history of the West.

So far as my thesis in this paper is concerned, what is important is not that faith swamped reason, which it did not, but that reason was prohibited from swamping faith. The vigorous confidence then rampant in the capacity of reason to achieve the truth had to be disciplined and structured within the context of a
truly Christian Wisdom. If a genus can be named from its highest species—good Aristotelianism—then permit me to illustrate my thesis by selecting what some of us consider to have been the highest species within the genus: the Thomistic articulation of the relations between Faith and Reason.

Often contrasted as though by contradiction with St. Augustine’s insistence that Faith itself is a prerequisite for philosophical understanding—credo ut intelligam, expanded brilliantly by St. Anselm—St. Thomas’s teaching is by no means as un-Augustinian as some scholars seem to think. But then again that teaching cannot be reduced to a footnote to St. Augustine’s corpus. Aquinas is sui generis. Possibly best approached by what The Common Doctor has to say about the issue in his Summa Contra Gentiles, his teaching centers around the twofold revelation of God to man.¹

Question: why reveal formally what is knowable by the simple exercise of the human intelligence? Was this not a redundancy on the part of God? Answer: this is not given by St. Thomas in terms of metaphysical principles; the answer is altogether psychological, existential, practical. Only a very few men, thanks to their talent and the fortuitous education of that talent, are capable of knowing these “revelabilia.” There seems to me to be present here a faint resonance of Aristotle’s and Plato’s insistence that education minus basic intellectual and moral qualities is intrinsically frustrating and their insistence that raw intelligence without education is equally frustrating. The two must somehow be brought together. The issue is political but the politics in question is foreign to Aquinas’s subject. Even if all this is granted, St. Thomas goes on, much time—years—are needed in order that these truths be known rationally. Yet God wills that man live his life by the natural law from the very advent of what subsequently would be called “the age of reason.” And, finally, even when these truths are known they are generally mixed with error due to the fallen nature of man. It follows that God, willing the salvation of all men, revealed to mankind truths which theoretically are knowable by natural reason, but which practically are known hardly at all by the many or are known imperfectly and mixed in with error by the few.

Let us note here the following: Aquinas has a high regard for what reason can do rationally, but this high regard is tempered by his awareness of the existential circumstances within which reason usually operates in any concrete human being. Were we to seek a parallel in the United States we might think of the mathematics teacher who enters a classroom in the “inner city” where poverty and drugs and broken families have so wounded his pupils that the rationality of his subject cannot be presented to them. Mathematics are abstractly rational but this abstract rationality is difficult to actualize, sometimes impossible to actualize under those conditions. Given that God wills the salvation of all men, He has revealed a hunger for these truths. They are known by Faith long before they are subjected to philosophical scrutiny.
St. Thomas himself indicated an almost nervous insistence that philosophical reasoning which is faulty not be used to defend the Faith. He spells out his motive: such fake reasoning will expose the Faith to ridicule by men bent upon denying her claims. Never try to prove what you cannot prove and—for the sake of The Lord!—never advance as a proof what is not one. The context here was the controverted issue concerning the eternity of the world. Our Faith holds that God created the world in time; better yet, He created temporal beings and before them there was nothing. However, insisted Aquinas, “being created out of nothing” is not identifiable with “having begun to be.” Something can begin to be, as holds the Faith concerning the inception of the world, but something could have been always and still have been created by God. Do not, St. Thomas argued, try to prove the temporality of creation because it cannot be done and if you attempt such a demonstration your metaphysics and your logic are faulty. Ultimately the issue depends on the Will of God. Knowing by Faith that He created things in time can neither be proved nor disproved. What can be proved is that everything created depends on His creative will. Go beyond that and you are advancing reasons which are not reasons. You open yourself up to ridicule by unbelievers.

It follows that Faith both moves the mind to think and Faith warns the mind not to think in areas which contradict that same Faith in God’s Revelation. Faith exercises this negative control over philosophical reasoning because unless it did so the philosophical reason in question could be shown to be, on philosophical grounds, bad philosophy. Faith thus helps philosophy to be better than it would otherwise be and Faith negatively helps philosophy from being bad philosophy. In the context of this study, please note the confidence in reason by St. Thomas. If you advance propositions condemned by the Church, your reasoning must be defective.

As indicated, some of the tenets of the Faith can be defended with irrefutable philosophical arguments but the Faith, taken as a whole, in globo, cannot be an object of philosophical demonstration. “Therefore the intention of the Christian disputing [with others] about the articles of faith must strive not to prove the Faith, but to defend the Faith. Whence Blessed Peter did not say: ‘always be prepared to prove,’ but ‘to satisfy’ namely, so that what the Catholic Faith confesses be shown not to be false.”

These considerations concerning reason and its relation to matters of faith seem to follow the curve of all education, be it an education in catechetics or in anything else. The late Dr. Yves Simon under whom I studied for a year at the University of Notre Dame was want to distinguish authority into substitutional and essential. The latter never dies such as the authority of the Magisterium of the Church. The former takes the place of some maturity not yet achieved by those under the “authority” in question. Authority, as Professor Alvaro d’Ors in Spain insists, is the social recognition of some truth or series of truths possessed by a

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person who professes them. I submit myself to the authority of a teacher: I take him at his word. He is the authority in mathematics, history, or philosophy. Only much later, if then, do I subject his teaching to my own rational evaluation. His authority initially is taken on faith. If it not be taken on faith, I learn nothing at all, more likely, I do not enter his class or the university in which he teaches. From this angle, faith precedes reason but this priority of faith over reason is itself reasonable. If I know little about subject X, if I want to learn more about subject X, I go to the authority. I do this with my health when it fails me; I do this with my automobile when it stops running; I spend my life doing just this—seeking the authority in this or that range of truths. It follows, as a general conclusion, that faith in authority is consubstantial with man's life in time. Without it, we learn very little indeed. The man who refuses to take somebody's word for the truth will most likely fail in his own search for the truth. Reason without Authority is simply inoperative.

It follows, almost paradoxically, that reason in its higher grades grows out of an initial acceptance of authority. In many cases this authority fades away, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes dramatically, when the former student now has mastered a discipline or a trade and begins to think for himself, to reason "on his own hook." This disappearance of "substitutional authority" leaves untouched "essential authority." For medieval man the essential authority of the Church concerning the Things of God never dies because these truths are revealed formally. The exercise of philosophical reasoning, however, within the public orthodoxy of Western Christendom flowered in the High Middle Ages thanks to two postulates: (1) truth cannot contradict itself and what is determined by reason, if indeed it is so determined, harmonizes with what Christian men believe by faith; (2) reason, I have emphasized this earlier, is good in itself and its good consists in concluding to new truths, either practical or speculative. Should reason fail by concluding falsely, this is not due to reason but to a fault in reasoning. The confidence of typical medieval men in reason could not be more forcefully manifested.

There was a kind of compactness in medieval thinking that began to unravel at the Renaissance. Let me begin with Renaissance Thomism in its understanding of the relations between philosophy and theology. All reasoning is syllogistic: perfect Aristotle. All reasoning consists in uniting two truths hitherto not united, thus converting them into premises. This union or synthesis produces the conclusion. Conclusions, thus, are in fact new knowledge. They are contained potentially or implicitly in neither premise. If I know, for example, that the President of the United States is constitutionally the Head of the Armed Forces of the nation, I know one thing. If I know that the President at the moment of this writing is a man called Bill Clinton, I can conclude that Mr. Clinton is Commander in Chief of the American Armed Forces. A simple piece of reasoning. But if I knew one of these premises in isolation from the other, I could not conclude as I have.
Clinton is the American President: assume I know that and no more. There are loads of presidents and kings who are not commanders of the Armed Forces of their countries. If I knew the American Constitutional provisions concerning the presidency but did not know that the actual president is a gentleman named Bill Clinton, I could not conclude. Conclusions are altogether new. They mimic, in their own created way, God’s creative act. In Renaissance scholasticism, theology is crafted in the following way. One premise is taken from Faith. The other premise is taken from reason, usually philosophical reason. The conclusion is neither Faith nor Reason: it is Theology.

I confess that I rather like the doctrine. It has the charm of simplicity. It makes sense to me but it was not precisely the doctrine found in St. Thomas in the High Middle Ages. Every philosophical truth—for that matter, every truth gleaned by man through reason alone, be that truth philosophical, historical, or anything else—becomes formally theological when pressed into a theological argumentation. Of course, it remains materialiter what it was in so-called “pure” Philosophy, but now it is no longer philosophical but rather theological. The argument is based not on formal or material considerations, but in the final cause. We can readily see that the Renaissance theory already suggests some kind of distance between philosophy and theology, overcome by the use of philosophy in theology. Earlier, in the thirteenth century, we have St. Thomas, more concretely, absorbing philosophy into theology, converting water into wine—the figure of speech is his own. The conclusion seems inevitable: the philosopher who is a believer finds his own discipline absorbed into a far more serious enterprise, theology, itself aimed at the salvation of souls. We need only recall St. Thomas’s somewhat curious teaching, curious to us at least, according to which the man in holy orders who seeks philosophy for itself is guilty of the sin of curiositas. Seeking philosophical truth for itself is perfectly legitimate for a layman, but not for a cleric. Given that outside Averroists there simply were no such laymen studying philosophy for itself, Aquinas’s condemnation seems close to universal in the context of his age. Philosophy was thus totally the “handmaiden” of theology.

It follows that there existed at that time a compactness of knowledge reflecting a compactness in being. Distinctions are important but that which is formally distinct is united with all the rest in the catalyst of existence. Faith in no way is set up against Reason. Both are considered to be consubstantial with human understanding.

Catholic apologetics from the time of St. Thomas have always insisted that it is reasonable to believe in the truths proffered by Revelation but that same apologetics has always insisted that believability is not belief. Belief follows an act of the will. I can have a plethora of reasons urging me to believe but none of them nor all of them cause belief. This last, in matters religious, is achieved thanks to the grace of God. We can discover, however, any number of parallels purely within
the natural order which illuminate the issue at hand. I believe in the word of my friend. I have good reasons to believe in his word but none of them, nor all of them together, constrain my belief. To take him at his word involves an act of faith on my part, reasonable faith in this instance, but faith nonetheless. I vote for a man to represent me in parliament or congress. It seems that his judgements on the issues of the day correspond to mine, but I vote for him finally because I have trust, belief, in him to be my representative. I go to two or three physicians for their opinions on the cure for some disease I am suffering. Not being an authority in medicine, I must take on his word one or another of the specialists I consult. My decision to accept the advice of this rather than the other physician is ultimately an act of faith, hopefully reasonable faith but faith nonetheless. The young man deciding on an education in philosophy, let us say, takes someone's authority on which professor under whom he will study, on the university in which he will enroll, on which philosophical masters he should follow.

This last example is highly suggestive in the light of this essay. No young student can make his goal the mastery of all the philosophical traditions of the West, to say nothing of those of the East. Nor can he begin his studies with the goal of learning "Philosophy," capitalized. Such a capitalized conundrum is a genus having no being in reality. A smorgasbord approach to the study of philosophy is a waste of time. At the very best it can give a student a factual and historical account of what this or that thinker held, but it can go no further, simply because life is too short to examine the thinking and to follow the reasoning going into everybody's philosophical system. Henri Bergson once noted that a man needs a lifetime to master two great philosophers and it is more than likely that he will only have time enough to master one. It follows that in a special way authority operates in a philosophical education. This means, of course, that faith in that authority is a condition for the very development of the habit of philosophizing. The Catholic young man has the authority of the Church recommending to him the study of the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas. More often than not the only authority guiding other novices is the authority of their first instructor in Philosophy 101. The irony is compounded because he is likely to pontificate to his pupils that they never should accept any authority in philosophy. (His ignorant little charges dutifully write all this down in their notebooks, thus accepting his authority that there is none.)

Faith completely intertwines itself in the fabric of life and the man who believes nobody soon perishes. The more profound philosophical issue at hand is less man's acceptance of the Word of God than his acceptance of the word of any other man. That all reason works within some kind of faith was a proposition that medieval intellectuality found to be consubstantial with human life itself. That reason, almost any kind of reasoning, unless it be reasoning from the first evidence of sensation, can even get off the ground without faith in some authority,
seemed to be evident by the most basic inspection of how men operate in life, even within a twenty-four hour span.  

St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*—a work of his youth full of a nervous balancing of positions and a careful working through to his own conclusions of issues which in his more mature work are presented with a kind of marmoreal maturity—distinguished between two terminal acts of understanding. The first act, commonly called today “simple apprehension” but more accurately referred to as “simple understanding,” is the understanding of an essential complexity in an incomplex or “simple” fashion. I understand, let us say, “green grass” without affirming or denying that the grass outside my window this morning is or is not green. Existence is abstracted from space and time. Comparable to a visual image which freezes the mobility marking all temporal beings, this act is like a snapshot of the real. (The analogy was first drawn by Fr. Joseph Owens.) The photograph halts the passage of time, freezes all motion even local motion which is the only aspect of the dynamism of reality caught by vision. (This analogy was first explained in our time by Ortega Y Gasset.) This quasi timelessness of the visual is an analogue to the timelessness of the concept. The second act of the human intellect is called today judgement and it consists of the intellect composing and dividing and simultaneously affirming or denying: “the grass is green—right now in this instant!” Aquinas notes that some call this act *fides* or “faith.”

The text on the surface contains something of a problem to the exegete. Belief or faith, after all, is itself a subdivision of judgement: all faith is judgement but not every judgement is faith. Setting aside the Arabic and Avicennian origin of the terms. I have suggested the following resolution to the problem. Because judgements, at least those of the third adjacent where predicates are composed with subjects, are an intellectual composition affirmed (or denied) to correspond to an existential “here-and-now” actual composing found in being; because the very “to be” (*esse*), although signifying absolutely that something is, consignifies the union of predicates with subjects: because the being of material things, their very existing, consists in a “being-composed”; because this “being composed” is not something “over-and-done-with” but an active “here-and-now-doing,” exercised in the present and thus signified in the present tense; because “belief” is ultimately an affirmation of what is said, spoken; because speech, again, is fluid—its being, like the being of music—consists in its “now being spoken,” belief—our response to the spoken word—indeed does mimic the very structure of judgement itself which, in turn, intentionally reiterates the fluidity of created existence.

In summation: the fluidity of the being of this passing world, gone in a twinkle even as I try to fix it before my intelligence, mirrors analogically the fluidity of speech. Belief, faith, is ultimately belief in what is *said*, what is *told*, person to person and only later, if then, frozen into written signs perduring on parchment.
and paper after the spoken word has given way to silence. To believe in anything is to believe in somebody speaking, in his word.

If we add to these metaphysical and epistemological considerations the truth that man’s entire cognitive life is woven into a texture which in large part is composed of a tissue of beliefs, the analogy drawn by Aquinas takes on deeper significance. To affirm and to deny is to live within the world surrounding us, including the world of science, technology, and even all culture. This involves spending—I hazard the guess—better than half our conscious lives in taking somebody else’s word on the truth of this or that. Sound opinion, which always involves accepting on faith the authorities, auctoritates, is the very condition for any life which transcends the most primitive of conditions.

That the Word of God cannot be reduced to reason is evident. This evidence is rendered all the more—how shall I put it? reasonable?—when we note that faith in anybody’s word is incapable of being reduced to the rationality going into its acceptance. Some startling conclusions follow from these considerations. A sharp division, producing a separation, is simply impossible ontologically and psychologically. We live by faith and by reason. If I have no faith I will never enter into the study of any discipline. If I have no faith I will shrivel into a solipsism prohibiting my getting out of bed in the morning. I will cease to be a human being. Many lunatics are men of reason who have renounced all faith.

The first mark of animal rationality is significative language. As a small child I am told that certain behaviour is dangerous—touching a flame in the fireplace; walking through a closed window; petting a snarling dog. As I grow older, I am instructed—by word of mouth—that this behaviour is acceptable and the other is not. I am guided by the authority of my elders to this or that university. And in all of my life I am constrained to consult a plethora of authorities on the status of my health, my automobile, my finances, my travel agent, and just about everything else pertaining to me. Being “told the truth” is consubstantial with moving about in the world. Thanks to faith, many acts of faith in many authorities, I commence to reason. Without that network of faith I would never reason at all because I would be dead long before I had a chance to flex the spiritual muscles of my rationality.

The so-called opposition between faith and reason, intended to be a wall of separation between the things of religious faith and those of philosophical reason, have hardened into a kind of cartoon in which one character stands for Faith and the other for Reason, as in a Punch and Judy puppet show. But in real life neither the Punch of Reason nor the Judy of Faith could stand on their feet for more than a few minutes. The so-called “Man of Reason” must have faith if only in his masters who have taught him that faith has nothing to do with reason. The so-called “Man of Faith” without reason would equally fall into a ditch as soon as he were asked for reasons for his Faith. Indeed the line cannot run from Philosophy understood as

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Reason and Faith understood as Theology. Theology is an exercise of reason by reasonable men who think about the content of that in which they believe. Reason is as operative in Christian theology as it is in everything else. In both cases the reason might be good or bad reason but reason it remains. The Catholic affirmation of the rationality of Faith in Christ and His Church, not provable by reason, is not only more rational than the denial by advocates of reason divorced from faith: it is more reasonable because the latter cannot be lived. If not a logical impossibility, reason without some kind of faith—indeed, plenty of faith—is an existential impossibility, a nothing for man.

Among the most remarkable doctrines proclaimed by the Church is found in the insistence by Vatican I that the existence of God can be known by reason. By an astonishing paradox, which looks like a Chestertonianism years before Chesterton, is the affirmation that we Catholics must hold on faith the proposition that God’s Existence can be known by reason. The defined doctrine is so striking that I beg leave to quote it:

_Eadem sancta mater Ecclesia tenet et docet, Deum, rerum omnium principium et finem. naturali humanae rationis lumine e rebus creatis certo cognosci possit: “Invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta, conspicientur.”_6

The same Holy Mother Church holds that God, the principle and end of all things, can be known certainly by the light of reason from the things He has created. Following is the famous text from St. Paul to the Romans: “The invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen being understood by the things that are made” (Romans: 1, 20).

In an age of irrationalism Faith came to the defense of Reason and although the Council wisely refrained from canonizing any given demonstration for God’s existence it insisted that His existence can be known by the use of human reason. It does not take a genius, not even a man whose intelligence is annealed by the habit of metaphysics, to reason to the existence of God, of a Lord over all being. St. Paul is not condemning the Romans for not being metaphysicians. Any reasonable man, moderately endowed intellectually, whose will is bent on discovering the rationality of his own life, can come to know that there is a God. There are a plethora of proofs affirming the reality of God: e.g., the famous “Five Ways” gathered from previous authors by St. Thomas in the *Summa Theologiae*: his “metaphysical” demonstration in the *De Ente Et Essentia*; Newman’s “Moral Proof” from his *Grammar of Ascent*; Maritain’s “Sixth Way” and others as well. We have this natural accessibility to God on the word of St. Paul in *Romans* and that document is Sacred Scripture revealed by God. I know of many medieval instances in which

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Reason came to the defense of Faith but Vatican I here puts Faith to the defense of Reason. Behind the document is the perennial Catholic insistence that man’s nature, including his reasonable nature, is substantially good and capable of delivering the goods it promises, the truth, even to the truth that God Is. Consubstantial with the affirmation of the good of reason is the affirmation of the goodness of creation, itself capable of signalling to man its Author.

The enemies of the Faith, when they raise the banner of Reason, are men of bad faith. We must insist that they narrow their attack on us until it emerges for what it is: not an attack on faith but an attack on our Faith, an attack not launched in the name of reason but launched from some other source, possibly “the halo of hatred that surrounds the Church of God,” in the words of Gilbert Keith Chesterton.

Catholic apologetics for this moment in history must not give way to the enemy his own premise: Faith and Reason are hostile to one another. They are not essentially hostile because reason in most human affairs follows on faith, as argued. Nor can they launch their attack on the more specific grounds that philosophical reason is hostile or indifferent to Faith. It is not.

Medieval intellectuality, thanks to questions proffered by the Faith, questions abstractly capable of being presented to anyone but in fact presented only to Christian men because they were Christian, yielded fully rational answers that are the patrimony of the whole race. This fruitful synthesis of Faith and Reason, Philosophical Reason, brought into being an intellectual tradition from which all others ought to be evaluated. Everybody philosophizes within some context involving some faith—faith in science, faith in man, faith in democracy, faith in the future, faith in language, faith in the Lord knows what. Our philosophy has grown up philosophizing, as have all others, promoted by questions that have emerged out of our faith in the authorities, crystallized into history by the cultures in which we live.

Any venture aimed at re-evangelization must be aimed, among other things of course, upon insisting on establishing the reasonability of Faith. We must always bear in mind that Faith is a gift of God and although that grace can be prepared for in a host of ways, Faith remains Faith. To someone who sees the reasonability of the Faith and who does not believe, our only response can be: pray and we will pray for you! God gives grace to those who ask for it. This we know from the infallible teaching of the Church. We must, therefore, deny any opposition between faith and reason and we must advance reasonable arguments in defense of our faith. Our apologetics might well note that the immense fruits of Catholic philosophy inherited from the High Middle Ages are due precisely to the fact that these fruits are Catholic.

We philosophize better if we philosophize as Catholics. Let me recall, in ending this essay, that St. Thomas Aquinas taught that nature is perfected by grace. The very nature of philosophy in its exercise, as well as in the specification
of the questions it sets to answer, is done better when the man philosophizing is a Catholic whose faith is not something extrinsic to his being but the spinal cord of his very existence as an intellectual.

Here I do not appeal to Faith but to historical experience. Look about you: see the chaos: savour the bitterness: contemplate the horror. That is the modern world! Is there anything reasonable about it? If you find nothing or very little appealing to defend, then you might well turn to an exercise of reason bathed in Faith. If you do so, you might well begin a resurgence of Christian Wisdom in our time. Few will heed you but if one or two listens to your message who subsequently occupy positions of power in our world, you will have done all you could do for the salvation of our civilization and for the men who live within it.

Notes

1. Summa Contra Gentiles I, C. 3-5. God reveals to man truths utterly beyond his rational comprehension. Aquinas evinces here the Holy Trinity and The Incarnation. But God reveals as well to man a range of truths that are accessible to reason. He mentions the existence of God Himself, the indestructibility of the human soul, and the natural law. God has formally revealed these truths through His Church but they are knowable by man’s reason.

2. “Sic ergo patet quod in hoc quod dicitur aliquid esse factum a Deo et nunquam non fuisse, non est intellectui aliqua repugnantia.” (De Aeternatiate Mundi, ed. Leon, 88: 211-213).

3. Ad hoc igitur debet tendere Christiani disputatoris intentio in articulis fidei, non ut fidem probet, sed ut fidem defendat: unde et beatus Petrus non dicit parari semper ad probationem,...ut scilicet rationabiliter ostendatur non esse falsum quod fides catholica confitetur” (De rationalibus fidei, c.2).


5. Even in the most simple and direct affirmations I make, faith is often operating. I am told that if I switch the ignition button on my car (usually to the right), that my engine will fire up and I can drive. I know nothing about mechanics, but I take the word of my first instructor in driving, and I have not been duped. Should the ignition not work one day I know that something is wrong with it and must seek a mechanic’s authority on the matter. Faith is operative (through the estimative and memorial senses penetrated by the intelligence) in the most basic acts enabling me to simply move around in the physical world.

Revelatione, 1806. 1 “Si quis dixerit, Deum unum et verum, creatorem et Dominum nostrum, per ea, quae facta sunt, naturali rationis humanae lumine certo cognosci non posse, anathema sit.”