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Most Rev. Jean-Louis Bruguès, OP

The Spirit of St. Thomas Today

I must confess that when I began working on this lecture, I first misread the title which was given to me as the focus of this two-day conference. I thought I read, “St. Thomas Today,” and so I thought to myself that without doubt there surely were several ways in which such a topic could be treated. The first one that came to mind was whether or not there is a Christian author today capable of creating a synthesis between ancient and modern thought, capable of expressing the breadth of doctrine in our own so-called post-modern intellectual context, capable of building a theological and philosophical “cathedral,” in other words, a contemporary St. Thomas? The response is obviously “no.” Certainly, we have theologians who work diligently, and who even blaze some interesting new paths – I think particularly of the work being done in the United States – but not one of them, at least to my knowledge, can even come close to the heights of Aquinas. This is because the spirit of our time does not lend itself to forming such a thinker.

The Italians have created an expression which I believe captures the contemporary intellectual climate: they speak of *pensiero debole*. We have to hear in this expression something of the anemia afflicting thought today. In fact, we would be hard up to form not only theologians whose works will be passed on to history, but also philosophers capable of one day figuring into the gallery of the great thinkers of humankind. Habermas, a philosopher who one might think of immediately, certainly offers an interesting approach to understanding that which has already been treated by the great thinkers, as famously recorded in his exchange with a certain Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger; however, but in that dialogue Habermas was only able to cite his illustrious German predecessors, of whom Heidegger was surely the last important figure. Now, without philosophy, there is no theology; and without a philosophy that is able to breathe deeply, there is no profound theology. I would add, even without being certain, that we can observe the same weakening of contemporary literature, at least in French-speaking lands.

I have spoken of “post-modernity.” Having become polysemous, the concept requires delicate handling. In a relatively famous work, the Scottish

philosopher who taught for many years in the U.S., Alasdair MacIntyre, estimated that based on the dominance of individualism and subjectivism, rational thought has been replaced by personal emotion. He thus spoke of “emotivism.”¹ When we say, “this is good,” what we really mean, he argues, is that “I find that this good and I ask that you say the same thing.” The emotional vagueness, often expressed with indignation, as for example in Spain, has ended up submerging all other considerations.² We have played emotion against reason, accepting that the affective has replaced the analytic. Just as the individual person has a universal value, and there exist as many different emotions as individuals, we have deduced that all emotions are equally valuable and interchangeable. And so, as Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly said, the “dictatorship of relativism” has imposed itself on us.

Has another step now been taken? Recently, we have begun to hear of conversations about having arrived at the point of “post-truth” thought. This expression has come to mean the refusal to speak about things as they are, or the transfiguration of what is real into piece-meal inventions of partial affirmations that seem true. The lie pays, it is said, so why should it be condemned? The most troubling things without a doubt are to come now that we have entered into a virtual era: the real is evaporating. The French sociologist Jean Beaudrillard has thus defended his thesis of the “de-realization of the world.” Discovering the truth, in this worldview, has become an impossible search. Is the expression “post-truth” a fleeting phenomenon, or does it indicate that we have embarked upon a new era? It is still too early to know.

Faced with such exhaustion, we are condemned once again to look for sources of living water in our memory, and thus ask fresh questions of those who have gone before us. Why not turn to St. Thomas? It is thus that I have made sense of the title of this international conference for which I have the honor of delivering the inaugural address this morning: *The Spirit of St. Thomas Today*.

¹ Cf. A. McINTYRE, *Après la vertu*, PUF, Paris, 1997. The first printing of this work was in 1981.

² Cf. J. ROMAIN, *La Dérive émotionnelle*, Lausanne, L'Age d'Homme, 1998.

I.

We need to recognize that we are coming back from far having gone far away. With your permission, in this first part of my lecture, I would now like to speak of my personal experience to illustrate this point. I entered the Dominicans of the Province of Toulouse in 1968. Some people think that I demonstrated my blissful ignorance by joining the order that year; and they are right. In that moment of history, the focus was on erasing the past. Nonetheless, I had the fortune of being accompanied by an older friar who taught moral theology. With the passage of time, I have become aware that he was very knowledgeable about Aquinas' thought. I experienced a relationship with him which translated all of the meaning of Dominican life for me. At one point, I was even his superior when shortly after my ordination I was elected prior of the friary in which we both lived. Since he had been my teacher, I was able to penetrate the arcana of the magnificent architecture which unfolds in the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*. "More rarely noted," wrote another Dominican from Toulouse in one his luminous volumes, "is an aspect which we would not know how to forget, but can only be rediscovered again and again: that the great novelty of the *Summa* lies not in its dogmatic section, but in its moral section, the *Secunda Pars*."³

Fr. Michel-Marie Labourdette, that older friar to whom I would like to now pay homage, had an extraordinary capacity which I have only found one other time in my life, in Ratzinger: that capacity to make you able to understand something complex, to be able to make clear that which is obscure. He was able to discuss the most thorny topics with such simplicity that you would be constrained to give each of them the most natural of solutions. It is true that each evening, in the solitude of one's cell, while seeking to reconstruct the problematic that had been studied together, you would experience great pain to retake the path and put into their true place each of the themes that had been debated earlier that day. In any case, it seems useful to me this morning to recount a lesson that I learned from Fr. Labourdette. In that time period, and not less so in France, moral theology had fallen into a state of great abandonment. They used to tell the story of how during a period of two years the seminarians in Toulouse did not receive any instruction in this area. In fact, they went on to say that it seemed that

³ J.-P. TORRELL o.p. *Saint Thomas, maître spirituel*. Initiation 2, Cerf/Éditions Universitaires de Fribourg, 1996 (p. 510).

this did not have any bad consequences. Reputed to be unrewarding and annoying, no one was willing to study or teach moral theology. After all, how could it be possible to be interested in morals after '68? As the popular song says, the sort falls to the youngest person. Thus, it came to be that I was directed toward becoming a professor and was asked to prepare to take on this abandoned chair of teaching.

Fr. Labourdette tried to encourage me: "We are asking you to study a subject that is not seen well today, but have patience: there will arrive a time when it will solicit the envy of others." In fact, by the end of the '70s, when they had claimed in the previous decade that "everything was politics," they were led to change the slogan and believe that "everything was ethics." Thus, the investors decided to place their money in the study of ethics. We began to look at nature with fear and compassion, and we were to suffer for her; we dreamed of a balanced and durable development in that study, which, with the passage of time, rigorously forbade any reference whatsoever to the natural law. We invented the field of bioethics to consider the issues surrounding the application of extraordinary discoveries in medical technology to human life. History at the same time destined that I be nominated by the President of the French Republic to the Consultative National Council of Ethics in 1997: a Dominican was recognized as a sage of the "lay" republic! In that moment, ethics became a "trend": everyone took to hiding in the complete disarray which followed. This first manifested itself with debates over terminology, as the word "ethics" came to be used in order to avoid the word "moral," as if the two words shared nothing in common. My old professor was right: the most neglected branch of theology would become that most sought after in a secularized society.

I was sent to teach moral theology, but how in such a context? At the end of the 60's and the beginning of the 70's, Western clergy were animated by a spirit which I would systematically qualify as "critical." The Second Vatican Council, as its first commentators who themselves formed a movement that can be called a kind of "meta-council" assured us, had helped the Church enter a radically new period in which the lessons of the past were no longer relevant. These same commentators would be engaged in lively battles some two decades later. However, at that time, the very idea of referring to the tradition and its great figures caused allergic reactions. It was impossible to even say the name Thomas Aquinas, under the penalty of offending others'

ears.⁴ I was dispensed from the systematic-critical arguments and “deconstructivism” of the teachers of that period because I was able to gather the last crumbs of those who were still teaching at St. Maximin. At the time, it seemed to me that there were still some lessons to draw from these men. Fr. Labourdette gave me one last piece of advice, “Do your theology like St. Thomas, but without ever mentioning his name.” That is why for many years I practiced an “amphibious” Thomism. To tell the truth, however, I must report that many of my students found my approach “very modern.”

II.

Earlier I said that we are coming back from far away. In fact, things began to change in a radical manner during the 1980's. A historic shift is always due to a number of factors; and we can leave to experts the charge of identifying them. For my part, I would like simply to draw attention to what followed – something which no one expected – namely, the curiosity of a generation who practically received no Christian culture, for the preceding generation had refused to transmit to them anything but a secular patrimony. The young of the 80's knew that they did not know; and they sought to understand, so that they no longer had to share in the prejudices of their elders (for from where did these prejudices come?). They returned to the great teachers of the tradition to find answers. Thus, St. Thomas once again occupied a place in seminaries and in theology faculties. Courses and work groups flourished on either side of the Atlantic, and specialized institutes saw the light of day; Aquinas was even permitted to exercise an influence on the cathedra of secularized universities.

St. Thomas came back into the Church through the “main door” and I would like to explain how. The change which I am in the middle of describing owed much to the pontificate of St. John Paul II, that great “athlete of the faith.” He thought that a catechism would be an indispensable way to help the council influence the behaviors and mentality of the People of God. As this was the case with the Council of Trent, why would it not be the same for Vatican II? He launched this enormous project, therefore, after the Synod of Bishops of 1985. It is not necessary here to enter into great detail; let's simply

⁴ The letter which Pope Paul VI sent to the Master of the Dominican Order on November 20, 1974, to restate the importance of St. Thomas in the teaching of the Church, was received with a profound indifference, not evoking neither echoes nor commentaries.

say that I was asked to direct a small group of experts charged with the third part of the work, which focused on morals. The invitation came after an earlier preparatory version, which had been sent to the bishops throughout the world between 1988 and 1989, received the most significant criticisms because of how it addressed the Church's moral teachings (9,000 amendments, from the total 24,000 received, were directed at the section on morals). Thus, I was asked to present a project starting from the drawing board.

How to move the project forward? The idea came to focus on the anthropology presented in the first part of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* as the point of departure. The conciliar text based its teaching on human dignity on the fact that the human person is created in the image of God (§ 12). Today we are not able to appreciate just how revolutionary this approach was. For three centuries, while that which Michel Foucault called the "ethics of a code" was imposed as the dominant model in teaching moral theology, the importance of the creation of man in the image of God had been completely absent. By choosing to emphasize theological anthropology, the council went back to her origins, to the intuitions of the Fathers of the Church, and also to the thought of St. Thomas, who opens the *Secunda Secundae* of his *Summa* with this teaching. Pushing forward their research in parallel diverse approaches to the topic, the experts were able to elaborate an original synthesis between the articles of the conciliar schema and the Thomist intuitions. These can be identified as the following:

Art. 1: the creation of man in the image of God

Art. 2: beatitude and the Beatitudes

Art. 3: human freedom

Art. 4: human acts

Art. 5: the passions (of which the council barely spoke)

Art. 6: conscience (which must be joined with Thomas understanding of the virtue of prudence)

Art. 7: the virtues (not very present in the whole of the council's teaching)

Art. 8: sin

The first part of the section called "Life in Christ," which corresponds to fundamental moral theology, unfortunately has not drawn the attention of commentators. This is too bad, because then they would be able to verify that which I call the "strong Thomist tenor" of the magisterial document.

How, then, present in a second section of the catechism, particular morals? Was there another approach beside the use of the Ten Commandments, as presented in the catechism of the Council of Trent, or of the virtues, as in the writings of St. Thomas? The debates were lively. I particularly remember the exchanges on the subject one month while we were literally locked up in a villa in Frascati. Cardinal Ratzinger, who presided over our working sessions, led us with wisdom: particular morals will continue to be presented as based on the Decalogue, because the Christian people is used to this concept, but each prescription would be explained and illustrated using the language of the virtues. The first commandment, for example, refers to the three virtues of faith, hope and love; the second, the virtue of religion; the fourth would be articulated using the virtues associated with familial and political life; the sixth with reference to the virtue of chastity, and so forth.

As we might expect, the focus of public opinion following the publication of the catechism was not on the vast perspectives opened up by its text, but rather on such contemporary concerns as the death penalty, homosexuality, Islam, legitimate defense, artificial procreation, the environment and unemployment. I maintain, therefore, the following thesis: in the course of the 90's, Thomism came back with a vengeance, in a manner which has rarely been seen in history of the texts of magisterial documents, beginning with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in 1992, and then in two important encyclicals, *Veritatis splendor* (1993) and *Fides et ratio* (1998). These are what lead me to offer a first response to the question that I posed at the beginning of this conference: where can we find the spirit of St. Thomas today? In the great writings of the pontificate of St. John Paul II, and more particularly in the catechism.⁵ How can we make known the spirit of St. Thomas today? By making the "Catechism of Vatican II" better known and understood.

III.

I have to put everything which might seem like triumphalism in the eyes of some into perspective. In the beginning of his book, *The Aesthetic Problem in St. Thomas Aquinas*, Umberto Eco is right to recall for us the fact that "Thomas Aquinas has had the misfortune of being read more by his 'fans' than by historians." In fact, the study of the corpus of Thomas' works has been entrusted to only some specialists, in very special milieux, like Dominican friaries (but not in all of them!) or the rare university. It is only

⁵ Even St. Augustine is cited overall more frequently than St. Thomas.

two months ago, for example, that I participated in a conference in Bologna organized by the International Society of St. Thomas Aquinas. How many participants were we? About fifty persons, at most, many of whom were young lecturers, and among whom were many Latin Americans, particularly Chileans.

It is important to recall that at the beginning of the 20th century, Thomism was not only in a field of ruins, but a *terra abandonata* by everyone. Only the Italian and French members of the restored Order of St. Dominic, which was dying after it had been totally suppressed in France in 1791, were a kind of meager, indigent and solitary group who continued to study and teach it. Yet, how many rebirths have occurred since then! In this third and last part of my lecture, I would like to address what the spirit of St. Thomas might say to our own day and age. As is clearly evident, I count on the exchange which we will hold immediately after my lecture, for you to complete, or even correct, my ideas.

Let us begin by establishing some precision about vocabulary. The concept of modernity is, above all, used in the fields of culture and the history of ideas. Modernity, in broad strokes, refers to an intellectual, spiritual and institutional arrangement designed by the Enlightenment thinkers. The human – and the human alone – was able to take the reins of destiny and happiness into his own hands. With these men, it is assumed, reason had finally reached its full maturation. The foundation of modernity required a radical rupture with the assimilated past – which in a highly polemical manner was portrayed as the “reign of darkness,” marked as it was by superstition and prejudice. Today, we speak of “post-modernism” in order to express the feeling that the major convictions underlying modernity show signs of use, or more profoundly, have been shaken to their core. In the face of this, uncertainties seem only to multiply. How can St. Thomas Aquinas help us in our own day and age? One could answer this question, of course, in many ways, as I am sure will be done during the course of our conference. To me, it seems that Thomas could act as our advocate, trying to convince of us the truth of things and of the dignity of the human person.

The truth of things

Post-modernity corresponds not to a crisis, but to a situation; for a real crisis leads to a rupture after a climax has been reached. Post-modernity is based

on the collapse of human reason, or as the school of Frankfurt calls it, the “eclipse” of human reason. Irrationalism is expressed in particularly strong currents of thought, as we aforesaid, in the form of emotivism. The paradox of this rupture is that it concerns the human capacity of reason to be able to understand what is real, if the “real” exists at all, at the same time that human reason is asserting itself in the scientific field and in technical advancements unparalleled in human history.

St. Thomas allows us to confront this current situation, for he teaches us to have confidence in human reason and its capacity for truth. In the official letter that Pope St. John Paul II sent to me on March 11, 1993, marking the occasion of the centenary of the *Revue Thomiste*, while I was Provincial of Toulouse, he wrote, “Aquinas invites every person to untiringly care about the truth, for it is by scrutinizing with insistence that one comes to understand reality and the One who is its author.” Since the Real exists, so does being and so does reality. The human person is capable of apprehending what is real through a theological approach which makes him wonder at the divine goodness as it is reflected in creation; but he is also able to do so in a “simply” philosophical approach, for the exercise of human reason is a participation in the very intelligence of God. St. Thomas clearly explains these two approaches in his *Contra Gentiles* (II, 4): “The philosopher argues from the proper cause of things, believing in beginning with the first cause.”

The teacher thus teaches what I call the courage of truth. If human intelligence is an image of divine reason, and even a participation in its activity, then the human person must be able to face current questions with serenity because he is able to measure the stakes and to judge their ins and outs. Moreover, because the mind is free, we are able to escape a kind of conformism with dominant schools of thought. “Philosophy applies not to learning what men have thought, but to learning the truth of things.”⁶ Such an assertion runs contrary to the prevailing tendency to substitute philosophy for the history of philosophy; and to engage in philosophical conversations that are only able to consider the opinions of others in the face of any given problem. In short, such an approach prefers approaching philosophy as a gallery of portraits, rather than as a search for the truth of things.

⁶ *Sententia super librum 'De Caelo et mundo'* (I, XXII)

The dignity of the human person

The term “dignity” has become a key concept of modernity. On December 10, 1948, the then forty countries of the United Nations endorsed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. For the first time in its history, humanity gave itself a charter for universal conviviality, based on respect for our common dignity. The declaration reads, “The recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the human family and of their equal and inalienable rights is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Indeed, in the controversial areas of abortion, euthanasia, medical experimentation on the human body, or more generally in the area of social justice, human dignity occupies a central place. When it comes to recognizing – or not recognizing – the humanity of those at both ends of the biological chain, or when it comes to mobilizing public opinion in favor of urgent humanitarian causes, it is always on the side of Kant that the authorities endlessly repeat the principle: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity as well in your person as in the person of another, always and at the same time as an end, and never simply as a means.” According to such a worldview, our dignity would thus be reduced to a kind of freedom conceived of as the autonomy of the subject. This might be a strong argument, but it is a little too dry for my taste. Thus, I wonder if we might join our fervor for human dignity to academic rigor, and ask what St. Thomas himself thought about the matter. He puts it in these terms, “The dignity of a reality means that it is good for what it is and for its own sake, while its usefulness means that it is good only in view of something else.”⁷ It is noteworthy that he underlines something that has an intrinsic value. Thus, human dignity is not linked to any social recognition, it is not granted by membership to a group (which could decide to expel a person from it), and it is not determined by a procedural approach. It intrinsically belongs to the person because he or she is the image of God. In this sense, to speak of the dignity of the human person is almost an exaggeration, because the origin of this term evokes a particular distinction which makes someone, as in the case of the Greek heroes, a considerable person, or someone who is to be held in the highest regard by others. We are reminded of Sophocles’ words, “There are many marvels in the world, but there is none greater than man...for speech, thoughts as lively as the wind, the aspirations of the soul from which are born the laws and the cities, all of that, man has taught himself, as soon as he knew how to make for himself a shelter to shirk the elements such as frost and rain.”

⁷ III Sent, Dist. 35, q. 1, a. 4

In a remarkable chapter of his *Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas shows that the dignity of man is so great that that God has allowed it to be imposed even on Godself. Human dignity requires, as it were, a kind of “morality” on the part of the Creator. For God must take care of man for man’s own sake, unlike the non-rational being which he governs, not for their own sake, but as mere parts of the whole universe ultimately in view of the human person.

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A final point before we open up this morning’s first meeting for discussion. In the aforementioned letter sent to me when I was the provincial of Toulouse, St. John Paul II wrote, “Through a frequent study of the monumental work of the Angelic Doctor, the Christian thinker acquires a rigorous method and conceptual instruments which enable him to penetrate the sacred doctrine and to conduct an argument proper to account for the existence and perfections of God, within the limit of what can be apprehended by human reason.” It will be up to us, during this conference, to deepen this rigorous method and to better use the conceptual instruments developed by the man who was canonized on July 18, 1323, after 300 miracles had been attributed to his intercession. At the canonization, Pope John XXII reportedly exclaimed, “He made as many miracles as articles!” but alas, it seems that this beautiful phrase is only apocryphal.