THE MAIN CHALLENGES FOR RENEWING OUR CULTURE

In 2010 the late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago famously remarked: "I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the church has done so often in human history".

So the questions are: what challenges do we face in picking up the shards of our ruined societies? And what resources does the Thomist tradition have to offer to assist in this recovery operation?

Back in 1952 a very young Fr Joseph Ratzinger wrote this short poem. He said:

> However the winds blow
> You should stand against them
> When the world falls apart
> Your brave heart may not despair
> Without the heart's bravery which
> Has the courage to withstand unshakably
> The spirits of the time and the masses
> We cannot find the way to God
> And the true way of Our Lord.

So, my first point is that we live in a time of Confessors or white martyrs. In theological parlance the term confessor refers to a saint who has witnessed to the faith and suffered for it but not to the point of death, and thus is distinguished from a martyr who suffers death. The term "white martyr" is also used to denote the same kind of Christian witness. Such people are not actually murdered for their faith, but they are subjected to an enormous amount of social opprobrium and frequently lose their jobs or end up in jail for engaging in some kind of politically incorrect speech or behaviour. In such times we need to remember the concluding words of Joseph Ratzinger's poem:

> Without the heart's bravery which/Has the courage to withstand unshakably/The spirits of the time and the masses/We cannot find the way to God/And the true way of Our Lord.

This is not a pious comment but a brutally real fact of contemporary Christian life in western countries.

If this is the primary spiritual challenge it comes accompanied with numerous intellectual challenges. At the macro level we are faced with the challenge of piecing together not only the shards of a once Christian culture but the very components of the faith which made that culture possible. We are in a ground zero situation where we can no longer presume that Catholics actually agree upon what the faith is and what the building blocks of Catholic theology are.

In this short paper there is not the space to explain precisely how the tapestry of the faith got torn apart over successive centuries. One can read the works of scholars such as Hans Boersma, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor to track the various moves on the chessboard of the Western intelligentsia to our current state. However, I would like to highlight just four important

shifts or moves which I think need to be challenged if we are to have any hope of collecting and rebuilding the shards. Two of them are medieval and two of them are modern.

The first such move was Franciscan nominalism which arose in the 14th century. It undermined the Thomistic understanding of the analogy of being. The consequences of Franciscan nominalism have been well summarised by Archbishop + Javier Martinez of Granada in the following passage:

> Once the analogy of being and the idea of being as participation in being was rejected by Duns Scotus in the thirteenth century and was substituted by the idea of the univocity of being, God had necessarily to be 'separated' from the world, and at the same time, he had to be reduced to 'a being' among others… this move was accompanied by other intellectual changes needed or provoked by it, all of which were loaded with consequences: human beings began to understand themselves and their relationship with the world as a 'copy' of this infinitely intelligent, powerful and capricious being that usurped the name of the Christian God.[1]

+ Martinez went on to explain that one significant consequence of this move toward the univocity of being is that one's own ego becomes the absolute and the relationship between one ego and another becomes dominated by "instrumental reason". Another consequence is that nature becomes 'a mere artefact, first of God, and finally, a commodity for human consumption'. Nature can no longer be a sign of anything else and this in turn sets up a barrier to a sacramental reading of nature.[2]

Without a sacramental reading of nature, the Catholic faith is like a body with its heart torn out. It may therefore be argued that what we might call "re-construction site number 1" has to be concerned with collecting the fragmented elements of a Catholic sacramental cosmology. We can have literally tens of millions of people roaming the earth who have been baptised as Catholics but if they have not the first clue of what we call a 'sacramental economy' or how the Persons of the Holy Trinity relate to them through space and time, then there is no way they can have a flourishing faith life. The theology of St. Thomas Aquinas can be a major resource for this construction site. So too can the works of Catholic writers such as the American Flannery O'Connor and the Orcadian George Mackay Brown, and no doubt numerous others in other countries and languages who have the talent to explain the Thomistic theology in a literary style which is easier for many people to digest. For example, there is a short story by Mackay Brown called "The Treading of Grapes" which takes the form of three homilies on the Wedding Feast of Cana. One is delivered in 1788 by a classically Calvinist Presbyterian minister, down on every kind of human enjoyment from wine to party dresses. He uses the story of Cana to berate his flock about spending too much money on their wives' wardrobes and drinking too much at weddings. He compared their enjoyment of ale to piglets sucking on the teats of a sow. The second homily is delivered in the 20th century by a modern liberal Protestant minister, who uses the homily to explain that Jesus didn't really turn water into wine. There was no miracle. Jesus was simply a responsible forward planner who knew that his apostles were big drinkers and saw to it behind the scenes that supplies were sufficient. Finally, one is treated to a homily by a Catholic priest delivered in 1548. Rather than berating people as piglets, or denying the reality of miracles, the priest tells his congregation

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[1] J. Martinez, 'Christ of History, Jesus of Faith', in *The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth,* edited by Adrian Pabst and Angus Paddison (London: SCM Press, 2009), pp. 26-27.

[2] For a more extensive treatment of this topic see: Tracey Rowland, *Catholic Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), chapter 3.

that at the wedding feast of the Lamb they will all be princes. Therefore, he says, I will call you Olaf the Fisherman and Jock the Crofter no longer, but I will call you by the name the Creator will call you on the last day—princes! Prince Olaf! Prince Jock! Mackay Brown gives his readers a window into a culture where the world is read sacramentally and Christian life is about the sanctification of the person in preparation for eternity with the Holy Trinity.

On building site number 1 we therefore need people who understand concepts like the analogy of being and the grammar of sacramentality and we need those who have the skill to portray these ideas in a literary form.

Not only did the medieval Franciscans undermine the Thomistic analogy of being, but they also made something of a mess in the field of moral theology and this brings me to the second intellectual move that now requires a new building site. As Livio Melina has explained in his book *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, William of Ockham separated the morality of the divine law from the natural morality of reason.[3] The construction of moral theology as an autonomous discipline separate from dogmatic theology was then confirmed by the typically Lutheran notion of ethics as a theological doctrine of duties and not as a doctrine of natural and supernatural virtues. Once morality is no longer linked to the virtues, including and especially, the theological virtues, morality undergoes its own process of secularisation. It is no longer associated with a likeness to Christ, a sharing in Christ's virtues no less, but with promoting the temporal welfare of others in society. This leads to a situation where Christian morality morphs into mere social utilitarianism and philanthropic altruism. Christian churches remain socially acceptable as providers of social welfare but not as promoters of biblical morality which entails the concept of personal sanctification.

The suggestion that there are gradations of moral excellence has therefore become the socially unacceptable side of Christianity in contemporary western culture. The French Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain referred to such a notion of moral excellence when he described human habits as 'metaphysical letters patent of nobility' that distinguish one person from another.[4] The idea that some persons might be morally superior to others because they have better habits or practices that accord with divine law is however an affront to every tenet of political liberalism.[5] In such circumstances many are tempted to take on the responsibility to promote the social well-being of others, but not the invitation to participate in the life of the Holy Trinity through the sacramental graces. Being a Christian is reduced to recycling the garbage and caring about people who come from socially marginalised groups.

There are two books where this sociological reality has been well documented. The first is *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* by Gerd-Rainer Horn. This work helps to explain how some of the strongest Catholic communities in the

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[3] Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For the Renewal of Moral Theology in the Light of Veritatis Splendor (*Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001). See also: Livio Melina, *The Epiphany of Love: Toward a Theological Understanding of Christian Action* (*Ressourcement*: Retrieval and Renewal in Catholic Thought, 2010) and *Building a Culture of the Family: The Language of Love* (Alba House Society of St. Paul, 2011).

[4] Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and Other Essays* (Nabu Press, 2010), p. 9.

[5] For an understanding of political liberalism see the classic works of John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971) and *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993). For an account of the various liberal defences of the doctrine of state neutrality which is an element of political liberalism see Tracey Rowland, "The Liberal Doctrine of State Neutrality: A Taxonomy", *University of Notre Dame Australia Law Review* 2 (2000): 52-66.

world (for example the Dutch Church of the 1950s) could within a decade become penetrated with Marxist ideology. As Horn moves from country to country citing the national student leaders of the generation of 1968 who in their time were household names, their biographies reveal one after another that not only did they have strong Christian formations, but in many cases they were former seminarians. Horn's thesis is that a utopian, messianic dimension of Catholicism overlapped with the secular ideals of the generation of the 1960s. Messianic Catholicism and Marxism captured the imagination of a generation and these twin forces reinforced one another.

The second interesting analysis is by Julie Pagis.[6] In her research on the Marxist student leaders of 1968, Pagis notes that as many as 40% of those she interviewed reported having experienced a primary religious formation. One of the key concepts used in Pagis' research was the distinction between "mass religiosity" understood in a Weberian sense as the need for ritual and institutionally dispensed supernatural aid (what in Catholic theological parlance is called a strong participation in the sacramental life of the Church), and what Pagis calls the "religiosity of the virtuous" which is less about sacramentality and more about ethics. Those whose formation fell into the type of the "religiosity of the virtuous" were the more easily attracted to Marxist political movements. When these types entered their university years a significant percentage of them ended up detaching themselves from the religious milieu of their childhood and became militant social activists. Today this phenomenon continues but the attraction is no longer to Marxism in a pure form but to a cocktail of ideas that have their origins in a variety of anti-Christian philosophies, including Frankfurt School-style Marxism and Nietzschean-style post-modernism. Gender ideology is a classic example of such a cocktail.

Our second construction site therefore needs to rebuild the links between sacramental theology and moral theology, between dogmatic theology and moral theology and between soteriology and moral theology. We need to resituate ethics on strong biblical and especially Christological foundations so that all human action is seen from the perspective of eternity. This was one of the major reconstruction projects of the pontificate of St. John Paul II. His suite of Trinitarian encyclicals –*Redemptor Hominis, Dives in Misericordia* and *Dominum et vivificantem*– provided the anthropological back-drop to his two explicitly moral theology encyclicals *Veritatis splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae*. It is well known that it was the moral theology of the Thomist Servais Pinckaers OP which undergirded the two moral theology encyclicals. What this particular construction site does is to situate morality, including sexual morality, within the context of Trinitarian theology. Nothing could be further from the secularising trajectory which began with Ockham and reached its height in Kant's desire to defend Christian morality by reference to reason alone.

Construction site number two therefore needs to continue to build on the foundations laid by St. John Paul II and scholars such as Servais Pinckaers and Livio Melina in the fields of theological anthropology and moral theology, including, of course, John Paul II's catechesis on human love. The Thomistic understanding of the theological virtues and their interaction with the various faculties of the soul and with the life of grace mediated through the sacraments are all component parts of these foundations. So too are many elements of the works of St. Bonaventure, the Seraphic Doctor, who should not be tarred with the same badly smelling brush as the nominalist contributors to the Franciscan tradition. The "Lublin Thomism" of St. John Paul II is also highly important in this context because it deepened the Thomist tradition by incorporating the dimension of human

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[6] Julie Pagis, 'The politicization of religious commitments: Reassessing the determinants of participation in May '68', *Revue Française de Science Politique* Vol. 60 (1), (2010), 61-89.

subjectivity, which is a major concern in the contemporary world but not something addressed by St. Thomas himself.[7]

Moving now from these two medieval moves on the intellectual chessboard to movements in our own times, the third intellectual junction to be highlighted is that of the influence of Frankfurt School social theory upon Catholic theology in the second half of the 20th century and beyond. A major crisis in Catholic fundamental theology over the past half-century has been the issue of whether the faith is something received as a gift that does not change from one generation to another, or whether it is something personally constructed anew as the ecclesial community moves through time. In his article 'Theology and Praxis' published in 1973, Charles Davis, who was for a time a British Jesuit, drew attention to the development of a completely new approach to the understanding of history, tradition and revelation among Belgian and Dutch theologians in the 1960s. Many of these abandoned Plato and Aristotle as theology's classical philosophical partners and took on the presuppositions of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory. Davis describes this seismic shift in the following terms:

> Fundamental for them [Dutch and Flemish theologians] as a consequence of their acceptance of the Marxist unity of theory and *praxis* is a conviction that the permanent self-identity of the Christian faith cannot be presupposed… Truth does not yet exist; it cannot be reached by interpretation, but it has to be produced by change. For these theologians therefore, faith is in a strong sense mediated in history through *praxis*.[8]

In the final paragraph of his article Davis asked the question: "Is theology, as [Edward] Schillebeeckx says, the critical self-consciousness of Christian *praxis*, or is [Leszek] Kołakowski right when he says: 'For theology begins with the belief that truth has already been given to us, and its intellectual effort consists not of attrition against reality but of assimilation of something which is ready in its entirety'?".[9]

Depending upon how this questioned is answered, one ends up with two totally different approaches to theology and arguably two radically different versions of Christianity. One presupposes that there is something like timeless truth, the other is strongly historicist in orientation.

For those of us who follow the position of Kołakowski, which would include all scholars in the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas and also of St. Augustine and contemporary theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, our third construction site needs to re-build confidence in the notion of truth. This must be done in a sophisticated way. No one is converted by being bashed over the head with syllogisms unless they are in some way "on the spectrum". *Veritas* needs

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[7] In this context see the following books and articles: William Norris Clarke, 'The Integration of Person and Being in Twentieth Century Thomism', *Communio: International Catholic Review*, Fall (2004): 435-47; Vilma Sliuzaite, *The Notion of Human Experience in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła: A Study of the Notion of Experience in the Light of an Adequate Anthropology* (Roma: Pontificiam Universitatem Lateranensem, 2013), Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), Jaroslaw Kupczak, *The Human Person in the Philosophy of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II: Destined for Liberty* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000).

[8] Charles Davis, 'Theology and Praxis', *Cross Currents*, Vol. 23 (2) (Summer, 1973), pp. 154-68 (167). For a more extensive analysis of this topic see chapter 4 of Tracey Rowland, *Catholic Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) and "What Happened in the Church and the World in 1968?" forthcoming in Tom Gourlay (ed), *1968. Culture and Counterculture: A Catholic Critique* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

[9] Ibid, 167.

to be rehabilitated from its association with syllogisms and "smart-alec" apologetics. While the Thomist tradition has traditionally been the flag-ship for *Veritas*, to defend *Veritas* today we need to enlist the support of an armada of additional authorities including scientists who are Christians. Among the more contemporary theologians the works of St John Henry Newman and Cardinal Gerhard Müller, would also be useful at construction site number 3. In particular Newman's *Grammar of Ascent* with its presentation of the illative sense would be helpful, along with Cardinal Müller's recent book *The Power of Truth: the Challenges to Catholic Doctrine and Morals Today*.[10]

My fourth and final construction site deals with the way in the Catholic intellectual tradition is presented. Here it is important to overcome the many dualisms that have crept into the presentation of the faith, especially the sharp separation of the disciplines of theology and philosophy, which is a very modern intellectual practice popularised by the Jesuits in the 17th century. While theology and philosophy are distinct disciplines (like the humanity and divinity of Christ) problems arise when the two are completely separated, so that some scholars only attend to theology and others only attend to philosophy without any integration of the two. Within the Thomist tradition this led to the habit of severing the philosophical components of the Thomist synthesis from the Patristic elements and presenting them in two completely separate courses. The great twentieth century Munich-based theologian, Romano Guardini, was highly critical of this separation, and for this reason his Chair at the University of Munich was called neither a Chair in theology nor a Chair in philosophy but the Chair of the Philosophy of Religion and the Christian Worldview. Similarly today at Sophia University in Loppiano outside of Florence there is no separate department of philosophy and theology but one combined department called the Department of Trinitarian Ontology.

These four construction sites are not the only ones that need to be undertaken, many others could be added, but the process of 'picking up the shards' needs to start somewhere, and these are four preliminary suggestions.

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[10] Gerhard Müller, *The Power of Truth: the Challenges to Catholic Doctrine and Morals Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2019).