

INTERPRETATIONS OF THOMISM THROUGHOUT HISTORY

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An exposition of the principal aspects and inherent difficulties in the interpretation of Thomism throughout history.

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The task of speaking on Thomism faces considerable difficulties. First and most obviously, there is the difficulty regarding terminology (in German „Thomismus“, in English “Thomism”, in Spanish and Italian “tomismo”, in French “thomisme”). Does the term “Thomism” simply express—as it is often the case in the Romanic languages—the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas as it is found in his writings, especially in his *Summa Theologiae*? Or does the term “Thomism” express—as is common in the Germanic languages—primarily the Thomist tradition, the so-called “School of St. Thomas Aquinas”? In this sense there is always a need to critically assess to what extent one’s positions are in accord with the teachings of Aquinas.

And secondly, who shall decide on which authors to include among the “Thomists”? While I was recently compiling—together with other collaborators—a list of names, which are to be included in the Lexicon of Thomists I am currently co-editing, it became clear to me for the first time how complicated and emotionally charged these discussions can be. The German editor of the

collected writings of Josef Pieper was so upset about the fact that Pieper had been included in the Lexicon, and therefore was considered a “Thomist,” that he refused any collaboration. A well-known American scholar reacted in a similar way regarding Gottfried of Fontaine. These discussions often take place against the background of the prejudice—which is still prevalent—that Thomists *a priori* are to be seen as shortsighted falsifiers of the authentic thought of Aquinas. We will return to this later.

The difficulties of speaking about Thomism do not end with terminology, but involve history, due to the fact that up until now there has been no comprehensive account of the history of the School of St. Thomas. It is often not easy to fit together the fragments, provided by often excellent studies on individual authors from this School, into a single and comprehensive account.¹

In addition to these difficulties there is the fact that the Church’s Magisterium has often spoken about this topic and continues to do so. This has prompted a discussion on the exact nature of the thought the Church recommends, a discussion which still continues.² These discussions are further complicated by the fact that, especially with the older generation, the disciplinary measures undertaken by the Church in relation to this discussion (for example against F. Marín-Sola or H. de Lubac) still cause reactions.³

1. So O. H. PESCH, “Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology,” in P. VAN GEEST; ET ALII (eds.), *Aquinas as Authority*, Peeters, Leuven, 2002, p. 128.

2. Cf. Pesch’s criticism to my approach *ibidem*, p. 133, and as a contrast: J. VIJGEN, „Die heutige Autorität des hl. Thomas von Aquin im Lichte der Tradition“, *Doctor Angelicus*, 5 (2005), pp. 5-53.

3. Cf. N. LOBKOWICZ, „Der Beitrag der (deutschen) Neuscholastik zur Versöhnung der Kirche mit der Moderne“, *Forum katholische Theologie*, 20 (2004), p. 241-256. It does not seem accurate to qualify Maritain as an “insignificant” thinker (*ibidem*, p. 250). Incidentally, the article contains several material errors: for instance, the well-known German Thomist Ernst Plassmann becomes „Hermann Ernst Plassner“ (p. 244); Suárez receives an Italian first name (p. 245); Gustav Siewerth is declared a typical neoscholastic (p. 252); it is said that Garrigou-Lagrange was the opponent of Hans Urs von Balthasar most filled

Despite these serious difficulties, I will attempt in the following presentation to clarify some of the aforementioned problems in order to approach the complex phenomenon of Thomism.

1. THOMAS AND THOMISM

According to the present state of research, the first explicit usage of the term “Thomism” can be traced back to the beginning of the 18th century, and more particularly to a letter by François Fenelon from 1710. He writes:

“Il seroit à désirer que quelqu’un travaillât à montrer la naissance, le progrès, les variations de ce qu’on nomme ‘le thomisme’.”⁴

The fact that Fenelon is already saying that “one” should investigate more fully the phenomenon which “is called Thomism” indicates that this term was already commonly used. The relatively late appearance of the term “Thomism” should not hide the fact that this phenomenon existed *avant la lettre*. From the earliest times onwards, the followers of *opinio Thom(a)e* were called *thomiste* or *thomatiste*, since they—in contrast to the Scotists and Nominalists—expounded their teachings *secundum Thomam*. For instance, Arnaldo de Villanova in 1304, and shortly afterwards the Scotist Petrus de Aquila already did so.⁵

It is interesting to note that, during the time of the *correctoria* quarrel, in which the authority of Aquinas was still highly disputed, Thomas was clearly distinguished from his students, but at the same time the defenders of Thomas’s orthodoxy were allowed to reflect the decisive elements of the teaching of their master in a

with hatred (p. 252), although there is not a single passage in his entire works in which he even mentions Balthasar; etc.

4. F. FENELON, *Oeuvre complète*, vol. 7, Paris, 1851, p. 663.

5. Cf. H. SCHMIDINGER, „Thomismus“, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 10, Basel - Stuttgart, 1998, pp. 1184-1187.

correct fashion. So for instance —as Martin Grabmann in particular has demonstrated in his numerous studies— the much debated doctrine of the real distinction between *esse* and *essentia*.⁶ Besides this implicit acknowledgment, there are the didactic efforts of the early Thomists to report the doctrine of Thomas in such a way as to assist his followers in responding to criticism. One should also mention in this context the so-called *melius dicta*, which aimed at showing that the (real or putative) contradictions in the immense work of Thomas were the results of a legitimate intellectual evolution, and in this way tried to soften these contradictions. The works of these Thomists also intended to clearly expose and highlight the central elements of the thought of Aquinas.

Together with the increasing reputation of Thomas, first within the Dominican order, and after his canonization by Johannes XXII (1323) throughout the whole of the Catholic world, the situation slowly began to change. This evolution is clearly visible in the work of Johannes Capreolus (to whom I return later): from the early Thomist school onwards, more and more scholars started to rely upon Aquinas. This development is closely linked to the origin of the commentaries on the *Summa Theologiae*. It is fitting in this respect that Johannes Tinctoris of Cologne (†1496) was the first theologian outside the Dominican order to write a commentary on the *Summa Theologiae*.⁷ Supposedly this custom was brought from Vienna to Cologne by the Dominican Leonhard Huntpichler (†1478). Already by the last decade of the 15th century there existed testimonies of lectures commenting on the *Summa* in Freiburg and Rostock. In Paris, the Belgian Dominican Peter Crockaert (†1514) lectured for the first time in 1507 on the *Summa*

6. M. GRABMANN, “Doctrina S. Thomae de distinctione reali inter essentiam et esse ex documentis ineditis saeculi XIII illustrata,” in *Acta hebdomadae Augustiniana-Thomisticae Romae celebratae 1923*, Romae, 1924, pp. 131-190; G. M. MANSER, *Das Wesen des Thomismus*, Freiburg ³, 1949, pp. 491-560.

7. Cf. U. LEINSLE, *Einführung in die scholastische Theologie*, Paderborn, 1995, p. 174.

in an auditorium. His Spanish student Francisco de Vitoria introduced the commentary on the *Summa* first in Valladolid, then in Salamanca. In doing so he laid the foundation for the great tradition of commentaries on the *Summa* in Spanish scholasticism. In the second half of the 16th century the status of the *Summa* as the fundamental textbook within the study of theology is already so widespread that even for the fiercest opponents of the Dominican school—the Augustinian eremites—it was natural to compose lengthy commentaries on the *Summa*.⁸ This greatly increased authority of Aquinas naturally led to the fact that his thought was explained in different ways, according to the context of the commentator. At the same time, every commentator tried to show that his position was most in accord with the thought of Aquinas. As a consequence, a variety of interpretations, various “Thomisms” arose—although this fact was not explicitly an object of study at that time. Together with these various directions in “Thomism”, an objection was heard again and again, in particular in regard to newly developed interpretations, which were directed against Thomism in the strict sense, that they had falsified the authentic doctrine of Aquinas or incorrectly applied his doctrine to contemporary issues. This leads to the fact that even someone like Martin Luther stressed the difference between Thomas and the Thomists:

“An alium habeatis Thomam in Italia et alium in Germania ignoro, nisi forte mihi suspicionem facere vultis, quod nec Thomistae Thomam, nec Thomas Thomistas intelligat.”⁹

Nevertheless, in his typically rude fashion, he called both of them names such as “preacher of the devil,” “jackasses”, and “pigs”.¹⁰

8. Cf. U. HORST, *Die Lehrautorität des Papstes und die Dominicanertheologen der Schule von Salamanca*, Berlin, 2003, pp. 31-33.

9. MARTIN LUTHER, WA I, 660, pp. 7-10

10. Cf. O. H. PESCH, *Martin Luther, Thomas von Aquin und die reformatorische Kritik an der Scholastik*, Hamburg, 1994, pp. 13-16.

When Pius V, towards the end of the Council of Trent, declared Aquinas a Doctor of the Church, this development intensified: Almost all theologians after Trent called upon Aquinas and identified themselves in one way or another as Thomists. This becomes clear in the legendary debate about grace, the *controversia de auxiliis*, in which the correct interpretation of the doctrine of Aquinas forms an integral part. In the beginning at least, the Jesuit side is very careful to lay claim to the doctrine of Thomas.¹¹ And even the term “Bañezianism”, used to describe the classical Thomism, which adhered strictly to the teaching of Aquinas, is of a much later date.¹² In fact one can see a significant development within classical Thomism: In reaction to lenient interpretations of Thomas, above all by Jesuits, there arose a trend of emphasizing much more explicitly that one wants to follow Thomas *per omnia et per omnia*. This also implied distancing oneself from the old school of Thomists regarding those elements, which were, from the perspective of classical Thomism, not enough differentiated from Scotism or from innovations of Protestantism and Molinism (including the followers of Suárez).

The authority of Aquinas became so important that it is said that John of St. Thomas even swore on his deathbed that in the last three decades of his life he had never written or said anything, which did not comply with the doctrines of St. Thomas. Likewise we know from the 17th century, that not few Thomists, like for instance Xantes Mariales of Venice (1580-1660), regarded St. Thomas as inspired and infallible.¹³ Accordingly, the judgment

11. Molina, for instance, appeals time and again to Thomas: “quem veluti scholasticae Theologiae solem ac principem sequi decernimus” (*Concordia*, prol., Ed. Paris, 1876, II), but in the end has to admit in some passages, that he differs from Thomas: *ibidem*, q. 14, a. 13, disp. 26, Ed. Paris, p. 125.

12. Cf. N. DEL PRADO, *De gratia*, III, 1907, pp. 427-467: “Utrum Bannezianismus sit vera comoedia a Molinistis inventa”; R. GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE, *Synthèse thomiste*, Paris, 1946, p. 689: “Bannez ne dit ici rien de plus que saint Thomas, et l’on voit de mieux que la dénomination de Bannézianisme pour désigner le thomisme classique n’est qu’une mauvaise plaisanterie ...”

13. Cf. D. BERGER, „Xantes Mariales: Thomistischer Dominikanertheologe (1580-1660)“, in *BBKL*, vol. 18, 2001, pp. 859-861

of the strict Thomists regarding those who only adhere to Thomas in a wider sense, or who in fact only want to use his name, is quite harsh. An otherwise prudent thinker like Billuart even implies that they want to hide behind their own mistakes and moral misbehavior by referring to Thomas.¹⁴

While Thomism in many parts of Europe suffered immensely from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, it revived in the context of Neo-scholasticism —together with the problems we mentioned above. This was intensified by the epochal Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* by Pope Leo XIII. A contemporary witness, the Dominican scholar Ceslaus M. Schneider, noted at that time:

“About twenty years ago the author witnessed how in the philosophical classrooms the exact same sentences, which today are defended in those books written ‘according to the mind of St. Thomas’, were then taught as explicitly aimed against St. Thomas.”¹⁵

As Josef Pieper convincingly showed, the effort to read their own theses “into Thomas” and in this way to claim validity for their theses stood in the background of this strategy.¹⁶ This went so far that, during those times in which one notices the beginning of a Thomistic Renaissance in the whole of Europe, it was not uncommon to speak at the same time of the “misery of the interpretation of Thomas.”¹⁷

The urgent need, therefore, to distinguish clearly between the doctrine of Aquinas and the “Thomistic” doctrine became more pressing. In the German language this distinction is made by using the terms „thomasisch“ or „thomanisch“ to refer to the doctrine of Aquinas, while the term „thomistisch“ is used to refer to the

14. CH. R. BILLUART, *Summa Sancti Thomae hodiernis academiæ moribus accomodata*, vol. 1, præfatio.

15. C. M. SCHNEIDER, *Die katholische Wahrheit oder die theologische Summe des hl. Thomas von Aquin*, vol. 1, Regensburg, 1886, p. LXII.

16. J. PIEPER, *Thomas von Aquin*, München³, 1986, p. 36.

17. A. STOLZ, „Das Elend der Thomasinterpretation“, in *Benediktinische Monatsschrift*, 14 (1932), pp. 158-161.

Thomistic tradition. No matter how justified this demand was in principle, the fact remains that in the German-language research on Aquinas this demand was made by those who could only regard Thomism as a distortion and falsification of the authentic doctrine of Aquinas.¹⁸ This fact did not favor the acceptance of this distinction by the strict Thomists but was gladly used by others ...¹⁹

In light of the fact that the “history of Thomism in critical comparison with Aquinas has been written neither for philosophy nor for theology”,²⁰ it naturally would be completely mistaken to immediately agree or disagree with this distinction or to uncritically adhere to the generalized prejudice of the distortion of Aquinas’s thought by Thomism. At any rate, it is worthwhile to hold on to the fact described by Romanus Cessario: “It is evident that without Thomas there would never have been Thomism. But it is also evident that without the laborious Thomists, there would have been little which would have remained of Thomas today.”²¹

In addition, there is the insight of hermeneutics, according to which understanding is only possible by entrance into a community of interpretation, which surpasses the moment of what is being understood here and now.

2. THOMISM AS A CONTINUING DEFENSIVE ATTITUDE

A further aspect which I, in view of an approach to the phenomenon of Thomism, find important, is a defensive attitude, which has marked the entire history of Thomism. One could even

18. Cf. R. MARKOVICS, *Grundsätzliche Vorfragen einer methodischen Thomasdeutung*, Rom, 1956, p. 3.

19. Cf. etwa K. RAHNER, *Geist in Welt*, Innsbruck¹, 1939, p. XI.

20. O. H. PESCH, „Thomismus“, in *LThk*², vol. 10, p. 156.

21. R. CESSARIO, *Le thomisme et les thomistes*, Paris, 1999, pp. 96-97, 117: “Sans Thomas d’Aquin, il est évident qu’il n’y aurait pas de thomisme. Mais il est aussi évident que, sans des laborieux thomistes, il n’y aurait pas grand-chose qui nous resterait de Thomas d’Aquin aujourd’hui.”

say that this attitude forms the decisive criterion for the division of Thomism in different periods, which has been up to now commonly accepted.²² This also applies to the early period of Thomism during the *correctoria* dispute, in which particular elements of the thought of Aquinas had to be defended against heterodoxy.

Even in the late Middle Ages one can doubtless say that Thomism, in general, “was continually in defense”.²³ It is well known that during that time it was not the School of Aquinas but rather the *via moderna* of Ockhamism which was the leading intellectual position. Following the title of the most important work of the Thomist school, the *Libri IV defensionum Theologiae Divi Doctoris Thomae de Aquino* by Johannes Capreolus, who bears the honorary title *Princeps Thomistarum*, the first great period in the history of Thomism is named the period of the *defensiones*. Capreolus’s commentary “can be defined as the historically most significant work which the Thomist school has produced to defend the doctrine of Aquinas”.²⁴

Capreolus uses the major part of his work to demonstrate that the claims of falsification of the doctrine of Aquinas by his school are completely unjustified, and that St. Thomas’s doctrine “already in its original development has precluded and answered subsequent objections in advance”.²⁵ In this principal work, Capreolus—in a strictly scholastic fashion— first summarizes the teaching of Aquinas relating to the matter at hand; then he presents the opinions of the Anti-Thomists who are to be combated (William of Ware, Petrus Aureoli, Durandus, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Johannes de Ripa, Gregorius de Rimini) in order to finally reject these opinions by referring anew to explicit citations by Aquinas. The immense prestige of the *Defensiones* of Capreolus

22. Regarding the question of this division, *ibidem*, pp. 40-53.

23. O. H. PESCH, *Thomas von Aquin. Grenze und Größe mittelalterlicher Theologie*, Mainz³, 1995, p. 29.

24. M. GRABMANN, *Geschichte der katholischen Theologie*, Darmstadt, 1961, p. 99.

25. *Ibidem*.

in the Thomist school, even long after his death, is demonstrated by the fact that Hieronymus Fantonus in the 16th century developed a much-used *Index in quattuor Capreoli libros* which, at the beginning of modern times, offered a compendium-like summary of the accomplishments of the most significant medieval Thomist.²⁶

This attitude continues in a modified form into the 16th century. The defense of Thomism against Protestantism (which had discredited for good the *via moderna* for the Thomists), against Molinism, and thereafter against modern philosophy in general (the era of the classical commentaries on Thomas and the *Disputationes*), played an important role. In the 19th and 20th century this was followed by a critical approach, above all, towards the philosophy inspired by Immanuel Kant, and—in the theological arena— by the battle against naturalism and modernism.

This attitude was soon to be dismissively judged as merely the “legendary combativeness” of a rigid school, whereas there was praise for those who wanted to change this defensive attitude to another of adapting Thomism to whatever seemed “modern” in a certain period in time.²⁷

However, the defensive attitude of Thomism may well be regarded as the willingness to engage in critical dialogue: such an attitude does not simply incorporate these tenets of thought which are incompatible with Thomistic thought. It therefore demonstrates that it takes its dialogue partners truly seriously. It engages itself in a dialogue with the contemporary tenets of thought of that

26. Similar works summarizing Capreolus were written by Paulus Soncinas, Isidor de Isolani (1522) and Silvester Prieras (1497).

27. Cf. for example Karl Rahner’s statements (SzT, vol. 10, p. 12): „Aber ich bin überzeugt, dass meine Interpretation richtig ist. Wenn man den hl. Thomas unter dem geeigneten Blickwinkel analysiert, dann ist es ganz klar, dass er ein *penseur moderne* ist“ - „in dieser Hinsicht wäre eine Restauration des bisherigen Schulthomismus und des diesem zugrundeliegenden unmittelbaren und fast naiven Verhältnisses zu Thomas ... ein Verbrechen [sic!] an der Kirche und an den Menschen von heute.“

particular moment on a high intellectual level, and in so doing shows that it is able to grasp timeliness as “the simultaneousness of the non-simultaneous” („Gleichzeitigkeit des Nichtgleichzeitigen“).

This would mean that the real timeliness of Thomism reveals itself wherever it appears strange and offering an alternative; wherever Thomas cannot simply be construed as a *penseur moderne*; wherever he, as antipode and alternative to the spirit of the age, shows himself especially helpful and therefore timely; wherever he —on the contrary— breaks through the superficial plausibilities which support the theorems of faith of any particular „Zeitgeist“; wherever his timeless wisdom places us in a painful but yet fruitful restlessness, breaks open the limits of our intellectual achievements and pulls us out our temporary home in order to lead us towards “an advance which surpasses time and the changing perspectives and periods in theology.”²⁸

3. THOMISM A SYSTEM OF THEOREMS

Finally, we should address another tension, which marks the entire history of Thomism: the tension between an interpretation which seeks to identify the “essence” of Thomism with a particular set of theorems and therefore focuses on its material content, and another interpretation which identifies the essence of Thomism with certain basic structures or methods and therefore offers a formal interpretation.²⁹

28. H. CH. SCHMIDBAUR, ‘*Personarum Trinitas*’. *Die trinitarische Gotteslehre des hl. Thomas von Aquin*, St. Ottilien, 1995, p. 17. See also what Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, following Ernest Hello (*Le sens du mystère*, Paris, 1934, p. 23), writes about the wise teacher: “Il nous irrite ... En nous arrachant à nos maisons, pour nous entraîner dans ses domaines, il nous inquiète et nous donne en même temps la paix supérieure ...”

29. Cf. D. BERGER, „Auf der Suche nach dem Wesen des Thomismus“, *Angelicum*, 79 (2002), p. 585-645.

Since the beginning of the Thomist school many have tried — especially for apologetic and didactic reasons— to identify the essence of Thomism by working out fundamental theorems, which could be handed over to future generations. A very popular literary form, besides the *concordantiae* and *tabulae*, were the *abbreviationes*: abbreviations or excerpts of the voluminous works of Aquinas, which presented students with the most important elements, the “intellectual core of Thomas’s work”³⁰ in the best ordered, competent, and swiftest way possible. Some outstanding examples are —besides the *Compendium Summae Theologiae* by Heinrich von Gorkum—³¹ the *Abbreviationes* of the *Prima* and *Prima Secundae* by Johannes Dominici of Montpellier, who served as *poenitentiarius* of Pope Johannes XXII. The prologues of these works show that the author consciously aimed at didactically working out the central basic theorems and guiding principles of Aquinas’s thought for further use by all those interested.

According to Johannes, those guiding ideas are like the salt in meals, since these indisputable truths, which serve as valid principles, prevent the entire *Scientia Sacra* from becoming flat and tasteless.³² John of St. Thomas, whom we already mentioned, also refers time and again to certain principles during his course on Thomistic theology. These principles, which serve as encompassing leitmotifs, not only give a clear structure to the

30. MARTIN GRABMANN, „Hilfsmittel des Thomasstudiums aus alter Zeit“, in IDEM, *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben. Abhandlungen zur Geschichte der Scholastik und Mystik*, vol. 2, München, 1935, p. 428.

31. He is also concerned about determining “the leading fundamental ideas of St. Thomas”: *ibidem*, p. 443

32. Quoted from *ibidem*, p. 434: “Necessarie rei humanae vite multiformis occupatio imminentis cure pervigil sollicitudo mentem nostram per varia distrahens interius animum minorem reddit ad singula, dum ipsum pariter et manum exterius protendit et indentem facit ad multa. In qua re fit, ut involuta doctorum dicta revolvere etsi libet non liceat nec latentes veritates de oscuro doctorali stylo in lucem producere nec eas dearticulando comprehendere et ordinate memorie commendare. Cum igitur venerabilis doctoris Sancti Thomae de Aquino ordinis Praedicatorum perutilis scientia et famosa, que in sue *Summe* quattuor partibus continetur, sit summe necessaria studiosis, sine qua saliente redduntur in sacris exercitiis infatuata eloquia et insipida documenta.”

different treatises but connect the different treatises and in so doing provide Thomism with a perfect synthesis.³³ The principles have mostly to do with these elements which are still today regarded as typical for Thomism: the analogy of being, the doctrine of the real distinction between *esse* and *essentia* in creatures, the intrinsic efficiency (*ex se efficax*) of divine decrees and grace, the essential supernatural character (*supernaturale quoad substantiam*) of infused virtues, the physical causality of the sacraments, the specification of acts, habits, and potencies by their formal objects, etc.

The work of the Dominican Antonin Réginald of Toulouse (1605-1676) exercised a great influence on the Thomist school. In his work *Doctrina D. Thomae Aquinatis tria principia cum suis consequentiis* (Toulouse, 1670)³⁴ he attempted to reduce the complete doctrine of Thomas to a few succinct, encompassing and unifying principles.

Following the Thomistic division of speculative knowledge into three areas of logical, ontological, and ethical order, he determines three basic principles:

“Primum principium illud est, *Ens est transcendens*. Secundum istud, *Deus solus est actus purus*. Tertium, *Absoluta specificantur a se, relativa ab alio*. Ex primo, majori ex parte philosophica profluunt; ex secundo, fere omnia theologica, quae ad speculativam partem pertinent; ex tertio, quamvis pleraque sint philosophica et speculativa, maxima tamen ex parte, moralia consequuntur.”³⁵

In the following books Réginald then shows, in which way these basic leitmotifs again evolve into a range of subordinated

33. Cf. R. GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE, *La synthèse thomiste*, Paris, 1946, pp. 54-55.

34. ANTONINUS REGINALDUS, *Doctrinae Divi Thomae Aquinatis tria principia cum suis consequentiis ubi totius doctrinae compendium et conexio continetur*, Parisiis, 1878.

35. *Ibidem*, p. IV.

basic theorems. He finds for the first principle alone a whole string of 978 further leitmotifs.

Another work of that period, which we should mention because of its originality, follows a similar procedure: the *Praecipuae Divi Thomae Aquinatis materiae in litaniarum rationem redactae* by St. Francisco de Borja S.J. (1510-1572),³⁶ the advisor to emperor Charles V. The author, praised for his strict penance and his spirit of praying, arranges all the central theorems of Thomism into nine different litanies. So for instance in the litany on God's attributes:

“Miserere nobis; Tu, qui es in te nobis ignotus.

Mis., ... Tu, qui es tuum esse, et tua essentia.

Mis., ... ”.³⁷

Or in the litany “de mysterio Incarnationis”:

“O anima Christi, quae ut instrumentum Verbi habes virtutem instrumentalem ad omnes immutationes miraculosas faciendas: miserere nobis.”³⁸

In this way the theologian wanted to offer a text, which would enable the reader to meditate through contemplative prayer on the important ideas of Thomistic theology. The ultimate goal consisted in penetrating into Thomistic theology so that the light of science would ignite the fire of true devotion.³⁹

Thomism in the 19th and 20th century assigned a significant role to this strategy. At first the three principles set out by Réginald found adhesion. Increasingly, however, the need arose to reduce

36. S. FRANCISCI BORGIAE S. J. *Praecipuae Divi Thomae Aquinatis materiae in litaniarum rationem redactae*. Ed. B. DE MARGERIE (Studi tomistici, 22), Città del Vaticano, 1983.

37. *Ibidem*, p. 25.

38. For the role of instrumental causality see my paper: „*Instrumentum nostrae salutis*. Die Rolle der Instrumentalursächlichkeit im Denken des hl. Thomas von Aquin aufgezeigt an der thomasischen Christologie, Ekklesiologie und Sakramentenlehre“, *Angelicum*, 82 (2005), p. 553-574.

39. Cf. the prelude of the work: *ibidem*, p. 22: “... ut non solum intellectus earum sublimitatem, et altitudinem assequi contentus sit, verum etiam voluntas flagrantissimis divini amoris flammis exardescat ...”

the many leitmotifs to one basic theorem. We mention only the excellent works by Norberto del Prado and Gallus M. Manser, who respectively saw the essence of Thomism in the doctrine of the real distinction between *esse* and *essentia*, and *potentia* and *actus*.

In this period the Magisterium also took up this interpretation, which focuses more on the material content. Most obviously this is exemplified in the well known 24 theses of Thomistic philosophy, issued by the Congregation of Studies. On the 27th of July, 1914, Pope Pius X authorized these theses, in which the Vatican Congregation of Studies by order of the same Pontiff approved a number of fundamental theses as undeniable parts of the doctrine of St. Thomas.

This document surely reflects the need for reduction we mentioned above. It is no accident that the first two of the twenty-four theses regard respectively the teaching of being as act and the division of being into act and potency. The real distinction between *esse* and *essentia* follows necessarily from these two theses. In this way the Thomistic doctrine receives a special meaning and form.

On the basis of these theses it is indicated, according to scholars then and now, that the “deepest root” of the Thomistic syntheses lies in the idea of being as being, which culminates in the *actus purus*, Being as a subsistent reality. Although one cannot remove from the synthesis of Thomism any one of the 24 theses without damaging the whole of the synthesis, nevertheless the thomistic notion of being is the life-giving root and the unifying element of all the other theses, the most basic element of the foundations of Thomism. These theses, however, quickly encountered fierce resistance, especially from German Jesuits.⁴⁰ The reasons for this reaction were not only a certain sympathy for Neo-modernism and the suspicion that this initiative imposed a strict Thomism on the entire Church; these reservations were also marked by a line of interpretation which saw Thomism mostly as a method.

40. Cf. the article in *Stimmen der Zeit*, 45 (1914) pp. 11 ff.

4. THOMISM AS A METHOD

We already find in John of St. Thomas, with all his emphasis on the important theorems of Thomism, an effort to analyze the basic structure or method of Thomism.⁴¹ He looked for the basic structure of Thomism in a specific interaction of the four causes of scholastic philosophy. This scheme forms the foundation for a “golden circle” in which all the theses of Aquinas are given a specific place. But in his thought, method and content are still interwoven in a balanced relationship.⁴²

At the beginning of the 20th century, due to the emphasis Hegel placed on the methodological aspect, the need was increasingly felt to bring the method of Thomism more to the foreground. At the beginning of the century, the Thomas scholar Rimaud remarks:

“Les mots diversement rangés font un diverse sens. Pareillement, les mêmes thèses essentielles diversement rangées font des philosophies diverses.”⁴³

The discussions initiated by Marie-Dominique Chenu about the plan of the *Summa Theologiae* are clearly related to this movement.

41. Cf. M. GRABMANN, *Hilfsmittel des Thomasstudiums*, p. 451: „Johannes a Sto. Thoma hat ... im Hauptwerk des Aquinaten mehr das ‚System der Entwicklung‘ als das ‚System der Anordnung‘ hervorgekehrt.“

42. JOHANNES A SANCTO THOMA, *Cursus theologicus in Summam theologicam D. Thomae*, vol. 1, Vivès, Paris, 1883, p. 191: “Igitur Divus Thomas juxta hanc triplicem considerationem Dei causantis, scilicet ut principium effectivum, ut beatitudo finalizans, ut Salvator reparans, divisit totam doctrinam *Summae Theologiae* ... Et sic a Deo in se, et in essendo, per Deum efficientem, et finalizantem, et salvantem, regreditur ad Deum, ut fruendum in se ultima gloria resurrectionis, quod est plane aureum Theologiae circulum complere, quem divina S. Thomae *Summa* circumgyrat.”

43. J. RIMAUD, *Thomisme et méthode*, Paris, 1925, p. 1. See also what Cardinal Cajetan writes in a similar way regarding the relation between *ens per essentiam* and *entia per participationem*: “Quoad rem vero, scito quod ista ratio in terminis communibus, communis est sapientibus fere omnibus; dissensio autem est in expositione terminorum et probationibus.” CAJETANUS, *In Iam Partem S. Th. Divi Thomae*, q. 44, a.1.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THOMISM THROUGHOUT HISTORY

And the philosophers and theologians associated with the reform movement in Catholicism saw in the method of Aquinas the only element, which had any contemporary significance. True Thomism consisted in adopting the fundamental attitude which was present in Aquinas: During his lifetime Thomas had revolutionized theology on the basis of new insights offered by other sciences (such as Aristotelianism); likewise we have today the task of adapting Thomism to a new situation without falsely taking into consideration the tradition. In the same way as Thomas in his own day incorporated Aristotle into his thought without falsely taking into consideration the Church directives, the task of modern theologians today consists of including the results of the secular sciences, above all modern philosophy, into theology and using them as guiding elements. The spokesman of this movement was the professor of philosophy Johannes Hessen (1889-1971) of Cologne, who expressed this theory in his book, *Die Weltanschauung des Thomas von Aquin*.⁴⁴

Despite the obvious anachronism underlying this interpretation, it remains even today the dominant line of interpretation in Germany. Contrary however to these rather superficial statements, the German Thomist Bernhard Lakebrink has in several works performed profound work in analyzing the method of Thomism as "Analektik."

The tension between identifying Thomism with a more material interpretation versus a methodological approach continued into the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council. While the preparatory commission had prepared a document (*De doctrina Sti. Thomae servanda*), which presupposed a more material definition of Thomism along the line of the tradition of the 24 theses, the Encyclical *Studiorum ducem*, and important statements by Pius X, Pius XII and John XIII, the objections against the document were raised from the perspective of a solely methodic approach.⁴⁵ The

44. J. HESSEN, *Die Weltanschauung des Thomas von Aquin*, Stuttgart ¹, 1926.

45. For the summaries of these discussions cf. A. GREILER, *Das Konzil und die Seminare. Die Ausbildung der Priester in der Dynamik des Zweiten*

actual texts of the Council, the passages of *Optatam totius* and *Gravissimum educationis*, then tried to find a middle way (*via media*) between both directions. The documents of the Council do not limit therefore—as a minimalist Thomism would have favored and still interprets it partly—⁴⁶ the authority of Aquinas to the domain of the relation between secular wisdom and theology, but Thomas is also according to the Second Vatican Council a Master “in so far as he worked out perennial insights.”⁴⁷

Such a middle way (*via media*) between a purely formal approach, on the one hand, and a too strongly material determination of Thomism, on the other, is recommended by the documents of the recent Magisterium, such as *Lumen Ecclesiae* and *Fides et ratio*, as well as by various statements of the current Pontiff [John Paul II].

5. CONCLUSION: WHICH THOMISM IS UP-TO-DATE?

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, we can only outline briefly some of the important aspects of the history of Thomism. Nevertheless allow me, by way of conclusion, to ask the following question: What remains of Thomism today? First of all, it should be noted that for the Catholic intellectual this question, in the context of the clear recommendations by the Magisterium regarding the thought of Aquinas, can not be put aside.

Regardless of the primacy of Aquinas over his interpreters, and regardless of the justifiable question about the extent to which “Thomistic” ideas are in accordance with the historical Thomas,

Vatikanums. Mit einem Vorwort von Paul Augustin Kardinal Mayer OSB (Annuaire Nuntia Lovaniensia, XLVIII), Leuven, 2003, pp. 53-55, 71-74, 115-149, 192-198, 239-301.

46. So O. H. PESCH, *Thomas von Aquin. Grenze und Größe mittelalterlicher Theologie*, Mainz³, 1994, p. 34.

47. J. NEUNER, in *LThk*², vol. 2, p. 344.

one should first of all not forget the immense value of an exact knowledge of the interpretations of Aquinas by the great Thomists.

Secondly, a defensive attitude can even today —as in the past— be justified, not if it run the risk of declaring a particular interpretation of Thomas exclusively valid⁴⁸ and automatically charge other thinkers with heresy; but if renounces to adapt the doctrine of Thomas to the spirit of the times, and makes instead the *proprium* of his doctrine fruitful in its function as an alternative to the contemporary *aporias*.

Thirdly, it seems to me that the middle way, which the Magisterium has taken regarding content and method, not only corresponds the most to the thought of Aquinas (*via media*) but also is the most intelligible from a systematical point of view. A conception of Thomism which only enumerates a set of theorems resembles, according to Jacques Maritain, an anatomic atlas, which presents a deplorable artifact instead of a living organism and instead of enabling a view on Thomism distorts this view.⁴⁹ But, on the other hand, a mere formal definition involves the considerable danger of turning Thomism into a completely empty framework in which anyone can set his own position and then label it as “Thomism.” This would be suicide for Thomism, for if everything can become Thomism, then nothing is Thomism anymore. As in scholastic philosophy form and matter are both necessary,⁵⁰ so these two procedures complement each other to

48. Cf. S.-TH. BONINO, “Discussione sulle relazioni di E. Forment e di I. Biffi”, in: *Doctor Communis. N.S.*, 1 (2001), p. 132.

49. J. MARITAIN, *Distinguer pour unir*, pp. XV-XVI : “Ces trois principes contiennent tout le thomisme; mais il faut aussi tout le thomisme pour les comprendre. De sorte que l’ouvrage de Réginald, avec son inévitable morcellement didactique, n’est lui-même par rapport à la doctrine qu’il expose qu’un planche d’anatomie par rapport à un organisme vivant ...”

50. Cf. THOMAS VON AQUIN, *In V Metaph.*, lectio 2: “Sciendum est autem, quod cum sint quatuor causae superius positae, earum duae sibiinvicem correspondent, et aliae duae similiter. Nam efficiens et finis sibi correspondent invicem, quia efficiens est principium motus, finis autem terminus. Et similiter materia et forma: nam forma dat esse, materia autem recipit. Est igitur efficiens causa finis, finis autem causa efficientis. Efficiens est causa finis quantum ad esse quidem, quia movendo perducit efficiens ad hoc, quod sit finis. Finis autem est

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form an integral Thomism. This is precisely what we encounter time and again in such a fascinating way in the works of the great representatives of Thomistic thought, and throughout the history of Thomism as a movement.

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causa efficientis non quantum ad esse, sed quantum ad rationem causalitatis. Nam efficiens est causa in quantum agit: non autem agit nisi causa finis. Unde ex fine habet suam causalitatem efficiens. Forma autem et materia sibi invicem sunt causa quantum ad esse. Forma quidem materiae in quantum dat ei esse actu; materia vero formae in quantum sustentat ipsam. Dico autem utrumque horum sibi invicem esse causam essendi vel simpliciter vel secundum quid. Nam forma substantialis dat esse materiae simpliciter. Forma autem accidentalis secundum quid, prout etiam forma est. Materia etiam quandoque non sustentat formam secundum esse simpliciter, sed secundum quod est forma huius, habens esse in hoc, sicut se habet corpus humanum ad animam rationalem.”