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## The Mystery of Christ in the Ministry of St. Thomas Aquinas

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WACŁAW ŚWIERZAWSKI, KRAKÓW

## THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST IN THE MINISTRY OF ST THOMAS AQUINAS

*Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak (Eph. 6:18—20).*

*Evangelicae sapientiae a saeculis in mysterio absconditae, quam in lucem produxit Dei Sapientia incarnata, ministerium expositionis adhibui... (S. Thomas, Ad Han-nibaldum Epistola Dedicatoria. Aurea Catena\*).*

St Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican friar and Doctor of the Church, died 700 years ago at the age of fifty. The respectful admiration he won among his contemporaries (*Ecclesiae lumen, orbis decus, theologorum gemma*<sup>1</sup>) has persisted through the ages. It is just a hundred years ago that Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879)<sup>2</sup> in which he emphasized the need to multiply the old and to complement it with the new; his recommendation, *ite ad Thomam*, was based on the well established and widespread opinion of the Church. Pius XI referred to St Thomas as *Studiorum ducem* (1923) and recommended his doctrine to be studied at Catholic universities and seminaries; he argued that anyone who knew a distant land only from description, even a very accurate one, did not really know it. The country was known only to those who had lived there. Similarly, Pius XI believed that no study of theology could have achieved an inner knowledge of God, if it had not issued from a close union with Him.<sup>3</sup> In Poland there has been a number of

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\* I have applied myself to the ministry of explaining evangelical wisdom for centuries hidden in the mystery and revealed by the Divine Wisdom incarnate.

<sup>1</sup> The inscription on the manuscript of the *Summa Theologica*, part III, in the Chapter Library at Toledo. Quoted from M. Grabmann, *Einführung in die Summa Theologiae des hl. Thomas von Aquin*, Freiburg 1928, 178.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the title of this encyclical, on the renewal of theological studies based on the Thomistic doctrine, was borrowed from the opening

theologians and philosophers of the school of St Thomas. K. Michalski CM, J. Woroniecki OP, M. Kornilowicz or A. Żychliński were among those who, like their master, came to know theology not from mere description, but through the union with God. This was revealed in the most unusual form of their ministry.

Much has changed since those days. The quest preceding the Second Vatican Council, the creative phase of the Council itself and the ferment following it have produced the almost magical word, *aggiornamento*. Moreover, the pressure of contemporary philosophical currents, contacts with non-believers, new developments in biblical hermeneutics and recent achievements in science, particularly in anthropology, have induced theologians to rethink their own theological views in confrontation with the progress in the technological and pragmatic civilisation. This led to many displacements of emphasis and sometimes to calling in question, or even direct attacks on the classical achievements of the past, particularly St Thomas (e.g. J. Tischner, „Decline of Thomistic Christianity”).<sup>4</sup> Reversing the old saying that greatness belittles the defeated the poet C. K. Norwid remarked that to belittle the defeated magnified their disaster, and went on to say that „it was then logically necessary to glorify the belittled to the extent real greatness was depreciated... In Cracow or Warsaw any restitution coming fifty years too late can be called a Jubilee... Among the Hellenes a man could be poisoned, killed or banished but he was never publicly and openly cheated by an inaccurate reading of words or of the proper name of things. For to read is to dig deep into expressions”.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this article on the Mystery of Christ in the ministry of St Thomas Aquinas is to defend the relevance of the recommendation of Leo XIII to our times. It attempts to show the way that has to be followed, if even today we are to find what B. Lonergan, an eminent disciple of St Thomas, calls the fascination of travelling along the highways paved by Aquinas. Thus the aim is to read Thomas — according to the apt expression of old handbooks, *ad mentem sancti Thomae* — in accordance with his spirit, intentions and purpose. Leo XIII in his encyclical admonished with the utmost earnestness that the golden wisdom of St Thomas should be restored and propagated in order to defend the Catholic faith, for the common good and for the progress of knowledge, and he

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words of the work of Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae: Aeterni Patris Verbum*. The text of the encyclical quoted here is in *Enchiridion Clericorum*. Typis Vaticani 1938, pp. 211—236 (numbers 396—430).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Y. Congar, *Saint Thomas, maître de vie spirituelle*, *Seminarium* 3(1977)994.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Znak* 22(1970)1—20.

<sup>5</sup> C. K. Norwid, *List do Mariana Sokołowskiego (1881)* (A letter to Marian Sokołowski), in: *Pisma wszystkie. Listy*, Warszawa 1971, vol. 10,163.

stressed he was speaking of the wisdom of St Thomas.<sup>6</sup> Let us not miss, therefore, the essence of the dispute.

Any reduction of Thomas's wisdom to the genius of his intellect would result in far-reaching, and well known, consequences. Though one of the essential arguments in his debates, e.g. with Averroism, was *hic homo intelligit*<sup>7</sup> in which he appealed to the act of understanding; to understand the text „in the spirit of Thomas“ means to understand its sense, to know what he wanted to say, to understand it in the way he meant. The phrase *intellectum valde ama* is implicitly interwoven with the lines of Thomistic texts but, as somebody once said, "Thomas loves wisdom, he loves it more than other philosophers do, though his love of God is even greater". Indeed, in Thomas the dominant role of the intellect does not consist in rationalism, it is the beginning of wisdom.

This attitude had its roots deep in his own experience. But he was not only an intellectual genius, he was also a faithful disciple of the Word Incarnate, the Word that through his living faith he tried to listen to and to observe. Finally, he was also a mystic who experienced what he was teaching. He is said to have written only what he knew from actual experience and in this sense his writing was a ministry.

### I. The Mystery of Christ — the Living Focus of Theology

Our reflections on the Thomistic theology must begin with rudimentary things. We should not then lose sight of the most essential fact that for Thomas Aquinas the focus of theology was in Jesus Christ and thus in Him he perceived its meaning and its ultimate end.

Such a concise formulation of Thomistic thought leads us to the vital question in theology, that of the relation between theocentrism and Christocentrism<sup>8</sup>, which has a tremendous import for Christian practice. Present-day theology often tries to explain this relation by the alternative, either-or solutions. Hence, the disrupted unity of revelation is a symptom of a deep crisis and manifests itself in the so-called genitive theologies (branches of theology known as dogmatic, moral, ascetic, mystical, liturgical, biblical and pastoral). The consequences of the crisis are most clearly visible in the loss of

<sup>6</sup> *Aeterni Patris*, n. 429.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *In III de An.*, lect. 7, § 690: "Si enim hoc negetur, tunc dicens hanc opinionem non intelligit aliquid, et ideo non est audiendus". The intellectualism of St. Thomas is discussed in B. Lonergan, *La notion de Verbe dans les écrits de saint Thomas d'Aquin*. Paris 1966, 227—233.

<sup>8</sup> G. Martelot SJ, *Theologie und Heilsökonomie in der Christologie der "Tertia"*, in J. Metz-H. Vorgrimler, *Gott in Welt. Festgabe für Karl Rahner*, Freiburg 1964, II, 3—42.

Christocentric motifs in such practical fields as catechesis and the pulpit, or in various anthropological interpretations that disrupt the monolithic unity of the human person. These attitudes can be summarized in such recurring phrase as "a non-practicing believer" or, what is even worse, "a practicing non-believer". It is like speaking of a dogmatist without morality or a moralist without dogma, a liturgist detached from real life or a sacrificer without an altar, a lawyer abiding by spiritless laws or a jurist dedicated to the spirit of laws without reference to the "letter", a philosopher ever searching but never reaching the practical meaning of his findings, or a pragmatist without an established course. The consequences of this state of things are obvious. The energy of theologians and of theological faculties, in many countries (mainly English speaking countries)<sup>9</sup> is excessively concentrated — presumably to the satisfaction of the scholars themselves — on the studies which only in the broadest sense can be treated as a part of theology.

In the early Christian tradition and in the tradition of mature theology we find a very sharp awareness of the unity of revelation which is lacking in the present-day theology — the awareness of the depth of the mystery. According to that old tradition it is not enough to assert — as E. Mersch does<sup>10</sup> — that Christology is at the centre of theology; we have to be explicit and say it is the mystery of Christ that lies in the centre of the theology. The statement derived from St Paul and ascribed to St Thomas by the Fathers of the Church, then tells us that theology cannot be defined merely as knowledge, or an intellectual system, or a reflection of faith. It is the witness to be given by generations of Christians transformed by the Holy Spirit and seeking with enlightened hearts the object for their contemplation — the „glory of this mystery" (Col. 1:27). It is around this axis that the order of theology, *ordo disciplinae*, has been built. In the course of this process theology has fuelled its reflection with the material taken from the Bible and from the Christian tradition without disregarding the instruments borrowed from Aristotle and other non-Christian thinkers.

The unity of tension between theocentrism and Christocentrism is best shown by St Paul in the synthesis of the doctrine with the apostolic ministry he made when he wrote, „For I want you to know how greatly I strive for you, and for all who have not seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged as they are knit together in love, to have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ (*EIS EPIGNOSIS TON MYSTERION TON THEOU, CHRISTOU*) in whom are hidden all the treasures of

<sup>9</sup> E. L. Mascall, *Teologia a przyszłość* (Theology and the Future), Warszawa 1970, 15.

<sup>10</sup> E. Mersch SJ, *L'objet de la théologie et le Christus totus*, RSR 12(1936) 129—157.

wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:1—3). According to St Paul<sup>11</sup> the mystery of Christ is identical with Christ himself (Col. 4:3) — Christ is the mystery revealed by God (Col. 2:2—3). To fulfil the divine plan of salvation God's "mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ" was "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9—10). This recapitulation which begins with Christ making his abode in human souls — "Christ in us" (Eph. 3:2—7) — leads us to the unity of Christ with the Church (Eph. 5:31—32). It is this mystery that is contained in the Bible and announced in the apostolic preaching of the word (1 Cor. 2:7). This brings us to the theology of St Thomas.

### 1. The Christological Theocentrism in the Mystery of the Divine and Human Nature of the Word Incarnate

One of the objections made by the critics of the theology of St Thomas refers to his alleged abstraction, his detachment from the dynamic processes of history. These allegations were refuted, in this country, by K. Michalski<sup>12</sup> and later by M. Seckler<sup>13</sup> who developed the Thomistic theology of history. But we cannot disregard, however, another truth: namely, it would be inaccurate to say the object of revelation refers primarily to the salvation of man. Thomas knew very well what would be the consequences, if stress were to be put exclusively on the history of salvation, an approach that today is followed from time to time under the influence of the present revival in biblical studies and suggests similar solutions in catechesis and in preaching. Being an experienced and brilliant biblicist, a master in *Sacra Pagina*, and well versed in the theology of the mystery, the theology of the divine plan of salvation that was realized in history, he knew that even before the world was created God is. Before beginning the work of salvation God is. Thus, the existing God has eternally announced his Word and it is the Word that Thomas was eager to apprehend by love, and having apprehended to communicate, to express it as the Word of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word demanding the response of man.

Thomas was not the first to wrestle with such problems. The

<sup>11</sup> For the theology of the mystery in St. Paul see J. Coppens, *Le "mystère" dans la théologie paulinienne et ses parallèles Qumrâniens*, in: A. Descamps, *Littérature et théologie Pauliniennes*, Louvain 1960, 142—165; A. PLOP, *Pour une mystique des mystères*, SVS 23(1952)377—397.

<sup>12</sup> K. Michalski CM, *Tomizm wobec współczesnej filozofii dziejów* (Thomism and the Modern Philosophy of History), (1934); *Dokąd idziemy* (Our Destination), (1956), both essays are in the collection of selected works, K. Michalski, *Dokąd idziemy. Pisma wybrane*, Kraków 1964.

<sup>13</sup> M. Seckler, *Le salut et l'histoire. La pensée de saint Thomas d'Aquin sur la théologie de l'histoire*, Paris 1967.

theologically creative 12th century gave us Hugo of St Victor (d. 1141) who in his work *De Sacramentis* arduously upheld the historical dimension in theology. Abelard (d. 1142) on the other hand, purged theology of all historical traces. Thomas, an expert of unification, attempted to produce a synthesis. How is it possible to combine the systematics of theological discourse with history, to unite the theology of God in the Trinity, of God concealed in his divine insight, with the theology of God incarnate in history?

The earliest work of St Thomas, the Commentary to Lombard's Sentences in which he applied the Plotinian dialectic of emanation and return (*exitus-reditus*) borrowed from Dyonysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, was an example of speculative theology permeated by history. Thomas did not pursue the search for an answer to the question "Who is God?", that absorbed him from childhood, solely along the plane of logic but, and above all, like in St Anselm, in the sphere of motives: *Cur Deus Homo?* In such a way Thomas joined the knowledge of „God in Himself” with the knowledge of „God for us”.

This thesis was further explored in the *Summa contra Gentiles*. Also there the work of Christ was presented as the *Opus Dei* dependent upon the causative reason. According to the so-called onto-Christology the word of Christ appealing to man's inherent desire for happiness encounters the human instinct of faith, which urges man in the same direction. The word coming, so to say, "from outside" was united "from within" with the grace of Christ and influenced man's decision at the same time preserving his freedom. Owing to this inner light man could see the design of the divine will and accept it.

Thomas returned to this fascinating problem in an extensive passage of his *Summa Theologica*. His starting point was again the revelation. For the revelation provided the foundation of theological knowledge, that *praecognitio finis*, the anticipated knowledge of God, and also had its practical aspect. Since it showed us the Object, that is, God, who is also the goal, it became contemplation and — when referred to the spiritual attitude resulting from the striving for the goal and participation in God — it pointed out the direction for action (*actio*).<sup>14</sup>

Hence, theology, *doctrina sacra*, goes beyond the division between the speculative and the practical; it neither separates dogmatics from the moral theology nor liturgy from life. A theologian sees the entire object of his reflection in the light of God who reveals it to him; for the knowledge of God transcends all categories.

<sup>14</sup> The most helpful guide through the maze of questions in the *Summa* is G. Lafont OSB, *Structures et méthode dans la Somme Théologique de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Tournai 1961. Especially the introduction which discusses different theories about the main structural theme of the *Summa* is of great value.

It is by the same act that God recognizes Himself and the work of His creation. The practice of theology, therefore, introduces us, in a sense, into the manner of cognition that is proper to God. Since God and His work constitute the object of such cognition, a cognitive act is equivalent to the striving for God. God is Alpha and Omega — Alpha in Christ and Omega in the Father. The two points of reference can never be separated from each other. That is why the most essential criterion of the truth of theology rests in its trinitary structure, and Christology that sees the mystery of Christ primarily in the fact of incarnation and in the hypostatic union reveals the Visage of the Father — the Godhead whose "being in Himself" is always "for us".

The composition of the *Summa Theologica*, so similar to Thomas's prologue to the Commentary on St John, represents a brilliant synthesis showing the unity of Christological theocentrism in the mystery of Christ, the God-Man; Parts I and II of this treatise expound what is in a sense the primary, the theological aspect of salvation, the aspect that reveals Christ as the God-Creator and the Christ-Man; in Part III there is the concrete dimension, the dimension that refers to the history of salvation in this mystery. We can see that the divinity in Christ is actually the way that leads to God. The incarnation themes, which Thomas expounded in such detail, thus become that basic principle of hermeneutics which allows us to apprehend the unity of God and Christ. It is in reference to the mystery of the incarnation, i.e. the hypostatic union that we see the identity of the treatises *De Deo* and *De Christo*.<sup>15</sup> Christology thus becomes a treatise about God — *De Deo*. Moreover, because of its theocentric synthesis it may also be said to incorporate ecclesiology. It is noteworthy that among the writings of St Thomas there is no treatise on the Church; indeed, for him, because of the Eucharistic Body, the Church becomes the mystical Body of Christ.<sup>16</sup> The Church is Christ. Christ is all-embracing, like in that splendid Augustinian exclamation: *Ipse per seipsum ad seipsum vadit*.

This gives us an indication how a knowledge of the mystery of Christ becomes the focus of theology. It is the theology of the Word Incarnate that is the keystone; for the Logos, the Word, provides the basic point of reference for interpersonal relations — dialogue and communication — that grow mature in friendship. According to St Thomas the true manifestation of friendship is to

<sup>15</sup> M. Corbin, *La parole devenue chair. Lecture de la première question de la Tertia Pars de la Somme Théologique*, RSPT 62(1978)5—41.

<sup>16</sup> The ecclesiology of St. Thomas was presented, from this viewpoint many years ago by J. G. Arintero OP, in his excellent *La Evolución Mística. An English translation was published in the U.S.A.: The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, St. Louis 1950, I—II.

reveal the secrets of the heart to a friend. God reveals His mysteries by allowing us to participate in His wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. The Trinitary Structure of the Subject of Theology

B. Lonergan, whom we have already quoted here, proved that while in the comments on Lombard's Sentences the structure of the Thomistic theology of the Trinity was based on the concept of filiation, the concept of the Logos, the Word, formed the theological focus of the more mature Summa.<sup>18</sup> Thus the theology of the mystery adopted by St Thomas runs along the following lines: The Father leads us to a knowledge of Himself through the Word, and the Word is His perfect image (*imago Patris*). This is why the theology of man to the image of God, man to the image of the Logos, becomes the foundation of the Thomistic theological synthesis.<sup>19</sup> This has far-reaching consequences.

The main of them is that being the object of theology God is also its subject.<sup>20</sup> He is not only the object of man's cognitive effort. He is also the infinite Good always sharing with man and helping man to know Him. God is thus perceived as the sole Doctor. It is according to this truth that Thomas developed in his thinking the hierarchy of the knowledge of God; at the summit there was the knowledge of God that He had of Himself, the knowledge that created transcendent beatitude and thus the fullness of Divine Life; then came the knowledge that was proper to the saints who participated

<sup>17</sup> S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Evangelium S. Joannis lectura*, Roma 1952, n. 2016 (it will be marked: *In Joan.*). Cf. also S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei lectura*, Roma 1951, n. 252 (it will be marked: *In Matth.*) "revelatio divinorum mysteriorum... facta est per Christum Verbum".

<sup>18</sup> B. Lonergan, *op. cit.*, VIII—X. The problem is extensively discussed in M. D. Chenu, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris 1954, 255 sq.

<sup>19</sup> St. Thomas's theology of the mystery is fully analysed in the work of M. J. Le Guillou, *Le Christ et l'Eglise. Théologie du mystère*, Paris 1963. To such thesis led: the work of O. Casel, *Das Mysteriengedächtnis der Messliturgie im Lichte der Tradition*, Münster 1926; O. Casel, *Neue Zeugnisse für das Kultmysterium*, FLW 13(1933)99—171, and H. Paissac, *Théologie du Verbe. Saint Augustin et saint Thomas*, Paris 1951. Cf. also W. Świerzawski, *God and the Mystery of His Wisdom in the Pauline Commentaries of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, *Divus Thomas* 74(1971)466—500. It is a pity this aspect passed unnoticed by H. Urs von Balthasar who did not even mention St. Thomas among the representatives of the so-called "theologische Ästhetik". Cf. H. Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, II. *Facher der Stile*, Einsiedeln 1962.

<sup>20</sup> See II—II,2,3; *In Joan.* 942, 944, 935, 938. *In Matth.* 360. "Ipse fons ecclesiasticae scientiae". Cf. also Y. Congar, *Traditio and Sacra Doctrina bei Thomas von Aquin*, in: J. Betz — H. Fries, *Kirche und Überlieferung*, Herder 1960, 170—210. M. J. Le Guillou, *op. cit.*, 186—206.

in it by that beatifying vision which fulfilled man's infinite desire to see God as He is; finally the lowest level was that of the knowledge through faith that was developing into theology.<sup>21</sup> According to Thomas the sense of theology is determined by the tension between the already known and the desire of full knowledge. Such theology is pervaded with mysticism and the mystical influence is apparent both in his biblical comments and in his systematic treatises. In response to man's longing God reveals Himself in His goodness. Hence, theology unites the knowledge of God with the experience of divine goodness.<sup>22</sup>

We now see that the study of theology requires the unity of two kinds of experience. They both point to the trinitary structure of theology. For, it is inherently in Jesus Christ, the *Aeterni Patris Verbum*, that God is the subject of theology.<sup>23</sup> It is Christ who knows the secret, who identifies Himself with the design of the Divine Wisdom, who is the Divine Wisdom and the fullness of the mystery. Moreover, His priestly ministry in the paschal mystery implies a cultic, liturgical perspective. The selfabasement of Incarnation and the humiliation of the cross lead to the exultation of the Resurrection and at the same time open the way to the sanctuary and enhance the dynamism of faith. Now those who believe can „approach“ (*prosagogé*) their Destination.<sup>24</sup>

Christ presented by Thomas in his evangelical images in Part III of the *Summa (mysteria vitae Christi, questions nos. 27—59)* has thus become for every man a model of true life. He is the one who shows the way and leads to the Father.<sup>25</sup> St Thomas emphasized with great relish that the Incarnation, the life of teaching (*dicta*) and deeds (*acta et passa*), the Resurrection completed in sending the Holy Spirit, and the Eucharistic presence were the source from which we drew out our deepest desire to know God and the aid necessary to satisfy it — a desire that could go to extremes in striving for God.

It is the *Verbum Spirans Amorem*<sup>26</sup> — the Holy Spirit — who

<sup>21</sup> I, 1, 6 and 8. The classic definition of theology in St. Thomas is: "Sacra Doctrina est scientia quia procedit ex principiis notis lumine superioris scientiae, quae scilicet est scientia Dei et beatorum" (I, 1, 3; *In Boeth. de Trin.* 2,2).

<sup>22</sup> The concurrence of the biblical doctrine of the mystery with the mystical tenet that being imparts itself was pointed out by A. H a y e n, *La communication de l'être d'après St. Thomas d'Aquin I. La métaphysique d'un théologien*, Louvain 1957.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas makes this assertion in the prologue to *Compendium Theologiae*.

<sup>24</sup> The teaching of the Apostles in Eph. 3:12 and Hbr. 10:19—22 was commented by St. Thomas in III, 5, 4, ad 1; III,45 "Ad gloriam aeternae beatitudinis adducuntur homines per Christum". *Comp. Theol.* 213, *De plenitudine sapientiae Christi*.

<sup>25</sup> „Christus, qui secundum quod homo via est nobis tendendi in Deum" (I, 2, prol.).

<sup>26</sup> *In Joan.* 946; I, 43, 5, ad 2.

in a privileged manner gives himself to the assembled in the Eucharist and is thus the instigator and the effective power of the process of salvation. Since, the Eucharist, according to that beautiful definition of St Thomas, is the place of both the sacrifice and the doctrine<sup>27</sup> revealed in a special manner. "The Son, therefore, being the Word gives us the doctrine, and the Holy Spirit enables us to comprehend it; if the Holy Spirit is absent from the heart of the listener, the teacher is preaching in vain".<sup>28</sup> Coming from the Father — the first Subject of the communicated truth — through the Son to the Holy Spirit, truth is being born in human hearts due to this trinitary intervention. "Only the one who accepts the Word in the spirit of the speaker can come to know it; the Word of God the Father is Love. Only the one who accepts it with ardent love can come to know it. It flows then into saintly souls and makes them prophets and friends of God".<sup>29</sup>

The ultimate beatifying vision — to know God as He is, to know Him through His own knowledge — constitutes the motive of all theological quest and reflection. A believer strives for this vision owing to his participation in the mystery of Christ, and the vision urges him ceaselessly to seek a deeper insight into theology. The study of theology, in turn, serves directly the pastoral practice. Eventually, the vision points out the directions in theological research.

The simplicity and the unity in the Thomistic theological synthesis were possible to achieve by his correct reading of the revelation contained in the Bible and expounded by tradition. He deduced his synthesis from the words and the actions of the Word Incarnate. He treated philosophy, including Aristotle whom he had christened as an instrument to the explanation of this perspective.

## II. The Calling of the Theologian: to Serve the Mystery of Christ

Does a theologian have a special calling? Thomas tried to find it out by going deep into the object of theology where he saw the pulsating life of the Subject. How did he reach it? Already in his question "Who is God?", put in childhood, we can see traces of this passion that motivated his thinking. God, whom Thomas wanted to

<sup>27</sup> I, 2, 102, 4 ad 3.

<sup>28</sup> *In Joan.* 1058 "Filius ergo tradit nobis doctrinam, cum sit Verbum; sed Spiritus Sanctus doctrinae eius nos capaces facit. Nisi Spiritus Sanctus adsit cordi audientis, otiosus erit sermo doctoris, Job. 32,8 inspiratio Omnipotentis dat intelligentiam".

<sup>29</sup> *In Joan.* 946 "Ille enim discit Verbum qui capit illud secundum rationem dicentis; Verbum autem Dei Patris est spirans amorem: qui ergo capit illud cum fervore amoris, discit; Sap. VII, 27 in animas sanctas se transfert, Prophetas et amicos Dei constituit".

know and who was gradually unveiling to his view, was the Living God, the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, the God from the burning bush of Moses, the Word Incarnate, the Crucified and the Risen from the Dead, the God of the Pentecost, the God of the Eucharist and the Bible.

The entire Thomistic theology is focused on the person of Jesus Christ, the way to the Father. Throughout his life Thomas commented on the Gospel, the good tidings about the Living God. All immersed in contemplation of the Divine Presence and for the love of Him he did what his talents (his intellectual aptitude), had destined him for. Let us look once again at the object of Thomas's theological contemplation. This will allow us to understand how the mode of the mission he had in life developed together with the maturing cognition of turning into the unity with the object.

1. "The Glory of the Mystery" (Col. 1:27)  
as the Object of Thomas's  
Theological Contemplation

Indeed, Thomas was a philosopher, but first of all a theologian. He was also a mature mystic. It is impossible to deny that mysticism gave wings to his thoughts and inspired his human mind with divine light. Mysticism is the apprehension of the Logos through love. It does not stop at individual or particular truths but perceives the whole, the Truth and in it the Love shared by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. A mystic is tuned to their inner dialogue, he dwells in the climate of eternity. It is Jesus Christ through his Spirit who introduces him into it.

These values, prominent in patristic theology, were developed by the Benedictine and Cistercian mystical theology of the 12th and 13th centuries.<sup>30</sup> But at that time new trends emerged leading to a deeper mystical experience, however not yet of the form that was developed in the 16th century especially by the Carmelite school (St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila). These trends dwelt upon the contemplation of the manhood of Jesus and were incorporated into the gradually developing theological vision; the emphasis was put on a deeper cognition of the unique mystery of God, as revealed by Jesus Christ and made accessible by the Holy Spirit, rather than on the experience of the greatness of divine love.

Theological reflection was now concentrated more on two aspects of the history of salvation: redemption through incarnation (the hypostatic union) and redemption through death fulfilled in the Resurrection. While the thinking of the Greek Fathers emphasized chiefly the mystery of incarnation, in the West the Fathers were more concerned with penetrating the mystery of redemption through

<sup>30</sup> Ch. Journet, *Introduction à la théologie*, Paris 1947, 23–32.

the cross. The great renaissance in the preaching of the Gospel in the Middle Ages again drew attention to the mystery of God descending to earth in the humility of incarnation. The meditations of St Francis of Assisi upon the manger of Bethlehem and St Anselm's asking in *Cur Deus Homo* for the motives of divine incarnation suggested the way for theological inquiry.

The mysticism, which was maturing in the contemplation of the mysteries of the life of Jesus, also influenced the minds. Thomas Aquinas, following the steps of his master, St Albert the Great, opened the golden age in theology; he strove to order its truths not only for practical pastoral aims but also in regard to the inner relations within their hierarchy. Thus he revived in his writing and applied in life the old tenet of the Greek Fathers, who identified theology with prayer, that it was impossible to speak sensibly of God (*theo-logia*) without speaking to God and, what is more, without listening to God.

Accepting the mystery of Christ as the guide-line of theology Thomas resorted to the mysticism of mysteries — the mysteries of the life of Jesus. He did not, however, describe experiences but strove to present the objects of redeeming faith. The main feature of this method was the sharp awareness of the transcendence of God. He did not hesitate to draw attention to the fact that in spite of the nearness of God in Christ we still approach Him as the Unknown.<sup>31</sup> For Thomas the ultimate knowledge of God was to know that we know nothing of Him.<sup>32</sup> In his comment to Boethius on the Trinity he wrote that God was adored in silence, not because there was nothing we could say about Him or know of Him, but because of our awareness that we could not grasp Him.<sup>33</sup>

Such views, derived from negative theology and freely borrowed from Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite,<sup>34</sup> reflected the nearness of the mystic to the Divine Object and were in sharp contrast with theological speculation and theological rationalism. Bringing together these extremes shows Thomas as a rare instance of the symbiotic coexistence of the theologian and the saint.

The consequence of such approach was that for Thomas, as J. Pieper aptly remarked, cognition did not aim at "truth" (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*), but rather at the submission to the influence

<sup>31</sup> I, 12, 13 ad 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Quaest. disp., De Potentia Dei*, 7, 5, ad 14.

<sup>33</sup> *In Boeth. de Trin.*, 2, 1, ad 6.

<sup>34</sup> St. Thomas was strongly influenced by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, a representative of the classic negative theology which sharply contrasts with theological speculation and rationalism. In the comments to Dionysius' *De Divinis Nominibus* he included 1700 quotations from this author. That shows that his methods were not only scholastic but that he used those of negative theology as well. This problem was analysed by J. Woroniecki, *Les elements dionysiens dans le thomisme*, *Collectanea Theologica* 17(1936)25—40.

of the First Truth, of the living Object.<sup>35</sup> This not only explains the foundations of anthropology which Thomas regarded as a part of theology, but also clearly outlines the purpose of the theologian's calling. As the whole theology should progress in accordance with reality (the theology of the temporal reality is not a discovery of the 20th century), the task of the doctors performing the ministry of theological teaching must consist in presenting the mystery of God in the light of the Wisdom Incarnate revealed by Jesus Christ. Thus, in its negative aspect the task of the theological ministry is to cope with mistakes, evil while in its positive aspect it is to teach and to preach.

## 2. Pro cujus amore

### — Theological Ministry manifested in Life

According to the advice of K. Michalski, a devoted student of Thomas Aquinas, the history of human life should be read from the moments when it reaches its apogee. In the life of St Thomas this moment seems to have been achieved in the mystical experience when one day in Naples, while saying Mass, he appeared to have crossed with his mind the boundary of two worlds so that he rather belonged to the other world ever since.<sup>36</sup> We know from his biographer William Tocco<sup>37</sup> that he had such an experience in St Nicholas chapel of the San Domenico Maggiore Church at Naples and that the sacristan, Brother Dominic of Caserta, found him in ecstasy before the crucifix and heard a voice from the cross telling Thomas: "You have well written about Me, Thomas — what reward do you want from Me?" The sacristan also heard Thomas answer he did not want anything but the Lord Himself. According to Tocco it was then when Thomas wrote the third part of his *Summa Theologica* in which he dwelt upon the death and the Resurrection of Christ, and he did not write anything more ever since. M. Grabmann is more precise saying that the theology of repentance and contrition — so closely related to the tears of St Francis of Assisi when, having seen the Crucified on Monte la Verna, he was coming down with the stigmata — were the last questions considered by Thomas.<sup>38</sup>

It is a pity that the comment on the Cantic of Canticles that Thomas supposedly wrote at the request of the Cistercian Fathers of Fossanuova, the last of his writings, has not been preserved and has remained unknown. We do have, however, the text of his last

<sup>35</sup> J. Pieper, *Scholastyka* (Scholastica), Warszawa 1963, 118 sq.

<sup>36</sup> K. Michalski, *Między heroizmem a bestialstwem* (Between heroism and bestiality), Kraków 1949, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Wilhelm von Tocco, *Das Leben des hl. Thomas von Aquino*, in: *Das Leben des hl. Thomas von Aquino*, Leipzig 1967, 131.

<sup>38</sup> M. Grabmann, *op. cit.*, 177.

prayer uttered after receiving the Eucharist. "I receive Thee, the reward of my soul, I receive Thee, the viaticum of my pilgrimage, for whose love I have studied, laboured, kept vigil, preached the word and taught..."<sup>39</sup> *Pro cuius amore* — for whose love — such was the intention that Thomas, the theologian and the saint, accepted as his aim.

The matter would be much simpler, if we stopped only at the most important, the most mature of his writings. But it is the tone and the content of his earliest writings that is really surprising. His two inaugural speeches,<sup>40</sup> delivered on occasions of getting the bachelor and then the master degree, give prominence to the role of the Bible in theology and outline the directions of his future inquiries along the lines presented here; they also give a surprisingly mature account of the coming ministry of his life.

According to Thomas, theologians, like tall mountains, *mentium splendorem prius recipiant*. Their spiritual life participates in eternity (*sunt in participatione aeternitatis*). Two years later Thomas said that the main purpose of his life was to exist for God and wanted all his utterances and senses to speak about Him.<sup>41</sup> He wanted to serve by speaking of God, to serve with his theological ministry. His death testified to his life-long service. Like a tall mountain peak basking in the sun he reflected its light in innumerable comments, treatises, arguments, sermons and lectures. *O Deus Ineffabilis* — words he often put on his manuscripts. He served faithfully in humility, poverty, and chastity. He knew that these were the necessary conditions to accept Christ, like in fiat of the Virgin Mary; especially when through the cross He revealed Himself as love.

Thomas was in a special way fascinated by the cross of Christ and he saw it as the source of wisdom. Again and again he read and contemplated the image of the Crucified so full of meaning. There he saw the object of his studies and of his meditation, and there throughout his life he sought the norm of conduct. Under the cross he found the humility that earned him the insight into the depth of divine mysteries and there he cleansed and trained his heart to accept the divine gifts. The wounds of Christ helped him to unravel the most complicated questions and to dispel doubts.

We are neither surprised when we read *Principale autem in doctrina fidei christianae est salus per crucem facta*<sup>42</sup> nor when we find in the chronicle of Ptolomy of Lucca that Thomas refused the offer of Pope Urban IV when the latter wanted to make him arch-

<sup>39</sup> Wilhelm von Tocco, *op. cit.*, 160.

<sup>40</sup> The two pieces entitled *Sermo primus: De commendatione Sacrae Scripturae* and *Sermo secundus: De commendatione et partitione Sacrae Scripturae*, are included in *Opuscula Theologica*, I. *De re dogmatica et morali*, Taurini 1954, 435—443.

<sup>41</sup> CG I, 1 c. 2.

bishop of Naples and also abbot in the wealthy abbey of San Petri ad Aram.<sup>43</sup> In 1270 Thomas began his *Contra pestiferum doctrinam retrahentium homines a religionis ingressu* by presenting the idea of imitating humble and poor Jesus. The ascetic and mystical significance of the doctrine of the Incarnation which he insistently included in the mystery of the cross, was also expounded in the work *De rationibus fidei contra Saracenos, Graecos et Armenos*. This beautiful jewel of mystical Passion literature shows the life of Christ as the deepest motif of wisdom, charity and peace, those three basic traits of the spiritual life of Thomas — the theologian.

The immersion into the mystery of Christ's human nature was perceived by Thomas as the way towards the knowledge of God and at the same time the way of following Christ in life. It was a synthesis of cognition and a deeply reverent attitude of adoration towards God incarnate. His last Lent sermon (1273) was constructed according to the three virtues: faith, hope and charity. For him God, the Life of his life, the Subject of his thoughts and actions, also constituted the Object of theology. When soon after he declared that all he had written was just straw only the flame of living faith remained in him, as the *praelibatio visionis*<sup>44</sup> kindled in his heart by the *Auctor Doctrinae*,<sup>45</sup> the Word Incarnate to whom he devoted his genius and to whom he offered his soul.<sup>46</sup>

### III. Theology "ad Mentem Sancti Thomae" at the Threshold of the 21 st Century

We now have to go back to our starting point. Is it still possible in the present state of crisis in theology to recommend, *Ite ad Thomam*? If so, then in what sense? can we still learn anything from Thomas at a time of such a deep crisis in understanding theological ministry? It seems worthwhile to look at these questions before we shall come to the end of this discussion. But let us not forget that we are all infected with the spirit of Cartesian rationalism. Hegel, in his lectures on the philosophy of history, wanted to rush as rapidly as possible from the 6th to the 16th century<sup>47</sup> and when the course of his lectures successfully brought him to Descartes he said he could call like a sailor "Land in sight". Hegel did not realize, however, that it was in the 6th century, when in 529 a Justinian decree closed down the Platonic Academy functioning in Athens without change of name for nine hundred years, that St Benedict

<sup>42</sup> *In 1 Cor.* 1:18 (I, 228).

<sup>43</sup> Ptolomäus von Lucca, *Kirchengeschichte*, in: *Das Leben...*, op. cit., 268.

<sup>44</sup> II—II, 2, 3.

<sup>45</sup> I, 45, 5; II—II, 88, 7, ad 1.

<sup>46</sup> K. Michalski, *Między heroizmem...*, op. cit., 14.

<sup>47</sup> J. Pieper, op. cit., 9—11.

founded Monte Cassino. There, seven hundred years later, Thomas Aquinas embarked upon his quest for an answer to the question "Who is God?" and received it. Perhaps now, seven hundred years after the death of St Thomas the time for searching has come again, according to the recommendation of Leo XIII, for drawing Thomistic wisdom from its very source. We shall discuss this now.

### 1. The Changeable and the Unchangeable in Modern Theology

One of the remarkable phenomena of our times is the enormous amount of theological writings.<sup>48</sup> Printed paper is being produced at such a speed that it almost becomes a flood. We are no longer satisfied with the repetition of classic theses. Instead we search for new ideas often forgetting Vincent of Lorin's wise maxim *Dum dicas nove, non dicas nova*. It was not the aim of the encyclical *Divino afflante* to reject this well tried precept. The green light, so necessary for the development of knowledge in the climate of freedom, does not release an author from the responsibility for his published writings or even for his thoughts.

Another dangerous characteristics of our times is connected with the change of emphasis put on the object of theology. The dynamism of practical theologies, particularly those with a pastoral bias, overlooks the theocentrically oriented speculative theology for the alleged static nature of the latter. Moreover, theocentric theological synthesis is being replaced by descriptions of the history of salvation. This is the situation in theology as well as in catechesis and preaching.

Are these dangers a repetition of the old error of resolving the tension between theocentrism and Christocentrism by means of alternative solutions? This was indicated by Pope Paul VI when he emphasized that in addition to the historical theology there was a need of a well grounded systematic approach to theology. For revelation requires a synthesis "for itself" while it also offers a synthesis "for us". We can neither accept any imbalance between the Bible and tradition nor between practical thinking and the rigours of speculative theology. *Intellectum valde ama!*

To illustrate this point it seems worthwhile to quote the case of E. Mersch,<sup>49</sup> who suggested a Christological theology in which Christ was to be viewed as the first object of theological cognition (*primus intelligibilis* = Le Christ mystique, centre de la theologie comme science). This proposition, even though, very close to the mystery of Christ being the focus of theology, cannot avoid that

<sup>48</sup> Y. Congar, *Situation et tâches présentes de la théologie*, Paris 1967, 61—80, 84—86.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 108—109.

subtle error we have mentioned at the beginning of our considerations; it favours one element of the alternative. It is true that we get acquainted with the intimate mystery of God only through the revelation of Christ (*ordo inventionis, acquisitionis*). But this does not change the fact that only through the mystery of God (theocentrism) we can arrive at a full knowledge of the mystery of Incarnation that is the mystery of Jesus Christ (*ordo iudicii*). Hence, if Christ is the centre, God is the termination (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28). Such is the structure of the divine wisdom. In the end of anthropology stands divinization therefore we have to keep in mind the advice given by A. Henschel "The Bible is primarily not man's vision of God but God's vision of man".<sup>50</sup>

In the light of what has been said previously we can see that there are at least two major tasks to be undertaken by present day theology burdened with an excess of sources and questions.<sup>51</sup> The first is to work anew through the variety of biblical sources, tradition and theological interpretations. The second to answer, in the light of the deposit of faith, the questions which life poses nowadays. Is this not the same mission as that of St Thomas? Indeed, the two dominant problems in his writings are fidelity to the sources and adaptation to the currently developing history; on the one side, the Bible, patristics and authority and the courage to baptize (not only Aristotle) on the other.

But still this is not the most essential thing. Thomas was the first and perhaps the only theologian who undertook a synthesis on such a grand scale. He established the epistemological status for theology that would be capable of justifying the need of the *ordinis doctrinae* together with its rational explanation and at the same time demonstrated the historical validity of theology by referring it to the economy of salvation. Hence, theology — *sacra doctrina* — became in his approach the theology of the mystery of Christ. Owing to its biblical and ecclesiastical basis (a specific trait of Thomistic ecclesiology) it has all the elements necessary for both the renewal of modern theology and the evangelization of the modern world through the pastoral ministry.

Modern theology has lost this coherence. It lost the unifying focus constituted by the mystery of Christ. Therefore, in order to overcome the crisis, theology must regain the sense of the mystery of Christ. Consequently, the creative theologian must place on the horizon of his quest the fulfilment of the eschatological dimension *in visione beatifica*. Since theology itself, even if its essential concerns are historical or refer to the history of salvation, will never be able to provide that which ultimately is demanded by faith. It

<sup>50</sup> *Man Is not Alone*, New York 1951, 129.

<sup>51</sup> G. Lafont OSB, *op. cit.*, 7—11.

will never open the way to "God Himself", to the transcendent God who stands beyond history — *Deus semper maior*.

The Logos, the Word, is the first step in the dialogue, which leads to the ultimate community (*KOINONIA*). This shows us the role of liturgy in creating theology. Mystagogy is in fact an introduction to the mystery of which liturgy is the starting point rather than an initiation into the liturgical mystery. St Thomas was fully aware of this when he wrote the words of the prayer, earned by humble kneeling: *O memoriale mortis Domini, Panis vivus vitam praestans homini, Praesta meae menti de Te vivere, et Te illi semper dulce sapere.*<sup>52</sup> His spirit and mind lived by the Eucharist and his theology matured in ardent prayer.

Obviously, theology, the product of mind, can always profit from contact with great philosophy; It cannot even risk being unaware of creative discoveries of human thought. But its true renewal comes from the immersion in the Word of God as taught by the Church, from the matured experience of mystics and developed by the great doctors, by their genius and sanctity.

## 2. The Suggestion of Thomas to the Present Theologians: *Contemplata Tradere*

Several times during these considerations we have referred to a very important fact which defines the mode of the theological ministry. If God is the Object of theology and simultaneously its Subject, then it is all the more important to remember that true theology can never become detached from spiritual experience. This truth has been emphasized by a number of theologians from St Justin to O. Casel and H. Urs von Balthasar. Hence, we can say that the most essential task of a theologian is to serve contemplation. It means that when developing the theological method it is necessary to preserve with utmost care the mystical element. The concern for such an art of practising theology contains a part of what was so extraordinarily achieved and fulfilled in the ministry of Thomas Aquinas. A theologian then becomes so pervaded with contemplation of the First Truth, the Living God, and of the Agape, the Charity so dear to us in the mystery of Christ that he cannot in any way separate his purely intellectual effort from his ministry of communicating directly in his apostolate the light he has obtained. Making such a synthesis and its practical application were summarized in Thomas's maxim *Contemplata aliis tradere*. The ministry of Thomas Aquinas, and of every theologian, understood in this way, shows the identity of his maxim with the motto of his master, St Paul: the Apostle of Jesus Christ — *Apostolus Jesu Christi*.

<sup>52</sup> Verse from the hymn *Adoro Te devote* ascribed to St. Thomas.