

Reflections on Scholasticism in Response to R. R. Reno's "Theology After the Revolution"

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To explain the context of these reflections, please note that they were originally written in response to a request which had originated from Fr. Paul Scalia, a priest of the Diocese of Arlington, who had asked for reflections about the content of a book review that had been recently written by Prof. R. R. Reno and which had appeared in a recent edition of the journal, *First Things*. A friend suggested that these reflections should be published as a blog text. Some emendations and additions have been made.

With respect to Prof. Reno's lengthy book review of Fergus Kerr's *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Chenu to Ratzinger*, in this reply, I attempt to speak in a manner which is heart to heart but in a manner also which is respectful of others, not wanting to hurt anybody in what I would like to say.

First of all then, I must indicate my substantial agreement with what Prof. Reno says in his article. A couple of years ago or so, a friend of mine in Canada (who had done a dissertation on the Trinitarian theology of Bernard Lonergan at Regis College in Toronto) recommended an earlier article by Prof. Reno which was also published in *First Things*. My friend shared the same concern which I had: the breakdown which we see in the order and structure of our Catholic theology. In this earlier piece, Prof. Reno had spoken about the demise of scholastic theology which had been normative in Catholic seminaries and universities until the time of the Second Vatican Council. He had argued then that the demise and the widespread rejection of scholastic thought had produced a situation where, today, students of Catholic theology no longer experience a common form of theological education. They no longer speak the same language; they are not trained to attend to the same kind of order which used to exist in how the different doctrines of faith were ordered to each other. The absence of a common theological background therefore hampers the possibility of having fruitful theological discussions. Persons increasingly work from different points of view; they attend to different sets of first principles; they ask different questions in a manner which not too well coordinated. We look around us and we both know that there has been a massive breakdown in the order and structure of our Catholic theology. The architecture is gone and this breakdown implies or encourages serious problems in the conduct of the Church's pastoral government. We admit, with St. Anselm, that a good definition of theology is to say that it is faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). But, if this business of seeking understanding is not happening too well; if, performatively, it is not happening at all in some cases, then, from a growing absence of understanding as this exists with respect to the meaning of our Catholic faith, it is to be expected that a breakdown in the practice of our Catholic religion is to be expected. Such a breakdown would naturally follow. Admittedly, it is also true to say that, from a bad or an inadequate practice of the faith, we have a set of conditions which would impede growth in our theological understanding. We look back now and ask for reasons, for explanations for events that appear to be lacking in intelligibility and rationality...

In this more recent article by Prof. Reno, as I have just noted, I must indicate to you my basic acceptance. Please allow me, however, to make a number of observations.

First, although Prof. Reno refers to scholasticism and how, traditionally, it has functioned normatively as the lens or point of view for Catholic thinking and understanding in philosophy and theology, he does not speak at all about the existence of different schools of thought or contrasting points of view

which exist within this scholastic heritage. In a doctoral dissertation which appeared in 1946, Georges Van Riet (d. 1977) undertook a study of Thomist epistemology as this has existed amongst Thomists in their theological praxis since early in the 19th Century. Van Riet's *L'epistemologie thomiste: Recherches sur le probleme de la connaissance dans l'ecole thomiste contemporaine* (Louvain: Editions de l'Institut Superieur de Philosophie, 1946) divides the cognitional theory of Thomist philosophers into two basic divisions: "those whose epistemology is fundamentally a matter of confrontation" ("seeing and confronting" as this tradition comes to us originally and initially from the works of Plato) and "those who hold an epistemology that is based upon understanding, comprehension, and intelligence," this last point of view referring to a tradition which comes down to us from the teachings of Aristotle who had spoken about knowing in terms of identity: a cognitive identity between a knower and a known (a knower understanding and the other that a knower understands and knows). I happen to have a copy of this work by Van Riet. I refer to it now in order to refer to tensions which have existed among persons who have commonly regarded Aquinas as their mentor and teacher: tensions which point to differences which exist when we begin to move into theology and use analogies which are fundamental in the work of theology "seeking understanding." We can recall the kinds of arguments which we find in St. Augustine's *De Trinitate*. Here and there, throughout this work, Augustine censures the use of material analogies in the investigations and work of theology. If we use material analogies in our speculative theological understanding, we will probably go astray and find ourselves enmeshed in heretical positions of one kind or another. In order to understand the things of God, we best work with immaterial analogies: intellectual analogies or spiritual analogies... Different words here attempt to say the same thing. In order to try and speak about the things of God, we need to work with an order of being which is not material, an order of being which, however, is accessible to us through our created contingent acts of human understanding... Put briefly, spirit touches spirit...if you will allow me to use this allusive way of speaking. Hence, in order to do good theology, we need to work with a good philosophy: a philosophy that is able to distinguish between these two orders of being and which does not attempt to understand all things from a viewpoint that works with a philosophy of mind which tries to understand our human acts of understanding in terms which are derived from the kind of cognition which occurs in our acts of sense. A different kind of being exists when we move from acts of sense to acts of understanding.

Second, it is to be admitted that Lonergan, Balthazar, Rahner, and many others (including Pope Benedict Emeritus) were not attracted by the kind of official scholastic theology which was taught to them when, as young men, they did their studies in philosophy and theology. To speak about this in a more accurate way, they were not happy with the kind of philosophy which was first taught to them before they proceeded to go on and enter into their theology studies. As a kind of refrain, we say that bad philosophy leads to bad theology or that bad theology is explained by bad philosophy. In reading, for instance, about Lonergan's earlier life, we can find his own testimony which refers to a Suarezian kind of Thomism which, in his younger years, was prominent in Jesuit schools of philosophy and theology. Aquinas is interpreted and understood through the thought of Suarez (a 16th Century Jesuit theologian). Lonergan in a series of autobiographical interviews (in *Caring About Meaning*, pp. 28-29) tells a humorous story about one of his teachers, a Fr. Bolland SJ. He would read Suarez "with a magnifying glass" and on the feast of St. Thomas would say a ferial Mass. In her *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 4, Tracey Rowland noted that, in his seminary studies, Ratzinger "found scholasticism to be too impersonal." After hearing a long lecture about God as the "*summum bonum*," it is reported that Ratzinger remarked to his seminary prefect: "a '*summum bonum*' doesn't need a mother." And so, as a consequence of his dissatisfaction with the overly objectivist way of thinking and understanding which appeared to be dominant within the scholasticism of his day, the future Pope turned to the interest in subjectivity which he found in the writings and thought of St. Augustine, Cardinal Newman, and personalist philosophers like Martin Buber. An extrinsicist type of philosophy

or theology which tries to respond to questions in philosophy and theology without adverting to the place and role of human subjectivity cannot be regarded as meriting our serious attention. Something vital is missing in it if, in our attempts to understand our world and life and the things of God, nothing was to be said or nothing should be said about either the activity or the receptivity of human subjects who must try and live in a way which accords with what they think that they have come to understand and know. In this same context, it is said about Etienne Gilson that, although he listened to many lectures about Aquinas in the course of his formal education in philosophy and theology, he found that he had to read Aquinas on his own if he was to understand him. The kind of instruction which he received was something that he tried to forget about and put aside. With respect to the life and work of Karl Rahner, we all know about his early dissertation difficulties. What was later published as his *Spirit in the World* was rejected by his dissertation director since it presented an interpretation of Aquinas which was not in keeping with the categories and expectations of scholastic thought. I am unfamiliar with the personal history and life of Balthasar. By and large, when we look back, we tend to find a chorus of complaints about the kind of Thomism which was taught in Catholic seminaries and universities as these existed throughout the world up until the mid-1960s. I was once told that, at the Catholic University of America, in 1966, the School of Philosophy decided to end its policy of using the thought of Aquinas as a kind of normative measure for any kind of work that is done in philosophy. According to this policy, prior to 1966, one was to understand and evaluate every other kind of philosophy from a viewpoint which was determined by how Aquinas was then taught and understood. Today now, in the context of our own time and vantage point, we look back and wonder about all these changes and we wonder about the worth of these many changes...

Two points come to mind at this point. First, Lonergan, Rahner, Ratzinger, Gilson, and others lived during the time of the Second World War and we can wonder about the kind of influence which this experience exerted on them. For some strange reason or perhaps through a lack of reason, the truth of the Catholic faith (despite its clarity in how it was taught through its theology) was not having too much of an impact on the lives of many persons. Terrible things were occurring and the theological culture of the day was not able to have much of an impact on the faith lives of many persons who were caught up in the Second World War. Second, if in our philosophical and theological thinking, solutions are posed and issues are discussed from a context that severs itself from the life of human subjects (human subjects who, in their subjectivity, are to be regarded as believers), then one wonders if this point of view is identical or congruent with a point of view which thinks in terms of a gap or a divide which exists between human subjectivity, on the one hand, and objectivity, on the other hand. If we think that some kind of gap exists between these two kinds of being, we adopt a point of view which does not think or advert to the possible existence of self-transcendence when we think about the nature or the character of the human spirit. A self-enclosed notion of the human subject jives with a point of view which thinks or which assumes that some kind of gap needs to be bridged between subjectivity and objectivity: a gap which, if crossed, would involve some kind of separation which must occur as one moves from one kind of being to another. If one can move into objectivity, subjectivity is left behind immediately or, in some way, it is immediately put aside or discarded.

Third, it is a sad fact in our day that so many Catholics (which includes many priests and religious: I would say a majority) have little interest in philosophy and theology. When I entered the Society of Jesus in 1973 in Canada (Guelph, Ontario), I was surprised to meet so many young Jesuit priests who had no interest in philosophy and theology. To hell with theology! I was surprised at this since it was apparent to me that the Church was then in a deep crisis. Many persons were ceasing to go to Mass on any kind of regular basis and many persons were also leaving the priesthood or/and abandoning religious life. Things were definitely on a downward curve. Hence, why now in these days of crisis get into anti-intellectual frame of mind, adopt an anti-intellectual attitude? Why, at this critical time in

the history of the Church, abandon doing serious work in philosophy and theology? Surely at this time, good work in philosophy and theology is most desperately needed. Among the young men that I knew then, there was only one young Jesuit who had a serious interest in philosophy and theology. I cannot mention his name. An American Jesuit. He left the Society some years later in the wake of serious allegations... He later married. I am in touch with him to this day. I retain fond memories of him... Again, to understand this rejection and alienation, I think that, again, we can speak about the positive relation which exists between bad theology and bad philosophy. In this context, somewhat as a consequence of it, we see a decline in religious faith, a loss of a sense of commitment, an inability to know or to enjoy a Catholic sense of reality and how this differs and stands apart from the existence of every other kind of outlook. In these years also, we tend to find a troubling relation between a distaste for theology and an attitude of disobedience toward the Church's Magisterium, the Pope's teaching authority most especially. We can recall the theological disobedience which occurred in 1968 with respect to the lack of reception given the Pope's reiteration of traditional teaching in 1968 on the subject of contraception. What was especially shocking was the scale of this disobedience (about 300 dissenting theologians). This inclination to disregard the Church's teaching office is still with us.

If I were to hazard some kind of explanation, I find myself repeating and adapting a teaching which comes to us from Aquinas (something which he had noticed in the context of his own day). If we look back at the formulations of scholastic philosophy and theology, we notice an orientation that is very much geared to the purpose and work of dogmatic theology: indicating why given Church teachings are to be regarded true and not false. Very many arguments are lined up and they are connected to different sources of one kind or another (scripture, tradition, reason) -- everything is used to show why a given teaching is true. Ludwig Ott's book on the fundamentals of Catholic dogma is a good example of this kind of scholarship and we should note that, in these works, we can find much good material. In the old textbooks, it is not to be denied that we can find many good things. However, as Aquinas had noted in the context of his own day, it is not wise to focus our attention exclusively on trying to provide proofs for the teaching of the faith. One needs to go to deeper levels in terms of reasons, meaning, intelligibility. Instead of an approach that is solely concerned with proof, argument, and certitude, something needs to be done in terms of understanding (experiencing the milk of understanding). We also need to grow in wisdom and understanding in terms of what is the possible, richer meaning of our faith: how things hang together and how all these things relate us to our final end: union with God. One wonders if, ultimately, from understanding, we get our best experiences of certitude. I quote a favorite text from Aquinas where he speaks about these matters in the *Quaestiones quodlibetales* 4, q. 9, a. 3:

...every act should be performed in a way that is adapted to its end. Now an argumentation can be directed to either of two ends. One kind of argumentation is directed to removing doubts as to whether something is so. In such argumentation in theology, one relies especially on the authorities... But another kind of argumentation is that of the teachers in the schools. It seeks not to remove doubts but to instruct the students so that they understand the truth that the teacher hopes to convey. In such cases it is necessary to base one's arguments on reasons that go to the root of the truth in question, that make hearers understand how what is said is true [*quo modo sit verum*]. Otherwise, if the teacher settles a question simply by an appeal to authorities alone, the students will have their certitude that the facts are indeed as stated, but they will acquire no knowledge or understanding, and they will go empty away.

In other words, was the traditional scholastic theology deficient with respect to the tasks and the

requirements of the need for good systematic theology? In systematic theology, we work with analogical acts of understanding. But, in recent centuries, what has been the quality of our analogical acts of understanding? What analogies are we using and how well do we understand them? How great is the extent and depth of our self-knowledge, our self-understanding? We recall here that Augustine was posing this type of question in his theology of the Trinity.

Fourth and as a last point, we live within our present context and we ask about what we should now do. We have inherited a mess. Some persons in the 1960s were saying this kind of thing. We have inherited a mess. What do we do now? As best as I can tell, things are messier now than they were in the 1960s. It is difficult for me to believe that our theological culture has been moving ahead. We now have far fewer centers of theological activity than what we had in the mid-60s. We have fewer schools of theology, fewer students, fewer teachers, fewer books being published. Have I left out anything? I cannot recommend a mere return to scholastic philosophy and theology as it had been taught in the early 1960s. However, I would recommend that we direct attention to the value of working with a metaphysics that is linked to an understanding of human cognition. A good metaphysics gives one a general structure for fitting things together, absorbing differing elements in a way that creates a kind of map or guide for us. However, metaphysics should not be taught in a manner that is divorced from the structure and order of human cognition. We recall here that Aquinas speaks about an order of proportion, *proportio*, between the existence of cognitional elements and principles and the existence of metaphysical elements and principles. In a different way of speaking, Lonergan speaks about an isomorphic relation between the order of knowing and the order of being. In my own work, I find, quite frankly, that if one is to give a fully adequate explanation about anything, then one must go back and forth between metaphysics and cognition. Many Lonerganians want to transpose everything into cognitional terms and the relations which exist between cognitional elements. However, I cannot see the sense of this approach. In Aquinas we have an understanding of human cognition which thinks in terms of an ongoing form of interaction between acts of sense and acts of intellect. One cannot get along without the other. Each supposes the other. I find in Aquinas another species of mutual priority and interaction in the relation which exists between will and intellect. As you try to explain something of the will or something of the intellect, one must go to something which exists in the intellect or something which exists in the will. Each accounts for the other. Hence, in a similar way, I would try to argue that a kind of mutual priority exists between the order of being and the order of knowing. Each supposes the other and if one examines any question within this kind of context, one can move toward a species of understanding which is far more complete. By entering into this kind of heuristic structure and by incorporating it into the fiber of one's being, one best positions oneself to enter into the riches of our Catholic philosophical and theological tradition, benefitting from it and adding to it, reaching out and making better evaluations about what we find strange and new in the development of our human culture.

In conclusion, please notice that I have given a truncated response to questions that had been raised by Prof. Reno about the current breakdown which exists in the order of Catholic theology. I have indulged in generalizations in order to say something that can be expressed in a review which is not too overly long.

A question which comes to mind for me now is to ask if anything can be done within parishes to create theology seminars for persons who could be interested in better understanding the possible meaning of their faith: how it can affect their lives, changing attitudes that lead to a re-understanding or a new view of life and how things fit together. I am sure that there are some persons out there who worry about what has been happening within our Catholic self-understanding of faith. We live during a time when it is not uncommon to meet persons who might have higher degrees in theology but who do

not have a sense of our Catholic theological tradition...no sense of roots and earlier controversies...