

Hidden clefs of Catholic tradition



On the occasion of his 800th birthday, Holger Dörnemann recalls the immense work and fundamental concerns of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), one of the most influential theologians of the late Middle Ages. He wrote the 'and' between nature and grace, faith and reason, creation and redemption into Catholic theology.

'Everything I have said seems to me like chaff.' Thomas Aquinas is said to have uttered these words on 6 December 1273, a good three months before his death. Whatever the reason - whether caused by a physical and mental breakdown or due to a mystical experience - this seemingly paradoxical sentence from the mouth of one of the most effective and creative theologians in church history points, as if through a burning glass, to what has been described as the 'hidden clef' (J. Pieper) of the theology of Thomas Aquinas, whose memorial day will be celebrated on 28 January in the anniversary year of his 800th birthday.

G. K. Chesterton alludes to this hidden clef when he emphasises the humility of the scholar as a special character trait of Thomas. 'He was prepared to take the lowest place in order to investigate the lowest things. He did not, as the specialists do, study the worm as if it were the world, but he was prepared to begin the study of reality by studying the reality of a worm.' The theologian, who taught at the most famous universities of his time in Naples, Paris and Rome, assumed, like his Cologne teacher Albertus Magnus, 'that the investigation of the most humble things ultimately leads to the highest truth.'

This theological approach to creation describes the fundamental basis on which he was able to build the lofty cathedral-like edifices of thought and theological sums that made Thomas Aquinas the theologian and philosopher of the Catholic tradition. No theologian before him left behind such an extensive body of work. The study edition of his main theological work alone, the *Summa Theologiae*, is set out in no fewer than 36 volumes in

the German Thomas Edition. After his death on 7 March 1274, many other theological writings and philosophical commentaries formed the basis for a philosophical-theological school of thought known as Thomism, which contributed to Thomas Aquinas being honoured well into the 20th century as the 'general teacher' (doctor communis) whose teachings were declared the basis of Catholic academic education by Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* in 1879.

Chesterton suggested giving Thomas the epithet 'a creatore' because of his theological thinking on creation. For Thomas, the reality that can be perceived by man in the light of his reason is the basis and starting point of God's creative and perfecting work, which is fully revealed in the light of grace. Grace presupposes nature and perfects it, as it says in this context in a central sentence of the Thoman doctrine of redemption. This harmonious unison of the two ways of knowing, faith and natural reason, has been part of a legacy of medieval theology that has remained with the Catholic tradition ever since Thomas and is still binding today. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Fides et ratio*, spoke of the two wings with which the human spirit rises to contemplate the truth.

Against all - even if perhaps well-meaning - critics, it is still assumed with Thomas that faith cannot be brought into a real opposition to reason. On the one hand, because both sources of knowledge - as already mentioned - are two (albeit different) perspectives on the same reality and, on the other hand, because they cannot contradict each other by definition. 'Either something is known, in which case it is not an object of faith, or it is believed, in which case it is not an object of knowledge.' (Which is why Thomas was only ever interested in defending faith and not proving it).

For Thomas - in a vertical turn of the Aristotelian doctrine of friendship - faith is the final criterion for the establishment of a friendship with God and thus at the same time the first act of a redeemed being in Christ, in which the constitution of the new relationship with God takes place.

It is precisely in his adoption of the doctrine of friendship from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and its theological utilisation as a 'paradigm of redemption' (H. Dörnemann) that Thomas once again demonstrates how he makes considerations of philosophical reason the basis of his theology. In the late *Summa Theologiae*, the 'General Teacher' of the then still undivided Christendom was able to bring together the objective doctrine of redemption (soteriology) and the subjective doctrine of redemption (doctrine of grace and justification) by means of the idea of friendship. A revolutionary idea that links Thomas Aquinas in his reflection on justification by faith with the reformer Martin Luther, who was born more than two and a half centuries after him, as O.H. Pesch in particular has worked out. However, unlike Luther, Thomas attempted to develop his theological thinking in the context of a philosophical frame of reference and to combine it with a positive anthropology and doctrine of creation.

This theological instruction, inscribed in the family book of the Catholic tradition, to express the 'plus' of revelation not through a devaluation of man's natural abilities or in disregard of natural reason, but rather as their fulfilment, is one of the greatest theological exercises in which generation after generation the strongest and most powerful forces have tried again and again.

This is one of the greatest theological exercises in which generation after generation the strongest and most capable forces have tried their hand again and again. And where it

succeeds, the great humility of the saint always shines through, which Chesterton described as Thomas' most characteristic attribute and which is expressed in almost every sentence, especially in the words shortly before the day of his death, as well as in his entire scientific life's work.—

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