

Si Si No No

THE ANGELUS ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTICLE REPRINT

Let your speech be, "Yes, yes," "No, no"; whatever is beyond these comes from the evil one. (Mt. 5:37) • October 2005
Reprint #66

Reflections of a Catholic Teacher

On the Nature of MODERN THOUGHT

PART 1

The following is the first part of the lecture given by Paolo Pasqualucci, professor emeritus of the University of Perugia, Italy, on January 3, 2004 at *SiSiNoNo*'s fourth theological congress held in Rome. It will be serialized in the next issues of *SiSiNoNo*. The text has been revised and expanded by the author. None of this is easy, but it is fellows like Dr. Pasqualucci that keep doctrine from impurities and our minds from going soft.

SETTING UP THE DISCUSSION

The Marriage of St. Thomas to Modern Thought

A decree of the Sacred Congregation for Studies (July 27, 1914) under the auspices of Pope St. Pius X, set forth 24 theses drawn from the metaphysics of St. Thomas as "safe directive norms" for the philosophical

Professor Paolo Pasqualucci has dedicated himself to the study of philosophy of law, politics, and of metaphysics. Among his most recent publications are *Introduzione à la metafisica dell'Uno* (Rome: Pellicani, 1996, 151pp.) dealing with the metaphysical notion of the One in relation to the metaphysical notion of God, and *Politica e religione, saggio di teologia della storia* (Rome: Pellicani, 2001, 89pp.) which explores the relationship between politics and religion from the standpoint of the traditional Catholic theology of history.

He has always participated in the theological congresses of *SiSiNoNo*. His contributions can be found in the Acts of the same, published in French by the Society of Saint Pius X and in English (partially) by Angelus Press.

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and theological studies of Catholics. Although these norms were not made binding, the motive for this decree was later elaborated by Pope Benedict XV in his epistle *Quod de Fovenda* of March 19, 1917:

The Roman pontiffs have constantly maintained that St. Thomas should be considered as “guide and master” in philosophical and theological studies, while always preserving liberty of discussion about that which could and was accustomed to be subject to discussion in both disciplines.

Popes Pius XI and especially Pius XII reconfirmed this principle. Pope John XXIII, however, in his celebrated inaugural address at the Second Vatican Council, maintained that the “principal goal” of the Council was not “discussion of this or that theme of the fundamental doctrine of the Church, repeatedly expounded in the teaching of the Fathers and of ancient and modern theologians.” For such a purpose “a council was not necessary.” The “principal goal” of the Council was supposed to consist above all in

a leap ahead towards doctrinal penetration and the formation of consciences, in more perfect correspondence of fidelity to authentic doctrine, albeit studied and set forth through the forms of investigation and the literary formulation of contemporary thought. One thing is the substance of the ancient doctrine of the *depositum fidei*, and another the formulation of its covering: and this difference should be taken account of in a spirit of patience, measuring everything by the forms and proportions of a magisterium pre-eminently pastoral in character.

By proposing this basic distinction between “substance” and “covering,” between form and content, Pope John XXIII, while not formally renouncing St. Thomas as a guide, coupled him with modern thought, which in its various components is notoriously as distant as can be imagined from Thomistic metaphysics. This is the great novelty the Pontiff proposed for the Council to realize as part of its “principal goal.”

Was it a matter, as many today still maintain, of a simple *exterior* adaptation, to make the ancient doctrine more understandable to moderns and contemporaries? But if it were a simple question of “exposition” and thus a pastoral matter, was not the convoking of an ecumenical council a disproportionate means to do this? Wouldn't it have been enough for the Holy Office to give instructions to the bishops and the pontifical universities? Furthermore, if it were a simple problem of the exposition of doctrine and thus a pastoral issue, why did Pope John XXIII affirm that, beyond the exposition of doctrine, it was also necessary to *study* doctrine according to the “methods” (as



LA RELIGION DE VATICAN I

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PREMIER SYMPOSIUM DE PARIS

4-5-6 OCTOBRE 2002

the official French translation has it) of modern thought? This distinction between the “substance” and the “covering” of doctrine was something new in the history of the Church. It did in fact lead to doctrine being studied in a deeper way in the light of contemporary thought and thus made to conform with its methods, thanks to a magisterium of “pre-eminently pastoral” character.

It is well known that the Latin version of this directive by Pope John XXIII is more concise and seems more moderate than the official French and Italian versions....But we must recall that John XXIII did not rectify the vernacular translations, but allowed them to circulate freely and used them himself on at least one official occasion in quoting himself. On this point he maintained an attitude that seemed intended to legitimize the vernacular translations as representing the authentic meaning of the more concise Latin text.

Some Essential Features of Modern Thought

Let us briefly outline some essential characteristics of modern thought. We shall focus on the negation of the distinctions between *substance* and *accident*, of *being* and *appearance*. Doing this, modern thinkers obscure the nature of *intention* as a conscious state of the subject's being, which is realized in a free and rational will, distinct from its acts which it nonetheless shapes. Additionally, modern thinkers attempt to overcome the *principle of causality*. We will conclude with a discussion on the negation of the category of *essence*, another fundamental premise of modern thought, focused mainly on the speculation of Martin Heidegger.

We hope that this exposition will show the *intrinsic incompatibility* of "modern thought" with Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, and the intrinsic weakness of the "negations" and "overcomings" on which modern thought is based. The modern school of thought deliberately places human thought, will, or instincts at the center of everything, denying any legitimacy to the very idea of the supernatural.

DISCUSSING THE ERRORS OF MODERN THOUGHT

An Overview of the Traditional Concepts

Let us begin with the concepts of *substance* and *accident* as summarized by St. Thomas Aquinas.

The first concept, that of "substance," aims to express that which constitutes the very essence of a thing or entity: that on account of which something is what it is. Even in everyday speech we are accustomed to speak of "the substance

(or essence)" of a thing in indicating the essential aspect of a thing, event, or situation, its inner or constitutive nature, fundamental structure or essence. The word *substance* is often used as a synonym for *essence*. The second concept, that of "accident," denotes by contrast that which appears to be an external quality or characteristic of a thing, whether permanent or transitory.

The substance is under (*sub-stare*) that which appears and contributes to the very being of something in its essence while the accident (*accidens*, that which happens and strikes the senses) appears from the outside, in perceptible or phenomenal reality. In a concrete entity, understood as a whole, substance and accident are found in an inseparable connection between what is external and what is internal and profound. The notion of accident implies transiency and change not affecting the substance. Man, for example, generally shows a loss of his outer characteristics with the passing of time, but can we deduce from this fact some modification in his very human nature? Certainly not. Nor can we say that this quality is lost with the eventual decline of his faculties because of sickness and old age. From a moral point of view, and a general spiritual perspective, man remains *always* himself, whatever exterior alteration may take place in all his qualities, exterior and interior.

An entity therefore both *exists* and *appears*: it appears as it is, but also as it is not. There is a logically necessary distinction between being and appearance, parallel conceptually to that between substance and accident. The substance is in the accidents, in the sense that it is manifest in them; however, it is *not identical* with its accidents, is not exhausted by them and cannot be identified with them. Substance persists through the changing vicissitudes of becoming. It involves their essence.

Applying These Traditional Concepts to "Transubstantiation"

What would result if we were to look at a dogma of the Catholic Faith without the help of the notions of substance and accident, philosophically of Aristotelian origin, re-elaborated in Scholastic thought, and in particular that of St. Thomas? Without this philosophical apparatus it is not

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possible to understand the singular wonder of transubstantiation in the most rational and thus the best possible way, in conformity with a sane intellect.

The consecrated bread and wine maintain their *species* or normal appearance, with all their natural qualities or accidents: colors, odors, density, weight, taste. But their substance is changed in a supernatural way. By virtue of the words of consecration, they have become “the body, the soul, and the divinity” of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Normally, the substance of something is manifest in the accidents or qualities of the thing itself. Nevertheless there can be a difference, because everything that is in itself exterior and subject to change does not always manifest its substance. This happens in a supernatural way in the Eucharist, where the consecrated Host is *sacred* not on account of what it appears to be, but because of what it has intrinsically become after consecration (transubstantiation) even while retaining all its accidents intact.

This difference can also be found in the realm of secondary causes. In the case of man, appearance (being external and therefore accidental) often does not correspond entirely or even in part to *being*, that is to the interior substance in the heart and the mind of a man. As far as spirit and the ethical life are concerned (the only life that counts as such for the purposes of our salvation) unity and difference constantly show themselves to our intellect, which must collect them, discerning in an adequate manner in itself and in others the relation between reality and appearance, that is to say, the difference between exteriority and interiority, between the transient and the permanent.

How Traditional Concepts Are Denied in Modern Thought

The faculties of discernment and judgment are hard to exercise, yet are of vital importance. Modern thought fails to supply any principle worthy of the name, prone as it is to simplify reality from the perspective of the subject. French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote:

Modern thought made great progress in reducing existence to a series of phenomena [impressions-*Ed.*] which manifest it. In this way it sought to eliminate a certain number of dualisms....Indeed it has above all disposed of the dualism that opposed that which is inside an entity to that which is outside. No longer is there anything exterior to an entity, if by this is understood a superficial skin that would conceal the

true nature of an object from our vision. This true nature was supposed to be the secret reality of things. It could be intuited or supposed but never reached because it was “interior” to the object taken into consideration. The phenomena that manifest the entity are neither exterior nor interior; they are all of equal value, they all refer to other phenomena and no one of them holds a privileged position....An electric current, for example... is nothing but the ensemble of actions that manifest it. No one of these actions is sufficient to reveal it. At the same time it does not cause us to see anything *behind itself*; it refers to itself and a whole series [of actions]. The result of this, as it appears, is that the dualism between being and appearance no longer has a place in philosophy. That which appears directs us to a whole series of phenomena and not to a hidden reality capable of drawing to itself all the *being* of the entity....Thus the being of an entity *is* precisely its appearance....For the same reason, the dualism of actuality and potentiality disappears. Everything is actual. There is no potential behind an act, nor is there a capacity, nor a virtue [of producing the action]....Therefore we can indeed refute the dualism of appearance and essence. The appearance does not hide the essence, but reveals it: it *is* the essence [my emphasis added].

Sartre here presents principles that he would apply both to nature and to man. These principles epitomize the characteristic tendency of modern thought towards a constant, progressive reduction to a single entity which is not God but man. If man—whether as an individual or as a collective subject—were to take himself as the source of the *meaning* of existence, of the whole, he would tend to *repress* not only every idea of essence but also every idea of transcendence, of First Cause, of the supernatural! He would then find himself enclosed in a reality that appears to be constituted by a *simple series of appearances*, by phenomena that could not be reduced to a deeper reality, would not depend on a first cause, and would not be marked by a final cause. It would thus be appearance, that is, the *situation*, that would make us what we are. Ethics could no longer be based on absolute principles—because such principles express an immutable essence that transcends phenomena—but would rather be a *situational ethics* and thus the mere reflex of a finite reality that constitutes and justifies itself by the demands of action.

In such a vision man, as a subject endowed with intellect and will, dissolves in the elusive becoming of appearances and is overwhelmed by the anxious perception of nothingness on which existentialist thought of the 20th century has always insisted. If in fact “appearance is the essence,” and if therefore “everything is in actuality,” if there is no potentiality *behind* and therefore *prior to* an act and no “capacity” or virtue is realized in it, this amounts to saying that

nothing underlies it. Behind the appearance there is no essence, and if there is no essence there is nothing behind it or, if one prefers, nothingness lies behind it. Thus, we come from nothing and we go to nothing. The inevitable conclusion constitutes a metaphysical absurdity even more than a moral one: if nothingness is both before and after us, how did something—life itself—arise?

A Criticism of the Materialistic Foundations of Contemporary Nihilism

To respond to this traditional objection, materialists have from ancient times responded that matter should be understood as *eternal and uncreated*. This amounts to an act of faith in matter. Matter is endowed with divine attributes; matter is implicitly supposed to contain an intelligence that gives order to the world.

Lucretius (c. 98-54 BC) wrote that things cannot be born from nothing by a divine act (*De Rerum Natura* I, 150) because otherwise reality would be dominated by chaos and “we would see everything born from everything, and nothing would have its own seed, men would be born from the sea, scaled fish on land, birds would jump from the sky (*ibid.* I, 158-63). Nature shows that every thing is born in a definite and ordered way, through the operation of a generative power that acts from its own seed (*ibid.* I, 168; 173-74) and develops not arbitrarily but in accordance with a determinate, specific and finite form. To understand this one must recognize that “a finite part of matter was given to all things, a limiting part was given to every existent thing for the purpose of generation out of which it is clear what can arise” (*ibid.* I, 203-4). The poet’s lyrical formulation begs an obvious question: “Who has given a finite matter and thus a determinate form to each and every thing?” Was it the gods?—No, the Olympian gods, infinitely distanced from the world, cannot be understood in this manner; the gods of Epicurus are neither creators nor judges, but mere ciphers, so to speak. Was it then matter that gave itself an order on its own, without the intervention of a demiurge or artificer?...

Lucretius does in fact think of matter as an entity that produces and orders itself *on its own* without need of a mind and a power to create it. This conception, with diverse nuances, is at the foundation of all materialistic philosophies through

succeeding generations. It is the well-known argument of the shoe that makes itself, without need of a cobbler. Common sense argues that it is absurd.

Yes, it is absurd. But there is no error that does not have its share of truth, its appearance of truth and its subtleties with their own power of fascination. Thus one should attempt to refute it with rational and measured arguments. Against Lucretius and his disciples the following arguments are to be made:

Understanding “Nothing”

Lucretius writes that, if things had appeared out of nothing, chaos would reign, because everything would come to be spontaneously without any order. Here he contradicts the traditional principle, which he himself repeats several times, that nothing can in any way be created from nothing (*nil posse creari de nilo, op. cit.*, I, 156-57). In fact, only nothingness can come from nothing and thus nothing can be produced by nothing, *not even* chaos (*i.e.*, birds falling from the sky, fish born on earth, *etc.*). Nothingness produces nothing. It abides forever in its absolute non-being. Non-being is always something that has no potential being. Nothing is born in nothingness, nor does anything develop in nothingness, whether order or chaos.

Nevertheless, our criticism cannot stop here. The philosophy of Lucretius obliges him to suppress a concept that is in itself valid—that of creation out of nothing, as revealed by revelation—by representing it *in a mistaken way*. That’s important to look at.

The target of Lucretius’s polemic is the pagan religion that he knew. In the introductory verses of his poem he exalts Epicurus for trampling on religion with his materialistic philosophy. He cites the (legendary) sacrifice of Iphigenia in Aulis as an example of the evils caused by religion. The concluding verse of this episode contains an invective that has been cited over centuries by all the enemies of religion, that is, “Religion had the power to induce the practice of such evils,” though the word “*religio*” in this context is better translated “superstition.”

Lucretius lived in the age of Cicero, when Roman society was in grave crisis because of the ongoing civil wars. This crisis arose from social, political, and economic causes. Religion in itself can hardly be cited as a cause of the crisis, understood

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in the strict sense. But Lucretius's visionary and poetically seductive materialism seems to express a more profound crisis than that derived from the lost political ideals of the Roman republic. It manifests the spiritual crisis of an entire civilization which could no longer find a place to stand. In such a situation the world-view of Epicurus was seductive. It proclaimed a philosophy of renunciation, of the hidden life, of egoistic retreat into oneself, compensated at the same time by exaltation of the self as an atom that, believing itself projected into the eternity of matter, imputed to itself a lasting cosmic dimension.

The idea of creation *from nothing* cannot be found in the religious mythology nor in the mystery religions of paganism, nor in Greek philosophy. The Platonic demiurge does not create matter from nothing, but forms its elements from an abiding substrate dominated by chaos:

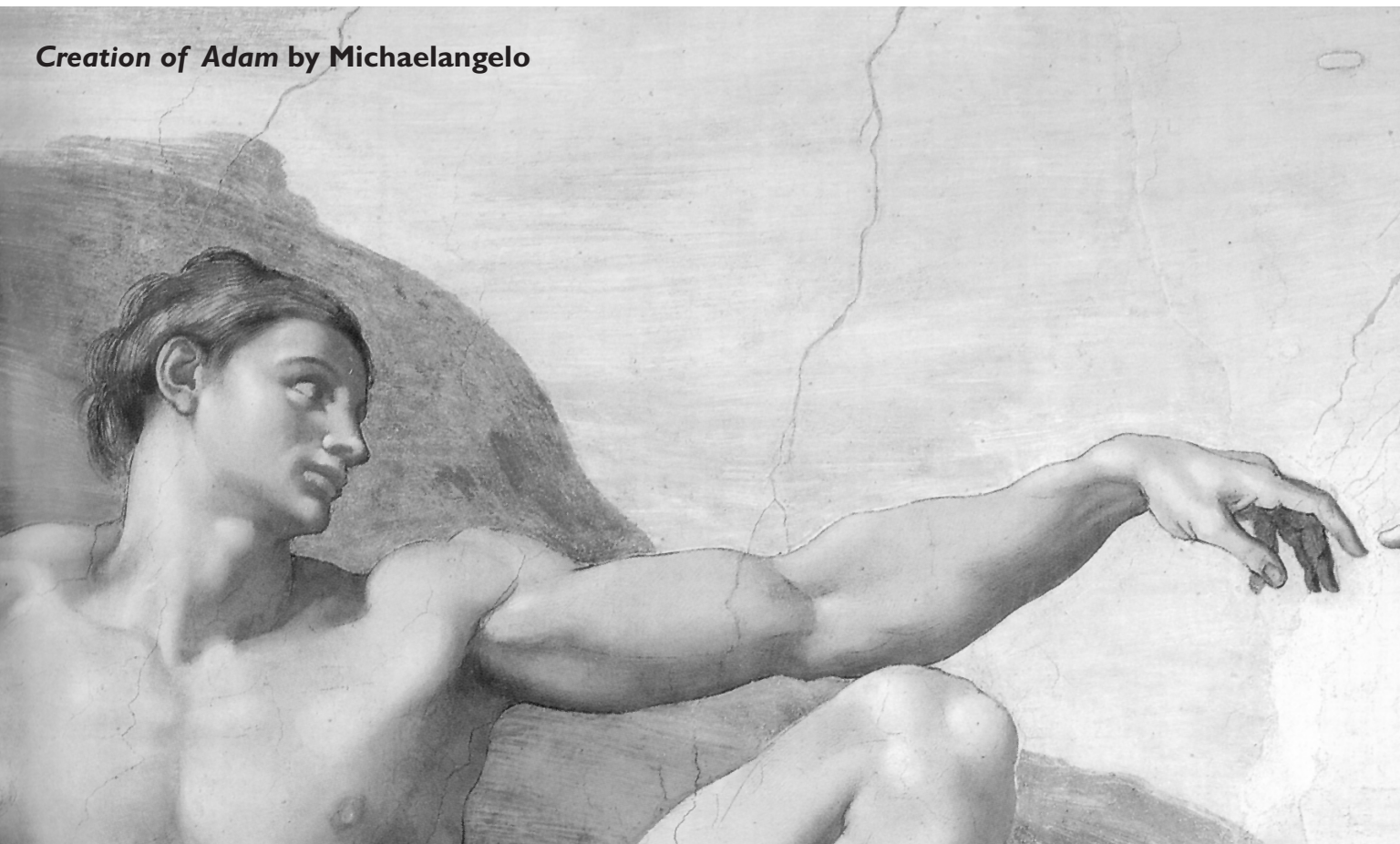
Because the god wanted all things to be good and that, insofar as possible, nothing be bad, he then took every visible thing that was not at rest but was driven about without order or rule and reduced it from disorder to order, judging this a superior condition.

In fact, creation from nothing is a Biblical concept, testified by divine revelation. Human thought did not arrive at it on its own. But we cannot suppose that Lucretius meant to polemicize

against the Book of Genesis. The Septuagint, the celebrated Greek translation of the Old Testament, was composed from 250 BC to about 130 BC and was not part of the intellectual furniture of Greek and Roman intellectuals in the first century BC, even if some general and indirect knowledge of its teachings cannot be excluded *a priori*.

Be that as it may, the concept of creation out of nothing as criticized in Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* is not the same as that revealed in the Bible. I must make this clarification to oppose the mistaken belief that Lucretian criticism is applicable to the Biblical doctrine. The creation of the world as described in Genesis does not suppose the existence of matter prior to the Creator, and thus does not imply the capacity of matter to give order to itself independently of a Creator. Creation took place according to the mind of God who thought and made all things issue forth from nothing. This happened in a sudden manner, according to the well-known *fiat* known from the Bible. This creation is not the work of nothing but of God, who makes all things (including man) originate from a state of nothingness with respect *to themselves*, not with respect *to God*. This means that the nothingness from which things arise is that of *their* prior lack of existence, not that of an absolute Nothing-Non-being-which cannot exist

Creation of Adam by Michaelangelo



if God exists. But God exists “from eternity” and will always exist. Lucretius, who did not believe in a reality outside the senses, clearly understood by “creation out of nothing” either the creative act of an absolute Nothing, of nothingness as a whole, which, if its existence be admitted, itself makes the concept of creation impossible; or else, and more likely, he understands it as the act of the Platonic demiurge, which makes the world out of an original *substrate* which would constitute “nothingness” as a primordial disorder. In either case his criticism of the idea of a creation out of nothing cannot be applied to the true conception of “creation out of nothing” as reported in the Sacred Scriptures.

Understanding “Matter”

If no one gave matter the capacity to distribute itself according to a form, to grow in a regulated and finite way, something that implies a plan, an end, it is then necessary to admit that matter possesses *on its own* that capacity which can be seen in a thought or a mind at work. But this implies that matter as such *thinks*, that it is capable of conceiving itself according to all the forms which it can possibly take. Matter would thus contain not only creative power but also thought itself, the mind that directs it. But mind and thought can only be conceived

as something spiritual. Matter would thus contain a reality (thought) whose characteristics are not those of matter, which is characterized first of all by *extension*. Mind lacks extension and thus, by virtue of this fact alone, its operations cannot be reduced to that of matter. They lack that essential condition of finite and sensible beings, that *spatially determined limit* that characterizes matter. The “mind,” intelligence, thought, spiritual ways of being that have their roots in our soul, this complex and entirely spiritual reality seems in effect *unlimited* in comparison with matter. As Anaxagoras said:

All other things have a part in every thing, but intelligence is unlimited, independent, and not mixed with anything, but stands alone in itself.

If matter were to think, would it not have to be capable of explaining itself? Instead, it always appears as endowed with form and forms itself [*i.e.*, as weather elements swirl and become a hurricane—*Ed.*] according to a direction and an end, without ever being able itself to give any explanation of its being and action, of why it is what it is. But this insuperable incapacity of matter seems nevertheless at the same time connected to its ordering itself according to the idea of an end. Such a connection, explains St. Thomas Aquinas, legitimizes or even necessitates the hypothesis of the existence of a



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Mind that creates and directs matter. As he says in his *Summa Theologica*:

We see in fact that determinate realities lacking reason, constituted by natural things, operate with a view to an end. This appears from the fact that they always or very often operate in the same manner to achieve the best end; whence it appears that they reach their goal not by chance but deliberately. But things that do not possess knowledge [because they lack reason-Ed.] do not tend towards an end if they are not directed by someone capable of knowing and understanding, but therefore, there must be a rational being by whose operation all natural things are ordered towards an end: and this entity we call God.

“Nature” Doesn’t Run on Auto-Pilot

The argument of Lucretius for the eternal conservation of all nature by nature’s *own operation* is totally unacceptable.

Thus it happens that nature dissolves all things into their own elements and does not disperse them into nothingness: if a body were subject to total dissolution, anything could suddenly disappear before our eyes and cease to exist: no force would be necessary to realize the separation of its parts and dissolve its connections. (*op. cit.*, I, 215-20)

The fact that the world has not disappeared up to now does not result from the fact that every thing has been absorbed into the constituent parts of its nature. A natural entity dissolved by death never returns. If it did, one would be obliged to admit the absurd concept that the dead body of one’s father is contained in the seed of each one of us and so on infinitely through the generations. The fact that the world persists up to now results from the fact that it is maintained in its being by new births that continually replace the dead. This self-reproduction involves a compensation of life and death that appears thought out and willed by Someone in function of the equilibrium of the whole.

For Christian philosophy the principle of causality [*i.e.*, that every effect has a cause-Ed.]: **1)** has an *ontological* value, that is to say, is really present in [the being of] things; and **2)** is so evident that it is easily resolved into the first principles of our mind [*i.e.*, that a thing is what it is and not what it is not, that one thing cannot be itself and another at the same time-Ed.]. In fact, given an entity that has the character of an effect [*i.e.*, by participation, contingency-Ed.], the intellect sees in it the implicit need for a cause. All our theodicy rests on the principle of causality (Parente-Piolanti-Garafalo, *Dizionario de Teologia Dogmatica*).

[“Theodicy,” by the way, is the philosophical apologetic that confirms the justice of God and whereby right reason demonstrates the principles of the Faith, the existence of a personal God, and the necessity and discernibility of revelation-Ed.]. Pope St. Pius X in *Pascendi Gregis* said about Lucretian concepts:

Their system, overflowing with so many and such enormous errors, has emerged from the marriage of false philosophy with the Faith. ☹

Translated exclusively for Angelus Press from *SiSiNoNo* (May 31, 2005, Vol. 31, No.10). To be continued.

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