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NEW CONCEPTS IN THEOLOGY

Any study of the history or the development of sacred theology necessarily looks towards the present and the future as well as towards the past. Basically, of course, such a study considers the elaboration of the proofs and expositions of Christian teaching in the past. It indicates the time when and the circumstances under which the various technical terms and expressions now current in theological literature first made their appearance.

Inevitably, however, a study of the history of sacred theology leads to some sort of theory about the function and the value of these technical terms and expressions in present-day literature and even, to a certain very limited extent, in the various dogmatic formulae into which they have entered over the course of years. Some have imagined that these technical terms are completely extraneous to the original deposit of Christian revelation. Others have taught that such terms represent concepts fundamentally and originally foreign to the genuine Christian message while, at the same time, they hold that these concepts have been appropriated by or assimilated into the body of Catholic doctrine as instruments useful for a time at least in expressing the truth and in confounding heresy. A third view of technical theological terminology describes it as introduced into the lexicon of Christian doctrine only because each one of these words has been found accurately and to some extent readily to set forth a meaning really contained in the message we accept with the assent of divine Catholic faith.

The notion that theological or even dogmatic developments are merely accretions to, rather than clear and accurate statements of, the doctrine God has revealed through Jesus Christ Our Lord is far too extravagant and unscientific to deserve the consideration of Catholic theologians. It would mean that when we teach, for instance, that the sacramental character is *reductive* a quality of the second species, a potency, that we would be making a statement entirely foreign to the original deposit of Christian revelation. It would mean that practically the entire content of scholastic theology is devoid of any Christian value. Finally, it would imply that, since a good number of these technical theological terms have become integrated into the various dogmatic formulae of the

Church, that these dogmatic formulae could not be considered as statements of truth revealed by God through Our Lord.

An application of this teaching to Catholic dogma constitutes one of the crasser aspects of the Modernist heresy. In the Anti-Modernist Oath we find a reprobation of the "error of those who affirm that the faith proposed by the Church can run counter to history, and that Catholic dogmas, in the sense in which they are now understood, cannot be reconciled with the truer origins of the Christian religion."¹ The statement that the technical theological phraseology which has been incorporated into the dogmatic formulae has no relation to the original deposit of divine revelation is merely the assertion of an error long since condemned by the Catholic Church.

The belief that technical theological terms, while not entirely unrelated to the original deposit of revelation, are primarily expressions of concepts assimilated into the body of Christian doctrine to serve as "contingent" instruments in proposing and defending that doctrine has attracted a certain amount of notoriety in our own day. Historians of dogma and of sacred theology have ascertained that certain technical terms and phrases have appeared in the exposition of Christian doctrine at definite times during the lifetime of the Church. Thus, for example, during the twelfth century the theologians as a group came to describe grace as a form. In this, as well as in similar instances, it is supposed that they took a distinctively Aristotelian concept, and employed this concept as a means for explaining the revealed message. According to this theory, the concepts thus introduced were "vital," and hence effective instruments for teaching at the time they were first introduced. The proponents of this viewpoint hold that these philosophical concepts remain "contingent," even after they have been integrated into the dogmatic formulae of the Church itself. Hence they believe that progress in sacred theology in our own time must involve the abandonment of those concepts which have ceased to be "vital," and the replacement of these notions by others more in line with modern thought.

This second theory is more cleverly conceived and more respectfully expressed than the one which considers all technical terminology as introducing completely extraneous elements into Christian

*DB,2U6.

doctrine. Nevertheless, it too is manifestly unacceptable. If the technical terms incorporated into sacred theology and into the various dogmatic formulae really designate ideas or concepts which serve only as "contingent" instruments for the teaching of Christian doctrine, then the propositions in which these terms are predicated of theological and dogmatic subjects are not properly true at all. If the concept expressed by the technical phrase "the sole formal cause of justification" were not objectively identical with that designated by the term "sanctifying grace," then the statement of the Council of Trent and of scholastic theology to the effect that sanctifying grace is the sole formal cause of justification would not and could not be properly true.²

If the concept of a formal cause were thus a merely contingent pedagogical instrument in the teaching of Christian doctrine, the term designating this concept could have no more than a metaphorical or symbolic function in the theological thesis or the dogmatic formula.³ In such a case, the teaching of Trent would actually mean that the concept of a formal cause could serve to help men understand how sanctifying grace functions in the process of justification, or that, with reference to justification, sanctifying grace holds a position something like that which a formal cause occupies in relation to the entity it determines.

Actually, however, neither dogma nor theology contain any such teaching. Both assert that sanctifying grace *is* the only formal cause of justification. Such a statement cannot, of course, be dismissed as merely metaphorical in character, since the object used in a metaphorical proposition must necessarily be so manifestly different from the subject it serves to explain that the figurative nature of the attribution is self-evident. St. Paul spoke of the Church as the Body (*râpa*) of Christ. This metaphor is instructive

² CL Sess. VI, cap. 7. *DB*, 799.

³ which Pope Pius X describes the teaching of the Modernistas a theologian with reference to what was called symbolism. Since symbols are but symbols in regard to their objects and only instruments for the believer, it is necessary, first of all, according to the teaching of the Council of Trent, that the believer do not lay too much stress on the symbol itself but avail himself of it only for the purpose of reaching the absolute truth which the formula at once reveals and in doing so" (*DB*, 2087) and that to express but without ever succeeding

precisely because a body (*σῶμα*) is a kind of thing manifestly different from a society. Thus the figure serves to show the ineffable intimacy of Our Lord's association with the company of His disciples. In the same way, the liturgy speaks of Christ as the Lion of the tribe of Juda. The diversity between a brute beast and the Incarnate Word is such as to prevent any misconception that this designation is proper rather than figurative. Thus the metaphor can serve to teach the strength and the triumphant character of Our Lord. In both of these cases the concept of one object is used as an instrument in teaching about the properties of another.

These conditions obviously cannot be verified in the case of the technical terms employed in theology and in the dogmatic formulae. There is and there can be no *prima facie* evidence of diversity between the concepts of sanctifying grace and the sole formal cause of justification. Hence a proposition which predicates one of the other can only be interpreted as meaning that these concepts are objectively identical. In the event that they are not thus objectively identical, then the proposition which predicates one of the other can never be explained as merely metaphorical. It must be rejected as false.

Those who hold that technical terms in theology stand for new concepts introduced into the fabric of Christian doctrine have blundered, not only in expounding the faith, but in explaining the facts of history. They have drawn a conclusion to which the evidence at their command gives no support whatever. The history of sacred doctrine shows many an instance of new terms being introduced. It does not and it cannot present evidence that these new terms, as used in the content of sacred theology or in the dogmatic formulae of the Catholic Church, designate concepts which are *objectively* distinct from those contained in the original deposit of divine public revelation.

Indeed, the evidence points in exactly the opposite direction. The Catholic Church is commissioned and divinely empowered to present the truths of divine public revelation to the men of all times, of all cultures, and of all places. In order to carry out that commission, the Church must obviously translate its message into the various languages and dialects of mankind, and must restate the same message from generation to generation. Thus, even in the same language, there have been necessarily new terms and new

phrases appearing very frequently in the course of history. But, given the divine commission and power of the Catholic Church, all of these newly introduced expressions have served only to set forth the one divine public revelation which Our Lord originally handed over to the Church through the apostles.

Some of the terms introduced into theology and ultimately into the Church's dogmatic formulae were previously found in the lexicon of Aristotelian philosophy. Obviously the men who first employed these expressions in the teaching of divinely revealed truth had no intention of teaching that the Aristotelian system itself was a part of the divine message. But the terms they chose had definite and recognized meanings, and the old theologians found that they could, with proper qualification, serve to express quite effectively and succinctly certain concepts inherent in the divine message. The concepts these terms manifested were already in existence and had, from the very beginning, been found in Our Lord's teaching. The technical terms gave the men of Aristotelian culture an effective means for teaching Catholic truth to the faithful of their own day.

The assertion that these new technical expressions, as they stand in the fabric of Christian doctrine, actually express ideas objectively foreign to the original content of divine public revelation carries with it the wholly unacceptable implication that the Church's teaching, at any given point in its history, is not actually and objectively the body of truth originally confided to the Church by Our Lord. Thus, in the final analysis, the interpretation which sees the concepts expressed by technical terms in dogmatic formulae merely as "contingent" instruments for the presentation of Christian doctrine involves a misunderstanding or at least a highly confused notion of the Church's own infallibility. And since sacred theology by its very nature intends to give only a clear, unequivocal, and certain statement of the Church's teaching, any idea that technical terms in this science stand for ideas objectively foreign to the original Christian message involves a serious misunderstanding about theology itself.

Progress in sacred theology, now as always, consists primarily in an adequate and accurate translation of invariable revealed truth into the vernaculars of the various men to whom the Church brings its teachings. Obviously the work of translation demands the

use of previous statements of the faith. Consequently, positive or historical theology makes a tremendously important contribution to this work in bringing forward and evaluating the sources and the older texts. Invariably a proper theological presentation of revelation for any era involves the statement, in language now understandable, of the truths which theology as such has always taught in the Catholic Church.

Hence this theological progress connotes, not the substitution of one set of "contingent" concepts for another, but a restatement in terms understood by men of the present day of those very truths which were expressed and are still expressed in the technical language of scholastic theology. Such a restatement or translation involves something far greater than the mere transfer of terms from one language into another. The Latin term *causa formalis*, for example, is not adequately translated into the American vernacular by the expression "formal cause." The Latin expression served to express a highly complex and profound notion which can only be conveyed to a modern listener or reader by a great number of words. It is ultimately important that the explanation be absolutely accurate and that the terminology employed be readily intelligible to the men of our day and our culture.

To a certain extent, of course, all theological terminology is inadequate. But we must not forget that it is inadequate as a description of the Triune God, the primary Object and the center of all theology. It is not necessarily inadequate with reference to the revealed message itself. The Church has been entrusted with a definite message, originally presented to it in human words. The terms used in later ages by the Church and its teachers should express not only accurately but adequately the content of the Church's one essential message, presenting in the words of our own day the teaching which Christ entrusted to His Church in Aramaic terms.

The growth and progress of theology consist in an ever more perfect grasp of the same truths of divine public revelation. New problems arise, but the only problems with which sacred theology is directly concerned involve questions about the meaning of the divine message itself. Theology is equipped to examine and to answer these questions, but its answers must always be expressions of the truth already contained in the divine teaching, and

now better understood because more intensively examined. The result is not and cannot be an addition of concepts objectively distinct from those previously contained in Catholic teaching, but a more perfect grasp of the old concepts and an accurate expression of these concepts in terms of our own day.

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Fifty Years Ago

In the July, 1898, issue of *The American Ecclesiastical Review* the leading article, by Fr. F. P. Siegfried, of Overbrook Seminary, is a defence of the traditional apologetic method against those who believe it inadequate for the modern mind, particularly Maurice Blondel, who upheld the method of immanence. While admitting that the "old method" should be supplemented by the findings of history, science and philosophy, Fr. Siegfried contends that it remains substantially sound. . . . The anonymous series on "American Religious Orders" continues with an article on the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, founded in 1812 by Bishop David. . . . Another instalment of *My New Curate* is contributed by Canon Sheehan, still writing under the anonymity of "An Irish Parish Priest" . . . Fr. Joseph Bruneau, S.S., in an article on "Biblical Research," praises the recent writings of Battifol on the Gospels, particularly his treatment of the synoptic problem. . . . In the *Analecta* we find a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, in reference to a type of tabernacle invented by a certain Fr. Barbara, who apparently wished to receive explicit approval of his invention. While praising the intentions of the inventor, the Sacred Congregation refused to give his tabernacle any special approbation, on the grounds that this matter pertains to the Ordinaries. . . . A communication in the Conference section criticizes a method in vogue in the writer's diocese, whereby a senior curate receives \$600 annually, and a junior curate only \$500. The writer suggests that all receive the same salary. . . . There is an account of a meeting of seminary presidents, held at St. Joseph's Seminary, Dtmwoodie, N. Y., to discuss seminary education in its relation to the higher training of the clergy at the Universities. Presiding over the meeting was Msgr. Conaty, Rector of The Catholic University of America.

F. J. C.

Answers to Questions

A “PLANNED PARENTHOOD” PROBLEM

Question: Some, doctors attached to the staff of a Catholic hospital have been attending public meetings in favor of “planned parenthood.” Should they be admonished that they must stay away from such gatherings under penalty of dismissal from the staff? If so, who is supposed to give the admonition ?

Answer: It is difficult to see how a Catholic hospital could retain on its staff a doctor who openly advocates planned parenthood—which according to present-day terminology means family limitation through contraceptive methods. It would be a source of grave scandal if a doctor favoring such a program were allowed to remain a member of the staff of a Catholic hospital. It is possible, indeed, that a doctor might attend a planned parenthood meeting on a single occasion, without realizing what such conduct would involve; and in that event, he should be given instruction and an admonition. If he promises to sever his connections with the planned parenthood movement, he could be retained at the hospital. But if he refuses to make this promise, he should be asked to resign from the hospital staff. This ruling should be applied to non-Catholic as well as to Catholic doctors. As is evident, we are speaking of the case of a doctor whose attendance would be regarded as a mark of approval. If a doctor is openly opposed to contraception, and attends meetings of planned parenthood associations merely to argue against the proponents of this movement, or to learn their tactics and arguments, he would surely give no scandal.

The answer to the question as to who should give the admonition and the ultimatum in the case of a doctor who is showing approval of the planned parenthood movement by his attendance at the meetings would depend on the particular status of the hospital. If it is owned and operated by a community of religious, the superioress or the nun in charge of the hospital would have the responsibility of performing this task. If the hospital is a diocesan institution, the priest who has been appointed as its supervisor would be the proper person to deliver the admonition.