

Truth and Truths

A Crucial Distinction in the Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*

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Needless to say, in the encyclical on faith and reason "truth" is obviously a fundamental notion, from the point of view of both faith and reason. In its opening sentence the encyclical compares faith and reason to "two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth." There is no overlooking the fact, furthermore, that the term is used with different meanings. As an analogous term it is not always free from the danger of equivocation and for this reason requires careful attention. What I would like to concentrate on in the present paper is the distinction between "truth" used in abstract and *quasi*-abstract senses—although certainly not always as an abstract *notion*—, on the one hand, and "truth" used in concrete senses, on the other hand. If Latin were strictly consistent, then it would be appropriate to distinguish neatly between *veritas* and *verum*, but unfortunately the word *veritas* is in fact used in both senses, *i. e.* for truth itself and for *a* truth, or truths. The distinction becomes palpable with respect to the use of the singular and plural forms of the word. For sometimes the term lends itself to the plural form and sometimes putting it in the plural is out of the question—and occasionally one is unsure. Now, although the difference between the two uses would seem to be engrained in common language, in reflective thought it is often ignored, occasionally giving rise to misunderstandings. Since in the encyclical itself there is no explicit elucidation of the various uses, I have been prompted to try to reflect more closely upon this relationship and its import.

The Two Dimensions of Truth

First, let me exemplify the different uses of the term "truth" in the encyclical. The Pope can speak, for example, —concretely—of "certain truths, whether philosophical or theological" (no. 54) as well as of the truth of philosophy or "philosophical truth" (no. 30)—in the singular—and (in the same paragraph) of "the truths of philosophy." There is the divine truth of faith¹ and "the truth of Christian faith" (no. 40), or "Christian truth" (no. 38), along with the "truths of faith" (*cf.* no. 43; 44; 45; 97) (also rendered as "the contents of faith"²). —Sometimes the ambivalence can be observed in a comparison of translations. In no. 105, for example the English translation has the plural ("the truths of the faith") where the Latin text has the singular ("fidei veritatem"). There exist, of course, "numerous truths" (no. 30; 31: "many more truths"), "philosophical truths" (no. 30), "religious truths" (no. 30), and "philosophical-religious truths" (no. 30). And naturally one raises "the question of the link between, on the one hand, the truths of philosophy and religion and, on the other, the truth [singular!] revealed in Jesus Christ" (no. 30). But here too we are to distinguish between "revealed truth," (e. g., no. 15) or "the truth of Christian Revelation" (no. 14), on the one hand, and "revealed truths," or "the truths of Revelation" (no. 92; 100; 76), on the other.

When the Pope speaks of "the Truth which is the living God" (no. 92) and in the same paragraph of "the Truth, which is Christ"³, then this is certainly not to imply that we are dealing here with *two* truths. But what about the sentence "philosophy seeks truth"? Is that

¹*Cf. e. g.* no. 44: "Faith accepts divine truth as it is."

²No. 43.

³*Cf.* also no. 73: "God's word is Truth."

the same meaning of "truth" (regardless of the fact that the English translation, in conformity with the Italian version, capitalizes "truth" in the one instance and lowercases it in the other)? Or is it in turn different from "the total and ultimate truth, that is, the essence itself of the objects of knowledge" (no. 82), to which philosophy is addressed. And when I enquire, as I am presently doing, about the meaning of the term "truth," I am of course using the word in still another way, namely, as an abstract, general notion. Similarly, when the Pope cites the scholastic definition of truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus* (no. 82), presumably he is not offering us a definition of God, nor, of course, is God to be understood as an abstract notion. What, then, is the difference between these two *quasi*-abstract uses? Perhaps the most difficult distinction in the entire encyclical is the one between "revealed truth" and "truth pure and simple," which seems to extend beyond revealed truth. In no. 73 we read: "It is as if, moving between the twin poles of God's word and a better understanding of it, reason is offered guidance and is warned against paths which would lead it to stray from revealed Truth and to stray in the end from the truth pure and simple [which the Latin refers to as "truth itself" (*ipsam veritatem*)]."

For the purpose of analyzing the essential relationship between theology and philosophy, the Pope proceeds by taking the point of view of abstract truth—a decisive choice of a basis for comparison and a good example for the importance of distinct thinking in regard to the notion of truth. "Since God's word is Truth (*cf. Jn 17:17*)," so he argues, "the human search for truth—philosophy, pursued in keeping with its own rules—can only help to understand God's word better." The clear distinction made at the beginning of Chapter VI (no. 65) between hearing God's Word [*auditus fidei*] and understanding it [*intellectus fidei*], as the twofold principle of theological method,⁴ makes it possible to speak of a circular relationship—of interdependence, of mutual influence—between theology and philosophy.

⁴*Cf.* no. 65: "Theology is structured as an understanding of faith in the light of a twofold methodological principle: the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei*."

Although theology receives the whole truth through Revelation, it does not stop there. As the Pope approaches the question, it is mandatory to *understand* what has been revealed, and this necessitates the "philosophizing mind" (no. 73). For according to the radical teaching of Augustine's that the Pope cites, "If faith does not think, it is nothing."⁵ At this point philosophy becomes unavoidable. However, it does not replace Revelation nor does it really go beyond it; it remains within the horizon of revealed truth, while searching for truth, its truth. In this way, theology and philosophy meet. Taken in the abstract singular: "Truth can only be one" (no. 79). Hence Revelation does not imply that the search for truth has found its goal; to the contrary, the search receives renewed motivation.⁶ Revelation is not simply the solution to the questions posed by philosophy. While, of course, maintaining their own "different aspects of truth" (no. 6), they both are striving after the same goal, and this goal that the two have in common the Pope surprisingly defines as the supernatural beatitude of Christian Revelation: "The ultimate purpose of personal existence, then, is the theme of philosophy and theology alike. For all their difference of method and content, both disciplines point to that 'path of life' (Ps 16:11) which, as faith [!] tells us, leads in the end to the full and lasting joy of the contemplation of the Triune God" (no. 15). We are thus urged to place ourselves freely "in the truth," for we "can find fulfilment only in choosing to enter the truth"

⁵Augustine, *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum*, 2, 5: PL 44, 963.

⁶"In the light of these considerations, the relationship between theology and philosophy is best construed as a circle. Theology's source and starting-point must always be the word of God revealed in history, while its final goal will be an understanding of that word which increases with each passing generation. Yet, since God's word is Truth (*cf.* Jn 17:17), the human search for truth—philosophy, pursued in keeping with its own rules—can only help to understand God's word better. It is not just a question of theological discourse using this or that concept or element of a philosophical construct; what matters most is that the believer's reason use its powers of reflection in the search for truth which moves from the word of God towards a better understanding of it. It is as if, moving between the twin poles of God's word and a better understanding of it, reason is offered guidance and is warned against paths which would lead it to stray from revealed Truth and to stray in the end from the truth pure and simple. Instead, reason is stirred to explore paths which of itself it would not even have suspected it could take. This circular relationship with the word of God leaves philosophy enriched, because reason discovers new and unsuspected horizons." No. 73.

(no. 107)—and it is noteworthy that here, *i. e.* in a Christian context, there is no further specification of truth.

But Pope John Paul II goes even further. He explains that philosophy is required not only for *understanding* what one has heard through Revelation but even for the very *hearing* of the Word of Revelation from the first.⁷

The reason why "the relationship between revealed truth and philosophy" has a circular form (no. 73), is that both revolve, spirally, within the compass of one and the same abstract "horizon of truth"⁸ (no. 107). Viewed "in the context of this highest horizon," —as the Latin puts it—the encyclical states: "This relationship imposes a twofold consideration, since the truth conferred by Revelation is a [!] truth to be understood in the light of reason. It is this duality alone which allows us to specify correctly the relationship between revealed truth and philosophical learning" (no. 35).

The key to the principal thesis of the encyclical, which asserts not just the convergence of philosophy and theology, but their unity, is, once again, the notion of truth. Philosophy and theology are linked together by "necessity" and the Pope goes so far as to claim even "the impossibility of their separation" (no. 77). The unity of truth, considered from the perspective of truth viewed as a horizon, or, to use another metaphor, in the light of truth, as opposed to truths, encompasses philosophical and theological truth. In no. 34 this is explained as follows (without employing the orthographical device of capitalizing "truth," which would hardly be

⁷"Philosophy contributes specifically to theology in preparing for a correct *auditus fidei* with its study of the structure of knowledge and personal communication, especially the various forms and functions of language." No. 65.

⁸*Cf.* no. 44: "the horizon of universal, objective and transcendent truth;" no. 92: "The Truth, which is Christ, imposes itself as an all-embracing authority which holds out to theology and philosophy alike the prospect of support, stimulation and increase."

feasible here): "This truth, which God reveals to us in Jesus Christ, is not opposed to the truths which philosophy perceives. On the contrary, the two modes of knowledge lead to truth in all its fullness. [Note that we have here one and the same truth.] The unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning [...]. It is the one and the same God who establishes and guarantees the intelligibility and reasonableness of the natural order of things upon which scientists confidently depend, and who reveals himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This unity of truth, natural and revealed, is embodied in a living and personal way in Christ, as the Apostle reminds us: 'Truth is in Jesus' (*cf.* Eph 4:21; Col 1:15-20). [...] What human reason seeks 'without knowing it' (*cf.* Acts 17:23) can be found only through Christ: what is revealed in him is 'the full truth' [...]."

Thus, we have, in short, a two-dimensional picture of truth: a vertical dimension, which is singular, and a horizontal dimension, where a plurality of truths occur. Both dimensions come together in the idea of searching for truth.

Searching for Truth

The Revelation of "universal und ultimate truth" does not mean that the believer has reached his or her intellectual goal and can now be content to come to a standstill, so that independent philosophy becomes dispensable. —For Aquinas, incidently, the question takes on just the opposite form: For him the question is not whether philosophy is necessary but why Revelation is necessary? —Rather than bringing the person to rest, revealed truth "stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort; indeed, it impels reason continually to extend the range of its knowledge until it senses that it has done all in its power, leaving no stone unturned" (no. 14). The human situation is thus one of existing among truths, not statically, but, so to

speak, suspended in motion between truths and truth: Seeking truth while finding truths. Life in truth has the form of a journey on "truth's way" (no. 48).

Our basic state in the light of truth is one of searching, as the encyclical does not tire to repeat. "It is by the nature of the human being to seek the truth. This search looks not only to the attainment of truths which are partial, empirical or scientific. [...] Their search looks towards an [!] ulterior truth which would explain the meaning of life. And it is therefore a search which can reach its end only in reaching the absolute" (no. 33). Precisely in "the human being's unceasing search for truth and meaning" lies "the grandeur of the human being, who can find fulfilment only in choosing to enter the truth" (no. 107). It is not just that the human being possesses a capacity for truth, in the sense of being capable of finding individual truths—its very definition consists in the searching: "One may define the human being, therefore, as the one who seeks the [!] truth" (no. 28). "By its very nature reason is orientated to truth" (no. 49). This holds true even in regard to revealed truth (*cf.* no. 105). Life in truth takes place in the manner of a "journey towards the one full truth" (no. 92). We have a "vocation to full truth" (no. 71). Put in other terms, our essential relationship to truth occurs more in the will than in the intellect. It is more important—at least in our present state—to love truth than to find what we can of it, in other words, to be truthful rather than actually knowing. Loving truth is more important, and is capital in the argumentation of the encyclical.

The search is called in the encyclical "humanly unstoppable" (no. 33). Revelation presupposes this natural state. "In Jesus Christ, who is the Truth, faith recognizes the ultimate appeal to humanity, an appeal made in order that what we experience as desire and nostalgia may come to its fulfilment" (no. 33). With or without faith, "the human being's ceaselessly self-transcendent orientation towards the truth" (no. 23), the human's "progression toward full truth" (No 22), determines life. For the whole of human life is

encompassed by truth. As Thomas Aquinas says: "Truth itself, which is the object of faith, is the goal of all of our desires and actions."⁹ In fact, Thomas even teaches that truth is the goal of the entire universe.¹⁰

I would now like to draw out some of the implications arising from the distinction between the two different dimensions of truth by turning directly to Thomas Aquinas and noting briefly some of his developments of this principle. By appealing to Thomas as "an authentic model for all who seek the truth" (no. 78), I am interpreting the encyclical in a way which it itself clearly recommends.

*The Truth of Faith and the Truths of Faith*¹¹

Does supernatural Revelation not serve to clarify the ambivalence of the truth situation?, it can be asked. Is it not the Revelation of the truth that we are ultimately seeking? No doubt, in the Thomistic view Revelation contributes knowledge that philosophy is unable to attain. But does Revelation contribute answers to the questions that philosophy poses but is itself *a priori* incapable of answering on its own strength? To the best of my knowledge, nowhere does Thomas Aquinas make such a claim. It is a frequent misunderstanding of philosophical

⁹Veritas prima, quae est fidei obiectum, est finis omnium desideriorum et actionum nostrarum. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 4, a. 2, ad 3. Cf. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 25, n. 10.

¹⁰"Truth is necessarily the final goal of the whole universe" [*Oportet igitur veritatem esse ultimum finem totius universi*]. *Ibid.*, I, c. 1, n. 4.

¹¹For a more extensive treatment see W. J. Hoye, "The Thought of Being as the Necessary Reason for Supernatural Faith in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas," *Doctor Communis*, 41 (1988), 173–183; *idem*, "Der Wirklichkeitsbegriff als Grund der Notwendigkeit des Glaubens nach Thomas von Aquin," *Knowledge and the Sciences in Medieval Philosophy (Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Medieval Philosophy [S.I. E.P.M.]*, vol. III (Annals of the Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics, vol. 55), edd. R. Tyorinoja, A. I. Lehtinen, D. Follesdal (Helsinki, 1990), 409–416.

researchers of Thomism that they often all too readily presume that theology can compensate for the deficiencies of philosophy. In regard to the question treated here, at least, the case is in fact just the opposite. Far from resolving the predicament of the *conditio humana*, faith accentuates the irony of a temporal life in truth. The fulfillment of all longings, that is to say, happiness, or, as one might say, standing in truth, is not achieved by faith itself. Thomas poses the surprising question whether happiness—that is, the goal of all human striving—consists in faith, and answers negatively. To the contrary, he explains, faith intensifies the longing for fulfillment.¹² It makes the disillusionment only worse, by proposing truths like the Trinity, which are utterly incomprehensible.

The Thomistic conception of faith has, to a large extent, been adopted by the magisterium. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 155) quotes Thomas' conception of faith, whereby "Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace."¹³ Thomas himself clarifies what he means by "divine truth." He refers to it as "first truth" [*veritas prima*], or perhaps one could say: "primordial truth." (When, in contrast, the encyclical uses this term—it occurs only one time—it has a quite different meaning and is obviously to be taken in a concrete sense.¹⁴) The object of faith is defined by Aquinas in a twofold manner: on the one hand, its object is truth itself [*veritas prima*], and on the other hand, truth is attained precisely as unknown: *Veritas prima est obiectum fidei secundum quod ipsa est non visa*.¹⁵ Accordingly faith brings about a twofold

¹²Per felicitatem, cum sit ultimus finis, naturale desiderium quietatur. Cognitio autem fidei non quietat desiderium, sed magis ipsum accendit: quia unusquisque desiderat videre quod credit. Non est igitur in cognitione fidei ultima hominis felicitas. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 40, n. 5.

¹³*Summa theologiae*, II–II, q. 2, a. 9; cf. *Dei Filius* 3; DS 3010.

¹⁴In no. 26 we read: "The first absolutely certain truth [*prima veritas absolute certa nostrae existentiae*] of our life, beyond the fact that we exist, is the inevitability of our death."

¹⁵*Summa theologiae*, II–II, q. 4, a. 1. Cf. *ibid.*, q. 1, a. 6, ad 2: ut sit non visum.

effect: it renders truth—as well as certain truths—present to our consciousness, while guaranteeing the unknowableness of truth itself. Believers are explicitly aware that they are not in possession of truth itself. Human thought is capable of grasping individual truths, but truth itself in the sense in which it is predicated of God remains beyond the grasp of human knowledge, with or without faith and Revelation. Expressed in another way, what is believed by supernatural faith is truth itself, taken in the most "abstract" sense, attained, however, not primarily as an act of the intellect, but of the will, which believes without knowing, without experiencing. Faith is a relationship of the will—by way of reason—to truth itself.¹⁶ What, then, is its relationship to truths, taken in a concrete sense, that is, what our encyclical refers to as "fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine" (no. 6)? On this question Thomas arrives at the necessary conclusions.

He refers to truth as the formal object of faith [*obiectum formale*], the formal object being understood as "that which is known."¹⁷ Individual truths he accordingly interprets then as the materiality of the proper object of faith. The particular truths of faith, the *credenda*, the dogmas, are for Aquinas merely the matter of faith¹⁸, they are not what is really known. Hence, truth itself is present to the mind through concrete truths, remaining, nonetheless, in itself unknown. Thomas compares it to light, which is perceived in concrete colors, without however being apprehended in itself.¹⁹ He also draws a comparison to the object of medicine,

¹⁶Cf. *ibid.*, q. 1, a. 1.

¹⁷Id per quod cognoscitur, quod est formalis ratio obiecti. *Ibid.*, II–II, q. 1, a. 1.

¹⁸In obiectum fidei est aliquid quasi formale, scilicet veritas prima super omnem naturalem cognitionem creaturae existens: et aliquid materiale, sicut id cui assentimus inhaerendo primae veritati. *Ibid.*, II–II, q. 5, a. 1, *corpus*. Obiectum fidei primum et formale est bonum quod est veritas prima. Sed materialiter fidei proponuntur credenda. *Ibid.*, q. 7, a. 1, ad 3. Cf. *ibid.*, q. 1, a. 1c; *In III Sententiarum*, d. 24, q. 1, a. 1, sol. 1, ad 1.

¹⁹Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II–II, q. 1, a. 3.

the formal object of which is health²⁰, whereas everything that a physician concretely does is just the materiality of what he is really concerned with.

The relationship between truth and truths in the content of faith can be viewed under another aspect. Thomas distinguishes between "implicit" and "explicit faith." He maintains that the only articles of faith that must be explicitly believed are the existence of God and divine providence. Everything else may in principle remain implicit.²¹ This implies that Revelation is, as Thomas calls it, "secondary" and "accidental" with regard to the object of faith.²² What Revelation does is simply to explicitate.²³ Thomas even goes so far as to refer to revealed truths as mere examples which serve as an occasion for the occurrence of faith itself: "And thus it is clear that faith comes from God in both parts, namely both in regard to the interior light that induces to assent and in regard to things which are proposed exteriorly, that is, which have their source in divine Revelation. And such things are related to faith-knowledge as that which is taken from sensual knowledge is related to principles, for by each there comes about a certain determination of knowledge. Hence, just as the knowledge of principles is taken from the senses and nevertheless the light by which the principles are known is innate, so does faith come from hearing, and nevertheless the habit of faith [*i. e.* that faith which offers salvation] is infused."²⁴

²⁰*Ibid.*, q. 1, a. 1.

²¹*Cf. ibid.*, q. 1, a. 7; q. 2, a. 5; q. 5, a. 4c; q. 16, a. 1c; *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 11.

²²Per accidens autem vel secundario se habent ad obiectum fidei omnia quae in Scriptura divinitus tradita continentur. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 2, a. 5, *corpus*.

²³*Ibid.*, a. 6c: explicatio credendorum fit per revelationem divinam.

²⁴Et sic patet quod fides ex duabus partibus est a Deo, scilicet et ex parte interioris luminis quod inducit ad assensum et ex parte rerum quae exterius proponuntur, quae ex divina revelatione initium sumpserunt. Et haec se habent ad cognitionem fidei sicut accepta per sensum ad cognitionem principiorum, quia utrisque fit aliqua cognitionis determinatio. Unde sicut cognitio principiorum accipitur a sensu et tamen lumen quo principia cognoscuntur est innatum, ita fides est ex auditu, et tamen habitus fidei est infusus. *In Boethii De trinitate*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 4.

It thus becomes understandable why Thomas denies that theology is defined by the event of Revelation. Not the *divinitus revelata* define the object of theology—that would be a restriction, a concretization of truth—, but the *divinitus revelabilia*, that is, whatever *can* be revealed—in other words, every possible truth.²⁵ Accordingly, Aquinas defines theology as a perspective, a *modus considerandi*, which he interprets in the *Summa theologiae* not as Revelation, but with the famous phrase *sub ratione Dei*.²⁶

To be sure, Thomas consistently teaches that Revelation adds truths to our knowledge, but what he does not claim is that the ultimate truth of reason is superseded by Revelation. The ultimate insight of reason pertains to the divine mystery; in other words, it consists of the knowledge of God's unknowability. By no means does revealed truth extinguish mystery. In the words of the Pope: "It should nonetheless be kept in mind that Revelation remains charged with mystery. It is true that Jesus, with his entire life, revealed the countenance of the Father, for he came to teach the secret things of God. But our vision of the face of God is always fragmentary and impaired by the limits of our understanding. [...] In short, the knowledge proper to faith does not destroy the mystery; it only reveals it the more, showing how necessary it is for people's lives" (no. 13). Thomas himself teaches clearly: "That is the ultimate of human knowledge about God: knowing that one does not know God."²⁷ This situation, which is of course determined not by the free will of God but by the essential structure of the human intellect, cannot be changed even by supernatural Revelation: "Although we are elevated by Revelation to the knowledge of truths that we would otherwise

²⁵*Summa theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 3, *corpus*.

²⁶*Ibid.*, a. 7, *corpus*.

²⁷*Illud est ultimum cognitionis humanae de Deo quod sciat se Deum nescire. De potentia*, q. 7, a. 5, ad 14. *Dicimur in fine nostrae cognitionis Deum tamquam ignotum cognoscere. In Boethii De trinitate*, q. 1, a. 2, ad 1. See W. J. Hoye, "Die Unerkennbarkeit Gottes als die letzte Erkenntnis nach Thomas von Aquin," *Thomas von Aquin* (Miscellanea Mediaevalia, vol. XIX), ed. A. Zimmermann (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 117–139.

not know," Thomas maintains, "nevertheless, not with the effect that we know in some other way than through the senses. [...] And thus it remains that immaterial forms are not known to us in respect to *what* they are [*quid est*], but only in respect to the fact *that* they are [*an est*], regardless of whether this comes about by way of natural reason based on the effects of creatures or by way of Revelation [...]."²⁸ "The nature of God in itself knows neither the catholic nor the pagan."²⁹

Over against this background Thomas can explain revelations that are by their very nature not understandable. Through the Revelation of truths that are incomprehensible, we attain more truth in regard to God's incomprehensibility.³⁰ Even God is unable to reveal to human beings what their natural reason is in principle unable to grasp. Even God in His Revelation must adapt Himself to the human capacity.³¹ *Gratia supponit naturam*. Faith knowledge serves to ignite desire for truth.³²

²⁸Unde quamvis per revelationem elevemur ad aliquid cognoscendum, quod alias esset nobis ignotum, non tamen ad hoc quod alio modo cognoscamus nisi per sensibilia [...]. Et sic restat quod formae immateriales non sunt nobis notae cognitione 'quid est,' sed solummodo cognitione 'an est,' sive naturali ratione ex effectibus creaturarum, sive etiam revelatione, quae est per similitudines a sensibilibus sumptas. *In Boethii De trin.*, q. 6, a. 3c, n. 2. Cf. *ibid.*, q. 1, a. 2; q. 6, a. 2, ad 5.

²⁹Ipsam naturam Dei prout in se est, neque catholicus neque paganus cognoscit: sed uterque cognoscit eam secundum aliquam rationem causalitatis vel excellentiae vel remotiois. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 10, ad 5. Cf. *Summa contra gentiles*, I, c. 3; *Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 3, a. 6c; *Super epist. ad Romanos*, c. 1, lect. 6.

³⁰Est etiam necessarium huiusmodi veritatem ad credendum hominibus proponi ad Dei cognitionem veriore habendam. Tunc enim solum Deum vere cognoscimus quando ipsum esse credimus supra omne id quod de Deo cogitari ab homine possibile est: eo quod naturalem hominis cognitionem divina substantia excedit, ut supra ostensum est. Per hoc ergo quod homini de Deo aliqua proponuntur quae rationem excedunt, firmatur in homine opinio quod Deus sit aliquid supra id quod cogitare potest. *Summa contra gentiles*, I, c. 5, n. 3.

³¹Divina non sunt revelanda hominibus nisi secundum eorum capacitatem. *Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 101, a. 2, ad 1.

³²Est etiam necessarium huiusmodi veritatem ad credendum hominibus proponi ad Dei cognitionem veriore habendam. Tunc enim solum Deum vere cognoscimus quando ipsum esse credimus supra omne id quod de Deo cogitari ab homine possibile est: eo quod naturalem hominis cognitionem divina substantia

If it were not the case that our truths are tainted with inadequacy, like broken reflections in fragments of shattered mirror-glass, in other words, if a really adequate representation of objective reality, a perfect unity of consciousness with its object, not just an assimilation [*adaequatio*] were to occur, then we would have not absolute truth, but indeed no truth at all. For something of the knowing subject [*aliquid proprium*] is a mandatory component of human truth—otherwise it would not be possible to speak of an *adaequatio*.³³ Our truths must be qualified by both similarity and dissimilarity with their object. Consequently, there exist no truths for us that do not include a certain element of distortion. In an important chapter of the *Summa contra gentiles* (III, c. 47), Thomas quotes a gloss on the passage from Psalm 12, 2: "Truths are decayed from among the children of men", and explains: "as from one man's face many likenesses are reflected in a mirror, so many truths [*multae veritates*] are reflected from the one divine truth [*ab una prima veritate*]." Concrete truths for Thomas always have the quality of "enveiled obscurations"³⁴ of truth. The error of the world, the ineluctable distortion inherent in all of our truths, resembles the colors filtered through the stained-glass windows of a gothic cathedral caused by the sunlight and suspended in mid-air, floating, as it were, in the twilight space. We can seek truth in no other place but in this twilight-world—where we never find it to our full satisfaction. We find truth merely in a human manner. Whoever has found truth, has found God's creation; whether God Himself has been found as well, *i. e.* something divine, depends not upon reason but upon the

excedit [...]. Per hoc ergo quod homini de Deo aliqua proponuntur quae rationem excedunt, firmatur in homine opinio quod Deus sit aliquid supra id quod cogitare potest. *Summa contra gentiles*, IV, c. 7, n. 3. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 1 argues in the same vein. In regard to truth *cf. In III Sententiarum*, d. 24, q. 1, a. 1, sol. 2.

³³Veri enim ratio consistit in adaequatione rei et intellectus; idem autem non adaequatur sibi ipsi, sed aequalitas diversorum est. Unde ibi primo invenitur ratio veritatis in intellectu ubi primo intellectus incipit aliquid proprium habere quod res extra animam non habet, sed aliquid ei correspondens, inter quae adaequatio attendi potest. *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 3, *corpus*.

³⁴Thomas quotes the observation of Pseudo-Dionysius: Impossibile est nobis aliter lucere divinum radium, nisi varietate sacrorum velaminum circumvelatum. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 9, *corpus*.

person's will. If one holds too tightly to this truth, refusing to continue on "walking in truth," "so that one progresses little by little in the knowledge of truth,"³⁵ then one remains imprisoned within the twilight-world. In contrast to the tradition preceding him, Thomas is able to view curiosity [*studiositas*] as a virtue.³⁶ Loving truth, seeking truth is essential to the human situation, but never possessing truth absolutely. What we *can* succeed in possessing are individual truths. But these are nothing but the rungs of a ladder that points up to absolute truth. Human beings are not endowed with the eyes of Platonic eagles, enjoying the legendary capability of gazing directly into the sun; for Thomas Aquinas we are more like Aristotelian owls, moving about in a shadowy reality. For Thomas the awareness of this gives rise to wonder about this ambivalent existence, which he looks upon as the foundation of religion.

Faith assures that truth itself retains its characteristic of unknowableness, without which there can be no moral life. The threat to this ironical life-situation is not only sensual concupiscence but also a common form of moral idealism. Concretizing truth itself—as opposed to truths—is inevitably immoral. The moral idealism of a fanatic involves the deception of believing one has found absolute truth, while one has in fact only discovered *a* truth. (Self-righteousness is usually the tell-tale sign.) Fanatic idealists know neither ambivalence nor doubt. They are, to be sure, in motion, but only within the context of practical activity. In respect to truth they have come to a standstill. They have put truth itself out of their minds, eclipsing it with *a* truth. For this would imply reducing God to a creature within our temporal world.

³⁵Et ideo ad hominem pertinet ut paulatim in cognitione veritatis proficiat. *In I Ethicorum*, lect. 11, n. 2.

³⁶Cf. W. J. Hoye, *Demokratie und Christentum. Die christliche Verantwortung für demokratische Prinzipien* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1999), 253–265.

*The Truth, the Truths and the Untruths of Conscience*³⁷

Seeing, as the Pope puts it, that "the good of the person is—not only—"to be in the Truth", but also "to do the Truth,"³⁸ considerations on truth lead naturally to ethics. In the Thomistic teaching on conscience, which exposes the inner nerv of the whole Thomistic ethics, the distinction between the two dimensions of "truth" becomes absolutely cardinal. In his encyclical letter "The Splendor of Truth" Pope John Paul II reaffirms the fundamental principle when he states: "In any event, it is always from the truth that the dignity of conscience derives" (no. 63). The inner structure of morality becomes clearer when one considers the idea of the erroneous conscience. The text just quoted continues with the observation: "In the case of the correct conscience, it is a question of the objective truth received by man; in the case of the erroneous conscience, it is a question of what man, mistakenly, subjectively considers to be true."³⁹

Viewed in the "truth-perspective" the notion of the erroneous conscience—regardless of the fact that this may not be the usual case—can prove to be extremely helpful in understanding the structure of truth such as it exists in the ambivalent state of dynamic suspension between truth and truths in which humans find themselves. The thorough and exact treatment that Thomas Aquinas devotes to his innovative teaching on the erroneous conscience represents not just an exception within his appreciation of truth in general; thanks

³⁷For a more extensive treatment see W. J. Hoye, "Die Wahrheit des Irrtums. Das Gewissen als Individualitätsprinzip in der Ethik des Thomas von Aquin," *Individuum und Individualität im Mittelalter* (Miscellanea Mediaevalia, vol. XXIV), ed. Andreas Speer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 419–435; *idem*, "The Erroneous Conscience and Truth According to Thomas Aquinas," *Moral and Political Philosophies in the Middle Ages. Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Medieval Philosophy*, edd. E. Andújar, C. B. Bazán, L. Sbrocchi (Ottawa, 1994); *idem*, *Demokratie und Christentum*, 297–328.

³⁸Pope John Paul II, Address to the participants of the International Congress for Moral Theology, April 10, 1986, 1 (= *Insegnamenti* IX, 1 [1986], 970).

³⁹*Veritatis splendor*, No 63.

to the radicalness of his analysis, the notion of truth as well as the human relationship to truth acquire thereby unmistakable clarity. In my opinion, furthermore, nothing brings the religious roots of morality more clearly to light than this insight. Expressed in other terms, the acknowledgement of the meaning of the erroneous conscience is only understandable with the help of the distinction between truth taken in an "abstract" sense and truth taken in a concrete sense, *i. e.*, in Thomistic terms, the difference between *veritas*, or, more precisely, *veritas prima*, and *vera*, or *veritas*, understood in a sense which is susceptible to being pluralized. Both the intrinsic difference and the relationship between the two meanings, *i. e.* the meaningfulness of making use of one and the same word to create an analogous term, becomes evident in Aquinas' extraordinary teaching on the truth of the erroneous conscience, for it presupposes a positive relationship to truth in spite of the fact that truth in concrete reality has actually been lost sight of. (Without such an insight, moreover, there would appear to be no way of justifying the idea of freedom of conscience.)

For what reason is it morally good to do objective evil and immoral to do what is in truth objectively good when my conscience is the reason behind my act—and this with utter disregard for the degree of incompetence of conscience (stupidity makes no difference)? If conscience is the immediate voice of God, how can it be explained that it errs at all? Thinking along these lines, Joseph Ratzinger has been moved to call Aquinas' teaching simply "incomprehensible."⁴⁰ Ratzinger objects that Thomas is guilty of contradicting himself by neglecting to distinguish sufficiently between will and reason. Ratzinger grants that the will is bound to obey reason, but reason itself, that is, conscience, he asserts, is under obligation not

⁴⁰"Unerfindlich." J. Ratzinger, Commentary on the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, second edition, vol. 14: *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Konstitutionen, Dekrete und Erklärungen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1968), 329.

only to seek but also to find objective truth. This means for Ratzinger that an erroneous conscience is always itself guilty, since "reason must know of God's law."⁴¹

When I now treat Thomas' convictions concerning the erroneous conscience, then it goes without saying that I am presupposing a truly erroneous conscience, one, that is, which is unaware of its error; ignorance that is in any sense willed is excluded from the present reflections.⁴² The fact that ignorance itself can be freely and culpably willed does not invalidate my question.

But Thomas' approach is in reality quite different from Ratzinger's; it is deeply *subjective*. He bases his conviction upon the fact that conscience attains reality precisely *qua* true [*ut verum*], not, in other words, as a really objective truth, but as what subjectively appears to be an objective truth. What is decisive for the person is how the will reacts to what conscience has found. This ironical constellation, which is absolutely crucial, arises from the distinction between truth in reality (*verum*) and truth as a "formality" (*ut verum*) in thought, *i. e.* as a (subjective) point of view. Even when conscience is deceived and arrives involuntarily at a false judgment, which comes down to a judgment contrary to God's eternal law, nonetheless, what it dictates is dictated *ut verum* and, precisely for this reason, "as derived from God, from Whom all truth comes."⁴³ Pope John Paul II quotes Thomas: "Whatever its source, truth is of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁴ And this is far from being a subjective deception. Concretely

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 331. For a similar standpoint cf. Robert Spaemann's introduction to: Thomas von Aquin, *Über die Sittlichkeit der Handlung: Summa theol. I–II, q. 18–21*, translation and commentary by R. Schönberger, Collegia Philosophische Texte (Weinheim: VCH Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990), p. XV.

⁴²Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 19, a. 6, *corpus*.

⁴³Ratio errans iudicium suum proponit ut verum, et per consequens ut a Deo derivatum, a quo est omnis veritas. *Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 19, a. 5, ad 1.

⁴⁴No. 44, quoting Thomas Aquinas, *ibid.*, q. 109, a. 1 ad 1: Omne verum a quocumque dicatur a Spiritu Sancto est.

regarded, the truth reached is purely subjective, but the relationship to God, as truth itself in the abstract sense, is objective. Although conscience has not succeeding in finding concrete truth, the will, in affirming conscience, chooses truth.

Accordingly, Thomas explicitly rejects the argument that God's law deserves more obedience than conscience⁴⁵, implying that conscience is to be relativized. In the world of concrete particulars, *i. e.* in the realm of moral decisions and actions, what God really wills that it happen remains, Aquinas even goes so far as to assert, unknown to us. "In particulari nescimus quid Deus velit."⁴⁶ It is simply impossible for us to separate God's will from the norm prescribed by our individual conscience. "The voice of conscience," he explains, "is nothing other than the presence, the arrival [*perventio*] of eternal law in the person having a conscience."⁴⁷ Even when conscience errs it grasps whatever it finds *as* God's will.⁴⁸ In this sense—to be sure, subjectively—, divine law infallibly "comes through" in conscience. What can be demanded of a human being is not that the individual person will what God wills, but—as Thomas put it—that he will what God wills that he will: *vult hoc quod Deus vult eum velle*.⁴⁹ And this is nothing other than that he will what his conscience proscribes.

When Thomas describes conscience as being infallible, he means this only in respect to the first principles of morality. What he intends is that whoever follows his conscience can be sure to be seeking truth. And the seeking for truth—not the actual finding of truth— is the essence of morality: the will's establishing of reason in human conduct. The moral order that

⁴⁵*Cf. De veritate*, q. 17 a. 4.

⁴⁶*Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 19, a. 10, ad 1.

⁴⁷*De veritate*, q. 17, a. 4, ad 2.

⁴⁸*Cf. ibid.*, ad 1.

⁴⁹*Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 19, a. 10, *corpus*.

Thomas has in mind is not a collection of general norms, or truths; it is simply the (abstract) relationship to truth itself. Expressed differently: It is religion. There is no infallible guarantee here that the objectively right thing will be done. Virtue and vice are a matter of character, not of practice. Should a hunter accidentally kill his father, believing that he is aiming at a deer, then there is no moral guilt involved in the act, although, considered under all of its aspects, the act is obviously not good.⁵⁰ Medieval Latin can speak here of a *peccatum*, but that is a general term and must be distinguished from *peccatum morale*.⁵¹

"Truth" is an analogous term. The truth of moral norms is not identical with the truth of morality itself. Abstract thought relativizes the objectification of morality. The distinction implied here is essential to Christian ethics. One result of this insight is that it sheds some light on the relationship of morality to faith. The pivotal point is the idea of truth. Precisely in its abstract sense, truth opens morality to its inherent religious dimension. Believing is necessary, declares Thomas, precisely because humans have abstract ideas.⁵² According to Thomas, religion is made possible by the fact that humans think abstractly within concrete existence. Otherwise, morality would remain on the horizontal level of history. Thomistic ethics is an ethics primarily of virtues and vices, not of concrete actions or practical norms. Morality does not consist essentially in practice, but in interior character. And character is a quality of the will, not of the intellect. (But that does not mean what one calls a strong will, that is, a will that is self-assertive. It is a will that conforms to the intellect, that is, which wills nothing but truth insofar as it is attainable by human consciousness.) In fact, speaking biblically, we are to "walk in truth" (2 Jn 4), not stand in truth. In other words, it is

⁵⁰Cf. *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, III, q. 12, a. 2.

⁵¹Cf. *De malo*, q. 3, a. 1c; a. 6c; *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 10.

⁵²What Thomas means in particular are the abstract notions of being and of the good [*universalem boni et entis rationem*]. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 2, a. 3.

impossible that truth itself become concrete for us in our historical situation. God's will is not identical with my will.

One can justifiably speak of the *irony of truth*. The truth of untruths and the deception inherent in truths articulate the twofold dimension of truth, namely, the horizontal and the vertical. The ambivalence of truth is emphasized by Thomas himself with the help of the distinction between truth in a material sense and truth in a formal sense. Human reason knows of the reality of absolute truth, but it is unable to apprehend it in itself, whereas it is the will, in its own way, that does attain abstract truth directly. In this sense, the will transcends the intellect. Although we are unable to know God directly, we are capable of loving him directly. Moral good and evil develop out of this ambivalent structure. Morality, *i. e.* the state of the will, arises "out of the apprehension of reason" [*ex apprehensione rationis*]. "The cause and root of human goodness is reason."⁵³ We are dealing here with something individual and subjective. What the will then has as its concrete object is what is presented to it by reason. For its part, reason remains something subjective, although its whole thrust is directed towards objectivity. Is something proposed by reason as bad, then the will itself becomes bad if it chooses this—regardless of the objective situation. This effect is distinct from the objective quality of the choice under consideration. Something that is in itself good can thus become evil in that it takes on a *ratio mali*—without necessarily being really evil—and, *vice versa*, what is in itself objectively evil can assume the *ratio boni* in the individual's mind.

Now, an ethical position like this makes sense—I think it can be said—only within a religious perspective. The meaning of life in the world depends ultimately on our relationship to God, not on our relationship to the world, nor to our external practice within society. Not

⁵³*Ibid.*, I–II, q. 66, a. 1, *corpus*. Cf. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 10: In actu igitur voluntatis quaerenda est radix et origo peccati moralis.

our relationship to concrete reality in itself is decisive, but our relationship to abstract truth (*veritas prima, i. e.* God). "In order to have a right will in willing a particular good, it is necessary that the particular good be willed *materialiter*, while the universal divine good be willed *formaliter*."⁵⁴ This means that the extent to which "the human will is required to conform to the divine will is restricted to the general formal aspect: *formaliter, sed non materialiter*."⁵⁵ In regard to the question whether a human will is in conformity with God's will, everything depends upon the *ratio*, the subjective aspect, of what is willed [*quantum ad rationem voliti*]. Hence, Thomas can lay down the principle, "Whoever wills something *sub quacumque ratione boni*, conforms [*ipso facto*] to the divine will."⁵⁶

Eternal Beatitude as the Apprehension of Truth Itself

Man's relationship to truth arrives at its final stadium in eternal life after death in fulfilling happiness. As the Pope has expressed it, "Only in the truth can he find salvation."⁵⁷ Here, too, it is the truth-perspective which provides the hub of Thomas' thought. Ultimate fulfillment, he teaches, consists in the contemplation of truth itself; "Man's ultimate happiness consists in the contemplation of truth [*in contemplatione veritatis*]."⁵⁸

⁵⁴Ex fine autem sumitur quasi formalis ratio volundi illud quod ad finem ordinatur. Unde ad hoc quod aliquis recta voluntate velit aliquod particulare bonum, oportet quod illud particulare bonum sit volitum materialiter, bonum autem commune divinum sit volitum formaliter. *Summa theologiae*, I–II, 19, 10, *corpus*.

⁵⁵Voluntas igitur humana tenetur conformari divinae voluntati in volito formaliter, tenetur enim velle bonum divinum et commune, sed non materialiter. *Ibid.*

⁵⁶Quicumque vult aliquid sub quacumque ratione boni, habet voluntatem conformem voluntati divinae, quantum ad rationem voliti. *Ibid.*, q. 19, a. 10, ad 1.

⁵⁷*Veritatis splendor*, no. 8.

⁵⁸*Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 37, n. 1.

Thomas enucleates this in chapter 51 of the *Summa contra gentiles*—a highpoint of Thomistic thought and a good example for the relevance of the distinction between truth in the two-fold sense as well as of the interplay between philosophy and Revelation: "Since truth [*verum*] is the perfection of the intellect, that intelligible which is truth itself [*veritas ipsa*] will be a pure form in the genus of intelligible things. This applies solely to God, for, since truth [*verum*] is consequent upon being [*esse*], that alone is its own truth [*sua veritas*], which is its own being [*suum esse*]; and this belongs to God alone [...]. Consequently, other subsistent intelligibles are not forms in the genus of intelligible things, but have a form in a subject; for each of them is something true but not the truth [*verum, non veritas*], even as it is a being, but not being itself [*ens, non autem ipsum esse*]. It is therefore clear that the divine essence can be compared to the created intellect as an intelligible species by which it understands; which cannot be said of the essence of any separate substance."⁵⁹

But note that such a union with God is not ontological: "And yet it cannot be the form of another thing through its natural being. For it would follow that, once united to another being, it would constitute one nature; which is impossible, since the divine essence is in itself perfect in its own nature. But an intelligible species, in its union with the intellect, does not constitute a nature, but perfects the intellect for understanding; and this is not inconsistent with the perfection of the divine essence."⁶⁰

This structure can also be expressed in terms of the distinction between essence and *esse*. The uniqueness of God's nature consists in the fact that His essence *is* His being. Precisely because of this, God is able to be united to human consciousness in a strictly immediate

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, c. 51, n. 4.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

sense—that is, as truth itself.⁶¹ "The divine essence is being itself [*ipsum esse*]. Hence as other intelligible forms which are not their own being are united to the intellect by means of some entity, whereby the intellect itself is informed, and made in act; so the divine essence is united to the created intellect, as the object actually grasped, making the intellect in act by and of itself."⁶² In the case of any other being, the union with human consciousness without any intermediary would result not just in its assimilation, but in its complete subsumption into consciousness, so that it would be an accident of the human knower. As truth itself, God can be united to a human intellect without impeding the independent being of either Himself or of the human subject, analogous to the way light can be united to the eyes.

The intrinsic knowability of God arises from the fact that He is the cause of the knowability of beings. "The divine essence is not something universal in being, since God is distinct from everything, but only in causing, for that which is through itself is the cause of what does not exist through itself. Hence, being subsisting through itself [*esse per se subsistens*] is the cause of all being received in another. And in this way the divine essence is an intelligible, which can determine the intellect."⁶³

Thomas analyzes this even more deeply. Divine causality in this sense, he warns, is not to be understood as formal causality taken in a literal sense; God does not become the content

⁶¹Est autem hoc singulare divinae essentiae, ut ei possit intellectus uniri absque omni similitudine, quia et ipsa divina essentia est ejus esse, quod nulli alii formae competit. *Compendium theologiae*, I, c. 9.

⁶²Divina essentia est ipsum esse. Unde, sicut aliae formae intelligibiles quae non sunt suum esse, uniuntur intellectui secundum aliquod esse quo informant ipsum intellectum et faciunt ipsum in actu; ita divina essentia unitur intellectui creato ut intellectum in actu, per seipsam faciens intellectum in actu. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 2, ad 3.

⁶³Essentia divina non est quid generale in essendo, cum sit ab omnibus aliis distincta, sed solum in causando; quia id quod est per se, est causa eorum quae per se non sunt. Unde esse per se subsistens est causa omnis esse in alio recepti. Et ita essentia divina est intelligibile quod potest determinare intellectum. *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, VII, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1.

of knowledge, *i. e. a verum*. Thomas speaks of God's being the form of the intellect only in the sense of a comparison to the ontological relationship between form and matter, "because," as he explicitly explains, "the relationship of the divine essence to our intellect is like the relationship of form to matter." The difference is subtle. "But this should not be understood as though the divine essence were a *true* form of our intellect or because out of it and our intellect there were brought about a single entity, as in natural things something is constituted out of form and matter; but because the relationship of the divine essence to our intellect is like the relationship of form to matter."⁶⁴ In the *De veritate* Thomas notes: "It is not necessary that the divine essence itself become the form of the intellect [*i. e. a truth*], but that it have a relationship to it *like* a form,"⁶⁵ that is, like the form that is ontologically conjoined with matter. In the eschatological vision human consciousness is like matter, and God functions like the ontological form of consciousness, but not as a real cognitive form, determining the content of consciousness.

⁶⁴Quod quidem non debet intelligi quasi divina essentia sit *vera* forma intellectus nostri; vel quia ex ea et intellectu nostro efficiatur unum simpliciter, sicut in naturalibus ex forma et materia naturali: sed quia proportio essentiae divinae ad intellectum nostrum est sicut proportio formae ad materiam. *In IV Sententiarum*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 1, sol. From this it is clear that Karl Rahner's interpretation of Thomas' reference to formal causality in the beatific vision as implying "transcendental causality" stands in contradiction to Thomas himself. For Rahner God is not a *verum*, but He is nonetheless "the content" and "the object of our vision" ("Über den Begriff des Geheimnisses in der katholischen Theologie," *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. IV [Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1962], 58; 76; 79. Vgl. W. J. Hoye, *Die Verfinsterung des absoluten Geheimnisses. Eine Kritik der Gotteslehre Karl Rahners* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1979), 60–61.

⁶⁵Non autem oportet quod ipsa divina essentia fiat forma intellectus ipsius, sed quod se habeat ad ipsum ut forma; ut sicut ex forma, quae est pars rei, et materia efficitur unum ens actu, ita licet dissimili modo, ex essentia divina et intellectu creato fiat unum in intelligendo, dum intellectus intelligit, et essentia divina per seipsam intelligitur [...]. Quaecumque in aliquo receptibili recipiuntur duo quorum unum est altero perfectius, proportio perfectioris ad minus perfectum est sicut proportio formae ad suum perfectibile [...]. Et ideo, cum intellectus creatus, qui inest substantiae creatae, sit imperfectior divina essentia in eo existente, comparabitur divina essentia ad illum intellectum quodammodo ut forma. *De veritate*, q. 8, a. 1, *corpus*.

Truth and God

How far is Thomas willing to go with his exaltation of truth? His radical position seems to have provoked a question posed during a late quodlibetal discussion. There someone confronted him with the question whether truth is stronger than wine, than the king or even than a woman. In spite of all, in his response he holds fast to his conviction—although first noting that these things cannot really be compared to one another—and argues that "truth is greater in dignity, and more excellent and stronger."⁶⁶

A deeper dilemma was posed by Dostoievski, who asked himself what he would do if forced to choose between truth and Jesus Christ. Dostoievski opted for Christ.⁶⁷ Thomas Aquinas, however, uncompromisingly chooses truth. He presents the question in the extreme case that one's conscience—undoubtedly an erroneous conscience—tells one that it is evil to believe in Christ. Under such conditions, he declares, rejecting truth and believing in Christ would be sinful.⁶⁸

But Aquinas, not stopping at this point, even confronts himself with a final dilemma: What must be said if God were not in fact truth itself and one were then forced to choose between God and truth. This is, of course, a fictional question, but Thomas hypothetically accepts it, nonetheless, thus adding additional clarity to his own position. As a conclusion of my paper, it can be remarked that it is only logical when he responds to the objection raised against the biblical figure Job that in daring to carry on a dispute on truth with God Himself he

⁶⁶*Quaestiones quodlibetales*, XII, n. 12, q. 14, a. 1.

⁶⁷Letter of Februar 20, 1854 to Natal'ja D. Fonvizin (*Complete Works*, ed. by the Academy of Science of the Soviet Union, vol. 12 [Leningrad, 1975], 297). A few years later the same question is brought up in *The Demons*, Part II, Chapter 1, 7.

⁶⁸*Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 19, a. 5, *corpus*.

disregards the superiority of the divine person, Thomas unhesitatingly and candidly replies:
"It must be answered that truth does not vary with the diversity of persons, so that when
someone is speaking the truth he cannot be defeated by whomsoever he might be disputing."⁶⁹

⁶⁹Et supra dixerat disputare cum deo cupio, ex nunc loquitur quasi Deum habens praesentem et cum eo disputans. Videbatur autem disputatio hominis ad Deum esse indebita propter excellentiam qua Deus hominem excellit; sed considerandum est quod veritas ex diversitate personarum non variatur, unde cum aliquis veritatem loquitur vinci non potest cum quocumque disputet. *In Job*, c. 13.