

Thomas Aquinas, Yves Congar and Unity in Faith¹

Unity in faith is one of the most crucial and, at the same time, one of the most mysterious factors that make up the unity of the Church. It is crucial because the Church is fundamentally a community of believers which came into being and remains united because of a shared faith in Jesus Christ; it is mysterious because, as many of the early Fathers of the Church have pointed out, the fact that so many individuals from so many cultural backgrounds come to share the same faith in Christ is nothing short of miraculous.²

The recent convergence text of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches entitled *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* includes unity in faith as one of the three essential elements necessary for full ecclesial communion:

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² For but one example, see Augustine's *De fide rerum invisibilium*, 4:7, CCL 46, 11, where he writes: "Does this seem vain or unsubstantial to you, and do you think that it is either a little or no divine miracle that all mankind runs its course in the name of the One crucified?" This English translation by Roy J. Deferrari and Mary Francis McDonald is taken from "On Faith in Things Unseen," in *Writings of St Augustine* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1947), 2:461. Similar statements concerning the miraculous quality of the fact that Christian faith is shared by so many are found in Augustine's *De utilitate credendi*, 14:31-17:35; *Confessiones* 6:11; *De catechizandis rudibus* 6:10; *Epistula* 137, 4:15-16; and *Civitas Dei*, 22:5-6. Some fine pages on the marvellous nature of unity in faith are found in Renè Latourelle, "La Chiesa mistero di fede" and "Paradosso e tensioni dell'unità," in *Cristo e la Chiesa: Segni di salvezza* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1971), 110-137.

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The journey towards the full realization of God's gift of communion requires Christian communities to agree about the fundamental aspects of the life of the Church. "The ecclesial elements required for full communion within a visibly united church – the goal of the ecumenical movement – are communion in the fullness of apostolic faith; in sacramental life; in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry; in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making; and in common witness and service in the world." These attributes serve as a necessary framework for maintaining unity in legitimate diversity.³

This is quite similar to how growth in communion is described in the second paragraph of Vatican II's *Unitatis Redintegratio*.⁴ Both speak of the unity of the Church in terms of the three elements of faith, sacraments and fraternal harmony under the guidance of apostolic ministry.

To many, it could seem naïve to hope that there could be the substantial level of unity in faith which would be required for full communion within a visibly united Church. Even within the one Catholic Church, it seems that one can encounter a variety of different opinions about matters of faith and morals. Not infrequently individual Catholics seem to have difficulty accepting the official teaching of the bishops.⁵ And if Catholics, whom we hopefully may presume have

³ Paragraph 37 of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>. The quotation embedded in this paragraph is from a study of 1990 by the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church entitled "The Church: Local and Universal," available in Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer and William G. Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 868.

⁴ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no.2 reads as follows: "It is through the faithful preaching of the Gospel by the Apostles and their successors – the bishops with Peter's successor at their head – through their administering the sacraments, and through their governing in love, that Jesus Christ wishes his people to increase, under the action of the Holy Spirit; and he perfects its fellowship in unity: in the confession of one faith, in the common celebration of divine worship and in the fraternal harmony of the family of God."

⁵ See Christopher Ruddy and Deborah Ruddy, "Handing on the Faith to the 'New Athenians' in the American Catholic Church," in *Handing on the Faith: The Church's Mission and Challenge*, ed. Robert P. Imbelli (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 130-149, which relates how difficult it has been for Catholic bishops in the United States to convince even the majority of Catholics in their country that abortion is wrong in all circumstances. The authors go on to offer suggestions about how different approaches to teaching on this topic could hopefully lead to greater acceptance by the faithful. The present essay in no way intends to condone dissent on such a serious issue as abortion, but rather to explore how unity in faith, according to St Thomas Aquinas, can and does countenance legitimate diversities. In line with St John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae*, I myself cannot see how a positive acceptance of abortion, under any circumstances, could be considered

a respectful appreciation for the authoritative teaching of the living magisterium, still remain divided on some issues of faith and morals, how could one ever hope for unity of faith to be achieved between Catholics and other Christians, who are divided among themselves into so many autonomous communities, each of which may likely include an even wider range of diverse convictions than can be found in the Catholic Church? Yves Congar, one of the Catholic theologians most intensely committed to working for Christian unity during the last century and an erudite disciple of his fellow Dominican, St Thomas Aquinas, was keenly aware of this problem.⁶

With gratitude to the University of Malta for the honour of having invited me to deliver this year's Aquinas Lecture, I thought it would be appropriate to explore some of the ways in which St Thomas - as seen through the eyes of Congar - tried to address the question of unity and diversity in faith. I hope to show that what the Angelic Doctor taught so long ago in the thirteenth century, during the golden age of scholastic theology, can yet speak about a question that is vitally relevant today. In what follows I will, first, say a few words about Aquinas' vision of the Church and about faith as one of its absolutely necessary defining characteristics. Secondly, given St Thomas' awareness of the fact that the personal grasp of the faith may differ from one individual to another and, moreover, that the community of faith may grow in its comprehension and doctrinal formulation from one age to another, the theme of unity and diversity in the faith, according to St Thomas Aquinas, will be treated. Finally, Congar's reflection about the potential ecumenical value of the way in which St. Thomas interpreted his sources or *auctoritates* (authorities) - what Congar calls one of Aquinas' "hermeneutical principles" - shall be considered.

The Church and Faith

On the feast of St Thomas Aquinas in 1977, Yves Congar, gave a conference in Ottawa, Canada, with the title "Vision de l'Église chez Thomas d'Aquin," which he opened with the provocative statement that St Thomas had never written a book about the Church. "Even more," he added, "of the more than

an expression of legitimate diversity within the unity of Catholic doctrine about faith and morals.

⁶ One of his last books, *Diversity and Communion* (London: SCM, 1984), original *Diversités et communion* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1982), is evidence that the attempt to explore how much diversity was compatible with unity in faith had come to be the principal object of Congar's study and writing in his final years.

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three thousand articles of the *Summa*, not even one has the Church in its title.⁷ Congar explained that, in this regard, St Thomas was not different from the theologians of his time. Treatises dedicated specifically to the nature of the Church only began to appear subsequent to two historical developments which occurred after the time of St Thomas: first, the gradual development of the secular state and society as autonomous from the Church, leaving the Church, as it were, standing on its own and, as such, in need of a description in its own right; and, secondly, the challenge posed towards the institutional structure of the Church in the forms of conciliarism, Gallicanism and similar movements.⁸ Congar argues, however, that there is a profound vision of the Church written between the lines of the *Summa theologiae* (*STh*) and many of St Thomas' other works. That vision is woven into his fundamental conception of all of human history and, indeed, all of created reality as exiting from God in creation and returning to God in redemption - the *egressus* (going out) and *regressus* (coming back) which provides the overall organizing principle of the *Summa*. The *exitus* (exit) from God is described in part I of the *Summa*, while the *reditus* (return) is the topic of parts II and III. In the process of return, or *reditus*, Congar situates St Thomas' understanding of the Church.

The Church is fundamentally the *congregatio fidelium* or community of believers, moving towards the consummation of salvation history which will occur in the kingdom of God. In heaven, the community of believers will enjoy the beatific vision and be transformed in such a way that they no longer need to rely on faith but enjoy direct knowledge of God, as suggested by the words of St Paul in a famous passage about faith, hope and love. Concerning faith, Paul writes: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (1 Corinthians 13:12). This passing from faith, which sees dimly as in a mirror, to the full knowledge of vision is crucial for understanding St Thomas' view both of the Church and of faith. What is the Church, for St Thomas? In the third part of the *Summa*, he writes: "*Ecclesia secundum statum viae est congregatio fidelium, sed secundum statum patriae est congregatio comprehendendum.*"⁹

Obviously, according to this description, faith is one of the Church's defining characteristics during her journey of return to the Father - *secundum statum viae*. Faith fashions the Church into that community which, during its earthly

⁷ Yves Congar, "Vision de l'Église chez Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 62 (1978): 523.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

⁹ *STh* III 8.4, ad 1. See also *Super Sent.* IV, d.6, q.1, a.3, qc.2, arg.2; IV, d.49, q.1, a.2, sol.5; *C. Gent.* IV, 76; *Super Eph.*, cap. 1, l.3; *Super Col.*, cap. 1, l.5; *Super Io.*, cap. 14, l.1.

pilgrimage, is defined as *congregatio fidelium*. Another way of highlighting the ecclesiological importance of faith for St Thomas appears when one considers the fact that, for him, the Church comes into existence as Christ's body by means of the new life circulating within her that flowed out from the passion and death of Christ on the cross. St Thomas very often argues that the means by which the saving power of Christ's passion is communicated are faith and the sacraments of faith.¹⁰ Congar comments:

The Church is realized as a Body living in and through [human beings] who become the recipients of the treasure of heavenly light and grace, of salvation and newness of life circulating in the whole Christ our Savior, Christ Crucified; she grows and flourishes as a mystic Body of [those] grafted into Christ But it is therefore also essential that [the members of the body] be *joined* by some means to Christ their Saviour, to the life-giving Cross. This is achieved, says St Thomas, by faith and the sacraments of faith.¹¹

Because of these means, Congar states that, in addition to the designation of the Church as *congregatio fidelium*, one can speak of a second Thomistic definition of the Church. He writes:

The economy of the realization of the body of Christ ... is in fact definable in terms of those two things: faith and the sacraments of faith. The Church visible, the Church institutional, is the ministry of the faith and of the sacraments of the faith, by which men are grafted into Christ and realize the Mystical Body which is the Church in its inward substance. We touch here the second definition of the Church given by St Thomas which relates to it, not only in its spiritual

¹⁰ In English this sentence reads: "The Church in the state of its journey [towards heaven] is the community of believers, but in the state of having arrived at its homeland is the community of those who comprehend." Many references to the texts of St Thomas in support of these statements are found in Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 530-531.

¹¹ Yves Congar, "The Idea of the Church in St Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 1 (1939): 353, which makes a reference to *STh* III 48.6, ad 2: "Christ's Passion [...] secures its efficacy by spiritual contact - namely by faith and the sacraments of faith...." I am drawing all of my quotations of St Thomas' *Summa* from St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, literally translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1947), vol. 2. While this translation entitles Thomas' *Summa* as "theological," I believe that the more correct title is *summa* of theology; hence I use the Latin *theologiae* instead of *theologica*. See also *Summa theologiae* III 64, 2. On whether the sacraments are instituted by God alone, see *STh* III 64.2, ad 3 which states: "The apostles and their successors are God's vicars in governing the Church which is built on faith and the sacraments of faith. Wherefore, just as they may not institute another Church, so neither may they deliver another faith, nor institute other sacraments: on the contrary, the Church is said to be built up with the sacraments "which flowed from the side of Christ while hanging on the cross."

substance, identical from Abel to the end of the world, but in its condition of society founded by Christ: *Ecclesia, id est fides et fidei sacramenta*.¹²

Thus, as a community of those saved, including even those not explicitly Christian such as Abel, the Church is defined as *congregatio fidelium*. But as a visibly identifiable institution, it is comprised of *fides* and *fidei sacramenta*. In either case, faith is clearly at the very heart of St Thomas' understanding of the nature of the terrestrial Church, still on her way to the final consummation of salvation history in the kingdom, when she will be transformed into the *congregatio comprehendendum*.

What about faith? How does Aquinas understand it?¹³ The *Summa theologiae* offers a magnificent presentation of faith, considering it together with the two other theological virtues of hope and charity.¹⁴ All three of these virtues are called "theological" because their ultimate object is God himself, but they relate to the divine mystery in different ways. Aquinas argues that, while both hope (for eternal life) and charity are directed to God under the aspect of God's goodness, faith, following the above mentioned passage from St Paul as well as various other passages, is directed ultimately to God under the aspect of God's truth. God is the first truth, the *veritas prima*. And so, Aquinas' treatise on faith in the *Summa* begins with the question "Whether the object of faith is the first truth?" His response is "yes" and thus, faith, for Thomas, falls primarily into the realm of the cognitive.

But faith is sharply distinguished from that knowledge which Aquinas associates with science and with direct vision. One of his favourite New Testament sources in reflecting on faith is the Letter to the Hebrews, whose eleventh chapter begins with the words "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith is a special kind of cognition. It engages the intellect, but not as impelled by direct contact with the object known, as in the act of seeing or in the various sciences known to the natural human intellect. Rather, faith occurs when the intellect is moved by the will to

¹² Congar, "The Idea of the Church," 355. The Latin words mean: "Church, that is, faith and the sacraments of faith."

¹³ My guide for this talk is Yves Congar, whose own understanding of faith is drawn from St Thomas. An excellent analysis of Congar's vision of faith was produced by Rev. John Anthony Berry, whose doctoral dissertation entitled "Yves Congar's Vision of Faith" was successfully defended at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome in 2013.

¹⁴ St Thomas has several fine treatises on faith in addition to that in the *Summa theologiae*, such as those in his *Commentary on the Sentences (Scriptum super Sententiis)*, III, d.23-25 Distinctions 23-25, and his *De veritate*, q.14. We will limit our treatment to that contained in the *Summa theologiae*.

accept, on the basis of the veracity of God and in light of the credibility of the prophetic and apostolic witnesses, that knowledge which God reveals about Himself.¹⁵ Faith is a sharing in divine knowledge, which could not be known were God not graciously to bestow it. This is not so very different from what, in our time, Vatican II would call the self-manifestation of God in revelation which is received in faith.¹⁶ In what I imagine must have been a source of great joy for St Thomas, faith is understood as a foretaste of the beatific vision. Any particular doctrine (*articulus fidei*) is a *perceptio divinae veritatis tendens in ipsam*, that is, a glimpse of divine truth tending towards the full vision of the reality of God, made known by means of revelation.¹⁷

Thus, faith has as its object the very being of God who reveals himself and whom St Thomas calls the *Veritas Prima* – the first truth. Faith is a sharing in the very self-knowledge of God. This could occur interiorly and immediately, when God directly inspires the minds and hearts of individual believers, but also publicly in the Church in an external manner through teaching, taken either in the active sense of passing on the message of the Gospel or in the material sense of the very content of the message. For Aquinas, the Latin expression *sacra doctrina* carries both senses of an activity and of an intellectual content.¹⁸

How is the divine truth known by us very un-divine human creatures? True to his overall understanding of human knowing, Aquinas very consistently states his epistemological principle that any object is known according to the

¹⁵ *STh* II-II 1.1 states that “the faith of which we are speaking does not assent to anything, except because it is revealed by God. Hence the meaning on which faith is based is the divine truth.” Ibid. II-II 1.4 notes that “those things are said to be seen which, of themselves, move the intellect of the senses to knowledge of them. Wherefore it is evident that neither faith nor opinion can be of things seen either by the senses or by the intellect.” See also ibid. II-II 4.1 which explores the definition of Hebrews 11:1 that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

¹⁶ *Dei Verbum*, no.2: “It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will (cf. Eph 1:9). His will was that human beings should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2:18; 2 Pt. 1:4). By this revelation, then, the invisible God (cf. Col 1:15; 1 Tm 1:17), from the fullness of his love, addresses human beings as his friends (cf. Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15), and moves among them (cf. Bar 3:38), in order to invite and receive them into his own company.” This notion of Revelation as the self-disclosure of God and of faith as the grace-inspired response to this manifestation runs throughout paragraphs 2-5 of Vatican II’s *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*.

¹⁷ *STh* II-II 1.6.

¹⁸ In the active sense, it approximates what we would call “tradition.” See Yves Congar, “Tradition et ‘Sacra Doctrina’ chez Saint Thomas d’Aquin,” in Johannes Betz, Heinrich Fries and Franz Xaver Arnold eds., *Église et tradition* (Lyon: Mappus, 1963), 157-194.

mode of the subject who knows it.¹⁹ For human beings, knowledge occurs in the judgment, as when a person consults the relevant evidence and comes to the conclusion that a particular predicate correctly describes a particular object as it exists in reality, as in the case of affirming that a particular tree is alive or that the Siege of Malta occurred in 1565, or that Pope Francis is the bishop of Rome. These are sentences, propositions, and human beings know by means of such propositions. So also the *prima veritas* which is God Himself and which is imparted to human beings in revelation is known by means of propositions. But, for St Thomas, it is essential that propositions are considered as merely a means to know reality. By means of teachings we come in touch with the mystery of God's very self. And so St Thomas writes that the act of the believer is ultimately not directed to sentences or propositions or doctrines but to the reality by means of which those propositions put us into real contact. *Actus credentis terminatur non in enuntiabile sed ad rem.*²⁰

The predominantly "cognitive" description that has so far been presented, however, would not do justice to St Thomas' profound understanding of faith. Because faith engages not only the human intellect but also the will which, under the impulse of God's grace, accepts with certainty the revelation of divine truth, faith is meritorious and, moreover, following the testimony of the Bible, faith needs to be formed by charity or love.²¹ Thus, while St Thomas' accent is on the cognitive dimension of faith, especially in order to distinguish faith from those other virtues of hope and love that also have God as their object, in no way is his view one that overlooks the existential, personal, affective and salvific dimension of faith. Faith is a very rich and complex reality in the life of a human person. While accenting its cognitive dimension, St Thomas deeply appreciated and lived its personal and existential reality; faith is very closely intertwined with the other theological virtues of hope and love. Given these preliminary reflections, what can be said about unity and diversity in the faith, according to St Thomas? To that we must now turn.

Unity and Diversity in Faith

St Thomas is convinced that there is a profound unity in Christian faith, taking as his point of departure such biblical texts as Ephesians 4:5 ("There is

¹⁹ "*Cognita sunt in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis*," *STh* II-II 1.2. English translation: "Things are known in a knower according to the mode of the knower."

²⁰ *Ibid.* II-II 1.2, ad 2. English translation: "The act of the believer comes to rest not in the proposition but in the reality itself."

²¹ *Ibid.* II-II 4.3 on charity or love as the form of faith.

one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all”) and 1 Corinthians 1:10 (“I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment”).²² Faith’s unity is located first of all in the author of faith who bestows the gift of faith, that is, God who is the First Truth. Every act of faith by one believer is united to the acts of faith by all other believers in that they all accept in trust, under the influence of grace, the authority of God who reveals. This is what Aquinas calls the “formal object” of faith, the *fides quo*, by which a person believes. Every act of faith accepts the authority of the revealing God. As such, all faith is one. But equally important is that the content which God reveals - the *fides quod* - is also one; it is God himself. This is called by Aquinas the “material object” of faith; its content. He opens his treatise on faith in the *Summa theologiae* with a question about the formal and material objects of faith.

The faith of which we are speaking does not assent to anything, except because it is revealed by God. Hence faith bases itself on the divine Truth as on its means. If, however, we consider materially the things to which faith assents, they include not only God, but also many other things, which, nevertheless, do not come under the assent of faith except as bearing some relation to God, inasmuch as, namely, through certain effects of the divine operation man is helped on his journey towards the enjoyment of God (*STh* II-II 1.1).

Thus, believers not only share the same motivation or basis for their faith - trust in the God who reveals himself - but they share the same content: the reality of God as made known through God’s action in history. Congar reports that, for Thomas, the doctrines which speak of creatures and of the circumstances of salvation history are objects of faith only insofar as they are expressive of and can be related to that first truth which is the very being of God (*nisi secundum quod eis aliquid Veritatis Primae adiungitur*).²³ I have found the systematic index that appears at the end of most editions of Denzinger’s *Enchiridion Symbolorum* to be a very helpful illustration of this principle proposed by St Thomas. That index divides the more than five thousand numbered passages produced during the

²² For the first of these, see *ibid.* II-II 4.6; for the second, *ibid.* II-II 1.10.

²³ Cf. Yves Congar, “Le moment ‘économique’ et le moment ‘ontologique’ dans la *sacra doctrina* (Revelation, Théologie, Somme théologique),” in Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Mélanges offerts à M.-D. Chenu*, Bibliothèque thomiste, no.37 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1967), 168-169; reprinted as article 13 in Congar, *Thomas d’Aquin: sa vision de théologie et de l’Église* (London: Variorum, 1984). The Latin phrase is from Thomas’ *De veritate*, q.14 a.8, ad 1, and means that a created reality is not an object of faith “unless owing to fact that something of the First Truth is added to them.”

two thousand year history of the Church into thirteen major subheadings, each one of which is primarily about God: the God of revelation, the Triune God, the God who creates, the God who saves in Jesus Christ, the God who meets us in the liturgy, the sanctifying God of the sacraments and so forth.²⁴

Aquinas further nuances this sharp focus on the material object of faith as God and the created things or salvific actions which pertain to God. In responding to the question as to whether the articles of faith are suitably formulated, he notes:

To faith those things belong essentially, the sight of which we shall enjoy in eternal life, and by which we are brought to eternal life. Now two things are proposed to us to be seen in eternal life: viz. the secret of the Godhead, to see which is to possess happiness, and the mystery of Christ's Incarnation, "by Whom we have access" to the glory of the sons of God, according to *Romans* 5: 2. Hence it is written (John 17:3): "This is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the ... true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent." Wherefore the first distinction in matters of faith is that some concern the majesty of the Godhead, while others pertain to the mystery of Christ's human nature.²⁵

Thus, God's very self and God's saving action on our behalf in Jesus are the mysteries to be enjoyed in the beatific vision. They constitute what some theologians have referred to as the "immanent" and the "economic" Trinity.²⁶ St Thomas also frequently refers to another New Testament verse which he believes succinctly expresses the same kernel of Christian faith: Hebrews 11:6: "Without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." St Thomas here interprets the words concerning "reward" as indicative of God's providence, thus confirming again the conviction that God and God's saving relation to us - the immanent and the economic Trinity - form the heart of the content of Christian faith. On such a division of the faith into these two great articles, Aquinas writes:

All the articles are contained implicitly in certain primary truths of faith, such as God's existence, and His providence over the salvation of man, according to

²⁴ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd bilingual ed. (Bologna: EDB, 2010), 3-284.

²⁵ *STh* II-II 1.8 *contra*.

²⁶ One example is Karl Rahner, "Trinity, Divine," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 6:295-303. For an easily accessible article comparing Rahner's thought on this topic to that of several other contemporary Catholic and Protestant theologians such as Barth, Hill, Jüngel, LaCugna, Moltmann and others, see David Lincicum, "Economy and Immanence: Karl Rahner's Doctrine of the Trinity," in *European Journal of Theology* 14 (2015): 111-118, http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ejt/14-2_111.pdf.

Hebrews 11: “He that cometh to God, must believe that He is, and is a rewarder to them that seek Him.” For the being of God includes all that we believe to exist in God eternally, and in these our happiness consists; while belief in His providence includes all those things which God dispenses in time for man’s salvation, and which are the way to that happiness.²⁷

Congar comments that, for St Thomas, the realities whose vision we will enjoy in eternal life and by which we are led to eternal life (*quorum visione perfruemur in vita aeterna et per quae ducimur ad vitam aeternam*) are the two great *credenda* - the two great truths “to be believed” - which include all other Christian doctrine; they represent the theological foundation, means and aim of the relation of the new covenant in Christ, which Congar sees as the very heart of Christian revelation and faith.²⁸

Given this overall framework, it is then no surprise that Aquinas briefly describes the articles of faith as being suitably formulated in the Creed, which he divides into two great sections: seven articles pertaining to the divinity - one for the unity of God, three for the Persons of the Trinity and three for the works of creation, redemption and glorification - and seven articles regarding the saving activity of God in Jesus Christ.²⁹ While the object of Christian faith is ultimately very simple - Karl Rahner, who studied Aquinas assiduously spoke of the mystery at the heart of Christianity as *ganz Einfach* (utterly simple)³⁰ - we human beings come to glimpse the mystery of God by means of a plurality of articles, as St Thomas writes: “matters of Christian faith are said to contain distinct articles in so far as they are divided into parts which fit together.”³¹ The

²⁷ *STh* II-II 1.7 *contra*.

²⁸ Congar, “Le moment ‘économique’ et le moment ‘ontologique,’” 183-184 writes: “Assumant cette idée biblique [Jn. 17: 3 and Heb. 11: 6], S. Thomas précise le double contenu du renseignement sur notre beatitude spirituelle, objet de la *Sacra doctrina* (*STh* I 1.1): c’est, dit-il, ‘*quorum visione perfruemur in vita aeterna et per quae ducimur ad vitam aeternam*.’ Tels sont les deux grands *credenda* qui englobent tous les autres et qui représentent le principe, le terme et le moyen entièrement théologiques du rapport d’alliance.”

²⁹ *STh* II-II, 1.8 *contra*.

³⁰ Cf. Karl Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology,” in *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 4:36-73.

³¹ Replying to the objection that some matters dealt with in Scripture are merely incidental and cannot be considered as objects of faith - such as Abraham having two sons - Thomas responds: “Some things proposed to our belief are in themselves of faith, while others are of faith, not in themselves, but only in relation to others; even as in the sciences certain propositions are put forward on their own account, while others are put forward in order to manifest others. Now, since the chief object of faith consists in those things which we hope to see in heaven, according to Heb 11:1 ‘Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for,’ it follows that those things are

most important of these articles are gathered together in the creed which, in a very beautiful way, joins together the profession of faith in the Three Persons of God - the Trinitarian profession associated with baptism in Jesus' words of parting to the disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel: "Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" - with the earliest proclamation of the salvation of human beings in Christ - 1 Corinthians 15:3-5: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." The creed simply meshes these two great truths together and Aquinas saw that integration as expressive of the statement of John 17:3 - "Eternal life is this: to know you the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" - a statement reiterated in somewhat different terms in Hebrews 11:6.

In this way, the creed expresses the profound unity of the content of Christian faith. Faith is not only united because its one source is the one Triune God, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. But the very content of faith is profoundly united, in that it concerns God's triune being and God's design of creation, salvation and glorification; every specific Christian doctrine must relate ultimately to this centre. But while St Thomas emphasizes the unity of faith, even to the point of affirming that the saints of the Old Testament in some way share the same faith which unites all believers who make up the *congregatio fidelium*, he is far from being insensitive to the diversity among believers both in the course of history or at any given point in it. His treatise on faith includes two articles concerning whether it is necessary for salvation to have faith in Christ and in the Trinity and his response to it in the affirmative.³² How could, for example, the saints of the Old Testament be said to share the faith of the Church after its institutional establishment with the coming of Christ and his founding the Church on the apostles? Aquinas' attempt to understand how unity in faith can also admit a legitimate diversity revolves around two distinctions: that between explicit faith and implicit faith and that between the faith of the learned and the faith of the simple.

in themselves of faith, which order us directly to eternal life. Such are the Trinity of Persons in Almighty God, the mystery of Christ's Incarnation, and the like; and these are distinct articles of faith. On the other hand, certain things in Holy Scripture are proposed to our belief, not chiefly on their own account, but for the manifestation of those mentioned above: e.g., that Abraham had two sons and such things should not form distinct articles," *STh* II-II 1.6, ad 1.

³² Ibid. II-II 2.7 and 8.

First of all, St Thomas points out that the ultimate happiness of human beings consists in “a supernatural vision of God. To this vision man cannot attain unless he be taught by God, according to John 6:45: ‘Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.’ No man acquires a share of this learning all at once, but a little at a time, according to the mode of his nature.”³³ This coming to know “according to the mode of his nature” is conditioned first of all by one’s position in the course of history. St Thomas adds that belief “of some kind in the mystery of Christ” would have been different prior to the historical coming of Christ; for example, that the sacrifices carried out through the history of Israel and described in the Old Testament would have foreshadowed Christ’s passion, but that a fuller grasp of the significance of Christ’s passion would be possible only after the event and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We see this process of coming to fuller understanding, for example, in chapter 24 of the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus explains the scriptures to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. This scene on the road to Emmaus reflects that gradual process of coming to grasp the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection which must have taken place many times in the first days after the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. St Thomas ventures that “the meaning of these [Old Testament] sacrifices was known by the learned explicitly [perhaps here he was thinking of the author of the suffering servant passages of deutero-Isaiah as one of the ‘learned’], while the simple folk knew it under the veil of the sacrifices, believing them to be directed by God to Christ’s coming, and thus their knowledge was covered with a veil, so to speak.”³⁴ He then adds that “after grace had been revealed, both learned and simple folk are bound to explicit faith in the mysteries of Christ ... such as the articles that refer to the Incarnation.... As to other minute points in reference to the articles of the Incarnation, men have been bound to believe them more or less explicitly according to each one’s state and office.”³⁵

Two points seem to be particularly relevant here for grasping how St Thomas accounts for the differences between believers regarding the actual content of the faith that they profess. First, in answering the question “whether one is bound to believe anything explicitly?” he replies:

As regards the primary points or articles of faith, man must believe them explicitly, just as he must have faith; but as to other points of faith, man is not bound to believe them explicitly, but only implicitly, or to be ready to believe them, in so far as he is prepared to believe whatever is contained in the divine Scriptures. Then

³³ Ibid. II-II 2.3.

³⁴ Ibid. II-II 2.7.

³⁵ Ibid.

alone is he bound to believe such things explicitly, when it is clear to him that they are contained in the doctrine of faith.³⁶

Obviously, here in this passage the necessity of explicit faith is answered by St Thomas in a very nuanced way. Salvation requires some degree of explicit faith for everyone, but the extent of this explicit faith depends on the condition that it becomes clear to a person that a particular truth is “contained in the doctrine of faith.” Logically, then, one’s location in history vis-à-vis the Christ event, and the extent to which one’s particular historical or cultural context conditions one’s knowing, are decisive for how much explicit faith is necessary for the salvation of any particular individual.

This question on the need for explicit faith is immediately followed by a question concerning whether all are equally bound to have explicit faith. Here Aquinas adds that even within the same historical and cultural setting, the different opportunities for education imply certain legitimate differences in the degree of explicit faith professed by different individuals. He writes that “men of higher degree, whose business it is to teach others, are under obligation to have fuller knowledge of matters of faith, and to believe more explicitly,” that “the unfolding of the articles of faith is not equally necessary for the salvation of all, since those of higher degree, whose duty it is to teach others, are bound to believe explicitly more things than others are,” and “simple persons should not be put to the test about subtle questions of faith.”³⁷ St Thomas, who was a university professor, did not see the Church’s unity in faith, a unity in which he firmly believed, as requiring that people of all ranks and professions hold precisely the same explicit number of doctrines in order to be one in faith. That would contradict a fundamental truth that he knew simply on the basis of human reason, that is, that what is known is known according to the epistemological capacity of the knower, who in this case is a finite human creature who has been privileged to grasp within his or her capabilities the self-revelation of the God, the *prima veritas*.

The notion that there can be differences between believers from one period of history to another is also affirmed when Aquinas raises the question about whether the articles of faith have increased in the course of time.³⁸ He writes:

As regards the substance of the articles of faith, they have not received any increase as time went on; since whatever those who lived later have believed, was contained, albeit implicitly, in the faith of those Fathers who preceded them.

³⁶ Ibid. II-II 2.5.

³⁷ Ibid. II-II 2.6 *contra* and 2.6, ad 1 and 2.6, ad 2.

³⁸ Ibid. II-II 1.7.

But there was an increase in the number of articles believed explicitly, since for those who lived in later times some were known explicitly which were not known explicitly by those who lived before them.

The notion of an increase in the articles of faith is also taken up when St Thomas addresses the possibility of drawing up a new version of the creed. For him, this is not only possible but even necessary:

A new edition of the symbol becomes necessary in order to set aside the errors that may arise. The reason for this is that there should be but one faith in the whole Church, according to 1 Corinthians 1:10: “that you all agree and that there be no dissensions among you”; and this could not be secured unless any question of faith that may arise be decided by him who presides over the whole Church, so that the whole Church may hold firmly to his decision.³⁹

This quotation is taken from an article which seeks to answer the question: “Whether it belongs to the sovereign pontiff to draw up a symbol of faith?” Here we see that, for Aquinas, the very fact that the divine revelation of the *prima veritas*, the first truth, is committed to a community that lives and grows in history requires an authoritative ministry that is capable of guiding that community in its understanding of revelation, especially in the light of the proven fact that misinterpretations and errors do from time to time emerge which threaten the community’s unity in faith. Congar points out that this article implies that St Thomas already accepted the infallibility of papal teaching, even though papal infallibility was not solemnly defined until Vatican I in 1870 and even though the highly respected historical research of Brian Tierney, whom Congar quotes, suggests that the precise topic of papal infallibility was only explicitly introduced by the so-called spiritual Franciscans under the leadership of Peter John Olivi several decades after the death of St Thomas.⁴⁰ Congar adds an important comment in this regard when he states that Aquinas begins his response to this question about the ability of the sovereign pontiff to promulgate a new version of the symbol of faith by stating that the creed “was drawn up by a general council,” and that the validity of a council is related in some way to the authority of the successor of Peter. Thomas, following the stipulations of Gratian’s *Decretals*, affirmed that a council “cannot be convoked otherwise than by the authority of the sovereign pontiff,” something which we know today was not the case for the councils of the first millennium. But that does not alter in the least the principle

³⁹ Ibid. II-II 1.10.

⁴⁰ See Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility, 1150-1350: A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty, and Tradition in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

which was true even for the councils of the first millennium, i.e., that no council could be considered authoritative against the approval of the bishop of Rome.⁴¹

Congar's point is that St Thomas did not isolate the pope from the proper contribution of the other bishops in this important role of making decisions about the normative expression of Christian faith. But also, and perhaps more importantly, St Thomas, without giving it the central place in his treatise on faith in the *Summa*, nevertheless clearly believed that the magisterium of the apostolic ministry of bishops gathered in council under the guidance of the authority of the successor to Peter played an irreplaceable role in maintaining unity in faith without squelching that legitimate diversity which derives from the different historical and cultural conditions of believers. "That there should be but one faith in the whole Church," wrote Thomas, there needs to be an "authority which is empowered to decide matters of faith definitely." This truth is something that John Henry Newman, that expert on the development of doctrine, clearly saw and affirmed, even when he was still an Anglican.⁴²

I hope that the foregoing comments have shown three things about St Thomas' view of the Church's unity in faith. First, unity in faith is rooted in the one Triune God who can neither deceive nor be deceived and who reveals Himself and His boundless love for human beings in creating and redeeming the world. As Congar interprets Thomas, the two great *credenda* (things to be believed) are the mystery of God to be enjoyed in the beatific vision and the mystery of Jesus Christ as the means which leads human beings to that vision. All other truths of faith relate to these two. Secondly, the distinction between *fides explicita* (explicit faith) and *fides implicita* (implicit faith) as well as the distinction between the learned and the simple provide the framework for Aquinas to account for the diversity which derives from the historical and cultural situation of believers, without damaging their fundamental unity in faith. Ultimately these factors reflect St Thomas' epistemology which unhesitatingly affirms knowledge of reality, but does so within the profound appreciation of the fact that such knowledge occurs according to the epistemological capacities of the knower. Though the reality of God is absolutely simple - we cannot here go into how such simplicity derives from Aquinas' reflection on the infinity of God - human beings know God through propositions which are themselves complex (having subjects and

⁴¹ See, for example, Hermann Josef Sieben, "Il rapporto tra concilio e papa fino alla metà del V secolo," *Concilium* 19 (1983/7): 38-47; William Henn, *The Honor of my Brothers: A Brief History of the Relationship between the Pope and the Bishops* (New York: Crossroads, 2000).

⁴² See Francis A. Sullivan, "Newman on Infallibility," in *Newman after a Hundred Years*, ed. Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 419-446; and Avery Dulles, "Newman on Infallibility," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 433-449.

predicates) and which are conditioned by time and space, by history and culture. Thirdly, Christ provided his Church with an apostolic ministry which is capable to discern in his name (cf. Luke 10: 16) what diversities within the historical interpretation of the faith are in harmony with its unity, and to reject those interpretations which are so diverse as to destroy this unity.

Given these three broad Thomistic principles concerning unity in faith, I would like to briefly conclude by recalling a fascinating article in which Congar comments on what he sees as the ecumenical value of one aspect of St Thomas' theological method. To that I now briefly turn.

The Ecumenical Value of the Hermeneutics of Saint Thomas Aquinas

Congar once lamented that prior to Vatican II some Catholic theologians unjustly considered the works of St Thomas as “an apparatus of abstractions and prefabricated solutions” when, in reality he is

the very image of a mind open to reality, to dialogue and to men's questions ... a model of honesty and respect for every atom of truth in proportion to the truth it contains ... entering into dialogue with the “heretics” of his time - all those who did not think like himself, inside and outside the Church. ... I could show that St Thomas represents ecumenism before the event.⁴³

Seven years after publishing those words, Congar seemed to carry out this claim. As is well known, the method St Thomas employed in many of his works was in the form of grouping together a series of questions that were all relevant to a particular topic, quoting various authorities which seemed to object to the answer which Thomas himself held, explaining the rationale of his contrary opinion and concluding by responding to the objections with which he opened the question.

For example, towards the beginning of his treatise on faith, Thomas wants to explain the truth of the statement from Hebrews 11:1 that faith is the conviction about things not seen. He begins with the objection that another passage of scripture recalls Jesus' words to the doubting Thomas: “Because you have seen me you have believed” (John 20:29). After explaining that, since the object of revealed truth is not “seen” in the sense of being something simply known by human reason but must come to human beings by means of God's initiative, Aquinas interprets Jesus' statement as follows: “Thomas *saw one thing*,

⁴³ Yves Congar, “Theology in the Council,” *American Ecclesiastical Review* 155 (1966): 229.

and believed another. He saw the man and, believing Him to be God, he made profession of his faith, saying ‘My Lord and my God.’”⁴⁴

Congar points out that this very method of St Thomas, that is, of explaining the meaning of revered authorities, such as scripture and various Fathers of the Church, whose literal meaning seemed to contradict the point that Thomas was trying to make, demonstrates his concern to uncover the true intention - the *intentio* - of the author whose text he is quoting as if it were an objection to his own opinion. Thus, before arguing that it is the pope who has the authority to draw up a new creed, Thomas recalls that the famous Athanasian Creed was drawn up not by a pope but by the patriarch of Alexandria, to which he replies that the intention of St Athanasius was not to promulgate a new creed but to offer “an exposition of doctrine, as appears from his way of speaking. But since it contained briefly the whole truth of faith, it was accepted by the authority of the sovereign pontiff, so as to be considered as a rule of faith.”⁴⁵ Or again, since the act of faith is truly meritorious because it engages the will and is not the result of a merely intellectual process of reasoning, Thomas needs to explain the seemingly opposed view of Gregory the Great, who taught that “there is no merit in believing what is shown by reason.” St Thomas replies: “Gregory is referring to the case of a man who has no will to believe what is of faith, unless he be induced by reasons. But when a man has the will to believe what is of faith, on the authority of God alone, although he may have reasons in demonstration of some of them, e.g. of the existence of God, the merit of his faith is not, for that reason, lost or diminished.”⁴⁶ The example to which Congar devotes most attention in his article on the ecumenical value of Thomas’ hermeneutical method is the question of the *filioque*. Here Congar writes about the “principle of the equivalence of what appear to be discordant formulations.” He quotes Aquinas’ *De potentia*, question 10, art. 5 contra, as stating: “*Si quis recte consideret dicta*

⁴⁴ *STh* II-II 1.4, ad 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* II-II 1.10, ad 3. The creed with which Aquinas is concerned in this section of his *Summa theologiae* is usually referred to today by its first two words *Quicumque vult* and is usually assigned not to Athanasius but to an unknown author of the fifth - sixth century; cf. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 1:673. The introduction to this creed in Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, 44-45, lists various names proposed as author but concludes that it probably comes from what is today Southern France and was produced by one whom we cannot identify. Nevertheless, the argument proposed here by St Thomas does not lose its value. His point is simply that the intention of the author could not have been to produce a new creed unless he were either the pope or an ecumenical council whose creed was authoritatively acknowledged by the pope.

⁴⁶ *STh* II-II 2.10, ad 1.

Graecorum, inveniet quod a nobis magis different in verbis quam in sensu (If one rightly considers the expressions of the Greeks one finds that they differ from us more in formulation than in meaning).⁴⁷

The point is that seemingly erroneous statements, or statements that seem to contradict another particular truth, should be interpreted reverently according to the analogy of faith, not forcing upon an imprecise expression an error in faith when an authentically orthodox or pious interpretation would be possible.⁴⁸ At times an intended orthodox thought can co-exist with a defective or even erroneous formulation, in such a way that a more benign interpretation is possible and would be a more just treatment of the person being cited. Only by looking at the historical context and at the question being addressed by a particular author is the way opened to a fair assessment. Congar argues that it is urgent for theologians today to employ such a hermeneutical method as they draw on writings from the past. For one thing, today we enjoy a better understanding of history, of the conditions it imposes on writings from any given period, and of the complex factors that enter into the process of knowing and formulating that knowledge, such as are revealed by the field of the sociology of knowledge. The rather simple Thomistic principle that faith can move from the implicit to the explicit can be enriched by recognition of the function of history and culture, a recognition which is apparent in paragraph 14 of Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism: "The heritage handed down by the apostles was received differently and in different forms, so that from the very beginnings of the Church its development varied from region to region and also because of differing mentalities and ways of life."

During several centuries after the Reformation, a polemical spirit governed the way Christians interpreted the writings of those from other communities. Today we must live not by simple rejection of others but seek to understand the reasons underlying writings of the past, even those whose tone seems overly critical and, when a merely literal meaning is forced upon them, are erroneous. I think of the example of the strident and even offensive (to Catholics) words of

⁴⁷ Yves Congar, "Valeur et portée oecumeniques de quelques principes hermeneutiques de saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 57, no.4 (1973): 616-169 on the filioque; *ibid.*, 618 for the quotation from *De potentia*.

⁴⁸ Here, Congar makes reference to Marie-Dominique Chenu, "Authentica et Magistralia: Deux lieux théologiques aux XIIe-XIIIe siècles," *Divus Thomas* 28 (1925): 257-285, with many examples at 282-283; Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Introduction à l'étude de S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 1950), 106-131; and Henri-Dominique Simonin, "La notion d' 'intentio' dans l'oeuvre de saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 19 (1930): 445-463.

some in the Lutheran and Calvinistic traditions on the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist. I suspect that the intention of such harsh words had much more to do with a justifiable rejection of abuses, both financial and within popular piety, than with a reasoned, well founded conviction that the mass has no relation to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Congar also relates what he considers to be St Thomas' more benign approach to interpreting his sources to Thomas' unshakable conviction that the articles of faith - even those most solemnly defined as dogmas - are perceptions of divine truth that tend towards a more complete grasp of the reality to which they put us into contact: *Articulus fidei est perceptio veritatis divinae tendens in ipsam*. Such a conviction can inspire a certain generous openness to the faith expressions of others, not only of believers with whom we are not in full communion, but even with believers of our own Roman Catholic household.

Conclusion

I suppose that, once upon a time, some of the things I have proposed in this talk may have been considered dangerous. But my basis has been either the texts of St Thomas Aquinas or those which Yves Congar published after Vatican II, when he was celebrated by many in the Church even to the point of being nominated a cardinal. I would like to conclude simply by saying that St Thomas' understanding of faith, its unity and its diversity, as recounted and commented upon by Congar, is very impressive and offers much that is particularly relevant for our time, now at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Thomas' benign method of seeking the best in the writings of others who believe in Christ can serve as a model for us today. He was also realistic in recognizing that believers do err; his rejection of various heresies can very easily be documented. But, as Congar tries to demonstrate and, in my opinion, does so convincingly, St Thomas sought out and honoured the truth no matter what its source. His benign reading of others strikes me as a method appropriate for ecumenical efforts today. I believe that it has already been employed and has resulted in great fruit in such texts as the Lutheran-Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.⁴⁹

St John Paul II in his *Ut Unum Sint* seems wholly in line with this benign reading of others which finds much support in Yves Congar's presentation of St Thomas' view of unity in faith:

⁴⁹ "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, [1999]," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

Ecumenical dialogue, which prompts the parties involved to question each other, to understand each other and to explain their positions to each other, makes surprising discoveries possible. Intolerant polemics and controversies have made incompatible assertions out of what was really the result of two different ways of looking at the same reality. Nowadays we need to find the formula which, by capturing the reality in its entirety, will enable us to move beyond partial readings and eliminate false interpretations.⁵⁰

Both Thomas Aquinas and Yves Congar would agree.

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⁵⁰ St John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 38.