

## Catholic Theological Association 2013 Conference Papers

### Augustine or Thomas in Catholic Theology?

#### Introduction

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In the past few years, and particularly during the last papacy, we have seen a maneuvering for position in the Roman Catholic Church as different groups vie for position to claim the proper inheritance of the Second Vatican Council. It has been a question of either pushing the conciliar boat out further to fully achieve what was promised, or pulling the boat back in to say “That’s enough, thank you” and even restoring liturgical traditions which we thought had gone, more or less, for ever. These tendencies have been expressed in obfuscating language about hermeneutics: the hermeneutics of continuity and discontinuity, or revisionist talk of the reform of the reform. Each side had its favoured theologians: von Balthasar and Ratzinger, or Rahner and Congar. Or they identified with Augustine or Thomas Aquinas. So, in some quarters these two venerable and great theologians were set against each other, which was always an odd thing to do as Thomas used Augustine as one of his three most frequently quoted sources along with the Bible and Aristotle. At any rate, this was the provocation for the Catholic Theological Association focussing theologically on Augustine and Thomas as a pair in its last annual conference held in September 2013 in Durham, against the backdrop of an exhibition of the Lindisfarne Gospels and the impressive bulk of the cathedral and castle, both of which were used for our communal liturgy.

In addition to the papers published here, delegates at the conference were able to hear a series of short papers on Augustine and Thomas; an introduction by Denys Turner to his recent book *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (Yale UP, 2013); a reading of some questions from the *Summa Theologiae* led by Simon Gainé OP; a tribute to Seamus Heaney, who had just died, by Eamon Duffy; and an insight into the character of Pope Francis by a fellow Argentinian priest, Augusto Zampini-Davies.

Discussion of coded ecclesiastical *prises de position* is largely absent from the academic and mainly dispassionate papers here. The exception is the introductory survey by John McDade on the Catholic Church's "culture wars". He is highly critical of a group he calls Post-modern Augustinian Thomists, who reflect Augustine's gloomy and pessimistic (but they would say "realistic") view of human nature after the Fall to conclude that a rapprochement between Catholic and liberal-secular-democratic culture is all but impossible. For them "being Catholic seems to mean being against everyone else rather than connected to everyone else". McDade argues for a more inclusive and universal Catholic culture – one that can accommodate Augustine and Aquinas – and he finds it exemplified in Charles Taylor.

The next two papers identify why we still need, first, Augustine, and, then, Thomas. With his customary mordant wit, Richard Price argues for the incontestable place of Augustine in Christian tradition, so that using Augustine, "the most influential of all Christian theologians", as a common resource is essential for ecumenical discussions. He also points to parallels between the social context of the church in Augustine's time and our own, and the need for compromises with and accommodations to social expectations, while at the same time not being optimistic about the earthly City getting any better. Fainche Ryan recommends Thomas's way of dealing with all questions of theology because of "his precise and clear analytical and argumentative approach", and in three areas in particular. First, Thomas is especially important for getting our thinking right about God, as an unknowable mystery from whom the world comes and not as an item within it. Next, as we are related to God, especially through prayer. And finally, in his account of how we are to live virtuously and flourish as members of this fragile and at times self-destructive species.

Oliver O'Donovan analyses the similarities and differences between Thomas's *Compendium of Theology* and Augustine's *Enchiridion*, the design of which served as a model for Thomas's late work, even though it was written over eight-hundred years later. Each has a discussion of faith, hope and love that uses the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, but Thomas departs from his predecessor in startling ways, especially in his discussion of faith. Augustine, we are told, understands faith as a moment in the act of worshipping God, "where Augustine turns it in an evaluative direction, towards goodness". By contrast, Thomas sees faith "as a cognitive presupposition of the worship of God" and turns it in a cognitive direction towards being. As a moral theologian, O'Donovan prefers Augustine's primacy of knowledge and the will so as to resist free voluntarism in human behaviour, but he appreciates Thomas's safe-guarding of ethical discussions by boxing them inside doctrine. Janet Martin Soskice also looks for similarities between Augustine and Thomas where there seem to be differences on the nature of God and the divine names, and on

creation. What is striking is how neither of them is simply locked into what might once have been called natural theology, for each of them works primarily from scripture and not Plato or Aristotle, and each brings Christ into play to supply what knowledge we have of God.

In what began as a short paper, Franklin Harkins draws on two of Thomas's early works to discover what intellectual distinctions he had to draw in order to deal with the tricky question of God's desire for universal salvation and the fact that some human behaviour prevents this. Tina Beattie offers a startlingly original Lacanian reading of Thomas. Thomas seems to have had some influence on Jacques Lacan's development of psychoanalytic theory and here we have suggestions (developed at length in a recent book) of a reciprocal reading in the areas of language and desire, creation *ex nihilo* and the incarnation, and Thomas's use of "gendered Aristotelian concepts". This, we are told, creates the possibility of a postmodern Thomism that goes beyond what we have inherited from the previous century. Finally Nicholas Healy argues for a fresh model of discipleship. The prevailing model, the one that predominates in the Catholic Church, one which he identifies with Augustine and Thomas, sets high moral and disciplinary standards and requires serious effort for a person to be considered a good Christian. To fall short, he suggests, is to be "an unsatisfactory Christian" according to this model. Following Karl Barth's theology of vocation, he proposes an alternative and less stringent, but more realistic, model of the Christian life.

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