

Preface

Thomism and the Challenge of Integral Ecology

THE LATE Fr. Richard John Neuhaus said that a “Thomist of the Strict Observance,” was one who believed that the thought of the Angelic Doctor is the intellectual hardware that can run any software. He was thinking, he said, of the Jesuit scholar Norris Clarke, whose philosophical work aimed at showing how Thomas Aquinas could make sense even of the process philosophers Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. At Fordham University my then-girlfriend Cathy (now my wife) would take me to lunch with Father Clarke, then in his late eighties, a spry gnome-like character who would regale us with his intellectual adventures of bringing St. Thomas to every conceivable endeavor. Upon his mentioning a lunch date with the Dalai Lama, I asked him what he had said. Father Clarke looked at us and said very seriously, “I told him, ‘You have wonderful meditative practices, but your metaphysics are terrible!’” The Thomist of the Strict Observance then attempted, well, to enlighten him.

I’m not sure I agreed with everything Father Clarke said about metaphysics or Thomas Aquinas, but that impulse to bring Thomism to bear on intellectual projects and problems out there in the world was remarkable to me. The tribe of old-fashioned Thomists is often

fiercely protective of their master in such a way as to ward off anybody attempting to bring him out of the thirteenth, the greatest of centuries, and into our own milieu. I do not doubt the intellectual seriousness, the learning, or the rigor of their work. If these, the E. F. Huttons of the perennial philosophy, speak in order to tell me my metaphysics is terrible, I listen. But their conversation is too often about pinning down the meaning of his texts and too little about applying his thought to the problems of the twenty-first, perhaps not the greatest—but hey, it’s what we’ve got—of centuries.

Therefore it can be particularly frustrating when tribal members tell me that they are bothered that what the public too often sees as Thomism is the intellectual project known as New Natural Law Theory (NNLT). This version of natural law reasoning, which its proponents say is not really new in the sense of wholly detached from the past but reflects substantial development of the mind of St. Thomas, was articulated by the late philosopher-theologian Germain Grisez, along with the late philosopher Joseph Boyle and the legal scholars John Finnis and Robert George. Broadly speaking, its basic position is that natural law precepts cannot be deduced from the facts of the world by what the ancients would call speculative reason. Instead, they propose that humans are capable of discerning the correct principles of reasoning and actions through a reflection on the first principle of practical reason (do good and avoid evil) and toward a group of goods such as life, work, religion, beauty, and others, the pursuit of which, they argue, is essential to understanding the logic of human free choices and actions. These goods are available to practical reason through a consideration of what it means to live a life characterized by integral human fulfillment. These goods, they say, are basic goods not resolvable into anything more primary and are “incommensurable,” meaning that one cannot either measure them against each other or order them according to importance. I think there are some definite problems with this construal, but my point here is not to rehearse or evaluate the criticisms of NNLT (in a future issue, theologian Christian Washburn will critique NNL thinkers on

their treatment of capital punishment). It is simply to note that whatever one's evaluation of their theory, no one can deny that this school of Thomists has done yeoman's work in trying to bring natural law thinking to bear on the subjects of our day. The most prominent contemporary figures, John Finnis, Robert P. George, Ryan Anderson, Christopher Tollefsen, Samuel Gregg, and my colleague Robert G. Kennedy, have written on, among other things, issues of abortion and bioethics; sexuality and what is now called gender identity; crime and punishment; and politics, economics, business, and finance. They have been the public face of natural law theory, and by extension the thought of Aquinas, for most non-Catholics and nonscholars because they have entered the fray in scholarly, public, and popular venues. Traditional Thomists who complain about this identification should stop checking the wires on the hardware and start writing more software in the form of op-eds, essays, and books accessible to nonspecialists and even the general public.¹

Christopher J. Thompson is one traditional Thomist who has risen to the challenge of showing how Thomist hardware can run the software of environmental and agricultural stewardship—to my knowledge, a topic not taken up even by those hardy NNL thinkers. A PhD from Marquette, Chris taught in the theology department before serving as the first chair of the department of Catholic Studies here at St. Thomas. He then spent a decade renovating the intellectual formation of seminarians as dean of the St. Paul Seminary. He returns this fall to Catholic Studies as the co-director of the Murphy Institute for Law, Ethics, and Public Policy. The announcement of this return coincided with the publication of his new book, *The Joyful Mystery: Field Notes Toward a Green Thomism* (Emmaus Road, 2017).

The “green Thomism” of the title designates not another school advocating for the correct approach to Thomas's writing and thought, but instead an approach from Thomas precisely to those issues of environmental concern that have become so prominent over the last half-century. A small-town Illinois boy, Thompson always included in his teaching great poetry about nature from the likes of Hopkins, Francis

Thompson (no relation), Coleridge, and others. The green Thomist project began when he realized that he needed to explain to college students what Hopkins's kingfishers who caught fire were. This ignorance was not simply the problem of the deterioration of modern education; even his brightest and most knowledgeable students suffered not merely from a lack of knowledge about the natural world but even a lack of exposure to it: what Richard Louv calls "nature-deficit disorder." Thompson's anecdotes about student reactions to the great and unknown outdoors (e.g., "I didn't know they raised animals in Minnesota") are chuckle-worthy but slightly worrisome.

Thompson realized when modern ethics went "agley" (to borrow from a poet Thompson doesn't quote), it probably had much to do with the modern lack of knowledge of nature, a prerequisite for knowledge of metaphysics and ethics. Unlike the NNL theorists, traditional Thomists argue that natural law involves an intellectual sharing in the eternal law through understanding the order and wisdom of God evident in "the things that are made" (Romans 1:20).

Note that the overall account of the natural law is not derived from some speculative meditation on the principles of human dignity or some highly conceptualized analysis of the nature of reason itself. Rather, St. Thomas turns to the ordering one finds in nature to provide the basic outlines of natural law. Creation and its creatures as given in ordinary experience provide the benchmarks for appropriate behavior and its demands. Nature discloses the outlines of a norm in both Catholic and organic circles, and the order among creatures both human and organic alike have a value and compelling standing, if you will, in moral analysis.²

The emphasis on the shared territory of "Catholic and organic circles" is important. What Thompson wants, following both popes Benedict XVI and Francis, is an "integral ecology," where human nature is integrated with the whole of nature and defense of human life is paired with defense of the natural world as a whole. While there are many who defend Catholic sexual ethics, Thompson finds that they can

be at a distinct disadvantage, because they quite often advance an argument about human nature that lacks the context of a view of nature as a whole. “The defense of the organic ordering of things, whether in the human body or other bodies, provides the extraordinary occasion to unite in common cause and mutual understanding various groups of sincere individuals who are so often opposed: those who promote organic practices in the garden bed, those who promote organic practices in the marriage bed.”³ This is not, as some older Catholic critics of sexual teaching argue, mere “physicalism,” though it is an acknowledgment that our status as embodied creatures means that physical bodies do set us moral guidelines. We should see, he argues, that though “the human person is never exhausted by the categories of organic activity,” neither do we “escape the ordering of that activity.”⁴

Thompson wisely gets to specific questions about ethics later on in the book. Rather than starting with the questions about GMOs or pesticides, he first outlines the traditional approach to natural law by drawing out precisely the ordering of thought necessary to get to ethical questions—an approach that runs from an understanding of nature to metaphysical thought to the edges of philosophy, where divine revelation becomes visible and a vision of what the human is and ought to do is unveiled. Much of *The Joyful Mystery* is written not in the standard philosophical vein of analysis and conclusion, but in an exhortatory, beautifully poetic—sometimes teetering on purple—prose that is designed to inspire ivory-tower and sacristy rats to find God in the creation that God has promised will, when human redemption is complete, again be experienced as a temple:

Indoor Christians could stand for renewal as well. Those who profess the truth of Christ, yet confine Him in rubric and regiment alone, can forget, and even hold in disdain, the first text and sacrament writ large all around us. *Sursum corda!* Nature belongs to Christ: in its origins through creation, in its consummation through redemption! The light we protect so tenderly in a bushel basket spirituality is better seen amidst the lampstands of the universe.⁵

This poetic, philosophical, and sacramental vision is definitely not new. It was found in the not-so-distant past here in America, where the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, founded in 1923 by a priest (later archbishop) Edwin O'Hara, "sponsored some 60 schools of rural instruction and philosophy, enrolling 1700 priests, 9,000 women religious, and 12,000 laity" and held annual conferences that attracted as many as 15,000 participants.⁶ While the organization, now called Catholic Rural Life, still exists and does good work, Thompson discovered that its work never really was taken up by any other Catholic institutions: "Of the 244 Catholic universities in the United States, not a single one offers a program of study in agriculture."⁷ And apart from Catholic Rural Life, there is almost no trace of the myriad smaller affiliate institutions that transmitted a coherent Catholic philosophical approach to farming and the environment. No doubt this disappearance has a lot to do with the decreasing number of farmers in the United States in general, but it also has to do with the large-scale abandonment of Thomism (or neo-Thomism) in the American Catholic intellectual scene in the postconciliar years, which truly had provided a coherent approach to Catholic intellectual life in the first half of the twentieth century and has never been replaced, as Philip Gleason showed in his landmark history, *Contending With Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1995). It is also related, I believe, to the 1969 revision of the Roman liturgical calendar, which made optional for bishops the Ember Days, the quarterly fasts and feasts associated with the agricultural seasons.

All of the above and more make any real popular and sane thought about ecology tough sledding. Thompson's traditional Thomistic appeal also has rhetorical challenges insofar as many traditional Thomists follow the master in holding that the lower creation is destined to pass away in the future life. While this view does not justify neglect or mistreatment of creation, it does tend to relativize such concerns to many minds. One coffee cup offered for sale (along with shot glasses that read "Thomism Straight Up") at the Dominican House of Stud-

ies reads, “Your dog won’t go to heaven.” The item, probably made in response to Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart’s attacks on this view, won’t be found on Thompson’s breakfast table since he breaks with Thomas on this point: “If ‘heaven’ were understood as the fullest expression of divine glory, every smattering of creation and its kinds could be somehow sustained in a manner beyond all comprehending, not for the sake of a humanity who has any use for such things, but for the sake of a humanity who can love such things—because they completely love the One from whom all good things come.”⁸

Despite the challenges within secular and Catholic culture, Thompson sees the current moment as providential for the reintroduction to Catholics of coherent thinking about nature, environment, and ecology, given Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’* and its call for an integral ecology. His title is actually taken from the encyclical, and the book quotes from Francis’s encyclical generously both in the text and in the “selected readings” printed at the end of each chapter. While I agree with Thompson that the moment is right for green Thomism, I am skeptical about the hope that there will be a large-scale rapprochement between those favoring organic garden beds and those favoring organic marriage beds any time soon, precisely because of the role of Pope Francis and *Laudato Si’*.

Thompson blames a lack of enthusiastic reception of the encyclical among Catholics, especially those who take Catholic teaching seriously, on “flawed . . . attitudes toward creation” and “indifference” to ecological problems, as well as views that Francis is “inserting into the Catholic theological tradition a merely transitory opinion on the meaning and value of the earth and our role” (7–8). On the first count, it is not clear that, at least in most first-world countries, there is any real hatred of creation or indifference to ecology on the part of most people. What is quite often seen is a difference of opinions about the health of the world’s ecological status and what is required at this moment. Francis’s and Thompson’s rhetoric tends to treat our situation as a unique crisis. Francis acknowledges different views in passing, but refers categorically to the earth today as “burdened and

laid waste . . . among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she ‘groans in travail’ (Rom 8:22)” (*LS 2*). Yet it is not clear that such an assessment is correct. Peter Kareiva, former chief scientist of the Nature Conservancy and currently head of UCLA’s Institute for Environment and Sustainability, penned an article a few months after the release of the encyclical in which he addressed nine “environmental myths” including “Human population is growing exponentially and it’s ruining the planet,” “Biodiversity is declining everywhere,” “We have already used up 1.5 Earths and exceeded our planet’s carrying capacity,” and “If we keep on our current path, Mother Earth will be destroyed and it will be the end of life on our planet.” Kareiva concludes that “Tropes of doom-and-gloom, of good versus evil, or environment versus business do not capture the challenges or opportunities for young environmental scientists.”⁹

Indeed, rather than a crisis of hostility toward or lack of concern for creation, we face a crisis of fashionable environmentalism treated as the approved secular substitute for concern about the human person. Thompson seems to think that a more sophisticated view of creation will unite the two groups of “organics,” but it is quite reasonable to think that Francis’s general teaching, which is largely unexceptionable in *Laudato Si*’s theological sections, has been and will be taken by some as a justification for compromising on issues of human life. These suspicions have not been assuaged by the inclusion of abortion and population control advocates such as Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Ehrlich among those invited to speak at the Vatican, the repeated public papal praise of Italian abortionist Emma Bonino, and the reorganization of the Pontifical Academy of Life with new members, at least one of whom supports abortion—not to mention the papal characterization of many defenders of Catholic teaching on sexuality as Pharisees and rigorists, the still-unresolved ambiguities of the controversial eighth chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*, and the appointments to high office of clerics who seem not to be concerned with settled doctrine on the human side of the integral ecology ledger. It is unrealistic to explain the reception of Francis’s teaching apart from an account of his very difficult and problematic papacy. Often defenders

of Pope Francis appeal to Pope Benedict's and Pope St. John Paul's many similar statements about the environment. The difference is that Benedict and John Paul were utterly clear about the hierarchy of concerns between humans and the other part of the environment. Just as it was said that only Nixon could go to China, it might be said that only John Paul or Benedict could have written an encyclical on integral ecology that would have been received more generously, since they were trusted to defend Catholic teachings on the human person unambiguously.

There is, however, a further hurdle in Thompson's project for those seeking to explain natural law. One argument in the book regards the understanding of the earth's current status—has the lower creation been affected by original sin? Is it "fallen"? Thompson argues that it is not, that it retains an integrity that makes it capable of disclosing the truth about God and the natural law. While I think such a position is defensible, two immediate concerns arise: first, that Thompson's position, even if correct, requires sustained nuance; and, second, that claiming an unfallen nature is not necessary for the conclusion Thompson defends—the position that creation is fallen is also defensible and still allows for experience of creation to help humans reason to natural law precepts. For Thomas, "natural law" refers to the rational creature's participation in the Divine Reason, to our rational and free human nature, rather than to the collection of all created things, understood collectively as "nature." Thus, even if one were to grant Thompson's claim, when he argues that "Creation and its creatures as given in ordinary experience provide the benchmarks for appropriate behavior and its demands," one needs to add—yes, but there is a great deal of work to do in sorting out which creatures and which behaviors do such a thing. For several decades those defending behaviors among humans that the Church has taught violate the natural law have appealed to the ordinary experience of various parts of the animal kingdom. Mating habits of most mammals bear little similarity to what the Church has taught is natural for humans. Same-sex sexual behavior has been observed not just in birds like the famously "gay penguins," but also in mammals such as chimpanzees

that are close in structure to humans. And the killing and even eating of young is known up and down the animal kingdom. The same goes for animal treatments of their own habitats—there may be a certain ecological balance, but it includes animal and plant behaviors that are, if not fallen, certainly not easy guides to the natural law.

I offer these criticisms of Thompson's book not because I think him wrong on the big picture, but because his book inspires a great deal of thought about what is needed for us to achieve a conversion of heart on birds, bees, and also the birds and the bees. Thompson has proven himself a worthy Thomist of the Strict Observance. His book most definitely shows that the Angelic Doctor's hardware can run ecological software. There are, however, a number of bugs to work out.

As I wrote about in the preface to the summer issue, this fall marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of the St. Thomas Catholic Studies program. That essay about our late founder Don Briel included details about the history of the program that were often dependent on a draft history of the program that is the joint work of a number of current and former faculty and students from the program. We are pleased to present as the lead article of this issue "**Catholic Studies: A Brief History**," now drafted, edited, and polished to perfection. It closes, no surprise, with words from Briel about the significance of the project: "In George Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest*, the priest, nearing death, says, 'Tout est grace.'—'All is grace, everything is grace.' This not only explains the history of Catholic Studies—because it has been a graced work, not simply the initiative but the set of people, the witness—but it is a reminder that all things, if properly perceived, can be the occasion of transformation. And that is really the hope."

Christopher Thompson's green Thomism may come as a surprise to many who associate ecological thought not with Thomists but with Franciscans, given the protoenvironmental view of their founder that dominates the popular imagination—Franco Zeffirelli's hippified Francis in *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* being example A. This is

probably somewhat inaccurate, for as Dominican biographer Augustine Thompson concluded, St. Francis of Assisi was too complex and conflicted to really allow one to describe a true, “historical Francis.” But what about the tradition he bequeathed? Thanks to translator **Stephen E. Lewis**, we are able to present Part One of “**Thinking in Franciscan**,” a long dialogue between renowned French philosophers **Emmanuel Falque and Laure Solignac** on “the very dispositions and interior accents of the thought that has been grafted onto Franciscan life.” The two touch on a great many themes that crop up when talking about Franciscan tradition: poverty, nakedness, humility, abandonment, and others. But they root all these concepts in the reality of God and the task of revealing him. Solignac describes the stigmata as the outward result of Franciscan “‘expressionism,’ through which the love of God is revealed and manifests itself even in human flesh.” That expressionism is possible because of God’s making himself known in his creation. For the Franciscan, God is cataphatic and not merely apophatic. Falque says, “What makes his reality is not his distance or his thick cloud, but his proximity and his condescension: ‘God, most highly cognizable in Himself (*in se*), is also most highly cognizable to us (*etiam nobis esset summe cognoscibilis*),’ insists the *Commentary on the Sentences*; ‘and if He were not so, it would be due to a defect on the part of our intellect (*defectus ex parte intellectus nostri*).’”

Vincent Wargo takes seriously that we find God cognizable, but asks the question about how we are to embrace Christian hope when it calls us into the future in precisely the manner of calling us into a thick cloud. In “**Festivity, Tradition, and Hope: Josef Pieper and the Historical Meaning of Human Praxis**” Wargo examines the great German philosopher’s examination of the paradoxical and prophetic nature of hope, which is indeed cataphatic, but also apophatic. Christian hope is handed down through tradition, which doesn’t give merely a list of things to look for in the future but a way to see past, present, and future as a whole. That this cannot fully be done this side of the eschaton is what makes it both exciting and difficult, since the

promise is not a happy ending for each individual or each age, but a historical pattern, the beauty of which will one day be revealed: “In the end, it is plain to see that tradition, while remaining one and the same, is not stale but a living phenomenon. It provides the believer with the content of her faith and the substance of her hope. And this is important since it is hope, for Pieper, which permits the individual a grasp, albeit unspecified, of the wholeness of human life and activity. The work of faith as an expression of human hope is truly personal in nature and it defies the logic of utopian progress.”

Christopher Thompson’s account of green Thomism emphasizes the need for receptivity to and contemplation of reality—the acquiring of wisdom before problems can be solved. This is, sadly, not what contemporary philosophy usually serves up. **M. T. Lu** in “**Modern Thought and the Sapiential Dimension of Philosophy**” argues that much of what goes by the name of philosophy over the last two centuries is not actually philosophical and suffers from what a friend of mine jokingly calls “science envy”: “As critics such as MacIntyre and other have pointed out, so much of contemporary academic philosophy (perhaps especially in, but not limited to, the English-speaking world) is aimed at a kind of technical proficiency, especially with a mind to fitting into a university context dominated by the natural sciences.” Lu traces the development of this intellectual ethos in modern thought from Bacon, Hobbes, and Descartes to its culmination in the thought of Kant—and the various flawed attempts by twentieth-century thinkers to overcome it. Lu lays out the hopeful elements in the contemporary philosophical scene, coming from both religious and nonreligious figures, that are accomplishing John Paul II’s desire, expressed in *Fides et Ratio*, to “recover the sapiential dimension of philosophy.”

Literary scholar **Adam Glover** has achieved the first-name status among the *Logos* editorial staff that is reserved in popular discourse to athletic and entertainment stars such as LeBron and Beyoncé. “This must be Adam,” we say upon reviewing another in his linguistically, philosophically, and theologically informed series of introductions to

Spanish-language poets working within the mystical tradition of the Church. **“Corpus Mysticum: Transubstantiation and the Poetics of Ecstasy”** brings to us Chilean priest, poet, and theologian José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois (b. 1936) and his collection *Book of the Passion*, whose themes of ecstasy Adam analyzes, using choice examples which he has himself translated. “As the poem describes the *ekstasis* of the bread, of the disciples, even of Christ himself, its language is caught up in an ecstasy of its own—disabused of its illusion of independence, pulled beyond the parameters of its ordinary existence, and called upon to proclaim the eternal lordship of the One through all things come into being and in whose communion we are invited to dwell *in saecula saeculorum*.”

Jesuit scholar **Pyong-Gwan Pak** asks, “Why is it that the people of our age remain unsatisfied despite the superabundant objects of desire?” In his article, **“St. Bernard of Clairvaux on the Riddle of Human Desire: The Necessity of a Reversal of Priorities in the Human Life of Desire”** Pak outlines Bernard’s understanding of the human predicament under sin and even under sin’s remnants of concupiscence—we know the good in a general way, but we do not desire it. The answer to this is precisely the ecstasy the poet Langlois wrote of—it is relationship with the living Lord that takes one out of oneself in order to become oneself: “The mysticism of the Word thus can become a definitive interpersonal vision in accord with which one can sharply focus one’s desire in terms of the ideal of union with the Word as the deepest possible call in our life of desire.” This desire is ultimately the work of God who himself orders his children’s hearts and calls forth from them the specific desires to cooperate with him in “a disciplined life of virtue, which includes not only the practice of various virtues, starting with humility, but also spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, and contemplation.”

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Editor

Notes

1. I am grateful to Samuel Gregg for a number of clarifications in this section's characterization of NNLT.
2. Christopher J. Thompson, *The Joyful Mystery: Field Notes Toward a Green Thomism* (Emmaus Road, 2017), 134.
3. *Ibid.*, 137.
4. *Ibid.*, 136.
5. *Ibid.*, 154.
6. *Ibid.*, 6.
7. *Ibid.*, 7.
8. *Ibid.*, 180.
9. Peter Kareiva, "Back to school: unlearning nine environmental myths," UCLA Institute of Environmental Science, November 9, 2015. <https://www.ioes.ucla.edu/article/back-to-school-unlearning-nine-environmental-myths/>.