

Is the Tertia Pars of the Summa Theologiae Misplaced?

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The Problem

An understanding of St. Thomas's *Summa theologiae* requires an understanding of the very structure of the work.¹ That structure, however, in its initial threefold division poses a problem. Put succinctly, the problem is this: Why does Thomas place his consideration of Christ in the third part after his consideration of the virtues and vices and the supernatural life of grace in the second? Is not Christ more properly treated prior to the life of virtue and grace, which is so dependent upon him?

This curious placement of Christ is but one of many structural novelties in the *Summa*. In the almost frantic efforts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to organize theological material, the placing of christology was more or less uniform. In *Liber sententiarum* II, Peter Lombard, in his customarily loose way, considers man in paradise, a good part of grace and virtue, the fall, original sin and vice. He reserves the virtues, theological and cardinal, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the second half of book III following the chapters on Christ. Since the gifts are given and the virtues truly efficacious through the saving action of Christ, this order is one of good sense and more or less true to historical sequence. William of Auxerre's *Summa aurea* follows the order of the *Sentences*. The *Summa fratris Alexandri* is ordered in the same way but with greater consistency. The christology immediately follows the fall, and only then are the life of grace and the virtues and vices considered. St. Bonaventure organized his little *summa*, the *Breviloquium*, in this same way. Each of these works builds into its very structure the integral place of Christ in the supernatural life of man. Christ is placed after the fall, by which man is separated from God, and he is placed before the virtues that arise from his saving action and by which man is restored to God.

Thomas rejects the more obvious historical ordering favored by his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. He surely had a reason

for doing so even though, with characteristic modesty, he does not signal this departure from his contemporaries. Such a departure suggests the importance of this initial division of the *Summa* and the need to understand the significance of this order.

Chenu

M.-D. Chenu noted this problem of the placing of the *tertia pars* in his landmark study, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas*. Chenu proposed his pseudo-Dionysian reading of the structure of the *Summa* according to which the *prima pars* treats the movement of all things from God (*exitus*) and the *secunda pars* the return of the rational creature to God (*reditus*). The *tertia pars* treats the way of that return, namely, Christ.² Chenu's very emphasis on the scheme of *exitus* and *reditus* highlights the problem of the placing of the *tertia pars*. The understanding of the first two parts within the pseudo-dionysian scheme makes the *tertia pars* look all the more accidental to the work.

Quite aware of this objection to the order of the *Summa*, Chenu explicitly addresses the problem in the light of his own understanding of the *exitus/reditus* structure of the work. First, Chenu stresses that the *tertia pars* considers the actual way in which the *reditus* of the *secunda pars* is accomplished. The *secunda pars* needs the *tertia pars*. In this, Chenu seems to say that the *tertia pars* ought to be read, at least in part, as if it were in the second place.³ But is it sufficient to reply that even though Thomas put his christology in the third place it effectively functions as if it were in the second?

Second, Chenu maintains that a fundamental shift in the method of the *Summa* occurs with the *tertia pars*. The first two parts are scientific in their method, concerned with natures and their implications. In the *tertia pars*, Thomas turns his attention to the contingent and historical matter of *sacra doctrina*, namely the Incarnation. Because of this shift, the *tertia pars* follows the first two parts, which are properly united by their scientific procedure.⁴ This division is problematic;⁵ specifically, such an understanding of the *tertia pars* posits a radical discontinuity with the first two parts, threatening the unity of the *Summa* as a whole. How can it be that this part of the *Summa*, which treats of that matter which Thomas calls the very consummation of the theological task,⁶ is of a different order from the theological task that preceded it?

Neither of Chenu's solutions is fully satisfying. In the first, Chenu seems to say that although the *tertia pars* is separate from the first two parts, it ought to be read as if it were between them. In the second, Chenu seems to say that the *tertia pars* is indeed fittingly apart from the first two since it represents a fundamental shift in method.

Sacra Doctrina

A more adequate consideration of the placement of the *tertia pars* is possible. Let us first consider briefly a particular aspect of Thomas's understanding of *sacra doctrina* as developed in the opening question of the *Summa* itself.

James Weisheipl has argued that for Thomas the task of *sacra doctrina* is not primarily the creation of new theological knowledge but rather the fuller understanding of the revealed truths of faith.⁷ That is, both premises and conclusions are often articles of faith. In arguing for the scientific nature of *sacra doctrina*, Thomas gives St. Paul as an example: because Christ has risen from the dead, so we too shall rise. As Weisheipl notes, both the premise and the conclusion are revealed articles of faith. What St. Paul does is to connect them and to connect them causally; and in so doing, Paul renders the conclusion, that we too shall rise, better known for it is now known in one of its causes, the resurrection of Christ.⁸

In part then, Thomas sees the task of *sacra doctrina* as the connecting of revealed truths. In this, it is analogous to the philosopher's finding of the middle term. Might not this notion of *sacra doctrina* color Thomas's understanding of his task in the *Summa*? Introducing students to theology, Thomas wants to show how the truths of the faith are ordered one to another. It is, of course, another instance of faith seeking understanding. Just as St. Paul had done in his consideration of the final resurrection, Thomas seeks to bring out, as is proper to any science, the causal connections between things, in this case, the articles of faith.

Unlike the natural philosopher, for example, who relies on arguments of strict logical demonstration, the theologian often appeals to arguments of fittingness. That is, given the fact of two revealed truths, it is fitting or appropriate that they be related in a particular way; the more the theologian can bring out the causal relations, the more fitting the argument. It is just such a vision that can shed light on the problem of the placing of the *tertia pars*.

The Fittingness of the Incarnation

Thomas's procedure here is quite clear if we consider the opening question of the *tertia pars* on the fittingness of the Incarnation. It is in this question that Thomas determines the Incarnation's final cause. He shows that the Incarnation is without necessity and wholly dependent upon God's goodness. The determining principle of the Incarnation is the divine intention (art. 1), and from that intention, as known through Scripture, Thomas establishes that Christ came to save man (art. 2), and

that if man had not fallen Christ would not have come (art. 3).

The second article sheds light on our problem. In it, Thomas asks whether the Incarnation was necessary for the reparation of man. This is to ask whether man could have been saved in some other way. As is the case with *sacra doctrina*, we are not in the realm of the logically demonstrable but of the fittingly demonstrable. Thomas first establishes his position in Scripture, then he explains how necessity is to be understood in this case, and finally he gives a series of illustrative instances drawn from the fathers of the fittingness of Scripture's claim.

The *sed contra* argues plainly. What frees man from perdition is necessary for his salvation; the Incarnation does this; therefore, the Incarnation is necessary for the salvation of man. That what frees man from perdition is necessary for his salvation is true by definition. That the incarnate Son frees man from perdition requires evidence, which is provided by Scripture: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that all who believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16). This passage from the Gospel of John describes a twofold end: first, that all who would believe in Christ should not perish, referring to the reparation from sin; and second, that they should have everlasting life, referring to beatitude.⁹

In the *responsio*, Thomas first explains how necessity is to be understood. Since the question is posed with regard to the means for a specific end (the Incarnation for the reparation of man), Thomas distinguishes two ways in which a means is necessary to achieve an end. In the first, something is necessary because the end cannot be had without it. The Incarnation is not necessary in this way, for God in his omnipotence could have saved man in some other manner. In the second way, something is necessary because the end is had in a better or more fitting way. Thomas gives the example of riding a horse for a journey. In this second way, the Incarnation is necessary for the reparation of mankind.

God intends to save mankind. He could have done it any number of ways. There is, however, a way that is particularly appropriate given that end. That way is the Incarnation. The remainder of the *responsio* argues for the Incarnation according to this necessity of fittingness. That man is saved through the Incarnation is a truth given in Scripture (as affirmed in the *sed contra*). The task at hand is to show the Incarnation's fittingness. Thomas enumerates ten instances of the fittingness of the Incarnation with regard to the reparation of man. Each is drawn from a father of the church. This is a notable instance of the way in which Thomas uses the fathers to make sense of Scripture. These ten instances are divided into two categories of five instances each. The first pertains to the usefulness of the Incarnation for man's advancement in the good; the second pertains to the usefulness of the Incarnation for the overcoming of evil. All ten of these arguments take their

force from the *secunda pars*. Each presumes the life of virtue and vice already established. Each is fitting because it corresponds to the nature of fallen man expressed in the *secunda pars*.

The five instances that advance man in the good pertain to faith, hope, charity, good action, and beatitude. The fifth is the goal and culmination of the first four, which are ordered to it.¹⁰

Consider the first instance which pertains to faith "which is strengthened when it believes that God himself has spoken" (III.1.2.resp.). In Christ, Truth itself, the Son of God, speaks to man. Thomas has chosen his words carefully. This conforms completely to Thomas's understanding of the theological virtue of faith developed in the *secunda pars*. The first and principle object of faith is first truth, the revealing God (cf. IIaIIae 1.1.resp.). This formal object takes precedence over the facts revealed, the material object. Thus for Thomas, Christ strengthens the Christian's faith not simply because he imparts new information about God (as a prophet might do), but because he is himself God and thereby when he speaks it is God, the primary object of faith, who speaks. Thomas builds very carefully upon what he has already established about the theological virtue of faith. The same kind of argument can be made for each of the other four instances in turn.

These first five instances pertain to the second of the two parts of the passage from the Gospel of John in the *sed contra*: that they should have eternal life. Thomas claims that Christ is not only the fitting cause of man's beatitude but the fitting cause of those positive things that assist man in gaining that beatitude (faith, hope, charity, and good action).

The five instances adduced to show the fittingness of the Incarnation with regard to the removal of evil follow a similar pattern. These pertain to the first aspect in the passage from John in the *sed contra*: that all who believe in him should not perish. The first instance is the instruction of man about his dignity with regard to the devil, lest demons present themselves to be worshiped because they lack bodies. Second, man is taught the dignity of human nature, that he not stain it with sin. The third strikes at man's presumption, because the grace of God is from Christ without any preceding merit of man. Fourth, the Incarnation stands in remedial contrast to man's pride. And fifth, the Incarnation frees man from slavery.

These ten instances cited by Thomas for the fittingness of the Incarnation appeal to the entire spiritual life of man, from the freeing of him from slavery to sin and death, through the life of virtue, to the eternal life of beatitude. All ten instances explicitly appeal to God incarnate. It is not simply that God fittingly increases faith, for example, but that he does so through the incarnate Word. Each and every one of the examples of fittingness requires the human nature of

Christ united to the divinity.

In trying to offer some kind of account for the Incarnation, Thomas appeals to its final cause: the salvation of man. Many facets of that saving work are brought to bear in understanding the Incarnation. Indeed, as the cause of causes, the final cause will shed the greatest light of intelligibility upon the mystery of the Incarnation.

Conclusion: The Placing of the Tertia Pars

To understand the need for and the appropriateness of the Incarnation requires an understanding not only of God, but also of man as an image of God (*prima pars*), of vice which distorts that image, and of the gracious life of virtue which restores and elevates it (*secunda pars*). The theological analysis of man in the *secunda pars* centers upon the revelation of man as an image of God. In the light of that image, Thomas analyzes the pathology of man's fallen nature, as well as the supernatural and gracious life of virtue. In his placement of the *tertia pars*, Thomas suggests the sublime love God has for man by the way in which the Incarnation is directed to that life of grace and the needs of the fallen creature that is his image. For Thomas, who Christ is and what he does is very much dependent upon what man is and his historical condition. In the line of argument in the *Summa*, the movement to the revelation about Christ has, as its principles, not only the revelation about God, but also the revelation about man. It is an instance of the true boldness to be found in Thomas's thought. The life of grace is not wholly dictated by the Incarnation of the Word; rather, the Incarnation of the Word is dictated by the demands of the supernatural life of fallen man. The wealth of arguments for the fittingness of the Incarnation and of the life, passion, and death of Christ ultimately rely upon man whom Christ came to save. If those arguments are to have as much force as they possibly can, then the pertinent aspects of man must already be known so that they may serve as principles in the arguments for Christ. Because he has already considered the fall, virtue, vice, and the supernatural life of grace, Thomas can and does use them to mold and guide his presentation of who Christ is and what he does.

Notes

¹ Notable efforts to consider the order of the *Summa* include, M.-D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. with authorized corrections and bibliographical additions by A.-M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago 1964), 297-318; G. Lafont, *Structures et méthode dans la Somme Théologique de Saint Thomas D'Aquin* (Paris 1961), 15-34; M. Seckler, *Das Heil in der Geschichte: Geschichtstheologisches Denken bei Thomas von Aquin* (Munich 1964), 33-47; O.H. Pesch, "Um den Plan der *Summa Theologiae* des hl. Thomas von Aquin," *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 16 (1965), 128-37; and L.E. Boyle, *The Setting of the "Summa theologiae" of Saint Thomas* (Toronto 1982).

² Chenu, (n. 1) 301-17.

³ *Ibid.*, 314-15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 315-17.

⁵ One might ask why certain topics are treated scientifically and why others historically. For example, why include the fall in the *secunda pars* (along with the consideration of the law of the Old Testament) but consider the sacraments in general in the historical *tertia pars*? As appealing as Chenu's position is in theory, Thomas neglects it in practice.

⁶ Prologue to the *tertia pars*.

⁷ J.A. Weisheipl, "The Meaning of *Sacra Doctrina* in *Summa Theologiae* I, q.1," *The Thomist* 38 (1974), 49-80.

⁸ The very first argument of the *Summa* is of this same kind. Thomas argues for the need for revelation from the supernatural end of man.

⁹ John 3:14 with the same twofold end appears in the article on the necessity of the passion, *Summa theologiae* III.46.1.sc and resp.

¹⁰ This hierarchy among the five instances of the promotion of man in the good is brought out in R. Cessario, *The Godly Image: Christ and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas* (Petersham, MA 1990), 126-29.