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AQUINAS ON HOLY SCRIPTURE AS THE MEDIUM OF DIVINE REVELATION

I. As it is argued in other papers of this symposium, St. Thomas holds that revelation is primarily **something** taking place in the **human** intellect and not a visible historical event or an ontological structure such as the person of Jesus Christ. According to St. Thomas it **consists formally** in the **illumination** of the mind by **God** ⁽¹⁾. The events as such, recorded in the Bible, and in particular in the gospels, are not yet revelation in the strict sense of the term: the *insight* into their significance, given by God to the **apostles** and **evangelists**, constitutes revelation. In fact, revelation is the impression of **God's** knowledge on the mind of the **apostle** or prophet. This **communication** as such **takes** place in a passing way, although the knowledge communicated remains present in the apostles and in the **Church**.

Revelation concerns God as **he** is in **himself** and his plan with man and the **world**, inasmuch as the latter is related to **man's** **salvation** ⁽²⁾. For this reason revelation is not restricted to supernatural **truth** which as such is **totally** hidden from man's natural reason. Sometimes it **communicates** natural truths of which the knowledge is necessary or useful for us in order to reach our supernatural destination. These truths can be **discovered** by reason although only few people effectively come to **know** them with certitude and without error. All revealed truths have in common that their knowledge is useful for man's eternal **salvation** ⁽³⁾. St. Thomas repeatedly **points** out that revelation is necessary for man's fulfilment man has a certain capacity for the vision of God; his most

⁽¹⁾ II-II 176, 2: « ... consistit in ipsa **illuminatione** mentis ». Cf. *Summa contra gentiles* III 154: « Revelatio fit quodam **interiori** et **intelligibili** lumine mentem elevante ad percipiendum ea quae per lumen naturale intellectus pertingere non **potest** ».

⁽²⁾ II-II 171, 3.

⁽³⁾ *De veritate* 12, 2: « ... omnia illa quorum **cognitio** potest esse **utilis** ad salutem ».

profound desire is to see God. However, the beatific vision which is man's last end, exceeds whatever man can conceive. To know his true vocation and final destination as well as the road leading to it and the means allowing him to reach it, man needs divine revelation⁽⁴⁾.

The beatific vision, man's beatitude, can be implemented only by the fullness of revelation, for God must « reveal » his innermost being to man, so that the divine essence is the intelligible species in which and through which the blessed see God, being at the same time that which they know⁽⁵⁾. Since whatever is less perfect in a genus depends on the first in this genus, imperfect revelation must receive its specification from the *visio beata*: since this is the ultimate gift by which God surrenders himself to man, any supernatural revelation is always an encounter between God and the prophet who receives it.

Speaking now not of this ultimate revelation, but of revelation given to man on earth, the Christian faith affirms that this revelation has been granted to a limited number of people who must transmit it to others⁽⁶⁾. Aquinas calls them prophets and apostles. Many of them wrote down what God revealed to them. Hence the question arises of the relationship between revelation and Holy Scripture.

We commonly speak of a divine inspiration of the authors of the sacred text of the Bible which is also called « the inspired book ». According to St. Thomas the term « inspiration » signifies a certain movement given to man from the outside⁽⁷⁾. When applied to the authors of Holy Scripture the term *inspiratio* means that God makes the sacred author write down what he wants him to write lifting up his mind, so that the author will better be able to understand, and moving his will. However, whenever the message conveyed has a meaning related to salvation which the recipient of inspiration does not or cannot know by his natural powers, the understanding itself of what he writes is given to the author by revelation. For instance, when St. Paul writes about the implications of Jesus' death and resurrection or about marriage as a sacrament, he communicates revealed knowledge. But in those passages in

(4) I 1, 1: « *Finem autem oportet esse praecognitum hominibus qui suas intentiones et actiones debent ordinare in finem. Unde necessarium fuit homini ad salutem quod ei nota fierent quaedam per revelationem divinam quae rationem humanam excedunt* ».

(5) II-II 171, 4 ad 2: « *Perfectio autem divinae revelationis erit in patria* ».

(6) See *Dei verbum*. Cf. *Expos. in 1 Cor.*, c. 14, 1.1: « *ad hoc enim Deus revelat ut aliis denuntientur* ».

(7) I-II 68, 1: « *Inspiratio significat quandam motionem ab exteriori. Est enim considerandum quod in homine est duplex principium movens. Unum quidem interius quod est ratio; aliud autem exterius quod est Deus* ».

which an inspired author only presents historical events, he came to know by natural means, without dwelling on their theological meaning, inspiration is not accompanied by a special revelation ⁽⁸⁾.

In their edition of the French translation of the treatise on prophecy Synave and Benoit write that for St. Thomas « inspiration » precedes revelation; it lifts up the mind above its ordinary level and increases its intellectual vigour. Revelation follows and works in the judgment which the mind forms when it has been elevated in this way. In current theological writing this distinction is not always made; the term inspiration is used to cover the entire process of divine causality on the mind of the sacred author.

II. According to St. Thomas revelation is a communication of knowledge and so he writes that it is given « per modum cuiusdam doctrinae » ⁽⁹⁾. In recent theological literature it is often argued that revelation is not so much the communication of a message as events in the history of salvation by means of which God reveals himself, Jesus Christ being the supreme revelation. As a matter of fact, in the Constitution *Dei Verbum* Vatican II declares that God has revealed himself by events. In his intellectualism Aquinas would have stressed unilaterally the cognitive aspect of revelation. In reply to this widespread criticism we answer

(a) Revelation is obviously about God himself, his plan of salvation and the means he chooses to bring man to eternal life. The entire object of the faith comes in under revelation. If one uses the term « revelation » in a broad and not very precise sense, one may say that, for instance, Jesus himself and the events of his life are God's revelation to man. — Vatican II intended to be a pastoral council and the terminology it uses is not necessarily that of scientific theology. If Jesus Christ himself is formally God's revelation to man, how can *Dei Verbum* say that the revelation is closed with the end of the apostolic period, since Christ lives now and for ever?

(b) Those who say that, formally speaking, revelation consists in both words (knowledge imparted) and events face the not so very easy task of explaining what the essence of revelation is, since they make the term signify essentially heterogeneous things. But there is perhaps more behind this « modern view » than appears at first sight. Those

⁽⁸⁾ II-II 171, 1 ad 4: « Ad prophetiam requiritur inspiratio quantum ad mentis elevationem, revelatio autem quantum ad ipsam perceptionem divinorum, in qua perficitur prophetia; per ipsam removetur obscuritas et ignorantiae velamen ».

⁽⁹⁾ II-II 171, 6.

who defend this view probably believe as most contemporary philosophers (and all those who follow Suarez) do, that there is a chasm between man's knowledge and reality: in their view man does not grasp and know things directly in themselves, but he only knows his own concepts. These concepts « represent », more or less adequately, partly or hardly at all, the things which remain outside man. When a theologian subscribes to this kind of epistemology (perhaps often even without realizing how partial this opinion is), he is bound to introduce a certain duality into the concept of revelation to avoid depriving it from its character of a personal encounter with God. However, the epistemology of Aquinas is very different: in the intelligible species the things themselves, in their intelligibility, come the intellect to be present there in man's being. The knowing subject becomes the thing known, so that both are one, as Aristotle and a venerable philosophical tradition teach. In this way, supernaturally revealed knowledge is itself the presence (although mostly only partially so and under the veil of theological analogy) of the realities of salvation. For this reason revelation defined as St. Thomas does, is necessarily an encounter with and self-communication of God.

We need not dwell on the philosophical implications of a rejection of this Aristotelian epistemology. So much is evident that its refusal opens the door to a pervasive subjectivism and destroys the metaphysics of being. Theologically this realism is confirmed by what the faith and theology teach about the perfection of man's knowledge in the beatific vision: God's essence is both the species through which the blessed know God and God's reality itself present in them in an all surpassing union.

(c) St. Thomas' definition of revelation is in perfect agreement with the preponderant use of the term in Sacred Scripture. In fact, as in other fields of theology, here too Aquinas's account is based on a most careful analysis of Holy Scripture which speaks of the communication to man of a special message. One may think of the *Letters to the Romans*, the *Hebrews* or the *Galatians*. In *Gal.* 1, 3 Paul writes that he learned the message (he preached) through a revelation of Jesus Christ. In *Gal.* 1, 5 he says « God chose to reveal his Son in Paul ».

The favourite term by means of which the Bible describes this message is « word ». When a man speaks, he manifests his thoughts by means of words⁽¹⁰⁾. Likewise God manifests his being and his holy

⁽¹⁰⁾ I 107, 1: « Nihil aliud est loqui ad alterum quam conceptum mentis alteri manifestare ».

will be means of an instrument, viz. the representations in the mind of the prophet he «requisitions» (or infuses) to be used in the super-analogy of the faith and, secondly and principally, the insights he places in the intellect of the prophet⁽¹¹⁾. One should notice the juxtaposition of «representations» and «insights» in Aquinas' explanation of prophetic knowledge: in fact, while revelation conveys knowledge about God's hidden plan of salvation it does neither always nor predominantly use representations and concepts the prophet did not yet know (although it can do so). But it is always a spiritual process in which, owing to a special prophetic illumination, the prophet perceives a supernatural sense in certain representations of things, events (and persons) or in certain sayings⁽¹²⁾. The events are either those of the past or of his own time of or the future which he sees before him. In the case of the apostles and evangelists this illumination concerned the meaning of the Old Testament as well as Jesus, his teachings, his life, death and resurrection.

The apostolic preaching of the mystery of salvation was full of life and vigour because it was sustained by this most profound personal experience of divine revelation. It would be a mistake, however, to think that this kerygma was alive because it was not yet formalised in propositions and that, on the other hand, the message became petrified when it was fixed in dogmatic formulae. The kerygma of the apostles and their helpers was not a sort of spontaneous talking about the events of Jesus' life and death. It was an authentic announcing of his message destined to all, which from the very beginning made use of specially coined formulae, the so-called pre-symbola⁽¹³⁾.

This message was «the truth» (1 *Tim.* 6, 5; 2 *Tim.* 2, 18; 3, 8; 4, 4; *Tit.* 1, 14). Jesus called the word of his Father and Himself Truth (*John* 17, 17; 14, 6). In doing so he indicated that revelation must be understood intellectually. Moreover, in the New Testament the kerygma is also described as a doctrine (*Matthew* 7, 28; *Marc* 6, 2; *John* 6, 16; *Acts* 2, 42). In the *Pastoral Letters* the term doctrine occurs fifteen times. The Apostles and their helpers were apparently aware of the fact that the terms «to teach» and «teaching» or «doctrine» (*didáskein* and *didaskalia*) expressed very well two aspects which they felt to be essential for the kerygma: its intellectual con-

(11) II-II 173, 3.

(12) For example, after the resurrection of Jesus the apostles «understood» the meaning of much of what he had told them.

(13) See H. SCHLIER, «Zur Grundlegung des Dogmas im Neuen Testament», in *Die Zeit der Kirche. Exegetische Aufsätze und Vorträge*, vol. 3, Freiburg 1962, 206-232, p. 214.

tent and its authoritative transmission⁽¹⁴⁾. St. Thomas summarises these facts by means of his concise expression that «revelation has been given by the way of a certain doctrine»⁽¹⁵⁾.

Christ, he writes, is the first and principal teacher of the faith⁽¹⁶⁾. Christ taught his disciples who instructed others by oral and written teaching⁽¹⁷⁾. The message of Christ is also destined to future generations, and for this reason it was committed to writing so that it would be preserved in its pure form. The writings of the apostles, that is the canonical Scriptures, contain the doctrine of salvation as they taught it and as it must be handed down to posterity. The purpose of the written word is to impress the doctrine in the hearts of people⁽¹⁸⁾, for the contents of Holy Scripture are no other than the doctrine of salvation. Now this doctrine consists mainly of supernatural knowledge but it concerns also certain natural truths presupposed by the faith, such as the existence of God, man's spiritual nature, the basic precepts of natural law, etc.

Holy Scripture contains the substance of divine revelation which is its source⁽¹⁹⁾. In this way Scripture may be called the vessel and expression of divine revelation. For this reason St. Thomas speaks of the authority of Sacred Scripture which is the foundation of the faith⁽²⁰⁾. «The formal object of the faith is the Primary Truth insofar as it is manifested in Holy Scripture»⁽²¹⁾. Therefore Scripture is the *regula fidei*, the rule of the faith, to which nothing may be added or from which nothing can be subtracted⁽²²⁾.

Sacred Scripture, containing as it does the doctrine of Christ and the Apostles, transmits the truth which man needs to know in order to be saved⁽²³⁾. Therefore, one finds in it «practically the entire doctrine of theology»⁽²⁴⁾. This sentence must be understood in the strict sense of the terms: theology is a science which must reach certain conclusions; to this effect it must start from absolutely certain foundations. Tradi-

(14) See K.H. RENGSTORF in Kittel's *ThWNT* II 148.

(15) II-II 171, 6: «...per modum cuiusdam doctrinae».

(16) III 7, 7.

(17) III 42, 4: «...verbo et scripto docuerunt».

(18) III 12, 4: «Scripta ordinantur ad impressionem doctrinae in cordibus auditorum sicut ad finem».

(19) I 1, 2 ad 2: «revelatio super quam fundatur sacra scriptura».

(20) III 55, 5: «...auctoritas Sacrae Scripturae quae est fidei fundamentum».

(21) II-II 5, 3.

(22) In *De div. nominibus*, 2, 1.1. Vgl. *Expos. in Evang. Ioann.* c. 21, 1.6: «Sacra Scriptura est regula fidei cui nec addere nec subtrahere licet».

(23) *Quodl.* VII, q. 6, a. 1.

(24) *Super epist. sancti Pauli*, Prol.

don does not always present such an absolutely certain basis as Holy Scripture does. Theologians need established texts to analyse and to argue from. The assertion of St. Thomas must not be taken to mean that the Bible alone is sufficient for the faith of the Church and for Christian life. The object of the faith encompasses more than that which is expressed in the Bible. Certain doctrines were not put down in writing by the Apostles but transmitted orally under the motion of the Holy Spirit. Aquinas quotes as examples the rule that Christians may adore an Image of Christ⁽²⁵⁾; the form of the sacrament of confirmation⁽²⁶⁾. Apparently the Church holds many things with regard to the sacraments which it received from the tradition of the apostles. The faith in the assumption of Mary has also been transmitted by oral tradition⁽²⁷⁾. In his excellent study on *Sacra doctrina. Reason and Revelation in Aquinas* E. Persson mentions another text illustrating the role of traditions⁽²⁸⁾: according to St. Thomas we know from the tradition of the Church that all mankind is infected by sin⁽²⁹⁾. Aquinas apparently intends to say that the Church teaches in a more determinate form what is indicated in *Genesis*, c. 3 and by St. Paul in his *Letter to the Romans*.

This takes us to another point. When St. Thomas says that Sacred Scripture is the principal foundation of the faith, this must not be understood in the sense of Scripture taken in isolation, — in the manner of Luther's *sola scriptura* —; for he considers always the Bible as it is known, used and interpreted by the Church. In this regard Aquinas followed the age-long tradition of the Fathers and the great theologians. As they say, the Bread of life, given to us in the *sacra pagina* must be ground by the teeth of tradition. St. Augustine writes, that Sacred Scripture is to be read *in fide catholica*⁽³⁰⁾. Without the Church and her magistry there is no correct interpretation of the Bible⁽³¹⁾.

In order to make the essentials of the gospel message more readily available and easily accessible to man, the apostles or their succes-

(25) III 25, 3 ad 4.

(26) III 64, 2 ad 1: « Et licet non sint omnia tradita in Scripturis, habet tamen ea Ecclesia ex familiaris apostolorum traditione... ».

(27) III 27, 1. See the excellent study of G. GEENEN, « The Place of Tradition in the Theology of St. Thomas », in *The Thomist* 15 (1952) 110-135.

(28) English translation, Oxford 1970.

(29) SCG IV 54: « Ex traditione Ecclesiae docemur totum humanum genus peccato esse infectum ».

(30) *De Gen. ad litt.* XII, c. 37, n. 70.

(31) See H. DE LUBAC, *Exegese médiévale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, I 1, Paris 1959, 56 ff.

sors composed the *Apostl's Creed* and the other early symbols such as the *Nicene Creed* ⁽³²⁾. These creeds do not add anything to Holy Scripture, but state and make explicit what is contained in it ⁽³³⁾. Because of this identity in content St. Thomas affirms that the teaching and interpretation of divine revelation by tradition and the magistracy of the Church is also the rule of the faith, for this rule is one with its foundational source, the written Word of God ⁽³⁴⁾. The doctrine of the Church proceeds from the First Truth as manifested in Sacred Scripture. In this way one may even say that the sense of revelation is shown in the doctrine of the Church or, even shorter, the sense of Sacred Scripture is the doctrine of the Church ⁽³⁵⁾. As E. Persson writes, « the teaching of the church is to be understood essentially as the *interpretation of scripture* » ⁽³⁶⁾.

III. This conclusion confronts us with the question of what is precisely revealed in Holy Scripture. The Bible is a collection of books and texts, in different literary genera, written under divine inspiration. As we have seen, Aquinas makes his own the firm conviction of all the Fathers that Sacred Scripture is the *mistrett* of our faith and the *food* of our supernatural life. As St. Gregory the Great writes, it is the *bread* which in the last period of time all men will eat in the house of Job ⁽³⁷⁾. The sacred text has such a depth of sense that it provides material for never ending meditation. The Bible is full of divine wisdom. St. Jerome speaks of an *infinita sensuum silva* ⁽³⁸⁾ and St. Gregory say that we labour its incredible depth as if we were on the high seas ⁽³⁹⁾. According to St. Augustine the Sacred Book does sometimes show a certain obscurity in order that Christians may discover several ways of understanding and so find themselves enriched ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

⁽³²⁾ II-II 1, 9: « ...necessarium fuit veritatem fidei in unum colligi ut facilius posset omnibus proponi ».

⁽³³⁾ II-II 1, 9 ad 2: « ... quae in nullo alio differunt nisi quod in uno plenius explicantur quae in alio continentur implicate secundum quod exigerat haereticorum instantia ».

⁽³⁴⁾ II-II 5, 3: « Manifestum est quod ille qui inhaeret doctrinae Ecclesiae, tamquam infallibili regulae, omnibus assentit quae Ecclesia docet ».

⁽³⁵⁾ II-II 5, 3 ad 2: « Omnibus articulis fidei inhaeret fides propter unum medium, scilicet propter veritatem primam propositam nobis in Scripturis secundum doctrinam Ecclesiae intelligentis sane ».

⁽³⁶⁾ O.c., p. 70.

F) *Moralia* 35, c. 14, n. 26.

⁽³⁸⁾ *Episf.* 64, c. 21.

⁽³⁹⁾ *In I Reg.*, proem.: PL 79, 19AC.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ *In Ps.* 126, n. 11.

More recently John Henry Newman also drew attention to the inexhaustible treasures of the Bible «It is in point to notice also the structure and style of Scripture, a structure so unsystematic and various and a style so figurative and indirect, that no one would presume at first sight to say what is in it and what is not. It cannot, as it were, be mapped, or its contents catalogued; but after all our diligence, to the end of our lives and to the end of the Church, it must be an unexplored and unsubdued land, with heights and valleys, forests and streams, on the right and left of our path and close about it, full of concealed wonders and choice treasures. Of no doctrine whatever, which does not actually contradict what has been delivered, can it be peremptorily asserted that it is not in Scripture; of no reader, whatever be his study of it, can it be said that he has mastered every doctrine which it contains » (41).

IV. At this juncture we must discuss the theory of the manifold senses of Holy Scripture in relation to divine revelation. St. Paul established the principle of the distinction between the spiritual and the literal sense: the allegorical meaning of the entire Old Testament, he writes, is Christ. Ever since St. Paul's time the Christian doctors have been searching for the spiritual meaning of the various texts of the Old Testament. Hieronymus notes «Spiritualiter intelligere debemus. Post historiae veritatem, spiritualiter accipienda sunt omnia» (42). According to St. Augustine, «Vetus Testamentum in Novo revelatum, in Vetere Novum velatum vide» (43). The Bible is essentially the *mysteriorum scriptura* (44). St. Augustine even goes so far as to say that the spiritual understanding of Holy Scripture is Christian freedom. According St. Gregory, whatever is in Holy Scripture must be understood allegorically and in a moral sense (45). Of Job he says: «Dum sua dicit, nostra praedicat» (46). As C.H. Dodd writes: «For the Christian theologians, the fuller revelation of God is also the revelation of his intentions with us » (47). In view of this position of the great doctors it is not surprising that medieval exegetes were eager to discover the spiritual sense of a great number of passages, not only of the Old Testament, but also of events recounted in the Gospels. They felt that the literal sense of the text was not the whole reason why the Bible had been given to them (48). God makes himself known through Scripture. Thus St. Augustine in-

(41) *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Part I, c. 1, 1, § 14.

(42) *In Isaiam Prophetam*, prol.: PL 24, 20B.

(43) *In Ps.* 105, n. 36.

(44) *Contra Julianum*, VI, 7, n. 20.

(45) *In Ezech.* II 2, 15.

(46) *Moralia* 20, 1: PL 76, 135D.

(47) *The Bible Today*, 161.

(48) DE LUBAC, *o.c.*, I 484.

vites us « Factum audivimus, mysterium requiramus »⁽⁴⁹⁾. In this regard there is a marked contrast with the attitude of most contemporary exegetes who, as L. Cerfaux writes, assume that only a small number of texts have such a spiritual sense⁽⁵⁰⁾.

Already at an early date this spiritual sense was subdivided. Besides the allegorical and moral sense the Sacred Text was also felt to have an anagogical sense: the events of the Jerusalem on earth foreshadow and point to the reality of the heavenly Jerusalem, the fulfilment of Christian hope. In this way a distinction was made between the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses. As St. Thomas did with regard to numerous other questions, he provided a theological explanation of these different spiritual meanings. About 1265 a disciple of Aquinas, Augustine of Dacia, published an essay, the *Rotulus pugilaris*, in which he expressed the doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture as taught by his master: *Littera gesta docet; quid credas allegoria; moralis quid agas; quo tendas anagogica*.

However, as we have indicated, this theory of the four senses is not a typically Thomistic doctrine. It has been read in St. Augustine, but in its developed form it is probably somewhat later.

In three places of his works Aquinas gives an explanation of this derivation. The texts are almost identical. The following is a summary of *Quodl. VII*, q. 6, articles 1 and 3 and a translation of the main part of the second article⁽⁵¹⁾.

In his study of the question of the different senses of Sacred Scripture St. Thomas proceeds methodically. He first establishes that there are other senses besides the literal sense. Some formidable objections seem to exclude any sense other than the literal one: a text should not be ambiguous; if it has more than one meaning, it will no longer be clear and may lead to error; moreover, the non-literal sense is useless in theological arguments; the author of the text had in mind only one sense. — Over and against these objections Aquinas quotes a text from *Daniel* and this observation of Hieronymus: « In verbis singulis multiplices latent intelligentiae ». The argument in favour of the existence of a spiritual sense of the sacred text is brief: Scripture must manifest that truth to us which is necessary for our salvation. The truth about

(49) In *Ioan. Evang.*, tr. 50, n. 6.

(50) « Simples réflexions a propos de l'exégèse apostolique », *ETL* 25 (1949) 575.

(51) As P. SYNAVE suggests (« La doctrine de saint Thomas d'Aquin sur le sens littéral des Ecritures », in *Revue Biblique* 35 (1926) 40-65, p. 52) Aquinas may have chosen the subject of the senses of Holy Scripture for his inaugural disputation as a master in theology (1256). At this occasion his public lecture was the famous « *Rigans montes* ».

something can be shown by words or by things, inasmuch as words signify things and one thing can signify another. The creator of the world may not only adapt words to signify something but he can also make one thing a symbol of another. The spiritual sense of Sacred Scripture consists in this second adaptation.

Answering the objections Aquinas notes that the spiritual sense is always based on the literal sense, so that there is no multiplicity. — It is true that it may be difficult to discover the spiritual sense, but this is done on purpose by God to stimulate research and to protect Scripture from being ridiculed by its enemies. — The answer to the third objection is very important: the spiritual sense of certain passages of Holy Scripture is always indicated clearly elsewhere in the sacred text, so that there is not need to fall into error. — The reason why one cannot use the spiritual sense in a stringent theological argument, is not because it would be defective, but because the thing (e.g. a lion) which in a certain passage has a spiritual meaning, may signify more than one other thing (e.g. Christ, but also the devil). Hence it is not sufficiently determined to one meaning so as to be used in an argument. — The main author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit who understood in one word of the sacred text far more things than those which are set forth or understood by the commentators. The human author of Scripture, who is an instrumental cause can also intend to express more things in one word: the prophets, when describing events of their own time, wanted to indicate what was going to happen in the future.

The second article raises the question of whether we must distinguish between four senses of Holy Scripture. A first objection against any such distinction argues that figurative speech is frequently found in Scripture, but these metaphors belong to the literal sense. — More objections follow: The allegorical sense seems to apply to Christ while the moral sense applies to the Christians. But the Church of the Head and of its members is the same. — The moral sense concerns the moral life of man. But the literal sense of numerous texts of the Bible consists in moral teachings, so that recourse to an extra spiritual sense of other texts, which would concern man's moral life, is superfluous. — The same Christ is the head of the *ecclesia militans* as well as of the Triumphant Church. For this reason the anagogical meaning (which refers to the Triumphant Church) must not be other than the allegorical sense. — If these four senses necessarily constitute the nature of the sacred text, any passage of the Bible must have these senses. But such is not the case. So far the objections.

Basing himself on texts of St. Augustine and Bede to the contrary St. Thomas argues as follows « One has to say that the distinction be-

tween these four senses must be understood in this way. For, as has been said, Sacred Scripture manifests the truth which it sets forth, in a twofold way: by words and by the symbolism of things. Now expressing the truth by means of words constitutes the historical or literal sense. Hence all that which one may get from the very meaning of the words, belongs to the literal sense. But as has been said, the spiritual sense means or consists in this that certain things are expressed by the symbolism of other things, for visible things usually are symbols of invisible realities, as Dionysius says. For this reason this sense, which is derived from symbols, is called the spiritual meaning.

The truth which Sacred Scripture expresses by means of symbols, is directed to serve two things, viz. to have the right faith and to act rightly. If it is directed to our acting rightly, we speak of the moral sense, which is called tropological sense with another name. If it is directed to give us the right faith, we must make a distinction according to the order of the things we must accept by faith. For as Dionysius says in his *De caelesti hierarchia*, c. 4, the state of the Church is between that of the Synagogue and the state of the Triumphant Church. Therefore the Old Testament is the « symbol » of the New and the Old and New Testament are the « symbol » of heavenly things. The spiritual sense as it is destined to make us have the right faith, can be based on that way of symbolic expression, by which the Old Testament foreshadows the New. Thus we have the allegorical or typical sense, inasmuch as those things which happened in the Old Testament, are explained as referring to Christ and the Church; or it may be based on that way of symbolic expression according to which both the New and the Old Testament signify the Triumphant Church. This yields the anagogical sense ».

In his answer to the objections Aquinas notes that terms such as « he-goat » when used by Scripture to designate other persons than Christ, do not signify things but similarities imagined by man; their meaning belongs to the historical sense. When applied to Christ, they are used in a spiritual sense. This is the case when such a term is used to denote an event which really happened (the expiatory goat foreshadowed Christ). But when a metaphor is used to signify Christ (such as the expression « a stone that broke away from the mountain » (*Daniel* 2, 34), its meaning belongs to the literal sense. — The allegorical meaning does not only concern Christ as the Head of the Church but also Christ as related to his members. But the moral sense concerns the members with regard to their own actions and not inasmuch as they are considered as members. — By « moral sense » we do not denote

the meaning of any text teaching us how to conduct our moral life but the sense of a text which conveys such instruction by means of the symbolism of certain things that are described by it. — The anagogical sense belongs to Christ insofar as he is the head of the triumphant Church. — In his answer to the fifth objection St. Thomas says that these four senses are not to be attributed to each passage of Scripture: in some there are four, in others three, two or even sometimes only one sense. In Sacred Scripture earlier events foreshadow what happens later and for this reason in Scripture something that is said in the literal sense of something earlier, can be understood in a spiritual sense of later things, but the opposite is not true. Among all that is said in Sacred Scripture, there are in the first place things which belong to the Old Testament. Therefore, those texts which in their literal sense refer to events of the Old Testament, may be explained according to four senses. In the second place come things which pertain to the present state of the Church, in which those things which apply to its Head are prior than those which pertain to its members. The true body of Christ and that which happened to it are symbols of the Mystical Body of Christ... Hence what is said literally of Christ, our head, may be explained both allegorically (referring to his Mystical Body), morally (referring to our actions which must conform to the example of Christ) and anagogically insofar as Christ has been shown to be our way to glory in heaven. When something is said literally of the Church, it cannot be explained allegorically, unless perhaps things said of the primitive Church, which are taken to indicate the future state of the Church on earth. But it can be explained in a moral and anagogical sense. Those things which according to their literal sense concern morals, are not explained in another way, except allegorically. Those things which in their literal meaning pertain to the state of heavenly glory, are not explained in any other sense, because they are not symbols of other things, but are symbolised by all other things.

In the third article Aquinas examines whether such a plurality of senses may also be found in profane texts. The spiritual sense of Scripture is based on the fact that things occurring at a certain time in history also signify something else. However, only God, the author of the world, can direct things in the course of their existence in such a way that such a spiritual sense may be seen in them. Because man cannot do so, this spiritual sense is found nowhere else outside Scripture. — This concluding article is of importance because Aquinas underlines the unique character of the spiritual sense of Holy Scripture, connecting it with divine providence which uses things in their historical context to

convey such further meaning to man⁽⁵²⁾. Not individual things (e.g., a rock or a Kon) as such carry this spiritual meaning but things in a certain context. In other words, the history of the world, the chosen people and the Church, as it is described in the Bible, becomes charged with a new and marvellous light, relative to Christ, to our own Christian life, here on earth and in heaven. In this way we discover the togetherness of all things in the all-surpassing wisdom and unity of God's plan of salvation and we bow our heads before the riches of Holy Scripture which surpasses our understanding.

As C. Spicq writes this doctrine of St. Thomas on the four senses of Scripture is not new. However, the way in which he formulated it, is so clear and precise that it has become the definite view of catholic theology⁽⁵³⁾. The literal sense of the text is that which the (human) author intends to express through what he writes. For this reason metaphors come in under this literal sense, because the author wants to express something definite by means of this figurative speech. In his *Expositio in librum Job*⁽⁵⁴⁾ Aquinas explains that « those things which with the help of sensible symbols are meant to signify spiritual realities, do not belong to the mystical sense, but to the literal sense, because the literal sense is that which is intended in the first place by the words, regardless of whether these are used in their proper sense or in a figurative way ».

V. It is often argued that St. Thomas only cared for the literal sense, but this view is not correct. It is true that the theologians of the thirteenth century in their study of Sacred Scripture were very attentive to the *littera*. Their purpose was to discover definite doctrine which they could insert into their treatises, whereas the spiritual sense could not be used in arguments⁽⁵⁵⁾. This was not different for St. Thomas. Thus we see that in his *Summa theologiae* he resorts to the spiritual sense of Scripture only where this is borne out by Scripture itself as, for instance, when Paul interprets the history of the Jewish people. The best known instance of this exegesis is found in the *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 102, where Aquinas presents a masterful study of the meaning of ceremonial law in the Old Testament: the various usages and practices employed by Israël foreshadow the perfect cult of God by Christ and

(52) St. Thomas uses the expressions « res cursum suum peragentes » and « sic autem ordinantur res in cursu suo ».

(53) *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latin au moyen âge*, Paris 1944, p. 273.

(54) Leonine XXVI, p. 7 229 ff. See also I-II 102, 2 ad 1: « Intellectus metaphoricae locutionis in Scriptura est litteralis quia verba ad hoc proferuntur ut hoc significant ».

(55) Cf. SPICQ, *o.c.*, p. 194.

also the celestial liturgy of the blessed: the *res* of the Old Dispensation are symbols of the *res* of the New Alliance⁽⁵⁶⁾.

But in his biblical commentaries Aquinas dwells frequently on the spiritual sense⁽⁵⁷⁾. Some passages of his *Exposition of the Gospel according to St. John* may serve as an example. *John* 21 describes the manifestation of the risen Lord to his disciples on the shores of the lake of Genēsareth. Without any hesitation St. Thomas resorts to the spiritual sense of the text: Jesus is frying some fishes on a coal fire at the moment the disciples are approaching. This means that Christ is preparing something for a spiritual meal. The «*piscis assus est Christus passus quando ex incendio caritatis ad nos immolatur in cruce*». The divinity of Christ is hidden as fishes are hidden under the surface of the water. Christ is the true bread insofar as he nourishes us by his doctrine and his body. In the next paragraph of this lesson St. Thomas notes that the ministers of the Church must also contribute to this meal. When Jesus tells the apostles to capture some fish it is as if he saying (quasi dicens): I have given you the gift of love, roasted my body on the cross and given you the bread of doctrine. Now it is your task to catch others. — But St. Thomas does not restrict himself to these explanations: if we understand the *passus* in a moral sense, the meaning is that Christ prepares the glowing coals of charity to set our souls ablaze. Peter draws the net on land because the Church has been entrusted to him in a special way; he pulls the fish ashore because in this way he shows the faithful the permanency of their eternal home. The miraculous catch contains only good fish, that is those who are destined for eternal life. There were 153 fishes in the net. This number, Thomas writes, has a mystical meaning. Man only gets to heaven when he observes the Decalogue and is helped by the sevenfold grace of the Holy Spirit⁽⁵⁸⁾.

If one would consider this sort of exegesis exceptional for Aquinas and attribute it to the fact that the later part of this *Expositio* (as from cc. 6) is a *reportatio* by Raynaldus of Piperno (revised, however, by Thomas himself), the answer is that the earlier chapters of the commentary proceed in the same way. There is, for instance, the wedding at Cana: Thomas first discusses the date of the wedding («*quantum ad*

(56) One may consult the explanations by J. TONNEAU in his edition of *La lot ancienne*, II (I-II 101-105), Paris 1971, 347 ff.

(57) His *Expositio in librum Job* is an exception: St. Gregory the Great had given a very thorough commentary of the spiritual meaning of the text and St. Thomas himself wanted to discuss the (philosophical) problems involved in this book: divine Providence and the occurrence of evil.

(58) *Expos. super evang. Ioannis*, c. 21, *lectio* 2, n. 2299 ff.

litteram pertinet ») to present next a mystical interpretation: the wedding signifies the union of Christ with the Church and his union with human nature which took place in the womb of Mary. The wedding at Cana happened on the third day, that is the time of grace follows on that of natural law and the time of the written law. The presence of Mary at the wedding signifies that our union with Christ comes about through her. With regard to the words « they have no wine », Aquinas says that before the incarnation wine was lacking in a threefold way, viz. that of justice, wisdom and charity. The six stone water jars signify the six periods into which the Old Testament is divided. Christ changed the water into wine the new doctrine he brings is a continuation of the Old Testament.

In his dedicatory letter to Urbanus IV which accompanied the first part of the *Catena aurea* Aquinas explains why in this commentary he does mention the spiritual sense of the different texts. This sort of exegesis is necessary, he writes, because the gospel contains the form of catholic faith and gives the rule of our entire Christian life. The exegesis of the spiritual sense apparently provides the indications how Christians must conduct their lives according to the virtues; it nourishes their prayer and loving contemplation.

A remarkable characteristic of this exegesis, of which we have given some examples, is that St. Thomas always corroborates the mystical sense of a passage with the help of quotes from elsewhere in Holy Scripture. This way of proceeding not only provides a basis to the spiritual sense, it brings out also the unity of the Bible and stresses that in order to grasp the full meaning of one text, we must read it against the background of Scripture in its entirety. However, the spiritual explanation of a text is not a free creation of the reader: it must stay as close as possible to its literal meaning and be conform to the teachings of the Bible (⁵⁹).

VI. Determining the literal sense of a text can be difficult. As an example may serve a passus discussed in the *De malo* 3, 14: the question is what is meant by sins against the Holy Spirit which cannot be forgiven (Mat 12, 31). St. Thomas quotes the views of the Fathers prior to St. Augustine, Augustine's own solution and finally a somewhat corrected version of it. He states next the principle of interpretation: not everything formulated indefinitely in Scripture must be understood in a general sense. With regard to the expression « sin against the Holy Spirit » we must understand that the term is used in a very special

(59) *Expos. in epist. beati Pauli ad Rom.*, c. 3, lectio 2,

sense, viz. It applies to sins committed out of wickedness (« *ex malitia* »).

To determine the literal sense of a text the commentator must discover the « intention » of the author, that is, find out what the author had in mind and wanted to express in the text⁽⁶⁰⁾.

One might think that in order to determine the literal sense of a text the theologian needs the help of scientific exegesis. However, this exegesis is at best only a preliminary step, for the true literal sense can only be seen in the light of the faith. As St. Thomas writes « *lumen fidei facit videre ea quae creduntur* »⁽⁶¹⁾. The true sense of the text cannot be found when one is outside the Church⁽⁶²⁾. We may illustrate this with Aquinas's exegesis of such texts as *Proverbs* 8, 24 (« The deep was not before I was born; before the mountains were settled, before the hills I came to birth ») and *Ecclesiasticus* 24, 3 (« I came forth from the mouth of the most High »). According to St. Thomas these sentences « sufficiently show » that the Word is engendered by the Father before all corporeal things; by « wisdom » from the mouth of the most High may be understood the Word of God⁽⁶³⁾.

VII. God being the main author of Holy Scripture it follows that whatever is contained in it is true⁽⁶⁴⁾. Here the question looms whether the sacred text can have more than one literal sense. In some places St. Thomas seems to answer affirmatively, for instance in I 1, 10 and *De potentia* IV 1. In the former article, quoting St. Augustine, he writes that since the author of Sacred Scripture is God who comprehends all things at once, it is not inconvenient when according to the literal sense of a particular text there are several senses. In order to understand what Thomas means let us examine the text of the *De potentia*. In this article the question is studied whether God first created formless matter before he made the distinct parts of the world. Thomas warns us that we should not right away say that a certain (philosophical or scientific) truth we know and which seems to be contained in Holy Scripture, is

⁽⁶⁰⁾ Cf. *Expos. in I Tim.*, c. 2, lectio 1 (intentio Apostoli).

⁽⁶¹⁾ II-II 1, 4 ad 3.

⁽⁶²⁾ See A. GARDEIL, *Le donné revele et la théologie*, Paris 1910, p. 218.

⁽⁶³⁾ S.C.G. IV 4 and 12. See JOSÉ ANTONIO FIDALGO, « Hermeneutica bíblica de Sto. Tomás de Aquino: interpretación de la sabiduría del Antiguo Testamento », in *Eiblia y Hermeneutica: VII Simposio Internacional de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra*, Pamplona 1986, 477-486. One should notice, however, the restraint of Aquinas, in particular with regard to the second text (« *intelligi possit* »). Apparently the literal sense is not clear so that we must do with the accommodate sense.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ *Quodl.* XII, q. 17, art. unic.

explicitly taught by it. Moreover we should not try to determine the sense of the sacred text in such a way that other interpretations which contain truth and agree with the context of this particular passage, are totally excluded. For it belongs to the dignity of Holy Scripture that it contains many senses under one wording (« sub una littera »). In this way it agrees with the various understanding different readers have and everyone marvels since one finds in Scripture the truth one had conceived oneself in one's mind⁽⁶⁵⁾.

What does this mean? Some see in these words a confirmation of the view according to which Aquinas admits several literal senses in one and the same text⁽⁶⁶⁾. However, the general gist of what St. Thomas writes about the Bible excludes such an interpretation: the human author wants to express something definite when he writes down the text and the words he uses have one meaning. These seemingly different statements of St. Thomas must apparently be understood otherwise. Certain texts of the Bible do not go into doctrinal details. E.g. it is not clear from the text of *Genesis* whether God first created matter (under a first form) and then the different things (St. Basil) or whether at the very beginning he already created different things (St. Augustine). Likewise it is not clear from the text whether the immaterial beings were created before the material world (St. Basil) or simultaneously with the material things (St. Augustine)⁽⁶⁷⁾.

The solution of St. Thomas is that different doctrinal positions may be possible, as long as what they say is sound and squares with what the Bible says. If so, they constitute possible senses. It is obvious that they are not the literal sense, because they are mutually exclusive. With regard to some particular questions the literal sense, insofar as it is revealed and *de fide*, does not go into detail; what it does clearly say is sufficient for man's salvation. These further, possible doctrinal interpretations of the text are called « accommodated senses » or « adaptable senses ».

Why does Scripture show a sort of latitudinarianism with regard to the precise meaning of certain doctrinal passages? God does allow

(65) I do think that these words describe very well what Aquinas experienced when he read Holy Scripture against the background of his amazing philosophical knowledge.

(66) F. CEUPENS, « Quid S. Thomas de multiplici sensu literalis in S. Scriptura senserit? », in *Div. Thomas. Piac.* 33 (1930) 164-175; S.M. ZARB, « Utrum S. Thomas unitatem an vero pluralitatem sensus literalis in Sacra Scriptura docuerit? », in *Div. Thom. Piac.* 33 (1930) 337-359; idem in *Revue thomiste* 15 (1932) 251-300. For an evaluation see P. SYNAVE, in *Bulletin thom.* 8 (1931) 711-718.

(67) On this question cf. *De potentia* 3, 18 ad 4.

this, Aquinas writes, so as to bring the sacred text closer to different persons and characters. In his encompassing knowledge God sees before him this variety of possible explanations. Even the human author of the text may have had, in some cases, through divine illumination an inkling of possible and more detailed interpretations. But he has left it open, so that in this way each of these interpretations could claim to be the sense of the text⁽⁶⁸⁾. The author did not further determine what he wrote down, because he did not see things clearly himself or did not want to determine further what he was writing.

This reminds us of certain determinations of the revealed text by the Church such as occur in christology, mariology and theology of the sacraments. Because Scripture is the book of the Church and must be read *in medio Ecclesiae*, the Church, animated and guided by the Holy Spirit, cannot be mistaken in the way it understands the message contained in God's Word. To the outsider it may seem that alien elements are added to the substance of the faith⁽⁶⁹⁾. But in reality the Church moves with a never failing instinct, discovering in the course of history the full depth of the treasures stored in the Sacred Text. I would even like to suggest that in those cases where certain philosophical insights are used to reach a theological conclusion from revelation, this conclusion conveys the revealed sense of Scripture. That part of the argument which is immediately revealed elevates the natural insight or principle, used in it, to its own level⁽⁷⁰⁾.

VIII. What has been discussed above allows us to answer the question of what is precisely revealed in Holy Scripture: whatever the human author writes down not only under the inspiration of God, but also because of divine revelation, that is the supernatural illumination of his mind by which he sees the things he is describing in their relation to God's plan of salvation. What belongs to man's eternal destiny surpasses all human knowledge-except certain natural truths presupposed by it; it can only be known by divine illumination. Now all of Holy Scripture is a message from God about the salvation of man either in a direct or in a less direct way. Thus the persons and events described in the Old Testament refer to the New Testament; this meaning has been revealed, at least to the prophets, the apostles and the church of the apostolic time.

(68) *De pot.* 4, 1: «Unde omnis veritas quae salva litterae circumstantia potest divinae Scripturae aptari est eius sensus».

(69) One may recall here the theory of A. Harnack and other protestant authors of a contamination "by Hellenistic influences."

(70) IOANNES A. S. THOMA, *Cursus theologicus*, I, disp. 2, 7.

The insight and revealed knowledge of the inspired author is a logical truth, which he expressed in human language. Since what is revealed to the author has to do with eternal salvation, it has at least a supernatural connotation. This means that the language in which it is expressed will often be analogous. In other words, the knowledge to be communicated is greater than and superior to its verbal expression in human language. A text of the Bible, guaranteed by the divine assistance given to its author as a correct expression of the insight God wanted this author to communicate, serves as the indispensable support to actualise this knowledge in the Church. Because there is a certain distance between knowledge and its verbal expression, even slightly differing texts (such as the Septuagint version, the Vulgate, etc. when approved and used by the Church) can give access to the logical truth revealed by God and *alive in the Tradition of the Church as it is guided by the Holy Spirit*. Moreover, as St. Thomas observes, the ultimate meaning of Sacred Scripture is richer and deeper than what even its human author understands. This does not mean that efforts to establish a critical text as close as possible to the original are insignificant, but it would not be « catholic » to argue that because the Vulgate translation of *Rom. 5, 12* (« in quo omnes peccaverunt ») does not quite render the sense of the original, the Church should change its doctrine of original sin.

At this juncture we can understand the full meaning of the fact that Holy Scripture is the book of the Church and can only be read *in medio Ecclesiae*. For moved and guided by the Holy Spirit the Church of later times seeks to understand and to express this revelation which found its linguistic expression in the written text of the Bible. If we use the term « sacred author » in a wider sense, so that it includes the apostolic communities which definitely accepted the Books of Scripture⁽⁷¹⁾, we must say that through divine revelation the sacred author necessarily had some knowledge of this more or less direct relationship of what he was writing (or of what had been written down in other parts of the Bible) with the eternal salvation of mankind. In this way the literal sense of a text such as the report of a battle in the *Books of the Maccabees* is expressed under divine inspiration but need not be revealed, whereas its allegorical and moral senses are. A similar remark applies to the Book of Job, the Song of Songs etc. The question has been raised why St. Thomas, when giving the exegesis of the literal sense of the *Book of Job*, did quote such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle and Rabbi Moyses.

(71) The question of the canon of Holy Scripture is intimately connected with that of divine revelation. We could not discuss it in this paper and refer to the relevant literature. See C. Spicq, *o.c.*, p. 144 ff.

But there is no problem when one considers that the *literal* sense of several of the discourses is a product of human wisdom and has not been revealed (although the text as it was written down is inspired).

If *all* of Holy Scripture has been written for our instruction as we travel to eternal life, *any* passus must always have *some* sense which has been **revealed**, but this is not necessarily its literal sense.

This shows how difficult the question is of Sacred Scripture as the vessel of divine revelation. But I hope that the account given above according to the doctrine and the principles of St. Thomas Aquinas does clarify at least some aspects of the issue. It also shows the importance of understanding revelation in its formal sense of a **communication** of knowledge to man and not as a « **happening** » or a historical event. Historical events may find their place in revelation (and may be called revelation in a wider sense) inasmuch as the knowledge imparted by God to the intellect of the prophets and apostles concerns such events and their meaning and/or is accompanied by the (natural) perception of such events by the prophet ⁽⁷²⁾.

⁽⁷²⁾ On the **subject of** this paper see W.G. VALKENBERG, *Did not our heart burn? Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Utrecht 1990.