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CHAPTER 2: THEOLOGY -- ITS PARTS AND METHOD

A. "Theology" and positive theology

5   "Theology" means thought and talk about God, and about ourselves and other things
in relation to Him.[1] Because it is possible to know something of God by the natural
light of reason, there is a branch of philosophical inquiry called "natural theology" or
"philosophical theology." "Sacred theology," by contrast, refers to studies which pro-
ceed in the light of faith and use reason only as it is illumined by faith.

10   Just as "interpretation" sometimes is used to refer to the acts of expressing and
receiving involved in simple and direct communication, so "theology" sometimes is used
to refer, on the one hand, to God's own knowledge and His revelatory signs or, on the
other hand, to the initial human reception and appropriation of God's revealing words
and deeds. In this sense of "theology" there are many different theologies within

15 divine revelation itself, since there are many different persons who receive God's revel-
ation, even His revelation in Christ: the apostles are twelve and the Gospels four.
Thus we speak of the "theology" of St. Paul, the "theology" of St. John, and so forth.
         This way of speaking is common and unobjectionable enough provided that one bears
in mind that the books of the Bible are special. The books of the New Testament in

20 particular bear perpetual and divine witness to the effective communication accomplished
by the revelation of God in the Lord Jesus (cf. DV 17). Inasmuch as these books were
written by apostles and their associates, they reflect apostolic belief and teaching,
which contains the normative appropriation of the words and deeds of Jesus and the
authorized witness to His resurrection (cf. DV 7-8; LG 18-19).

25   We cannot rightly read the books of the New Testament if we imagine that they con-
tain mere interpretations of revelation. Revelation is communication, and the communica-
tion was not accomplished until what Jesus said and did was appropriated by the apostles
under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 14.26; 15.26-27; 16.13). Therefore, we
have no more direct access to God's revelation in Jesus than the New Testament writings,

30 understood and used as the Catholic Church understands and uses them in her teaching,
liturgy, and life. It follows that we ought to regard the various theologies of the New
Testament as compatible, mutually complementary, and equally normative for our own
thought and talk about matters of faith and morals.
         "Theology" in a stricter sense begins with the work called "interpretation" in a

35 proper sense--that is, with systematic and methodical attempts to facilitate communica-
tion and overcome misunderstandings. As a form of communication, divine revelation is
served by interpretation. The theological interpreter seeks to discover and effectively
express the true and full meaning of the texts of sacred Scripture and of other wit-
nesses to the faith of the Church. This sort of interpretation is the proper task of

40 one main part of theology, the part which is called "positive theology" because it is
concerned with the deposit of revelation--that is, with what God has posited or put in
our world by revealing Himself as He has.
         Positive theology is basic for all other theological work. Because their objec-
tive is to discover what God has in fact revealed, positive theologians try to avoid

45 reading into sacred Scripture and other texts theories which--even if true--arise from
sources other than revelation itself. The method of positive theology is mainly
linguistic-literary and historical. But in any study some theoretical framework is in-
evitable. If the use of such a framework is not frankly acknowledged, it will be intro-
duced unconsciously and surreptitiously. The Catholic theologian engaging in positive

50 theology makes use of the theoretical framework provided by developed Catholic teaching,
because, as I explained in chapter one, section F, this teaching is not extrinsic to
God's revelation but rather contains and transmits it (cf. DV 10; CCE 30-33).
         The study of sacred Scripture is the most important part of positive theology.
But other witnesses of faith also must be studied in a similar way. These include not

55 only the writings of the Fathers of the Church, conciliar and papal teaching documents,
and other linguistic material, but also the history of the Church, the liturgy, the
lives of the saints, and so on. All that the Church has been and comes to be belongs in
one way or another to the tradition of revelation and faith (cf. DV 8). Therefore,
everything pertaining to the Church can be examined by positive theologians with a view

60 to their proper goal of accurately hearing God's revelation and facilitating reception
of it in all its richness (cf. OT 16).
         The positive theologian is not limited to examining one by one texts and other
witnesses of faith. Without bringing to bear theories extrinsic to revelation itself,
the positive theologian can carry out studies which disengage elements common to many

65 witnesses. For example, general themes in the Bible are examined, using the techniques
of the history of ideas. Thus there are special studies on themes such as revelation,
faith, covenant, walking according to faith, divine glory, and so forth. Principles
central to revelation itself can be used to disengage aspects of revelation which are
expressed in more or less extensive documentary witnesses. For example, works are done

70 on the theology of John, on the theology of the New Testament, on biblical theology.
         A very important part of the work of positive Catholic theology is to trace the
origin and development of the Church's beliefs in the books of sacred Scripture and in
other witnesses up to the present. Part of this task is to show how doctrines defined
by the Church, understood in the precise sense in which the Church understands them, al-

75 ready are in some way present in the Bible and in tradition, and to show this without
reading into these sources anything which cannot be found there (cf. Pius XII,
DS 3886/2314).

B. Systematic theology and its parts

80
         Positive theology tries to avoid importing theories from outside revelation; it
seeks to determine precisely what God has revealed. But Catholic theology never limits
itself to this positive part. It proceeds from positive to systematic theological re-
flection. In systematic theology, propositions which are not revealed but which are

considered true are related to truths of faith, in order that rational reflection in the light of faith might in various ways lead to a fuller understanding of the truths of faith and all their implications.

There are many ways of seeing why systematic theology is important and even neces-
5   sary. The following way, if considered carefully, might prove helpful.

God reveals Himself to us to establish a personal relationship with us. It is clear, especially as He reveals Himself in our Lord Jesus, that He wishes this relation-ship to be not merely an arrangement engaging some part of our lives, but a total friend-ship which is to touch and enrich every aspect of individual and social human life.
10   Indeed, by way of this relationship with humankind, God wishes to bring all things into personal touch with Himself, "to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship" (Eph 1.10). To relate and integrate realities, we human per-sons must know the truth about them and must act according to the truth. Therefore, the truths of faith must be integrated with all the other truths which humankind can know so
15   that Christians can cooperate in the work of restoring all things to the Father through Christ.

Systematic theologians help the whole People of God to carry out this work of integration; they help especially at the boundary where revealed and nonrevealed truths meet. This boundary is where rational reflection upon nonrevealed truths extends to
20   consider those truths which can be known by reason and which also pertain to revelation. The systematic theologian attempts to illuminate and guide rational reflection in order to inform it with the light of revelation. In exchange, the systematic theologian at-tempts to borrow from reason enlightened by faith truths which will expand understanding of the truths of faith.
25   A classic formulation of the work of systematic theologians is "faith seeking understanding." St. Cyril of Alexandria, commenting upon John 6.70, beautifully ex-presses the common Christian conviction that faith is intellectually dynamic:

"And we have believed and have known that You are the Holy Christ of God." . . .
They say that they both believe and know, applying both to the same. For it is
30   needful both to believe and to know. . . . And again it is well that they do not say they first knew and then believed; but when they have entertained faith, then in second place they bring in knowledge. For knowledge comes after faith and not before it, according to what is written: "If you have not believed, neither have you understood [Is. 7.9 in the Septuagint]." When we have first within us a kind
35   of basis for the augmentation of faith, then knowledge is built up little by little, and we are restored to the measure of stature in Christ and are made a perfect man and spiritual [cf. Eph. 4.13] (FEF 2111).

On this view, the growth of understanding what is of faith, which systematic theology attempts to promote, is not an optional extra for Christians, but an essential aspect of
40   Christian life.

Systematic theology can be divided in various ways. The following approximates some of the divisions most commonly used at present.

Fundamental or foundational theology examines the possibility, the nature, and the method of theology. Much of what is included in these introductory chapters belongs to
45   fundamental theology. In considering the possibility of theology, one needs to consider the way in which theological expressions can be used meaningfully. One also must show the reasonableness of believing that God has in fact revealed Himself. The characteris-tics of human persons which make us able to hear and respond to God's word also must be considered. To fundamental theology also belongs the study of the manner in which the
50   Church can make herself known as the bearer of divine revelation to persons having di-verse, sophisticated worldviews--religious or otherwise (cf. CCE 107-113).

Another systematic theological discipline sometimes is called simply "systematics"; it formerly usually was called "dogmatic theology." "Dogmatic" here means "pertaining to basic doctrine," but in English the word has come to mean "opinionated." Therefore,
55   this part of theology might better be called "contemplative systematic theology." Con-templative systematic theologians attempt to clarify the connections among the truths of faith, in order to organize them into a single, continuous view. They attempt especial-ly to clarify the connections between all other truths of faith and the central reality of the relationship which God initiates by revealing Himself, the relationship which He
60   is bringing toward fulfillment in the Lord Jesus. Philosophical positions which comport well with those revealed truths which reason also can know are used in contemplative systematic theology to round out the account of reality provided by revelation itself.

To the extent that contemplative systematic theology attains its objective, "it does reach, by God's generosity, some understanding of mysteries, and that a most profit-
65   able one" (Vatican I, DS 3016/1796). Even with the light of faith, however, rational reflection cannot understand revealed mysteries in a way which lessens the need for faith. Rather, such reflection makes all the clearer that intimacy with God is His own gift, and that its fullness still is to be received in a manner which surpasses under-standing. For this reason, contemplative theology leads to prayer of praise and thanks-
70   giving, and provides solid nourishment for that prayer of communion with God which is one of the most appropriate acts of Christian life (cf. DS 2264/1284).

Moral theology, with the principles of which the present work is concerned, is another systematic theological discipline. Like contemplative systematic theology, the study of the principles of moral theology includes a systematic reflection upon all of
75   the principal truths of faith. However, in studying Christian moral principles, we will be less interested in expanding understanding of the truths of faith and rounding out the Christian worldview than in making clear how this worldview can shape the whole of Christian individual and communal life.

Yet one should not too sharply distinguish contemplative from moral theology. The
80   source of both is the one word of Christ, which dwells by faith in the hearts of be-lievers. It is a dynamic word, with power to perfect both the inner self and the whole of one's life, as St. Paul says:

Dedicate yourselves to thankfulness. Let the word of Christ, rich as it is, dwell in you. In wisdom made perfect, instruct and admonish one another. Sing

gratefully to God from your hearts in psalms, hymns, and inspired songs. Whatever
you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus. Give
thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3.15-17).
The revelation of God, the divine self-gift in the Lord Jesus, calls for thanks on our
5   part. Thanks is expressed in two ways: in praise and in performance. By praise we
acknowledge the generosity of God; by performance we give Him in return for His gift all
that we are, all that we have--our own lives.
All revealed truth is normative. God invites humankind into a relationship with
Himself, and this invitiation demands our free response and our implementing cooperation.
10 We are asked to "live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received" (Eph 4.1).
Christian moral principles provides an answer to the question of relevance: Even if
Catholic faith is true, what difference does it make to me if I accept it? What life-
style is implied by the Catholic worldview?
Christian moral principles shows how the living Lord Jesus, who is the center of
15 Christian life, exemplifies a unique style of life. Various special studies in moral
theology consider particular issues according to the standard of what is fitting for
individuals and groups who wish to live according to a Christian lifestyle. Moral theol-
ogy cannot do its full job if it remains at the level of general principles. It also
must show the relationship between divine revelation and Catholic teaching on particular
20 issues, such as the morality of choosing one's profession, of paying taxes, of sexual
activity, and so forth.
Pastoral theology studies the use of the other parts of theology in the work of
the priestly life. Pastoral theology is not merely a technique; it is not related to
the other disciplines of systematic theology as medicine is related to biology. Pastor-
25 al work is not properly an art. Rather, it is a way of making Jesus present to teach,
govern, and sanctify humankind today.
Inasmuch as the priestly life is one particular form of Christian life, the princi-
ples of pastoral theology are those of Christian morals. For this reason, I regard
pastoral theology as a part of moral theology, a part appropriately considered as a dis-
30 cipline in itself because of its extent and importance in the seminary program.

C. Inappropriate methods for systematic theology

A method is a regular way of doing something. In the work of an intellectual dis-
35 cipline, such as systematic theology, it is helpful to have a method appropriate to the
subject matter and purpose of the discipline. In many respects, the method of an intel-
lectual discipline consists in many little tricks and bits of information; one learns
most of these things by working with someone competent in the field. But in a certain
respect, the question of method is a question of how to organize propositions into
40 trains of thought. Only this aspect of method will be considered here.
There are different ways of organizing propositions into a train of thought. A
poem does it in one way, a sermon in another, and a scientific treatise in still another.
Some of these ways are not appropriate for systematic theology.
There is legitimate and important work to be done in finding more expressive and
45 persuasive representations to use in the communication of divine revelation. This
poetic and rhetorical task belongs mainly to the fields of liturgy, homiletics, and
catechetics. The work is more clearly seen to be necessary if one realizes that revela-
tion is a total personal communication, not exclusively the transmission of proposi-
tional truths.
50 Today some scholars suggest substituting this work for rational reflection upon
the truths of faith. But in the Catholic Church the poetic and rhetorical task never
has been allowed to replace the articulation of the propositional truths of faith, nor
have doctrinal formulae ever been allowed to be reduced to mere symbolic or persuasive
elements of communication (cf. Pius X, DS 3426/2026; 3483/2079). The teaching of Vati-
55 can II clearly maintains the received view of this matter (cf. OT 16). Indeed, theology
involving rational reflection upon the truths of faith is the only conception the
Council knows. A Catholic approach to creative work in liturgy, homiletics, and cate-
chetics always is shaped by an understanding of the aspects of faith which are intelli-
gible and always conforms to the truths articulated in the Church's teaching.
60 So much is it the case that Catholic theology takes an intellectualist approach
that in ecclesiastical documents theological disciplines often are called "sciences."
In English, the word "science" primarily applies to the supreme kind of autonomous human
knowledge about some field of experienced facts. Theology is not a science in this
sense. I think it would be best to avoid the word "science" when speaking in English of
65 theological disciplines.
St. Thomas Aquinas (ca.1225-1274) probably fulfilled the ideal of Catholic contem-
plative systematic theology more perfectly than any other single theologian before or
since his time. Using an original philosophy which he developed by very creative reflec-
tion upon both the work of Aristotle and the philosophical content of prior Christian
70 writing, Thomas articulated a systematic theology which begins from God, one and Triune,
as the source of all else, proceeds to study creation and the fall of humankind, then
considers the principles and norms of Christian morality, and finally treats the Incarna-
tion, the redemption, and the sacraments as the way by which human persons can return to
God.
75 St. Thomas had a wide and deep knowledge of sacred Scripture and of the writings
of the early Church Fathers. Thus he was able to bring his philosophical view into con-
tact with many witnesses of faith, considering them not only in small bits and pieces,
but also as integral works, which he interpreted with all the accuracy permitted by the
historical knowledge and literary techniques of the thirteenth century.
80 In developing his systematic reflection, St. Thomas followed as far as possible
Aristotle's scientific method. The result is that the system of Thomas does illuminate
the mysteries of faith by reason working in the light of faith. His work brings out
many important connections among the truths of faith, and it renders intelligible the re-
lationship between divine revelation and human learning, especially insofar as the

latter can be fit within the general framework of Aristotle's philosophy.

As already noted, the Catholic Church still recommends the general approach of St. Thomas as a model for theological work (cf. OT 16). Nevertheless, even as adapted by St. Thomas, the scientific model of Aristotle is not altogether appropriate in theology.

5 For Aristotle, the objective of science is explanation of facts by knowledge of their precise causes. Once one knows the proper cause, one sees that the fact is necessary and could not be otherwise than it is. Since theology is centrally concerned with the acts of God revealing and of human persons responding--which are not necessary but free acts--the central facts cannot be explained. Moreover, although fundamental truths
10 of faith do in a way illuminate other truths, causes remain obscure. For example, the main causes of what is brought about in the sacraments belong within the intimate being of the divine Persons to whom faith is only an approach.

Thus, as important as is the work of St. Thomas, his attempt to proceed in a scientific way can be criticized. It has been argued, I think justly, that Thomas proceeds
15 too confidently in drawing implications from truths of faith.[2] It seems to me that at times Thomas forgets that the language of talk about God is relational; he proceeds as if the concepts expressed by this language involved an understanding--which Thomas himself expressly excludes--of what God is in Himself.

St. Thomas was not the only great medieval thinker to attempt a theological synthe-
20 sis. There were other excellent attempts, notably that of St. Bonaventure (1221-1274).[3] At the same time, some theologians using less adequate philosophical instruments went to the opposite extreme from Thomas. If he was overconfident, they were underconfident. They began to doubt the ability of the human mind to understand and to grow gradually in the knowledge of reality. They emphasized the problem and importance
25 of knowing that propositions certainly are true; they gave far less attention to problems of clarification and explanation.

This philosophical and theological approach usually is called "nominalism." The result of nominalism was to separate sharply the domains of rational inquiry and of faith. In the former, certitude was to be sought from sense experience and from logical
30 analysis. In the latter, certitude depended entirely on authority.[4]

The nominalism of late medieval thought persisted into the beginnings of modern philosophy. Although much of modern philosophy is a secular humanist substitute for Christian theology, the first movements of modern philosophy were not opposed to Christian faith. For example René Descartes (1596-1650) intended his philosophy to help fun-
35 damental theology by securing beyond any possibility of doubt the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, the freedom of the human will, and other truths which are both revealed and knowable by the natural light of reason.[5] The method of Descartes emphasized the objective of gaining absolute certitude. He believed this could be reached by analyzing cognition to its absolutely unquestionable bases, which he thought
40 consisted in clear and distinct ideas.

The philosophy of Descartes and of others who shared his general approach is called "rationalism," not because it stresses reason in opposition to faith but because it stresses reason in opposition to experience. Descartes was greatly interested in mathematics, and he developed his philosophical ideal on the model of mathematical rea-
45 soning, rather than on the model of a factual study such as biology or history. Rationalistic philosophy seemed consistent with faith and it seemed to many Catholic theologians to offer a new and promising approach. Therefore, many Catholic theologians more or less fully adopted and adapted a rationalist approach for their work.

A rationalist philosophy, even if it need not contradict essential truths of faith,
50 has a number of limitations and tendencies which render it less than ideally suited for the work of theology. As already noted, the rationalist stresses certitude as an objective; this objective does not fit well with the ideal of theology as a work of faith seeking constantly growing--but only gradually growing--understanding. Also, the rationalistic emphasis on clear and distinct ideas tends to distract users of the method from
55 the complexity and richness of human thinking, and thus leads them to overlook the many varied and complicated ways in which linguistic expressions have meaning. As a result, rationalists almost inevitably misunderstand the relational character of the language used to talk about God. Moreover, rationalists often overlook the need for careful interpretation of the witnesses to faith. They generally oversimplify the problem of
60 interpretation even when they realize the need for it.

Rationalist philosophers focus upon the intellectually knowing subject; they tend to identify the human person with the mind, the thinking self. Bodiliness and other dimensions of the person are insufficiently appreciated. A theologian using rationalism tends for this reason to ignore many aspects of revelation and to stress almost exclu-
65 sively the communication of propositional truths. At its extreme, this tendency leads to a conception of faith as acceptance of a certain amount of correct information rather than as a personal relationship of hearing and adhering to God revealing Himself in the Lord Jesus.

Rationalist philosophy also makes a very sharp distinction between the knowing
70 subject and the thing known. It thus tends to be unsuited to practical reflection, in which one thinks about oneself and shapes one's becoming by one's thought. A rationalist approach tends rather to look at what is known as if it were a detached, mathematical object. Any practical problem tends to be looked at on the model of the application of mathematics in engineering.

75 This approach also takes insufficient account of history, which can hardly be so easily ignored when one begins practical reflection about the lives of real, bodily persons who have diverse abilities and opportunities, and who exist in actual relationships with one another. This aspect of rationalism had the result that the more it became accepted as a method for Catholic theology, the less Christian life could be treated
80 integrally by the same theological inquiry which considered the central truths of faith. The latter were considered much more as dogmas or theoretical truths to be proved from the witnesses of faith than as normative truths shaping Christian life.

Every Christian philosophy is concerned essentially with truths which can be known and defended by the natural light of reason, but which also are included in or implied

by divine revelation. The Christian philosopher seeks to understand this set of truths as a unified view of reality, to establish them by various methods without invoking the authority of revelation, and to answer objections from anyone who is willing to engage in a fair interchange of reasoned criticism. Because Christian philosophy is a creative
5   work of reason, there can be many such philosophies which differ on various issues, but which are alike in never denying any proposition whose denial would entail the denial of a truth of faith.

Christian philosophies such as those of St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure are equally Christian but simply different on the philosophical level. Despite any limitations in
10 method, both are flexible and powerful instruments for faith seeking understanding, since both can develop through the interchange of criticism and both are able to deal with the facts of nature and of history.

A rationalistic philosophy is not very adaptable. It is a poor instrument for faith seeking understanding. Its ability to deal with data is strictly limited. To the
15 extent that Catholic systematic theology began to use rationalist philosophy, it tended to become unchanging and sterile.

By 1700, Catholic theology was heavily influenced by rationalism.[6] The belief of the Church was divided into theses to be proved. At this point moral theology was almost entirely separated from dogma--that is, from contemplative systematic theology.
20 Even within dogmatic theology, the relationships among the truths of faith considered in the various treatises tended to be ignored. Sacred Scripture and other witnesses of faith were mined simply as sources of premises to be used in proofs, rather than being studied in their own integrity. The full and accurate interpretation of the tradition in the light of Catholic faith was neglected. The importance of certain sources, such
25 as the Church's history and liturgical practices, tended to be ignored, for although these sources contain aspects of revelation, it is not easy to draw rationalistic arguments from them.

The model of science adopted in modern theology under the influence of rationalist philosophy was even less appropriate than the Aristotelian model of science which St.
30 Thomas had used. The quest for a kind of certitude which is not always available in theology and the ignoring of relationships among the mysteries of faith led quickly to frustration and ultimately to a discipline with minimal relevance for Christian life.

Today, some think that previous attempts to make theology scientific met with grief only because of the unsuitability for theology of the scientific models of Aristot-
35 le and of rationalism. These models are called "classical" conceptions of science. The suggestion is that theology should adopt the model of modern, empirical science.

Such a science proceeds by gathering facts, noting regularities, and excogitating hypotheses which might account for the observed data.[7] A good hypothesis should logi- cally imply factual truths other than those which first suggested it. Further investiga-
40 tion is conducted to see whether the implications of the hypothesis check out. Eventu- ally, even good hypotheses must be qualified, modified, or even discarded in favor of more adequate ones.

Chemistry is a good example of a modern science. The data to be explained are chemical changes. The theory that matter is made up of elementary atoms variously ar-
45 ranged into compounds has been extraordinarily enlightening, powerful in accounting for facts, and fruitful in inquiry and application.

The modern model of science seems to me even less suited to theology than any classical model. What are the data to be explained? On the one hand, if they are facts which can be observed by anyone, with or without faith, such as the facts of religious
50 experience or behavior, theology will be reduced to a theory of part of human life. If what faith says about this part of human life is admitted into the theory, there seems to be no reason to ignore what faith says about what has not yet been experienced. If what faith says about human life is excluded from the theory, the result is a merely rational discipline detached from divine revelation. On the other hand, if theology
55 models itself upon modern science but considers as data the truths of faith themselves, then the mysteriousness of God and His will to draw humankind into intimacy with Himself blocks any attempt to develop very wide-ranging hypotheses and to test them by experi- ment. The model of modern science will be useful within limits, but not for systematic theology as a unified whole.

60   It is perhaps worth noticing in passing that even those disciplines which usually are called "social sciences" do not conform strictly to the modern model of science. It is true that careful workers in these disciplines do proceed with accurate methods to collect, describe, and catalogue data. But instead of developing testable hypotheses, psychology and the social sciences usually must settle for more concrete and limited
65 understandings of human activities and relationships. In attaining these insights, the human sciences more often proceed like humanistic studies than they do like natural sciences.[8]

Almost all the work done in the human sciences proceeds on the assumption that human persons cannot make free choices. Some philosophical theory or ideology which pur-
70 ports to account for unfree human behavior is used to organize and interpret facts about the activity and relationships of persons. Thus psychologists and social scientists offer diverse and incompatible accounts of the evils which afflict humankind, but sin has no place in their accounts. They propose diverse remedies for these evils, but the grace of Christ is not mentioned among these remedies. Because of their inadequate
75 grasp upon the reality of their subject matter, these disciplines do not reach the same consensus as does a science like chemistry, which differs little in the Soviet Union and in the United States.

It follows from the dependence of the human sciences on nonfactual assumptions-- especially the assumption of determinism--that while theology cannot ignore the findings
80 of these disciplines, neither can it accept their results uncritically. A Christian philosophy must sift these results to separate the important data and sound insights which they contain from the assumptions which reflect commitments incompatible with Christian faith (cf. CCE 99).

D.   A more appropriate method for systematic theology

     The method which seems to me appropriate in systematic theology is one of disci-
plined meditation and discussion, by which various relationships among truths of faith
5   and between them and other propositions are clarified, new concepts and propositions
developed, and a gradually growing understanding is achieved of the mysteries of faith
and of other things in the light of faith. I call this method "dialectic." Since there
are many conceptions of dialectical method, one must clarify what one intends by this
way of doing theology.
10   Anyone who has studied some of Plato's dialogues will understand what I have in
mind. Plato always tries to formulate clear questions and to distinguish the meanings
of linguistic expressions. The devices of logic are used to determine whether proposi-
tions are compatible or incompatible, to find which propositions imply which other ones,
and thus to make clear all that is involved in holding a certain position.
15   In such dialectics, one finds reasoning which is similar to that required by each
of the models of scientific inquiry. For example, sometimes the properties of something
are shown to follow from what it essentially is, as in Aristotelian science; sometimes
conclusions are proved from more certain principles, as in a rationalist science; and
sometimes hypotheses are developed to account for a certain range of data, as in a
20   modern empirical science. What is peculiar about the dialectical method as Plato uses
it is that none of the models of science organizes inquiry as a whole. Each scientific
model's characteristic way of proceeding is employed where it seems helpful, but no at-
tempt is made to organize all reflection according to a single model.
          Vatican I speaks about the method of theology. Its words are few, but clear and
25   precious. After pointing out that the mysteries of faith come to us only by God's gift,
the Council continues:
          It is, nevertheless, true that if human reason, with faith as its guiding
          light, inquires earnestly, devoutly, and circumspectly, it does reach, by God's
          generosity, some understanding of mysteries, and that a most profitable one. It
30   achieves this by the similarity [analogia] with truths which it knows naturally
          and also from the interrelationship of mysteries with one another and with the
          final end of man (DS 3016/1796).
Even so, the mysteries are not grasped in the way that truths about the natural world
are grasped. Faith remains necessary.
35   It is interesting to notice what the modest statement of Vatican I does not say.
It does not say that rational reflection upon the mysteries of faith leads to a knowl-
edge of truths through causes (Aristotle's scientific method), nor that it establishes
with certitude which propositions are truths of faith (the method of rationalist sci-
ence), nor that it develops theories to account for the data of faith (the method of a
40   modern science). Rather it says that reason can gain some understanding of mysteries by
comparing one truth with another.
          It seems to me that this teaching of Vatican I implies that the proper method for
theology is the method called "dialectic" in Plato's sense of the word. By this method,
one considers truths of faith by comparison (analogia) with truths of reason, with one
45   another, and with the ultimate fulfillment to which God calls us in the Lord Jesus. As
is often said, one truth is considered in the light of another. To understand the dia-
lectical method of theology, it is helpful to consider what is meant by this expression:
"in the light of."
          If one considers the truth that Mary is the mother of Jesus in the light of the
50   truth that Jesus is God, one sees the truth of Mary's motherhood in a new light, for one
knows her to be the mother of God. The relationship here is deductive. But nondeduc-
tive relationships among propositions also illuminate one truth by another. For example,
propositions about revelatory words and deeds corresponding to one another are mutually
illuminating. The truth that God made promises to Moses together with the truth that
55   what was promised occurred communicate as neither by itself could do. The relationship
in this case is not a deductive one. Again, the truths of the Old Testament illuminate
those of the New and vice versa, since the Gospel fulfills what God began with the Law.
          One not only finds the various truths of revelation mutually illuminating; one
also comes to some understanding of faith in the light of truths naturally known by
60   reason and vice versa. For example, the truth that human persons can make free choices
pertains to faith (cf. Council of Trent, DS 1555/815), but it also can be established by
reason.[9] If this truth and the truth that humankind is made in God's image are
brought to bear upon the truth that God creates, the mystery of God's creative act is
not eliminated, but in some way it is illuminated, for it also is a matter of faith that
65   God creates freely (cf. Vatican I, DS 3025/1805). Conversely, the truth about human
aspirations for freedom and justice is understood in a different way by one who believes
that human persons are made in God's image than by a secular humanist.
          As I explained in chapter one, section F, divine revelation, as a total personal
relationship, contains more than the propositional truths of faith. Tradition has an
70   experiential aspect and also includes ways of living and worshipping whose reality the
Church gradually comes to understand more and more perfectly. This development can be
aided by theological reflection which brings into fruitful relationship truths of faith
already implicitly taught by the Church and truths deeply imbedded in Christian imagery,
experience, life, and worship. Thus, for instance, the truth that Jesus is truly a man
75   is greatly illuminated by the practices and experiences related to the celebration of
Christmas, the feast of His birthday. This celebration gives us an irreducible aware-
ness of the incarnate Word's solidarity with us in our human weakness and limitations.
We knew the risen Lord of Easter when He was just a babe in arms.
          In the ways exemplified and others, a dialectical method of meditation and discus-
80   sion can lead to some understanding of mysteries of faith. This insight can provide a
basis for genuine development of doctrine. Over and over again throughout history,
questions are put to the Church which bear upon the realities of faith but which are
formulated in concepts not previously in use among believers. For example, whether the
human species could have evolved, using the word "evolved" in the precise sense in which

it is used in Darwin's Descent of Man, is a question which could not have been asked be-
fore Darwin.

     Faced with such new questions, the Church must consider the possible answers in
comparison with truths of faith already articulated, and judge which answer is in har-
5   mony with faith (cf. DS 3896/2327). This judgment is not an arbitrary one, since the
Church must be faithful to what God has revealed. Moreover, not even the Church herself
can change the meaning or contradict the truth of doctrines she already has taught as
belonging to faith, since God's revelation is present in the Church's teaching (as I ex-
plained in chapter one, section F) and God is infallible (cf. Vatican I, DS 3020/1800).
10
     E.   Theological method and difficulties

          Dialectical method proceeds by considering propositions in the light of one an-
other. Thus far I have been emphasizing the ways in which this method of meditation and
15 discussion can lead to some understanding of truths of faith by a comparison of true
propositions with other true propositions. But in proclaiming the Gospel, the Church
also must safeguard the faith by rejecting false propositions.
          From a purely logical point of view, to know a proposition to be true is to know
its contradictory opposite to be false, and so false propositions do not introduce any
20 special problem in the purely logical aspects of theological method. But in meditation
and discussion, in personal study and in interpersonal communication, true and false
propositions are more than pairs of contradictory opposites. Therefore, inasmuch as the
dialectical method of theology is not so much a scientific method as a method of medita-
tion and discussion, false propositions raise some special problems which require dis-
25 tinct consideration.
          Vatican I teaches that the possibility of disagreement between faith and any other
source of knowledge is excluded in principle. God cannot be inconsistent, and all knowl-
edge ultimately comes from Him either by revelation or by the natural light of reason.
Of course, apparent contradictions do crop up. But
30   . . .the chief source of this merely apparent contradiction lies in the fact that
          dogmas of faith have not been understood and explained according to the mind of
          the Church or that deceptive assertions of opinions are accepted as axioms of
          reason (Vatican I, DS 3017/1797).
The Church has the mission of proclaiming the Gospel, the source of all saving truth and
35 moral teaching (cf. Council of Trent, DS 1501/783). To carry out her mission, the
Church must safeguard the faith by rejecting false claims to knowledge, so that no one
will be misled by faulty theories and sophistical arguments. It follows that for Catho-
lic theologians
          . . .it is forbidden to defend as legitimate conclusions of science such opinions
40   that are known to be opposed to the doctrine of faith, especially if they have
          been censured by the Church; rather, they are absolutely bound to regard them as
          errors that treacherously wear the appearance of truth (Vatican I, DS 3018/1798).
The phrase "doctrine of faith" used here must not be limited to truths solemnly defined.
It also includes at least those truths of faith and morals proposed by the ordinary and
45 universal magisterium of the Church either as truths divinely revealed or as truths to
be held definitively (cf. Vatican I, 3011/1792; Vatican II, LG 25).[10]
          Thus it is characteristic of Catholic theologians to think with the Church, to con-
form their judgments to the doctrine of faith, and to treat as erroneous every opinion
which the Church condemns as such. St. Vincent of Lerins accurately describes the ideal
50 of the theologian:
          He is a true and genuine Catholic who loves the truth of God, the Church, and the
          Body of Christ; who puts nothing else before divine religion and the Catholic
          Faith, neither the authority nor the love nor the genius nor the elequence nor the
          philosophy of any man whatsoever, but, despising all that and being fixed, stable,
55   and persevering in his faith, is determined in himself to hold and believe that
          only which he knows the Catholic Church has held universally and from ancient
          times (FEF 2172).
This ideal will seem an affront to intellectual freedom only to those who forget that
the Church's teaching is not a human wisdom: "Since, in God's wisdom, the world did
60 not come to know him through 'wisdom,' it pleased God to save those who believe
through the absurdity of the preaching of the gospel" (1 Cor 1.21).
          Catholic theologians should take up difficulties which arise and should pursue
truth with the full power of their scholarly discipline, wherever that pursuit might
lead. The question is: How can one function as a scholar without calling into question
65 any truth of the Catholic faith? The answer is that neither theology nor any other
field of scholarship bearing upon faith deals in obvious matters of fact or in simple
self-evident truths such as those of logic. Catholic scholars deal in historical proba-
bilities which can be argued, in interpretations which are never absolutely certain, in
theoretical constructions which are only more or less plausible. Therefore, scholarly
70 conclusions never absolutely compel assent. If a conclusion appears to be incompatible
with a truth of faith, one asks: Is this conclusion as certain as it seems to be? Is
the result really incompatible with faith, or does it only seem to be so because of lack
of understanding? Is one's personal understanding of faith really an accurate grasp of
the faith of the Church?
75   Nothing of intellectual rigor need be sacrificed in answering these questions, nor
need one in the least doubt the truth of faith. Every apparent conflict is somehow sol-
uble, although solutions do not always come easily. The human mind has in reserve a
great capacity for withholding assent. If one has faith, one draws on this capacity to
gain time for seemingly insoluble problems to be solved. In this way, not by hasty re-
80 visions, real progress in understanding faith occurs.
          Apparently insoluble problems will be resolved eventually. Often those who first
uncover real difficulties lack the resources for resolving them. Sometimes a resolution
is not forthcoming in a single generation. But the truth of Catholic faith and its
development does not depend upon one generation. The problems which outlive this

generation will find their resolution in the future. Meanwhile, Catholic theologians
must be honest scholars and firm believers; they must hold fast to the elements of prob-
lems which seem to admit of no solution. We do not believe because faith is absurd, but
we are unwilling to give up either believing or thinking because the combination of the
5 two activities sometimes puts us in a position which appears absurd.

F. Theological method and dialogue

      One encounters false propositions not only in one's personal reflection, but also
10 in reading the works of others and in conversation with others. Catholic theologians
will judge the thinking of others just as they judge their own thinking by the standard
of the Church's teaching. Of course, since others sometimes do not accept this standard
or, if they do accept it, sometimes are not well-instructed in the faith of the Church,
one often encounters apparently false propositions in their statements.
15   The first rule for understanding others is to test one's own interpretation of
their statements. If someone seems to state a false proposition, the first possibility
to consider is that one is misunderstanding the statement. Others often use words in
ways one would not use them oneself. Everyone speaks somewhat loosely at times, leaving
out qualifications which are necessary, in the hope that the extralinguistic context
20 will clarify the expression sufficiently to convey the true proposition he or she has
in mind.
      If patient efforts at careful interpretation do not reveal and resolve a misunder-
standing, the second step is to use much the same procedure in dealing with the appar-
ently unacceptable propositions of others that one uses in dealing with difficulties
25 which arise in one's own thinking. Are the proposition one considers true and the propo-
sition the other person apparently holds really inconsistent? What grounds does the
other person have for holding the proposition? Perhaps when these grounds are investi-
gated, a mistake will be revealed, admitted, and corrected. Has one accurately under-
stood the Church's teaching oneself? When this question is investigated, sometimes the
30 result is a fruitful growth in one's own grasp upon revealed truth.
      If these procedures do not lead to a resolution of the disagreement, the method of
disciplined discussion excludes as inappropriate either of two extreme approaches to
which one might be tempted. One extreme is polemic; the other is irenic. The words
"polemic" and "irenic" relate to war and peace; both approaches signal the abandonment
35 of pursuit of truth in favor of politics and diplomacy. These are legitimate occupa-
tions in their place, but they are not the business of theologians.
      The polemical approach is to accentuate differences as much as possible, to concen-
trate on what seems erroneous in an opponent's position, and to express oneself not with
a view to affecting the opponent's thinking but with a view to rendering the counterposi-
40 tion unacceptable to third parties. The assumption which underlies polemics is that the
opponent is in bad faith, that real conversation is therefore excluded, and that the
sole stake in the debate is its effect upon the minds of others. Very often, polemi-
cists assume propositions which their opponents need not grant; by proceeding in this
way, the argument becomes question-begging against the opponent, although it can still
45 be successful in respect to the audience for which it is intended.
      The irenic approach is to accentuate the area of agreement as much as possible, to
try to ignore what seems erroneous in another's position, and to express oneself primar-
ily with a view to improving the personal relationship between oneself and the person
with whom one disagrees. The assumption which underlies the irenic approach is that
50 those who hold unacceptable views nevertheless are in good faith, that unrestricted crit-
icism might upset other aspects of the personal relationship, and that the real stake in
a situation of disagreement is the interpersonal bond which remains more or less intact.
Very often, irenicists concede propositions which they cannot consistently grant; by pro-
ceeding in this way, the discussion becomes relativistic and incoherent: "I do not see
55 things quite that way myself, but no doubt it is true for you." Such relativism termi-
nates all serious thought, including thought about the truth God reveals in the Lord
Jesus.
      Instead of either of the extreme approaches, dialectical method points to theologi-
cal dialogue as the appropriate approach to real and serious disagreements touching mat-
60 ters of faith. In his inaugural encyclical, Ecclesiam suam, Paul VI observes that in
revealing Himself God initiates a dialogue with humankind. He points out that this
method is appropriate in the proclamation of the Gospel and in all communication in re-
spect to the faith. Pope Paul also notes that dialogue excludes both the polemical and
the irenical approaches (Ecclesiam suam, 81 and 91). Dialogue is not always the same
65 kind of discourse (80); it is not locked into a rigid format (88). What are its proper
procedures?
      The starting point, it seems to me, is to recognize that there is some area of gen-
uine agreement. Dialogue begins with this recognition, as does the irenic approach, but
unlike the irenic approach does not stop there and never subordinates the quest for com-
70 munion in truth—which is a very important interpersonal good—to other aspects of the
personal relationship. One who engages in dialogue does not make assumptions about the
good faith or bad faith of the other; one hopes for good faith, of course, but proceeds
without making any judgment one way or the other. The result is that partners in dia-
logue maintain a serious interest in trying to affect each other's thinking. They do
75 not intentionally either propose question-begging arguments or concede propositions they
cannot consistently grant.
      The first stage of dialogue is to explore areas of agreement and disagreement,
without minimizing or maximizing either. (I presuppose that the efforts previously des-
cribed toward accurate interpretation and resolution already have been carried out.)
80 The areas of agreement provide a common basis which can be brought to bear upon the is-
sues over which there is disagreement. A very important area of agreement for dialogue
is a shared stock of logical presuppositions, for progress in dialogue depends very much
upon uncovering inconsistencies in one another's positions.
      There is nothing polemical about pointing out to partners in dialogue that there

is some inconsistency in their positions (cf. Ecclesiam suam, 114). One does this, for example, whenever one constructs an argument using premises which one's partner in dialogue must grant to draw a conclusion incompatible with some position which he or she defends. Jesus sometimes uses this method (cf. Mt 15.1-6; Mk 2.24-28).

5   The essential thrust of an argument which points out inconsistency is that it challenges the one who is inconsistent to change. It presents a crisis, an opportunity for development. When one is presented with an argument indicating inconsistency one is put in the position of having to judge oneself. If one is in good faith, the challenge will lead to reflection and progress toward truth; if not, the challenge will be evaded and
10   change avoided by withdrawal into more profound falsity.

There are a great many ways in which inconsistencies can arise and there are a great many forms of reasoning which clarify inconsistent positions. It is impossible here to discuss these matters in detail. However, three points are especially relevant to the method I use in the present book when it is necessary to examine positions which
15   seem to me false.

First, since the Church's belief is the standard for judgment in Catholic theology, there already is a serious inconsistency in the thought of those who wish to engage in this discipline without accepting this standard. Their position could be rendered consistent if they made clear precisely what standard of judgment they are prepared to ac-
20   cept, and characterized in an appropriate way the sort of theology or philosophy they are doing.

Second, when one engages in dialogue, one tends to concede to one's partner everything one believes to be true. But to discern inconsistencies, it is important for the purposes of discussion not to concede propositions which one believes but which one's
25   partner is not entitled to assume. For example, one ought not to concede the truth of parts of the Church's moral teaching which a partner in dialogue wishes to take for granted if he or she denies the trustworthiness of other parts of this same teaching. Such a partner must be asked to give an independent account of the manner in which any moral norm whatsoever can be established. Until such an independent account is given,
30   further discussion is likely to be fruitless.

Third, one ought never to ignore the grounds upon which and the arguments by which one's partner in dialogue reaches or defends a position with which one disagrees. Often it is precisely here that difficulties lurk and can be brought to light. The tendency is to focus attention on the false position—to try to establish the truth of Catholic
35   belief—and to ignore the fallacies which one's partner in dialogue mistakenly thinks support his or her position. For example, many who deny the Catholic belief that adultery is always wrong argue that one may commit adultery when the refusal to do so would result in some greater evil. As I shall explain in due course, this sort of argument cannot stand close scrutiny. It is a mistake to ignore the argument and try to show sim-
40   ply that adultery is always wrong; it also is a mistake to concede the argument and try to maintain simply that consequences do not matter.

G. Method of moral theology

45   In the field of moral theology, one must bear in mind that a moral theory, whether philosophical or theological, cannot be deduced from facts. No accumulation of experiences or theoretical truths can lead to a moral principle or a concrete moral judgment, for logic simply does not permit the deduction of propositions concerning what ought to be from propositions about the way things are.
50   For this reason, it is a mistake to imagine that the Church's rejection of the suggestions of a new morality can lead to an embarrassment similar to that which followed from the rejection on their own level of the factual observations included in Galileo's research. Facts can no more show the Church's moral teaching to be false than they can prove it to be true. The situation in this matter is strictly parallel to a matter of
55   faith such as the bodily presence of Jesus in the Eucharist: chemical tests cannot show Him to be present, nor can the results of laboratory tests disprove what faith teaches.

Nevertheless, the moral teaching of the Church and the data of the experience of Christian life—such as the lives of the saints—are mutually illuminating. Likewise, the concrete moral judgments the faithful make are relevant to the reflective work of
60   Catholic moral theology.

Every moral theory, philosophical or theological, reflects upon the moral experience and judgments of a certain community. To the extent that the theory fits the data, they are used to testify to its realism and practicability. To the extent that the theory must take leave of moral judgments commonly made in the community, reasons are given
65   to explain why false moral judgments are made. A moral theorist can disagree with the moral judgments made in his or her own community to the extent that the theory belongs to a worldview which allows the theorist to transcend the limits of this particular community.

For example, many secular humanists reject racial discrimination. A poll might
70   show that the sense of the community favors racial discrimination in certain instances. The secular humanistic ethical theorist does not accept the sense of the community as determinative. Instead, witnesses who favor discrimination are disqualified—for example, as insufficiently informed or as narrow minded and short sighted.

In a similar way, Catholic moral theology finds the experience of Christian life
75   and the judgments of the faithful illuminating, but does not allow such data to override the Church's moral teaching. Catholic moral theologians are helped to keep their balance if they bear in mind that the community to which Catholic moral theory is relevant is not merely the present membership of the Church in affluent societies, but the whole People of God, from Abraham to the last man, from Calcutta to Amsterdam, Cracow, New
80   York, Peking, and Rome.

Moreover, the Catholic moralist recurs to the principles of Catholic morality and ultimately to the fundamental truths of faith, and there finds resources for interpreting the data of the moral experience and judgments of the faithful. Since divine revelation is not merely the conveying of a set of theoretical truths but is a total personal

communication (as explained in chapter one, section F), the single Gospel is "the source
of all saving truth and moral teaching" (Council of Trent, DS 1501/783). One is called
not only to hear the word of God but also to adhere to it, to do His will by putting the
words of the Lord Jesus into practice (cf. Mt 7.15-17; Jas 1.23-25; 2.14-26).

5   Therefore, the infallibility of the Church extends not only to matters of faith
but also to matters of morality--that is, not only to the truth to be heard as the word
of the Lord, but also to the truth to be executed in love (cf. 1 Jn 3.18; Vatican I,
DS 3032/1811; 3074/1839; Vatican II, LG 25).
          The Church is, by the will of God, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to
10   give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ Him-
          self, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the
          moral order which have their origin in human nature itself (DH 14).
By the standard of the truth the Church teaches, the Catholic moral theologian evaluates
the moral experience and judgments of the faithful. These data cannot be ignored, but
15 moral theological method--like the method of any reasonable ethical theory--cannot con-
sider them decisive.

H. <u>Systematic theology and interpretation</u>

20   The work of theologians considering one truth in the light of another, by the
method of disciplined meditation and discussion, often is said to be a work of interpre-
tation or of investigation of the meaning of the truths of faith. But one must distin-
guish between the effort to facilitate a given communication and the investigation of
the ulterior significance of truths already formulated and accepted. The former is
25 called "interpretation" in the strict sense discussed in chapter one, section G; it is
the chief work of positive theology. The latter might better be called "understanding"
as in "faith seeking understanding"; this is the work of systematic theology.
          The two tasks obviously are closely related and often are confused. One reason
for this is that theological reflection often begins from written documents, especially
30 from sacred Scripture; documents are open both to interpretation and to understanding by
systematic reflection. The interpreter of the Bible seeks to facilitate communication
of what the language actually expresses; this is the quest for the literal sense of
Scripture. Systematic reflection by disciplined meditation considers what Scripture lit-
erally communicates in one place and compares it with what it communicates in another
35 (for example, by comparing the Old and New Testaments), or compares what Scripture liter-
ally communicates with other truths pertaining to faith and Christian life. Such syste-
matic work is said to discover various spiritual or figurative--more-than-literal--
senses of Scripture (JBC 71.32-55). In fact, the effort is to understand the realities
which pertain to faith by the meditative comparison of one truth with another.
40   Confusion between interpretation and theological understanding not only occurs in
the handling of Scripture but also in treatments of defined doctrines and other truths
of faith. For example, to interpret the Church's teaching on original sin is to try to
determine the literal sense of the documents in which this teaching is expressed, such
as the decree on the subject of the Council of Trent (DS 1510-1516/787-792), and to re-
45 articulate what the documents assert in such a way that someone today can understand
them accurately and thus accept or reject what the Church actually teaches, not some
other propositions. But systematic theologians sometimes say that they wish to offer a
fresh <u>interpretation</u> of original sin, when they actually mean that they wish to propose
a new theological <u>understanding</u> of the states of affairs picked out by the propositions
50 which the Church teaches.
          Interpretation helps us to know exactly what God has revealed, precisely what He
wishes to communicate to us, especially in the Incarnation, the words and deeds, the
death and resurrection of Christ. Theological understanding helps us to discover what
difference this revelation makes to all of created reality and what difference it makes
55 or should make for our own lives, so that we can consciously and responsibly praise God
for what He is doing and cooperate with Him in doing it. Notice that one might say:
Theological reflection helps one to discover what revelation <u>means</u> for all of creation
and for our own lives. But this use of "means" does not refer to the meaning of lingui-
stic expressions which interpretation seeks; rather, it refers to relationships in
60 reality itself.

I. <u>Faith -- the presupposition of systematic theology</u>

          This distinction between interpretation and theological reflection of a systematic
65 sort points to a very important aspect of theological method: The quest for understand-
ing of the faith presupposes the acceptance of the truths of faith. As the Internation-
al Theological Commission states: ". . .theology can only be done in a living communion
with the faith of the Church."[11] Theology is bound by the word of God in Scripture
and in tradition; it is bound by the confessions of the belief of the Church in this and
70 previous times; it is bound by the documents of tradition; and it is bound by pastoral
and missionary responsibility, for theologians should take account of the impact of
their publications on the belief of the faithful, on the proclamation of the Gospel, and
on catechesis.[12]
          A dialectical method similar to that of theology can be used by one who does not
75 accept the truth which God has revealed; in such a case, the discipline is a kind of
philosophy. Or the method can be used by one--such as a believing Jew or Protestant--
who does not accept that the truth of divine revelation is present in the belief and
teaching of the Catholic Church; in such a case, the discipline is theology, but not
Catholic theology. One who is not a believer can try to interpret the Bible, using "in-
80 terpret" in the strict sense of finding its literal meaning. (Even so, the inquiry is
hampered for a nonbeliever by the tendency to ignore the extralinguistic context of
Scripture in the life of the People of God, without which the linguistic content of
Scripture is inevitably misunderstood.) But one cannot undertake to understand what one
believes, using "understand" in the sense of systematic reflection, unless one believes

something.

Although this proposition might seem self-evident, there are some today who deny it. Noticing that faith is a personal relationship with God, they exclude from faith itself all propositional content. To the extent that faith pertains to the mind, they
5 reduce it to a kind of experience of God, a preconceptual and extrapropositional religious sense. The propositions which the Church believes and hands on as truths of faith are, on this view, only symbols or inadequate representations, which never fully express faith itself.

This position presupposes the possibility of a more than sentient preconceptual
10 and extrapropositional contact with reality. I indicated in chapter one, section B, why this presupposition is implausible. The teaching of Vatican I on faith (cf. DS 3008-3020, 3031-3043/1789-1800/1810-1818) which I have cited very often, takes for granted throughout that faith itself includes the acceptance of some definite propositions. The nonpropositional notion of faith was put forward by certain theologians—referred to as
15 "Modernists"—around the beginning of this century.[13] Pius X rejects this view (cf. DS 3484-3486/2081-2085). That assent to some definite propositions is essential to faith is obvious from the New Testament itself (cf. Acts 2.41; 15.7; Rom 10.9-17; 1 Cor 15.1-8; 1 Tm 4.6; 2 Tm 4.1-5; Heb 11.1-6; 2 Pt 1.12-2.2; 2 Jn 7-9; and many other places).
20 Those who advocate a nonpropositional notion of faith should be asked several questions. First, precisely what is faith on this view, and how can one tell whether one has it or not? Second, can an individual refuse to believe? If so, how? If not, can faith justify? Third, how can individuals communicate the faith? How can any group hold the same faith? Fourth, how can any proposition symbolize or express faith?
25 Exactly what is the supposed relationship between faith and expression? How can one tell whether one or another expression is more or less appropriate?

Careful reflection upon questions of this kind will make clear that although Christian faith is much more than assent to a set of propositions, anything called "faith" which does not include such propositional content will be something not just a little
30 different but completely different from what is called "faith" in the Bible and in the whole of Catholic tradition.

It is possible for a person, like Plato, to carry on dialectical inquiry without accepting many propositions as certainly true; indeed, Plato perhaps assumed as truths which could never be contradicted only the things which must be so if dialectical in-
35 quiry is to be possible and worth carrying on. But usually, persons who engage in dialectic are not purely seekers of wisdom as Plato was; rather, they think that they in some way have ultimate truth. Christians believe that God has given humankind wisdom in the Person of our Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1.18-2.16); Catholics believe that truths which belong to this wisdom are present in the belief and teaching which comes to us in
40 the Church from the apostles (DS 1501/783, 3006/1787, DV 7-10).

Therefore, Catholic theology is a dialectical reflection which begins not only from the belief that the quest for wisdom is possible and worthwhile, but also from the belief that God has mercifully responded to humankind's quest for wisdom. In theology, every past linguistic expression is open to examination and improvement; every proposi-
45 tion which does not somehow pertain to faith is open to denial if it should turn out to be incompatible with a truth of faith; every truth of faith is open to development as the Church gradually grows in understanding of God's revelation in Christ. But in theology, not every proposition is open to denial, for then the proposition that God has revealed Himself would be open to denial, and one's inquiry would not be theological.
50 Similarly, in Catholic theology, the truths the Catholic Church proposes for belief cannot be denied.

J. The limits of reinterpretation

55 Some today seem to reject certain truths of Catholic faith, yet they say they do not deny what the Church believes, but only reinterpret it. What are we to make of this?

Certainly, more careful interpretation of the documents of faith—using "interpretation" in the strict sense—sometimes has surprising results. Also, theological reflection can throw new light on old truths without contradicting them.
60 But some people actually do deny the factual content of faith, and continue to accept only certain general propositions entailed by the Church's beliefs. They seem to feel a need to eliminate from faith everything which is factually unique, since the factually unique cannot be reduced to a phase in a rational system. For example, some writers say they reinterpret the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus; they fail to af-
65 firm (or they even deny) that He is not dead now; they accept a general proposition, such as that Jesus plays a vital role in the religious lives of His followers, which is entailed by the traditional teaching; and they claim that their account of the role Jesus plays in the lives of His followers is a reinterpretation of the traditional doctrine of the resurrection—a reinterpretation which at last arrives at its true meaning,
70 after nearly two thousand years of naive misunderstandings.

This procedure is deceptive. Catholic faith is not in a system of general propositions, but in the flesh and blood reality of the revelation of God in the Lord Jesus. We cling to the Word incarnate, to the intactness of His mother's virginity, to the bloody reality of His death, to His fleshly risen life, to His bodily presence in the
75 Eucharist, to the death-dealing effect of our first parents' sin, to the life-giving power of our Lord's risen body for our dead bodies, and to the confident hope that we shall embrace Him in the flesh. Catholic faith is not afraid of what is too concrete to be intelligible. We kneel before matter: the Word made flesh.

Vatican I already condemns anyone who "says that as science progresses it is some-
80 times possible for dogmas that have been proposed by the Church to receive a different meaning from the one which the Church understood and understands" (DS 3043/1818). In a famous statement at the beginning of Vatican II, which the Council later made its own (cf. GS 62), John XXIII calls for a suitable restatement of Catholic teaching. But he points out that this is only possible because "the deposit or the truths of faith,

contained in our sacred teaching, are one thing, while the mode in which they are enunci-
ated, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment, is another."[14]
 This statement of Pope John's often has been mistranslated and misrepresented. He
is making clear that the propositional truths of faith are distinct from its linguistic
5 expression. He is not opening the door to a merely verbal fidelity which would give the
Church's definitions of faith and her common, even if nondefinitive, ways of expressing
her belief a meaning different from the one which the Church understood when those ex-
pressions were used prior to the opening of Vatican II.
 Anyone who claims only to reinterpret the Church's beliefs and who seems to deny
10 any aspect of them should be asked: Is yours the only reinterpretation of this doctrine
or are there possibly others? In any case in which the deceptive procedure is used,
there can be plural stories, each of them inconsistent with the others.
 The next question is: By what standard is your reinterpretation to be judged
better or worse than any alternative? This question is extremely important. If the
15 answer to it is: By the standard of the witnesses of faith, interpreted as the Church
understands them, then one is dealing with a legitimate theological effort. If the an-
swer is: By the standard of modern science, or by the standard of credibility to the
contemporary mind, or by the standard of relevance to current problems, or anything of
this sort--anything except the witnesses of faith understood as the Church understands
20 them--then one is dealing with something other than a legitimate theological effort.
 Often enough, those who claim to reinterpret the Church's beliefs but really deny
them fail to ask themselves the question about a standard; they offer no decision proced-
ure for one who wishes to compare and critically evaluate so-called reinterpretations.
In the absence of a decision procedure, reinterpretation is not science, not dialectic,
25 not a disciplined form of inquiry at all. Rather, it is a form of story telling, a poor
kind of fiction in the production and reading of which some people find enjoyment.
 Of course, at times it might not be clear whether a particular proposition does
belong to the belief of the Church, and Catholic theologians will investigate and per-
haps disagree about this question of fact. Again, an individual always can make an
30 honest mistake, and without realizing it deny, perhaps by implication, a proposition
which does pertain to faith. However, if someone who sets out to do Catholic theology
should knowingly set aside Catholic faith, even in a single proposition, then he or she
would be engaging in an activity which might still appear to be Catholic theology, but
which in reality would be at best a philosophical substitute, centered upon the commit-
35 ment alternative to Catholic faith which demanded that the truth of faith be set aside.

Notes to chapter two

1. A convenient, brief introduction to theology is G. F. van Ackeren, S.J., "The-
40 ology," New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 14, pp. 39-49. A fuller introduction, which in-
cludes but is not limited to historical considerations, is Yves M.-J. Congar, O.P., A
History of Theology (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1968).
 2. On the overconfidence of St. Thomas, see Louis Bouyer, The Eternal Son: A The-
ology of the Word of God and Christology (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1978),
45 pp. 348-355; James F. Ross, "Aquinas and Philosophical Methodology," Metaphilosophy, 1
(1970), pp. 300-317. A useful and not overly difficult introduction to the philosophy
of St. Thomas is Armand A. Maurer, C.S.B., Medieval Philosophy (New York: Random House,
1962), pp. 163-191; with an excellent short bibliography, pp. 404-406.
 3. Maurer, op. cit., pp. 137-152 and 400-401, also is helpful as an introduction
50 to the thought of St. Bonaventure.
 4. Ibid., pp. 265-291 and 414-415, provides an introduction to William Ockham and
to nominalism in general.
 5. A helpful introduction to Descartes is James Collins, A History of Modern Euro-
pean Philosophy (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1954), pp. 138-198.
55 6. See P. de Letter, S.J., "Theology, History of," New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol.
14, p. 55.
 7. See Irving M. Copi, Introduction to Logic, 4th ed. (New York and London: Mac-
millian, 1972), pp. 422-468, for a simple introduction to the method of modern science.
 8. The situation in the human sciences is far from simple, but reflection on them
60 from diverse philosophical viewpoints reveals the unsatisfactoriness of the view that
they are sciences in the same sense that chemistry is a science. See Maurice Natanson,
ed., Philosophy of the Social Sciences: A Reader (New York: Random House, 1963); May
Brodbeck, ed., Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences (London: Collier-
Macmillan Ltd., 1968).
65 9. See Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., Germain Grisez, and Olaf Tollefsen, Free Choice: A
Self-Referential Argument (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976),
pp. 122-185.
 10. Thus it is a mistake to argue: "This point of Catholic teaching has not been
solemnly defined; therefore, it has not been infallibly proposed, and it could be false."
70 See John C. Ford, S.J., and Germain Grisez, "Contraception and the Infallibility of the
Ordinary Magisterium," Theological Studies, 39 (June 1978), pp. 263-277. Everything
which is solemnly defined was infallibly proposed and believed by the Church before it
was defined.
 11. International Theological Commission, Theses on the Relationship between the
75 Ecclesiastical Magisterium and Theology, June 6, 1976 (Washington, D.C.: United States
Catholic Conference, 1977), thesis 7, 2.
 12. Ibid., thesis 3.
 13. A classic statement of the modernist conception of faith, revelation, dogma,
and theology, which Pius X condemns, is by one of its leading proponents: George Tyrrell,
80 Through Scylla and Charybdis, or The Old Theology and the New (London: Longmans, Green,
and Co., 1907), pp. 265-307. A historical and critical treatment of modernism is J.
Rivière, "Modernisme," Dictionnaire de théologie catholique, vol. 10, cols. 2009-2047.
For a brief introduction with an extensive context, see Avery Dulles, S.J., Revelation
Theology: A History (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), pp. 83-89.

14. Ioannes XXIII, "Allocutio habita d. 11 oct. 1962, in initio Concilii," AAS 54 (1962) 792.

Questions for study and review

1. Distinguish the various meanings of the word "theology." Explain the distinction between positive and systematic theology; relate their distinction to the distinction between interpretation and understanding.

2. Moral theology is systematic, and the principles of Christian morality include all the basic truths of faith. How, then, does moral theology differ from dogmatic (that is, contemplative) systematic theology?

3. Explain how every attempt to develop theology on the model of a science runs into difficulty because of the uniqueness of our awareness of divine reality, whether the awareness is merely rational or is that of Christian faith. In considering this point, review question two, chapter one, and relate the two questions to one another.

4. Describe the dialectical method which I suggest as an appropriate procedure for faith seeking understanding. How does dialectical inquiry into faith lead to true development of doctrine? In considering this question, take into account question five, chapter one.

5. When one who engages in theological reflection encounters apparent contradictions, how ought he or she to proceed? The discussion in the text presupposes that one will make use of various practical means, which are not described. What might these means be?

6. Why must one who engages in dialogue offer frank and pointed criticisms of the views of his or her partner in dialogue? Today it often is suggested that it is "judgmental" or "uncharitable" to say that another is holding false views on fundamental moral and religious questions. Under what conditions is this suggestion correct?

7. Explain the main point made about the method of moral theology. Show how this point is related to the dialectical method and the presupposition of faith appropriate in all systematic theology.

8. Describe and criticize the modernist conception of faith.

9. Explain how the need for a decision procedure sets definite limits to reinterpretations of received beliefs within Catholic theology. In considering this question, review question nine, chapter one, and relate the two questions to one another.