

## Theological Disagreement: What It Is & How to Do It.<sup>1</sup>

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I'm surprised, grateful, and honored to be giving this plenary address at the CTSA's annual meeting. My thanks are due to the organizers of the meeting, and especially to President-Elect Susan Wood, who was kind enough to tender me the invitation. The Society was among my first guides into the garden of Catholic theology in the US after I was received into the Church in 1996, and I learned a great deal from attending its meetings in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I'm grateful for that, even though I've often since felt ill at ease here, and have attended irregularly since the mid-2000s. That uneasiness has been the result, mostly, of what seems to me a bad fit between my understanding of what theology is and style of doing it, and those favored and practiced by most members of the Society. Perhaps the Society is becoming less dogmatically monolithic than it has been on those matters; the President's letter on theological diversity suggests that this might be so. And of course it's possible that my uneasiness was based on a misperception. Whatever the truth about this, I hope that what I'm about to say in this address to the Society might shed some light both on my own sense of gratitude-threaded uneasiness at being here, and perhaps also on the meeting's general theme of identity and difference. I hope, too, to make a contribution to what I hope will be a move by the Society toward the *cor ecclesiae* and away from its present position, which is all too often, as it appears to me, outside the body, as scold.

With these preliminaries in place, heartfelt and without reservation as they seem to me, let's get to work.



My title is: "Theological Disagreement: What It Is & How to Do It." Under that heading I'll do the following things. First, I'll offer a definition of theology in its broad sense, and then narrow that down to give a definition of Catholic theology, which I take to be a kind, certainly not the only kind, of theology. I'll then derive from the definition of Catholic theology an understanding of the range and kinds of theological disagreement, restricting

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<sup>1</sup> What you're reading is, with minor cosmetic changes, exactly the lecture delivered as a plenary at the CTSA's annual meeting in San Diego on 6 June 2014. I'm grateful to Michele Saracino of Manhattan College, for her helpful response at that meeting. I'm grateful, too, for comments on earlier drafts of this piece, to Carole Baker, Jennifer Benedict, Luke Bretherton, James Garneau, Judith Heyhoe, Reinhard Hütter, Bruce Marshall, and Stanley Hauerwas. Their gracious help shouldn't be taken to suggest agreement with anything written here.

this analysis to disagreement among Catholic theologians. I'll end by making some recommendations about the Society's own practices.

'Theology,' in its broadest and most fundamental sense, denotes a particular human practice: that of engaging in reasoned thought and discourse about god. The practice is, in Latin, *sermo de deo*, and in Greek *logia* about *theos*. This is the meaning suggested by the word's etymology; it is also the meaning standardly given the word in the Latin-using West.<sup>2</sup> In this meaning, the most general one, theology is a particular kind of discursive performance, distinguished from other such performances by what it is about. This is an ordinary and perspicuous way of distinguishing one discourse from another: palaeontology is about old things; anthropology about the human; geology about the planet earth; and theology about god or the gods. These discourses are distinguished one from another by their objects, by what it is they are about—by their distinct kinds of aboutness, we might say, to speak as philosophers sometimes do. There are difficulties, to put it mildly, in specifying how anything we might say can be about that god who is the LORD,<sup>3</sup> the creator *ex nihilo* of all that is, and the nature of those difficulties is itself a properly theological topic. I won't pause to say more about those difficulties, however, but will content myself with the formal claim that the sense of 'about' in sentences like 'palaeontology is about ... ' or 'theology is about ... ' is given by the nature of what is being talked about and the locally-formed habits of those doing the talking, and therefore varies significantly from science to science.<sup>4</sup>

In this broadest sense of theology, almost anyone can do it. You don't have to be a believer, certainly not a Christian, and still less a Catholic; you can be a Jew; you can be a Muslim; you can be a pagan. All you need is sufficient skill in the discourse to be able to contribute to it, and it is not such a difficult skill to obtain—no more difficult, I should think, than getting the skill to be able to contribute to discourse about monster-

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., Augustine, *De civitate dei*, 8.1, who defines *theologia* as *de divinitate ratio sive sermo*, and who, in so defining it, makes no sharp distinction, and perhaps no distinction of any kind, between it and *philosophia*, which, since it is the love of wisdom, etymologically speaking, and since the LORD is also wisdom, and since love entails knowledge, is love-knowledge of the LORD just as much as philosophy is; see, among many instances of this line of reasoning, his lyrical appreciation of what the Platonists know about the LORD in *De vera religione*, and in *De civitate Dei*, 8, *passim*). Compare, for example, Thomas Aquinas, with beautiful precision: "*illud est subiectum scientiae, de quo est sermo in scientia, Sed in hac scientia [scilicet theologia] fit sermo de Deo: dicitur enim theologia, quasi sermo de Deo. Ergo Deus est subiectum huius scientiae,*" *Summa Theologiae*, 1.1.7, *sed contra*. See the helpful discussion of the senses of 'theology' in Bruce Marshall, "Quod Scit Una Uetula: Aquinas on the Nature of Theology," in Joseph Wawrykow & Rik Van Nieuwenhove, ed., *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 1-35.

<sup>3</sup> In my usage, 'god' means any putative member of the class of the gods; 'God' means the only actual member of that class; and LORD is the proper name of that member. See, e.g., Psalm 95 for this usage.

<sup>4</sup> 'Science' is a better term for the kind of activity theology is than, e.g., 'discipline,' which perhaps sounds more natural to contemporary ears. 'Discipline' unavoidably echoes the Weberian iron cage of *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, while *scientia* is among the standard terms in the Latin West for the kind of cognitive-contemplative intimacy with what they come to know possible for human creatures.

truck rallies or about the bouquet of wine made from Sicilian grapes. What count as constraints upon discourse about god—what can be said in it and what can't; which utterances are well-formed and which are not—will vary to some extent from one community of discourse to another, and the question of how deep those differences go is a properly empirical one. Augustine thought that the Platonists understood the LORD's simplicity; I think that some Hindu thinkers understood that the LORD's relation to what is other than himself must be characterized as one of *creatio ex nihilo*;<sup>5</sup> but some Christian thinkers have thought, it seems, that the truth about matters such as these cannot be arrived at without explicit knowledge of the LORD's self-revelation in Christ. I won't say more about these differences and difficulties here, other than to emphasize that if anyone's theological discourse is about the only god there is, then it is about the LORD, for he is exactly that god, the great king above all gods; there is no other.

So far, theology. What now about Catholic theology? What makes theology Catholic? Catholic theology is constituted as such by the fact that its discourse about the LORD is self-consciously and intentionally responsive to what the LORD has given of himself to his bride, the Church. That gift is given and evident paradigmatically and essentially in the LORD's gift of himself as Jesus Christ, and in the events preparatory to and flowing from that gift—which is to say the election of Israel and the founding and sustaining of the Church. More particularly, and since theology is distinct from worship, which is responsive to that same gift, Catholic theology is responsive to the LORD's doctrinal self-gift, which is to say the gift of a lexicon and a syntax for thinking and speaking about the LORD, and of a substantive set of teachings about the LORD's nature and activity. That doctrinal self-gift is evident first and fundamentally in the canon of Scripture; and second and derivatively in the magisterially given and authoritatively binding teachings of the Church about matters that have to do with the LORD. These are what theologians, those who practice theology, attend to first and last; this is the material with which they—we, as Catholic theologians gathered here in fellowship—work; this is the corpus of doctrine, *sacra doctrina* as some Catholic theologians have liked to call it, to which we conform our thought and about which we endlessly think. The gift of doctrine is a beautiful thing; it is also an important thing. The privilege given us of having sufficient learning and sufficient intellectual gifts to be able to think about the doctrinal *corpus Christi*, and of having enough time and space to think about it, is therefore a great and humbling one. None of us is individually very good at theology; none of us can see its scope and detail with clarity; and even all together, all the hundreds of us gathered here at this meeting and all the thousands of theologians the Church has now and has ever had, we are nothing more than amateurs and stammerers. Even the teaching Church, in the paradigmatic persons of its bishops, can only be incipiently theological.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine on Plato and the Platonists: *Confessiones*, book 7; *De civitate Dei*, book 8; *Epistula* 118; *Contra Academicos*, book 3; and so on. Hindu thinkers on the LORD as creator *ex nihilo*: Ramanuja (eleventh century), especially in the *Sri Bhasya* and the *Gitabhasya*; and Madhva (thirteenth century), especially in the *Brahmasutrabhasya* and the *Tattvasankhyanam*.

<sup>6</sup> Underlying this paragraph is *Donum Veritatis*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (1990).

All the formulations I've just given float upon deep waters which there's no time to plumb today. What I've said is perhaps enough to distinguish Catholic theology from Protestant, which shares some of the characteristics I've outlined but by no means all; and certainly from Jewish or Islamic or Buddhist or Hindu theology, which share fewer. Since my principal task today is to talk about theological disagreement among Catholics, to make some suggestions about what that activity is and how it might best be done, I'll now emphasize three tasks that belong to the work of Catholic theology, tasks derived from the definitional sketch just given and intended to make it easier to see what Catholic theologians are doing when they disagree one with another, and to yield some prescriptions about how disagreement should be undertaken and about what its purposes and limits are.



The first task of a Catholic theologian in considering a particular topic or question is discovery. She needs to discover what counts as doctrine on her topic—what, that is, constitutes the Church's lexicon and substantive teaching with respect to it. That lexicon and that teaching bind her: they are the material upon which her thought works. To be a theologian is to be under authority: the authority, most fundamentally, of the LORD's self-revelation, which means, textually speaking, the authority of Scripture and of magisterially-given teaching, which is itself formulated under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This task of discovery is often no easy one. The tradition is long, its archive large and in many languages, and the relative authoritative weight of its various elements itself a matter of doctrine, and, therefore, of interpretive dispute. Once discovered, the content of what has been discovered needs to be ordered and systematized, to the extent possible and appropriate to whatever question is under consideration. Then, the theologian knows, always imperfectly and often erroneously, what she has to deal with. She knows the liberating constraints under which her thought may now work—rather as a trial lawyer, once the process of legal discovery is complete, knows what he has to work with, what is possible in the way of argument and what is not, and how the case may now be constructed.

Discovery is followed by interpretation. Knowing, for example, that the Fifth Lateran has some interesting and very particular things to say about the immortality of the soul,<sup>7</sup> or that the Synod of Constantinople rejects *apokatastasis*,<sup>8</sup> or that the Constitution *Benedictus Deus* contains a strong affirmation of the intermediate state between death and general resurrection,<sup>9</sup> does not provide anything approaching clarity about what these pronouncements may or must be taken to mean. No doctrine, whether

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<sup>7</sup> Denzinger (editio XLIII), §§1440-1441.

<sup>8</sup> Denzinger (editio XLIII), §411.

<sup>9</sup> Denzinger (editio XLIII), §§1000-1002.

scriptural, conciliar, or more broadly magisterial, interprets itself; there are always many suggestions that can be made about how a doctrine may be read; and it is a proper part of the theologian's task to make just such suggestions.

Very often, a particular theologian's suggestions as to how this or that doctrine ought be interpreted will be pursued by juxtaposition: that is, deciding which doctrines to juxtapose to which influences how they are read—it pushes interpretive thought about them in a certain direction. But this is not the only way to perform the task of interpretation. The theologian may also look for points of doctrinal tension within the broadly magisterial tradition, and suggest speculative resolutions of them—about, for example, the weight and significance of the thought of Thomas Aquinas for determining the theological import of particular philosophical positions;<sup>10</sup> or about whether there is any need for a theologian to think that there is a meaningful distinction between theology and philosophy;<sup>11</sup> or about whether the fairly consistent magisterial denial of bodies to the angels entails that they have no spacetime location.<sup>12</sup>

It's also possible, and perhaps this is the most common case, to look at some widely-distributed element of the magisterial lexicon whose semantic content and syntax are under-interpreted, or whose interpretation is controversial—such as, 'own body' (*corpus proprium*) said of both the flesh of a particular person before death and after the general resurrection;<sup>13</sup> or *subsistit in*, said of the relation between the Church of Jesus Christ and the visible Catholic Church;<sup>14</sup> or *persona* used as term of art for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;<sup>15</sup> and then to suggest some ways of thinking about what these terms or phrases mean, and how they might be combined with others.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the ways in which the theologian's interpretive task may be undertaken. It is an essential and many-faceted aspect of what the theologian is called upon to do, and it is ingenuity and energy in performing the interpretive task that principally distinguishes great theologians from merely good ones.

Discovery and interpretation are followed by speculation. For me, and I suspect for many theologians, theology's speculative aspect is its most interesting and intellectually exciting. That is not because I expect to arrive at the truth by theological speculation, though of course I hope for that; neither is it because I think that the understandings of particular topics I entertain when I speculate theologically have any authority, or indeed any weight at all other than that to be found in the responses they might prompt in others who read them, and the effect they might have, utterly imponderable, on the deliberations of the teaching Church over time. Speculation is,

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<sup>10</sup> See Leo XIII's encyclical letter, *Aeterni patris* (1879).

<sup>11</sup> See, especially, Vatican I's Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* (1870), and John Paul II's encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (1998).

<sup>12</sup> See the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§328, 330; cf. Pius XII's *Humani Generis* (1950), Denzinger (editio XLIII), §3891 (but this is at best an *obiter dictum*).

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., the Fourth Lateran's Definition against the Albigensians and Cathars, Denzinger (editio XLIII), §801.

<sup>14</sup> See *Lumen Gentium* (1964), §8.

<sup>15</sup> For the classical form of the question about the meaning of *persona* in trinitarian grammar, see Augustine, *De trinitate*, 5.10—taken up again in *De trinitate*, 7.7-11.

rather, a delight because it is something close to a pure activity of the intellect, an unadulterated thought-performance about matters of great importance—matters, in fact, of greater importance than all others. When theologians speculate, they begin to move beyond doctrine. That is because, if the tasks of discovery and interpretation have been done well, the theologian knows what doctrine requires on this matter, and has at least begun the task of interpreting and ordering the *depositum fidei*. Performance of those tasks, if done well, has among its yields the identification of questions to which there is no direct doctrinal answer, questions, that is, to which neither Scripture nor its magisterial interpretation provides an answer, and to thought about which they may not even provide much guidance. Of course, there are many nontheological questions of this sort: theology has nothing to say about the validity of proofs of Fermat's Last Theorem, or about the macro-economic policies of the International Monetary Fund. But these are not the province of the theologian, and, fortunately for theologians who care about having something to do, there are also very many properly theological questions, and it is these about which the theologian delightedly speculates after having done her work of discovery and interpretation.

Two examples may suffice, both of considerable interest to me. The first is the question of Islam: What is it? What does the LORD have to do with it? How is it to be accounted for, thought about, and responded to by Catholic theologians? The Church has no doctrinal position on this, and it is in part a theological question, which means that it falls within the scope of properly theological speculation. There has been plenty of that, but even at that level there is no dominant line of thought.<sup>16</sup> The second is the question of the flesh of nonhuman animals: Might it, or some instances of it, be present in the resurrection—be resurrected, that is to say, for eternal life? Again, no doctrine speaks to this, though there are certainly elements of the grammar and syntax of properly Christian thought that suggest lines of thought about it, and a fair amount of theological speculation about it.<sup>17</sup>

This picture of the theologian's tasks implies that it is not among them to establish Church doctrine. That is essentially an episcopal function.<sup>18</sup> Theologians may and should teach Church doctrine by ordering it, systematizing it, writing books and essays in which it is set forth, giving lectures on it, speculating about it, and so on. But that is not the same as establishing what the Church's doctrine is. Doing that requires an authority theologians lack: the authority to pronounce, performatively, on the question of what it is that the Church teaches about this or that, and in the act of pronouncing to make it so. Historians and analysts of the baseball book of rules may certainly depict, analyze, and

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<sup>16</sup> On Islam, see *Nostra Aetate* (1965), §3, and the large number of consultative documents since. The standard Christian position from John of Damascus to Nicholas of Cusa is that Islam is a Christian heresy.

<sup>17</sup> On the flesh of nonhuman animals and plants: see, speculatively, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.9.

<sup>18</sup> The Spirit moves, as well, in the hearts and minds and bodies of all the baptized, and that is why the *(con)sensus fidelium* is deeply implicated in the episcopal discernment and formulation of doctrine. But still, when doctrine is defined, the agents of central and non-negotiable importance in doing that are episcopal ones. For a beautiful poetical-speculative version of this point see Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 149-156.

offer speculative suggestions about the definitions of 'ball' and 'strike'; but they have no power to rule on the field of play that some pitch is one or the other. That power is reserved to umpires, and it is a performative power: when the umpire calls a strike, that act suffices to make it one; when the Church's bishops assembled define doctrine, that act suffices to make it such, and it does so because of the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There are, of course, complications here on questions of detail: it is not always clear just when the Church's bishops have defined doctrine; and the category 'doctrine' itself is internally complex—there are kinds and degrees.<sup>19</sup> But the schema given remains valid and important even if it is not always easy to see just how to apply it. Clarifying its application is among the tasks of theologians.

This picture of the theologian's work is, or ought to be, productive of speculative work of a daring and radical kind. If it is incumbent upon theologians to get as clear as they can about the difference between Church doctrine, on the one hand, and speculative proposals about and elaborations of doctrine, on the other hand, then theologians are freed from anxiety about whether their speculative proposals are right. It is not up to them—to us—to decide this; whether any element of a particular theologian's speculative proposal is incorporated into Church doctrine is a decision made by the teaching Church over time, with the college of bishops playing an essential role in arriving at that decision. And usually the time taken is so much that the theologian is safely dead and (perhaps) enjoying a preliminary version of the beatific vision before it is clear how his work has been appropriated and used by the Church. In this way, the theologian is relieved of anxiety about her own rightness and her own influence, at least if she is Catholic; the picture is very different for Protestant theologians, on whose shoulders a heavy weight is placed, one that cannot be borne and that hampers and constrains the properly speculative aspect of theological work. The same weight bears down upon Catholic theologians when they forget, or avert their gaze from, the nature of their task. What we have as Catholic theologians is the deep freedom that comes from the recognition of the authority under which we work; I wish that more of us—and especially more of this Society's members—saw this clearly, and worked in the light of such clarity.

Given this understanding of the theologian's task, a conclusion about the point and purpose of theological work follows effortlessly. Theologians do their work in order to bring the Church to greater cognitive intimacy with the LORD. This is not the deepest intimacy there is: that is to be had in worship, and most especially in the sacramental life. But it is still intimacy of a kind. The LORD wants us to know him as best we can, and the theologian contributes to that knowledge, or may do so if her work goes well. Keeping our eyes on the prize—a deeper knowledge of the LORD—ought help us avoid distractions, and especially the confusion of taking Catholic theology to be about something other than the LORD as he has given himself to his Church. It is easy, and common, for theologians to find themselves serving and seeking other goods—social justice, perhaps; or world peace; or the preservation of the created order—as if pursuing these things were theology's primary task. But it is not. These topics, and many others like them, are theological only to the extent that treatment of them flows from and is

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<sup>19</sup> See J. T. R. Lamont, "Determining the Content and Degree of Authority of Church Teachings," *The Thomist* 72/3 (2008), 371-407. And for a case study, see my "Is There a Doctrine of the Descent Into Hell?" *Pro Ecclesia* 17/3 (2008), 257-268, and the literature cited therein.

integrated with theology's response to what the LORD has given us of himself. The LORD is theology's first and last topic, thought is theology's first and last device, and the Church theology's first and last audience.



If theology is principally a work of the intellect, then it is also intrinsically and properly agonistic. It proceeds, that is, very largely by way of struggle with and differentiation from incompatible positions on whatever matter is at hand. This is true of all works of the intellect, and it's true because we human creatures can neither learn how to think nor perform the act of thinking other than responsively. The same is true of speech and speaking. The broadly Cartesian model of thought that depicts it as capable of proceeding, even of proceeding most effectively, a priori, in solitude and silence, is mistaken in every respect. Solitude and silence cannot bring thought into being or make it flourish because thought is dependent—causally, logically, practically—upon prior responsive engagement. That's simply how thought works: in response to gifts given. We can respond to and learn from those with whom we agree, of course, as well as those with whom we disagree, and we always do some of both. But the principal engine of thought—theological thought as much as every other variety—is the making of perspicuous and provocative distinctions, and doing that is always a matter of the agon. Spending too much time with the like-minded damages speculative thought, and eventually kills it; what the theologian needs, if she wants to do good speculative work, is a situation in which her thought is placed under pressure by intense and deep-going disagreements. Think of Augustine arguing with Jerome about the proper interpretation of Galatians 2, Augustine arguing with Julian about the proper understanding of human sexuality, Pascal arguing with the Jesuits about moral theology and the right understanding of human action, Newman against Pusey on whether anglo-catholicism is possible, or even, in a different rhetorical register, the structure of the scholastic *quaestio*, which is essentially argumentative.<sup>20</sup>

But here we need a little care. I've said that the best disagreements, those the presence of which is most stimulating for thought, are intense and deep-going, and this is true. Something needs to be at stake, or at least needs to be perceived to be at stake, in order for the agon to reach a properly productive pitch. But disagreement, if it's broad as well as deep, if, that is, there's just too much of it because it extends too far on every side, can prevent argument as easily as enabling it. Arguments between advocates of cricket and advocates of baseball about which is the best game are typically anemic, frustrating, and short-lived, and that's just because there's not enough agreement to permit them to

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<sup>20</sup> For Augustine's correspondence with Jerome, see (Augustine's) letters nos. 28, 39-40, 67-68, 71-73, 75, 81-81; for Augustine on Julian, see the *Contra Iulianum* (opus imperfectum) (early 420s); for Pascal and the Jesuits, see the former's *Lettres provinciales*; for Newman against Pusey, see the former's *Letter to Pusey* (1865).

become deep and interesting; the two games differ profoundly in structure, purpose, and performance. By contrast, arguments about the appropriateness to baseball of the designated hitter rule occur within a context of agreement about nearly everything, and can, therefore, come to have all the properties of a good argument. The principle that the best, most intense, and most productive arguments are those between people who agree about almost everything is generalizable, and applies very well to Catholic theological disagreement.<sup>21</sup> Catholic theologians have, or should have, agreement about almost everything, and therefore are not lacking in what makes the intellectual agon possible.



Catholic theological disagreements typically belong to one of three broad kinds. There are, first, disagreements about what Catholic theology is and how to do it. Second, there are disagreements of a broadly interpretive kind about the purchase or meaning of particular items of doctrine. And third, there are disagreements about particular speculative proposals in theology. These kinds of disagreement overlap in various ways, as will become evident; but it remains heuristically useful to distinguish them, and to treat them separately and seriatim.

Disagreements of the first kind, about what Catholic theology is and how to do it, are mostly unproductive and uninteresting. They amount, typically, to disagreement about the rules of the game, and in that way are like disagreements between advocates of baseball and cricket. It might be argued, for instance, that Catholic theology is not, as I've depicted it in these remarks, an intellectual enterprise self-conscious about its dependence upon doctrine, and to that extent a discourse responsive to authority. In an extreme case, an advocate of such a position might argue that it does not belong to Catholic theology to begin with discovery as I've depicted this—that the question of what binding doctrine there is on a topic is not to the point at all when theology is being undertaken. Perhaps, it might be said, Catholic theology is purely speculative and needs no authorities of any kind; or perhaps its authorities are exclusively the voices or experiences of some group favored by or of special interest to the theologian; and there are many other possibilities. Often—and this has commonly been the case in the public pronouncements of this Society during the last three decades or so, as also sometimes in the plenary addresses given before it—this rejection of the need for discovery as proper to Catholic theology is coupled with affirmations of the autonomy of theologians. If you think that Catholic theology is not a discourse based upon authority, it will come easily to you to reject the constraint of your own theological practices by such authorities, whether they be living bishops or formulations of doctrine from the archive. And such rejections are

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<sup>21</sup> For a philosophical version of this point, see Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in idem, *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 183-198 (first published in 1974).

commonplace among North American Catholic theologians; this Society has been the principal public voice supporting them.<sup>22</sup>

I've called these kinds of theological disagreement uninteresting, and that is because in most cases they are disputes about a label, like, in form, the legal disputes about which wines can properly be called 'champagne.' Such disputes are not, typically, about what a thing is: sparkling wines produced in California or Oregon remain just what they are whether or not it is permitted to affix the label 'champagne' to them; so do sparkling wines produced in the Champagne area of France. What's at issue isn't the nature of the thing, but rather what's permitted by way of labelling. So also, usually, with disputes between theologians who deny the need for doctrinal discovery, and those who affirm it. A *mujerista* theologian might take as authoritative for her theological enterprise only the voices and experiences of Latinas, and thus not see or actively deny the need for doctrinal discovery of the kind I've sketched. A Thomist of the strict observance might, think all that's necessary for doing theology is analysis and interpretation of what Thomas wrote. Each can recognize, with enough attention and care, what the other is doing; and each may think of what they are doing as properly and fully Catholic theology. (I doubt that either is.) But disagreements about whether and why what each does, theologically speaking, is to be called 'Catholic' are likely to remain sterile and to be resolved, if ever they are, by some approximate equivalent to the European court rulings that limited the application of the term 'champagne' to sparkling wines produced in the appropriate region of France. That is, by stipulation backed, where possible, by sanction.

It's interesting in this connection to consider the differences between the mission statement of this Society, and that of the Academy of Catholic Theology, which is another, much smaller and much newer (founded in 2007) US professional association for Catholic theologians.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., the Society's resolutions and public statements about the cases of Margaret Farley (2012) and Roger Haight (2005).

<sup>23</sup> I should note that I am a founding member of the Academy of Catholic Theology, and still serve on its board. Here are the two mission statements: (1) CTSA: "Our purpose, within the context of the Roman Catholic tradition, is to promote studies and research in theology, to relate theological science to current problems, and to foster a more effective theological education, by providing a forum for an exchange of views among theologians and with scholars in other disciplines. ¶In this way the Society seeks to assist those entrusted with a teaching ministry of the Church to develop in the Christian people a more mature understanding of their faith, and to further the cause of unity among all people through a better appreciation of the role of religious faith in the life of human beings and society." (2) ACT: "The Academy of Catholic Theology's principal purpose is to foster theological work of the highest intellectual standard that is faithful in the Spirit to the Revelation of God in Christ, as that Revelation has been handed on in Scripture and Tradition, and authoritatively interpreted by the Magisterium. Members of the Academy seek the integration of the sacred sciences and their related subdisciplines; they further value the role of philosophical investigation, especially metaphysics, in the integration of faith and reason. In this regard the Academy subscribes to the principles articulated in Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian: "In theology ... freedom of inquiry is the hallmark of a rational discipline whose object is given by Revelation, handed on and interpreted in the Church under the authority of the Magisterium, and received by faith. These givens have the force of principles." The mission of the Academy is to receive and seek to understand these givens of faith, insofar as the Holy Spirit enables us to do so in via."

The mission statement of this Society, the CTSA, uses the word 'theology' and its derivatives four times, but specifies its meaning only by locating it "within the context of the Roman Catholic tradition"; nothing at all is said about what theology is or how it should be done. The implication is either that it's sufficiently obvious who is and who is not a Catholic theologian, and what Catholic theology is and how it should be done, that no comment on these matters is required; or, perhaps, that the Society wishes not to take a position on these matters, and thus to make the set of Catholic theologians co-extensive with the set of those who wish to call themselves such.

In contrast, the mission statement of the Academy of Catholic Theology is centrally concerned to say what Catholic theology is and how it should be done, and to gather to itself theologians who understand what they do in this way; it makes what I've called doctrinal discovery an essential part of the enterprise, and is sufficiently explicit about the place of the magisterium in that enterprise that it quotes *Donum Veritatis*, the 1990 Instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian, on exactly that question. One might reasonably say that the Academy's statement exhibits some anxiety about what Catholic theology is; one might also say, with yet more justification, that the Academy's mission statement is to some degree framed with the existence of an entity like the Society in mind. But whatever the right causal story is, it is clear that the nature of the theological enterprise was of interest to the founders of the Academy, and that it was not to the founders of the Society—or to whoever was responsible for the latest version of its mission statement.

It might seem that the Academy's mission statement is restrictive in a way that the Society's is not. And in one way that is true. But in fact it seems to me that the Society's apparently open and nonrestrictive understanding of what Catholic theology is has led to dogmatic closure about the issue both more profound and more protean than anything suggested by the Academy's statement. That is—and here I venture an empirical claim about which I'm happy to be corrected by those who've studied these matters more closely than I have or am likely to—the very openness of the Society's mission statement with respect to the question of theology is what contributes to its lack of hospitality to those who have a more precise and thought-through understanding of what it is they do as theologians. It's as if the World Series were left sufficiently open, definitionally speaking, that Jamaica's cricket team could be invited to play, with the result that no game can be played. Those who'd like to play baseball, and therefore protest the presence of cricketers as detrimental to the game they know and love, are then excluded as knuckle-draggingly troglodytic dogmatists. And the upshot is the replacement of a highly rule-governed and beautiful series of baseball games with some more or less aimless exercises with balls and bats, exercises whose very formlessness makes impossible the discrimination of beauty from ugliness and truth from falsehood, and which, of course, makes the recognition of mistakes impossible. For that, you need broad and detailed agreement about rules, and about what it means to follow them.<sup>24</sup>

This is a fanciful example, of course, and its applicability to our topic may reasonably be disputed. But it does seem to me a not entirely inadequate representation of

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<sup>24</sup> The classic analysis of rule-following, and its concomitant, error-identification, is that by Ludwig Wittgenstein. See, e.g., *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §208, on *und so weiter*.

the state of theological play in the Society, and one traceable exactly to the let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom approach on its part to the work of theology. The truth is that the best intellectual work in any field, theology as much as any other, occurs when the field is narrowly defined. Only with bracingly severe formal constraints in place can effective intellectual work be done.

What I've just said does not rule out significant and deep-going disagreements about what Catholic theology is and is for; but it does relocate such disagreements at the level of the interpretive or the speculative—the second and third kinds of disagreement distinguished earlier. That is, any theological enterprise that does not take the task of doctrinal discovery seriously (an extreme case would be one that rejected such a task altogether) *ipso facto* doesn't count as Catholic theology. But this still permits, and indeed suggests, the possibility of interesting, polemical, and passionate disagreement about what Catholic theology is and is for. It's just that such disagreements, if they are to count as disagreements within Catholic theology rather than disagreements extrinsic to it, would typically have the form of interpretive arguments about what a particular doctrine or quasi-doctrine should be taken to mean. To make this general principle particular: any Catholic-theological analysis of what the task of Catholic theology is that did not think it important to engage and interpret *Donum veritatis* would, just because of that, place itself outside the ambit of Catholic theology properly understood. But *Donum veritatis*, like any other magisterial document, does not interpret itself, and is thus open to a variety of readings (which is not the same as to say just any reading) of all its central claims, readings that might suggest distinct speculative tracks for thought. Catholic disagreements about the theologian's task should begin from, and be threaded through by, engagement with this text, among others. That's what makes them disagreements that belong to Catholic theology.

But why, you may ask, think of Catholic theology like this, as having doctrinal discovery as among its non-negotiable characteristics? This takes us back to the labelling dispute. I have no answer to the question that does not already assume that Catholic theology should be thought of in this way. *Simili modo*, if I'm asked why baseball should be understood as the game ordered by the baseball rule-book and not that of some other game, I have no noncircular answer. But that is not a problem; it's a feature of human thought. If asked to justify the validity of *modus ponens*, the principle of material implication (if p, then q; p; therefore q), it turns out that I cannot without deploying the very principle whose validity is in question. But it is hard to see this as a problem. In many cases, the question 'why think of *s* as *p*?' when pressed, can only be answered stipulatively: that's how it is.<sup>25</sup> In our case, this means that if you want—and it's pretty clear that a goodly number of members of the Society do want—to understand Catholic theology as an enterprise to which doctrinal discovery is irrelevant or inimical, you may. The upshot will be that the intellectual practice you perform under that name is not recognizable to me as Catholic theology, as the one I perform probably is not to you. There that dispute must remain. What each of us can do in such a case is do what we do, hope to make beautiful the artifacts we produce, and show them, in humility and love, to

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<sup>25</sup> "Habe ich die Begründungen erschöpft, so bin ich nun auf dem harten Felsen angelangt, und mein Spaten biegt sich zurück. Ich bin dann geneigt, zu sagen: "So handle ich eben." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, from §217.

those engaged in other enterprises. That's what I'm doing here this morning, with the words of this talk. The beauty and the passion of Catholic theology is in large part given to it, as I see things, by its intrinsic responsiveness to authority. That not all Catholics see it this way is a matter for lament.

What I've just said is intended to show the limits of argument about what counts as Catholic theology, and to suggest the essentially stipulative nature of conclusions on that matter. Whenever it's the case that two groups of people disagree about the meaning and reference of an important word or phrase—'Catholic theology,' 'champagne,' 'marriage,' and so on—there is and can be no easy resolution, and, short of the law court or a language police like the Académie Française, no resolution at all. I've shown you what I think, and I would very much like you all to think it too. I have no expectation of that outcome, however.



Disagreements about what Catholic theology is and is for are, we can be thankful, not the only kinds of disagreement we should discuss. Much more interesting and productive are disagreements at the interpretive and speculative levels. These, recall, occur among those who agree, broadly at least, about what Catholic theology is and is for, including the importance of doctrinal discovery to that enterprise. They are disagreements about what formulated doctrine should properly be taken to mean, and they are disagreements about the direction in which speculative thought should move when there is no explicit doctrine on a particular matter. I've mentioned some instances of disagreements of this kind already. They can go deep, and issue in incompatible positions. If Augustine is right about the proper interpretation of Galatians 2, Jerome can't be.<sup>26</sup> If Thomas is right about the essential bodilessness of the angels, then Augustine must be wrong that they may be thought of as having bodies.<sup>27</sup> If John Henry Newman is right about deathlessness being proper to the Blessed Virgin because of her sinlessness, then those many theologians who think that it belonged to her nature to die even though sinless can't be.<sup>28</sup> If Hans Urs von

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<sup>26</sup> See note 20.

<sup>27</sup> For Thomas on the angels see *Summa Theologiae* 1.50-64, and the *Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis*. For Augustine on the angelic (and demonic) body, see *De divinatione daemonum*, passim.

<sup>28</sup> For Newman on the Blessed Virgin's sinlessness, deathlessness, and (yet) death, see, inter alia, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, vol. II (London: Longmans, 1907), pp. 227-228; *Letters and Diaries*, vol. XXII (London: Nelson, 1972), p. 225; Philip Boyce, ed., *Mary: The Virgin Mary in the Life and Writings of John Henry Newman* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), pp. 161-162; and, very strikingly, *The Sermon Notes of John Henry Newman* (London: Longmans, 1913), p. 225.

Balthasar is right about how to understand Christ's descent into hell, then theologians who differ on that matter, such as Alyssa Pitstick, can't be.<sup>29</sup> And so on.

Disagreements like this, in part speculative and in part interpretive, are the lifeblood of Catholic theology. That's because they involve the essential and defining tools of thought: precision and perspicuity in the making of distinctions, imagination in constructing thought-experiments that reveal the essential structure of a position, rhetorical passion in argumentative engagement with opposed positions, and so on. By means of them, theologians clarify, order, and develop their thought: for those purposes, there is nothing half as effective as a good opponent, someone, that is, who agrees with you about almost everything—who is, that's to say, a Catholic theologian in the sense given to that descriptor in these remarks—and yet who disagrees with you deeply about the particular matter at hand, whatever that might be. This means that theologians should actively seek disagreements of this kind, and when they find them, should delight in them as a gift. It's rather like being caressed: the gift of a caress is what gives you your flesh as itself being capable of offering caresses, and the gift of an argument is what gives you thought as capable itself of offering arguments. For the intellectual life, there's nothing better.

The Catholic theologian, however, as I've already suggested, is not in the game solely for intellectual delight, even though that is present, as epiphenomenon, in great intensity. No, she is in the game for the Church: she offers her speculative and interpretive proposals to the Church as gifts whose reception and use she neither knows nor needs to know, but about which she is confident that, over time, it will be right. Her errors (and there are always many of them) will fall away, her truths will redound to the glory of the LORD, her perspicuous distinctions will enter into the Church's intellectual life, and her confusions and imprecisions will fall away. All we have to do is work as theologians under the sign of hope and with all the energy and skill we can muster. The rest isn't up to us, *Deo gratias*.



I conclude with three brief recommendations to the Society.

The first is that the Society encourage more theology, more serious thought and writing about the LORD which is responsive to the *depositum fidei*, and in doing this discourage (otherwise interesting, no doubt) intellectual work that doesn't fall under that rubric, or is at best peripheral and ancillary to it.

The second is that the Society actively foster theological disagreement at the interpretive and speculative levels. Too many of the Society's consultations and panels and so on, in my experience, proceed under the umbrella of a softly self-congratulatory

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<sup>29</sup> See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Was dürfen wir hoffen?* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1986); Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

dogmatism which doesn't permit serious disagreement and actively prevents polemical exchange. This is a mistake. The Society ought to encourage more contestation: that's how thought works.

The third is that the Society make a serious attempt to reflect the range of theological work actually being done by Catholic theologians in the United States. It is, after all, the largest professional organization of its kind in the US, and probably therefore in the world, and it is explicit about its desire to be a place in which all Catholic theologians can find a place to share their work. There are perhaps some signs that the Society is moving in this direction—its recent report on theological diversity is perhaps one such. But still, it seems to me, much more needs to be done, and intentional effort on the part of the Society will be needed to do it. Seriousness about this goal should also help the second goal, that of fostering serious disagreement—for if a more representative range of the Catholic theological work being done in the US were to be part of the Society's life, then serious disagreement at the speculative and interpretive levels would likely be evident across the board. That's what I hope for.