

*POPE JOHN PAUL II ON ST THOMAS AQUINAS AS THE MODEL AND
GUIDE FOR THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY*

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Pope John Paul II fulfilled a great mission in his 27 year long pontificate: he consolidated and guided the many discordant energies resulting from the Second Vatican Council; he cleared a path through the confusion of the post conciliar years; he set the Church out into the deep of the new millennium. “Duc in altum,” put out into the deep, our Lord’s words to Peter, were one of his favorite phrases, along with “Be not afraid.” He traveled the globe, visited many unlikely places and persons, studied contemporary philosophy, art, and politics; he wrote and preached prodigiously; at the end of his life he was a silent witness to that joy born of suffering, the paradox of the Beatitudes and was acclaimed by millions and millions of people upon his death. So how does the medieval Dominican, St. Thomas Aquinas, factor into his story? And what is the possible relevance of Aquinas to a contemporary university?

Well let us think about the stories within stories. Why did Karol Wojtyla, a Polish priest, philosopher and Bishop take on the name of John Paul II. He followed the brief pontificate of Pope John Paul I. So why that name John Paul to begin with? It consolidates the two persons behind Vatican II – John XXIII and Paul VI. We put together two who are frequently put apart, the good John and the tough Paul. And yet they belong together – John XXIII after all said the council, which he convoked, should “transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion.” The Church need to guard this precious treasure, or deposit of faith and make it more available to the modern world. And Paul VI, while concerned with the doctrinal confusion during and after the council, laid the foundation for the great impetus of global awareness and commitment of the Church in development of peoples and evangelization. John and Paul are one. As were Saint John and Saint Paul. The stories within stories are fruitful for us to hear. So I must tell you about my one meeting with the Pope before he was Pope. I was a graduate student at the Catholic University of America in 1976 when Cardinal Wojtyla was invited by Jude Dougherty, Dean of the School of Philosophy, to give a paper. Although already prominent in the Church and world affairs, he was known to few of us. He gave an intricate but powerful lecture on Aristotle and Kant, a grad student’s delight. Afterwards my friend and I approached him during the wine and cheese reception; I asked him whether there was a “Marxist-Christian” dialogue in Poland. With a twinkle in his eye, he looked at us eager grad students and chuckled, saying “Ah it is more like a monologue!” Well, there was the future Pope – diplomatic, humorous, but unequivocal in his challenge to the oppressive ideologies. The next day at lunch another friend, now a professor at University of Dallas, said “that man ought to be Pope.” We all scoffed. “A philosopher,” said one; “a Pole,” said another. Not a likely Pope. How wrong we were. The first year of his pontificate, 1978, was my first year of full time teaching, at Benedictine College in Atchison Kansas. I have followed each encyclical and writing with great care and interest. From the first, *Redeemer of Man*, to one of the last, *Faith and Reason*, I find a remarkable gift of wisdom and compassion. His legacy will endure

for centuries. It is my ardent hope that St Thomas will do something to memorialize his life and work with a program and a building. For there is a unique connection between Pope John Paul II and St Thomas Aquinas. And UST is uniquely positioned to pursue this connection.

So what is the connection between John Paul II and St Thomas Aquinas? As a matter of biography we know that he studied in Rome, not at the Jesuit Gregorianum, but at the Dominican Angelicum. His mentor was the great Thomist Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, called by some of his enemies the “sacred monster of Thomism” because of his watchful eye over doctrinal disputes and his pipeline to the Vatican offices. Wojtyla wrote on John of the Cross, himself a careful student of St. Thomas. We can also look to the section of *Fides et ratio* where he mentions five thinkers for special regard, among them Maritain and Gilson, great Thomists, as well as Edith Stein (Saint Benedicta of the Cross) a Thomist of sorts. (He also mentions Cardinal Newman, not a Thomist but a fellow traveler, and Rev Rosmini). But there is no great mystery as to his endorsement of St. Thomas. Let’s read and see for ourselves. We can start with the first two quotes on the cover page of my handout.

“Saint Thomas is an authentic model for all who seek the truth. In his thinking, the demands of reason and the power of faith found the most elevated synthesis ever attained by human thought, for he could defend the radical newness introduced by Revelation without ever demeaning the venture proper to reason.”

The first theme in this connection is the way Thomas handled faith and reason. Although notice how he phrases it – faith is referred to as the “radical newness” of the gospel. This will be important for us to see the ultimate purpose of the Catholic university.

“The philosophy of St. Thomas deserves to be attentively studied and accepted with conviction by the youth of our day, by reason of its spirit of openness and of universalism, characteristics which are hard to find in many trends of contemporary thought.”

The second theme is the concern for teaching and forming the young people of day and the need to overcome the culture of our day with its closed mindedness and relativism. St. Thomas is a great liberator of the mind.

Let’s start with the second theme – the cultural crisis of our time and the plight of the youth. Read quote number 1:

In the present Letter, I wish to pursue that reflection by concentrating on the theme of *truth* itself and on its *foundation* in relation to *faith*. For it is undeniable that this time of rapid and complex change can leave especially **the younger generation, to whom the future belongs and on whom it depends, with a sense that they have no valid points of reference.** The need for a foundation for personal and communal life becomes all the more pressing at a time when we are faced with the patent inadequacy of perspectives in which the ephemeral is affirmed as a value and the possibility of discovering the real meaning of life is cast into doubt. This is why many people stumble through life to the very edge of the abyss without knowing where they are going. At times, this happens because **those whose vocation it is to**

give cultural expression to their thinking no longer look to truth, preferring quick success to the toil of patient enquiry into what makes life worth living. Fides et ratio #6

This passage has caught my attention from the time I read it for its poignancy and its truth apparent to those of us who work with young people or who are parents of teenagers and young adults. They are at sea. There are no points of reference. They stumble to the edge of the abyss. And no one calls to them. John Paul is sharp with those who ought to be teaching and guiding them, having given up on truth. I just read the sorry attempt by the professors at UT to reform their core courses. One may take a course on “obesity” to fulfill this credit. So parents wish to choose UT for their children. Astounding. But then again it is my generation, the baby boomers, who fell into the abyss of the sixties and many never recovered, corporate job or no. Look at Bill Clinton.. Well Pope Benedict calls the climate a dictatorship of relativism. The politically correct rules the minds of many. It is not cool to believe in truth. Well that is the crisis of our day – a crisis of truth. Our culture denies truth, trifles with truth, fears truth. Truth, what is that, sneered Pilate. The absence of truth is convenient – we no longer have to work for it; we no longer have to conform our life to it. You do your thing and I do mine – if we find each other groovy.

Chesterton, in his book on Aquinas, said that a saint is the antidote for the age: A saint is an antidote because he becomes holy through “exaggerating whatever the world neglects” (23). He is the remedy to existing problems. St. Thomas is a great Saint for the 20th Century because the world rejects reason, and so they are in need of St. Thomas’ embrace of reason. Maritain calls him the Apostle of our Age because he is the apostle of truth.

We are made for truth; the ancient philosophers knew this – the unexamined life is not worth living said Socrates. All men by nature desire to know, said Aristotle. And our Lord said that he is the truth the way and life. Truth is a property of being; truth is the expansion of mind and heart; truth is a form of communion with the world. We do crave truth. As Augustine said Our hearts are restless until they rest in God – our hearts are restless for truth.

John Paul II says in Fides that we need a philosophy consonant with the word of God – to seek wisdom, to know what is, and cover the full range of concerns from the world, human nature to God. See Ex corde – it is the charter of our university and the basis for our core curriculum.

But the Ayyatolah and the terrorists have truth do they not? Falwell has truth. Is this not why the age is afraid of truth? Well JP2 recommends the way Thomas pursues the truth – he is humble, balanced, confident, nuanced. All of this approach is summed up by the phrase dialogue of faith and reason. This is why the academy needs the dialogue of faith and reason, and it is sorely missing. “each without the other is impoverished and enfeebled. Deprived of what Revelation offers, reason has taken side-tracks which expose it to the danger of losing sight of its final goal. Deprived of reason, faith has stressed feeling and experience, and so run the risk of no longer being a universal proposition.” In other words, each corrects the other. Newman saw this 150 years ago. The circle of knowledge must be full or there is usurpation distortion and quackery. That is why he said a real university gives prominence to theology. Or without theology there is no university. UST is the only university in town. Rice, UH etc do many other things – get money train students, do research but not an institution engaged in the full education of man. It is true –Aquinas said that humility is acknowledging gifts given. We need a forum for the dialogue of faith and reason here at UST. So St Thomas is a master of dialogue and John Paul II is his prime pupil. Look at the miles traveled, countries visited, people encountered, dialogue engaged. And Benedict is no different in his desire for dialogue. For dialogue requires a hard head and a soft heart; too many of us have soft heads and hard hearts!