


Unum Necessarium: Gerald Vann's Unifying Thomistic Vision

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Abstract

We note how Gerald Vann's pastoral context fired his concerns, and examine part of his output, especially his Lectorate thesis, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, The Divine Pity*, and *The Son's Course*. He popularised insights drawn from Aquinas and Neo-Thomists, developed in conversation with his brethren, while critically welcoming other traditions and modern culture. He rooted creative thought in Thomist doctrine, and offered Aquinas's vision as an answer to prevalent forms of disintegration. Some of his ideas and expressions are 'of their time'; his urging an ever fresh contemplation of Christ, and his approach to the Gospel 'paradox' of renouncing all things for God's sake, while sharing God's love for creatures, are recognized as a powerful statement of recurring Christian themes. Vann was *ahead of his time* in sharing widely the distinctively Thomist account of the Spirit's role in guiding our pilgrimage, working unity, and divinizing our perceptions through his Seven Gifts. In this Vann was faithful to the Thomist vision he developed in his formal studies, of the eternal Processions of the Divine Wisdom and the Holy Spirit lying behind the coming of creatures from God and, more excitingly still, lying behind our return to our Triune Archetype.

Keywords

Gerald Vann, Thomism, Divine Archetype, Incarnation, Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Unity

Introduction

Gerald Vann OP, (1906-1963) was a celebrated spiritual writer, preacher, and broadcaster. Some of his works were reissued in his lifetime; since then, five have been republished by Sophia Institute Press, New Hampshire, including *The Divine Pity* (1945) as *The Seven Sweet Blessings of Christ* in 1997, and *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (1940) as

The Aquinas Prescription in 2000.¹ The Dominican Seminar of 2013, the 50th anniversary of his death, studied aspects of his thought. The speakers included Aidan Nichols, whose *Dominican Gallery*² included a study of Vann. Here we note what pastoral concerns fired his outreach, and how, in his formal theological studies, he picked up themes from creative Neo-Thomists, seeing the value both of appropriating Aquinas' vision in a life-giving way, and of insights which had largely remained confined to academic theology. Some of his impressive output popularises these insights, and remains a resource worth tapping.³

Context and Pastoral Concern

Lawrence Vann was born in 1906 and educated at the Dominican boarding school then at Hawkesyard. He was too young to fight in the First World War, but could grasp its devastating consequences. In 1923 he entered the novitiate at Woodchester, taking the name Gerald; Victor White and Mark Brocklehurst were among his fellow-novices. A year later they commenced studies at Hawkesyard; in 1929 they were part of the first generation of student friars at the newly built Blackfriars in Oxford – Vann became the community's organist. In 1930 he went to the Angelicum to gain the Lectorate in Theology; Victor White went to Louvain, and Mark Brocklehurst remained in Oxford.

Vann returned to Oxford for a University degree in English Literature. Hence, he was formed intellectually in two worlds: he imbibed the Thomist tradition at Hawkesyard, then within Blackfriars, and finally in Rome's neo-Thomist atmosphere; on the other hand, Blackfriars' location, and Vann's reading for an Oxford degree, brought him into contact with the intellectual currents of the society in which he would preach. His formation bears the hallmarks of Bede Jarrett's outward looking vision; and Vann's writings – seeking to synthesize doctrine, human experience, and human culture – exhibit the dialogue with contemporary thought that Jarrett hoped to achieve when he established the Oxford Priory.

After formal studies, Vann taught at the Dominican boarding school, which had moved to Laxton.⁴ He would remain a member of this community for eighteen years, eventually serving as superior of the religious house then headmaster of the school. This was an ideal context in which to pursue a dialogue between Aquinas and the demands and

¹ The others are *Eve and the Gryphon*, *The Seven Swords*, and (co-authored with P. K. Meagher) *Stones or Bread?*

² *Dominican Gallery: Portrait of a Culture* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1997), pp. 124-183.

³ A version of part of this paper was delivered by Nicholas Crowe, OP, at the Aquinas Institute's Colloquium held on-line on 22 May, 2021.

⁴ The school closed in 1967.

priorities of early twentieth century British culture. One gets the sense that Vann's experience of teaching prompted him to reflect deeply on how to help the young people in his care become saints. Aidan Nichols notes that Vann's two decades as a teacher were his most creative.⁵

Vann's role shepherding young people into adulthood in the complex social and political world of the 1930s and 1940s helps explain his intellectual fertility. He devoted time and energy to pondering how best to prepare his students to involve themselves constructively as Catholics in a society that was – in his eyes – profoundly unhealthy and broken by sin.

A pessimistic streak in Vann's analysis of modern culture and society⁶ is not surprising given that he wrote in the shadow of the trenches, the political and economic turmoil that bred general strikes and hunger marches, the rise of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the Shoah, the Second World War, the beginnings of the cold war, and the threat of nuclear Armageddon. Vann clearly had a great love and respect for the best of human art, literature, culture, and philosophy. But he viewed his contemporary context as profoundly sick, dangerously disintegrated, and at times insanely violent. This coloured his theology: his understanding of the Gospel lies behind his campaigning for peace in the 1930s and his foundation of the international Union of Prayer for Peace whose members undertook to pray for peace and disseminate the Church's teaching on societal and international amity. While accepting the Church's teaching on just war, Vann concluded that modern methods of warfare rendered a just war impossible.⁷

There is an urgency in Vann's attempt to build an international alliance for peace, as in his advocacy of solidarity between social classes and for the overcoming of divisions among Christians. His awareness that the young would pay the price of division may well have impelled this urgency. He knew that another European war would, like the previous one, be prosecuted by Europe's youth, meaning that boys like those for whom he was responsible would be sent to die. Thus the fire behind Vann's critique of modernity, the energy in his search for unity, can be traced back to his pastoral responsibilities as priest and teacher. He saw that a radical reintegration of society was needed around a principle that enables humanity to find a common unity in the midst of legitimate diversity – a unity that reflects the Triune God. The only solution to the catastrophic disintegration discernible in philosophy, politics, society, morality, anthropology, economics, and even in the Church's life, was a return to the One Thing Necessary, as taught in the Gospel. A renewal

⁵ *Dominican Gallery*, p. 124.

⁶ See, for example, the 'essays in application' in *Morals Makyth Man* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938).

⁷ *Morals Makyth Man*, Chapter XIII; *Morality and War* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1939).

of our communion with God and neighbour in Christ makes possible a 'Christian humanism',⁸ a reintegrating vision of God, humanity and the world attained through contemplation of the person of Jesus. In support of this claim, as we shall see, Vann directed attention to Aquinas.

Anchoring in Thomistic Doctrine, Hospitably and Creatively

Vann completed his formal theological studies with a thesis entitled 'Concerning the Mystery of the Most Holy Trinity: Archetype of Human Life'.⁹ It exhibits a concern for interaction between theology and modern culture: Vann quotes French and English figures of cultural significance, such as Paul Claudel, Jean Cocteau, Baudelaire, Eric Gill and Roger Eliot Fry.¹⁰

The thesis begins on a note of hospitality towards different traditions, and hints at the need to incorporate scientific discoveries, by exploring whether a 'trace' of the Trinity may be found in the world. Vann notes that 'in the sphere of created nature each creature... always strives in some way to progress, evolve and perfect itself', quoting Henri-Louis Bergson,¹¹ who proposed an '*élan vital*' as an alternative to both mechanism and traditional finalism.¹² The 'natural instinct to attribute to God... a kind of fecundity and intrinsic evolution' helps explain why ancient philosophers (mis)conceived of divine fecundity; various Fathers and Mediaeval theologians did better, and Richard of St Victor offered 'very beautiful arguments for proving the existence of the Trinity',¹³ – Vann will quote him again. The Neo-Thomist Édouard Hugon, and Aquinas himself, support calling the processions of the divine Persons 'fecundity';¹⁴ but Vann insists, with Aquinas, that the Mystery of the Trinity cannot be proved by reason alone¹⁵ – hints of divine fecundity that philosophers and theologians have found in the world and human nature *can* be seen as reflections of the Trinity, but only in the light of revelation.

⁸ *Morals Makyth Man*, pp. 91-2.

⁹ *De Sanctissimae Trinitatis Mysterio: Humanae Vitae Archetypo* (Rome: Angelicum, 1931). Hereafter STL.

¹⁰ STL, pp. 23, 33, 25, 60, and 33, respectively.

¹¹ STL, p. 3 – quotation from *L'Évolution créatrice*, p. 7. When Vann wrote, evolutionary theorists comprised several camps. The 'evolutionary synthesis' between Darwinism and Mendelian genetics began to crystallise in 1943 when The Committee on Common Problems of Genetics, Paleontology, and Systematics was established.

¹² Leonard Lawler, 'Henri Bergson', section 5, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (substantive revision May 27, 2020).

¹³ STL, pp. 3-9.

¹⁴ STL, p. 19, referring to *Prima Pars* 27, 5 ad 3.

¹⁵ STL, pp. 9f.

Vann carefully sets out Aquinas' Trinitarian theology,¹⁶ manifesting a concern both to ground speculative theology in authentic doctrine and to bring out neglected aspects of Aquinas' thought. As was usual at the time he looks for continuity in Aquinas rather than changes of mind. Vann also draws on the commentatorial tradition, and on Louis Billot.¹⁷

Some 19th-century theologians had sought to popularize an appreciation of the Holy Spirit's work, such as H. E. Manning¹⁸ and Matthias Joseph Scheeben,¹⁹ but in his Encyclical *Divinum Illud Munus* (1897) Leo XIII could still lament a neglect of the Holy Spirit in doctrine and devotion. Vann devotes great care to the procession of the Holy Spirit.²⁰ He starts with a phrase of Aquinas' that he will re-use: the Son is *Verbum spirans amorem*, 'the Word who breathes forth Love'.²¹ This brings out how the Processions of the Word, and of the Spirit 'in the manner of love', though distinct, are inseparable. Maritain's take on this, 'In us as well as in God, Love must proceed from the Word',²² heads the whole thesis. Helped by Maritain, Claudel, Baudelaire, Cocteau, and Fry, Vann argues that in human art a concept is not enough; the work to be produced must be *loved*, rather as the coming of the perfect Image from the Father lies behind the coming forth of creatures that reflect the divine Exemplar, while the generosity of their coming forth can be traced back to the Holy Spirit as Love proceeding inseparably through the Word.²³

Vann's Aquinas Paper, 'The Sorrow of God',²⁴ likewise grounds in Thomistic doctrine an agility of thought sympathetic to contemporary concerns. It evokes the heart-rending phenomenon of innocent suffering, and the desire to find that God must 'be involved in the sufferings of all his creatures'. Vann's answer includes points Herbert McCabe would make in 'The Involvement of God',²⁵ that God, *qua* God, cannot suffer, and that, because of the Incarnation, it is *literally true* that

¹⁶ STL, pp. 10-53.

¹⁷ The choice of Billot is perhaps both eirenic and a veiled critique of Church policy, since Billot, a Jesuit, had resigned from being a Cardinal in 1927, probably because of Pius XI's opposition to *Action Française*.

¹⁸ *The Temporal Mission of the Holy Ghost: or, Reason and Revelation* (London: Longmans, Green, 1865) and *The Internal Mission of the Holy Ghost* (London: Burns and Oates, 1875).

¹⁹ *The Glories of Divine Grace* was published in English in 1886 (London: Washbourne), *The Mysteries of Christianity* not until 1947.

²⁰ STL, pp. 22-36.

²¹ *Prima Pars* 43, 5 ad 2.

²² STL, p. 1, quoting *Prayer and Intelligence*, p. 3. Maritain is the author quoted most frequently, apart from Aquinas.

²³ STL, pp. 23, 26, 32-35.

²⁴ Oxford: Blackfriars Publications, 1946. Reprinted in *The Pain of Christ and the Sorrow of God* (London: Blackfriars, 1947).

²⁵ *New Blackfriars* 60 (1985), pp. 464-476. This contains further creative Trinitarian theology.

God has suffered. Herbert was addressing the now widespread opinion that God, *qua* God, *can* suffer. Vann, writing earlier, unpacked how 'the mystery of divine pity is expressed temporally in the Passion of Christ'. In God there is an *eternal* 'will-to-share', to be 'involved in the suffering of his creation'.

The Trinity as Archetype of Integrity, Creativity and Graced Life

The other text that heads the whole of Vann's STL is from Aquinas: 'Just as... the procession of Persons is the *ratio* of ['ground', or 'reason behind'] the production of creatures by the First Principle, so the same procession is the *ratio* of [their] return into [their] Goal'.²⁶ This leitmotif of the section on 'the Trinity as Archetype'²⁷ expresses in a Trinitarian way the *exitus-reditus* pattern Chenu would soon make prominent.²⁸ Vann begins with Aquinas' Augustinian doctrine of the human being, able to understand and love itself, as *image* of the Trinity called to be re-created into a greater degree of likeness by knowing and loving *God*.²⁹ Thus Vann is not claiming that human life *automatically* reflects the Trinity in a thorough-going way; rather, the Triune Archetype *calls us towards* a richer, divinizing *and* humanizing, participation in It.

One way in which God's Life is archetypal is by being 'social'.³⁰ Vann quotes Richard of St Victor's 'concordial charity and con-social love', but his reference to the unity of Essence and the principle that the (external) works of the Trinity are undivided distances him from the 'social doctrines' of later theologians. Vann states three implications. First, there is no purely *individual* ethics, a point which meshes with his critiques of some modern approaches to ethics.³¹ Secondly, he notes, apparently with approval, that until the Middle Ages the soul's intimate contemplation was not seen as distinct from common prayer, notably the Mass and the Divine Office. With the rise of self-consciousness and individual devotion, extra-Liturgical times of meditation were prescribed. Here Vann allies himself with the Liturgical Movement, but later, as we shall see, will also strongly advocate individual mental

²⁶ STL, p. 1, quoting *In I Sent.*, XIV, 12, 2, repeated on pp. 54, 57 and 64.

²⁷ STL, pp. 54-82.

²⁸ M.-D. Chenu, 'Le plan de la Somme Théologique de Saint Thomas', *Revue Thomiste* 47 (1939), pp. 99-107.

²⁹ Vann does not use *Prima Pars* 93, Aquinas' mature treatment of this theme, which skips over the mind's ability to understand and love *itself* and focuses at once on knowing and loving *God*. D. Juvenal Merriell would analyse Aquinas' progression and his sensitivity to *Augustine's* development in *To the Image of the Trinity: A Study in the Development of Aquinas' Teaching* (Toronto: PIMS, 1990).

³⁰ STL, pp. 58f.

³¹ *Morals Makyth Man*, Part I.

prayer. Thirdly, the Church should exhibit a social, joyful *unity*. This goes with Vann's concern for Christian unity, and his associating the *making of peace* with the highest Gift, Wisdom.³²

The Thomist vision of the Father expressing in the Word all that he creatively knows, and loving in the Spirit all that he utters in the Word, reveals a second way in which the Trinity is Archetype: Archetype of creativity.³³ Vann had already said, 'The artist is a man who is always falling in love'.³⁴ 'Art' covers more than painting and sculpture: we speak of 'the art of fighting', 'the art of logic' – even 'the art of living'. Vann laments how art has become 'the handmaid of commerce', and work has been degraded into 'a hateful means of acquiring wealth' so that people seek happiness outside work rather than *in* their work. Vann quotes Eric Gill, and shared his concern for work to be fulfilling with Vincent McNabb.³⁵ However, his study of the Beatitudes would recognize that work is not always experienced as fulfilling: the common priesthood typically 'today is the sacrificial work which attempts to redeem industrialism from within'.³⁶

Vann sees Marriage as creativity: 'Married love is normally the primary fulfilment of men and women because normally it is the primary form of creation'.³⁷ He speaks of 'the making of the unity of man and woman',³⁸ but his talks on the distinctive vocation of woman³⁹ do not seem to have prompted speculation on how the unity-in-complementarity of man and woman might image the Trinity.⁴⁰

Philosophy, too, is an art, and must be holistic. Vann criticizes philosophy isolated from life. By contrast, true Thomism can regulate the whole human being so that we become able to know *and to love* all things in God, for in us, reflecting God, the 'word' should 'breathe forth love'.⁴¹

We are also called to reflect the Trinity, in whom all that the Father utters in the Word he loves in the Spirit, by integrating knowing and affectivity: an exaggerated intellectualism can be as harmful as

³² *The Divine Pity: A Study in the Social Implications of the Beatitudes* [henceforth DP] (London: Sheed & Ward, 1946; Collins/Fontana 1956), chapter IX. The association of peace making with Wisdom is Thomist (*Secunda Secundae* 45, 6).

³³ STL, pp. 60f.

³⁴ STL, p. 23.

³⁵ His *The Church and the Land* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne) had been published in 1926.

³⁶ DP, p. 186.

³⁷ DP, p. 160.

³⁸ DP, p. 148, quoted in *Dominican Gallery*, p. 165.

³⁹ Published as *Eve and the Gryphon* (Oxford: Blackfriars Publications, 1946).

⁴⁰ For the emergence of this theme, see Bertrand De Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History* (Still River, Massachusetts: St Bede's Publications, 1982), Chapter 8, section I.

⁴¹ STL, pp. 61-62, also quoting Albert the Great, proclaimed a Doctor of the Church later in the year of Vann's thesis.

pursuing the affections without the light of reason.⁴² This anticipates Vann's concern for holistic education, set out in *Blackfriars School, 1659 -1959*,⁴³ which, among other *desiderata*, wants the child to re-find his/her roots in nature, in the rhythm of life and the cycle of the seasons, and all levels of the personality to be addressed at once and yet distinctly in 'such a way as to render them a harmonious unity'.

Thomism's Timeless Character?

Among the philosophers whose thought is not life-giving, who themselves are sometimes cut off from life, Vann includes an unspecified some 'who know Thomist doctrines very well'.⁴⁴ Thomism must be more than a parsing of Aquinas' corpus; our task is to continue (or recommence) Aquinas' work of bringing the Gospel to bear on contemporary developments, using the timelessly valid methodological and conceptual tools he forged.⁴⁵ This way of turning to Aquinas stands to guide Western culture out of its crisis, for Aquinas is a humane, holistic teacher who showed in his own day how all things find their unity in Christ, and are transfigured by him. Vann articulates this in *Saint Thomas Aquinas*.⁴⁶ Here he identifies the West's sickness with an overemphasis on Martha and a neglect of Mary,⁴⁷ an exaggerated esteem for action and the material, and a relative disdain for contemplation, the ascetic, the spiritual – in short, for what gives action meaning and purpose. This imbalance explains the worship of political ideologies, and reductionist philosophies, as well as the usual suspects of wealth and sensual experience. Aquinas can re-order our priorities.

As in other works for non-specialist audiences, Vann deploys powerful rhetoric rather than detailed historical or textual analysis. He draws rather too sharp a distinction between the activism of the secular and Christian West on the one hand, and the more mystical perspectives of the Christian East, and of eastern cultures and religions generally, on the other.⁴⁸ Vann as a whole is more nuanced, but here he wants to present Aquinas as a mediating figure in whom we find synthesized an 'anthropology constructed... from above' and one 'constructed from below', to 'take count of the whole man'.⁴⁹

⁴² STL, p. 25.

⁴³ Hinckley, 1959. See *Dominican Gallery*, pp. 125-127.

⁴⁴ STL, p. 61.

⁴⁵ *Morals Makyth Man*, Part I.

⁴⁶ London: Hague and Gill Ltd., 1940. Henceforth STA.

⁴⁷ STA, pp. 1-8.

⁴⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), would make scholars wary of caricaturing the scientific, practical West *versus* the mystically wise but organizationally inept East.

⁴⁹ STA, pp. 77-102 and 166f.

Vann identifies a practical orientation in western theology, centred on grace and the life of grace, while the East emphasizes who Jesus is rather than what he does and what we must do.⁵⁰ Vann points out the extensive use Aquinas makes of eastern writers such as pseudo-Denys – the paradigmatic eastern mystic – and John Damascene alongside Latin authorities, thus drawing together and enriching the best of both traditions.⁵¹ Aquinas gives due place both to the ‘eastern’ emphasis on the hypostatic union and a conviction that Jesus’ sacred humanity is salvific because it bears divinity, and to the ‘western’ emphasis on ascending mediation in which Jesus, through his Sacrifice and merit, raises up the human into God’s life.

In Aquinas’ synthesis, Martha’s action is valued, but Mary’s contemplation takes first place. The insights and integrity of reason, science, and philosophy receive due honour, but faith, revelation, and *sacra doctrina* take priority. Aquinas recognizes the good, the proper authority, of the secular, but it must harmonize with the sacred, which guides it towards the Highest Good. Above all, he promotes the reintegration of the human person itself around ‘the pearl of great price for which’ – as the Gospel urges – ‘all else must be sold’.⁵²

Vann sees a further dimension to Aquinas’ achievement, quoting Rousselot: ‘No philosopher has more intimately or vitally incorporated Platonism into his synthesis than St. Thomas’.⁵³ In the English Province’s oral tradition, the idea that Aquinas synthesized Plato and Aristotle is attributed to Vann’s fellow-student, Mark Brocklehurst,⁵⁴ and in the preface to *Saint Thomas Aquinas* Vann acknowledges Brocklehurst’s thesis that Aquinas reconciles ‘eastern’ contemplation with ‘western’ activism. Their friendship was lifelong: Brocklehurst’s obituary notice says, ‘He collaborated with Fr Gerald Vann OP on all the latter’s books’.⁵⁵

A profound Thomistic insight runs through Vann’s treatment of contemplation and action, faith and reason, etc. It concerns the relation of created effects to their First Principle and Final End: God is radically other than his creatures, and precisely as such he dignifies them and draws them to their fulfilment. This is a metaphysical truth; and where Vann defends his intuition that rightly ordering the relation between the divine and the creaturely enables the synthesis of the traditions of East and West, and of human life and culture around ‘the one thing

⁵⁰ STA, pp. 8-13.

⁵¹ STA, p. 104.

⁵² STA, pp. 8-13; *Eve and the Gryphon*, p. 80.

⁵³ STA, p. 150, quoting Pierre Rousselot, *The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1935), p. 36.

⁵⁴ Whose intellectual career was thwarted by his being elected Prior six times between 1941 and 1965.

⁵⁵ Simon Francis Gaine, OP, ed., *Obituary Notices of the English Dominicans from 1952 to 1996* (Oxford: Blackfriars Publications, 2000), p. 43.

necessary', he tends to direct us towards Aquinas' metaphysics. If a metaphysic is valid it is 'true now and for ever'.⁵⁶ Of course, the dependence of all things on God for their very being is a truth prior to the correct understanding of their natures and causal relationships. But Vann urges a re-turning to Aquinas partly because, whilst he made use of analogies borrowed from Aristotelean science, his metaphysics as a whole is not dependent on them or any particular scientific theory:

The originality of St. Thomas... consists, first, in the perfection with which he wove the endless threads of thought and of life into an *organic* unity... elaborating them into a hierarchy which leads every detail of the manifold back to the one; secondly, in the fact that he made sure, by keeping his thought free from physical theories and maintaining it always on the metaphysical, and therefore eternal, plane, that his synthesis should not be a dated system, should not be something static, final, and therefore bound to become obsolete.⁵⁷

This claim echoes those Neo-Thomists⁵⁸ who, arguably, were somewhat intimidated by the advance of the natural sciences, and tended to retreat into metaphysics for fear that, for example, Newton had disproved Aristotelean ideas of causation and movement. This anxiety was understandable when Vann wrote *Saint Thomas Aquinas*. Textbook diagrams made atoms look like miniature solar systems for years afterwards, raising the spectre of 'mechanism'. Despite the growing conviction that particles behave in some ways like waves, scientists could still hold that particles behave deterministically, and explain Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in terms of measurement interfering with a system. A year after Vann's death, Bell's Theorem made the truly mysterious nature of matter clearer. However, a 1936 article by Aniceto Fernández⁵⁹ would provoke William Kane OP, to develop the 'River Forest' School of Thomism,⁶⁰ and it has become possible, with increasing confidence, to bring Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy into fruitful conversation with contemporary science.⁶¹

After claiming that Aquinas' metaphysics is independent of physical theories, Vann quotes another fellow student:

⁵⁶ STA, p. 33.

⁵⁷ STA, p. 154; cf. p. 108.

⁵⁸ For an introduction to the history of Thomism, see Romanus Cessario, *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2003).

⁵⁹ Anicetus Fernández-Alonso, 'Scientiae et Philosophia secundum S. Albertum Magnum', *Angelicum* 13 (1936), pp. 24-59.

⁶⁰ See 'A Brief Note on How to Understand the River Forest School of Thomism' on the Academia page of Philip Neri Reese, OP.

⁶¹ E.g. Michael J. Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action. Contemporary Science and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2012); *New Blackfriars* for November 2013 and November 2019.

Thomism as [Aquinas] left it is 'a vital organism, embryonic, but endowed with an infinite capacity for the assimilation of new truth and for adjustment to new conditions and environments without loss of its substantial identity. This precisely was his great gift to mankind; an ultimate synthesis, centred on God, so elemental and so elastic that it could include all future discovery and speculation, and, in so doing, both enrich itself and give unity to all human knowledge, past, present and future.'⁶²

Victor White's 'elastic' organic unity centred on God is subtly different from Vann's focus on an organic unity maintained on a metaphysical plane not bound to any physical theory. There is some tension between Vann's concern to bring Aquinas to bear on contemporary developments, and his distancing of Aquinas' metaphysics from physical theories. His 'earthy' vision of education, his call to integrate mind, body and the natural world, can hardly hold aloof from some physical theory as to what it means to be a rational animal.⁶³ The scientific study of human psychology has advanced since Vann's time, and it is easier to bring 'virtue ethics' and Aquinas' moral theology into dialogue with the details of the human animal's physical, psychological, and interpersonal development.⁶⁴

In his pastoral, moral, and spiritual works, Vann clearly *did* preach an organic unity of the human being, centred on God, focusing his readers' attention on God the Son who entered the world of matter, sense, and animality, and sensitizing them to the Spirit's work helping us hold fast to the One Thing Necessary in human spheres such as politics and culture. Arguably, scientific discoveries made after Vann's time render the contemporary world more hospitable to his ideas.

The Holy Spirit's Unifying Personal Guidance

A distinctively Thomist component of the theology of the Holy Spirit concerns the Seven Gifts. Aquinas saw them as 'habits', not in the sense of virtues – 'strengths' – that *we* deploy, but in the sense of Spirit-given ways of being *attuned* to the personal guidance of the Spirit to whom we relate as apprentice to master-craftsman, student to teacher.⁶⁵ By

⁶² Victor White, *Scholasticism* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1934), p. 27, quoted in *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 154-5.

⁶³ Cf. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why human beings need the virtues* (London: Duckworth, 2009), pp. x & 19, where Alasdair MacIntyre goes back on his attempt in *After Virtue* 'to give an account of the place of the virtues, understood as Aristotle had understood them... while making that account independent of... Aristotle's "metaphysical biology";' since, for example, a failure to understand the animality of the human condition obscures crucial features of moral life and development.

⁶⁴ E.g. some essays in David Carr *et al*, eds., *Varieties of Virtue Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁶⁵ *Prima Secundae* 68, 1-3.

contrast, the Scotist tradition saw the list of Gifts as another set of names for the virtues. Despite the work of Manning and Scheeben, among others, the Gifts had become the preserve of academic theology – even of ‘mystical theology’, removing them further from what it seemed ‘safe’ to divulge to ‘the ordinary faithful’.

A long section in Vann’s STL⁶⁶ explores the third way in which the Holy Trinity is the Archetype of our graced life, namely the Spirit’s *unifying* role through his Gifts. Here he focused on three of them; in *The Divine Pity*, one of his most celebrated books, he would popularize the Thomist account of all Seven Gifts, manifesting his pastoral concern to help people grow in their spiritual lives by cultivating receptivity to the Holy Spirit’s guidance. Aidan Nichols helpfully summarizes its teaching,⁶⁷ bringing out the originality of Vann’s associating the Seven Gifts with the Seven Sacraments. Despite his efforts, the role of the Gifts is still only slowly being appropriated.⁶⁸

In his STL, Vann relies especially on the *Secunda Pars*, where Aquinas was still developing his mature doctrine of the Gifts – it was beyond Vann’s scope to analyze Aquinas’ changes of mind. His other guides were John of St Thomas, Maritain, and Ambroise Gardeil’s entry on the Gifts in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* and his *La structure de l’âme et l’expérience mystique*.⁶⁹ Gardeil noted a debate among Thomists as to whether the Gifts operate in *all* graced acts or only in a limited subset; he took a middle way: they operate *often*, but not when we have no need of special guidance,⁷⁰ and Vann agreed with him.

Vann was of his time in synthesizing the Thomistic account of the Gifts with the tradition represented by Sts John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila,⁷¹ but he criticized over-reliance on ‘methods of mental prayer’.⁷² He recommends setting aside time for personal prayer daily and putting aside distractions during the ‘prayer of quiet’ or ‘of union’, giving the impression that Christians generally should practise – or at least hope to be transitorily *given* – the *types* of prayer sometimes

⁶⁶ Pp. 62-82.

⁶⁷ *Dominican Gallery*, pp. 155-167.

⁶⁸ Charles E. Bouchard, ‘Recovering the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Moral Theology’, *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) pp. 539-558. Helpful recent works include: Andrew Pinsent, *The Second Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (London: Routledge, 2012); Jack Mahoney, SJ, *The Holy Spirit and Moral Action in Thomas Aquinas* (London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021).

⁶⁹ DTC IV, 2 (1924), columns 1728-1781; *La structure de l’âme* 2nd ed. Paris: Lecoffre, 1927.

⁷⁰ DTC, IV, 2, col. 1779-1781. B. Froget, OP, had restricted the sphere of the Gifts; Mgr. Perriot had widened it.

⁷¹ Quoted in DP, pp. 155f, 180.

⁷² DP, pp. 82-84.

organized into 'stages of prayer'; 'the way of prayer is long and hard'.⁷³ This is in some tension with his lauding the 'simplicity' of the Lord's Prayer;⁷⁴ it contrasts with Herbert McCabe's remark that 'distractions' often reveal what we really want and need to pray about, which may be different from what we think we *ought* to pray about,⁷⁵ and his insistence on the Trinitarian depth of the apparently ordinary prayer of petition.⁷⁶ However, Vann anticipates McCabe's concern to relate personal prayer to the Liturgy.⁷⁷

In his STL,⁷⁸ Vann explores the Spirit's role in bringing us to *unity* in communion with the Triune God, and what kind of communion this is, and the Gifts' role in overcoming the limitations inherent in our pilgrim state. One limitation is the *complexity* of what we believe: *many* propositions about God and the *many* means by which we journey into God. The Gift of Knowledge brings a simplifying unity, a *sense* of how all things come from the Trinity who are One, and journey back – or help us journey back – into *union* with the Triune God. We begin to *intuit* the One whose light irradiates all things. Another limitation is Faith's 'obscurity' – 'We walk by faith and not by sight',⁷⁹ and we cannot *believe* what we have come to *know* clearly.⁸⁰ The Divine Reality transcends the human words in which we 'clothe' Faith. By the Gift of Insight the Spirit 'takes us by the hand' while we cannot see, granting a kind of direct 'taste' of God and a penetrating judgment of how far God surpasses us.

For the believer to *adhere* to the God whose depths only the Spirit searches,⁸¹ Faith must be brought alive by Charity. Since the Son is *Verbum spirans amorem*, it is *the Gift of Wisdom* that assimilates us to him, since it bursts into Love and is an *experiential* form of cognition. Thus intellect and will are harmonized when the Divine Persons dwell in us as the Known in the knower and *the Belovèd in the lover*,⁸² the Son and the Spirit being sent to bring us to the Father.

Vann follows Aquinas and John of St Thomas by speaking of an 'interior taste', a 'supra-rational perception', of the God whom we enjoy; and of Charity, while still belonging to the realm of Faith, leaping beyond Faith's premises to attain God himself. Wisdom can 'leave the pedestrian way of concepts... and fly on the Spirit's wings into the bright cloud, burning darkness, mystical union'. He refers to Gardeil's

⁷³ DP, pp. 155-9, 166, 182, 188; cf. STL pp. 81f.

⁷⁴ DP, p. 157.

⁷⁵ 'Prayer', in *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), pp. 215-225, at p. 223.

⁷⁶ McCabe, 'Prayer', *passim*.

⁷⁷ E.g. DP, p. 157.

⁷⁸ STL, pp. 68-82.

⁷⁹ II Cor. 5:7.

⁸⁰ *Secunda Secundae* 1, 4 & 5.

⁸¹ Quoting I Cor. 2:10.

⁸² *Prima Pars* 8, 3; 43, 3.

reliance on the Saints' experience of 'the prayer of union, ecstasy, and "spiritual marriage".' It is, naturally, difficult to express in words exactly what these 'experiential' forms of cognition feel like, but clearly Vann wants his readers to be open to something of them.⁸³ God's fecundity, as transcending all imperfection, is compatible with God's changelessness; hence the closer we come to *immobilitas* in contemplation, the more we become *like* God. As Vincent McNabb had said: 'Only a fool would mistake silence for empty-headedness; only a fool would mistake the immobility of the monk for aridity and death of soul'.⁸⁴ Further research may be in order as to how close Aquinas' 'experiential cognition' is to other Saints' experience or how suitable a tool Gardeil's 'Augustinian' understanding of the soul is for interpreting Aquinas' account of the Gifts.⁸⁵ If not, setting out the *range* of valid 'spiritualities' might encourage Christians whose experience does not match that of the widely recommended exemplars.⁸⁶ Maybe Gardeil and Vann had something of this in mind when choosing exemplars for *Les Dons du Saint-Esprit dans les Saints dominicains*⁸⁷ and *Eve and the Gryphon*.⁸⁸

Aquinas sees the Gifts, especially Wisdom, as involving a 'connaturality' with God born of Charity,⁸⁹ a 'being on the same wavelength' as our Divine Friend analogous to the coinciding of instincts between human friends or spouses. This helps us resolve the apparent tension in the Gospels between love of God to the exclusion of all else, and the urgency of love of neighbour. Reflecting this apparent tension, Vann asks us to renounce all else for the sake of *unum necessarium*, to sell all for the sake of the Pearl of Great Price; that is, for the sake of knowing, loving, serving, and possessing *God*.⁹⁰ At the same time, he asks us not only to see and love God in creatures (which by itself might reduce them to a ladder on which to climb to God) but also to see and love them in God – to share God's 'vision' for them. Several passages in *The Divine Pity* capture the balance between renunciation of proprietorship, and sharing God's love of creatures: 'it is not the *objects* of our love that have to be changed, it is our *love* that has to be changed by being transformed into the love which is the heart of Christ'.⁹¹ As

⁸³ STL, pp. 81f; DP, pp. 79f, 154-6, 178.

⁸⁴ STL, p. 52.

⁸⁵ Gardeil was aware of the issue: *La structure de l'âme*, Vol. I, pp. xxvii-xxxii.

⁸⁶ This seems to be a purpose of Simon Tugwell's *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1984).

⁸⁷ Subtitled *Étude de psychologie surnaturelle et lectures pour le temps de la Pentecôte* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1903).

⁸⁸ Here Vann holds up Our Lady, Catherine of Siena, Monica, and Dante's Beatrice.

⁸⁹ *Secunda Secundae*, 45, 2 & 4. Cf. *Divine Pity*, p. 180.

⁹⁰ DP, p. 19.

⁹¹ DP, pp. 8-18, 79-82, 85f, 144.

Vann's STL had put it: 'love of creatures "is changed, not taken away"; it does not cease to be human, but starts to be divine'.⁹²

The Son's Course

The leitmotif of Vann's STL, that the procession of Persons is the 'ground' of our return into God, matches the structure of *Summa Theologiae*, in which *Secunda Pars* unpacks what the Spirit's Mission accomplishes – which includes the Son's invisible Mission⁹³ – and *Tertia Pars* expounds the Son's visible Mission, extended to us in the Sacraments. The Son is *Verbum spirans Amorem*, hence his graced humanity and redeeming work are the 'conjoined instrumental cause' of the Grace of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁴ It is no surprise that Vann's most valuable books include *The Divine Pity*, which develops themes of *Secunda Pars*, and *The Son's Course*,⁹⁵ which matches Aquinas' Christology.

We noted that one of Vann's intuitions is that Aquinas rightly ordered the relations between the divine and human, faith and reason, contemplation and action. We must add that the fulcrum of this harmony is the Incarnation. Vann urges us to contemplate Jesus Christ who unites divinity and humanity in his one Person, and reintegrates humanity itself. It is not too much to say that Vann finds his appeal for a new Thomistic synthesis – one that is up-to-date, but uses tools Aquinas left us – not primarily on Aquinas' metaphysics but on his Christology. Christ is the key to truly deep engagement with God.

We suggested that the constraints of his time led Vann to distance Thomist metaphysics from the world that science accesses, whereas we need to root our reflections in a 'real-world' awareness of, especially, human biological psychology. Nevertheless, Vann saw that Aquinas' metaphysics, precisely by rightly ordering the relation between Creator and creature, helps us see Jesus clearly. For the potency of Aquinas' Christology flows from its robust fidelity to the Chalcedonian formula of fully human and fully divine, and relies on his clear understanding of the relation between the human and the divine. Vann makes this point at the opening of *The Son's Course*:

We have touched on only one or two of the attributes of God, because for the moment the point we need to be clear about is that if we took merely the gospel picture and failed to dig deep enough into it, however much we knew that human language is metaphor we might still make

⁹² P. 68, quoting the Preface of the Dead added to the Roman Missal in 1915.

⁹³ *Prima Pars*, 43, 5 & 8.

⁹⁴ *Prima Secundae*, 112, 1 ad 1 & ad 2; *Tertia Pars*, 8, 1 ad 1; 48, 6; 56, 2.

⁹⁵ London: Collins-Fontana, 1959. Much of it comprises earlier publications or unpublished talks. It is a valuable source of readings for carol services and Lenten meditations, for example.

God too homely, might miss something of his immensity; if we followed merely the philosophical way we might sense the immensity but it might remain abstract or at least comfortably remote. In the first case we might have loving trust but not enough awe: in the second case we might be content with a respectful but comfortably distant acknowledgement. But if we put the two things together, if we realise that it is the immensity of the infinite consuming fire, the uncreated love, that washed the feet of the disciples or is crowned with thorns, then immediately we see the appalling challenge, appalling unless it causes us to fall to our knees in a worship and a love and a joy which engages and transforms the whole of our being.⁹⁶

Vann saw Thomism as enabling a reconciling synthesis between East and West, Church and state, Faith and science, theology and art, because Aquinas saw profoundly into the mystery of the one thing necessary, the unifying love of the Triune God. This is taught us, *and achieved for us*, at the point of communion around which all creation turns: the marriage of divinity and humanity in the Incarnation. The profundity of Aquinas' vision was indeed facilitated by the potency of his conceptual apparatus, including his metaphysics, but the culmination of his *Summa* was the Word made flesh, who was also the centre of Vann's thought. Vann encourages us, too, to synthesize our contemporary experience in the light of the Word, and does so in a way that urges us to appreciate the Liturgy:

The way to become like God is to love God; and to love one must learn, and to learn one must look – not just a fleeting glance, a partial awareness, but a long and deep concentration of awareness... The [liturgical] calendar is important for two reasons; and the first and main reason is that through its yearly course it takes us through the course of Christ's life upon earth and shows us what lessons we are to draw from the events, the mysteries, of the successive stages of that life... Through all that showing we learn Christ if we really take part in and absorb and live the Christian liturgy; and in learning Christ we learn God... for a second reason... our knowledge and love of God and our life with him are not to be thought of as being a sort of supernatural vacuum, remote from the life, the interests, the affairs of every day, of this mundane, material world. If a man is to learn God, love God, live with God at all it must be *this* man, this particular body-soul in this particular setting, the child of God but also the child of Nature, of this our mother earth, who does so.⁹⁷

Aquinas broke new ground by bringing into his systematic Christology *all* the mysteries of Christ's journey as human;⁹⁸ as Mark Jordan has argued, he assumed that through the Liturgy the readers of *Summa*

⁹⁶ *The Son's Course*, p 20. Cf. the Chalcedonian background to *The Sorrow of God*.

⁹⁷ *The Son's Course*, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁸ Previous systematic works had focused mostly on the Incarnation and Redemption.

Theologiae were already being formed by them.⁹⁹ Vann invites us to be formed by them.

Summa Theologiae included 'work in progress': Aquinas made clear that the Spirit's Gifts operated in Christ, but did not explore in much detail how.¹⁰⁰ One way to follow Vann's lead, and appropriate Aquinas' vision for ourselves and our time, is to ponder what the Spirit can do for us in the light of what he did supremely in Christ, and so appreciate how the Missions of the Son and the Spirit, distinct as they are, inseparably lead us, through our real-life vocations, into the Divine Unity.

Conclusion

We have examined only part of Vann's output and thought, but enough to notice the concerns bred by his historical context and pastoral engagements, and to glimpse the influence of his contemporaries in the Province as well as of Aquinas and his other sources – even, perhaps, in a small way, how some of his ideas have stayed 'in the mind of the Province'. Some of his ideas and expressions are 'of their time', and later developments in the natural and psychological sciences allow us to appreciate Aquinas' 'Aristotelian' cosmology and psychology better than he could. But Vann's project remains inspiring: rooted in sound theology, to show how all things come from the Triune God, and our journey back into God must be made in the friendship of the Divine Wisdom and the Holy Spirit who have been sent us. Vann urges an ever fresh contemplation of Christ and the challenge of his teaching. In a way that was ahead of his time he invites us to sense, what still needs sharing more widely, the Spirit's role guiding our pilgrimage, making grace 'take flesh' and crafting a single-hearted vision prioritising the One Thing Necessary and cherishing all else in Its light.

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⁹⁹ *Teaching Bodies: Moral Formation in the Summa of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ *Tertia Pars*, 7, 5 & 6.