

The Integrative Theology of Richard Fishacre OP

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This year marks the 750th anniversary of the death of the first two Dominican masters at the University of Oxford, Robert Bacon OP and his student and successor Richard Fishacre OP. From the former there survives only a Psalms commentary and a sermon.¹ From the latter, however, we have a number of works, including the earliest *Sentences* Commentary composed in England. Peter Lombard's four books of *Sentences* offered to their readers, which eventually included all candidates for the degree of master of theology at the leading medieval universities, a systematic exposition of texts from the Fathers, principally St. Augustine. It was therefore seen as the locus of speculative or "dogmatic" theology as opposed to "moral" theology, the locus of which was the Scriptures.

This role for Lombard's work, moreover, was reaffirmed in a so-called *epistola secreta*, a sealed letter, issued by Pope Innocent IV and addressed to Robert Grosseteste, who was at the time bishop of Lincoln but who still kept a close watch on developments at the studium where he had spent so much time and invested so much energy.

We send word to you [says Innocent] not to prohibit our beloved son, friar R. [Fishacre] of the Order of Preachers, teaching at Oxford in the theology faculty, from lecturing *ordinarie* on the books of the *Sentences*, but rather encourage the same in order that he might lay bare to his attentive listeners, in accord with the grace bestowed on him, the profound contents and necessary truth of that book, since in it are to be found testimonies by Catholic teachers, worthy of belief, which assert the truth that must be adhered to by believers when the darkness of error has been dissipated.²

The pope was apparently reacting to a letter sent to the Oxford masters a year or two earlier in which Grosseteste insisted that all their lectures (*vestras lectiones omnes*), especially those in the morning hour, the time set aside for what were called the *ordinary* lectures, be based on the books of Sacred Scripture. Instead, complained Grosseteste, the *hora matutina* was being given over to unspecified books (the *Sentences* are not mentioned by name), which were other than *foundational*, in the way in which Sacred Scripture alone is foundational. Although James

Ginther has argued recently that there is no evidence in Grosseteste's letter that he was opposed to the "new theology" but simply to its preeminent place in the curriculum,³ neither must it be said is it an endorsement. Indeed, the bishop of Lincoln in his letter to the masters seems rather clear that *all* lectures be based on Scripture. And in fact, somewhere along the line Grosseteste's comments—rightly or wrongly—seem to have been interpreted as hostile to a theology other than one based directly on the sacred text. Hence the pope's intervention on Fishacre's behalf.

Whatever the nature of Grosseteste's animadversions, it is clear that Fishacre is breaking new theological ground in his *Sentences—Commentary*. In the concluding lines of his Prologue to the first book of his Commentary Fishacre argues that the science of theology has two parts: the one focuses on God as the supreme goodness, the other on God as supreme truth. The former is concerned with instruction in morals, the latter with the more difficult questions concerning the faith. Though both parts are contained indeterminately (*indistincte*) in the sacred text, *modern masters* treat the former part in their commentaries on Sacred Scripture; the latter and more difficult part is extracted from the holy canon and placed in the book called the *Sentences*.⁴

Thus in his Commentary Fishacre treats systematically of all the doctrinal questions raised by the Lombard text, and even some that are not. Sometimes this treatment is in the nature of a simple gloss on the Lombard text, sometimes the reader is treated to the full apparatus of a scholastic disputation, with arguments for and against and a *solutio*. What is noteworthy however, is that despite the distinction he has announced, the Fishacre Commentary is replete with *moralitates* or moral lessons. Many of these lessons, at least from the first two books of the Commentary, were gathered together by an enterprising scribe, perhaps a Cistercian monk (judging by the provenance of the manuscript, which was Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire), and published separately.⁵

When discussing the immutability of God in the first book, for example, Fishacre finds occasion to inveigh against religious who, owing perhaps to a harsh word on the part of a prelate, change convents or, even worse, change religious orders.

The topic of God's simplicity in the same distinction urges the reader to adhere to the Simple, that is to God, who is without fold (*sine pilica*). Fishacre recalls St. Paul's warning that he who cleaves to a harlot becomes one body with her; the same holds true for those who cling to their possessions, to their cattle, horses, lands, villas, to their gold and silver—attachments that are even more egregious. The man in the parable [Luke 12,19] who says: "My soul, you have plenty of good things laid by for many years to come; take things easy, eat, drink, have

a good time” Fishacre condemns as enjoying his plenty at the expense of those who want even the necessities of life.

And what is the destiny of those who are attached to the things of this world? The message is harsh:

These monsters ‘*monstra*’ who have been thus enriched and dissipated and made fat, whither are they bound? To the kingdom of heaven? No, because Christ is poor and weak . . . having nowhere to lay his head [Luke 9,58]. . . But He is the way [John 14,6] . . . and the gate [John 10,93. And narrow is the gate [Matt. 7,14], etc.⁶

Fishacre’s commentary on distinction 12 of Lombard’s first book prompts him to remind his readers of the proper order of things: important as knowledge is, goodness is to be sought first. Indeed, we know, he says, that many wise men have perished eternally, among them Lucifer, Plato, Aristotle, and perhaps even Solomon! Wisdom profits the salvation of others, goodness one’s own. What profit is there then in pursuing wisdom to the neglect of goodness?

In fact, a good deed is of more value to one’s neighbour than even the best sermon, claims the Preacher Fishacre. There are two senses whereby we learn: sight and hearing. And the former is more efficacious in moving us than the latter. This is not to be wondered at because the aperture of the ear has another opposite it, and thus what enters one ear does not penetrate to the soul, whereas the eyes are located more closely together and what enters through the eyes penetrates directly to the consciousness.

Likewise, knowledge is the drink of the soul, the “water of wisdom” [Ecclesiasticus 5,3] in the Scripture text, and good deeds its food. However, if one imbibes without eating, one loses one’s mind. “All that learning of yours is driving you mad,” Faustus shouts to Paul [Acts 26,24]. When Jesus fed the multitude, there is no mention of his supplying drink as well, and on the two occasions when Jesus did provide the wine—at the wedding feast of Cana and at the Last Supper—it was only after the guests had eaten.

The procession of Persons in the Trinity, moreover, leads Fishacre into a discussion of the ecclesial analogue of the Father, the bishops, and a warning against prelates who do not preach. From the Father there issues the Word and the Gift. And it is incumbent on the bishop to provide both, just as Jesus taught the multitude before feeding it. Many bishops, however, do not preach the word, owing either to ignorance, neglect, or physical absence.

The prelate is like a physician, whose medicine is found not in herbs but in words. But just as the physician who is ignorant of the medicinal properties of the simples is unable to cure the sick, so likewise the prelate who is ignorant of the saving words of the Scriptures is helpless

to bring succour to his subjects. If there is a difference, it is that the disease of the soul goes much deeper and is therefore more resistant to a cure.

To negligent and absent bishops Fishacre offers similar advice, drawing upon the words of Scripture and persuasive arguments. The absent prelate is likened to severing the head from the body: the result is always the death of the body. The neglectful prelate, moreover, is reminded that the crucified Christ left a twofold patrimony: the temporal and the spiritual. The temporal patrimony—the cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, and so on—is provided for the care of the priest in order that he might in turn be free to care for the spiritual welfare of those entrusted to him. Too often, unfortunately, he places a higher value on the former. Breaking into the second person, as he does not infrequently when he is in the moral mode, Fishacre asks rhetorically:

But when you take excellent care of your own goods, but His only minimally, aren't you breaking the agreement and being an unfaithful servant?⁷

It is love of neighbour, furthermore, that establishes our status as sons of God. The basis for this love is God's prevenient love for us, for all members of the human species. For it was to our species that God united himself in the unity of a single person. And whoever loves the God-made-man loves also those loved by Him, as any lover loves those loved by the beloved. Or just as the lover loves the gift given by the beloved, especially if it bears his or her image, so too every human being, made in God's image, bears His likeness. Or again, as the members of the same body serve the other members with a mutuality of love, even more so should the members of Christ's mystical body.

Although the subject matter of the second book of the *Sentences* does not offer as much scope for moralizing, concerned as it is principally with the creation account, even here the lessons are not totally absent. In a distinction which is concerned with the creation of woman, Fishacre establishes the claim that individuals of the human species are more unified than the members of any other species, because the human subsumes in his nature the natures of all other genera. The moral lesson? If in the words of *Ecclesiasticus* [13,19], *Every living thing loves its own sort*, the human person should love his fellow man more than any other species.

In addition, those living under the same roof and sharing the same table are for that reason more closely united and love each other more intensely. but we all live in the same house, which is the Church, and partake of the same meal, namely the Body of Christ. How intense therefore should be the love where the union is so close! However, Fishacre laments, today we are far from that ideal. The words of the

prophet Micah [7,2] have come true: *All are lurking for blood, every man hunting down his brother*. This likens the human person to the animals, and in fact makes him even lower than the beasts.

In another chapter of the same distinction (18) Fishacre argues that woman was made from man and not from earth. The reason for this is that the man should love her the more. And this love should be a love of equals, since the woman was made from the man's rib, which is in the middle part of his body, and not from the top or the bottom, lest the woman be thought of as either his superior or his subject.

In yet another chapter of distinction eighteen Fishacre muses that Adam experienced no pain at the loss of his rib. Joy is a stronger passion than sorrow, and Adam's joy at having a companion would have erased any sense of sorrow or pain, just as a friend's visit to a sick person results in a diminution of the latter's discomfort. In this instance, Fishacre leaves the reader to draw his own moral conclusions.

The Lombard does offer a venue in book two for a discussion of the free choice of the will, the structure of the human act, and sin, and in book three (curiously) of the virtues and vices—all central concerns of the moral theologian. Fishacre gives full treatment to these subjects, with his discussion of the free will issue constituting the lengthiest distinction in the entire commentary.⁸

I could multiply the examples many fold, but I think the point is made. Having made the distinction between moral and speculative theology and having promised in his *Sentences* commentary to isolate the difficult questions concerning the faith for students already instructed in the moral message of the Scriptures, Fishacre time and again turns aside from the speculative considerations prompted by the Lombard text to draw some moral lesson for his reader.

Since many of these moralitates are frankly obtrusive and break up the flow of the argument, one has to wonder what Fishacre is up to here. Was he trying to minimise the difference between the Bible as locus of moral instruction and the *Sentences* as locus of the more difficult speculative issues—indeed, minimize the difference between Scripture and the *Sentences*? Had the opposition of Grosseteste come to his attention even as he was fleshing out the theological project he had sketched in his prologue? Or did he simply anticipate the kind of objection that a more traditional theologian might raise?

We can of course only guess at the answers. It is, however, clear that Fishacre's commentary delivered more than it promised, and the result was an integrative work of theology that is unique in the genre of *Sentences* commentaries. What is also a matter of historical record is that the new theological methodology eventually triumphed. At mid-century Richard Rufus wrote what was so far as we know the first *Sentences* commentary by an Oxford Franciscan, reflecting in the 358

proemium what was certainly Grosseteste's view of theology:

At this point some people like to raise certain general questions regarding theology itself, and this thanks to this *summa* of the Master [Lombard]. This does not seem to me to be necessary, since this *summa* is not theology itself, nor even any part of it. For the divine Scripture is whole in itself, perfect quite apart from this and every other *summa*. ... Nevertheless because this is the custom, we too will touch on some of [these issues].⁹

Rufus was, however, fighting a war that was already all but lost. Although there is no evidence that Simon of Hinton, Fishacre's successor as Dominican regent, lectured on the *Sentences*, Robert Kilwardby did, and so apparently did every Dominican bachelor thereafter. In 1253, the year of Grosseteste's death, the Oxford masters passed a statute that seems in retrospect to have been an attempt at compromise: bachelors, according to this decree, could lecture either on a book of the Bible or on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard or on the *Histories* of Peter Comestor)¹⁰ By 1267, however, Oxford had capitulated to the Parisian custom and mandated use of Lombard's *Sentences* as the text to be covered in the theology faculty.¹¹

This has not proved to be the happiest development for the science of theology. Although, as Fishacre demonstrated, there is latitude in Lombard's work to discuss moral matters and to remain connected with Scripture, the tendency once the universities took the lead in theologizing from the monasteries was for increased specialization, with the result that speculative or dogmatic theology began to pull away from its mooring in the sacred text. Ignatius Eschmann, in one of his more bellicose moods, once cast this division in uncompromisingly negative terms:

There is no greater harm ever done to any fine and noble thing in history than the harm done to theology when the <theorists of the> "Golden Age" declared the it was to be divided, as though it were a piece of cake, into speculative and practical theology, the latter being so-called moral theology.¹²

- 1 See Thomas. Kaeppli, *Scriptores Ordinis Praedicatorum Medii Aevi* (Rome, 1980), p. 3:311.
- 2 See G. Abate, "Lettere secretae d'Innocenzo IV e altri documenti in una raccolta inedita del sec. XIII," *Miscellanea Franciscana* (1955), p. 347, n. 149.
- 3 James Ginther, "Theological Education at the Oxford Studium in the Thirteenth Century: A Reassessment of Robert Grosseteste's Letter to the Oxford Theologians," *Franciscan Studies* 55 (1998), p. 83–104.
- 4 See my edition of the Prologue: "The Science of Theology according to Richard Fishacre: Edition of the Prologue to his *Commentary on the Sentences*," *Mediaeval Studies* 34 (1972), p. 96–98.

- 5 I have edited this text and published it under the title “The Moral and Spiritual Theology of Richard Fishacre: Edition of Trinity Coll. MS O.1.30,” *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 60 (1990), p. 5–143.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 19–20.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 8 See my article, *Richard Fishacre’s Treatise ‘De libero arbitrio’, Moral and Political Philosophies in the Middle Ages*, Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Medieval Philosophy, eds. B. Carlos Bazàn, Eduardo Andújar, Leonard G. Sbrocchi, vol. 2 (Ottawa: Legas, 1995), p. 879–91.
- 9 Oxford, Balliol Coll. MS 62, col. 3.
- 10 *Statuta antiqua universitatis Oxoniensis*, ed. S. Gibson (Oxford, 1931), p. 49.
- 11 I take 1267 as the *terminus ante quem* from Roger Bacon’s philippic in that year against the modern theologians who had abandoned the source of Christian truth, the Bible, in favour of novelties; *Opus minus*, in *Fr. Rogeri Bacon Opera Quaedam Hactenus Inedita*, ed. J. S. Brewer (London, 1859; reprinted, Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1965), p. 329.
- 12 Ignatius Theodore Eschmann, *The Ethics of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Two Courses*, ed. Edward A. Synan (Toronto, 1997), p. 196–97.

Law and Theology in Fishacre’s *Sentences Commentary*

Joseph Goering

The topic of this brief communication, Theology and Law in Fishacre’s *Sentence Commentary*, emerges, as one might expect, from the decade-long project of producing a critical edition of the commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* by the Dominican theologian, Richard Fishacre. Preparing this edition has been a delightful and often-surprising exercise, and it is one of the surprises that concerns us here. Put in the form of a question, it is this: Why does a Dominican theologian, teaching in the theology faculty of the University of Oxford during the 1240’s, devote so much of his exposition of Book Four, on the Sacraments, to a detailed consideration of the Church’s canon law and to the teachings of the jurists?¹

The edition of Fishacre’s commentary provides two kinds of clues to the question. The first is what Fishacre says, explicitly, and the second is what he does—the ways in which he utilizes canon law and the teachings of the canonists in his commentary. We will examine each

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