

A HOUSE BUILT ON ROCK:
THE NEED FOR THE SENSE OF TOUCH IN THEOLOGY

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Lord . . . Thou hast wrought all our works *in us*.

— *Isaiah, xxvi, 12*

God is *in* all things, not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it acts. For an agent must be joined to that on which it acts immediately, and reach it by its power; hence it is proved in the *Physics VII*, that the thing moved and the mover must exist together. Now, since God is being itself by His own essence, created being must be His proper effect; as to ignite is the proper effect of fire. But God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being; as light is caused in the air by the sun as long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore, as long as a thing has being, so long must God be present to it, according to its mode of being.

— St. Thomas Aquinas
Summa Theologiae I, q. 8, art. 1, c.

I. "The Great Anthropocentric Shift"

In the learned world today only a few bother about the five proofs for God's existence that St. Thomas Aquinas sets out

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at the beginning of the *Summa Theologiae*. Even Catholic universities treat them with amusement. I have heard them referred to as “God’s five proofs for the existence of St. Thomas, or whatever.” The general sense is that they are naive, rendered passé by the progress of modern thought. Yet the great edifice that is the *Summa* was built upon these “five ways.” Not only that, the whole of Christian intellectual culture was grounded in these arguments. The upheaval of Christian culture that came with the Enlightenment achieved its effect primarily by undermining this intellectual foundation. Western civilization, which had its origins in Athens and Jerusalem, now repudiates both. The “five ways” are at the center of this upheaval and its story is one of paradox.

The greatest paradox of higher education goes largely unnoticed. Most people assume the university, by its very nature, is altogether independent of religion and even hostile to it. Many would agree with the description of higher education offered in a recent *Los Angeles Times* article relating the author’s youthful interest in religion: “Later, I left for college and learned to live in a rational world, where mysteries are simply problems waiting to be solved. I forgot all about holy things lurking in the shadows.” Even Catholic colleges seem to accept the truth of George Bernard Shaw’s remark that “a Catholic university is a contradiction in terms.” Recent history suggests that higher education is more a threat than a boon to the faith. How many parents have wept to find out that their children at Catholic institutions have dropped the practice of the faith? Their own offspring have forgotten the “holy things.”

I say this is a paradox, an apparent contradiction, because the university as an institution in the world grew out of the heart of the Church, as the papal document *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* points out. Oxford, Cambridge, Salamanca, the University of Paris, and all the other institutions that are the origin and model of the modern university arose as centers for theological studies. In the spirit of “faith seeking understanding,” to

use St. Anselm’s expression, theologians brought together all the human arts and sciences as “handmaidens” to serve their “Queen,” sacred doctrine.

The original moving force of the university was faith, not doubt. The spirit of “faith seeking understanding” isn’t that of skepticism. It does not take its model from “Doubting Thomas,” who refused to believe in the Lord’s resurrection without proof. Thomas’s motivation was understanding seeking faith, not “faith seeking understanding.” The university, to the contrary, arose because faith seeks union with God.

The model for the university was Mary, the sister of Martha, spoken of in the Gospels. Mary, in sitting at the Lord’s feet absorbing every word He spoke, had “chosen the better part.” Her love of Jesus drew her to seek closer union with God through deeper understanding. The university, arising as it did in a Christian world, did not seek to come to Christianity but to grow within it. The same longing Mary knew brought the university to life from the heart of the Church.

Some, indeed, regard as paradoxical sacred doctrine’s use of reason as a “handmaiden.” This is a superficial paradox. True, faith is a gift from God, not a product of mere human reason. True, also, the human arts and sciences originated chiefly among the pagan Greeks and Romans. Still, nothing is more natural to faith than that it should use and perfect the nature it builds upon. Grace presupposes nature—intelligent nature at that. When grace effects in the soul faith, hope, and charity, it does not circumvent the intellect and will of man. The body as well as the soul is profoundly engaged by revelation. I will comment presently on the influence of the sense of touch. The cosmos itself, of which man finds himself a part and which forms the immediate object of man’s understanding, is equally at the service of the faith. God fundamentally manifests himself through the world. Hence errors we make in our natural knowledge of man and the universe become fatal impediments to the supernatural life. St. Paul, in *Romans* 1:20, wrote that God has “manifested the invisible things of

Himself from the Creation of the world, clearly seen being understood by the things He made, His eternal power and divinity." And again, "professing themselves to be wise, they became fools . . . who changed the truth of God into a lie; and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator."

Faith which desires to see God in eternity desires to "see" God even in this life—albeit "through a glass darkly," not face to face. Thus charity no doubt moves the believer to demonstrate the "invisible things of God . . . His eternal power and divinity." Faith even seeks to investigate the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation. These are beyond reason to prove; hence they are revealed that we might know the "Son of the living God, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer." Yet reason can "see" what these articles of faith mean and what they imply. Furthermore, reason can disprove any "arguments" that appear to contradict them—for truth is one and no convincing rational argument can be raised against it. Reason and revelation, as St. Thomas Aquinas has so beautifully shown, are altogether harmonious.

The claim is often made that the natural arts and sciences thrive better when free from religion, which is thought to suborn their testimony in favor of religious bias. In truth, the opposite is the case. When faith formed by charity seeks understanding in order to draw nearer to God, faith has no use for falsity. Only when the arts and sciences are sound and valid do they serve their "Queen" well. Faith, Hope, and Charity furnish the strongest motive against the vanities and biases of human inventions. Thus Pope Leo XIII would write that in the Middle Ages the liberal arts and sciences flourished as they have never done before or since.

How then, this betrayal, this "non serviam" of the handmaidens to their queen, sacred doctrine? What happened to turn reason, the lower, against revelation, the higher? Moreover, why is the study of revelation so full of dissent? The problem is in reason, not in revelation. Theological disputes are at bottom philosophical. Bad philosophy can deeply

poison the study of religion. Today, the Vatican is engaged in a struggle with Catholic universities and colleges, especially in America. The issue is whether the magisterium can require a mandatum, an oath of fidelity, from theologians who claim to teach Catholic doctrine. There is widespread rejection of the Vatican's request, chiefly on the grounds that the determination of the meaning and truth of the deposit of faith by the magisterium directly conflicts with the ruling principle of the modern university: academic freedom. Free inquiry should not be stifled by authoritative teaching from any quarter. This is a dogma, largely unexamined, that tyrannizes today's higher education. Such dissent has its roots in philosophy, yet it is spoken of as a theological dispute. And truly it strikes at the heart of faith. Bad philosophy does indeed poison religion.

At first sight, the demand to submit the Creed to personal scrutiny, refusing to assent to Christ and His Church, seems a reversion to Doubting Thomas. Not faith seeking understanding but understanding seeking faith. But the case may be worse. The Apostle Thomas, upon seeing the Lord and touching His wounds, exclaimed, "My Lord and my God." Thus he turned in an instant from doubting the sensibly provable fact of the Resurrection to a profound faith in the unprovable mystery of the Incarnation. The case may be worse, I say, because the absolute doctrine of free inquiry implies a rejection of truth itself. Pontius Pilate ("What is truth?") rather than Doubting Thomas provides the appropriate image. Superficially the doctrine of academic freedom suggests that since truth is difficult to attain, it is wise never to stifle inquiry; we must not dogmatize our opinions and quash wonder. Yet it implies more. Inquiry is for the sake of the truth; yet truth itself can no longer have authority. It, too, is questionable. Even God's hands are tied; He cannot reveal salvific truth that is unquestionable. Faith can have no place in the groves of academe. "Academic freedom," rooted in a deep philosophical skepticism, is a child of the Enlightenment, when the Age of so-called Reason supplanted the Age of Faith. The

Enlightenment brought with it the implicit proposition that there is no truth. The proposition is self-evidently false (for the proposition is either false and there is truth, or it is true and there is truth.) Still it has been embraced by Western intellectual culture and now dominates higher education both outside and inside the Church. How did this ever come about? How did "reason" become magnified, and God minimized? Pope John Paul II called this "the Great Anthropocentric Shift."

II. The "philosophy of existence" vs. the "philosophy of consciousness"

We should never underestimate the significance of philosophy. What appears to be a small theoretical error in the beginning can grow into an error of cosmic proportions. Pope John Paul II, in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, remarks most aptly on the origins of dogmatic skepticism when he discusses the modern mind-set. The Holy Father contrasts the traditional "philosophy of existence" upon which Christian culture was founded with a "philosophy of consciousness" that has defined modern thought. The latter philosophy, he points out, inaugurated "the great anthropocentric shift" which led to the loss of Christian culture and complicated "Salvation History," that is, the sense that the world comes forth from God and is ordered to Him through Salvation. George Berkeley, a British philosopher and Anglican divine, made his contribution to the "philosophy of consciousness" with his famous assertion: *Esse est percipi*, "to be is to be perceived." By this he meant that the being of things is actually in the perception of them. Matter, for example, does not have an existence in its own right; its reality is no more than the perceptions of it. Its color, surface, shape, size, and the like, have being only as modes of our consciousness, not as independent realities. Matter for him is a meaningless word. As an Anglican bishop, Berkeley thought the rejection of a material world would be

a boon to man's sense of the spiritual world. The opposite has been the case.

Berkeley's thought once provoked the celebrated wit and savant Dr. Johnson. James Boswell, Johnson's companion and biographer, tells of a time when he was walking with Johnson, who was struggling with Bishop Berkeley's argument. Dr. Johnson's common sense rebelled against Berkeley's conclusion, but he found himself fighting its intellectual subtleties. Finally, in exasperation, Johnson kicked a stone mightily, saying, "Thus do I refute Berkeley."

Samuel Johnson teaches us an important lesson. The refutation, Dr. Johnson sensed, was best made by a reduction of the question to the sense of touch, to the "big toe," for touch is the most basic of our senses. Aristotle had long ago observed that, "whatever is in our minds is first in our senses." The human mind is itself a tabula rasa, a potency to be actualized, but it cannot become actual, and thus conscious, unless it be first brought into actuality by the existing physical world that moves our senses. Understanding, rooted in sensation, is at the core of the "philosophy of existence." Human knowledge starts, as it were, with "the big toe." Likewise, sacred doctrine, which makes use of human knowledge as a "handmaiden" must also acknowledge "the big toe."

We all get the point of the expression "pinch me to prove I am awake" and understand why Doubting Thomas wanted to touch the Lord's wounds to confirm the Resurrection. Sight, hearing, taste, and smell all reveal the sensible qualities of the objects perceived, that is, their color, shape, sound, odor, and the like. However, the sense of touch, that unique sense spread throughout the entire body, not only perceives the tangible qualities of heat, cold, moist, dry, hard, and soft, etc. but also makes us aware of these qualities as they affect and change our bodies. One will say "I feel heat" as he approaches a fire, and again, "I feel hot" as he senses the heat of the fire warming his own body, and thus moves away from the fire as the cause of the physical change he perceives in himself. It is primarily

this sense of touch that brings us to judge the existence of the objects we perceive. This is the sense we most trust not to be illusory. Without it we would lack certitude about the existence of the visible world around us. When St. Paul wrote in *Romans* that we know the invisible God, His existence and His attributes, from the visible things around us, he was speaking of the importance of this sense to theology itself. The sense of touch is the foundation of the "philosophy of existence."

Do not think that the intellectual life is something isolated in human affairs. Ideas have consequences, and these consequences form the culture that shapes our lives. We live by reason; thus, we live by principles that determine our judgments and inform our human existence. There is good philosophy and there is bad philosophy, but there is never no philosophy. We either state our principles, or we blindly assume them. Socrates understood this fundamental truth when he said, "the unexamined life is not worth living."

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, the Holy Father points out the logical consequences of modern thought or ideas. Descartes, he notes, marks the beginning of a new era in the history of European thought. The Holy Father speaks of this, as mentioned earlier, as the "great anthropocentric shift." With Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) as the point of departure for truth, reality ceased to measure the mind. Ideas instead became the measure of reality.

St. Thomas Aquinas, by contrast, in the tradition of philosophical realism, the "philosophy of existence," spoke of the idea not as the object of thought but as that by which (quo) the mind understands things. The idea or concept itself, according to St. Thomas, became an object of thought only when the mind reflected back upon its own operation. In Descartes' time, philosophers spoke of the idea itself as the direct and immediate object of our understanding. The consequence of this view is that one now has to judge which ideas represent an existing realities and which do not. But, even when he doubted the truth of his thought universally, Descartes found

himself unable to doubt his own doubting, that is, his own thinking (for to doubt is to think). Thus he hits upon his *cogito ergo sum*—his point of departure for philosophy. When Descartes examines this proposition he sees in it the quality of being "clear and distinct." This standard becomes the measure of all truth.

The "man on the street," in fact, thinks just the opposite. What is most certain to him is what he grasps most generally and confusedly. If, for example, he comes upon a strange object, say, a wombat, he is far more certain that it is something, or even something living (ideas that could be said about many quite different things) than that this strange animal is a specific species of marsupial. But then, the "man on the street" thinks he is talking about things, not about ideas. Descartes, not following common sense, sets a problem for the philosophers who follow him. Trapped in consciousness now, philosophers unsuccessfully struggle to find their way to reality. In some ways, however, it is not the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes that is the source of modern philosophy, but the assumption that the objects of our thought are ideas, not things. This assumption rejects the evidence of the sensible objects themselves, which evidence becomes known fundamentally through the sense of touch.

III. Theology begins with the "big toe"

Philosophers in modern times, failing to grasp the force of the "five ways," have let traditional theism slip from their minds. At best, they might claim to be deists. The deism of which I speak is that philosophical position which denies the interference of the Creator with the laws of the universe. God may be the Creator of this world system, according to deism, but the system operates on its own. Mathematical physics has been the most successful child of the Enlightenment, and consequently we take our world view largely from its perspective. But the mathematical formulae that express the laws of

physical phenomena in no way reveal the dependence of the universe on God. They express rather a self-sufficient system. Whatever theoretical account is generated to explain such a system, it is of a hypothetical and provisional nature. It may even seem a compatible hypothesis to suppose that God created this self-sufficient system. That is, to suppose deism. Such a God, however, could not be the God of the Scriptures, the God who defines Himself as "He who is." The Holy Father in the light of Christian theology speaks of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*, which is to say God's very essence is to be. All other natures can have actual being only as a separable accident; they need not exist. Their actual existence must of its nature be a participation in the divine being in whom being is not participated but essential. God cannot not be. St. Thomas will speak of being as the proper effect of God, so that if a creature comes to be it must not only borrow its act of existence from the divine being but also remain in act due to God's sustaining causality. It is no more possible for the world to exist independently of God than for the light to remain in the transparent atmosphere after sunset.

God as St. Thomas speaks of Him is the God of theism, the God "in whom we live and move and have our being," to use St. Paul's language. With deism, God is not God nor is creation, creation. If creation is self-sustaining, it is no longer creation; its essence has somehow become necessary. The atheist is quite at home with deism for God is no longer rationally necessary.

God as *ipsum esse subsistens* is, of course, not immediately known to the created intellect. Indeed, the infinite being of God surpasses the finite nature of any creature. Short of beatitude, no creature can see God "face to face." This is why every created intelligence, human or angelic, must ascend to whatever knowledge of God it may attain by starting from the created order to which its intellect is proportioned and proceed from these effects to a sense of their cause. God is not knowable by an abstraction or intuition, but only by a

judgment or inference from the visible things we can apprehend. As St. Paul says in Romans, the invisible things of God, His existence and His attributes, are known from the visible things around us. In short, we know God as the first principle of all things, through demonstration of Him as the first efficient cause of creatures and of their operations. By this ascent through an order of efficient causality, the creature's intellect comes to know God through inferences of divine pre-eminence along with the denial and removal of all imperfections. Only in this way do we see what is meant by God as *ipsum esse subsistens*. This idea can only be attained through the precise steps the mind takes in the "five ways." In fact, each step, each negation must be retained in thought to form an idea at all adequate to divine truth. Otherwise all notions of God are but metaphors, such as the phrase "the Man upstairs." Divine Contemplation, apart from infused supernatural light, cannot be fruitful save through the analogical sense of being unfolding in "five ways." I shall not attempt a full exposition of these "ways." But I would like to consider with some care the idea of efficient causality which is central to the "ways." Efficient causality is a problem for the modern mind, a mind bound up with the "philosophy of consciousness" and its inability to know the order of reality as it exists in reality.

Unless we understand what an efficient cause is and that there are such in our experience, the "five ways" are not efficacious. Reflection tells us that to be a cause is to be *in* the effect in such a way that the effect cannot be what it is without that presence. Causes cannot act at a distance. This is most clear in the case of the causes that constitute a being, such as the body and soul of a man. These are the material and formal causes, sometimes spoken of as intrinsic causes. There are causes, on the other hand, thought of as extrinsic causes, whose presence in the effect is less evident. I am speaking of the efficient cause, that is, the agent or moving cause of another being, and of the final cause, or the end for which a thing may be moved. If the final cause, however, can be said to

be *in* the effect, it can only be in virtue of the efficient cause itself being *in* the thing moved. The end for which I am now moving my pen, for example, is *in* the pen by virtue of my hand moving the pen. My hand, of course, as a moved mover is not a mover of the pen unless the hand itself is moved by my will and intellect which gives the purpose to this series of movers. In this series I even "see" my will and intellect *in* the movement of the pen as directing it to an end. In a similar fashion, the "five ways" show God to be simultaneously present to every effect such that, if His efficient causality were withdrawn, every creature would fall back into nothingness.

But are there truly efficient causes in the world I know? Do I have reason for thinking that so-called agents are in fact *in* the patients they appear to act upon? If they are not in the effect, are they really causes? And if an agent cause need not be *in* its effect while the effect is taking place, how can I assert a simultaneity in a series of efficient causes? If God is immediately the agent cause of the effect I start from in a demonstration, His agent causality must be seen as simultaneous with the effect, or I can infer nothing about His existence from the effect. If there is a series of agent causes between the effect and God as the ultimate agent, again the series of movers must be simultaneous, or nothing follows. If the agent cause is merely thought of as prior to but not present in the whole effect, there is no need to think that the agent cause need even exist as the effect goes on. If efficient causality is not understood rightly, neither God's existence nor His attributes can be known to us. How then is theology possible?

Modern thought has difficulty seeing the cause *in* the effect and hence efficient causality as causality is not understood. We may isolate an agent and call it the responsible antecedent of a given effect, but as a cause it is incomprehensible. Consequently, any reasoning through such "causality" becomes nugatory. The source of the problem again is with the assumption that we do not know things but only the ideas of things. If ideas, not things, are what we know, the idea of the cause and

the effect should reveal the presence of the cause *in* the effect. The idea of one billiard ball striking another should reveal this causal relation. But, as David Hume has pointed out, we only know the alleged cause to be prior to the alleged effect, not *in* it as that upon which the motion of the struck ball depends. We know, says Hume, that the idea of four contains the idea of two plus two. Such he speaks of as a "proposition of reason," but of the ideas of physical phenomena, we can only have, to use Hume's words, "propositions of fact." It is a fact that fire heats water in the sense that fire approaching water is followed by the perception that the water is now hot. We are not, however, allowed to say that fire is the cause of water becoming hot as having its own heat somehow *in* the water. True, says Hume, the "vulgar man," that is, the non-philosopher, will assume that the fire caused the water to boil but this is due to his experiencing a "constant conjunction" of the two. He comes to expect one to follow the other as if the antecedent were the cause. Efficient causality by this account is a psychological phenomenon; but logic knows better than to be so deceived. By this account the reasoning of the "five ways" necessarily fails.

The "vulgar man," however, may be wiser than the wise. It takes a mind with the acuity of an Aristotle, however, to manifest his "vulgar" good sense. In the *De Anima*, Aristotle distinguishes two senses of alteration. The strict sense of alteration he speaks of as the kind of change that a body undergoes, for example, when it changes from black to white, and he speaks of a lesser sense of alteration such as occurs when we see something white. The "vulgar" or common man is aware of this difference when, say, he nears a fire and says, "I feel heat" and again, when after being near the fire he says, "I feel hot." In the strict sense of alteration the subject changes from one contrary to another, that is, from cold or some intermediate temperature to hot. Such a change is necessarily successive or progressive; it does not happen in an instant. The alteration in sensation, however, is not from one

contrary to its opposite, but rather from a potency to receive, say, the color white to receiving that color as a perfection of the power of sight. St. Thomas speaks of this alteration of sensation as a "spiritual change" distinct from the alteration of a body changing color, which he calls a "physical change." By "spiritual" he does not mean that the sense impression is a universal like the ideas of the intellect, but rather that like the reception of the intelligible species in the intellect, the senses also receive sensible species instantaneously. That is to say, there is no contrary form to be removed, nor a disposing of the power before the sense can receive its object. The sense itself is a potency to be immediately actualized by its proper sensible object. In fact, the sensible object is received under the conditions of matter such that one does not see white in general, but the particular white found in the particular white object. Moreover, the sensible object is received by the eye as the eye is a corporeal organ—yet a corporeal organ so proportioned that it may be actualized by a particular color while not becoming itself colored. St. Thomas will speak of this mode of existence in the eye as an "intentional mode" of being. Hence the color existing in the eye, not being the color of the eye itself, must be the color of the object. The "vulgar" man, I say, recognizes these distinct modes of existing, i.e., their "intentional" mode and the physical mode when he distinguishes the senses of "I feel heat" and "I feel hot."

A modern scientist might say that the eye is a sense organ inasmuch as "it can transform a light wave into a nerve impulse," and *mutatis mutandis* this applies to the other senses as well. Such language would follow a more specialized investigation of sensation, but one that presupposes the common and ordinary experience of sensation about which Aristotle and St. Thomas speak. In either case, it is understood that no sense retains its proper sensible and so no contrary quality need be expelled from the organ when it is later acted upon.

That the "vulgar" man distinguishes color in the eye from color in a table implies that color as such is not an idea. Color admits of both intentional and physical existence. An idea or sense impression as such cannot have a physical existence, as Bishop Berkeley has pointed out. Furthermore, if sensation is a "common passion", as St. Thomas speaks of it, then the primacy of agent to patient shows clearly that color belongs in its being to *things*, not to consciousness.

Though sensation is rightly called "spiritual" in the sense described, it is nonetheless a bodily passion insofar as each sense is a power in an organ resulting from the composition of elements proportioned so as to leave the organ in an equilibrium capable of being acted upon by a determinate genus of sensible quality. The aqueous humor of the eye, for example, is neutral with respect to color and thus can receive color without becoming colored, just as the air which is a medium of sight can transmit color without becoming colored. The same appears to be true of hearing, smelling, and tasting. Each has its proper sensible genus by which we distinguish it. Hearing alone perceives sound, smell alone odor, and taste alone savor. Hearing, smell, taste, along with sight, all have distinct organs located in the head, and all need an external medium in sensing. A white object pressed against the eye could not be seen without a diaphanous medium, nor could a savor be tasted without moisture on the tongue.

The sense of touch, by contrast, has some striking differences from the other four senses. For one, it is not located in the head only but spread throughout the body—even in the organs of the other senses. It is also the most common of the external senses. Some animals have only touch but none lacks touch. Unlike the other senses, touch does not have just one proper genus, but several. By touch we know the hot and the cold, the moist and the dry, and the hard and the soft. They are distinct genera, irreducible one to the other. In this sense, touch is not formally one sense as are each of the other four senses. We speak of touch as one sense, however, in virtue

of the subject of these diverse genera, namely the substance which is the animal body. It is composed by the elements distinguished primarily by the hot and the cold, the moist and the dry, the hard and the soft, etc. These genera pertain precisely to body as body. And thus touch is found throughout the body and is the fundamental sense. Without touch no animal could avoid those corporeal things that would destroy it. Without a sense of heat we might walk into fire. Without an awareness of pressure we would readily be crushed. Color, sound, smells, and tastes as such are not harmful to our being, but are indeed useful for our well-being. For the clam these other senses may not be necessary, but touch surely is.

The object of touch, moreover, must come into contact with this sense. Thus it is called *tactus* or touch. Since there is no external medium, it must be that, in touch alone, the flesh itself is the medium. For this reason, Aristotle infers that the sense of touch is not the flesh merely but a potency within the flesh. Modern biologists speak of temperature and pressure receptors throughout the body. The role of the body as medium of the tangible qualities gives touch a special character. Since the flesh is composed of elements distinguished by the tangible qualities, it cannot be without these qualities. Hence, when it is acted upon by an external object heating it or pressing upon it, the body already has its own temperature and pressure. It is quite unlike the eye that receives color in so far as it has no color. In the case of touch the impinging heat or pressure works a "physical change" in the tactile organ itself so that the sense corrupts from its natural condition when sensation occurs. A sign of this is that when the internal temperature or pressure of the animal comes into equilibrium with the external temperature or pressure, sensation ceases. When our bodies reach room temperature we no longer notice the temperature of the room. The sensation of temperature or pressure occurs, therefore, in relation to a natural condition of the animal either exceeding its natural temperature or pressure or falling short of them. For this reason, St. Thomas

speaks of touch as the most material and the coarsest of the senses. Even as it is perceiving it is corrupting. Sight, on the other hand, not only notes many distinctions in its objects and perceives at the greatest distances, but is the least subject to physical change and corruption. It is so "spiritual" that we liken the immaterial intellect to it.

If touch in its very act of sensing undergoes a "physical change" in what sense is its alteration called "spiritual"? Once again St. Thomas refers the name "spiritual" to the instantaneous, for although the tangible object is acting on the sense organ in a physical way, the sensation itself that takes place is not "engendered." By this he means that sensation like motion itself does not successively come to be. You are moving or you are not. Once you move you have moved. This comes to be instantaneously. Likewise for touching. As soon as you touch something you have already touched it. So touch like the other sensations is a perfect activity albeit one that weakens in the activity itself.

A final and important difference between touch and the other senses is its ability to feel the parts of the body itself. Sight has no power to see the color it receives when seeing or the ear the sound in it when it hears, but touch knows not only the tactile qualities of the external object but also the effect that those qualities have on our own physical being. We not only know the object through an "intentional" motion, an immanent activity remaining in the knower, but also know this perceived quality to be altering our corporeal reality. In short, we know the object moving our sense of touch to be the efficient cause of a physical change in us by its being in union with the tactile sense organ. With touch the immanent activity of sensation, an activity that begins and ends within the agent, terminates in the same reality as the transitive activity beginning in the object outside of the knower and ending *in* the knower. We, of course, move other things ourselves, but like the golden rule that we are to do unto others what we would have them do unto us, we understand the real

effect of an action better when we actually suffer it. The “vulgar” man knows that the push he feels when bumped is the efficient cause of his being moved and this to the extent that the agent is *in* the patient. This is not a mere psychological trick he plays upon himself but a most concretely felt experience. It is so concretely felt that he turns to touch to “feel the wounds” of Christ in order to confirm the reality of the resurrection lest he merely “believe.” This error that Hume falls into is rooted finally in the false judgment that what we know is the idea of the thing and not the thing itself, which reveals its own truth.

St. Thomas’s treatment of touch drawn from Aristotle’s *De Anima* is an analysis on the level of the ordinary experience of men that does not change over the ages. In St. Thomas’s account of this basic experience, which account is presupposed to any further investigation, it is clear that we do not invent an explanation of the efficient causality of one body upon another. Rather, we experience in the most concrete fashion an agency and patiency in which we as patients not only know the agent as another, but we know it in its otherness to be affecting and changing our very being. We know the efficient cause to be an efficient cause because our changing is tied to agents being present *in* us, yet being still another thing. With good reason does Dr. Johnson come to the defense of the “vulgar man” and vigorously refutes both Berkeley and Hume with his “big toe.”

This small error in the beginning, that is, taking the idea of a thing and not the thing itself as the object of knowledge, this starting point in consciousness alone, has contributed immensely to the purely secular culture we know today. The rationalism of the Enlightenment soon replaced the traditional “philosophy of existence” elaborated by St. Thomas Aquinas. Human thought, by losing touch with the tangible things, lost touch also with the existing God who made these very things, the same God who is *ipsum esse subsistens* (being subsisting in itself.) God is that absolute being from whom all creation

receives its being. God alone is His being. Creatures only have being borrowed from God. Strictly speaking, God alone is being. As John Paul II put it, “150 years after Descartes, all that was fundamentally Christian in the tradition of European thought had already been pushed aside.” God, who is “autonomous existence,” was supplanted by “autonomous thought,” and in the process the significance of redemptive salvation was profoundly undermined. When visible things around us are not known in themselves, when their inner structures, their natures, do not point to God, then God is no longer in our world. He may be thought to be outside the world, as in deism. But a God who is unnecessary for the world’s continuing existence is meaningless to human thought. God is the proper cause of the being of creation, not only in its beginning but throughout its duration. Otherwise, atheism soon follows. And, of course, in a climate of atheism there is no longer a redeemer, nor is there theological hope.

IV. Human wisdom resolves to “the man in the street”

In the middle of the twentieth century, Etienne Gilson wrote, “Philosophy,” [meaning the traditional philosophical reasoning of St. Thomas and the Church] “always buries its undertakers.” That tradition, because it is so fundamental to human experience, cannot be destroyed without destroying man himself, and, therefore, like the “Golden Rule” indelibly written in our hearts, the “philosophy of existence” reasserts itself as an abiding wisdom. A wisdom that is “here today and gone tomorrow” is no wisdom at all. Wisdom is per se perennial. As Charles Péguy said, “we all know more than we know that we know, and philosophy for the most part consists in making explicit what we all know implicitly.” Only in true philosophy are we true to ourselves, true to the implicit experience that all men in all ages and places share, which forms the foundation of all we know. Without this we could not even begin to communicate with each other.

The supplanting of the perennial wisdom has meant a vast upheaval for Christian culture. For this reason the Holy Father censures “the great anthropocentric shift in philosophy.” This shift carries thought away from existence to an absolute “subjective consciousness” in which “only that which corresponds to human thought makes sense.” Objective truth alone can lead thought to God—for truth is convertible with being. St. Paul did not say that God is known from man’s thought, but from direct contact with the tangible world.

In *Fides et Ratio*, the Holy Father, while showing the value of the many studies that make up the modern university, emphasizes the centrality of the perennial philosophy. Not every sort of human knowing is primarily valuable to sacred doctrine. What is hypothetical and passing in human opinions has but a secondary importance. For this reason, John Paul II introduces the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* with the comment: “although times change and knowledge increases, it is possible to discern a core of philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole. Consider, for example, the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with a capacity to know God, truth, and goodness. Consider as well certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all. These are among the indications that, beyond different schools of thought, there exists a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity. It is as if we had come upon an implicit philosophy, as a result of which all feel that they possess these principles, albeit in a general and unreflective way. Precisely because it is shared in some measure by all, this knowledge should serve as a kind of reference point for the different philosophical schools. Once reason successfully intuits and formulates the first universal principles of being and correctly draws from them conclusions which are both logically and ethically coherent, then it may be called right reason or, as the ancients called it, *orthos logos*, *recta ratio*. . . . the Church considers philosophy (in this

sense) an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it.”

In short, perennial wisdom is at the core of Catholic education.

The genius of Aristotle, whom St. Thomas called the Philosopher, is invaluable to perennial wisdom. No one has spoken of his place more tellingly than did Cardinal Newman in his *Idea of a University*. Of Aristotle he wrote: “. . . he is the oracle of nature and of truth. While we are men, we cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians, for the great master does but analyze the thoughts, feelings, views, and opinions of human kind. He has told us the meaning of our own words and ideas, before we were born. In many subject matters, to think correctly, is to think like Aristotle; and we are his disciples whether we will or no, though we may not know it.”

The irony of modern “anthropocentric” philosophy is that it betrays man himself in the most fundamental way. It robs him of his rightful wisdom, and it ushers in a dogmatic skepticism that undermines his deepest hopes and desires.

The most thoughtful scientists have even sensed the absence of a basic human wisdom left by the modern sciences and technologies. It is not the popes alone who call us back to realism and perennial wisdom. Since the upheavals of classical mechanics in the early part of the twentieth century, a chorus of scientists, including Einstein, Heisenberg, Duhem, Russell, and other giants in science, recognizing the provisional and passing character of mathematical physics, have pointed out the need to analyze our ordinary, prescientific knowledge of nature. This learning, in their judgment, is what is most stable, true, and fundamental to human experience. “Scientific thought,” said Einstein, “is a development of prescientific thought.” The concepts in ordinary language of nature, of time, of place, of motion, etc. are basic to any modern scientific theory. Science, for all its successes, has not rendered them obsolete.

A HOUSE BUILT ON ROCK

The neglect of common experience has uprooted all the disciplines. The classical account of a liberally educated man given by Aristotle in his *De Partibus Animalium* as one who knows the principles of the several fundamental disciplines and can therefore judge the soundness of any discourse in the light of those principles is not attainable unless we can ground the arts and sciences in that stable, true, and perennial knowledge that resolves into our ordinary experience of reality. If we can say no more than that all theory is but opinion, "the rubber never touches the road." We spin our wheels, but we don't educate. The university, which in its origin was a place of truth, now defines itself as a marketplace of opinions, one opinion following another. Disoriented thought is the patrimony of Enlightenment skepticism. Paradoxical as it may sound, the university, "the house of intellect," cannot be true to reason itself without the Faith. A "house built on sand" will surely fall. A Christian intellectual culture built upon the same sand will fare no better. The faith must be founded upon a theism, and theism can only be established by the "philosophy of existence." Since the time of Pope Leo XIII all the popes have urged a return to the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. The Thomistic revival of the twentieth century, however, too often linked the language of St. Thomas with concepts taken from the "philosophy of consciousness." This betrayal of the mind of St. Thomas brought the revival to an end. Neo-Thomism is never the answer. We all begin philosophy in our ordinary experience, and this experience has not changed over the ages. St. Thomas, and Aristotle before him, knew the same world we do, but they analyzed our knowledge of it with such a remarkable fidelity to common experience that their thought remains the benchmark to this day. Knowledge does not end with them. But it must begin with their insight if the creature is to return to his source: God.