Seven Theses on Dogmatics and Patristics in Catholic Theology[1]

And yet, unless my senses deceive me,
the old centuries had, and have,
powers of their own which mere "modernity" cannot kill.[2]

Lewis Ayres

I

At the outset we must identify that a theological failure has marked Catholic thought over the last century.[3] Marie Dominique Chenu OP wrote as follows in 1937:

> If Christianity draws its reality from history rather than metaphysics, the theologian's first concern, in dignity as well as in order, is to know that history, and to equip himself to this effect. This is no transitory requirement, which one can hurriedly abandon to specialists at the door of the laboratory of speculation, but a permanent devotion in which the mind immerses itself...
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> In this conception of theology, Holy Scripture and Tradition are not primarily a collection of arguments to be used in the Schools and their disputed questions. They are primarily what is given, to be scrutinised, known, and loved for themselves - and all subsequent speculations would be in vain which do not aim at a better understanding of this gift out of all the resources of its religious intelligibility.[4]

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1. I would like to thank a number of friends who commented on earlier drafts, and especially Michel René Barnes, Simon Oliver and Andrew Summerson, as well as the two anonymous readers for the journal who made a number of very helpful suggestions.

2. Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Penguin, 2004), 43 (from Jonathan Harker's Journal, 18th May).

3. I should also note that throughout this paper, my concern is with the Latin rite Catholic context. The place of Patristic theology within the Eastern Catholic Churches will of necessity be rather different. Later in the paper I mention Vatican II's *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*; on this text and the character of Eastern rite Catholic theology as Patristic see Andrew Summerson, "*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* as Proof and Itinerary of the Hermenuetic of Reform: *Theoria* and a Little *Praxis*," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 57 (2016): 135-144, Khaled Anatolios, "The Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*," in Matthew Levering & Matthew Lamb, eds., *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 343-349.

4. Marie Dominique Chenu OP, *Une école de théologie: le Saulchoir* (Paris: Cerf, 1985), 132: "Si le christianisme tire ainsi sa réalité de l'histoire, non d'une métaphysique, le théologien

This paper is written in the belief that Chenu was largely correct in his pithy charge - a charge that can also be heard in a number of other key theologians of *ressourcement*.[5] And yet, since the Second Vatican Council, Catholic theology has failed to consider with sufficient seriousness what it would mean to teach and practice dogmatic theology in the light of Chenu's account of the ways in which Scripture and tradition should be central to the theologian's attention.[6] This is not to say that profound theological reflections have not been offered during this period, but it is to say that one of the most important (if often inchoately stated) suggestions of the original core theologians of *ressourcement* has simply not been taken forward in any depth.[7] That this is so is my first thesis.

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doit avoir pour premier souci, premier en dignité comme en ordre chronologique, de connaître cette histoire, et de s'équiper à cet effet. Non pas besogne transitoire, qu'on aura háte d'abandonner à des spécialistes, à la porte du laboratoire à spéculation, mais application permanente ou l'esprit se complaise... Dans une telle conception de la théologie, l'Ecriture sainte et la Tradition ne sont donc pas d'abord des répertoires d'arguments à l'usage de l'Ecole et de ses conclusions disputées; C'est d'abord le donné, à scruter, à connaitre, à aimer pour lui méme, et toutes les spéculations ultérieures seraient vaines qui n'iraient pas à mieux connaître ce donné dans toutes ses ressources de religieuse intelligibilité." There is an English translation now available of the third chapter of *Une école* in Patricia Kelly (ed.), *Ressourcement Theology: A Sourcebook* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), here 17-18. My translation is hers, with a few significant changes.

5. The adverb results from my uncertainty about the division between history and metaphysics with which Chenu begins. Chenu's target in constructing this opposition is, obviously enough, the Neo-thomist theologians of his day. In broader perspective, and in the light of our needs today, we should reject the opposition; *we* need careful attention to the metaphysics embedded in and supporting traditional Christian doctrine! By "*ressourcement* theologians" in this essay I refer to the loose group of French thinkers primarily active between the 1930s and the aftermath of Vatican II. Different scholars will, of course, identify different names, and the borders of the set are necessarily unclear. I think of Hans Urs von Balthasar as close Swiss cousin, rather than as the highpoint of *ressourcement* (as has become common in recent writing).

6. My concern here is with Catholic theology, and for reasons that will soon become clear my argument depends on peculiarly Catholic concerns about the nature of tradition, but readers in other Christian communions will, I hope, find the argument useful, especially insofar as it suggests that our accounts of theological sub-disciplines, our accounts of what we should study, and how we should attend to that which we study, must ultimately be *theological* accounts.

7. As an example I note Michel Fédou's recent *The Fathers of the Church in Christian Theology*, trans. Peggy Manning Meyer (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019). Fédou does an excellent job of showing how attention to Patristic writers has influenced Catholic theology over the last century, and of suggesting ways in which such attention can help in the future; but the book offers no extensive *theological* reflection on why these texts should be an essental part of Catholic theological conversation.

The suggestion with which I am concerned, and which was sustained by a number of the original *ressourcement* figures, may be divided in two. In the first place, attending to the foundational theologians of pre-modernity is a fundamental point of departure for theological renewal. Figures as De Lubac, Chenu and Congar (for example) were deeply committed both to the figures of the Patristic period as a constant source of theological renewal, and to the great figures of medieval theology. My own concern will be with Patristic texts but, as will become clear, I follow the theologians of *ressourcement* in not treating medieval theology as the "other." Second, though here the thesis is far more inchoate, these same figures - and Daniélou's name must be added to the previous list of examples - also argued that our attention to the tradition should be shaped by post-Renaissance modes of historiography. However, such *ressourcement* figures did not see (as their detractors have argued from time to time) attention to the historical as an embrace of the sorts of cultural relativism that render determinative dogmatic statements impossible. As Chenu makes clear (although the others I have named were more reticent in so doing), it is rather that one may envisage a confluence between modern philosophical attention to the historical and the doctrine of the Incarnation, which allows us to see that entering into the study of the tradition may be a central form of speculative theology.

Unfortunately, these theses were not articulated in anything like a full form during the period before the council, and after that event they faded from view as the concerns of dogmatic/speculative/systematic and fundamental theology shifted dramatically. Their importance is acknowledged at a tangent in Balthasar's continuing emphasis on the appropriate remembering of the tradition (as Cyril O'Regan has insightfully put the matter[8]), but out of the turmoil of Catholic theology since the council

8. Cyril O'Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering (1):Balthasar's Response to Philosophical Modernity. Vol. 1: Hegel* (New York: Crossroad, 2014), e.g 9-14: "As a dynamic field of memory, the Christian tradition - as with any tradition of discourse - is constantly threatened by forgetfulness. ... [Balthasar] senses with Eliot that modernity is bedeviled by a pervasive, deep, and aggressive form of forgetfulness... In addition, Balthasar judges that this forgetfulness finds a seal of protection in and through the legitimation procedures of the Enlightenment, which stipulates that part of the price of being modern and rational, and thus truly human, is that one leaves behind the presumption, belief, and custom which constituted one's legacy.... Balthasar understands that his task is to outbid modernity's amnesia of the Christian tradition, and to persuade us of the value and validity of Christian memory... [there is] a more narrow, less visible, yet complementary aspect of Balthasar's dealing with tradition that bears on the possibility of a theology after modernity. It involves not so much the demonstration of memory against the actual 'bleeding out' of memory in the Enlightenment.. so much as a critical response to important post-Enlightenment responses... that emphasize memory as a solution... to say 'I misremember' is to imply a recall - often a very confident recall -that turns out to miss the mark... Balthasar's target then is a form of cultural and historical memory that omits critically to assess the truth conditions of its own history of counter-memory, and fails properly to distinguish between apparent and real remembering."

have come remarkably few attempts to give an account of the place of Patristic theology in Catholic thought, especially *theological* attempts that describe the place of Patristic texts on the basis of a theology of tradition. Moreover, the legacy of the *ressourcement* theologians for the study of Patristic texts is complex. While figures such as Daniélou certainly produced a generation of scholars of Patristic thought who have contributed much to the field, most have plied their craft in an academic system which sees them *a priori* as historians, rather than as "systematic" theologians. Balthasar, by virtue of not holding a teaching position in a university, did not produce a generation of scholars, but it is noticeable that for all his celebration of Patristic theology, I know few devotees of his thought who have felt themselves called to Patristic life. A fascination with his thought has led mostly to a further fascination with his particular modern concerns, and writing *about* Balthasar (or, for that matter *about* De Lubac or Chenu) is *not* the same as actually studying early or medieval Christian thought and engaging in dogmatic *ressourcment.* It is difficult to escape the conclusion that *ressourcement* thinkers failed to stimulate either a tradition of Patristic scholarship that understands itself as an integral part of the dogmatic or speculative enterprise, *or* a vision of dogmatics in which Patristic theology has a clear and integral function.

This failure is of particular importance now both because of the state of early Christian studies, and because of the state of current "systematic" theology. In the first place, the Anglo-American world has seen an increasing bifurcation in the study of early Christianity with the result that many scholars no longer imagine themselves as having any significant relationship to the theological community and have methods and intellectual concerns determined only by wider currents in the secular academy. Those who *are* trained to investigate theological concerns are most frequently socialised to consider themselves historians rather than theologians. In the second place, the broad acceptance within the Catholic world of a particular conception of "systematic" theology has served to embed these divisions. Although such terms as "systematic," "dogmatic," and "speculative" are all malleable, the increasing use of the phrase "systematic theology" in the post-conciliar Catholic context has coincided with the sense that a "systematician" normally describes someone with expertise in theology since the beginning of the twentieth century. If I write on Maximus's Christology I am a historian; if I write on Rahner's I can call myself a systematician. This equivalence between "systematic theology" and modern theology raises a number of vital *theological* questions about how theological work is conceived, and it has also led to a frequent dogmatic illiteracy among scholars who are well-versed in a particular area of theory, or in a particular modern *reconstruction* of a dogmatic locus, but whose knowledge of basic doctrinal *loci* - of *what* is being reconstructed - is thin. By "thin" I mean dependent on secondary treatments probably acquired during an early stage of graduate education, and lacking in awareness of the richness of debate that led to those doctrinal formulations, or knowledge of the debates among those who advocated for those formulations. Luckily the hegemony of this set of assumptions is not

absolute, and one who sets out to think beyond them will find (especially now) many allies along the path.[9]

In this context it is time to turn again to the claims articulated by the theologians of *ressourcement* about the importance of Patristic theology, and think *in our context* how they may be taken forward. The French programs of *ressourcement* on which I draw usually cast themselves as answering broad modern needs. This is particularly clear in Daniélou's famous essay "Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse," where it is the rise of Marxism and existentialism, as well as our new attention to history and to "life" that demands we abandon the arid work of modern scholasticism and return via the study of liturgy, Patristics and new scriptural scholarship to the voice of the Lord.[10] Our situation in the post-conciliar context is rather different, and the particular *ressourcement* for which I am calling here is limited and aimed at refocusing our vision of theological speculation, at rethinking *theologically* the divisions created by the modern professionalised sub-divisions of the field, and at drawing out in our day the promise of the theologies that pointed toward and shaped the Council's vision. Nevertheless, even this more modest *ressourcement* may aid the development of a Christian response to the increasing recognition that the promises of Marxism and existentialism were in vain before the power of modernity's anti-traditionalism, commodification of knowledge and cultural amnesia. Envisioning theology correctly may aid us in showing the explanatory power and beauty of Christian thought and tradition, a goal that resonates deeply with the work of the *ressourcement* thinkers, even as we must recognise a rather different cultural moment.

My first thesis is, then, that we must acknowledge this failure; the seventh will draw threads together by suggesting what it means to label dogmatics a conversation. The five theses in between could be offered in a different order, but each constitutes a necessary building block if the nature of the theological conversation is to be grasped.

II

My second thesis is that "systematic" theology, as commonly concieved today, does not aid us in considering the importance of attending to Patristic theology. It

9. In some more traditional Catholic contexts there are certainly "systematicians" whose area of expertise is Thomas (I discuss the conversation between those who study medieval theology, and students of early Christian theology at a number of points through this essay); I have former students from more conservative Protestant backgrounds who are employed teaching "systematics" even though their training is in early Christian theology.

10. Jean Daniélou, “Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse,” *Études* 249 (1946): 1–21. This essay may be found in translation both in Kelly, *Ressourcement*, 61-72, and in *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 18/1(2011).

will, consequently, be helpful for me to identify how, in what follows, I use the term "dogmatic" theology as an alternative.

The study of the sacred page is certainly "the soul of theology,"[11] but the primary goal of theological thought is to enter more deeply with heart and intellect into the Christian mysteries - via the Christian symbolic universe - and to speak of them in truth, in ways that hand them on to the next generation, and in ways the draw others to belief. This entering into the Christian mysteries is the foundation from which all other theological activities flow, the foundation on the basis of which new times, circumstances and questions are described and addressed. The use of the term "dogmatics" reminds us that attention to these mysteries is focused by the Church's formed dogmas, centrally those concerning the economy of creation and salvation in Christ and the Trinitarian God from whom this activity flows, but spreading out to consider the character of human activity in this great story.[12] Thus, insofar as we identify discrete theological subfields (e.g. ethics) that tend to be deeply engaged with particular areas of human inquiry often conducted without Christian commitment (as, e.g. an ethicist might be engaged with non-Christian philosophers writing on the human person, with economists, with writers on the nature of medical care, and many other subfields), theologians with such foci think best when they drink deeply from the central dogmatic well. Dogmatics in this sense is an activity that flows from attention to revelation, from attention to Christ's person as acting and speaking during his earthly sojourn, from attention to the Scriptures which witness to that acting and speaking, and from attention to the guiding of the Christian community by Christ and his Spirit since Pentecost.[13] This is most certainly also a "speculative" enterprise, in

11. *Dei Verbum,* §24. On the place of Scripture in dogmatic theology see thesis seven.

12. I offer a longer account of the theological enterprise in my "What is Catholic Theology?" for L. Ayres & M. A. Volpe (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook to Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5-41.

13. And, consequently, while it is always good to remember Congar's insistence that while a movement of *ressourcement,* draws on a re-reading of texts and an attention to sources, it does so in order to return us to the paschal mystery. See Yves Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'église*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 304-5: "Revenir aux principes, se 'ressourcer', comme on dit maintenant, c'est penser la situation dans laquelle nouse sommes engagés à la lumière et dans l'esprit de tout ce qu'une tradition intégrale nous apprend du sens de l'Église... Dans ce triple retour aux sources liturgique, biblique et patristique, le ressourcement prend son vrai caractère: il est tout autre chose qu'un retour au passé... il est réinterrogation des textes, mais quelque chose de plus aussi, et de plus essentiel: il est recentrement sur le Christ en son mystère pascal." The threefold scholarly focus of textual re-reading that Congar celebrates here, and the centrality for him of the liturgy - a focus that enriches and focus our attention to what it is that God has effected in Christ is - I hope, reflected in the focus on the Patristic period as shaping the Christian symbolic universe in my next thesis (even as I also think that our time demands a more persistent attention to the basic dogmatic heritage of that period than Congar saw necessary in an age and context

the sense that Catholic theologians are called to explore, to look towards God, as part of the journey toward contemplation. Speculation here has not so much the modern sense of thinking something new and experimental for its own sake, as a more ancient sense of grasping, analysing, contemplating the God who has acted in Christ, and the shape of that action. Theological speculation is also inseparable from the Christian vision of the transcendent creator as simple, universally present, sustainer of all. It is in knowledge of these principles that we look with and through Christ toward God.[14]

In the post-Renaissance context, as I will explore in my fourth thesis, Catholic theologians should see themselves as obligated to draw on a *range* of specialised expertise, and those possessing such expertise will, in turn, be part of scholarly conversations involving people who work with no conscious intent of arguing doctrinally. But is thinking dogmatically and speculatively best understood as a distinct sub-discipline among these specialisms? At times theologians *must* aim at a synthetic presentation or grasp of the whole or part of the Christian truth: this may be for one's students; it may occur in the context of exploring paths opened by new philosophical discussions, or Biblical / historical scholarship; it will almost certainly occur as a necessity for oneself, and it may occur as an offering in the work of apologetics or catechesis. But whether that aim is also best understood as a distinct academic discipline is a very different question.

One problem I have, then, with the term "systematic" theology is that it turns a laudable and necessary *aim* of theological thought into a "discipline," when it should more sensibly (in the light of basic theological committments) be an activity performed alone or together by those with different areas of expertise representing the appropriate objects of the theologian's attention and reverence.[15] This problem is

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where he and his theological peers received a dogmatic formation now rare). I thank Fr Robert Imbelli for drawing my attention to this passage in Congar.

14. The dogmatic, speculative task is thus also a philosophical one. That much should also be clear from my discussion later of the manner in which the student of Patristic texts should observe the adaptation into the Christian fold of a range of metaphysical positions that are, hence, perennial in Catholic dogmatics. It is, however, a separate question, beyond the scope of these theses, how far we should conceive of the philosophical aspects of the speculative task as ever a distinct theological sub-discipline, and how the philosophical tasks appropriate to theology map onto the concerns of modern philosophical traditions - or those who today identify themselves as "philosophers of religion."

15. From one perspective it makes perfect sense to speak of a theological "system." The various parts of the divine economy are a connected whole, a connected action, and that action reflects the one eternity of the divine life. But, obviously enough, that divine life is hidden from our comprehension and thus the "system" in this sense remains the object toward which we strain and into which we are drawn. We know it by attending to the unfolding and authoritative theological tradition, and we know it by attending to the work of those people and moments who have been drawn to its heart. In a manner appropriate for us, divine truth is revelaed to us, and we come to share in it. But, consequently, wariness about any one "systematic" account of the whole of Christian teaching produced by a

greatly compounded, first and most significantly, by the (often unconscious) identification of "systematic" and "modern" theology. If the figures one uses in "systematic" thought or teaching are almost only modern *or* if patristic and medieval figures are presented only through the secondary gaze of textbook presentations - or as they are used within the work of other modern systematicians - then much is intimated to students and colleagues about the appropriate ordering of theological attention.[16] In practical terms, if the focus of one's theological argument is modernity - either understood as a series of errors needing refutation, or a series of compelling enticements demanding constant engagement - then one's very activity can, quite unintentionally, constitute a form of forgetting and mis-remembering.

These problems become worse when it is the case that those identifying themselves as systematicians have expertise mostly in - using again Cyril O'Regan's language - those who have remembered the tradition badly. In such cases simulacra of Christian doctrines may be argued over with great intelligence and sophistication, but that which should be remembered is still constantly missed. A further complication flows from the very nature of the ecumenical context in which most of us are now trained and think. That Catholic theologians, for example, are also familiar with the work of major Protestant theologians, and especially with Orthodox traditions, offers a significant enrichment; and yet, given the linking of systematic and modern theology, it becomes even easier for the trainee systematician to set sail on a sea of opinions without useful knowledge of where the tradition has been badly remembered, and without sufficient attention to where many things floating on that sea comprehend the nature of theological thinking in ways inimical to Catholic principles.[17] I do

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theologian or theological school is warranted. The analogical thinking that of necessity will be deployed, the importation of particular philosophical adhesives, which provide a foundation uniting otherwise not entirely interlocking parts, all of these are both called for and appropriate, *and yet also* they are that which should point out constantly to us the character of our speculative thought at this point in the divine economy.

16. Of course, on the other hand, if Patristic and Medieval figures are given prominence in such systematic presentations but in a manner perhaps overly reverent, where it is not shown necessary to engage them as complex figures demanding sufficient scholarly labor, then we have similarly failed to exhibit and nurture *appropriate* reverence. I take this up below in my fifth thesis.

17. Imagine an essay comparing Fr Thomas Weinandy and Jürgen Moltmann on divine suffering, an essay which assumes that the two figures are, without reserve, participants in the same discourse. To some extent these two authors are in the same family of discourses, and one may certainly speak meaningfully to the other. But Weinandy will take *a priori* as authoritative a body of principles and doctrines that Moltmann's understanding of theological practice allows him to question or abandon. Weinandy's view of tradition, and of those held up in the Church's memory as saints, will affect the manner of his attention to St Thomas or St Cyril of Alexandria in ways not true of someone who envisages the discourse of theology in Moltmannian terms. This is not yet to offer a critique of one or the other's

not want to deny that expertise in modern theological developments is an *essential* part of the dogmatic conversation; but I am asking for a more conscious and theologically informed account of how and why that conversation has a particular shape.[18] Different Christian traditions will have different answers to the question I pose here, and it might be entirely appropriate for a particular Protestant tradition to argue that theologians should foreground the conversation between the theologians of the last few generations and the text of Scripture read in a particular way. Doing so would represent a particular valuation of tradition and a particular conception of the theological task. It would not be so for all Protestant traditions, and should be impossible within a Catholic or Orthodox context.

The very idea of "systematics," as it is commonly understood, thus makes reflecting on the place of Patristic theology very difficult. Common assumptions about the nature of "systematic theology" as a discipline in its own right drains the ability of the Church to form a dogmatic *conversation* focused on a continual *ressourcement*. In my sense, then, "dogmatics" is not another term for systematic theology, so much as an attempt to take up what is appropriate about the self-understanding of many who undertake that enterprise and argue that those appropriate features are better imagined taking place in a rather different configuration. Against the long sweep of Christian thought's history, our current sub-disciplinary divisions, and the discrete professional training that forms them, are still novel; their current structure and effects needs to be the subject of careful and *theological* consideration.

I also use the term dogmatics as an alternative to "speculative" theology, as it has commonly used in a Catholic context. Here my objection, as is clear enough from my brief comment on Chenu above, is to the manner in which speculative theology has been defined throughout modernity in opposition to "positive" theology. This division makes too easy a distinction between the historical investigation of positive theology and the conceptual work of speculative.[19] Now, of course, my general characterisations of modern systematic theology are problematic in their generality. It is

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substantive position, but it is to point out a significant difference in understanding of the theological enterprise itself.

18. I discuss the concept of conversation further in my fifth and seventh theses.

19. I say a little more about this question in my “Theology And The *Historia Salutis*: Post-Conciliar Renewal And One Recent Thomism,” *The Thomist* 79 (2015): 511-550. On the conception of "positive" theology in the tradition that links Newman, Gardeil, and Congar, see the very helpful treatment by Andrew Meszaros, "The Regressive Method of Ambrose Gardeil and the Role of *Phronesis* and *Scientia* in Positive and Speculative Theologies," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaniensis* 89 (2013): 279-321. Meszaros offers a good treatment of Congar's own attempt to distinguish "positive" and "speculative" theology", focusing especially on this tradition's insistence that positive theology takes the Church's faith as a point of departure, and attention to particulars, to history is the very core of theology (see esp. p. 305). But the attempt to retain positive and speculative theology as two distinct disciplines seems constantly questionable. Meszaros, for example, references Congar's own distinguishing of

certainly possible to point to a number of figures in recent Catholic thought who have written in ways that actively transgress the boundaries of which I have spoken.[20] The rise of "*ressourcement* Thomism" also provides, in many ways, what should be an ally - a model of theological argument which reaches back before modernity for its principles, and which does so with clear commitments to historical scholarship.[21] Here the conversation concerns the relationship between scholasticism and Patristic theology, and I will return to that question later in my argument. But pointing to particular examples does not mean that the general tendency should be allowed to pass unquestioned. Indeed, in a period where there are such examples, it is possibly all the more important that we ask how they may be encouraged and nurtured, and on what *theological* basis we should do so.

III

My third thesis offers a definition of Patristic theology, one that will aid us in grasping (as my fourth thesis) why Patristic theology has been a central authority and source of renewal for Catholic thought.[22] The temporal boundaries of "Patristic" are of necessity unclear. At one end the writers of the canonical New Testament and the earliest generation of "Patristic" writers overlap. There is little sense in separating them by identifying a particular date, even if particular texts come to be recognized as part of the Scriptural canon and thus to possess a distinct authority. At the other

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the two by claiming that one uses the resources of philosophy, while the other depends on the historical sciences. Meszaros then opts for a sophisticated account of positive theology investigating historical causality, while speculative theology focuses on the principles that are the causes of the realities themselves, and thus reveals interconnections between doctrines. But even this distinction is problematic when one remembers that careful attention to, e.g., Augustine's Trinitarian texts, involves not only considering what questions and developments prompted him to write thus, but also exploring how the elements of his thought interrelate. If one undertakes this as an exercise in dogmatics as I envisage it then it most certainly also involves awareness of the relationship between Augustine's thought and the Church's magisterial tradition, exploring how Augustine's fleshing out of the principles of Trinitarian thought may aid us in grasping what has been revealed to us of the life of God. But this is a complex topic that must be the subject of discussion elsewhere.

20. I think of such texts as Olivier-Thomas Venard's remarkable volumes *Thomas d'Aquin, poète théologien* (Paris: Ad Solem, 2003 & 2004); or Jan-Heiner Tück's *Gabe der Gegenwart: theologie und Dichtung der Eucharistie bei Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg: Herder, 2014).

21. I use the term as it is deployed in Reinhart Hütter and Matthew Levering, *Ressourcement Thomism: Sacred Doctrine, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America press, 2010).

22. The following section has benefited immensely from conversation with Michel Barnes, Pui Ip, Rebecca Lyman and Peter Martens, none of whom will agree with all I say.

end, it is impossible to say clearly when "Patristic" theology ends.[23] The rise of Islam certainly set in train significant shifts in the Christian world; the controversies over iconoclasm can, in retrospect, be seen as the closing of the great period of Patristic definition; the slow canonisation of the earlier fathers - a process that develops over centuries from the fifth - all of these witness to a new awareness of those earlier figures as a set; the gradual separation of Eastern and Western Christianity is also of importance, but again it is impossible to identify any precise date for such a split. For all these reasons, it seems heuristically useful to think of the 8th-9th centuries as the end of the Patristic period, as long as one admits that these boundaries are highly porous. The porosity of boundaries does not render them heuristically useless; indeed, on many occasions overly precise boundaries are themselves problematic.

In his *Principles of Catholic Theology* Ratzinger characterises "the Fathers" as providing a constitutive and definitive response to the "word" that is spoken in revelation.[24] How were they constitutive? My answer is related to that which the then Cardinal gave, but it is also distinct - in large part because my concern is with the development of theology rather than Christianity as such.

First, Patristic theology gradually articulated the character and meaning of faith in Christ, through the identifying and reading of Scripture, and through the definitional work of the doctrinal arguments and polemics that culminate in the post-Chalcedonian Christological iconographical debates. The result of this definitional work is not, however, best understood as a series of propositions and credal statements that the theologian should now happily engage free from knowledge of those original contexts (even as those propositional statements are themselves authoritative for Catholic theology[25]). Each of these definitional texts emerged within a complex negotiation,

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23. The idea that 451 might mark a useful boundary holds little water. How little may be seen just in a moment's reflection on the centrality of the *post*-Chalcedonian debates and definitions for Christology in both East *and* West. Sometimes the near conjunction of John Damascene in the East and Bede in the West is offered as a useful marker. This is not unhelpful, but only as long as these figures themselves are not themselves as decisive turning points. In fact the attempt to identify precise boundaries for broad theological shifts is not a helpful use of time, which may be better spent thinking about the character of those broader changes.

24. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, tr. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy SND (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), 147-152. See also p. 134: "We need only recall the names of Odo Casel, Hugo Rahner, Henri De Lubac, Jean Daniélou to have before our eyes a theology that knew - and knows - that it was close to the Scriptures because it was close to the Fathers. This situation seems, in the meantime, to have ceased to exist. in the course of a few years a new awareness has arisen that is so filled with the burning importance of the present moment that it regards any recourse to the past as a kind of romanticism that might have been appropriate in less stirring times but has no meaning today."

25. Some writings from the main ressourcement figures may give the impression that those figure were opposed to the principle that revelation delivers a propositional content, and their interests in Patristic and Medieval spirituality and exegesis may consequently be taken

and existed within a field of more extended explanations, which we may now take as offered to us as the objects of consideration for any who seek to understand those texts. Similarly, each of these definitional texts was produced within theological cultures that stimulated and were shaped by changing patterns of thought and imagination. Thus, for example, the development of Nicene Trinitarianism gave rise to patterns of thinking about the relationship of Creator and creation, patterns of reflecting on analogy and mystery, patterns of terminological usage that would be intrinsic to subsequent dispute and speculation; the complex reception and development of Chalcedonianism gave rise to new and complex forms of adapting the vision of the Incarnate Word's union of divinity and humanity to imagine a range of theological relationships and transformations. Thus, that which is gifted us in our credal and conciliar heritage is richer and denser than often appears when the formulae alone are the object of investigation.

One way of setting out this first theme is to say that the Patristic period saw the setting out of the Christian symbolic universe, which is constituted first by the set of words and images used in Scripture. Of course, "Scripture" here is not a monolothic unit, but a symbolic universe layered over time (the Hebrew Scriptures), on which the texts that coalesce into the New Testament comment. The New Testament itself is then composed, ordered and received *within* an emergent Christian symbolic universe. But, second, this whole is then developed and structured as Christianity's basic doctrinal, ascetic and liturgical patterns are formed over subsequent centuries.

Second, the Patristic period was not only one in which the foundational content of classical Christian belief was defined and the Christian symbolic universe emerged, but also one in which the fundamental dynamics of Christian argument, reflection, and ascent emerged and were honed. The early patristic period saw not only the emergence of a distinct set of Christian Scriptures that could be used liturgically, and in theological thought and argument, but also the culture of reading and interpretation that would shape *how* those scriptures were to be read. This culture emerged as part of Christianity's remarkable interest in engaging and cannibalising the culture and traditions of the hellenistic world.

Techniques of argument and thought are, however, never neutral tools; they are always metaphysically loaded. In this case, the developing shape of Christian argument

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as diverting attention away from such propositional content. It is, I suggest, important to take the statements of a Congar or a De Lubac at face value: such was not their intention. The Church's ability to teach and speak authoritatively, and to reason on the basis of revelation remains foundational for them; their concern is to reimmerse those traditions of theological speculation that had come to focus overly on deductive forms of reason in the complex symbolic universe given to the Church by the Spirit in its earliest generations. Doing so both broadens the character of the reasoning seen to be appropriate within theology, and opens up to us the complex epistemological and analogical world within which that thought should occur. In our day, maintaining this balance between the propositional and the broader Christian symbolic universe is essential.

is inseparable from the emergence of what we might, with much trepidation, term Christian Hellenism.[26] The phrase is, I suggest, warranted, by the basic fact that Christianity develops within the context of Hellenic culture, adapting much of its reading culture, and embedding in its positons and claims terms drawn from, adapted from, a variety of Greek philosophical traditions - as already had significant strands of hellenised Judaism. This is so whether one references Paul's speech on the Areopagus or Justin's stylised conversion narrative, progressing through various Greek schools of wisdom. But, equally importantly, the term Christian Hellenism is warranted by the manner in which Christian writers eventually come to understand the "moral and spiritual labor" of Christian thinking through a language of ascent toward contemplating the immaterial, infinite reality of the divine life present in Christ that owes its origins to the achievements of the Greek philosophical tradition, and particularly the Platonic tradition.[27] In the same vein, the heritage of developing Christian apophaticism is an inalienable part of the Patristic doctrinal heritage, central to its culture of theological argument, and a fruit of Christians thinking within the Hellenistic context. One can fairly make the theological case that this Christian Hellenism involves a transformation of those prior traditions that they themselves could never have expected; but this does not negate the importance or depth of relationship between Christian thought and those traditions. Through this engagement some of the most basic philosophical commitments of the Christian faith were set.

Third, just as tools of argument turn out to be metaphysically loaded, **they are also institutionally located.** While the adaptation of Greek scholarship was central to the development of Christian thinking during the first few centuries, that adaptation occurred and was shaped by a quite distinctive set of institutional relationships.

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26. I use the term in light of (but also slightly differently from) the famous use by Fr Georges Florovsky. Paul Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 201-219 offers an excellent discussion of Florovsky's usage. John Behr, "From Synthesis to Symphony," in Brandon Gallaher and John Chryssavgis, eds., *The Living Christ: The Theological Legacy of Georges Florovsky* (London: T & T Clark-Bloomsbury, 2021), 279-288 offers an important critique from an Orthodox viewpoint, one that coincides with my own in its emphasis on what follows from the fact that we study texts, not "the *phronema* of the Fathers." My own account differs from Behr's parly because of particular Catholic committments to the centrality of scholasticism, and in suggesting that one's *theology* of tradition should be a central driver of how one views the role in dogmatic conversation of the different phases of theological history.

27. See David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea. Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 58: "The Christian vision of the world, however, is not some rational deduction from empirical experience, but it is a moral and spiritual aptitude - or, rather, a moral and spiritual labor." In the paragraphs that follow Hart offers the example of Staretz Zosima's struggle to love, and to see the beautiful. I was drawn to the phrase by its quotation in Gary Anderson's wonderful essay, "*Creatio ex nihilo* and the Bible," in Gary Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl, eds., *Creation* ex nihilo*. Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 15-35.

Much significant Christian writing occurred in the context of polemical, identity defining conflict over basic Christian belief. Much was also expressed in homiletic and epistolary form often seeking to address questions arising from particular correspondents and communities with varying degrees of education. Much was also of an apologetic nature, defending the beliefs of the Christian community as rational within categories shaped by hellenistic traditions of thought. In all of these cases we see patterns of thought in which theology sees itself as arising from and defending the beliefs of actual Christian communities, and we see patterns in which the relationship between elite and non-elite Christian thought is a constant worry. We certainly see Christian writers criticising the faith of the *simpliciores* but writers (such as Origen) who do so in aid of a more complex ascent through and into the narrative and imaginative world of the common faith, *not* in order to demythologise that world.[28] In this sense, the "vigor" of early Christianity flows from this desire to preserve, and salute the Christian symbolic universe as one that may always be frutifully entered, trusted and thought within.[29] I say this, obviously enough, in the knowledge that the same period also saw the growth of a Christian intellectual tradition in which writers copied and adapted forms of writing from their non-Christian peers - the commentary and the history present good examples. But this copying did not yet remove those writers from the broader set of relationships on which I have focused in this paragraph.

One problem with identifying an age of the "Fathers" by general characteristics is the ease with which such an identification might seem to involve a lack of attention to the often vicious nature of polemic between early Christian writers, and the sheer complexity of theological development over this period. In this light appeals to a Patristic synthesis or symphony must be regarded with suspicion, and accounts of the "universal agreement" of the Fathers treated with great care. As will become clear in my fifth thesis, I think one may combine attention to these features of the period with celebration of Patristic theology as a constant source of renewal in Catholic theology.

Last, and like many commentators down the centuries, I spoke above of the vigor and youthfulness of the theological work and writing of the Patristic era. While such statements can exhibit a great romanticism - perhaps evident in a concomitant refusal to admit the complexity of theological development, the unpleasantness of patristic polemic, the inconsistencies to be found in even the greatest of writers, the personal sinfulness of some of those revered from the period - one can still see in this

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28. See my "Of Scholarship, Piety, and Community: Origen's Purpose(s) in *Contra Celsum*," in James Carleton Paget & Simon Gathercole (eds.) *Celsus in his World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

29. I am grateful to Pui Ip for reminding me of the discussion to be found in Rowan Williams, "Origen: Between Orthodoxy and Heresy," in *Origeniana Septima: Origenes in den Auseinandersetzungen des 4. Jahrhunderts,* edited by Wolfgang Bienert and Uwe Kühneweg (Louvain: Peeters, 1999), 3-14.

period the vigor of arguments had for the first time, of the creative fervor of arguments and decisions that will cast the character of Christian thought ever afterwards, and which are articulated in a context without centuries of earlier precedent.

IV

If we are to understand the place of Patristic theology in a rightly ordered Catholic dogmatics we must also understand that Patristic texts have been a constant source of authority and renewal. From one perspective this is historically so. Thus, ingredient to the development of scholasticism is the presentation of Patristic theology as a foundational set of authorities in theological argument. This is apparent in such otherwise divergent compositions as Lombard's *Sentences* and Thomas's *Summa.* For both authors, Patristic writers are treated as setting the parameters for debate on disputed questions (which may involve them being opposed to each other), as offering foundational interpretations of dogmatic definitions, as offering fundamental points of reference in the interpretation of Scripture, and consequently a foundational set of philosophical commitments. To someone schooled in the modes of modern historical consciousness the manner in which a Thomas often solves competing statements by Patristic authorities - or dissolves ambiguities in their phraseology - through the imposition of distinctions that we know to have been alien to their thought - can be unconvincing; but it should also be a witness to the central place that such authorities hold in this mental universe.

From the Renaissance on we see the emergence of different approaches to asserting the value of Patristic theology, even as the same figures retain their authority. For example, in the preface to his edition of Irenaeus's *Against Heresies,* Erasmus adopts Irenaeus's own rhetoric to claim that in reading the second century master we are able to hear the voice of those who first followed Christ.[30] Erasmus's debt to Renaissance historicism is clear enough - turning to Irenaeus involves philological work in order to hear him as a figure different in historical and cultural location - and the "voice" we hear in his work is one otherwise obscured by later theological development. The same style of appeal is that which we hear in some of the *Ressourcement* theologians of the twentieth century. One sees this, for example, in the manner that De Lubac, throughout his *Catholicisme*, speaks of the "fathers" as instinctively grasping the fundamentals of a doctrine, and expressing its core. It is their ability to penetrate to the core and thus to the heart of that which is biblical or apostolic that recommends them.[31] The same is seen in the way he contrasts the Patristic ability to

30. *Opus Eruditissimum Divi Irenaei episcopi Lugdunensis, in quinque libros digestum*... Erasmus, and the heritage of Humanism is discussed in my next thesis. A digitized version of the 1547 printing may be found at:

https://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb11204131_00003.html.

31. E.g. *Catholicism. Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, tr. Lancelot c. Sheppard & Sr. Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), e.g.: 29 (concern with what

maintain a "symbolic" world in which the multiple signification of terms and their ability to aid us in ascent toward God finds its exemplar in the eucharist, with emerging scholastic concerns to provide rationalistic analysis of terms.[32] Daniélou, in the *The Bible and the Liturgy*, speaks of the early Christians' inhabitation of a common symbolic world that is essentially biblical in origin and character.[33] In such cases we see the post-Renaissance focus on the need for the creation of cultural distance if we are to hear the voice of these texts, *and* a focus on the power, unity, and vitality of that voice over against more recent scholastic theological styles.[34] Of course, among those who continued to see the scholastic tradition as a gift of synthetic, systematic and speculative theologising beyond what was achieved in the Patristic period, a version of Patristic authority closer to that found in the medieval period remained.[35]

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is "fundamental"), 40 (intuitive recognition of what Christianity needed), 145 (the "spontaneous" expression of truths in symbolic form before formulae), 175 (the earliest Christians have the peculiar genius of uniting the two testaments and setting in train an essential feature of Christian thought).

32. Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum. L'Eucharist et L'Église au Moyen Age* (Paris: Aubier, 1949). See esp. p. 253, then 260. This distinction is frequently asserted, but rarely explored at length. See e.g. *Catholicism*, 145 (concerning the Christian's sense of history's consummation): "Before it was reflected in formulas and theories this belief found spontaneous expression through the selection of symbols and other usual representations."

33. Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 4: "...this [Patristic] symbolism is not subject to the whims of each interpreter. It constitutes a common tradition going back to the apostolic age. And what is striking about this tradition is its biblical character."

34. The continuity I point out here between Erasmus and these twentieth century figures, and the distinction between all of these and the scholastic use of patristic authorities, is only a pointer towards a complex field of diverse models. Newman, for example, certainly adheres to the post-renaissance concern for careful philological study and the importance of placing Patristic texts in their historical context. At the same time, through his career we see a number of different ways of presenting the Patristic period in relationship to the modern Church. See the excellent discussion of Benjamin J. King, *Newman and the Alexandrian Fathers: Shaping Doctrine in Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Discussion of the use made of Patristic writers by Dionysius Petavius / Denis Pétau in his *Dogmata Theologica* (1643) would also be of importance in a more extensive discussion.

35. An excellent example is presented by Scheeben's account of the history of theology. He divides that history into three, the period of the Church fathers, that of early Scholasticism, and then the modern period. Each contains a brilliant century, and then a period of decline. It is in the second that we see the beginning of "genuine systematic theology" **(***eigentliche systematische theologie***)** (§1027), and in the best of the third period we see a return to the first two. See Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics I.II*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), 207-270. Of course, from our perspective in the early twenty-first century, the course and nature of modern theology look rather different!

It is important, however, for us to recognise that the constant and yet shifting role of Patristic theology in Catholic thought is not merely a contingent fact of theological history; it also flows from fundamental theological commitments, even if those commitments need in the present context more overt exploration and statement. In the first place, the foundational place constantly accorded Patristic theology should, I suggest, also be read as a theological statement of its permanent authority. It is interesting, for example, to note that *Dei Verbum*, a text whose attention is perhaps most strongly focused on the character of revelation and on the appropriation to Catholic use of modern Biblical Studies, and a text which has remarkably little to say otherwise about the structure of Catholic theology, remarks on the importance of the study of "the Fathers" as following from the Church's devotion to Scripture, and salutes the witness of "the Fathers" to the unfolding of the "living tradition."[36] The Council's decree on the Eastern rite Churches salutes the fact that "the tradition that has been handed down from the Apostles through the Fathers" (*ea quae ab Apostolis per Patres est traditio*) - a tradition that is also part of the "divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church" - shines out clearly in them.[37] Intriguingly, one may also point to the manner in which *Aeterni Patris*, in 1879, eulogises Thomas because he so well gathers together the wisdom of the Fathers, and adds to that wisdom where appropriate.[38] In the course of saluting Thomas thus, Leo XIII quotes fairly extensively

36. *Dei Verbum* 8: "For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her. The words of the holy fathers witness to the presence of this living tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church. Through the same tradition the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her; and thus God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (see Col. 3:16). Cf. *Dei Verbum* 23: "The bride of the incarnate Word, the Church taught by the Holy Spirit, is concerned to move ahead toward a deeper understanding of the Sacred Scriptures so that she may increasingly feed her sons with the divine words. Therefore, she also encourages the study of the holy Fathers of both East and West and of sacred liturgies." https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html (accessed 1 April 2021).

37. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* 1. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_orientalium-ecclesiarum_lt.html#_ftn1 (accessed 1 April 2021).

38. *Aeterni Patris* 8: "But in order that philosophy may be found equal to the gathering of those precious fruits which we have indicated, it behooves it above all things never to turn aside from that path which the Fathers have entered upon from a venerable antiquity, and which the Vatican Council solemnly and authoritatively approved." http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html (accessed 1 April 2021).

from Sixtus V's own 1588 salutation of scholasticism in the form of Thomas and Bonaventure for their opening up of the writings of the Fathers.[39] These few references should at least indicate the presence of a consistent magisterial holding up of early Christian theologians as fundamental authorities - alongside the Church's more obvious celebration of the credal heritage of the early Church.[40]

In the second place, in the face of late modernity's - and late modern theology's - frequent misremembering of tradition, I have suggested that we should attend again to the intense work devoted to the theology of tradition in the decades around the Second Vatican Council.[41] Such a reflection may complement the largely implicit theology of the history of Christian thought that I noted in the previous paragraph by suggesting with new force why and how the "answer" to the Word (in Ratzinger's terms) drawn out for us in the life of the Church should command our attention. I suggested we may build on Congar's account of the history of the Church as a history of responses, known and unknown, drawn out by the Spirit of Christ in and for the Body of Christ. In this context the foundational moments that define Christian faith should not be seen merely as resulting in formulaic texts and propositions, but also

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39. *Triumphantis Hierusalem* 15: "And, indeed, the knowledge and use of so salutary a science, which flows from the fertilizing founts of the sacred writings, the sovereign Pontiffs, the holy Fathers and the councils, must always be of the greatest assistance to the Church, whether with the view of really and soundly understanding and interpreting the Scriptures, or more safely and to better purpose reading and explaining the Fathers, or for exposing and refuting the various errors and heresies." https://franciscan-archive.org/bullarium/triumphe.html (accessed 1 April 2021).

40. And these few references include none to the Church's insistence about the importance of Patristic study. I think especially of the much neglected document *Inspectis dierum*, "On the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests," produced by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1989 (for the text see *Origins* 19 [Jan 25th 1990], 549-561). That text is also endorsed by the 2016 *ratio fundamentalis* concerning the formation of Priests, where study of "the Fathers" is recommended as appropriate for students seeking to understand the spiritual dimension of the life of the People of God (113), as necessary for seminary professors (140), and as an essential part of dogmatic theology (168). See http://www.clerus.va/content/dam/clerus/Ratio%20Fundamentalis/The%20Gift%20of%20the%20Priestly%20Vocation.pdf.

41. See "*Totius Traditionis Mirabile Sacramentum*: A Theology of Tradition in the Light of *Dei Verbum*," in Thomas Joseph White, Bruce McCormack & Matthew Levering (eds.), *Dogma and Ecumenism. Vatican II and Karl Barth's* Ad Limina Apostolorum (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 54-80. It is helpful to think of Congar's *La Tradition et les traditions* as looking backward to Emil Mersch's *le Corps mystique du Christ* and forward to Ratzinger's account of the People of God as, in one sense, the speaking subject of Scripture, every bit as much as Congar also attempts to advance on the particular debates about tradition represent by the controversy over the relationship between Scripture and tradition focused around the work of J.R. Geiselman, or the work of Congar's teacher Ambroise Gardeil OP.

as moments of response that may constantly claim our attention. At the same time, we may read the act of handing over the faith, the act of *traditio,* as sacramental in nature, as an act in which the Spirit works toward the reformation of the mind learning humility before the truth, and perhaps learning to articulate that truth for the Christian community. The act of handing-on may thus be seen as intrinsically speculative, and the speculative as intrinsically traditional.

Finally, I have noted already that Catholic thought has contingently, and to some extent dogmatically, long sustained a sense of theological progression in which the achievements of the Patristic age are then expanded and systematised in scholasticism. Against this background it would be nonsensical to argue that dogmatics needs *only* to turn its attention to Patristic theology, but it *is* certainly possible to argue that turning again to Patristic theology, making it a central part of the dogmatic conversation, is a natural path warranted and even demanded by Catholic tradition when we find ourselves in a time of forgetting and mis-remembering. The novelty here lies mostly in the importance of devoting time to articulating the theology of tradition on the basis of which we do so turn, and the importance of articulating how we should turn to these texts theologically in the light of Christian thought's entanglement with post-Renaissance philology and modes of scholarship. And thus, with this last observation we arrive at my fifth thesis.

V

Good students of Patristic texts today are necessarily children of the Renaissance, and understanding the burden that this lineage should impose is fundamental if we are to understand the relationship between dogmatics and the study of early Christian theology. However, we need first to situate that lineage within the broader story of Christianity's interaction with the development of the western scholarly and philological tradition. Pre-modern theological practice both in its modes of speculation, and in its modes of textual commentary, reveals itself to be among the traditions flowing from Hellenistic and Roman scholarship.[42] The adaptation of literary-critical and rhetorical traditions was intrinsic to the formation of early and medieval Christian interpretive culture. Adapting a particular set of reading techniques from these

42. I use the term "ancient scholarship" in the sense that it is described in Franco Montanari, Stephanos Matthaios & Antonios Rengakos, eds., *Brill's Companion to Ancient Greek Scholarship. Vol I* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), x: "...'ancient scholarship' encompasses numerous phenomena that belong to the literary civilization. the term 'scholarship' refers first and foremost to all written works that aim specifically and directly to provide an interpretation of the literary works on various levels. Thus in this sense it refers in the first place to the different forms of commentary... But one immediately realizes that 'scholarship' also covers many other genres: *in primis* the impressive phenomena of lexicography and linguistic-grammatical studies... Moreover the vast field of rhetoric must aso be taken into account from a vareity of perspectives, nor should one overlook the reflections on poetics, which stand midway betwen philosophy and scholarship *stricto sensu*."

traditions and consequently making a particular set of assumptions about how meaning should be determined, played a significant role in determining what it meant for Christians to treat the texts of "Old" and "New" Testaments as Scripture. In like fashion, the adaptation of notions of abstraction and ascent from a variety of Greek traditions of thought and analysis (which involved engagement with an intertwined set of philosophical, literary-critical and rhetorical traditions) became intrinsic to Christian interpretive and speculative culture. This was not the appropriation of cultural traditions alien to the earliest Christians - for many (such as Paul) the educational philosophy and practice of the grammarian and rhetor was simply part of the cultural world of the earliest Christians. And yet the conscious intensification of relationship to Hellenistic high culture that we see in the development of Christian interpretive culture, and in the adaptation of particular philosophical traditions need not have been so (consider in contrast the rise of Rabbinic culture). Adapting to Christian use the structures of hellenistic scholarship seems to have flowed naturally as Christianity grew into its universal mission.

It is against this background that we can best understand the complex legacy of the Renaissance for today's student of Patristic texts.[43] Some of the concerns of humanism, both in its early Italian, and later Northern European manifestations, focus on a recovery of techniques already adapted by Christians in antiquity, such as renewed interest in the philological, especially the establishing of manuscripts, and concern with the development of linguistic forms. Concern with the establishment and deployment of primary documents in historical argument - and debates over the links between history and rhetoric - also turned to ancient examples, Christian and pre-Christian - Thucydides, and Polybius, but also Papias, Eusebius and Sozomen. The persuasiveness of such techniques for Christians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was surely rendered far stronger simply because they were as much recovered as discovered - even if, in that discovery they were adapted and yoked to a variety of new concerns.

But already we encounter a decisive difference with earlier Christian adaptations of their Hellenistic culture. The recovery of philology and history in the Renaissance was inseparable from a particular historical consciousness, one which depended upon the drawing of a clear distinction between the Classical and the early Christian, on the one hand, and the medieval period which followed. In Erasmus's case the valuation of pre-Christian classical culture combined with celebration of Greek

43. On the developments involved here see James Turner, *Philology* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). Chp. 2 offers an excellent survey of the period. On the question of writing history a powerful and elegant point of departure is provided by Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

and Latin Patristic writers, and yet focused above all on the uncovering of Jesus himself through careful philological attention to the New Testament.[44] Erasmus also followed decades of earlier humanists who had contrasted ancient rhetoric and sophisticated Latin to the rhetorically unappealing Latin and dialectical forms of argument characteristic of late medieval scholasticism. Similarly, although many authors simply continued medieval chronicle traditions, others saw themselves as uncovering truer accounts of figures otherwise hidden behind hagiographical veils - as, for example, we see in Erasmus's account of Jerome.[45]And thus humanist scholarship gradually opened a different hermeneutical space between the commentator and the early Church. The task of understanding times and writers different from one's own gradually came to involve not only attention to the particular characteristics of those times - particular differences in language and rhetoric - but also the placing of those times and writers within periodisations inevitably value-laden. The opening of such interpretive space was thus a highly complex affair; the projection of cultural distance is an imaginative work setting the shape of what is "encountered" and how it is appraised, and such projection entails also an (often inchoate) sense of that which enables understanding across this "gap."[46] The image of Pandora's box is too negative a one to use here, but it is true to say that these developments opened a world of questions that still beset the Christian scholar. Nevertheless, the opening of this cultural distance offered much to the Christian scholar over subsequent centuries: a rich recovery of the saints in their times; a deeper understanding of Christianity's development; the potential to reflect ever more deeply on the mystery of God's drawing out of human response over the centuries; a deeper understanding of the course of theological emergence, continuity and polyphony.

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44. On Erasmus's understanding of historical periodisation see István Bejczy, *Erasmus and the Middle Ages. The Historical Consciousness of a Christian Humanist* (Leiden; Brill, 2001), esp. 24-32 for initial observations on the Patristic period. See also the manner in which Erasmus comments on the periods of history in his 1518/9 *Ratio verae theologiae*; See D. Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus: The New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus*, Vol. 41, ed. R. D. Sider (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), esp. 527-532 (Holborn 198-201). For discussion see Manfred Hoffman, *Rhetoric and Theology. The Hermeneutic of Erasmus* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1994), chp. 1.

45. A particularly interesting example of how the newer and older models of historical investigation coexisted is provided by Simon Ditchfield, *Liturgy, Sanctity and History in Tridentine Italy. Pierro Maria Campi and the Preservation of the Particular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chp. 11, 273-327. The same can, of course, be said for many other genres, e.g. Jean Céard, "Theory and Practices of Commentary in the Renaissance," in Judith Rice Henderson, ed., *The Unfolding of Words. Commentary in the Age of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 3-23.

46. And this sentence of course alludes to a discussion that runs, to name some of its most interesting points, from Vico to Gadamer. Particularly useful as a point of departure for the student seeking not so much to understand that story, but to consider how we proceed today remains Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

And yet we can also see now why Christian - and especially Catholic - scholars have adapted these post-Renaissance developments to Christian ends in a manner far more halting and uncertain than that in which the early Christians engaged hellenistic culture. However persuasive these new techniques, the privileging of the Classical and the early Christian raised fundamental questions for many about the status of scholastic theology, and even the authority of the Church to make judgments about its past and its texts. It is no accident that it is from the late fifteenth century that we see the emergence of *theologia positiva* - the study of the sources of Christian faith - carefully distinguished from *theologia speculativa* - a distinction that immures the speculative practices of scholastic reasoning. At the same time, as one follows the story on into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it becomes ever more clear that the development of modern philology and scholarship is interwoven with the rise of the intellectual cultures of modernity often consciously antithetical to traditional Christian belief. The broad historiographical push toward the opening of cultural distance between the interpreter and the texts she studies often served the rise of a relativist antithesis to any continuous teaching or truth, and this remains true even as those techniques in a variety of forms are now the common currency of any serious study of the Christian past.[47] If this complex legacy is the necessary background to any such study, then much follows for the shape of the dogmatic conversation.

How, then, might we summarise good practice for the scholar who works today within this tradition? Attention to what texts say, and what they do not, is a basic requirement (and a goal easily missed given our propensity to read texts in the light of grand narratives and models seemingly invested with authority). Attention to the questions that texts are attempting to answer is always rewarded. Quentin Skinner's exhortation to such habits is, in many respects, only the distillation of concerns that scholars of early Christianity influenced by the Renaissance - such figures as Caesar Baronius, Ludovico Muratori and Bernard de Montfaucon - would certainly have recognised as their own. Thus, the eschewing of grand narratives - at least an awareness that those narratives are usually the product of particular historical concerns and frequently distorting - is a habit that constantly proves fruitful, and constantly draws us back to the actual texts we study. Awareness that we only approach texts asymptotically, getting closer through our philological technique, and yet never arriving, is also crucial. At the same time, these habits are best deployed in good awareness of what are now extensive fields of scholarship. Post-renaissance scholarship thus demands of its adherents not only expertise in particular forms of cultural context, but also a meaningful engagement with the deep funds of scholarship now attendant on the study in every period of Christian thought. Even a scholar who finds herself able to

47. My focus in this thesis is with the character of the study of Christian thought through history, and particularly with early Christian thought. I have not here discussed the specialised field that Biblical studies became over the last century or so. I offer some comments on the phenomenon toward the end of my seventh thesis.

function in more than one area of scholarship will, at times, need to practice appropriate attentiveness through conversation, through attending to the works of those expert in fields outside their immediate ken. And, thus, a key feature of good scholarly practice here is the recognition of other good scholarship, and understanding how and where one should be deferential to it (and where it demands serious interrogation). Focusing on this habit of recognising expertise does not mean that good scholars necessarily prescind from offering general theses, or reaching out far beyond their areas of expertise. Such attempts are essential to the reading of any individual text, and to the task of contributing to any wider scholarly conversation (in "dogmatics" or not). Thus, emphasising the importance of learning to recognise expertise merely points to the dynamics of attention involved, and necessary anxieties, of reaching out well. Good scholarly attention of this kind - especially when coupled with a theology of tradition that draws us back to key texts - may exercise a wonderful drag against the onrush of the new, calling our attention better to the true, and to the ephemeral nature of much that so easily holds the modern attention.[48]

In a recent lecture Alisdair MacIntyre calls us to examine what we owe to our dead, and argues that above all we owe them truthfulness.[49] For the sake, at the least, of our own self-understanding we owe to them an account of how we are embedded in language conversations and decisions (good and bad) that were handed on to us. Such truthfulness in turn depends on our possessing an appropriate rich language in which to converse, and habits of conversation, and especially listening, that will enable us to attend to each other and to our dead. As he notes, a culture deficient in the skills of good conversation will be deficient in the skills of self-reflection. MacIntyre's reflections helpfully throw into relief some of the connections I am attempting to make here. The question of what we owe to our *theological* dead, especially given our theoogy of tradition, is a vital one, and is in part answered by our ability to shape a culture (and an imagination) that promotes truthful attention to them. At this point in the history of Christian thought, shaping such a culture will involve us in reflecting deeply on how we immerse ourselves in, and yet also adapt to Christian needs and

48. There is a further question that caanot be discussed extensively here concerning how one demonstrates that appropriate scholarly resources have been engaged, and where particular genres demand a far lighter touch. I am, obviously enough, clear that mere enthusiasm for reading early Christian texts, and occasional quotation, does not consistute much of an act of *ressourcement.* But it is important to recognise that theologians are called to write for different audiences, and many are also called to preach. The question of how one appropriately roots oneself in good scholarly habits when writing in a context where showing those habits would only be a distraction, must await a future occasion.

49. Alisdair MacIntyre, "What We Owe to Our Dead. Alas!" An as yet unpublished keynote address to the 2021 Winter Conference of the De Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaQGJTvYjiU. I am grateful to Professor MacIntyre for sharing with me the text of the lecture. Some of the discussion of conversation found therein is prefigured in his *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

devotion, the heritage of Renaissance scholarship as part of a renewed conception of dogmatics.[50]

The reference to "conversation" above leads to one of my main observations about the ideal structure of dogmatic theology. If it is true that Catholic theology does demand of us the theology of tradition I outlined in my fourth thesis *and*, if it is plausible to suggest that paying close attention to particular identity-defining moments in theological history may be understood as a key *speculative* task when we seek to renew our understanding of fundamental doctrines *and*, if it is also true that Catholic theology has reasons to find many aspects of the modern scholarly tradition persuasive, *then* it follows that good thinking in dogmatics will necessarily be a conversation of which each one of us can only be a part.[51] Only as a conversation in which the voice of the early Church is *appropriately* heard, and the developments of scholasticism are likewise appropriately heard, as well as the genealogy of modern remembering and misremembering heard, only such a conversation offers to the Church dogmatic renewal in full depth. How recognition of this point should shape that dogmatic conversation is the subject of my seventh and last thesis.

And yet, as should be clear by now, Christian paticipants in this scholarly tradition *need* also to consider how they should question and adapt. Thus, for example, Christian scholars will need to be particularly attentive to the manner in which assumptions about causality and human motivation are implicit in scholarly judgments and concerns. How far, for example, does a given scholar or scholarly tradition assume that theological conflict or speculation is necessarily epiphenomenal to the struggle for power over others? It is not that such struggles are not often implicit in the actions of fallen theological minds, it is that an unremitting assumption that this is always the case and always determinative removes a necessary Christian complexity in how people are seen and their thought analysed. This is but one example, but it is enough to show that at the heart of conceiving the role of the Christian scholar of Patristic texts is the importance of recognising a collection of habits and patterns of attention which, in some ways, we might term a spirituality of attention and curation

50. One might fairly ask if my claim implies that pre-renaissance treatment of figures and events from the tradition fails in appropriate remembrance. I would suggest not. In the first place, the foundations of all Christian historiography are laid down in antiquity. In the second place, even the hagiographical exuberance of many texts concerning the saints may reveal to us much about the importance of reading all in Christ. Our task is to take forward both these aspects, without naive claims that we simply know better, and yet with recognition of the great resources that modern historiography offers to us, and the demands it places upon us.

51. A further question which is of importance here concerns how we imagine our theological grasp. In almost every generation there are a few whose intellectual grasp allows them to offer a grand thesis about the *kerygma* as a whole. There is little virtue in us imagining that we might all be thus. Our aim should be to imagine the theological conversation such that we understand what particular corner we may make our own, and from there enrich the whole.

appropriate for Christians who also accept the deep promise of modern scholarly traditions. I would, however, be misunderstood, if I were thought to be advocating here only the importance of attentiveness to intellectual phenomena that war against a Christian imagination; a commitment to post-Renaissance scholarship demands we also explore how our habits of reverence should be shaped by recognition of the complexity and sometimes sheer mysteriousness of the process by which formed Christian teaching emerged and was developed (sometimes at the hands of individuals whose complexity may have been previously hidden behind a curtain of hagiography). It is not that such figures should simply no longer be revered - in many cases we deal with figures held up for us in the Church's liturgical memory - it is that we need to recognise anew the complex and mysterious interaction of divine and human action.[52]

At first sight, this complex balancing of habits of attention might not seem to be Balthasar's fabled "theology on its knees"; my concerns may seem far too arid and scholarly.[53] And yet, while not all theological writers will be quite so directly concerned with the negotiation of scholarly literature, for those who work in or are trained within modern university cultures, I suggest that what I sketch here is an essential part of how one should perform that toward which Balthasar was pointing. The Christian philologist or scholar is inevitably linked to the academy, but it should not be her home, it should not be that in which she can rest and from which she draws all sense of worth and purpose as a theologian (let alone as a person!). Just as early Christian scholars viewed some ancient philosophical traditions as traditions of great worth, and yet also as traditions calling for great watchfulness and, at times, correction and denunciation, so too must we regard the academy. Theologians can certainly be thankful for the hospitality often shown to us by the university, and theologians have much they to contribute to the life of the university and the flourishing of the humanities (especially in an era where even scholars in the humanities can seem so unable to defend their own purpose); but we make that contribution best when we understand why the university is not our home. The home of the theologian is the city of God, and the life of that city is one for now always interwoven with the city of this world.[54]

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52. I have reflected further on ways in which theology may be understood as an act of curation in "Of Slowness and Distance: reflections on Philology and the Curation of Tradition in Catholic Theology," in A. Briggman and E. Scully, eds., *New Narratives for Old: Reading Early Christian Theology Using the Historical Method* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, forthcoming).

53. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Theology and Sanctity," *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 206.

54. I offer further reflection on this theme in "The Work of a Theologian in the Body of Christ," in George Westhaver (ed.), *Christ Unabridged: Knowing and Loving the Son of Man* (London: SCM, 2020), 195-210.

The complex relationship between the Christian scholar and academy means that when we speak of the Patristic scholar and her relationship to dogmatic theology, we must recognise that the Patristic scholar will find herself both part of a guild of theologians, and immersed in a guild of scholars of early Christianity among whom many will be neutral or antipathetic toward Christian belief, many of whom will have simply no interest in the study of Christian thought. This context has many benefits for the Christian Patristic scholar interested in aiding the conversation of dogmatics, but it also means that she faces the complex task of carving out both an appropriate place in the theological conversation *and* in the broader academic field - two tasks which both fight against the grain of our times.

VI

"If," one might ask, "theology were to be as you suggest, then how would there be progress in theological expression, how will newness appear?" My sixth thesis offers a brief response to such a question. Remember, first, that my concern throughout this article is with the study of the Christian faith's core dogmatic heritage. The purpose of study in this case is not directly to effect change, especially in the time of forgetting and misremembering that is ours. And yet, there is much more that must be said. In the first place, as St John Henry Newman wrote at the end of "The Benedictine Schools": "The reassertion of what is old with a luminousness of explanation which is new, is a gift inferior only to that of revelation itself."[55] The act of understanding an author, or a collection of authors, or - in the case of dogmatics - the act of understanding the realities of which those texts speak, is one in which the individual mind is both deeply shaped by the traditions it inhabits, and yet its own particular concerns, disposition and history shape its conception and imagination. Each of us, as we seek to understand, will inevitably make connections between particular themes or authors, and particular aspects of a dogmatic account will shine out to us. This is not to identify an inevitable and discordant plurality in Christian thought: the more, for example, we know about the Church's magisterial teaching tradition on the Trinity, the more we will be aware of multiple points of entry into contemplation of that reality, each of which may catch our attention. And thus, in every act of understanding such things some novelty will appear. And perhaps the newness that is an expression of an idea or text living again is that which we should now seek. As readers of Patristic texts in the twenty-first century we necessarily read authors whose cosmological, societal, biological, and medical assumptions (to pick just a few), are often very different from our own. As I noted earlier, we can only approach such texts asymptotically, and via

55. See *The Rise and Progress of Universities and Benedictine Essays*, with introduction and notes by Mary Katherine Tillman (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 476.

an unconscious imaginative reconstruction of what we read. [56] Novelty, then, need not be looked for or sought, just waited for; it will arrive in sufficient quantity. One of the most insightful realisations of that greatest of Swedish detectives Martin Beck is that while routine police work is not necessarily the infallible route to solving a crime, it most certainly is what one should do while waiting for that something to turn up which *will* solve the crime.

Earlier I quoted Cyril O'Regan's excellent analysis of modern mis-remembering. In the midst of the pages from which I quoted we find this:

> ... Christianity never affirms the old as the old, but only the old as the new, as the ever new, as Augustine intimated in the *Confessions* (Bk. 10). Whatever Christianity is, it is not then a museum... Nor are matters helped if the image of the cathedral replaces that of the museum whose Enlightenment pedigree is, perhaps, too palpable. The image of tradition as a cathedral is profoundly misleading if it is taken to imply that it itself provides the foundation for life and thought, and if it is taken to mean that it is open to either the synoptic or panoptic gaze. This is to fetishize tradition... a more adequate grasp of the cathedral as the image of tradition, is to think of the cathedral as defined by multiple heterogenous spaces through which the worshipper moves. This kinesis, which excites freedom, subverts monumentality to reveal precisely the unfixed, the dynamic flow of religious life and the livingness of tradition.[57]

These words come only in the introduction of a massive account of Balthasar's engagement with Hegel, and one that offers a substantial argument for the manner in which Balthasarian thick description of the pre-modern may refute post-Enlightenment mis-remembering. And yet a few comments may be offered on these words alone. O'Regan is certainly correct to highlight the impossibility of a panoptic gaze over tradition, as he is to emphasise the central place the "newness" of divine presence and grace in human beings (which nicely parallels the early Ratzinger's vision of continuity and novelty in the development of tradition).[58]

But to set kinesis and "unfixed... dynamic flow" in this direct fashion over against the "cathedral" of tradition is problematic in two ways. In the first place, Christianity often does indeed affirm the old - not as the old, but as the *given*. Augustine in Book X of the *Confessions* is affirming *God* as the ancient and the new. Further, Augustine's insistence on God's slow formation of his memory such that he may grow

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56. Even as we also believe that they and we speak of the same divine realities and action such that we truly recognise in their statements what we know in faith.

57. O'Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering*, 10-11.

58. Though, if I have a concern about Balthasar and his devotees, it is partly that to so many of the latter his work gives the impression of just such a panoptic gaze! O'Regan's pointing out that this is precisely what Balthasar is arguing against is a vital counter-expression.

in the ability to recognise God's action, focuses around memories that are not simply his, but ancient in the Church and in Israel, and ultimately reflect the very structure of a creation that goes out from God only to be drawn back.[59] The provision of memory is also the provision of a Scripture given for us to use as we address our Lord. The old is given us as the means of discovering ourselves as individuals within an ordered divine economy. In the second place, should we imagine the cathedral as "multiple heterogeneous spaces"? Yes, at times, and without succumbing to mere tourism, one may move through a cathedral in unpredictable patterns. But a cathedral is built for liturgical movement and liturgical stillness; that movement is certainly diverse, encompassing many different kinds of liturgical events at the high altar, and many different kinds of liturgy and private devotion at side altars, but this range of movements shapes us as individuals within ancient and given patterns. The movement through tradition to which the theologian is called is one ordered in many ways: by the Church's teaching tradition, by particular spiritual disciplines, by our own particular journeys intellectual and spiritual, and through this movement newness comes upon the reader as I described above. Tradition in this sense most certainly *is* the foundation for life and thought, but it is so because God gives it, and uses it within us to bring forth the confession and practice of Christian faith in each generation. How one describes the newness of theological judgment to which the Spirit draws us is a highly complex question, and I do not think that in the end O'Regan and I are far apart, but in a time such as ours that too easily celebrates the "creative" and the "novel" in theological work, his words at least provide an opportunity for me to suggest an alternative construal of this imagery.[60]

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59. See my "Into the Poem of the Universe: *Exempla,* Conversion, Church in Augustine's *Confessions"*, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 13 (2009), 263-281.

60. Jennifer Martin presents us with an interesting example of the care with which one must think about how to typify one's engagement with tradition. In a recent essay, "Memory Matters: *Ressourcement* Theology's Debt to Henri Bergson," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23 (2021): 177-197, Martin questions the fairness of claiming that Balthasar's presentation of Gregory of Nyssa in *Présence et pensée* does not stand up to more recent historical scrutiny. She argues that Balthasar, like Péguy and many other *ressourcement* figures, owes much to Bergson's intuitionism, especially as it is governed by his vision of the duration of psychological time as an organic state in which the past is known as it is actualized into a relation with the present. Whether or not this grasps Bergson, and whether Bergson himself is right, is beyond my scope here; for me what matters is that these metaphysical observations enable Martin to deploy an oppositional metaphor in which tradition is either (quoting Balthasar) "like passing bricks from person to person" or "a Heraclitan flame, always in flux" without ever facing basic methodological and ethical questions about how one *should* read these texts in the light of one's theological commitments (even as one admits the inevitability of "newness" on hermeneutical and metaphysical grounds). In her account of Péguy, it is interesting that Martin references John Milbank's "'There's Always One Day Which Isn't The Same As The Day Before': Christianity and History in the Writings of Charles Péguy," in Darren Sarisky, ed., *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal* (London: Bloomsbury,

VII

In the light of theses two to six, rightly ordered Catholic dogmatics reveals itself as, ideally, as a conversation shaped to draw out the theologian's commitments, and nurture appropriate forms of attention. I use the term conversation because different voices must be heard representing the moments of the tradition held up for us as windows onto the mystery of the divine life and action. I use the term "conversation" here in two senses. First, in its most obvious sense, I mean that the person who seeks a deeper understanding of Christian teaching should be both attentive to the tradition (mostly likely to a particular period of the tradition, or to key figures within a period), and recognise that good growth in their knowledge will involve attending to and learning from a range of other figures with expertise in other key figures and periods. This conversation is also one in which the participant knows they must learn from, as well as question, both the defined teaching tradition and other participants in the conversation. Second, however, there is a sense in which this is a conversation that takes part in an imagined community. Benedict Anderson's famous phrase was, of course, used to speak about nations as communities in which participants, who can never know all their peers, nevertheless imagine the communion they have with them by imagining a range of shared goals, interests, and characteristics.[61] Theologians must ask themselves about how they nurture a particular imagined community as the site of their conversation, a community that extends both "horizontally" among the living, and "vertically" (or "chronologically") to include our forebears.

The very use of the term "conversation," then, suggests that listening (to revelation, to those who have shaped our faith, to the Lord through them) is at the heart

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2017), 9-36. Milbank's complex meditation on Péguy plays off the latter's critique of historiographies that embody the "cult... of quantification and calculation" (p. 11), which offer secular accounts of progress (since the French revolution), and which imagine that events may be understood as discrete entities. No, Milbank argues, following Péguy and to some extent Bergson, events are far more complex phenomena, becoming what they are through their reception and influence, being necessarily paradoxical - pregnant with all that they will be, and yet needing that unfolding to be. Moreover, events are always what they are only in Christ, the one true event. Consequently, "historiography scours memorials in order to record facts with accuracy. But just this supposed realism must miss the reality of the event" (p. 13). And yet, here we see an important elision. Interpreters may scour memorials - texts and material artifacts - against the background of a wide variety of assumptions about the object of their scouring. This opposition between scouring memorials *or* conceiving events correctly in a metaphysical sense may well reflect Péguy's own rhetoric, but simply it leaves unanswered the theological and ethical question of *how* one should read, of what we owe to our theological dead. This is so even as I would want to claim that Milbank's Christological characterisation of the event as such is entirely right.

61. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edition (London: Verso, 1991).

of dogmatic theology, and that, in scholarly terms, such listening foregrounds the task of attentive commentary. Our first work as theologians is not to "construct" or "critique" theologies of the Trinity, or accounts of the Incarnation, but to listen the tradition, to hear the principles of thought that have been defined for us, to attend to the variety of forms in which these principles are worked out and explored, to understand how those forms developed and the questions and conflicts that emerged in different periods of the Church's history. It is a work of hearing and entering the Christian imaginative universe, and coming to understand a little more of the ordering and exploration of that universe as the Spirit has given it to us. If we are to foster appropriate remembering of tradition at this point in the history of Christian thought, we need both to reflect on the theology of tradition, and on what follows from our relationship to the post-Renaissance scholarly tradition. In this sense our dogmatic conversation needs to make granular readings of that tradition an expected and sought-after part of any scholarly attempt to explore the meaning of fundamental Christian doctrines. There is always too much to read, and there are always too many avenues of fascinating thought to travel down; theology needs to make certain that it has created a space, a conversation in which those texts which *must* be heard are actually heard.[62] From this style of attention theologians will then be better able to speak to and in new contexts, and answer the particular questions and concerns of each generation.

Ideally, the more detail we could offer about the shape of this conversation, the more easily we would be able to offer an account in the abstract of how theologians might be trained for this conversation, and how theology departments should be structured to nurture it. But in reality such wholesale change is beyond the theologian's ability to effect: the universities in which new scholars are trained and socialised are too fixed in their ideology; the disciplines in which theologians are trained too dependent on the culture of the modern university; the different Christian traditions have not shown themselves adept at shaping institutions that can respond to current crises.[63] The situation seems to be a little better when we speak of religious communities where communal structures and liturgical life are able to shape the imaginations of those undergoing theological training, but it is not inevitably so. I imagine that I am not the only theologian in mid-life to feel the deep contingency and ephemeral nature of the good dogmatic conversations that I have seen. This will most likely remain a constant of intellectual life; but while this fact should counsel us against supposing that we cannot simply expect good conversation, given the divisions between

62. And here, I think, my own preference is not to characterise attending to early Christian texts so much as a hearing of the Church in its youth, as a stripping away of theology down to its core, an experience far more akin to ascending a mountain to feel the air free from the complex pressures of modern life.

63. It is also true that in recent few, if any, Christian traditions have really grasped the importance of encouraging the training of new generations of scholars deeply skilled at and invested in studying the *theology* of the early Christian period.

theological sub-disciplines in our day, it should also suggest the importance of thinking clearly about the foundations and character of good dogmatic conversation, in the hopes of nurturing a future in which the tradition is better remembered.

All that I have said so far is rather general in tone; what of the place of Patristics in this conversation? Because the Catholic theological tradition unfolds through a variety of periods, because, for example, of the place that Thomas holds, it is impossible to present Patristic theology as *all* that is necessary in that conversation. Rather, one must think in more complex ways about what roles those expert in Patristic theology may perform within the dogmatic conversation. I would like to highlight three (that are closely related to the three features of Patristic theology I identified in my third thesis). First, the advocate for Patristic theology should always be an advocate for the complex structures and interrelationships of the Christian symbolic universe. The scholar of Patristic thought should be the one in the very best position to call our minds back to the complex field of images, terms and symbols drawn from Israel's Scriptures and the life of the early Christian community that is the material from which the New Testament, the Church's liturgical life and its theological controversies are woven.

Second, Patristic theology may help to give rise to a healthy dynamic between recognition of the Christian dogmatic core, and that which has been drawn out of it over the centuries. The Patristic scholar should not understand herself to be standing in opposition to the student of Scholasticism - or to the scholar engaged with a particular modern trinitarian theology - that is, as one offering a competing and sufficient model of theology. Rather, in dialogue with those expert in later developments, the one devoted to Patristic thought may continually draw attention to the fundamental core of Christian doctrines, to their interrelationship with the Christian symbolic universe, and to the interplay between the known-in-revelation and the fundamental mystery of divine life and action. **It is in appreciation of this deep core to Christian thought that Christian speculation is best shaped, encouraged and, occasionally, reigned in**. It is, indeed, important to ask how, in the shaping of a theology toward better remembrance, the conversation between students of Patristic theology and students medieval theology may be encouraged. The recent emergence of new traditions of theologians for whom Thomas is a guide and source is much to be welcomed; but the conversation that should consequently ensue between us remains somewhat unclear. It does seem to me that the Patristic scholar should push the devotee of scholasticism to reflection on what follows when Patristic authors are received inadvertently as inspired and yet adolescent authorities in need of philosophical and logical completion, or where they are simply misread - texts excerpted from broader context, texts read without attention to ancient cultural contexts. In the light of such reflection what new conversations must open about the course of theological development and the speculative possibilities open for us? These questions I do not yet know how to answer, but they should press upon us, even as we should also recognise that scholastic discussion does also offer advance and clarity in various areas.

Third, the Patristic scholar should be a constant advocate helping theologians in other periods grasp something of the manner in which the development of early Christian thought was inseparable from complex patterns of adapting non-Christian philosophical and literary-critical traditions. It is always vital for theologians to bear in mind which adaptations are so deeply ingrained in complex of Christian thought and teaching that they do constitute the core, the bones, of a "perennial philosophy" for Christian thinkers. But these adaptations are best seen as assumptions and principles simply interwoven into the structure of basic Christian doctrines and methods of argument.

The question of how the study of Scripture relates to the relations between different specialisms in this conversation is vital, but too complex to have been discussed in this paper. However, some basic principles will at least indicate how addressing that question would be vital to a fuller account of the dogmatic conversation. The Christian adaptation of post-Renaissance historiography is particularly complex in the case of Biblical studies. On the one hand, the development of modern Biblical studies has been of immense importance in delivering to us new perspectives on the relationship of the New Testament to its Jewish context, and in enabling us to see more clearly the character of the development that Christian thought underwent as, over the first few centuries of the Church, the mysteries of the gospel were articulated. On the other hand, the same historiography has often worked (unconsciously and consciously) to break the bonds between formed Church teaching and the text of Scripture (or, perhaps, better it has often served to break the complex links between the written text of Scripture and the ordered Christian symbolic universe that is Scripture's home). The rise of professionalised Biblical studies in the modern university setting has made these tensions all the more acute; students of dogmatics or theology in any period of the Church, find themselves "outside" the circle of expertise in Scripture. In the past few decades, however, many avenues have opened among those trained in modern biblical studies, for exploring how Scripture may be read as a canonical text, and as a text also opened by reflection on later Church teaching. Needed now is further reflection on Scripture's place within the conversation of dogmatic theology. Reshaping dogmatics as conversation will not involve removing the status of "Biblical Studies" as a distinct specialism, but it will involve recognising that a rightly ordered conversation in dogmatics means that those expert in each period of the Church's history must learn to see themselves as also guardians and curators of the gradual unfolding of the depths of Scripture - and those who study Scripture's meaning to its writers, redactors, and earliest audiences must come to accept the necessity of those who study the further unfolding of those depths.[64] Thus will Scripture be best read in "the same Spirit in whom it was written." **[DV **]**

64. For some indication of how I would shape such a discussion see my “The Word Answering the Word: Opening The Space of Catholic Biblical Interpretation” in R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky, and Justin Stratis (eds.), *Theological Theology: Essays in Honor of John B. Webster* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 37-53.

One of the hardest things to learn, as a theologian trained in the modern university, is that sometimes the most important forms of discourse for theologians to hear are those that speak in simple terms against the philosophical complexes of modernity, and speak of the central truths of Christian belief. When we listen to the Patristic Church, we must certainly hear voices that are every bit as philosophically complex as those that modernity offers, but many of those same Patristic voices struggle not only to defend, but to call us back to the direct language of the faith and to rest there. This is a voice that the modern theological conversation desperately needs to hear. In listening it is not that we are drawn away from a sphere of academic "credibility" in which theology can present itself as acceptable before the court of the modern university (even if at times such pleading certainly serves good purposes), but that we are drawn toward a sphere in which the power and attractiveness of the Christian gospel may be heard, and the basis on which theologians engage and yet dispute secular scholarly traditions seen with clarity.

One criticism of the argument that runs through these theses will suggest that, whereas the *ressourcement* proposed by my French forebears was very consciously aimed at answering the perceived needs of "modern" humanity, that for which I have advocated is focused on the internal structure of theological thinking and thus far more limited in its concerns and horizon. There is some sense in this critique; my goal here is rather limited. And yet, I would also suggest that the showing to the world a rightly ordered theological conversation *is* an act of evangelisation. We show the beauty of the Christian tradition not only by apologetic ahistorical arguments, but by showing the mystery of the tradition, its warts and beauty, through exhibiting its explanatory power, its slow development, and the people that it has transformed.