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**“Principium Omnis Creaturae”
Exemplarism of the Divine Word in Thomas Aquinas’
*Super Epistolam ad Colossenses Lectura***

***Principium Omnis Creaturae*
Egzemplaryzm Słowa Bożego w *Super Epistolam*
ad Colossenses Lectura Tomasza z Akwinu**

Abstract. At the crossroads of a complex texture of neoplatonic and peripatetic contaminations, in Aquinas’ *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses Lectura*, the mediaeval doctrine of divine ideas comes across to the historian as a crucial element in the theological definition of the intra-trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son as well as of the dependence of creatures on Divine Wisdom. The paper aims to outline how the critique of many platonic positions blending with the recovery of Proclian axioms within a creationist frame provides Aquinas with an explicative model capable of describing in semantic terms not only the notion of divine Word, but also the causal bond between creatures and their creator.

Streszczenie. Na skrzyżowaniu złożonej struktury neoplatońskich i perypatetyckich wpływów, w *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses Lectura* Tomasza z Akwinu, średniowieczna doktryna idei boskich jawi się historykowi jako kluczowy element w teologicznej definicji wewnątrztrynitarnej relacji między Ojcem a Synem oraz zależności stworzeń od Boskiej Mądrości. Artykuł ma na celu zarysowanie, w jaki sposób krytyka wielu stanowisk platońskich, łącząca się z odzyskaniem aksjomatów Proklusza ujętych w ramach kreacjonizmu, dostarcza Akwinacii modelu wyjaśniającego, który pozwala opisać w kategoriach semantycznych nie tylko pojęcie Boskiego Słowa, lecz także związek przyczynowy między stworzeniami a ich stwórcą.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Aquinas, Paul the Apostle, Divine Word, Exemplarism.

Słowa kluczowe: średniowiecze, Akwinata, Paweł Apostoł, Słowo Boże, egzemplaryzm.

Introduction

Not only does *Super epistolam ad Colossenses lectura* provide a meaningful perspective on the theological depth of Aquinas' biblical exegesis, but, by virtue of its references to Platonism, it serves also to widen the traditional boundaries of divine exemplarism within Pauline mediaeval commentaries (cfr. Borgo 2022, 149–174). As an outcome of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theology conference, *The Mediaeval Reception of the Letters of Paul*, held in Torun in the summer 2023, the present study aims to consider Aquinas' lecture on the Epistle to the Colossian from an historical and theoretical perspective. After an archaeological examination of the framework of Aquinas' commentary, subsequent paragraphs seek to identify exemplarism as a structural element in the theology of intra-trinitarian relationships as well as in the definition of the integral dependence of creatures on divine Word.

It was Jean-Pierre Torrell who mentioned the commentary on the letter to the Colossians with respect to dating issues relating to Aquinas' *Super epistolas sancti Pauli lectura*. Indeed, according to Robert John Henle's study on Thomas' Platonic sources (cfr. Torrell 2002, 368, n. 22), the fourth lesson of the first chapter draws from Proclus' *Elementatio theologica*, whose translation by William of Moerbeke dates to 1268 (cfr. Henle 1970, 47–48). Even though this may not be at all impossible, since *Corpus Dionysiacum* and *Liber de causis* suffice to explain the reference, it appears nonetheless more reasonable to agree with Robert Wielockx regarding the difficulty of fixing a precise date of the course, its revision and publication. It's known that chronological questions about Aquinas' Pauline lectures have been widely debated in the scholarly literature due mainly to the complex history of manuscript tradition. Aquinas' *Super epistolas sancti Pauli lectura* appears to be divided into two quite different blocks: one containing the commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans and the beginning of the first Letter to the Corinthians, the other which comes in the form of a *reportatio* by Reginald of Piperno and which starts from the eleventh chapter of the first Letter to the Corinthians and ends with the Epistle to the Hebrews. It's worth noting that a part of Thomas' original exposition of the first Letter to the Corinthians has been lost and replaced by a text of Peter of Tarentaise (cfr. Porro 2016, 188–190). Pierre Mandonnet hypothesised that Thomas lectured on the Pauline epistles twice: the first time between 1259 and 1265, the second time between 1272 and 1273 (cfr. Man-

donnet 1928, 211–245). This general framework has been preserved by almost every scholar, with the exception of Thomas Weisheipl (1983, 373) and Simon Tugwell (1998, 247–248), who wished to date the Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans to the period of the second Parisian regency. Torrell, who, at first, called for a serious reworking of this timeline (cfr. Torrell 2002, 367), came to agree with Mandonnet's and René-Antoine Gauthier's proposals. As a consequence, the French scholar places the first teaching on the *Corpus Paulinum* between 1261 and 1265 in Orvieto or, more probably, in Rome, where they could have been the object of teaching of the new *studium* (that's to say the convent school) (Torrell 2017, 379–387). On the contrary, the lectures on the Letter to the Romans, the first part of First Epistle to Corinthians and the Letter to the Hebrews might be situated in Naples, which stores one of the principal witnesses to the text, the manuscript *Biblioteca Nazionale* VIII.A.17 (cfr. Porro 2016, 188–190). In a recent reconsideration of the problem, Wielockx has convincingly stated that, contrary to the countless hypotheses that have been advanced, the construction of the critical edition, in the hands of Gilles de Grandpré of the Canadian section of the Leonine Commission, already clarifies that there is no proof Thomas held courses on the Pauline corpus on two distinct occasions, nor does it seem possible to distinguish between a manuscript edited by the author as an *expositio* and one circulating in the form of a mere *reportatio*. The only firm fact that, according to this reading, should be maintained is that the publication of the commentaries began in Naples, although it would be misleading to identify this with the place where Thomas lectured on Paul's letters (cfr. Wielockx 2009, 177).

1. The double task of the sage

Far from simply an occasional missive to a first-century Phrygian community, the Epistle to the Colossians is assumed to be an integral part of the perfectly ordered plan of divine revelatio, pointed out in the general prologue of *Super epistolas sancti Pauli* as well as in his *resumptio* at the University of Paris in the spring of 1256.

Marking his inaugural lecture as a licensed master, Aquinas explains that, whereas the Old Testament admonishes through commandments, the New Testament aids by the gifts of grace. According to a triadic Neoplatonic pattern of explication, the first part of New Testament, i.e. the Gospels, deals with

Christ's life as a source of the grace; Paul's epistles constitute the second part treating the power of grace; the rest of the canonical books concerns grace in the Church. In two recent papers, Franklin Harkins (cfr. Harkins 2013, 242) and Anthony Giambrone (cfr. Giambrone 2018, 26) seem to receive Thomas Prügl's cursory suggestion that the first lecture must be placed immediately after this *inception*. Indeed, the lack of a division of Pauline epistolary in the inaugural lecture, *Hic est liber mandatorum Dei*, might indicate the aim of the new master to begin his first regency by a commentary on Paul's letters (cfr. Prügl 2005, 388–391; 414, n. 68). As a matter of fact, it is in the general prologue of *Super epistolas sancti Pauli*, that Aquinas proceeds to subdivide the Pauline corpus. The Apostle is likely to consider the doctrine of grace in a threefold way, namely as it is in the head itself, which is Christ; as it is in the principal members of the mystical body, which are the prelates; and as it is in the mystical body itself, which is the Church. Under this last rubric, the grace in the Church is furthermore considered as it is in itself in the Epistle to the Romans. Secondly, it is considered as it is in the sacraments in the letters to the Corinthians and to the Galatians. Finally, according to Aquinas, the Epistle to the Ephesians deal with the establishment of the unity of the Church, while the Letter to the Philippians deal with its development; and the two letters to the Thessalonians deal with the defence of the Church from persecution, while the Epistle to the Colossians deals with its defence against heresy.¹

Randall Smith has recently observed similarities between Aquinas' biblical prologues and his sermons. Thomas prefaces to each epistle offer a short homiletic introduction in the form of a sermon mnemonically structured around a scriptural theme, normally, but not always, given by the Dominican lectionary (cfr. Smith 2012, 793). In the exergue to the prologue to his own lessons on *Colossians* – a verse of the *First Book of Maccabees* “Protegebat castra gladio suo” (3, 3)² – the field signifies the church, which Paul protects from heretics with the word of God as a “spiritual sword”. The image denotes the inseparability of the refutation of errors from the proclamation of the truth, according to the definition of the *officium sapientis* provided by Aristotle³ and Paul (cfr. Gauthier 1993, 147–156).⁴ What is more, the doctrines made the ob-

¹ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Super epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, prologus, n. 11, I, 3.

² Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses lectura*, c. 1, lc. 4, n. 30, II, 132.

³ Cfr. Aristoteles Latinus, *De sophisticis elenchis*, 165 a24–27, VI, p. 6.

⁴ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Titum lectura*, c. 1, lc. 3, II, 307.

ject of Thomas' criticism reproduce not only ancient theological errors, but also heterodox doctrines, which have become a topical issue again with Latin Avicennism and Cathar sects. It's significant then that, by presenting Christ's relationship with God and creation, the reduction of error to the professed truth leads Aquinas to suggest exemplarism as an explanatory model to determine the metaphysical relationship between the Word and the beings.

2. The Word as Image of God

The theological assumption of the structural inability of the subject to directly know the invisible God, inscribes Aquinas' exegesis in the theological symbolism, prevalent in the mediaeval contemplation of nature, which interprets reality as a theophanic system (cfr. Gregory 1992, 85). In this model the fundamental postulate, according to which things participate being within the formal limits of the essence, cannot be separated from the belief that the essence itself is the product of a ordering Thought (cfr. Pieper 1957, 45–71). Things are significantly placed between the knowledge, which they measure, and the creative knowledge of God, by which they are measured (cfr. d'Onofrio 2011, 37; Amerini 2009, 39).⁵ The resulting system is thus capable of including, in a single glance, the creator and the creature, the cause and effects, archetypes and copies.

In the opening lines of Lecture 4, after having recalled the benefits of grace, Thomas's *divisio textus* discloses the fundamental exegetical perspective that the Apostle is seeking to counter false teachings concerning the Son's relationship to God and to creation. If Christ, as generated, is Father's image, it follows that the exemplary relationship, determined by the creation of all things in the Word, makes the creatures themselves visible images of the invisible God, not "quantum ad speciem",⁶ as the Son, but as signs. Creation is therefore conceived in an analogous way to the trinitarian relationships. While the generation of the Word and the proceeding of the Holy Spirit can be considered an intrinsic diffusion of goodness and being within the trinitarian life,⁷ creation

⁵ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 2, co., 9.

⁶ Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses lectura*, c. 1, lc. 4, n. 31, II, 132.

⁷ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, l. 1, d. 2, q. 1, a. 4., s.c., 73.

is thought to be the extrinsic diffusion of the self-diffusive divine perfection.⁸ Thomas' world is thus entirely oriented towards the manifestation of divine perfection, as the creator knows and wills all things by knowing and willing nothing but itself.

Deus enim non alio se cognoscit et creaturam, sed omnia in sua essentiam, sicut in prima causa effectiva. Filius autem est conceptio intellectualis Dei secundum quod cognoscit se, et per consequens omnem creaturam. Inquantum ergo gignitur, videtur quoddam verbum repraesentans totam creaturam, et ipsum est principium omnis creaturae.⁹

In second place, *Super epistolam ad Colossenses* points out a significant passage in the identification of divine ideas with the word, formed by the subject at the end of the cognitive process. In fact, Aquinas states that, since divine nature is intellective, the generation of the Son can be shaped as a conception in God's thought.¹⁰ In the fifteenth book of *De Trinitate*, Augustine had placed the generation of divine Word in parallel with the production of an internal word distinct from that uttered in the speech act.¹¹ In *Super epistolam sancti Pauli*, the two formal notes defining the notion of "verbum" – the formal resemblance with the known object and a certain distinction from the subject¹² – reproduces the solution to the crucial issue regarding divine Word and the conception of mental word in the noetic process, adopted since the *Quaestiones disputatae De veritate*, discussed in Paris in the academic year 1256–1257. The exteriority implied by the reconsideration of the word as an outcome of knowledge process points out that word ought properly to mean just *personaliter* in Trinitarian theology, while only a partial consideration of the intentional content of the word may allow for an essential predication *in divinis*.¹³ It appears to have reversed the relation between the general law and

⁸ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 19, a. 2, co., 233.

⁹ Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses lectura*, c. 1, lc. 4, n.35, II, 133.

¹⁰ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses lectura*, c. 1, lc. 4, n. 36, II, 133.

¹¹ Cfr. Aurelii Augustini *De Trinitate*, XV 10, 17 – 16, 26, 483 – 501.

¹² Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses lectura*, c. 1, lc. 4, n.35, II, 133: "Verbum autem mentis nostrae est, quando formamus actu formam rei cuius notitiam habemus, et hoc significamus verbo exterior."

¹³ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 2, co., 124: "Unde verbum si proprie accipiat in divinis, non dicitur nisi personaliter; si autem accipiat communiter, poterit etiam dici essentialiter."

the exception outlined in the commentary on the first book of Lombard's *Sentences*, in which nothing prevented the use of "verbum" *essentialiter*, whereas the theological preference for employing the term according to a personal meaning is not strictly demanded by the *virtus vocabuli*.¹⁴

3. The firstborn of all creation

In the second part of the lesson, Thomas deals with the causal relationship between the Word and things, which concerns the three metaphysical topics of creation, multiplicity and conservation in being.¹⁵

With respect to the discussion of the exemplary causality of the Divine word in creation, Thomas at once rejects the Platonic hypostatisation of forms and excludes the proposition that God, in its cognitive and creative relationship with the world, might be subject to a norm other than itself.

sciendum est, quod Platonici ponebant ideas, dicentes, quod quaelibet res fiebat ex eo quod participabat ideam, puta hominis vel alicuius alterius speciei. Loco enim harum idearum nos habemus unum, scilicet Filium, Verbum Dei. [...] Deus omnia in sua sapientia dicitur facere, quia sapientia Dei se habet ad res creatas, sicut ars aedificatoris ad domum factam. Haec autem forma et sapientia est Verbum, et ideo omnia in ipso condita sunt, sicut in quodam exemplari.¹⁶

It's therefore the employment of the traditional artisan model, whereby the effect proceeds from the cause according to an exemplary paradigm, that makes the entire creation an expression, more or less lucid, of the inexhaustible depth of divine essence (cfr. Lenzi 2013, 170–172). Aquinas' assumption, that creatures can ultimately be considered a manifestation and, therefore, a sign of divine perfection, extends a doctrinal tendency, which can be traced back to *De doctrina Christiana* and *De trinitate*.¹⁷ In Thomas' synthesis, the Augustinian suggestions are combined with *Corpus Areopagiticum* theopha-

¹⁴ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, l. 1, d. 27, q. 2, a. 2, co., I, 659; cfr. von Gunten 1993, 121–128.

¹⁵ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses lectura*, c. 1, lc. 4, n. 36, II, 133.

¹⁶ Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses lectura*, c. 1, lc. 4, n. 36, II, 133.

¹⁷ Cfr. Aurelii Augustini *De doctrina christiana*, I 2, 2, 7–8, II 10, 15, p. 41; *De Trinitate*, VI 10, 12, 242.

nic architecture (cfr. Maierù 1981, I, 55–57), insofar as the notion of hierarchy is functional to a symbolic conception of the world, which postulates at least two different levels – ontological and semantic – of sign and meaning.

The pivotal question concerning the plurality of beings and the hierarchy of their perfections thus finds its solution in the metaphysical impossibility that a single creature can comprehensively express, by means of formal determinations, the perfection that belongs, in an indeterminate way, to the First Cause (cfr. Porro 2007, 37). Against the Manichaean – or, rather, Avicennian – position, according to which the distinction of beings doesn't fall under divine power, the relationship between cause and effect configures the plurality and the specific differences among entities as an intelligible expression of the depth of divine essence (cfr. Wawrykow 1995, 149–153; Lenzi 2017, 67). In this sense, multiplicity is implied by the impossibility of a single creature ever expressing divine perfection. God has therefore produced different creatures so that what is lacking in the expression of divine goodness in one thing may be made up for by another.¹⁸

If the entire universe represents divine goodness more perfectly than any part¹⁹, Proclian laws of participation, appropriately filtered in a monotheistic key, offer Thomas the fundamental axiom of continuity in the orders of reality. The procession of creatures thus establishes a hierarchical ladder that expresses, proportionally to the proximity to the first cause, a dynamic relationship in the efficient, exemplar and final order, according to which what belongs to the cause in an essential way, belongs to the effects in a participatory way; what belongs in an essential way to inferior things, belongs to the First one in the proper way of causes.²⁰

¹⁸ Aurelii Augustini *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, q. 41, 63: “cum omnia deus fecerit, quare non aequaliter fecit? Quia non essent omnia, si essent aequalia. Non enim essent multa rerum genera, quibus conficitur universitas, primas et secundas et deinceps usque ad ultimas ordinatas habens creaturas. Et hoc est quod dicitur omnia.”

¹⁹ Cfr. Thomae de Aquino *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* I, 1, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2, ad 6, I, 1021; *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 2, c. 44, 368–369; *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 47, a. 2, co., IV, 487; *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 16, co, II, 87–89.

²⁰ Cfr. Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses lectura*, c. 1, lc. 4, n. 41, II, 134: “ea quae conveniunt superioribus essentialiter, inferioribus conveniunt participative; quae vero inferioribus essentialiter conveniunt, superioribus causaliter conveniunt.”

Conclusion

Made from nothing, the creature owes its being to the incessant influence of the creator according to an ontological dependence, whereby the existence of the effect lasts no longer than the duration of the action of the cause. Thomas links the radical dependence of the creature from divine power to the annihilation which would inevitably arise from the cessation of the causal influence of the creator. Following an image suggested by Augustine²¹ and Gregory the Great,²² it's the phenomenon of illumination to give philosophical intelligibility to the creative process by assimilating the dependence of the creature on the creator to the relationship between the sun and the air, which participates in the light of the sun without participating in the nature of light.

Sic enim se habet Deus ad res, sicut sol ad lunam, quo recedente deficit lumen lunae. Et sic si Deus subtraheret suam virtutem a nobis, in momento deficerent omnia.²³

The analogy expresses all the instability of a transitory effect, radically linked to the duration of the action of its cause. In this sense, the convergence, only analogical, of the condition of light in the air with the status of intention is not intended to reduce the entire ontological consistency of the creature to an illusion.²⁴ It seems, on the contrary, to express the status of the world in the same semantic terms used for the theological definition of the Word, who is indeed the "image of the invisible God" and the "firstborn" of what is created, in Him and through Him. As an element demanded by the description of the processes, which integrally suspend things to God's conservation in being, divine exemplarism thus seems not to be an Augustinian ruin that Thomas juxtaposes with an Aristotelian system, elaborated by removing the Platonic world of Forms.

²¹ Cfr. Aurelii Augustini *De Genesi ad litteram*, l. 4, c. 12, 108.

²² Cfr. Gregorii Magni *Moralia sive Expositio in Iob*, l. 16, c. 37, § 45, III, 825.

²³ Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam ad Colossenses*, c. 1, lc. 4, n. 44, II, 134.

²⁴ Cfr. Id., *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 6, II, 35.

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