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## **The literal sense and the spiritual understanding of Scripture according to St. Thomas Aquinas\***

### **Sens dosłowny i sens duchowy rozumienia Pisma Świętego według św. Tomasza z Akwinu**

**Abstract.** In contemporary Biblical hermeneutics, there is a confusion about what the literal and spiritual senses are. From this confusion, it follows that the interpreter does not know the sense to be reached and that there is a considerable distance between what the Bible meant when it was written and what it now means in the Church. St. Thomas has a clear doctrine about what is the literal sense and what the spiritual sense, which can clarify this confusion and avoid the negative consequences it has for exegesis. From this doctrine, there are two essential contributions that can serve this purpose: the literal sense is mainly the sense intended by the divine author, and the spiritual understanding is what allows the interpreter to reach the literal sense of the New Testament, the key that opens up the meaning of revelation and of Scripture.

**Streszczenie.** We współczesnej hermeneutyce biblijnej istnieje zamieszanie dotyczące tego, czym jest dosłowny i duchowy sens. Z tego zamieszania wynika to, że interpretatorzy nie wiedzą, jaki jest sens, który mają osiągnąć i jaki jest dystans między tym, co Biblia znaczyła, kiedy była napisana i co teraz znaczy w Kościele. Św. Tomasz podaje jasną doktrynę o tym, czym jest sens dosłowny i duchowy, która może wyjaśnić to zamieszanie i uniknąć jego negatywnych skutków dla egzegezy. Z tej doktryny wynika, że sens dosłowny jest tym, który zamierzał sam autor, duchowy zaś jest tym, co uznaje interpretator, aby ubogacić dosłowny sens Nowego Testamentu. Jest to klucz, który poszerza znaczenie objawienia i Pisma Świętego.

**Keywords:** Saint Thomas Aquinas; biblical hermeneutics; literal sense of Scripture; spiritual sense of Scripture.

**Słowa kluczowe:** św. Tomasz z Akwinu; hermeneutyka biblijna; sens dosłowny Pisma św.; sens duchowy Pisma św.

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Contemporary Biblical exegesis seems confused about what is the literal and what is the spiritual sense. There are two main consequences of this confusion, 1) indeterminacy in the sense the interpreter should seek, and 2) a considerable distance between what Scripture meant when its authors wrote it (literal sense) and what it means now in the Church (spiritual sense). Let us see how this situation has developed.

When seeking to understand the meaning of any text we need to know the sense we are looking for. In this way, when we find it, we will be able to recognise that we have in fact found it.

During the Patristic Period and the Middle Ages, the sense of Scripture that the interpreter sought was the spiritual one. In it was found the Word of God. On the other hand, the literal sense was insufficient, and even harmful, as it did not truly transmit the saving Word of God, in accordance with the words of St Paul: „the letter kills, but the Spirit giveth life“ (2 Cor 3:6).

In the Middle Ages, St Thomas, trying to clarify the many senses of Scripture, stated firmly that the literal sense was the first and essential sense, on which the spiritual senses were based.<sup>1</sup> In the literal sense the interpreter could find the Word of God with everything necessary for salvation.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, through the literal sense the interpreter could approach the spiritual senses which enriched the transmission of the Divine Word.

The critical exegesis that began with modernity radicalized this statement of St Thomas: it identified the literal sense with the sense intended by the human author, and claimed that it contained the true message of Scripture. The spiritual senses would only be additions to the proper sense in Scripture, given by the faith of the religious community reading it. The spiritual sense would thus be a sense beyond the text, derived from a later projection over the truth of the text, which would ultimately be judged on its truth through the meaning of the literal sense.

Since the middle of the 20th century, new methods of literary analysis in exegesis and above all, new hermeneutics, have legitimized the various ways of extending the reading of Scripture in each Christian community according to its faith. This is known as the spiritual sense. This new approach, however, has not clarified the sense to be sought, and above all, has created a distance between the literary historical meaning intended by the human author and the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.10.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.10 ad 1.

meanings beyond the text, among which is the spiritual sense by which each religious community reads Scripture according to its faith.<sup>3</sup>

The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) points in the same direction. In its desire of determining the direction which best corresponds to the mission of exegesis in the Catholic Church, the document dealt with the literal and the spiritual sense of Scripture. It defined the literal sense as “that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors,”<sup>4</sup> but pointing to its dynamic aspect by which the biblical text extends its meaning beyond what human authors meant in their historical moment. To conceive this dynamic aspect, the document used the new hermeneutics which stresses that a written text add new meanings to the original sense when it is placed in new circumstances. Founded on this dynamic aspect of the biblical text, the PBC document presented the spiritual sense as “the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.”<sup>5</sup> This reading is correct, because in it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the Scriptures.<sup>6</sup> However, the document stated that “contrary to a current view, there is not necessarily a distinction between the two senses (the literal sense and the spiritual sense),”<sup>7</sup> because “when a biblical text relates directly to the paschal mystery of Christ or to the new life which results from it, its literal sense is already a spiritual sense. Such is regularly the case in the New Testament.”<sup>8</sup> We can see, therefore, that the PBC document starts from the literal sense of the human author and based on the ability of a written text to extend its meaning beyond what the author meant, conceives the spiritual sense as that which arises from its reading from the fulfillment of Scriptures. The main sense that the interpreter should seek is the spiritual sense, but his starting point is the literal sense, knowing also that there is no necessary distinction between them.

Thus, the PBC document has accepted the primacy of the literal sense of the human author, proper to the contemporary exegesis, and has tried to legitimize

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<sup>3</sup> One example of this may be seen in: R.E. Brown, “Hermenéutics” in: R. E. Brown – S. M. Schneiders, “Hermenéutics” in: *NJBC* (Englewood Cliffs 1990) 1148–1162.

<sup>4</sup> PBC, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II.B.1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, II.B.2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, II.B.2: “In it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is therefore quite acceptable to reread the Scriptures in the light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, II.B.2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, II.B.2.

his extension to a broader meaning that ultimately responds to the Church's reading of Scripture. With this articulation of the biblical senses, Catholic exegesis is situated in an attitude of dialogue with historical-critical exegesis and with the exegesis of other Christian confessions. What is not so clear is whether such articulation favors the understanding of Scripture as the Word of God or inclines one to consider it as a mere human word, and whether it helps to read Scripture in Church, allowing to recognize what the Church believes in its letter.

Regarding this last issue, we can consider what the PBC document said about the *sensus plenior* of Scripture. For the PBC the *sensus plenior* is the spiritual sense inasmuch as that contains more than the human author said because of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> This deeper truth will be revealed in the course of the time, and it is only revealed in the course of time through the full revelation and through the insertion of texts into the canon of Scripture. No problem so far. But the PBC document presented some examples to illustrate its statement. Among them it quoted from Rom 5,12-21 and said: "The definition of original sin by the Council of Trent provided the fuller sense of Paul's teaching in Romans 5:12-21 about the consequences of the sin of Adam for humanity".<sup>10</sup> The text suggests that the Council of Trent has gone beyond what St. Paul meant by his words. Thus, there would be a gap between what St. Paul taught and what the Church has dogmatically read in these texts (cf. DH 1512–1514).

The confusion about the literal and the spiritual sense is also found in some documents of the contemporary Magisterium of the Catholic Church. On the one hand, some of them state that the spiritual sense of Scripture is the true sense to be reached, while a mere literal sense will kill.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, other texts recognize the literal sense as the main sense of Scripture that contains the essentials of the Word of God and opens the other senses of Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

Given this situation, this article is intended to help overcome the confusion which exists with respect to what is the literal and what the spiritual sense of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, II.B.3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, II.B.3.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. VD 37. In this text, Benedict XVI presents the literal sense as the basic sense, and quotes Aquinas. But then he assumes the perspective of the PBC document and presents the spiritual sense as that which springs from the reading of Scripture in the light of the Paschal mystery. The interpreter must start from the literal sense of the human author, and seek the spiritual sense, that contains the true meaning of Scripture, because the letter kills and Spirit gives life.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. CEC 115–117.

Scripture, and so avoid its consequences. For this we take some contributions from the doctrina of Aquinas. St Thomas has a clear doctrine about what is the literal sense and the spiritual sense, and what we call the spiritual understanding of Scripture.<sup>13</sup> From it we take two ideas: 1) the literal sense is mainly the meaning intended by the divine author, and 2) the interpreter must seek the spiritual understanding of the literal meaning. It seems to us that these contributions may help to clarify the confusion.

We shall firstly consider with the literal sense as the sense of the divine author (1), and then with the spiritual understanding of the literal sense of Scripture (2). Finally, we shall show how these contributions of St Thomas clarify the confusion about what is the literal and what the spiritual sense, and so avoid these consequences (3).

## 1. Literal sense as the sense of the divine author

For St Thomas, the meaning of Scripture is mainly the meaning intended by the divine author, and secondarily by the human author. This is true of both the literal and the spiritual senses. In addition, the literal sense is the first sense that God intended to communicate to man, and the one that opens up the spiritual senses. Finally, the literal sense of the New Testament is the sense in which God transmits to man the fulness of his revelation, and thus the one which allows true understanding of the literal meaning of the rest of Scripture and of the

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<sup>13</sup> St Thomas deals with Biblical senses at four points in his Works: *Super Sent.*, pr. q.1 a.5; *Quodlibet*. VII q.6 a.1-4; *Super Gal.* cap. IV, lec. VII; *Summa Theologiae* I, q.1 a.10. In the text of the *Summa Theologiae* St Thomas offers his most synthetic and mature thought. Some important studies on the subject: P. Synave, “La doctrine de saint Thomas d’Aquin sur le sens littéral des Écritures”: *RB* 35 (1926) 40–65; S. Parenti, “Il senso letterale della Scrittura secondo S. Tomasso”: *Sacra Doctrina* 77 (1975) 69–92; H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l’Écriture* II.II (Paris 1964) 285–302; M. Arias Reyero, *Thomas von Aquin als Exeget. Die Prinzipien seiner Schriftdeutung und seine Lehre von den Schriftsinnen*, (Einsiedeln 1971); V. Balaguer, “El sentido literal y el sentido espiritual de la Sagrada Escritura”: *Scripta Theologica* 36 (2004) 509–562; G. Dahan, “Les quatre sens de l’Écriture dans l’exégèse médiévale” en: M. Arnold (ed.), *Annoncer l’évangile (XV<sup>e</sup>–XVII<sup>e</sup> s.). Permanences et mutations de la prédication* (Paris 2006) 17–40; republicado en G. Dahan, *Lire la Bible au moyen âge. Essais d’herméneutique médiévale* (Génève 2009) 199–224; G. Dahan, “Introduction” en: Saint Thomas d’Aquin, *Commentaire de l’Épître aux Galates*, (Paris 2008) XXXI–XLIV; J.C. Ossandon, “La interpretación bíblica según Santo Tomás. Antecedentes y alcance de su doctrina acerca del sentido literal de la Sagrada Escritura”: *Isidorianum* 34 (2008); O.-Th. Venard, “Problématique du sens littéral” en: Id (ed.), *Le sens littéral des Écritures* (Paris 2009).

spiritual senses. We shall now consider more closely these three statements of St Thomas.

### 1.1. The sense of Scripture is primarily the sense of the divine author

In his doctrine on Biblical senses, St Thomas stems from the fact of revelation and inspiration in Scripture. He believes with the Church that God has revealed Himself to man through the “prophets” (that is, Moses, the prophets, Christ, the Apostles, etc.) and has transmitted the content of the revelation through Scripture and the “preachers of the faith” (what we call living tradition) accompanied by inner grace.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, he recognises that God has placed his saving Word in the “letter” of Scripture. And He did not do it alone, but rather through a man whom He inspired to write.

To comprehend more accurately how God, through man, has put his Word into the letter of Scripture, St Thomas thought of Biblical inspiration as a part of the charisma of prophecy. For this charisma, God as the main cause would have raised the intelligence of the hagiographer to understand what he wanted to communicate to men, and would have moved and guided him to write it, using him as a living, rational instrument.

From the fact of revelation and the nature of the inspiration, St Thomas considers the Biblical senses. Firstly, for the Aquinate, the sense of a text is the knowledge of reality that the author wants to transmit to the reader through written signs.<sup>15</sup> Thus, he says: “*sensus litteralis est quem auctor intendit*”.<sup>16</sup> St Thomas, in his exegesis of texts, whether Biblical or philosophical, always seeks the “intent” of the author as the meaning of the text<sup>17</sup> and considers that an

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.6 a.1; CG III, 154; *De Ver* q.18 a.3.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. The philosophy of the language of St Thomas Aquinas is found mainly in his *Expositio Peryermeneias* and in *De veritate*, q.11, on the master. Cf. M. Beuchot, *Historia de la filosofía del lenguaje* (México D.F. 2005); Id., *La filosofía del lenguaje en la Edad Media*. (México D.F. 1991); Id., *Introducción a la filosofía de santo Tomás de Aquino* (Salamanca 2008).

<sup>16</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.10.

<sup>17</sup> An intention is an act of the will which has as its object the end as a reason for acting through the means (cf. *Summa Theologiae* I.II q.12). In this case, the intention of the author in writing is the act of will by which the author seeks to communicate something he knows through a written text. If we take this as the intention of the text, it will be what the author wished to communicate through the text. There are abundant examples in the exegesis where Aquinas speaks of the intention of the author as that which he strives to achieve. As an example: “Evangelista Ioannes, sicut dictum est, intendit principaliter ostendere divinitatem verbi incarnati; et ideo dividitur istud evangelium in partes duas.” (*In Io*

interpretation that does not respond to the intent of the author is false or is an accommodation.<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, as God is the main author of Scripture and the hagiographer the instrumental author, the main sense of Scripture is the sense that God wants to communicate. The meaning that the human author intends to communicate is the same as that of the divine author insofar as, raised by God as a living, rational instrument, he participates in the knowledge of what God wants to say through his words. Nonetheless, the human author does not always manage to know everything that God wishes to say to us through his words. In many cases, there is an extra meaning that the hagiographer is not able to understand. This is why Aquinas speaks of him as a deficient instrument.<sup>19</sup>

For St Thomas, then, the meaning of Scripture is mainly the meaning of the divine author, and only secondarily the meaning of the human author. This is true both for the literal<sup>20</sup> and the spiritual senses.

cap.1 lec.1 [23]); “Quidam ergo hoc intelligunt dictum esse de primis legis operibus, scilicet quod caeremonialia gratiam non conferebant per quam homines iustificantur. Non tamen ista videtur esse intentio apostoli, quod patet ex hoc quod statim subdit per legem enim cognitio peccati” (*Super Romanos* cap.3 lec.2 [297]). Cf. A. Guggenheim, *Jésus Christ, grand prêtre de l'ancien et de la nouvelle Alliance. Étude du Commentaire de Saint Thomas d'Aquin sur l'Épître aux hébreux*, (Paris 2011) 635–642.

<sup>18</sup> *In Ps*, pr.: “Theodorus enim Mopsuestenus dixit, quod in sacra Scriptura et prophetiis nihil expresse dicitur de Christo, sed de quibusdam aliis rebus, sed adaptaverunt Christo: sicut illud psalm. 21: diviserunt sibi vestimenta mea etc., non de Christo, sed ad literam dicitur de David”; *Super IV Sent* dist.21 q.1 a.2 q.1 ad 3 “Ad tertium dicendum, quod in sacra Scriptura praeter principalem sensum quem auctor intendit, possunt alii sensus non incongrue aptari. Et sic Hieronymus per adaptationem quamdam loquitur, et non secundum intentionem Apostoli”.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.173 a.4.

<sup>20</sup> Some interpreters of St Thomas have identified his literal sense with the modern literal sense. This literal sense is not the sense of the divine author but of the human author. Thus, taking advantage of the primacy given by St Thomas to the literal sense, but understanding it as the sense intended by the human author, the authors have considered St Thomas as a precedent of one of the fundamental assumptions of historical-critical exegesis. C. Spicq says, surprisingly, that the literal sense in St Thomas is „the immediate meaning intended by the inspired author of words or things that are no more than signs, and as it may arise from text or the context” (C. Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au moyen âge* [Paris 1944] 274). It follows that: “It is necessary to distinguish the unique, literal sense of Scripture, on the side of Man, and therefore the only meaning that is an object of scientific research which cannot break the basic law of language, from the full sense that God, when inspiring the text, perceives in a one word and under one glance”. (C. Spicq, *Esquisse*, 284). Cf. P. Grelot, *La Biblia, palabra de Dios. Introducción al estudio de la Sagrada Escritura*

## 1.2. The senses of Scripture: literal sense and spiritual senses

God communicates with us through the letter of Scripture. However, this single letter covers a multitude of senses. What are they and how are they related? This is the question addressed by St Thomas in the *Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.10. With this question, Aquinas continued the ancient tradition of the theorists of Christian exegesis<sup>21</sup> that, given the wonderful depth of Scripture<sup>22</sup> tried to identify its modes of expression. These modes crystalize around the theory of the four senses of Scripture, which became “canonical” at the start of the 13th century, although it was not considered a closed system.<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, on the other hand, offers an excellent explanation of these four senses, above all by establishing a clear criterion of distinction between the literal sense and the spiritual senses, and defining their relationship accurately:

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(Barcelona 1968) 23; Arias Reyero, *Thomas von Aquin als Exeget*, 148–150; M. Aillet, *Lire la Bible avec S. Thomas* (Fribourg 1993)138.

<sup>21</sup> St Thomas collects the hermeneutic tradition of St Augustine and other Fathers. In the sc of the question in the *Summa* he quotes St Gregory the great as a witness to this tradition: “Sacra Scriptura omnes scientias ipso locutionis suae more transcendit: quia uno eodemque sermone, dum narrat gestum, prodit mysterium” (*Summa Theologiae* I q.10 a.10, SC). It is a text of St Gregory (San Gregorio Magno, *Moralia in Iob* XX,1, ed. M. Adriaen [CCSL 143A] 1003), but changing *gestum*, for *textum*. On the value of this change in the way of classifying Biblical senses, cf. P.C. Bori, *La interpretazione infinita* (Bologna 1987) 99; Aillet, *Lire la Bible avec S. Thomas*, 63–66.

<sup>22</sup> *Mira profunditas*. This is an expression commonly referred to Scripture in the middle ages. St Thomas uses this expression in: *In Jeremiam*, pr.; *Super Psalmo* 32, n.6; *Super Psalmo* 50, n.7; *In Io.*, cap.4, lec. 2. This mediaeval statement has been given special relevance by H. de Lubac (cf. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture* I.I [Paris 1959]). Due to the profundity of Scripture, mediaeval commentators attribute to it a multitude of senses and a richness of symbolism from which a great variety of statements is derived. This awareness of the great depth of Scripture can even be held to be the cause of the excesses that seek in each word of Scripture an almost universal science (cf. Y.M. Congar, *La tradición y las tradiciones* I (San Sebastián 1960), 156 y 212 n.1).

<sup>23</sup> To see the current state of the question of the four senses in mediaeval times: Cf. G. Dahan, “Les quatre sens de l'Écriture dans l'exégèse médiévale”, 199–224. At the end of the article, the author says: “Au coeur du moyen âge, on doit voir dans le système des quatre sens, plutôt qu'une codification contraignante, une manière de canaliser et de structurer une exégèse qui pourrait être débordante et dérégulée; mais, davantage, au-delà de cette tentative de structuration d'une signification multiple, il me semble percevoir les efforts inlassables d'exégètes qui s'efforçaient passionnément d'entendre la Parole de Dieu et de l'annoncer à ceux dont ils se sentaient responsables” (*Ibidem*, 224).

Respondeo dicendum quod auctor sacrae Scripturae est Deus, in cuius potestate est ut non solum voces ad significandum accomodet (quod etiam homo facere potest), sed etiam res ipsas. Et ideo, cum in omnibus scientiis voces significant, hoc habet proprium ista scientia, quod ipsae res significatae per voces, etiam significant aliquid. Illa ergo prima significatio, qua voces significant res, pertinet ad primum sensum, qui est sensus historicus vel litteralis. Illa vero significatio qua res significatae per voces, iterum res alias significant, dicitur sensus spiritualis, qui super litteralem fundatur, et eum supponit.<sup>24</sup>

In this text, St Thomas distinguishes the literal sense from the spiritual senses by their means of signifying. The literal sense is the sense in which the author, through his words (*voces*) signifies certain realities (*res*). On the other hand, the spiritual senses are those in which the author, through the realities signified by the words (*res*) signifies other realities (*res*).

The first means of signifying is the human means, while the second is exclusively God's.<sup>25</sup> Men may adapt words to express what they wish to say. Only God can adapt realities themselves to each other, and signify one with another, especially when dealing with facts or people that are individual, contingent and future, taken from the story of salvation (e.g. the sacrifice of Isaac may signify the redeeming death of Christ). If the realities signified were only universal essences, man could signify one with another with a certain foresight. But these are not necessary facts of the story of salvation, and only God can guide them by his Providence to exist according to a likeness, and know them in order to signify one reality (e.g. the redeeming death of Christ) by another (e.g. the sacrifice of Isaac).<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, in the text under analysis, St Thomas finishes by saying: "*sensus spiritualis; qui super litteralem fundatur, et eum supponit*". Thus, he

<sup>24</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.10. Also cf. *Quodlibet* VII q.6 a.1; *In Gal* cap.4 lec. 7 (254).

<sup>25</sup> St Thomas deals with this question, mainly in *Quodlibet* VII a.6 a.3. Also cf. *Super Gal* cap.4 lec.7 (254).

<sup>26</sup> *Quodlibet*. VII a.6 a.3: "Respondeo. Dicendum, quod spiritualis sensus sacrae Scripturae accipitur ex hoc quod res cursum suum peragentes significant aliquid aliud, quod per spiritualem sensum accipitur. Sic autem ordinantur res in cursu suo, ut ex eis talis sensus possit accipi, quod eius solius est qui sua providentia res gubernat, qui solus Deus est. Sicut enim homo potest adhibere ad aliquid significandum aliquas voces vel aliquas similitudines fictas, ita Deus adhibet ad significationem aliquorum ipsorum cursum rerum suae providentiae subiectarum. (...) Unde in nulla scientia, humana industria inventa, proprie loquendo, potest inveniri nisi litteralis sensus; sed solum in ista Scriptura, cuius Spiritus Sanctus est auctor, homo vero instrumentum; secundum illud psalm. XLIV, V. 2: lingua mea calamus Scribae velociter scribentis". Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.10; *Super Gal* cap.4 lec. 7 (254).

indicates how the spiritual and literal senses are related. The literal sense forms a base for and articulates the spiritual senses, and there are two reasons for this:

- Firstly, because the literal sense is signified first. This sense, then, signifies the human means (from the letter to the reality), and so is the sense that the reader would expect the text to connote. Furthermore, the reader should first know what the letter of scripture says (literal sense) in order to be able to know subsequently the meaning of the realities signified by that letter (spiritual sense).
- The second reason, because the literal sense is a given sense that defines the possible equivocation of the spiritual senses and contains what is "necessary to the faith". The spiritual sense is expressed by a likeness between the two realities signified. This likeness is, however, equivocal. St Thomas illustrates this with the example of the lion that in Scripture may refer to Christ (Ap) and the devil (1 Pe), and so where a lion appears in Scripture it is not possible to identify a given spiritual sense.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the literal sense of Scripture has a specific meaning. St Thomas thereby deduces that, as Scripture was ordered by God to manifest revelation,<sup>28</sup> to avoid equivocation in the message revealed as far as possible, God wanted the literal sense to contain clearly everything "necessary for the faith".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Quodlibet* VII q.6 a.1 ad 4: "Ad quartum dicendum, quod non est propter defectum auctoritatis, quod ex sensu spirituali non potest trahi efficax argumentum, sed ex ipsa natura similitudinis, in qua fundatur spiritualis sensus. Una enim res pluribus similis esse potest; unde non potest ab illa, quando in Scriptura sacra proponitur, procedi ad aliquam illarum determinate; sed est fallacia consequentis. Verbi gratia, leo propter aliquam similitudinem significat Christum et diabolum: unde per hoc quod aliquid de leone dicitur in sacra Scriptura, ad neutrum potest fieri processus, in sacra Scriptura argumentando." Also cf. *Super Sent* pr. q.1 a.5.

<sup>28</sup> *Quodlibet* VII q.6 a.1: "Sacra Scriptura ad hoc divinitus est ordinata ut per eam nobis veritas manifestetur necessaria ad salutem".

<sup>29</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.10 ad1: "Ad primum ergo dicendum quod multiplicitas horum sensuum non facit aequivocationem, aut aliam speciem multiplicatis, quia, sicut iam dictum est, sensus isti non multiplicantur propter hoc quod una vox multa significet; sed quia ipsae res significatae per voces, aliarum rerum possunt esse signa. Et ita etiam nulla confusio sequitur in sacra Scriptura, cum omnes sensus fundentur super unum, scilicet litteralem; ex quo solo potest trahi argumentum, non autem ex his quae secundum allegoriam dicuntur, ut dicit Augustinus in epistola contra vincentium donatistam. Non tamen ex hoc aliquid deperit sacrae Scripturae, quia nihil sub spirituali sensu continetur fidei necessarium, quod Scriptura per litteralem sensum alicubi manifeste non tradat." (*Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.10 ad1).

It should be noted that these statements are not attempts to deny that the spiritual senses are proper Biblical senses. For Aquinas, the spiritual senses are divine senses intended by God for the strengthening of faith and of the Christian life.<sup>30</sup> It is true that St Thomas took part, together with Hugh of Saint Victor and others, in a reaction to the overly arbitrary and universal use of the spiritual meaning.<sup>31</sup> However, it does not appear that it was St Thomas's intention to deny it doctrinal value or moral teaching, leaving it only for preaching, moral building or piety. It is sufficient to think of the doctrinal use that St Thomas makes of spiritual senses in the treatise on Old Law in the *Summa Theologiae* (I.II q. 98–105), and of the commentaries on the Gospels of St Matthew and St John. The tendency to forget the value of revelation of the spiritual senses is further emphasized by the rise of nominalism with its more logicist conception of theology.

In conclusion, St Thomas recognises as true senses, intended by God, the literal and the spiritual senses of Scripture, and distinguishes them by the means they signify: the literal sense, from the letter to the reality, and the spiritual senses, from the reality given by the letter to another reality. Furthermore, he bases the latter on the former because the literal sense is the most connatural sense to man, the one which unambiguously contains what is necessary for salvation, and which opens knowledge of the spiritual senses and makes it clear.

### 1.3. The literal sense of the New Testament

If, from what has been said, the literal sense is the first sense that God intended to communicate to man, and the one which opens the spiritual senses, the literal sense of the New Testament is the sense that, above all, God wanted to communicate, as it contains the fullness of revelation and thus opens true understanding of the literal meaning of all Scripture, and of its spiritual senses. Let us now look at this.

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<sup>30</sup> *Quodlibet* VII q.6 a.3: “Veritas autem quam sacra Scriptura per figuras rerum tradit, ad duo ordinatur: scilicet ad recte credendum, et ad recte operandum”.

<sup>31</sup> Hugo de San Víctor rescued the allegory from the almost universal, arbitrary meaning into which the allegorism of antiquity had placed it, a situation reaffirmed by Carolingian theology, to place it in a framework of the story of salvation. St Thomas took the same line: “Certes les événements et les choses signifient, mais en tant que contenu dans une trame historique dont on ne peut les abstraire pour les traiter à coup de tropes littéraires ou naturalistes” (M.D. Chenu, “Théologie symbolique et exégèse scolastique aux XIIe-XIIIe siècles”, en: E. de Moreau [ed.] *Mélanges Joseph de Ghellinck* II [Gembloux 1951] 521).

St Thomas recognises that God made known the content of His revelation progressively,<sup>32</sup> and that this content reached its fullness in Jesus Christ and his Apostles. The fullness of this content is measured by Aquinas with respect to the purpose of the revelation: to lead man to beatitude.<sup>33</sup> And thus, in Jesus Christ God had made known explicitly the purpose to which he wishes to lead man, which is the knowledge of his intimate mystery, that is, the mystery of the Holy Trinity, and the path that truly leads to it, that is, the mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>34</sup> In nature, God had left the possibility of knowing that knowledge of God was the purpose of man, and of ordering ourselves to Him by faith in Divine Providence, but without revealing the true content of this purpose, nor the path truly leads to it.<sup>35</sup> In the Old Testament, God had revealed imperfectly to Israel the end to which he wished to lead it, and had shown a path that did not truly lead to salvation, but only to the preparation, prophecy and figure of the true way.<sup>36</sup>

The depositaries of this full revelation are the Apostles.<sup>37</sup> St Thomas considers that they had the greatest explicit knowledge of the full revelation, so that, as *maiores* they could transmit it to the whole Church.<sup>38</sup> The faith of the Church

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<sup>32</sup> The Aquinate presents the progressive character of revelation mainly when addressing the virtue of faith and prophecy. The *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.1 a.7 ad 2 says: “Ad secundum dicendum quod profectus cognitionis dupliciter contingit. Uno modo, ex parte docentis, qui in cognitione proficit, sive unus sive plures, per temporum successionem. Et ista est ratio augmenti in scientiis per rationem humanam inventis. Alio modo, ex parte addiscentis, sicut magister qui novit totam artem non statim a principio tradit eam discipulo, quia capere non posset, sed paulatim, condendens eius capacitati. Et hac ratione profecerunt homines in cognitione fidei per temporum successionem. Unde apostolus, ad Gal. III, *comparat statum veteris testamenti pueritiae*”. Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.174 a.6; *De Ver* q.12 a.14 ad1.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.1; II.II q.1 a.8; q.2 a.5-8.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.1 a.8; q.2 a.5-8.

<sup>35</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.2 a.7 ad3: “Si qui salvati fuerunt quibus revelatio non fuit facta, non fuerunt salvati absque fide mediatoris. Quia etsi non habuerunt fidem explicitam, habuerunt tamen fidem implicitam in divina providentia, credentes Deum esse liberatorem hominum secundum modos sibi placitos et secundum quod aliquibus veritatem cognoscentibus ipse revelasset”. This content serves the gentiles as an implicit theological faith that guides them to eternal life.

<sup>36</sup> St Thomas shows this idea when comparing the New Law with the Old Law. The Old Law leads to the blessed state only insofar as it was a figure of the New Law. The New Law, on the other hand, truly guides one to it. Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I.II q.106–107.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *In I Cor* cap.3 lec.2 (152); *In Rom*, cap.8 lec.5 (678).

<sup>38</sup> St Thomas states as linked to faith not only that the Apostles received full revelation (that which truly leads to salvation), but that they possessed it in the most explicit manner

depends on this knowledge.<sup>39</sup> It is not they know all the determinations of its content, but rather that they have this full knowledge in a more intimate and universal “word”.<sup>40</sup>

The content of this revelation offered to man in Christ and in the Apostles, God has transmitted to us through the New Testament, and more specifically through the literal sense of the New Testament, which contains what is necessary for salvation.

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possible (*Summa Theologiae* I.II q.106 a.4: “Non est autem expectandum quod sit aliquis satatus futurs in quo perfectius gratia Spiritus Sancti habeatur quam hactenus habita fuerit, maxime ab Apostolis, qui *primitias Spiritus* acceperunt, idest est, *et tempore prius et ceteris abundantius*, ut *Glossa dicit Rom 8*”; *In Rom* cap. 8 lec.5 (678). To describe this dependency of knowledge of the content of revelation of some with respect to others, even in the bosom of the Church, St Thomas uses the concepts of *maiores* and *minores* (cf. *Summa Theologiae* II.II. q.2 a.5) and it is explained through the law of mediations (cf. *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.3 a.6).

<sup>39</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I q.1 a.5 ad 2: “Innititur enim fides *nostra revelationi Apostolis et prophetis factae*, qui canonicos libros scripserunt, non autem revelationi, si qua fuit aliis doctoribus facta”; *Super Symbolum Apostolorum* art.9: “Circa quartum sciendum est, quod ecclesia est firma. Domus autem dicitur firma, primo si habet bona fundamenta. Fundamentum autem Ecclesiae principale est Christus. Apostolus, I cor. III, 11: fundamentum aliud nemo potest ponere praeter id quod positum est, quod est Christus Iesus. Secundarium vero fundamentum sunt apostoli, et eorum doctrina”.

<sup>40</sup> In the following text, St Thomas gives a synthetic explanation of the transmission of the highest Apostolic knowledge of revelation through Scripture. *In div Nom* cap. 3 (251): “Quia ergo ista ita sunt, ideo nos *determinamus* praedictum librum esse *magistrum perfectarum* considerationum, non aptum quibuscumque, sed his tantum qui sua capacitate multitudinem excedunt, ita quod ille liber habet quamdam secundam auctoritatem ab eloquiis Scripturae canonicae, cui nulla auctoritas adaequari potest; ita quod verba illius libri consequenter se habent ad verba *christorum Dei*, idest ad verba sanctorum Apostolorum, qui dicuntur Christi, propter plenitudinem spiritualis gratiae et propter sacerdotii dignitatem. Et sic cum ille liber tam altus conveniat tantum perfectis, nos secundum nostram proportionem trademus divina his qui sunt secundum nos, idest imperfectis, nobis similibus. [...] Considerandum est autem quod quanto aliquis intellectus est altior et perfectior, tanto plura in uno potest comprehendere. Infirmitas autem intellectus requirit ut singula singulariter explicentur. Et ideo doctrinam Hierothei, in paucis multa comprehendentem, dixit perfectam”. Other texts explaining the perfection of knowledge of the most intimate and universal word: for intimate: cf. *Summa Theologiae* I q.27 a.1 ad 2; *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.6 a. 1; for universal: *In div Nom* cap. 3 (251): “Considerandum est autem quod quanto aliquis intellectus est altior et perfectior, tanto plura in uno potest comprehendere”. For the angels: cf. *Summa Theologiae* I q.57 a.2. For man: *Summa Theologiae* I q.89 a.2: “Quod aequaliter apparet in hominibus, nam qui sunt debilioris intellectus, per universales conceptiones magis intelligentium non accipiunt perfectam cognitionem, nisi eis singula in speciali explicentur”. Also cf. *Summa Theologiae* I q.85 a.7.

The principles mentioned have a second consequence: as the fullness of the revelation of the New Testament is that which shows us the purpose God wishes to lead us to, and the true path that guides us to it, it follows that knowledge of it is what allows us to understand that natural teaching and the Old Law do not show the purpose to which we are called, nor do they offer the true path leading to it. Thus, we understand that natural economy and the Old Law are not two definitive teachings, but only preparations or figures of the true purpose and path to salvation. It is undoubtedly necessary to have prior knowledge of the natural truths and the truths of the Old Law to be able to accept the full revelation of the New Testament. But the Old Testament and the natural economy are only given their true value in the light of this full revelation. For these reasons the literal sense of the New Testament, by transmitting to us the fullness of revelation, opens true understanding of the literal meaning of the Old Testament (and even of the natural economy of salvation).

For our research, it is useful to point out a third consequence deriving from these principles: the substantial identity in the literal sense of the New Testament between the literal meaning of the divine author and that of the human author. If God wanted revelation to guide man to beatitude and the Apostles possess the knowledge that truly leads to beatitude, it must be understood that whether expressed orally or in writing there is little difference between what they meant and what God meant to say through their words. This claim may be extended to the authors of the New Testament, since the hagiographer shares this Apostolic knowledge, either through being an Apostle, or by receiving it from them to communicate to the Church.

#### **1.4. Conclusion**

St Thomas understands, then, that the sense of Scripture is primarily the meaning of the divine author, and secondarily the meaning of the human author. This is true of both the literal and spiritual meanings. The reason for this is that God is the main author of Scripture and the hagiographer the instrumental cause, and any effect is primarily attributable to the primary cause, and secondarily to the instrumental cause. Furthermore, the hagiographer acts as a deficient instrument, as he does not fully know the content of the revelation that God transmits through his words.

The literal sense, on the other hand, is that by which God intends to transmit the content of revelation. This sense would give man knowledge of the essentials of revelation and would open the spiritual senses which offer a richer communication of his Word.

The literal sense of the New Testament is that sense in which God offers man the full revelation received from the Apostles, allowing him to understand the true saving value of the Old Testament and the natural order. In this literal sense of the New Testament there is also an identity between the content that God wishes to transmit to us and that which the human authors expressed with their words.

For our research, it is important to underline the conclusions that, for St Thomas in the literal sense of the New Testament, understood as the sense of the divine author, God offers man the key to that allows him access to full revelation and to the meaning of Scripture as a whole. This, then, is the sense that the interpreter should seek to achieve understanding and to truly understand Scripture.

## 2. The spiritual understanding of the literal sense

So far, we have spoken of the sense of Scripture, that is, about what the author of Scripture wants to communicate. We shall now speak of understanding, that is, what the reader or interpreter should understand when reading Scripture. This understanding will be true, when it reaches what the author wishes to communicate, in this case, the divine word.

In this section, we want to show that, for Aquinas, the reader or interpreter reaches true understanding of Scripture to the extent that it is a “spiritual” understanding. And as the literal sense of the New Testament is the fullness of revelation and the key that opens the rest of Scripture, the interpreter will achieve understanding of Scripture insofar as he achieves spiritual understanding of the literal meaning of the New Testament.

To better understand what St Thomas means by spiritual understanding of Scripture, we should first consider what interpretation is (2.1.) and what is the process of interpretation, focusing on the *hermeneutic leap*<sup>41</sup> through which spiritual understanding is achieved, particularly of the literal meaning of the New Testament (2.2.). In what follows, we shall consider whether this teaching

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<sup>41</sup> I borrow from G. Dahan this expression to describe the passage from the letter to the spirit. G. Dahan, *Lire la Bible au Moyen âge. Essais d'herméneutique médiévale*, (Genève 2009) 18: “J’ai tenté de montrer que ces quatre sens n’étaient peut-être pas la meilleure clé pour pénétrer dans l’exégèse médiévale et que mieux valait revenir à l’opposition ancienne lettre / esprit, où deux ensembles d’égale richesse se font face et où, surtout, apparaît mieux toute l’importance du passage de la lettre à l’esprit, ce que j’appelle le “saut herméneutique”

of Aquinas can help to overcome the confusion of the literal and the spiritual senses of Scripture.

## 2.1. The Interpretation of Holy Scripture

Interpretation is a process which takes the reader from the letter to the meaning. In interpreting Scripture, the interpreter starts with convictions which allow him to recognise the nature of the book before him. He then begins a search for the literal sense of Scripture, and primarily the literal meaning of the New Testament. To achieve this, it is necessary to overcome a number of difficulties that may prevent him from doing so. Among others, St Thomas mentions the difficulty of the height of supernatural mysteries. Overcoming this obstacle is what allows true understanding of Scripture, the “spiritual” understanding, to be achieved, rather than retaining a deformed or insufficient understanding, called “carnal” or “literal”.

Following these steps closely with St Thomas we can better understand what spiritual understanding of Scripture is, and its importance in avoiding confusion about the spiritual and literal senses of Scripture, and the consequences of this.

### 2.1.1. The interpretation of Scripture: from the letter to the meaning

Biblical interpretation is part of man’s acceptance of the Word of God received through Scripture. This acceptance is a process that takes place in three stages: from the letter to the meaning, from the meaning to the truth, and from the truth to the loved truth.<sup>42</sup>

- In the first place, *the passage from letter to its meaning*. The “*homo viator*” receives into his senses the outward sign of the letter of Scripture. This outward sign may be written or read by a voice. From this sign man begins to understand what God wants to communicate to him through the text, which is precisely its meaning.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> This description depends on the conception of St Thomas as to knowledge and human language. St Thomas explains it mainly with regard to knowledge: *Summa Theologiae* I q.79-88 y *De Veritate* q.10; with respect to language: cf. *Expositio Peryermeneias*.

<sup>43</sup> When speaking of the literal sense in St Thomas, we have not deal with the dimensions of this literal sense, which are *littera, sensus et sententia*. We have done this to avoid distracting from the basic argument. The *littera* is the text in the most material sense, and the sense which arises from the text in its grammatical, linguistic and literary connections. The *sensus* is the meaning that statements have in its historical context. While the *sententia* is the doctrine that the text intends to communicate. In Scripture, there are statements (e.g.

- The process of receiving Scripture does not end with the understanding of Scripture, as it is necessary to take a further step: *from meaning to truth*. The recipient knows what Scripture says, but does not know whether that is true. Now he must know fully, understanding it as true.
- Finally, this truth must become for the “homo viator” into a principle of supernatural life, the beginning of eternal life and the means to attain it. For this reason, this knowledge must be *verbum spirans amorem*, which resembles us to the Word, and gives us up to the Divine Persons.<sup>44</sup> The revelation, whose ultimate goal is our beatitude, will not be properly accepted by knowledge that does not transform a man in his affects, and will not be a principle to act by.

Of the three steps by which man accepts the Word of God transmitted by Scripture, *interpretation* is the first, the passage from text to its meaning.

### 2.1.2. The process of interpretation

If the interpretation of Scripture is the passage from letter to meaning, the Word of God, how then does this process work? And what actions should be performed?

#### a) Three fundamental convictions of the interpreter

The interpreter should start out with three prior convictions, which may be implicit, and will place him appropriately before Scripture to begin the work of interpretation.

- Firstly, the interpreter starts with the conviction that human knowledge is able to reach a proper understanding of revelation, and that human language is able to transmit it. Without this conviction, there could be no expectation that Scripture can communicate proper and new truths about the mystery of God and of salvation, nor that could transmit them.

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Abraham had two sons) made with respect to others (e.g. God’s path to salvation) and these are ordered, ultimately, to present the mystery of God and his plan of salvation for man, the purpose of the whole of Scripture (cf. *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.1 a.6 ad1). This is why H. de Lubac says, speaking of the literal sense of the Angelicum, that: “le sens “littéral” auquel il se tient dans ce commentaire n’est pas tout à fait celui de l’exégèse moderne: c’est celui d’une étude doctrinale et théologique” (De Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* II/2 [Lyon 1962] 298). Thus, *littera, sensus et sententia* are three levels of literal meaning, through which the interpreter is shown the true meaning present in the *sententia*. Cf. G. Dahan, “Les quatre sens de l’Écriture dans l’exégèse médiévale”, 240–241).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I q.43 a.5 ad 2.

- Secondly, the interpreter recognises that he is before the Word of God revealed to man and transmitted in a set of books that have God as their author and which have unity because of the divine authorship, and the unique divine design of revelation and salvation. Without this, the interpreter will be unaware, not only of the divine authorship, but also of the truth and holiness underwritten by the divine authorship, of its saving sense which finds completion in Jesus Christ and of the extra meaning found in its words, in both literal and spiritual senses.
- Thirdly, the interpreter recognises that Scripture has been transmitted in the context of the Church. Revelation has reached us through Scripture and the "preachers" of the faith, in the language of St Thomas.<sup>45</sup> These preachers (the Fathers, the doctors of the Church, popes and Councils, theologians, saints, heads of families, etc.), moved by the Holy Spirit which gives life to the Church, transmit the content of revelation and are its interpreters, each in accordance with his own role.<sup>46</sup>

b) The search for the literal sense which opens the spiritual senses and the search for the literal sense of the NT

From three convictions, the interpreter begins his search for meaning in Scripture. Firstly, of the literal sense of Scripture, because, as we have seen, this is the first sense intended by God, and it opens the spiritual senses. And above all, the interpreter tends to reveal the literal sense of the New Testament because it contains the completion of that message that God wishes to communicate to man for his salvation, and thus allows the true meaning of all Scripture to be arrived at.

c) Difficulties to be overcome

In this access to the meaning of Scripture, and more specifically to the literal meaning of the New Testament, the interpreter encounters a number of difficulties that must be overcome.<sup>47</sup> St Thomas sets them out in a text in this way:

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.6 a.1.

<sup>46</sup> To see these statements of St Thomas and the textual references: cf. E. Ménard, *La tradition. Révélation-Écriture-Église selon Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Bruges – Paris 1964).

<sup>47</sup> St Thomas dealt with the difficulties to be overcome in interpreting Scripture primarily in three texts: in the *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.1 a.9 ad1 when dealing with the object of faith *Summa Theologiae* II.II q.176 a.2 ad 4 when dealing with the charism of interpretation; and in the prologue to the commentary on the Lamentations of Jeremiah, *In Threnos Ieremiam*, pr.

Ad primum ergo dicendum quod veritas fidei in sacra Scriptura diffuse continetur et variis modis, et in quibusdam obscure; [...] <sup>48</sup>

Detailing, in another text, the reasons for this obscurity, St Thomas says:

Ad quartum dicendum quod interpretatio sermonum potest reduci ad donum prophetiae, inquantum scilicet mens illuminatur ad intelligendum et exponendum quaecumque sunt in sermonibus obscura, sive propter difficultatem rerum significatarum, sive etiam propter ipsas voces ignotas quae proferuntur, sive etiam propter similitudines rerum adhibitas; secundum illud Dan. V, audivi de te quod possis obscura interpretari et ligata dissolvere. <sup>49</sup>

Reducing the various obstacles or obscurities by avoiding repetition, we see that St Thomas offers four:

- Ignorance of words or expressions, through ignorance of the language, or because they are used mainly by the educated.
- The dispersion of the content of revelation throughout Scripture, whether over its length or because the truth properly revealed are made manifest through many other truths ordered to reveal those that truly lead to eternal life.
- The variety of types of expression (narrative, exhortative, figurative or with a multiplicity of senses...), underlining the difficulties inherent in figurative language.
- The height of the mysteries described in Scripture.

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<sup>48</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II.II q. 1 a. 9 ad 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II.II q. 176 a. 2 ad 4. He says the same in the prologue to the book of the Lamentations of Jeremiah, adding the difficulty of educated language, *In Threnos Ieremiam*, pr.: “In modo ostenditur difficultas; unde sequitur: *in qua erat liber involutus*. Est idem iste liber involutus ornatu verborum: unde et metricis descriptus, et rethoricis est ornamentis coloratus. Prover. 15: lingua sapientum ornat scientiam. Est etiam involutus profunditate mysteriorum. 1 Corinth. 13: spiritus enim loquitur mysteria. Et apostolis dicitur in persona omnium qui sacras Scripturas ediderunt: vobis datum est nosse mysterium regni Dei. Matth. 13. Est etiam involutus varietate similitudinum, sicut et ceteri prophetarum libri. Proverb. 1: animadvertet parabolam et interpretationem, verba sapientum, et aenigmata eorum. Osee 12: ego visiones multiplicavi, et in manibus prophetarum assimilatus sum. Et hoc signatum est per tria involumenta quibus vasa sanctuarii involvebantur, Num. 4. Per velum enim quod diversis coloribus, et pulchra varietate erat distinctum, ut dicitur Exod. 26, significatur diversitas similitudinum. Per pelles, et pallium hyacinthini coloris, significantur caelestia mysteria, quibus quasi impraegnatus est liber iste. Per pallium purpureum significatur ornatus verborum. Haec enim involutio Spiritus Sancti explicatur a sacris expositoribus: quia sacrae Scripturae eodem spiritu sunt expositae quo sunt editae, sicut dicit Augustinus”.

Of these four difficulties, we should focus on the last: the height of the mysteries. This difficulty is the one that requires from the interpreter a hermeneutic leap (the transition from the “letter” to the “spirit”) to achieve spiritual understanding of Scripture. The supernatural mysteries which require a hermeneutic leap are the heart of revelation (the Trinity, the Incarnation, the life of Grace, etc.), since through them man is led to supernatural beatitude, and this is the purpose of revelation. This explains the importance of their understanding for the correct interpretation of Scripture.

To understand what the obstacle of “the height of the mysteries” consists of, we should remember that God has communicated to man, through supernatural revelation, a proper and new knowledge about his intimate mystery, and the path to supernatural beatitude, truths which are beyond the reach of human understanding.<sup>50</sup> But such communication is carried out in human language, that is, using concepts, judgements and reasoning formed by man from his human experience, and taking words to express this knowledge and communicate it to others.

To be able to know and express these realities, which are beyond human experience and beyond the reach of human reason, God has raised this knowledge and human language. This elevation consists of a new and higher use of the analogy of pure concepts, that is, those that express limitless perfection in themselves based on the act of being (be, good, one, live, understand, love, etc.), and in an analogical use of the special concepts of revelation. These concepts are those that in human experience cannot be raised to infinity by analogy, because they have limits within them, but revelation has led us to know that they are concepts that have no limits in themselves. For example, the concept of son. In human experience the concept of son presupposes limits, because it is linked to animal life (angels have no children), and because in the unicity of God there appears to be no room for a father-son duality. However, revelation tells us that in God there is a son and so the concept can be applied to God, understood by analogy as a spiritual procession, where we are assisted by the concept of Logos. And so, by this super-analogy of the pure and special concepts of revelation, God has shown man in a proper and new way His intimate mystery and the path to supernatural beatitude.

As well as offering knowledge of these mysteries via these analogical concepts and judgements, God has consummated his revelation giving man a testimony that is Him who teaches so that man may say that it is true. The right

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<sup>50</sup> All this section has as its principal reference: J.H. Nicolas, *Dieu connu comme inconnu. Essai d'une critique de la connaissance théologique* (Paris 1966). Nicolas gives a profound and detailed presentation of the position of St Thomas Aquinas.

analogical process would allow man to reach understanding of what God has revealed, but he can, however, only say that it is true by the power of divine testimony, since what God reveals is not self-evident to man, nor can it be the fruit of any conclusion.

On the other hand, in Scripture, God has also assumed human verbal language and written to communicate properly His supernatural mysteries. One of the characteristics of this language, noted by Aquinas, is that it can be proper or figurative. Each of these forms has its validity for the transmission of revelation and its dangers. Proper language transmits the mystery of God and of salvation more accurately and without ambiguity, but due to its abstraction it is more difficult for man to grasp its real and specific content, and therefore more difficult for it to cause love. On the other hand, figurative language speaks of the realities expressed through accidental likeness, and so has the danger of reducing the message to the measure of man. Nonetheless, it can give the revealed concepts a greater closeness to man, and so give rise to love more easily.

The difficulty of the height of the mysteries for the interpreter, then, is the following: the interpreter sees the letter of Scripture, which enshrines the supernatural mysteries that God wishes to be understood and are the heart of revelation. To reach them it is necessary to distinguish literal from metaphorical use of the language of revelation, and to carry out correctly the analogical process of the concepts of revelation.

With regard to the first, man distinguishes literal and analogous use thus: he first tries to understand something in its inherent sense, and if he sees that this does not work out, he moves on to the metaphorical level (e.g. if I say that the lions entered the field of play, and I see men, since the men cannot be called lions in the literal sense, I will understand it as a metaphor, recognising in those men the quality of fierceness). In the language of revelation, the danger is twofold. On the one hand, anthropomorphism, i.e. taking the metaphors of God as though they were literal (e.g. imagining the arms of God to be literal). On the other hand, and this is the main danger with respect to the height of the mysteries, believing that what is meant metaphorically is meant literally, because our understanding tends to adapt what is said to the measure of human experience (e.g. interpreting the divine filiation of Jesus not as the transmission of a single divine nature, but as a mere relation of preference shown by God to the man Jesus, believing the former to be impossible).

With regard to the second, man has great difficulty performing the analogical process of the concepts of revelation correctly, as his proportionate horizon is the essences of material things. If man has, for this reason, considerable difficulty in thinking about God, the angels and the spiritual realities of his soul, and does so with some reference to the essence of material things, thinking

analogously of God and the angels, how much more difficult must it be to add to this analogy the super-analogy of the concepts of revelation? Thus, the interpreter has a tendency to reduce the supernatural mysteries to more human measure, closer to his limited horizon. To avoid this the interpreter should take care to carry out correctly the analogical process, following the indications of the language of revelation.<sup>51</sup>

## 2.2. The spiritual understanding of the literal sense

As we have seen, the passage that the interpreter must make from the letter of the text to the meaning presents a basic obstacle in the height of the mysteries of the revelation that it must attain. This is what, together with G. Dahan, we have called the hermeneutic leap: the transition from the “letter” to the “spirit”. If this is not done the interpreter will attain a deformed understanding of Scripture itself.

The patristic theological tradition, inspired by St Paul and St John, has called the true understanding of Scripture “spiritual”, distinguishing it from the false understanding which it calls “literal” or “carnal”. St Thomas also uses this distinction. Let us now look at it.

### 2.2.1. Literal understanding and spiritual understanding

Firstly, St Thomas addresses this matter in his commentary to the second letter to the Corinthians. Commenting on the verse that says “*sed usque in hodiernum diem, cum legitur Moyses, velamen positum est super cor eorum*” (2 Cor 3, 15), he explains that, although the veil over the face of Moses has been removed by the death of Christ, opening the veil of the Temple, and the true path to salvation has been made apparent, in the minds of non-believing Jews the veil remains, owing to a lack faith in Christ, which prevents understanding of Scripture.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> One distinct problem we wish to address is if man with just his natural understanding is able to perform the hermeneutic leap, or whether he needs supernatural help (faith, charity, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the testimony of the Church, etc.). This is dealt with extensively in our doctoral thesis.

<sup>52</sup> *Super II Cor cap.3 lec.2* (108): “Consequenter cum dicit sed usque in hodiernum diem, etc., ostendit quomodo adhuc apud Iudaeos est velamen quantum ad infideles, licet remotum sit per Christum. Circa quod sciendum est, quod velamen dicitur apponi alicui dupliciter: aut quia apponitur rei visae ne possit videri, aut quia apponitur videnti ne videat. Sed Iudaeis in veteri lege utroque modo appositum erat velamen. Nam et corda eorum excaecata erant, ne cognoscerent veritatem propter eorum duritiam, et vetus testamentum

The Lord, in this way, through His death and resurrection and His sending of the Holy Spirit, mysteries which truly lead to salvation, has revealed the true meaning of salvation, which, in the Old Testament, was only presented as preparation, prophecy and figure. The reading of the Old Testament, therefore, reveals in its deepest sense, that is, the spiritual, insofar as the realities of the Old Testament are understood as preparation, prophecy and figuration of Christ, the meaning which truly leads to salvation. The error in the reading of the Jews is precisely to understand the realities of the Old Testament not as figures, but as truth, in the sense of a true and definitive path leading to salvation.<sup>53</sup>

Though it is the case that in Christ the true reality that leads to salvation has been objectively revealed, faith is still needed from each follower of Christ in order to understand the meaning of Scripture spiritually. Commenting on the quoted text, St Thomas thus said:

Unde in signum huius velamen erat in facie Moysi et non in faciebus eorum, sed, veniente Christo, velamen remotum est a facie Moysi, id est a veteri testamento, quia iam impletum est, sed tamen non est remotum a cordibus eorum.

Therefore, the literal understanding of the Old Testament is a reading that takes the realities of the Old Testament as definitive with respect to salvation, and does not value them as preparation, prophet or figuration of Christ,<sup>54</sup> the One who truly leads to salvation. In this sense, only admittance to the mystery of Christ leads to spiritual understanding of the Old Testament.<sup>55</sup>

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nondum completum erat, quia nondum veritas venerat. Unde in signum huius velamen erat in facie Moysi et non in faciebus eorum, sed, veniente Christo, velamen remotum est a facie Moysi, id est a veteri testamento, quia iam impletum est, sed tamen non est remotum a cordibus eorum. Et hoc est quod dicit sed usque in hodiernum diem, quasi dicat: amotum est a fidelibus veteris testamenti velamen, sed adhuc cum legitur Moyses, id est, cum exponitur eis vetus testamentum, act. cap.XV, 21: Moyses a temporibus antiquis habet in singulis civitatibus, qui eum praedicit in synagogis, etc., velamen, id est caecitas, est positum super cor eorum. Rom. XI, 25: caecitas ex parte contigit, etc.”

<sup>53</sup> *Super II Cor cap.3 lec.2 (107)*: “Sed idipsum velamen, quod erat in veteri testamento, antequam velum templi scissum esset in lectione veteris testamenti, quia non aliter intelligunt illud, quam ante, quia adhuc innituntur figuris, ut veritatem non revelent, id est non intelligunt: sic velamen Dei, non figuram, sed veritatem credunt, quod scilicet evacuat quantum ad fideles, et quantum in se est omnibus per Christum, id est in fide Christi, sed in eis non manet, quia non credunt venisse Christum”.

<sup>54</sup> These relations are presented systematically by the Aquinate in treatises on the *Summa Theologiae* about the Old Law (I.II q. 98 – 105) and the New Law (106 – 108).

<sup>55</sup> St Thomas also considers that the reason the Jews have not accepted Christ is their „carnality”, which prevents them from rising above the level of the „letter” of Scripture, subject to the human way of judging the same revelation of God both in the Old and the

### 2.2.2. Carnal understanding and spiritual understanding

Secondly, St Thomas also distinguishes between spiritual understanding of the mysteries from their carnal understanding. St Thomas, commenting on the text of 1 Cor 2, 14 (“*Animalis homo non percipit quae sunt Spiritus Dei*”) explains that the carnal man is bound by the beginning of his knowledge of the senses, and by his affection of bodily and human goods, and so is closed to knowledge and love of spiritual and supernatural goods.<sup>56</sup> It is not that the carnal man, with respect to his knowledge, cannot raise himself beyond the senses because he only learns with them and not with his understanding, but because he cannot overcome the weight of the proportionate horizon to man, to the essences of material things, and raise himself beyond it, by spiritual analogy and supernatural analogy. Aquinas, therefore, says that the animal man conceives of God in accordance with the imagination of bodily things (*iuxta corporum phantasiam*), that is, without overcoming anthropomorphism; or according to the letter of the Old Law, (*iuxta legis litteram*), not conceiving it from the mystery of Christ with the spiritual sense of the Law and salvation or according philosophical reason (*iuxta rationem philosophicam*), that is, from human reason closed to the supernatural.

Therefore, spiritual understanding is which has the interpreter that understands properly the words that reveal the mystery of God and His deepest mysteries. The transition towards them involves, with respect to knowledge, a purification of the concepts and images. This purification is carried out, as we have said, through the analogical process of concepts and judgements, which allows the interpreter to know correctly the spiritual and supernatural realities communicated to us by Scripture. In the absence of this intellectual process it will not be possible to gain entry to the truth that God reveals to us, and we will reinterpret the words of revelation, giving them mere metaphorical force, thereby reducing them to a carnal or purely human viewpoint.

Let us look at a very significant text. St Thomas commenting on Jn 16, 25 (*Haec in proverbii locutus sum vobis; venit hora cum iam non in proverbiss loquar vobis, sed palam de Patre annuntiabo vobis*) describes this spiritual understanding and the process followed by the Apostles in going from a carnal

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New Testament (cf. *Super II Cor* cap. 3 lec. 2 [107]). Thus, even though in this section we have underlined the importance of literal intelligence of Scripture (which does not attain the mystery of Christ and takes as definitive the institutions of the Old Testament), this is also, for Aquinas, analogically a carnal intelligence.

<sup>56</sup> *In I Co* cap. 3 lec. 1 (130).

understanding, which led them to interpret the words referring to the spiritual realities as metaphors, to a spiritual understanding:

Differentia enim haec est inter spiritualem et animalem virum: quia animalis homo verba spiritualia accipit ut proverbialiter,<sup>57</sup> non quod proverbialiter sint dicta, sed quia mens eius supra corporalia elevari non valens, sunt ei obscura; I Cor. II, 14: *animalis homo non percipit ea quae sunt Spiritus dei*. Spiritualis autem homo accipit spiritualia ut spiritualia. Discipuli autem a principio quasi animales erant, et quae dicebantur eis, obscura erant et sicut proverbialiter; sed postmodum a Christo spirituales effecti et per Spiritum Sanctum edocti, spiritualia aperte capiebant.<sup>58</sup>

This spiritual understanding of the Apostles to the words of Jesus is the same as that required by the interpreter when approaching the literal sense of Scripture, and especially the literal sense of the New Testament, the hermeneutic key to all of Scripture.

### 2.2.3. A deeper spiritual understanding

Within spiritual understanding, the Aquinate distinguishes between a first understanding and a deeper understanding. St Thomas deals implicitly with this subject when he comments on the text of 1 Co 2,6 (“*Sapientiam autem loquimur inter perfectos*”). The doctrine spoken among the perfect is the same saving doctrine for all, but known more fully. Let us recall the commentary of the Aquinate:

Dicit ergo: apud vos solum Christum Crucifixum praedicavi, sapientiam autem, id est profundam doctrinam, loquimur inter perfectos.<sup>59</sup>

This more profound doctrine consists above all in a greater knowledge of the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and of its participation to ourselves:

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<sup>57</sup> Clarifying the sense of *proverbialiter* St Thomas says previously: “Proverbium proprie dicitur quod communiter est in ore omnium, sicut illud Prov. cap. XXII, 6: *adolescens iuxta viam suam, etiam cum sensuerit non recedet ab ea*. Sed quia haec quandoque obscura sunt et metaphorica, inde est quod proverbium quandoque sumitur pro parabola, in qua aliud dicitur, aliud signatur. Et hoc modo accipitur hic proverbium pro parabola, id est pro parabolica locutione” (*In Io* cap. 16 lec. 7 [2148]).

<sup>58</sup> *In Io* cap. 16 lec. 7 (2152).,

<sup>59</sup> *In I Cor* cap. 2 lec. 1 (81).

In Christo autem Iesu, ut dicitur Col. II, 3, sunt *omnes thesauri sapientiae et scientiae dei absconditi*, et quantum ad plenitudinem deitatis et quantum ad plenitudinem sapientiae et gratiae, et etiam quantum ad profundas incarnationis rationes, quae tamen Apostolus eis non annuntiavit sed solum ea quae erant manifestiora et inferiora in Christo Iesu. Et ideo subdit et *hunc crucifixum*, quasi dicat: sic vobis me exhibui ac si nihil aliud scirem quam crucem Christi. Unde Gal. Ult. Dicit: *mihi absit gloriari, nisi in cruce Domini nostri Iesu Christi*.<sup>60</sup>

As we see in the text, this understanding of the Trinity and of the mysteries of the Incarnation and its participation to us, is developed by a deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ, God and man. It is precisely this knowledge of the profundity of God that allows man to judge as do the wise from the final cause, uniting the content of the revelation.

### 2.3. Conclusion

We have seen, therefore, that for St. Thomas the interpretation of Scripture is the passage from the letter to the meaning, thus attaining understanding of the Word that God communicates to us. And so, the interpreter stems from a few basic convictions, which place him before the Word that God transmits to him via Scripture and the Church. From that point, the interpreter begins a search, firstly for the literal sense of Scripture, which will open for him the understanding of spiritual senses. In particular, the interpreter must attain the literal sense of the New Testament, which will allow him to understand the fullness of revelation and to read the rest of Scripture appropriately.

To attain this understanding, the Aquinate considers that the interpreter must overcome a series of difficulties including ignorance of language, variety of forms of expression, dispersal of content and the height of the mysteries transmitted by Scripture. This final difficulty is the one that requires the interpreter to correctly move from the “letter” to the “spirit”. True understanding of the supernatural mysteries can only be achieved in this manner. These myster-

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<sup>60</sup> *In I Cor* cap. 2 lec. 1 (75). Look at the statement of the Aquinate on its relevance to us: “Et ne credatur revera verbum crucis stultitiam continere, subdit *his autem qui salvi fiunt*, id est nobis, scilicet Christi fidelibus qui ab eo salvamur, secundum illud Matth. cap. I, 21: *ipse enim salvum faciet populum suum a peccatis eorum, virtus Dei est*, quia ipsi in cruce Christi mortem Dei cognoscunt, qua diabolus vicit et mundum. Apoc. V, 5: *ecce vicit leo de tribu Iuda*. Item virtutem quam in seipsis experiuntur, dum simul cum Christo vitiis et concupiscentiis moriuntur, secundum illud Gal. V, 24: *qui Christi sunt, carnem suam crucifixerunt cum vitiis et concupiscentiis*. Unde in Ps. CIX, 2 dicitur *virgam virtutis tuae emittit Dominus ex Sion*. Lc. VI, 19: *virtus de illo exibat et sanabat omnes*” (*In I Cor* cap. 1 lec. 3 [47]).

ies are the ones that order and lead man to beatitude, and are, therefore, the end of God's revelation and the hermeneutic key to Scripture.

St Thomas, like St Paul and St John and the patristic and mediaeval tradition, has called this true understanding of Scripture spiritual understanding, to distinguish it from the false understanding he calls literal and carnal. This understanding is acquired by accessing the mystery of Christ, fullness of revelation and key to Scripture, which requires the correct distinction between the proper and metaphorical use of words in Scripture, and above all, the correct analogical process for the concepts and judgements of the revelation. Such understanding on the part of the interpreter, furthermore, may be perfected according to whether he acquires a deeper understanding of these mysteries and reads through them the rest of revelation.

### 3. Conclusion

So far, we have presented the two contributions of the doctrine of St Thomas: the literal sense of Scripture as the sense of the divine author, and the spiritual understanding of the literal sense. They can illuminate contemporary Biblical hermeneutics to clarify the confusion about the literal and spiritual sense of Scripture, and avoid the consequences we pointed out at the beginning: the confusion about which sense of Scripture the interpreter should seek, and the considerable distance between what is transmitted by the literal sense, and what by the "spiritual". Let us show this.

#### 3.1. The literal sense of Scripture as the sense of the divine author

In contemporary Biblical hermeneutics, the literal sense is the sense intended by the human author according to the specific perspective of his time. To see this, we may take R.E. Brown as a paradigmatic example of contemporary Catholic Biblical hermeneutics in the historical-critical tradition

R. Brown defines the literal meaning in this way: "the sense which the human author directly intended and which the written words conveyed".<sup>61</sup> In his explanation of the definition he stresses that this is the meaning intended by the human author when writing from his own perspective referring to specific

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<sup>61</sup> R.E. Brown, "Hermenéutics" in: R. E. Brown – S. M. Schneiders, "Hermenéutics" in: *NJBC* (Englewood Cliffs 1990) 1148. Also, cf. Id., *An introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York 1994) 39.

readers.<sup>62</sup> With respect to this suggestion. Brown himself is aware that determining the human author who has written the text is not as straightforward as it may seem: who is the author of the text, the original writer, or the reviewer or editor, when there may even be a long period of time between them?<sup>63</sup> Brown states, reasonably, that the search for a literal sense covers both the original meaning of the sections before revision, and the meaning of the book after the revision.

Beyond the literal sense of Scripture there are other senses which Brown calls “more-than-literal senses”.<sup>64</sup> The more-than-literal senses are, for Brown, fruit of a triple process:

- The first sense stems from the value of meaning added to all great works by later readers in a dialogue between text and reader. Brown relates this meaning with the new hermeneutics, the new literary criticism and other forms of exegesis.
- A second sense comes from the integration of each work in the Biblical canon. Brown relates this meaning to canonical criticism (mainly that of Sanders).
- A third sense is fruit of the development of the Church in understanding of Scripture guided by the Holy Spirit. Referring to this sense, Brown includes also the canonical criticism (above all that of Childs), the Christian vision of the Old Testament, and above all the reading of the Church (Magisterium, the Fathers of the Church, etc).

As we see, Brown has not included in the literal sense the meaning acquired by each book when included in the canon and read in the Church by the Fathers, the Magisterium and the Christian faithful. This position is based mainly on two things:

- It depends on the conception of literal sense in Scripture as a sense exclusively of the human author, and not mainly of the divine author.
- Furthermore, it is based on his position with respect to knowledge of the mediators of revelation (prophets, Apostles and Christ Himself) as limited by the possibilities of a person of his time. In this way, the meaning deriving from integration into the canon and, above all, the meaning expressed by the Church in its reading and teaching go be-

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Brown, “Hermeneutics”, 1148–1149.

<sup>63</sup> Brown, “Hermeneutics”, 1148: „An intelligent debate centers on on how to apply „author” in discussing books where two figures, the substantial writer and the redactor/ editor, were separated by a considerable distance of time and/or outlook”.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Brown, “Hermeneutics”, 1153–1162.

yond what they originally meant. (e.g. on the institution of the Eucharist or the priesthood<sup>65</sup>).

This distinction between the literal and supraliteral senses leads to the two consequences of which we have spoken previously: what is the meaning that the interpreter should seek as the true meaning of the text, what Scripture meant, or what it means today in the Church? And how to accept what Scripture means today when it is far removed from what it once meant?

The conception of the literal sense of St Thomas Aquinas as the sense mainly intended by the divine author would allow these consequences to be overcome. For two reasons:

- Firstly, if we recognise that Scripture is the Word of God, it is logical to accept that the literal sense of Scripture, that is the meaning of the words, is mainly a divine sense. With this perspective, it is possible to combine the several human collaborators (author, redactor, editor, ...) and several processes that provide richness of meaning to the first sense of the human author (rereading, gathering together with other books of Scripture, establishing a canon). These would all be unified by the motion and elevation of the divine author who guides these writings so that they mean what He intends to transmit through them. Although St Thomas did not know in such richness of detail the processes by which Scripture was formed, but he does offer us a doctrinal framework within which they can be suitably combined.
- Secondly, if the literal meaning is mainly the meaning of the divine author and instrumentally of the human author, it is possible to explain why there is extra meaning which the human author, above all in the Old Testament, does not manage to attain, but which can be perceived in the light of full revelation, that is, in the New Testament. So, reading the Old Testament from the fullness of the New, is not a new meaning, beyond the text, but its true meaning.

On the other hand, the literal meaning of Scripture as the meaning of the divine author would make it easier to conceive properly the elevation of knowledge of revelation that Scripture communicates and its coincidence with what

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<sup>65</sup> R.E. Brown, *Historical critical Exegesis and Church doctrine*, (Eugene Or. 1985) 48: "One would *not* need to think that, as Jesus reclined at that meal, he had clearly thought out the continuing eucharists of the church and those who would preside at them. In my judgment, such a view in no way weakens the validity of the dogma of Trent (DH 1752) that "Christ" established the apostles as priests with the words "Do this in commemoration of me". It simply demands nuance: namely, that establishment by Christ involves looking at what Jesus did historically on the night before he died in the light of Christology, liturgy, and ecclesiology of the next 100 years which interpreted the original action and words".

the Church teaches. The reason for this is that it would allow Scripture to be understood as the fruit of a joint action between God and the hagiographer. We say only that “it would make it easier”, because such a conception of the elevation of knowledge of the Apostles and the hagiographers depends more on the concept of prophecy and of supernatural inspiration in which God intervenes to illuminate human intelligence and make known the supernatural mysteries, and also of a conception of the perfection of knowledge as more intimate and universal. This would allow us to recognize that the Apostles possess the fuller knowledge of the supernatural mysteries of revelation.

### 3.2. Spiritual understanding of the literal meaning of Scripture

As we have seen, the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, presents the literal sense as “the sense expressed directly by the inspired human authors”.<sup>66</sup> It then defines the spiritual sense of Scripture as “the sense expressed by the Biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit in the context of the Pascual Mystery of Christ and of the new life he brings”.<sup>67</sup> This is a meaning that stems from the fullness of revelation. This reading is legitimized by the fact that the New Testament itself describes itself as the “fulfilment” of the Scriptures.<sup>68</sup>

As we see, the document of the PBC distinguishes the literal sense with a linguistic criterion (the sense expressed by the human author through the text) while it distinguishes the spiritual sense by a criterion taken from the history of revelation (sense conceived from the fulfilment of revelation). This is not a suitable division, identifying the literal and spiritual by a single criterion. In St Thomas, on the other hand, there is a suitable division as it distinguishes the literal and spiritual sense by a single criterion, in this case linguistic (what is meant by the words and what is meant by the realities expressed by the words). Also, he takes the charism of prophecy and of inspiration to conceive the literal sense as the meaning primarily of the divine author and secondarily and sometimes deficiently of the human author. Finally, he adopts a criterion of the history of revelation to conceive the literal sense of the New Testament as that which gives the fullness of revelation and allows the rest of Scripture to be revealed.

The distinction set out in the PBC document does not make it so clear which meaning should be sought by interpreter as the main sense of Scrip-

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<sup>66</sup> PBC, *The interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II.B.1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, II.B.2.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Ibidem, II.B.2.

ture: the literal or the spiritual. Conversely, the distinction of Aquinas allows to know which is sense the interpreter must seek: the literal sense of the divine author which is fully revealed in the New Testament and which essentially coincides with that of the human author of the New Testament. This sense opens the interpreter to the rest of Scripture.

The spiritual sense of the PBC document, moreover, suggests a certain dangerous dualism between what Scripture meant and what it means. If the literal sense is that of the human author and the spiritual sense arises on reading what was written by a human author by the light of the Pascual mystery, it might appear that this meaning is added to the meaning of the text. Conversely, the literal sense of the divine author allows the extra meaning already foreseen by God in the words of the human author to be better explained.

We have seen which is the contribution of the Aquina's doctrine about the literal sense of the Scripture as a sense of the divine author for the PBC document. Let us see now his contribution of the spiritual understanding of the literal sense of Scripture.

The PCB document presents the methods and approaches for interpretation of Scripture (I y II.1.2) and struggles to give indications so that the exegetes reach a true understanding of Scripture, which, above all, avoids fundamentalism and historicism and is open to the theological sense of Scripture. Here we can see an analogy with what Saint Thomas calls the spiritual understanding of Scripture, in contrast to his literal and carnal understanding. However, the true understanding presented by the PCB document has a certain ambiguity precisely because of the indeterminacy of what is the main sense that the interpreter must seek and because it seems that the spiritual sense is beyond the sense of the text. The doctrine of St. Thomas affirms that the main sense of Scripture has already been given and is mainly found in the literal sense of the New Testament as a key that opens the rest of Scripture. Thus, the true understanding of Scripture is that which reaches the mystery of Christ offered to us in the New Testament. Conversely, the carnal and the literal understanding is a reading that does not grasp the understanding of the Scripture from Christ.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> We have seen that for Aquinas the main difficulty to overcome in interpretation was the height of mysteries of revelation that have been expressed in analogical language. Some writers of the new hermeneutics, precisely those influenced by the linguistic bent of the modern mind that casts judgement on the capacity for human knowledge and language to think about and communicate supernatural and metaphysical truths, and even those that are beyond the immediate experience of each man, thus turning everything into interpretation, have cast doubt on the literal meaning of Scripture: If the author wished to communicate something, it was something belonging to his world, which I cannot attain, but only reinterpret in my own world, starting off an infinite chain of interpretation. As I understand

With this doctrine, St. Thomas clarifies the Pauline affirmation that “the letter kills and Spirit gives life” (2Co 3,6), so followed by the Fathers and the medieval, showing that it is not a problem of “letter”, but of his spiritual understanding. Furthermore, this doctrine does not negate the possibility of adopting the different methods and approaches to interpreting Scripture, but allows to direct them to their true purpose: the spiritual understanding of the literal sense of the New Testament as the key to the whole Scripture.

### 3.3. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to clarify the confusion between the literal and the spiritual sense of Scripture in contemporary hermeneutics. Such a confusion can lead to not knowing exactly what is the sense that the interpreter should seek, and tends to favour dualism between what Scripture meant and what it means now.

For this we have taken from the biblical hermeneutics of St. Thomas two ideas and we have tried to show how his conception of literal sense as sense of the divine author and his conception of spiritual understanding of this literal sense can help to resolve the confusion and improve Biblical exegesis.

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it this problem does not belong directly to the literal sense, but to the capacity of human knowledge and language to speak about supernatural and metaphysical truths. As we have seen, St Thomas takes this as read, and shows the specific way in which it is carried out by the analogical process. To argue this point would take us beyond the scope of the article. Cf. O.-Th. Venard, “Problématique du sens littéral” in: Id (ed.), *Le sens littéral des Écritures* (Paris 2009) 293–353. In this article Venard presents the problems associated with the literal sense from this perspective, and offers his answer in the light of St Thomas.

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