



Nature and the Supernatural in *la nouvelle théologie*: The Recovery of a Sacramental Mindset¹

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Abstract

A sacramental ontology, informed by a *ressourcement* of the Church Fathers, informs the theology of the mid-twentieth-century Catholic movement of *nouvelle théologie*. Rejecting the neo-Thomist separation between nature and the supernatural, the *nouvelle* theologians focused on the sacramental presence of supernatural grace in natural realities. To be sure, differences among these *ressourcement* theologians cannot be denied: de Lubac and Bouillard emphasized the *a*-scending character of human participation in divine grace, while Balthasar and Chenu stressed the *de*-scent of the Incarnation into the created realities of time and space. Nonetheless, the four theologians shared a deep appreciation for the Greek Fathers, which enabled them to counter the neo-scholastic separation between nature and the supernatural with a sacramental ontology.

Keywords

sacramental ontology, neo-Thomism, *nouvelle théologie*, Henri de Lubac, Henri Bouillard, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Marie-Dominique Chenu

In the decades surrounding the Second World War, a number of French theologians made a concerted plea for theological renewal in the Catholic Church. Their approach—often referred to as *la nouvelle théologie*—included a sharp critique of the regnant neo-Thomist separation between nature and the supernatural. These *nouvelle* theologians insisted that “historicism,” on the one hand, was the result

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of an isolation of the realm of nature, while the “extrinsicism” of the supernatural realm, on the other hand, had led to ecclesial entrenchment and hierarchical authoritarianism.² As a result, *nouvelle théologie* looked beyond the neo-Thomist scholasticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for a *ressourcement* of the “Great Tradition”—especially the Church Fathers, but also medieval theology—in order to effect both theological and cultural renewal. For the *nouvelle* theologians, the pressing question was: to what extent are we willing to correct a modern, positivist approach to reality, as expressed in the neo-Thomist tradition, with a sacramental view, one that chastens the Aristotelianism and intellectualism of St. Thomas by appealing to the Platonist-Christian synthesis that has characterized much of the Church’s tradition, and to some extent continues to influence also Thomas Aquinas himself?³

My focus will be a group of four theologians: Henri de Lubac (1896–1991), Henri Bouillard (1908–81), Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88), and Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895–1990). They are united in their opposition to the baroque scholasticism of neo-Thomism and its nature – supernatural divide.⁴ I will note in each of the four authors a concern for a sacramental mindset that regards the created order as symbolic in character, so that it makes the supernatural reality present to the world of time and space. At the same time, however, the various *nouvelle* theologians pursued this sacramental ontology each with their own distinct emphasis. De Lubac and Bouillard tended to draw on the Greek Church Fathers and the neo-Platonic tradition; so, they highlighted the sacramental link in its upward direction: nature pointed upward to the supernatural, thus making it present.⁵ Balthasar and Chenu tended to be a great deal more critical of the Platonic tradition and were fearful of an idealism that undermined the goodness of creation; as a result, they accentuated the sacramental connection in its downward direction: the Incarnation valued the created order and thereby gave it its sacramental character. To be sure, we should not turn these

² Cf. Hans Boersma, “Sacramental Ontology: Nature and the Supernatural in the Ecclesiology of Henri de Lubac,” *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007): 242–73.

³ For the tension in Thomas’s thought, see Hans Boersma, “Theology as Queen of Hospitality,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 79 (2007): 291–310.

⁴ I have elaborated on the approaches of these theologians to the nature-supernatural relationship in more detail in Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86–148.

⁵ Perhaps the best overall introductions (in English) to these two scholars are Susan K. Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998) and Thomas G. Guarino, *Fundamental Theology and the Natural Knowledge of God in the Writings of Henri Bouillard* (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1984).

differences into a contrast.⁶ As I hope to show, a sacramental ontology, informed by a *ressourcement* of the Church Fathers, informs each of the *nouvelle* theologians.

Henri de Lubac: Natural Desire as Sacramental Presence

De Lubac's 1946 publication, *Surnaturel*, uncompromisingly rejected commentatorial Thomism and sounded a clarion call for a reintegration of theology and philosophy. Specifically, de Lubac objected to two developments in the neo-Thomist tradition: the rise of the notion of pure nature and the denial of a natural human desire for the beatific vision. The notion of pure nature was, in the neo-Thomist tradition, a human state in which God hypothetically could have created Adam. That is to say, according to his absolute power God could have created Adam without original justice and sanctifying grace. Before long, later Thomists worked out this hypothesis into an elaborate scheme in which two parallel orders ran alongside one another, each perfectly following its own course: the natural and the supernatural orders each leading to its own appropriate connatural end. Soon a twofold beatitude, even a twofold vision of God, was the result. Out of concern to minimize any kind of inherent link between nature and the supernatural, the Thomist tradition had turned *pura natura* from hypothesis into reality. The neo-scholastic defence of the gratuity of grace was, de Lubac believed, a mere smokescreen. He repeatedly insisted that the threat to gratuitous grace lay, not in the notion of a "natural desire" or in attempts to reintegrate the two planes of reality, but in the secularism implicit in the strict separation of the two realms.⁷

⁶ On the one hand, de Lubac is not naïve with regard to the real problems inherent in the Platonic tradition, and the Incarnation remains a central element of his theology, while Bouillard's Thomism gives him a real appreciation for the relative autonomy of the natural order. On the other hand, both Balthasar and Chenu have a genuine appreciation for the Greek Fathers, including the neo-Platonism of Denys.

⁷ Cf. de Lubac's warnings against secularism in *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, trans. Lancelot Sheppard, introd. Louis Dupré (New York, N.Y.: Crossroad – Herder & Herder, 2000), xxxv, 240. Through the events of Vatican II and beyond, de Lubac became more and more convinced that the threat came less from neo-Thomist extrinsicism than from secular immanentism, though of course he viewed both as based on the same premises. See de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, trans. Richard Arndez (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1984). As Tracey Rowland comments: "For de Lubac, the idea of a pure nature contained dangerous Pelagian tendencies, since it meant that it would be possible to sever grace from nature and marginalize it under the category of the 'supernatural'. The supernatural could subsequently be privatized and social life would then proceed on the basis of the common pursuit of goods associated solely with the 'natural' order" (*Culture and the Thomist Tradition after Vatican II* [London: Routledge, 2003], 94).

De Lubac's *ressourcement* of the Church Fathers made him positively inclined to a Platonist-Christian synthesis. To be sure, his latent neo-Platonism always remained tempered, and probably with good reason.⁸ It is nonetheless clear that his arduous insistence on a *desiderium naturale* stemmed from his wish to return to a spirituality that placed mystery and paradox in the centre of its theology.⁹ The *desiderium naturale* functioned as a "suspended middle" between nature and the supernatural, something that was reserved for human beings alone, and that was theirs as a result of the fact that they were created as spirit,¹⁰ made in the image of God,¹¹ for the sake of the eternal vision of God.

The reason de Lubac was unyielding on the issue of natural desire was his realization that it provided an essential theological link with a patristic, more or less neo-Platonic mindset, which had been sacramental in character. Few emphases were as important to him as this acceptance of paradox and mystery, something he had appropriated through his sustained reading of the Church Fathers and the medieval tradition. A purely positivist theology that refused to acknowledge mystery and wished to remove the scandal of apparent contradictions would always end up isolating and rationalizing one side of the equation and would thus become "heresy properly so called."¹² The most serious problem with neo-scholastic theology, from de Lubac's perspective, was that it seemed like "a buildup of concepts by which the believer tries to make the divine mystery less

⁸ The title of John Milbank's book on de Lubac (*The Suspended Middle*) takes its cue from Balthasar's use of the same phrase in Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac: An Overview*, trans. Joseph Fessio and Susan Clements (San Francisco, Calif.: Communio – Ignatius, 1991), 14–15. See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005). Milbank is incorrect, however, in assuming that in some sense de Lubac regards natural desire as already supernatural in character (*ibid.*, 38–40). Balthasar himself points out that de Lubac never makes this move. For de Lubac, there is "no trace yet of supernatural grace" in the created spiritual nature, which is exactly why he was not interested in Karl Rahner's "supernatural existential" (Balthasar, *Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 71). Not unfairly, David Lyle Jeffrey points out that "in *The Suspended Middle*, de Lubac sounds more like Milbank than like himself" (Rev. of *The Suspended Middle*, by John Milbank, *JAAR* 75 [2007]: 715).

⁹ Just a glance at some of the titles of de Lubac's books illustrates the importance of paradox in his thought. See Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1987); *idem*, *More Paradoxes*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 2002); *idem*, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, trans. James R. Dunne (New York, N.Y.: Ecclesia, 1969).

¹⁰ Cf. de Lubac's historical theological investigations regarding human nature as tripartite, i.e., consisting of body, soul, and spirit, the latter being the locale of the *imago dei*. See Henri de Lubac, "Tripartite Anthropology," in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1996), 117–200. Cf. *idem*, *Brief Catechesis*, 26–27.

¹¹ Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, introd. David L. Schindler (New York, N.Y.: Herder & Herder – Crossroad, 1998), 98–100, 108.

¹² *Ibid.*, 175.

mysterious, and in some cases to eliminate it altogether.”¹³ For de Lubac, it was the very contingency of the historical reality of the imprint of the image of God that gave it the potential to function as the sacramental means of entering into deifying union with the triune God.

Henri Bouillard: Analogy and Sacramental Ontology

When Henri Bouillard joined the Jesuit faculty at Lyons-Fourvière, controversy broke out as soon as he published his dissertation, *Conversion et grâce chez S. Thomas d'Aquin*, in 1944. The events that ensued would ultimately lead to his being removed from his teaching position in Fourvière in 1950. Much of the controversy resulted from the spectre of Modernist relativism.¹⁴ Repeatedly, the Dominicans from the St. Maximin studium of Toulouse accused Bouillard of falling into the trap of Modernism, which the 1907 encyclical, *Pascendi*, had sharply condemned.¹⁵ And, with the Modernist crisis still in recent memory, the apprehensions were understandable. After all, Bouillard presented a daring interpretation of St. Thomas's views on conversion and grace, in which he placed the Angelic Doctor's

¹³ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁴ The controversy is traced in Karl-Heinz Neufeld, “Fundamentaltheologie in gewandelter Welt: H. Bouillards theologischer Beitrag,” *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 100 (1978): 417–40; Étienne Fouilloux, “Dialogue théologique? (1946–1948),” in *Saint Thomas au XX^e siècle*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino, et al. (Paris: Saint-Paul, 1994), 153–95; Aidan Nichols, “Thomism and the *Nouvelle Théologie*,” *Thomist* 64 (2000): 1–19; Richard Peddicord, *The Sacred Monster of Thomism: An Introduction to the Life and Legacy of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange* (South Bend, Ind.: St Augustine's, 2005), 146–60; Jürgen Mettepenningen, “Truth as Issue in a Second Modernist Crisis? The Clash between Re-contextualization and Retrocontextualization in the French-Speaking Polemic of 1946–47,” in *Theology and the Question for Truth: Historical and Systematic Theological Studies*, ed. M. Lamberigts, L. Boeve, and T. Merrigan, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum Lovaniensium*, 202 (Louvain: Leuven University Press; Louvain: Peeters, 2007), 119–42.

¹⁵ E.g., Marie-Michel Labourdette, “La Théologie et ses sources,” *Revue thomiste* 46 (1946): 364–67. Cf. Thomas Guarino, “Henri Bouillard and the Truth-Status of Dogmatic Statements,” *Science et esprit* 39 (1987): 335. Cf. for much of the following controversy Labourdette, “La Théologie et ses sources,” 353–71; “La Théologie et ses sources: Réponse,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 33 (1946): 385–401; Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, “La Nouvelle théologie, où va-t-elle?” *Angelicum* 23 (1946): 126–45; *idem*, “Vérité et immutabilité du dogme,” *Angelicum* 24 (1947): 124–39; *idem*, “Les Notions consacrées par les Conciles,” *Angelicum* 24 (1947): 217–30; *idem*, “Nécessité de revenir à la définition traditionnelle de la vérité,” *Angelicum* 25 (1948): 185–88; *idem*, “L'Immutabilité du dogme selon le Concile du Vatican, et le relativisme,” *Angelicum* 26 (1949): 309–22; *idem*, “Le Relativisme et l'immutabilité du dogme,” *Angelicum* 27 (1950): 219–46; *idem*, “La Structure de l'encyclique ‘Humani generis’,” *Angelicum* 28 (1951): 3–17. The debate between Labourdette and the *nouvelle* theologians was republished in M. Labourdette, M.-J. Nicolas, and R.-L. Bruckberger, *Dialogue théologique: Pièces du débat entre “La Revue Thomiste” d'une part et les R.R. P.P. de Lubac, Daniélou, Bouillard, Fessard, von Balthasar, S.J., d'autre part* (Saint-Maximin: Arcades, 1947).

theology squarely within the history of the development of doctrine. How could an emphasis on the historical context of Thomas's thought *not* relativize his theology?

Moreover, the epistemology that enabled this emphasis on historical context and this questioning of inherited Thomist doctrine was one that appeared to take its starting-point in the Kantian turn to the subject. Bouillard made a distinction, derived from St. Thomas, between the absolute character of divine affirmations of doctrine and the contingent character of their linguistic representations.¹⁶ Both Réginald Garrigou-Lagrangé (1877–1964) and his student, Marie-Michel Labourdette (1908–90), located exactly at this point a return to the epistemology advocated by the Modernists. Bouillard, so Garrigou-Lagrangé thought, had given up on absolute truth and had made it relative to the human subject.

In actual fact, Bouillard used the doctrine of analogy to construct an ontology that *both* took human historical and subjective contingency seriously *and* insisted that it received its significance precisely because of its analogical link with the eternal being of God himself.¹⁷ We can see this use of analogy particularly when we take a look at the way in which Bouillard interacted with the theology of Karl Barth, on whom he wrote a second, monumental dissertation in 1950.¹⁸ Here, Bouillard expressed his serious reservations vis-à-vis Barth's understanding of *analogia entis* as put forward in the *Church*

¹⁶ Henri Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce chez S. Thomas d'Aquin: Étude historique* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 219–24. Cf. Thomas G. Guarino, "Henri Bouillard and the Truth-Status of Dogmatic Statements," *Science et esprit* 39 (1987): 331–43; idem, "Fundamental Theology and the Natural Knowledge of God in the Writings of Henri Bouillard," Ph.D. diss. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1984), 20–27. Thomas Aquinas had stated "that these names signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full representation of Him" (*Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [1948; repr. Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics – Ave Maria, 1981], 1 q.13 a.2).

¹⁷ Cf. Hans Boersma, "Analogy of Truth: The Sacramental Epistemology of *nouvelle théologie*," in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth Century Catholic Theology*, ed. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), forthcoming.

¹⁸ Henri Bouillard, *Karl Barth*, vol. 1, *Genèse et évolution de la théologie dialectique*, Théologie, 38 (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1957); idem, *Karl Barth*, vol. 2, *Parole de Dieu et existence humaine*, 2 parts, Théologie, 39 (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1957). Bouillard published a number of shorter essays in which he summarized particularly his disagreement with Barth's rejection of natural theology. See idem, "La Refus de la théologie naturelle dans la théologie protestante contemporaine," in *L'Existence de Dieu*, by Henri Birault et al., Cahiers de l'actualité religieuse, 16 (Tournai: Casterman, 1961), 95–108, 353–58; idem, "La Preuve de Dieu dans le 'Prosligion' et son interprétation par Karl Barth," in *Congrès international du IX^e centenaire de l'arrivée d'Anselme au Bec*, Spicilegium Becense, 1 (Le Bec-Hellouin: Abbaye Notre-Dame du Bec; Paris: Vrin, 1959), 190–207; idem, *The Logic of the Faith*, trans. M. H. Gill and Son (New York, N.Y.: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 59–137; idem, "Karl Barth et le catholicisme," in *Vérité du christianisme*, ed. Karl H. Neufeld (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1989), 101–16; idem, *The Knowledge of God*, trans. Samuel D. Femiano (New York, N.Y.: Herder and Herder, 1968), 11–62.

Dogmatics. When Barth grounded the analogy entirely in the revelation of God's grace, he did so for understandable reasons, reacting against the nearly univocal view of analogy of Cajetan (1469–1534) and especially Suárez (1548–1617). For Cajetan and Suárez, Bouillard explained, concepts themselves were analogous, so that they had the ability to give us actual knowledge of the essence of God. An imperfect but nonetheless direct resemblance pertained, according to these later commentators, between human concepts and the essence of God.¹⁹ Suárez even went so far as to speak of a “division of being between infinite and finite.”²⁰

By contrast, Thomas had borrowed from Denys's apophatic neo-Platonism. Appealing to the sixth-century Syrian monk, Bouillard commented: “The attributes that we borrow from [creatures] to affirm them with regard to God must also be denied being, in order to signify that they do not befit him except in an eminent sense. One will thus say, with pseudo-Denys, ‘God is wise’, ‘God is not wise’, ‘God is super-wise’. Since wisdom has its source in God, it must be that he possesses it. But it is not in him in the way we conceive it, and in that sense we must deny that attribute of him.”²¹ The sub-text clearly read that neo-scholasticism, building on Cajetan and Suárez, had failed to grasp the true meaning of St. Thomas and had thereby abandoned the neo-Platonic tradition and had lapsed into a modern form of rationalism.

Concerned to uphold divine transcendence and the freedom of grace, the neo-Thomist detractors of de Lubac and Bouillard believed that the only means at their disposal was to keep the eternal truth of God as far removed as possible from any human vicissitudes. The theologians of Lyons-Fourvière took a different approach. Refusing to live in a modern, non-sacramental world, de Lubac maintained that God drew human beings to himself by connecting with their natural desire for the beatific vision. The human spirit could become a sacrament of the presence of God. Bouillard insisted that human language, embedded within historical realities and their developments, was able to speak of supernatural, unchanging truth in an analogical fashion. Human signs could make present signified realities. The human spirit and human discourse, both could function as sacramental means to draw human realities into the presence of God.

Hans Urs von Balthasar: Christ as the Hourglass

It is fair to say that the first part of Balthasar's life was characterized by a deep immersion in the Church Fathers, and that de

¹⁹ Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III.200.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 203.

Lubac was largely responsible for these explorations.²² Balthasar's kinship with de Lubac meant that he essentially adopted the latter's understanding of the nature-supernatural relationship, including his trepidation regarding the notion of pure nature and his insistence on natural desire for the vision of God. Kevin Mongrain is right to turn Balthasar's sacramental sensibility into a central interpretive key for his work: "God redeems creation *qua* creation, and hence sacramentally infuses and unites worldly beauty, goodness, and truth with supernatural grace."²³

There seems to me, however, a difference in emphasis between de Lubac and Balthasar. De Lubac used his sacramental ontology to highlight that it was really *supernatural grace* in which nature participated, while Balthasar used the same sacramental ontology to stress that it was *nature itself* that participated in supernatural grace. Or, to put it differently, while de Lubac, ever the Greek patristic scholar, was keen to emphasize the upward movement of divine ascent, Balthasar's incarnational approach emphasized the downward divine descent into the created realities of this-worldly time and space.²⁴

Thus, Balthasar was too fearful of Platonic categories to simply look to the Fathers for the repristination of a sacramental universe.²⁵ Interestingly, however, when he looked to individual Church Fathers for assistance in developing his own theological aesthetics, the impression of a rather Platonic patristic universe quickly faded. In his studies of figures as diverse as Irenaeus, Denys, and Maximus,

²² For overviews of Balthasar's main patristic publications, see Brian E. Daley, "Balthasar's Reading of the Church Fathers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 193–95; Charles Kannengiesser, "Listening to the Fathers," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco, Calif.: Communio – Ignatius, 1991), 59–63.

²³ Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York, N.Y.: Crossroad – Herder & Herder, 2002), 61.

²⁴ Brian Daley also draws attention to Balthasar's quest for a "sacramental understanding" of the world in his engagement with the Church Fathers, an understanding that does not just press "through worldly images" but "recognizes the presence of transcendent holiness in sensible things" ("Balthasar's Reading," 190–91). Cf. also Ben Quash's comment on the "almost sacramental character" of the mediation of the "differentiated diversity of material things" ("Hans Urs von Balthasar," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd ed., ed. David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 111. Rodney A. Howsare also speaks of Balthasar's "'sacramental' sensibilities" (*Hans Urs von Balthasar and Protestantism: The Ecumenical Implications of His Theological Style* [London: T&T Clark – Continuum, 2005], 107; cf. *ibid.*, 191, n. 15).

²⁵ Cf. also Balthasar's cautionary comments about a repristination of the Fathers in *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco, Calif.: Communio – Ignatius, 1995), 9–13. Cf. Deirdre Carabine, "The Fathers: The Church's Intimate, Youthful Diary," in *The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Bede McGregor and Thomas Norris (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 74–75.

Balthasar consistently emphasized the anti-Platonic aspects of their theology, such as the goodness of the created order, the significance of time and history, and the irreducible difference between Creator and creature. If perhaps this speaks for itself in the case of St. Irenaeus, Balthasar also claimed that there had “hardly been a theology so deeply informed by aesthetic categories as the liturgical theology of the Areopagite,”²⁶ in which the created order had thus been able to function as a sacramental means of entering the heavenly mysteries. Denys was a mystical theologian who took his place squarely within the visible Church, and whose doctrine of analogical participation allowed him to put forward a sacramental ontology that saw the “un-manifest” in the beauty of the manifest. And in the theology of Maximus the Confessor, similarity and dissimilarity came to their fullest expression in the hypostatic union of the Incarnation. “[E]veryone recognizes,” commented Balthasar, “that [Maximus’] ontology and cosmology are extensions of his Christology, in that the synthesis of Christ’s concrete person is not only God’s final thought for the world but also his original plan.”²⁷

Balthasar beat a similar drum in his discussion with Karl Barth. While defending *analogia entis* on the grounds that for Thomas the notion of “being” was not a neutral, overarching concept, Balthasar emphasized the Christological analogy as the climactic fulfilment of the philosophical analogy. He had encountered this Christological structure of the divine – human relationship both in de Lubac and in the Greek Fathers (though perhaps more obviously in Irenaeus and Maximus than in Denys). The result was a reworking of the doctrine of analogy in Christological fashion, in a way that was quite out of line with the neo-scholastic approach to analogy.²⁸ Repeatedly, Balthasar employed the image of an hourglass, “where the two contiguous vessels (God and creature) meet only at the narrow passage through the center: where they both encounter each other in Jesus Christ.”²⁹ For Balthasar, Christ was the hourglass or the narrow

²⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, vol. 2 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil, ed. John Riches (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1984), 149.

²⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 2003), 207.

²⁸ Howsare goes so far as to suggest that Balthasar engaged Barth because he “recognized in Barth’s critique of Liberal Protestantism a concern not unlike de Lubac’s critique of neo-Scholastic dualism. In other words, it was not primarily to defend the Catholic understanding of analogy to Barth that Balthasar wrote this study. Rather, it was to show his fellow Catholics the dangers inherent in the doctrine of analogy when it is totally removed from the context of theology proper” (*Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 83).

²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco, Calif.: Communio – Ignatius, 1992), 197. See also *ibid.*, 234, 341; *idem*, *Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 118. Cf. Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 1994), 66–67. Balthasar may

passage where God and creature met. Analogical doctrine, theologically understood, meant that in Christ both similarity and dissimilarity between Creator and creature found their true expression, so that in Christ we could see not only a pointer to God, but could witness the presence of God himself.³⁰

Chenu and the Dionysian Character of Theology

The heartbeat of *nouvelle théologie* was its program of *ressourcement*. This is true also of Marie-Dominique Chenu,³¹ perhaps despite his obvious interest in social Christian practices.³² These practical concerns were always intimately connected to his theological program of *ressourcement*.³³ For Chenu, *ressourcement* only deserved the name if today's social and ecclesial situation would enter into dialogue with the text. As Regent of the Dominican studium of

well have taken the imagery of the hourglass from Oscar Cullmann, who used it to describe salvation history as narrowing in Christ, broadening out from there. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Spirit of Truth*, vol. 3 of *Theo-Logic*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 2005), 287.

³⁰ The sacramental cast of Balthasar's Christological analogy has far-reaching implications, particularly for the doctrine of the Trinity and for atonement theology, since Balthasar insists that Thomas's "real distinction" between being and essence in some way goes back to the Trinity, so that suffering and other aspects of human becoming get taken up—in analogical fashion—in the triune God. For further discussion, see Bernhard Blankenhorn, "Balthasar's Method of Divine Naming," *Nova et Vetera*, English edition 1 (2003): 245–68; Matthew Levering, "Balthasar on Christ's Consciousness on the Cross," *Thomist* 65 (2001): 567–81; Angela Franz Franks, "Trinitarian *analogia entis* in Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Thomist* 62 (1998): 533–59; Gerard F. O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³¹ For an excellent bibliography, see Christophe F. Potworowski, "Bibliography of Marie-Dominique Chenu," in *Contemplation and Incarnation: The Theology of Marie-Dominique Chenu* (Montreal, Que.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 237–321.

³² We can think here of Chenu's *engagement* with the *jocistes* in the 1930s, with the worker-priest movement in the post-war years, and with Christian-Marxist dialogue throughout much of his career. The *jocistes*—a term deriving from *Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique* (JOC)—were lay Catholic Action groups involved in mission work among the working classes. Cf. Chenu's 1936 essay, "La J.O.C. au Saulchoir," in *La parole de Dieu*, vol. 2, *L'Évangile dans le temps* (Paris: Cerf, 1964), 271–74. The worker-priests were priests who also felt called to be involved among the working classes. Chenu's involvement with the worker priests led to him being exiled from Paris to Rouen for a brief period of time in 1954. See Chenu's 1954 essay, "Le Sacerdoce des prêtres-ouvriers," in *ibid.*, 275–81. For an historical account, see Oscar L. Arnal, *Priests in Working-Class Blue: The History of the Worker-Priests (1943–1954)* (New York, N.Y.: Paulist, 1986).

³³ Chenu recounts that people would sometimes think there were two Chenus, "one old medievalist, who does palaeography, and a kind of scoundrel who runs in the lines of fire of the holy Church" (*Un théologien en liberté: Jacques Duquesne interroge le Père Chenu*, Les interviews [Paris: Centurion, 1975], 61). For an analysis of how Chenu regarded the relationship between praxis and theory in an increasingly secularized France, see Christophe Potworowski, "Dechristianization, Socialization and Incarnation in Marie-Dominique Chenu," *Science et esprit* 93 (1991): 17–54.

Saulchoir, he published in 1937 his programmatic manifesto, *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir*.³⁴ He took the opportunity to lament the theological “system” that had come to dominate scholastic thought in the sixteenth century and had led to a loss of the innovative and creative approach that had been a principle of Thomism itself.³⁵ When in 1942 *Une école de théologie* was placed on the Index, one of the main reasons lay in the fear that Chenu’s turn to history would introduce theological relativism.³⁶

No doubt, Chenu, along with de Lubac, Bouillard, and Balthasar regarded the neo-Thomist separation between nature and the supernatural, between faith and history, as seriously problematic. Chenu’s rejection of such dualism implied a deep appreciation for the experiential character of faith as lying at the root of theology, as well as for the contemplative tradition that Denys had passed on to the Western tradition, particularly via Thomas Aquinas. Theology, explained Chenu, “is the science of salvation. One enters it by an ‘initiation’, and for this the liturgy provides both the ritual and the light. Once again we see that theology remains *within* the mystery.”³⁷

Denys served as the main inspiration for Chenu’s own mystical-theological program, as becomes clear from his dissertation. For Denys, mystical contemplation had consisted of “intellectual passivity,” a “knowledge-experience of God under the influence of

³⁴ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir* (Kain-Lez-Tournai: Le Saulchoir, 1937). Chenu’s book was re-published in 1985: idem, *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir*, with contributions by Giuseppe Alberigo, Étienne Fouilloux, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Jean Ladrière (Paris: Cerf, 1985). For further analysis of the book and its historical context, see Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation*, 46–55; Fergus Kerr, “Chenu’s Little Book,” *New Blackfriars* 66 (1985): 108–12.

³⁵ Chenu, *Une école* (1985 ed.), 123.

³⁶ Chenu’s book speaks of a “discrete relativism of the framework of the most coherent and most unified systems” (ibid., 125–26; cf. ibid., 148). Claude Geffré rightly observes, “In the context of the time, this relativizing of dogma was a real provocation” (“Théologie de l’incarnation et théologie des signes du temps chez le Père Chenu,” in *Marie-Dominique Chenu: Moyen-Âge et modernité*, ed. Joseph Doré and Jacques Fantino, Les cahiers du Centre d’études du Saulchoir, 5 [Paris: Cerf, 1997], 134–35). In 1938, Chenu was forced to sign ten propositions, which clearly were designed to exclude any kind of relativism. The first proposition stated: “Dogmatic formulations express absolute and immutable truth.” Cf. Fergus Kerr, “A Different World: Neoscholasticism and Its Discontents,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 128–48.

For historical accounts of the events surrounding the 1942 censure of Chenu—as well as Louis Charlier and Henry Duméry—see Robert Guelluy, “Les Antécédents de l’encyclique ‘Humani Generis’ dans les sanctions Romaines de 1942: Chenu, Charlier, Draguet,” *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* 81 (1986): 421–97; Étienne Fouilloux, “Autour d’une mise à l’Index,” in *Marie-Dominique Chenu*, ed. Doré and Fantino, 25–56.

³⁷ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Is Theology a Science?* trans. A.H.N. Green-Armytage (New York, N.Y.: Hawthorn, 1959), 46. Cf. ibid., 63, where Chenu insists that the “aim of the theologian remains from start to finish the attainment of a beatifying knowledge of God and a full life of grace in the world.” For a discussion of Chenu’s understanding of theology, see Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 170–84.

divine action by way of connaturality: *pati divina* [suffering divine things].”³⁸ There is a genuine sense in which for Chenu, Denys represented the authentic sacramental mindset. St. Augustine’s “sign,” Chenu would later argue, pointed away from the material world, while Denys’s “symbol” acknowledged its inherent value, at the same time anagogically leading the believer into mystical contemplation.³⁹ It is in Denys, therefore, that Chenu found what we might call a sacramental ontology, which he believed was capable of overcoming the extrinsicism of the manualist tradition.⁴⁰

I nonetheless need to raise a question with regard to the consistency of this sacramental ontology in Chenu. Joseph Komonchak has made the comment there are “few words that appear more often in these writings of Chenu than the word *autonomy*.”⁴¹ For Chenu, the law of the Incarnation meant not just a celebration of the historical and material character of the created order, but also an acceptance of cultural shifts that focused increasingly on the natural realm. As a scholar of twelfth- and thirteenth-century theology, Chenu traced the discovery of nature among twelfth-century theologians and in the process repeatedly made reference to the “desacralizing” of a previously “sacramentalized” world.⁴² The interesting point is that Chenu appeared quite taken with these twelfth-century developments of desacralizing or desaccramentalizing, thus seemingly undermining his Dionysian anagogical approach.

In similar vein, he often appealed to “signs of the times,” which we must read carefully and could only ignore at our own peril.⁴³ For Chenu, the autonomy of the natural order depended not

³⁸ With the help of Denys, Chenu was, on the one hand, able to maintain that the gradual ascent to perfection involved an essential moment of discontinuity in faith. If, on the other hand, the passive character of contemplation was its one, essential element, this also meant for Chenu that mystical contemplation was not characterized by immediate spiritual contact. See Carmelo Giuseppe Conticello, “*De contemplatione* (Angelicum 1920): La thèse inédite du P. M.-D. Chenu,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 75 (1991): 414.

³⁹ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, preface Etienne Gilson, trans. and ed. Jerome Taylor and Lester Little, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching, 37 (1968; repr. Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 124–28. Cf. *ibid.*, 82: “The ‘sign’ of Augustine and the ‘symbol’ of pseudo-Dionysius belonged to two quite different Platonisms.”

⁴⁰ When stumbling across Chenu’s repeated and often unqualified denunciations of Platonic idealism, we need to keep in mind, therefore, that Chenu takes aim at the Augustinian tradition, not at the Dionysian tradition.

⁴¹ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Returning from Exile: Catholic Theology in the 1930s,” in *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, ed. Gregory Baum (New York, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 41.

⁴² Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society*, 5, 14, 127, 265.

⁴³ Cf. especially Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Les Signes des temps,” in *Peuple de Dieu dans le monde*, Foi vivante, 35 (Paris: Cerf, 1966), 35–55. The background to Chenu’s

only on his Thomist appreciation of the created order, but also on his insistence that the Incarnation continued in the Church, and through the Church throughout society, in all sorts of ways. It is not clear how Chenu's strong assertion of a natural *telos*, independent of the supernatural end of human beings, could avoid lapsing into the very "historicism" that he wished to avoid. Nor is it clear how such an approach fit with the Dionysian theurgical and faith-based reading of reality. A closed, natural finality certainly moved Chenu at times far away from the sensibilities of de Lubac.⁴⁴ Most significantly, perhaps, Chenu's advocacy of a desacralized universe made it difficult for him to sustain the incarnational or sacramental ontology that he was intent on recovering.

To summarize, in reaction against the neo-Thomist tradition, *nouvelle théologie* embarked on a program of *ressourcement* in an attempt to recover a sacramental mindset that had been part and parcel of the Great Tradition. There are obvious differences among the four theologians in the ways in which they gave shape to such a sacramental ontology. De Lubac and Bouillard may have emphasized the *a*-scending character of human participation in divine grace, while Balthasar and Chenu stressed the *de*-scent of the Incarnation into the created realities of time and space. Moreover, at times, particularly in Chenu, apprehension of Platonic categories went so far as to put into question the sacramental character of reality. It is nonetheless evident that the four theologians shared a deep appreciation for the Greek Fathers, which enabled them to counter the neo-scholastic separation between nature and the supernatural with a sacramental ontology.

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interest in the "signs of the times" lay in the idea of a "continued Incarnation," a notion for which Chenu was indebted to Tübingen theologian, Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838).

⁴⁴ Komonchak accurately points out four differences between Chenu and de Lubac: (1) de Lubac was less enthusiastic about the Thomistic achievement, which had made possible a later compartmentalized anthropology; (2) de Lubac insisted less on the autonomy of the created order and more on the supernatural finality of creation; (3) de Lubac placed less emphasis on economic questions and was more reserved about alliances with Marxism; and (4) de Lubac was more critical of the post-conciliar situation than was Chenu ("Returning from Exile," 44–45). Potworowski adds to this that Chenu's approach to "signs of the times" makes him less sensitive than de Lubac to problems associated with the question of evil (*Contemplation and Incarnation*, 178–79).