What's New about the 'New Ressourcement'?

THE CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES OF A PERENNIAL PROJECT OF RETRIEVAL*

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The ressourcement movement—a term coined by the French writer Charles Péguy—first emerged in the 1930s. Péguy conceived of ressourcement as a movement "from a less perfect tradition to one that is more perfect, an appeal from less profound tradition to one that is more so . . . a search for the deeper sources; in the literal sense of the word, a 're-source.'"[1] Those "deeper sources" were, of course, the Scriptures and the lyrical writings of the Church Fathers. For the ressourcement masters, this "re-source" was a necessary step for the Church to fulfill its missionary task in the modern world—a task for which the regnant neo-scholasticism, with its dry presentation of Thomism and sharp demarcation between natural reason and theology, seemed inadequate. Réginald Marie Garrigou-Lagrange, one of the most vigorous defenders of neo-Thomism, first gave the movement the appellation *nouvelle théologie*, the "new theology"—an epithet that, nevertheless, stuck.[2]

*This essay is a lightly edited transcription of a talk given at the opening dinner of the inaugural *New Ressourcement* conference in Rochester, MN, on November 5, 2023.

1. Quoted in Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Mary John Ronayne and Mary Cecily Boulding (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF, 2012), 26.

2. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, "La nouvelle théologie où va-t-elle?," *Angelicum* 23, no. 3 (July–December 1946): 126–45.

The New Ressourcement 1, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 1–20
ISSN: 2995-5939 (Print) ISSN: 2995-5947 (Online)

By the 1940s and 1950s, the movement reached its high-water mark with writers such as Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar, and at the Second Vatican Council, the ressourcement movement won the day. Many ressourcement theologians were *periti* at the council, shaping both the substance and style of the documents, all of which were approved with overwhelming support.[3] One of the younger *periti* present, Joseph Ratzinger—the future Pope Benedict XVI—would go on to cofound the *Communio* journal with de Lubac and Balthasar. And one of the younger bishops present, Karol Wojtyła, would later, as Pope John Paul II, honor both de Lubac and Balthasar by raising them to the cardinalate—the latter dying shortly before the consistory. Both popes stabilized the interpretation of Vatican II and carried forward the torch of the ressourcement project.

Having traced, in brief compass, this movement's profound impact on the twentieth-century Church, the question naturally arises: Why a "new ressourcement" project almost a hundred years later? And what is new about it? I should like to approach these questions first by putting them within an autobiographical framework—not because I think my own life is all that interesting but because I believe that most of the major theological and pastoral themes of the last sixty years have played a role in my own development as a theologian and bishop and that this background will illuminate my conviction that the new ressourcement is the needful thing today for Catholic theology. Then, I will present a more theoretical framework, proposing four general principles of the new ressourcement; three contemporary areas of concern to which it must be attentive; and one suggestion, by way of conclusion, regarding the overall approach to theology undergirding this project.

3. See *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection: Constitutions*, ed. Matthew Levering (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), and *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection: Decrees and Declarations*, ed. Matthew Levering (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2023).

Coming of Age in a Postconciliar Church

I was born in 1959 and became an altar server in 1969, right around the time of the promulgation of the Missal of Pope St. Paul VI. Thus, I have no real memories, nostalgic or otherwise, of a preconciliar Church or a preconciliar liturgy; my entire life as a Catholic has been, essentially, postconciliar. And my earliest experience of the Church in the 1960s and 1970s—when I was going through grade school, high school, university, and my earliest years in seminary—is what I have come to refer to as "banners and balloons" Catholicism.

This was an era marked not only by great liturgical experimentation—a collapsing of the distinctions between the priest and the people, the sanctuary and the nave—but also by a certain doctrinal drift. There reigned a constant preference for the immanent and political over the transcendent and mystical; a fully Rahnerian interpretation of sacraments as celebrations of an already present grace; and a Kantian reduction of religion to ethics, especially social justice.[4]

Thus, I have very little memory, as a young person, of learning about the Trinity or the Incarnation, of grace or salvation. In fact, religion class, much like physical education or art, was graded on a check-or-minus basis, clearly communicating to us that this was—unlike math, history, or English—an unserious class lacking any sort of intellectual depth. In retrospect, I would come to see this formation as the flowering of the theological liberalism that had been on offer within the Protestant world from the time of Friedrich Schleiermacher and in the Catholic world from the time of the modernists.

It is against this backdrop that I am compelled to understand one of the most decisive moments in my life—namely, the discovery of Thomas Aquinas when I was a freshman at Fenwick High School outside of Chicago. In the spring of 1974,

4. See Karl Rahner, "Thoughts about the Sacraments in General," in *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 288, and Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

a bright young Dominican friar laid out Thomas's arguments for God's existence.[5] Now, if you had asked me then, at fourteen years old, whether I believed in God, I certainly would have said yes. But I had never realized that God could be a matter for such careful intellectual consideration. For some reason—and I see it now as a real grace—God broke through the fog of my religious formation.

This is why, to this day, I always have a difficult time understanding people who complain about Aquinas being dreary or dry or rationalistic. I had precisely the opposite experience: discovering Aquinas was a bracing blast of fresh mountain air, a lightning flash, a revelation. From there, I went to the local library, where I found two volumes on Aquinas from Mortimer Adler's Great Books series, one of which included the arguments for the existence of God. I treasured this book, even as I understood very little of it—much like my first experience of Shakespeare with *Romeo and Juliet* around the same age. It was, in the Ignatian sense, a deep consolation.[6] How wonderful, I thought, that such a thing should exist.

I continued to return to this private fascination with Thomas Aquinas, but a second important connection came two years later when another Thomas showed me how to come into more personal contact with the God I had discovered through reading Aquinas. Thomas Merton's autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* quite literally fell in my lap; I was working in the stockroom of a bookstore outside of Chicago with my brother, who threw it at me, saying, "I bet you would like this. It was written by a Trappist monk." I said—with unconscious irony given Merton's later interests—"I don't want to read a book by some Buddhist." To which my brother responded—and I quote—"Trappists are Catholics, you idiot."

5. See *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3.

6. See Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, in *Ignatian Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2020), 110.

The Seven Storey Mountain is the story of a person falling in love with God. Here again, through Merton's mediation, I found Aquinas to be perfectly congruent with a deep spirituality.

Indeed, it was Merton's own confrontation with the precision of the Thomistic doctrine of God, which he had discovered through Gilson's *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, that opened the door to his conversion.[7] This richly articulated theology led him on the path that eventually conduced toward the monastery. Something similar had been happening with me. Yet Merton's own story, to use the cliché, remarkably linked the head and the heart for me. Aquinas had kicked open the door of the life of the mind, whereas Merton kicked open the whole mystical tradition, from Bernard of Clairvaux up through Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

To shorten some of the story, in 1979—the year after the conclave that elected Wojtyła to the papacy—I entered the seminary at Theological College at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. My experience there was mixed indeed: on the one hand, the seminary was left feather of the left wing in terms of wild liturgical experimentation and doctrinal drift; on the other hand, my philosophy classes at the university—conducted by the likes of John Wippel, Thomas Prufer, and especially Robert Sokolowski, who became my biggest influence there—were substantive, and anchored in the classical intellectual tradition of Catholicism. Between the seminary and the university, it was as though I were reliving the tension of my early years, confirming both my suspicion of Catholic progressivism and my appreciation for Aquinas and all that he represented.

In 1982, I returned to Chicago to enter major seminary at Mundelein, where I would go on to live and teach for many years. There, I received formal instruction in the regnant liberal Catholicism of the time, which dominated the seminary's intellectual life; indeed, the great gift of the seminary to me, in

7. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2017), 204–9.

many ways, was helping me to understand the origins of the Catholicism that I had experienced as a young man.

My professor of moral theology was Timothy O'Connell, who was a student of Josef Fuchs, Bernard Häring, and Richard A. McCormick and one of the premier popularizers of their proportionalist ethical theory. O'Connell's book *Principles for a Catholic Morality* was widely read at the time. At the heart of his work is the claim that the moral quality of a person's life is determined not so much by his particular actions but by the fundamental option taken at the deepest ground of his being—an option either for or against God. "Whosoever says 'yes' from the depths of his being to anything," O'Connell writes, "says 'yes' to everything. . . . In the deepest sense of the word, they have been saved."[8]

My principal instructor in systematic theology was John Shea, one of the most popular practitioners of the Rahner-Tillich-Schleiermacher method of correlation. Shea was famous for his method of theological reflection, which began with a personal experience of God; moved through biblical symbolism expressing that experience; and, finally, correlated that imagery to a doctrine of the Church such as the Trinity. Shea, of course, studied under Langdon Gilkey, who studied under Paul Tillich, who represents the liberal tradition flowing from Schleiermacher. This tradition had become standard issue in the Church for quite some time, and through Shea, I came to understand its contemporary masters: Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx, Walter Kasper, Franz Jozef van Beeck, and especially Karl Rahner.

My training in biblical theology during my seminary years was entirely based in the historical-critical method, the main inspiration being the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* editors: Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy, and especially Raymond E. Brown. The primary concern of our instructors was determining the historicity of the scene and the intention of the

8. Timothy O'Connell, *Principles of a Catholic Morality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 105.

human author; any question regarding the spiritual or theological sense of biblical passages was referred to spirituality or homiletics classes.

Thus, the great tripod of our theological formation was proportionalism in ethics, experiential-expressivism (to use George A. Lindbeck's term[9]) in doctrine, and historical-criticism in the Bible. This was the articulate intellectual expression of the Catholic progressivism that I had taken in as a child and experienced at Theological College. I had come to love the life of the mind and so took all of this in. But almost completely absent from any of our seminary formation—whether ethics, doctrine, or Scripture—was the very figure who had opened up that life to me: Thomas Aquinas.

What also became clear to me in later years—and what I began to sense even in those days in an inchoate way—is the remarkable Christological deficit in all three of these methods. In ethics, nothing would distinguish the proportionalist calculus from the moral strategizing of a secular humanist; in doctrine, human experience becomes the starting point and measure of doctrine, positioning Christ by something extraneous to himself; and in the Bible, the attempt to understand the mind of the human author within his cultural and historical context—however fascinating—led to a balkanized approach to the biblical texts and a loss of any kind of unifying element toward which all of them tend. What difference was Jesus Christ making to this tradition? Where was the unifying trajectory in the direction of Christ in the Bible, so insisted upon by the classical tradition, or the voice of God, the principal author of Scripture?

I will mention my parish experience briefly, for it sheds some further light on our situation today. With this great farrago in my mind—from banners and balloons, up through Aquinas and Merton, and up to CUA and Mundelein—I commenced my parish work at St. Paul of the Cross Parish outside

9. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984), 31.

of Chicago in the summer of 1986. There were four priests in the rectory and three thousand families in the community; the six weekend Masses and even the three daily Masses were well attended; there were confessions every day; and there were 150 weddings a year and a comparable number of funerals.

This was, in a way, the last gasp of an older and more vibrant Catholic culture stemming from the formation of my parents' generation. What I have witnessed over the thirty-seven years of my priesthood, in three different dioceses, has been a steady falling off of these numbers. You are now far more likely to find one priest with four parishes than four priests in a rectory. And though the matter is certainly complex and the causality multiple, my own conviction is that it is, in large part, the after-effect of theological liberalism.

An important turning point for me came in 1989, when I was sent by Cardinal Bernardin for doctoral studies at the Institut Catholique in Paris, where my exposure to the Fathers, de Lubac, and Balthasar went a long way toward undermining my confidence in the Catholic liberalism that I had been taught. Catholic liberalism was certainly on offer there; the dominant voice was represented by Claude Geffré, the star of the faculty at the time, who was in the hermeneutical tradition of Paul Ricœur and David Tracy. However, I fell in with Michel Corbin, my doctoral director.

Corbin—who studied under Henri de Lubac, and accordingly had a good deal of the *nouvelle théologie* suspicion of Scholasticism in him—did know Aquinas well, but he deeply loved the Church Fathers. The typical structure of a Corbin seminar was the careful reading of Aquinas on a given matter—creation, grace, God's power, or whatever it might have been—followed by a reading of the Fathers on the same issue: Chrysostom, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, or even Bernard, whom Corbin considered a Father. And Corbin's judgment—though he loved Aquinas and studied him with great attention and affection—almost invariably was that the Fathers had handled the matter better than Aquinas had.

So, through Corbin's ministrations, I came for the first time in my career into vibrant contact with the patristic world. Yet I had never lost contact with Aquinas; in fact, Corbin sent me on a quest to uncover the Christological dimension of Thomas's doctrines of God and creation, and my doctoral thesis was substantially dedicated to Aquinas's thought, drawing him into conversation with the classic Protestant liberal Paul Tillich.[10]

During these Paris years, partly due to Corbin, I also began my careful reading of Hans Urs von Balthasar. That reading of Balthasar would intensify when I returned to Mundelein to teach in 1992, when the first of the John Paul II–generation seminarians began arriving. In these teaching years, I signed up to teach a course on Balthasar, which compelled me to read him. So, I spent roughly a year plowing through much of the Balthasarian corpus, which, of course, had a life-changing impact on me.[11]

I also continued my exploration of the patristic world through the ministrations of John Henry Newman, whom I began to read seriously not long after my return from doctoral studies. At Theological College, I had heard the great Church historian John Tracy Ellis, at the end of a homily, call Newman "the greatest Catholic theologian since Thomas Aquinas," and I finally got around to reading him with great interest and great care. As is well known, Aquinas is rather conspicuous by his absence in Newman, while the Fathers are front and center. Moreover, the middle-aged Newman, sent to Rome for studies in preparation for the Catholic priesthood, found the Scholasticism of mid-nineteenth-century Catholicism stifling, very much as Balthasar, de Lubac, and Ratzinger would a century later. Thus, Newman, in a way, completed my own patristic formation.

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10. Robert Barron, *A Study of the "De potentia" of Thomas Aquinas in Light of the "Dogmatik" of Paul Tillich* (San Francisco: Edwin Mellen, 1993).

11. Robert Barron, "How von Balthasar Changed My Mind," in *Renewing Our Hope: Essays for the New Evangelization* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 65–84.

Throughout these years, however, Thomas remained for me a great touchstone figure. In fact, my experience through this entire period of patristic exploration—from Corbin's presentations up through my reading of Newman—was that there is a deep continuity between the Fathers and the admittedly different language of Aquinas. I never experienced this as an either/or, as if in discovering Balthasar, I had to jettison the medieval master. There was no dreadful contradiction involved; on the contrary, I found these figures deeply congruent one with the other. The path seemed to lay, as someone described to me at one point, in an "open Thomism"—a firmly grounded Thomism that remained open to a ressourcement.

My point in offering this hopefully not too laborious summary of my own intellectual journey is that all of these waves and strains that I experienced in my own formation led me, by a winding path, to the conviction that the needful thing today is something like a ressourcement: not Catholic liberalism, not an isolated neo-scholasticism, but a rich recuperation of these great Catholic intellectual sources that are Christological in emphasis and inspiration.

General Principles of a New Ressourcement

Having sketched my own formation and journey into the ressourcement masters, I would like to offer four general principles of a new ressourcement. A first principle is this: *a new ressourcement must get over the battle between Thomas and the Fathers*. The war between neo-scholastic and ressourcement theologians, premised on the idea of some ineluctable opposition between them, is tiresome and unnecessary: we ought to cut the Gordian knot by claiming Aquinas as a Father, and therefore, one of the great sources that a new ressourcement would consult.

Let us admit that Thomas is indeed deeply biblical, profoundly spiritual, and eager to draw on patristic sources both West and East. Aquinas, in his *Summa*, famously cites Augustine more than he does Aristotle, but he also draws on John of Damascus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius. To say

that Thomas requires a split with the Church Fathers is simply not true—not even for Thomas himself. And let us readily concede that his is but one voice in a chorus of voices—and that neither his style nor philosophical form of expression is absolute. Hardly anyone today was formed in a starkly Scholastic context and feels the need to rebel against it—as did de Lubac, Balthasar, and Ratzinger.

But let us also recover Aquinas as the Common Doctor of the Church—by which I mean someone who gave particularly clear and systematic expression to the Church's teaching at a high level of academic articulation. And let us admit that many of the Aristotelian insights upon which Aquinas relies are not so historically conditioned as to be irrelevant today, but rather represent permanent achievements in intellection. A historicism obsessed with situating a Thomas or Aristotle within their particular context of time and place overlooks their perennial value. Thomas Aquinas ought to function as a *pierre de touche* for Catholic theologizing.

Second, in regard to Scripture, *a new ressourcement should frankly and unapologetically adopt a patristic style of exegesis*, one drawn more from the Alexandrian school than from the Antiochene. I'm obviously borrowing here from Newman, but I think his insight is particularly helpful in our context.[12] The Antiochene approach, when it devolves into its modern historical-critical guise, had become almost completely dominant in exegesis, but it was not feeding personal spirituality, preaching, or the evangelical mission of the Church. When I speak of the Alexandrian approach, I mean one marked by a typological interpretation sensitive to the various layers of meaning within the scriptural texts; to the coherent and mutually illuminating relationship between the Old and New Testaments, which was so central to de Lubac,

12. See John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2017), 235–40, and John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1908).

Daniélou, and company; and to the real divine authorship of the Bible—the singular voice that speaks through the entirety of the Scriptures.

Joseph Ratzinger's famous 1988 Erasmus lecture in New York is of decisive importance here.[13] Before the cream of the crop of Catholic biblical scholarship—including Brown and company—Ratzinger gave a seminal talk in which he praised the historical-critical method while also noticing its inherent limitations and questioning its dominance. Though Ratzinger was dismissed by the academic establishment, the paper had a profound impact on the theological landscape. One might think also in this context of N.T. Wright, whose own recovery of the stunning metanarrative of the entire Bible has been decisive in contemporary explorations of the Scriptures, including my own.[14]

Thirdly, in regard to ethics, *a new ressourcement ought to develop a virtue ethic grounded deeply in the Bible and in the saints*. Here, the ongoing project of retrieval would follow the lead of thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and James William McClendon. What draws these three together is a virtue ethics based upon a kind of narrativity: Aristotle's "good man," who teaches the moral life by example, is succeeded by Christ himself and by the saints as the objects of positive mimesis. In short, in seeking the right thing to do, we find the saint and do what he does. The excessively abstract and deductive rationalism of both neo-scholastic natural law ethics and proportionalism are overcome in this more holistic approach.

13. Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The 1988 Erasmus Lecture," *First Things*, https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/04/biblical-interpretation-in-crisis.

14. See Robert Barron, *The Great Story of Israel: Election, Freedom, Holiness* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2022), ix; and N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 121–43; *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013), 121–27.

My master in this field has been the Dominican Servais Pinckaers—the finest moral theologian since the Second Vatican Council—who managed a brilliant synthesis of the patristic and Thomistic approaches to ethics grounded in the Beatitudes.[15] Thomas, Pinckaers observes, discusses *beatitudo* in the very opening questions of the *prima secundae*, and comes to law only with question 90—and thereupon hangs a tale. The moral life begins not with the law but with *beatitudo*, with the nature of happiness; it is then followed by the virtues that make *beatitudo* possible; finally, it examines the laws that shape the virtues. This manner of construing the moral life puts the lie to Chesterton's clever but misleading quip that good morals, like good art, begins by drawing a line.[16] The line drawing, in point of fact, comes much later in the process. What comes first is the display of the objective goods that constitute the rightly ordered life; what follows are the virtues that make the achievement of that life possible; and only then come, finally, the laws that form the virtues. The genius of Pinckaers is that he shows that Aquinas is altogether patristic in that moral rhythm.

Finally, in regard to doctrine, *a new ressourcement must read the lesser logos from the standpoint of the Logos.* The basic problem, in doctrine, is logical—that is to say, determining which logos has the priority. Experiential-expressivism attempts to read the Logos of Christ from the standpoint of a lesser logos—or, in the language of the postliberals, to position Jesus by some frame of reference external to him. But this throws the study of doctrine off-kilter. If John is correct in the prologue of his Gospel, and Paul is correct in his Letter to the Colossians, you cannot read Jesus from the standpoint of a logos extrinsic to himself.

The new ressourcement must, therefore, resist and overcome this experiential-expressivist program. Christ, not

15. See Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 229.

16. G.K. Chesterton, "Our Note Book," *Illustrated London News*, May 5, 1928.

experience, must be the starting point. As Balthasar saw so clearly, Christ must interpret himself—or better, the interpreter must allow the form of Jesus to unfold according to its own inner logic, showing itself especially liturgically.[17] This is not to say, of course, that experience is not good or important; different forms of theological liberalism can be very useful indeed in terms of apologetics. But liberalism ought never to be the matrix for proper theological analysis, for the primacy given to experience in liberal theology is deeply problematic from a theo-logical standpoint. When Christ is positioned by something extrinsic to himself, he becomes marginalized; when he becomes marginalized, he becomes a secondary or even tertiary consideration. And Christ must remain the center.

Particular Concerns

Having considered general principles of a new ressourcement based on the theological landscape of the past century, I would like to look at some particular concerns based on the Church's evangelical proclamation in the digital space today, since the perennial project of resourcing the Catholic tradition must always relocate itself in the present. My apologetic and evangelical work in this arena over the past decades has revealed a number of pressing concerns among nonbelievers and seekers today that a new ressourcement ought to take seriously.

The first of these, unsurprisingly, is *the existence of God*. On my Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything) excursions, I have found, again and again, that this is the central question: Is there a God? How do you know? How can you make rational sense of such a proposition?[18] People, especially young people,

17. See, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009), 470–78, and *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 108–26.

18. "I'm Bishop Robert Barron, a Catholic bishop ready to answer any questions about God and religion from nonbelievers. AMA!" Reddit, September 26, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/d9n42v/im_bishop_robert_barron_a_catholic_bishop_ready/; "I'm

are leaving the Church today in record numbers because they are not finding answers to these questions; therefore, a new ressourcement ought to promote a new apologetics, recovering the rational attempts to justify belief in the existence of God—a tradition running from the Fathers up through Anselm and Aquinas.[19]

I can assure you that in the years I was coming of age, there was scant attention paid to the classical arguments for God's existence. They were written off as either too rationalistic to be taken seriously or as long-debunked relics from a pre-Kantian intellectual world, but in any event, as making no real difference in people's lives. Though Kant's so-called refutations of the classical arguments are wanting and betray very little understanding of what an Aquinas was up to, such arguments were hardly ever seriously considered or enthusiastically defended.

When the New Atheists rose to prominence, they simply rehearsed old arguments from Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud. Nevertheless, they were effective apologists and evangelists for atheism—and Christians in general, and Catholics in particular, were rather ineffective in answering them. Why? At least part of the answer is that, in the years following the Second Vatican Council, apologetics came to have a bad name, and we threw our intellectual weapons away. One notable exception was William Lane Craig, a Protestant apologist and philosopher who drew very successfully on the classical Catholic arguments in debating the New Atheists while so many Catholics simply wrung their hands.[20] We find another instructive

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Bishop Robert Barron, a Catholic bishop ready to answer questions from atheists, skeptics, and seekers. AMA!" Reddit, April 21, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/mvl4wt/im_bishop_robert_barron_a_catholic_bishop_ready/.

19. See *The New Apologetics: Defending the Faith in a Post-Christian Era*, ed. Matthew Nelson (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2022).

20. See, for example, William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).

case in the philosopher Edward Feser, a former atheist, who had long regarded the classical arguments as debunked but, when he finally read them and sought to understand them, discovered their persuasive power, becoming a kind of evangelist on fire for them.[21]

I believe that theologians of a new ressourcement should enter into renewed dialogue with Aquinas precisely on this point of demonstrating God's existence. I have found particular traction with a somewhat reconfigured version of the argument from contingency and also the implicit argument from the motivation of the will toward a final causality, toward some *summum bonum*, found at the beginning of the *prima secundae*.[22] We might also look to Augustine's sense of God as the necessary *prius* of all thought and action—that truth in itself and goodness in itself that is assumed by anyone seeking to know true things and to do good things.[23]

A second major area that theologians of the new ressourcement should explore is *the problem of disaffiliation*. The percentage of those in our country who claim no religious affiliation has grown from 3 percent in 1970 to fully 26 percent today.[24] Among Catholics, the figures are even worse, with 50 percent of millennials raised in the Church no longer practicing the faith.[25] And among Catholics, for every one person who joins the Catholic Church, six are leaving.[26] This was not

21. See Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2017).

22. *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3, I-II, qq. 1–2.

23. See, for example, *De civitate Dei* 8.7; *De magistro* 11–12; *Soliloquia* 1.12–15; *De trinitate* 12.24–25.

24. "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

25. "America's Changing Religious Landscape: Chapter 2," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-2-religious-switching-and-intermarriage.

26. David Masci and Gregory A. Smith, "Seven Facts about American Catholics," Pew Research Center, October 10, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/10/7-facts-about-american-catholics.

particularly a problem for the classical ressourcement thinkers, but it decidedly is for us.

The theological establishment has not come to terms with this rise in disaffiliation. I think here of David Tracy's famous reflection on the three publics of the theologian—namely, the wider society, the academy, and the Church. The last of these three has been the most ignored by academic theologians in the last fifty years. Theologians and the Church have not remained in fruitful dialogue, and while the former ruminate and enter into dialogue with their intellectual colleagues, their churches have entered a time of crisis. A new ressourcement, by contrast, must be passionately interested in applying their minds to the problem of disaffiliation, asking themselves how they might, in their field, draw people back into the Church.

And this is not simply a matter of institutional concern; rather, it constitutes an existential disaster for at least a couple of generations of Americans. When people accept the view that there is no God, no ultimate meaning, no purpose to life, that they came from nothing and will return to nothing—why are we surprised to see the numbers for anxiety, depression, and suicidality spiking among the young? For past generations of Catholics, Church attendance, ritual, and shared community all provided a context of meaning, so why are we not dedicating most of our theological energy to the purpose of repopulating our churches and parishes?

A third and final area of concentration should be *the self-invention culture*, which is directly repugnant to a Christian view of reality. The existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, in its most radical form, is now the default position of practically every young person in the West. I mean, of course, the view that there is no objective truth, goodness, or beauty, and that one, accordingly, has the right and privilege of choosing one's own values as one sees fit: "Existence precedes essence."[27] The Cartesian turn toward the subject, expressed in his famous

27. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 22, 24, 29.

Cogito ergo sum, has been radicalized beyond anything Descartes himself or even his most energetic epigones could have imagined—and it is causing a profound dissolution in the psyches of young people and wreaking real havoc in our society.[28] The *Casey* decision of the US Supreme Court gives a stunning expression to this perspective—namely, that the range and power of personal liberty are so great that freedom itself determines "one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, of the mystery of human life."[29] Today, of course, this comes to the fore in regard even to gender. There is an infinite variety of genders precisely because there are unlimited options for the free and self-determining will.

Pinckaers's distinction between freedom of indifference and freedom for excellence is apposite here.[30] The default position of so many is the freedom of indifference, wherein the subject autonomously hovers above the yes and the no. Equally apposite is Dietrich von Hildebrand's insistence that the objectively valuable should never be reduced to the merely subjectively satisfying.[31] The loss of an objective value to which all people can look up has resulted in—to put it in Girardian terms—a frenzy of mimetic violence, since everyone now looks resentfully around at the goods that others have invented. Theologians of the new ressourcement ought to combat the culture of self-invention by promoting the freedom for excellence and the display of objective value.

28. René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 101.

29. Casey v. Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania, 505 U.S. 833 (1992), no. 851.

30. See Servais Pinckaers, *Morality: The Catholic View*, trans. Michael Sherwin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 2001).

31. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, trans. Fr. Brian McNeil (Steubenville, OH: Hildebrand Project, 2016), 18–19, 26–27, 127–29, 438.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would offer a simple suggestion. Taking shape through this academic journal and gathering in a diverse community of thinkers, the new ressourcement project theologizes in a biblical and patristic key and unapologetically claims the medieval and ancient masters as our masters; thus, it ought to resituate itself on the far side of the divide that Balthasar characterized as the most tragic in the history of the Church: not the rupture between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity in the eleventh century, nor the rupture between Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century, but rather the rupture between theology and spirituality at the end of the thirteenth century.[32]

Prior to this era—from the patristic period through Thomas Aquinas—all of the great theologians were pastors and vice versa. If you had asked Chrysostom, Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, or Origen to distinguish between his theology and his spirituality, he would not have understood the question; the theologians *were* the spiritual masters—and very often the bishops. Yet now, we draw a sharp line between spiritual figures such as Eckhart, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila and the work of the theologian. Part of the new ressourcement ought to be a recovery of that integration.

Hence, preaching, conversion, and pastoral care should be central concerns of our work, even as it remains at a high and rigorous level. We are committed not simply to doing good academic work but to helping our Church and its people at a time of crisis. Theology, ultimately, is in service of the spiritual life and of prayer. If the new ressourcement can lead the way on this reintegration, it will make a huge contribution to the life of the Church.

Word on Fire was born, in many ways, of a desire—in the face of great evangelical challenges both inside and outside of the Church—to stop wringing our hands and to start doing

32. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1, *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 181–201.

something about it. *The New Ressourcement* journal will, I hope, contribute to that same ethos in the realm of theology. In this difficult time—inheriting, as we are, a fragmented intellectual landscape in the Church and facing down, as we must, an increasingly hegemonic secularism in the culture—we must simply get on with the intellectual work of the Church.