

**Acceptance Address for the Aquinas Medal
of the American Catholic Philosophical Association**

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When I read in the rules for the selection of an Aquinas medalist that a candidate “should be recognized as having contributed significantly to the development of philosophy in the Catholic tradition,” I felt a lot more comfortable receiving the medal than I did earlier while perusing the list of previous recipients, a list that includes a goodly number of genuine philosophical giants in addition to the rest of us. In fact, the wording is, to my mind, vague enough to allow me to count the stellar work of my former students as a contribution on my part to “the development of philosophy in the Catholic tradition.” So I gratefully accept the Aquinas medal with a clear conscience.

I also noticed in passing that those same rules make no explicit mention of St. Thomas Aquinas himself. I don’t know whether there’s any historical connection between the two, but this omission stirred some memories about the situation with Catholic philosophy as I was starting my own career in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. The generation just before mine had already eradicated almost any trace of Thomism from the graduate and even undergraduate curricula at most of the big Catholic universities in the United States. Catholic philosophy as it had been practice was deemed out of date, intellectually not with it, unimpressive by secular academic standards, hidden away in a ghetto, etc. It was also, to be honest, an embarrassment, especially when you were trying to gain the approval of the secular academic elites. (Notice how truth as a goal has passed out of sight; so much for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.) One indication of how bad things got is that in 1984 this very organization, the American Catholic Philosophical Association, seriously entertained at its annual business meeting the proposal to expunge the term ‘Catholic’ from the very name of the organization! (I may be mistaken, but I think I remember smoke emanating from the ears of Mary Catherine Sommers, God bless her, during the ensuing debate.)

The devastation wrought to the Church in America by this attitude and by its associated policies is incalculable, and we are still paying the price. In a moment I will say something about how ludicrous—indeed, how deliciously ludicrous—the fears about academic respectability were. But, to my mind, the most deplorable consequence has been that thousands upon thousands of Catholic college students were thereby robbed of their rightful legacy and sent out into the world without the chance to acquire a mature understanding of their own Faith or of how the serious practice of that Faith might benefit their professional lives as well as their private lives. Why even have Catholic colleges and universities if they don’t have as one of their central goals the formation of intellectually mature Catholic natural scientists, social scientists, historians, writers, sculptors, painters, literary experts, philosophers, theologians, doctors, lawyers, journalists, entrepreneurs, financial managers, accountants, engineers, architects, etc.—and, I should add, intellectually mature Catholic mothers and fathers? Yet, at least at the university where I worked for 37 years, the core curriculum does not effectively aim at this goal, and the very suggestion that it should aim at it cannot even be broached in polite conversation. In any case, it was concern with such matters that led me to devote the bulk of the last half of my career, directly or indirectly, to the education of undergraduates.

By the way, I don’t mean to imply, or to pretend, that I was completely innocent in all of this. As a seminarian in the mid-1960’s, I was one of those headstrong liberals demanding *aggiornamento* and railing against the sort of fuddy-duddy unreconstructed Thomistic Aristotelianism that I was destined

eventually to fall in love with. I remember vividly, while reading Ralph McNerny's *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* for the first time, coming across his entertaining description of what he imagined to be a typical seminary common room discussion in the 1960's. It was with deep shame for, and disgust with, my past self that I found myself forced to identify with the young know-nothing who was blithely casting aspersions on St. Thomas and all things Thomistic. "That was me! How did Ralph find out?"

In any case, it has turned out, fifty years later, that the unrelentingly advertised future demise of the Catholic philosophical tradition has, shall we say, failed to materialize. The past thirty years have witnessed a surprising number of Thomistic-Aristotelian incursions, not always recognized as such by their proponents, in mainstream English-speaking philosophy across a wide array of fields, including metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophy of nature, philosophical anthropology, and moral theory. For those who might be interested, I have provided some documentation for this claim in a 2014 paper entitled "The Vindication of St. Thomas."

Moreover, St. Thomas provides contemporary Catholic philosophers and theologians, even those who choose in the end to deviate from him, or add to him, in one way or another, with the philosophically most plausible starting points in metaphysics, philosophy of nature, moral theory, and philosophical anthropology, along with the deepest and most thoroughly worked out account of the relation between faith and reason. And this framework is attracting a sufficient number of younger scholars to ensure its being sustained in major universities at least for the short term future. In fact, there are surprisingly many younger Catholic philosophers and theologians who have dedicated their careers either to extending the Catholic intellectual tradition internally, as it were, or to putting that tradition into contact externally, as it were, with sympathetic subsections of mainstream philosophy and theology, or to both these tasks. This is something that would have been unimaginable in the 1970's and 1980's — as unimaginable as Ed Feser's delighting over the veritable library of standard 20th century scholastic textbooks that he has managed to accumulate. (I think of them like 1950's baseball cards: "I'll trade you this Klubertanz and this first English edition of Garrigou-Lagrange for a Vince Smith and a John Oesterle.")

But to my mind, an even more exciting development is the work of the Thomistic Institute of the Pontifical Faculty of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. I know that most of you are familiar with their work, and especially with the Aquinas 101 project, not to mention the Hillbilly Thomists singing group. What we have here is a major pedagogical initiative which is easily accessible to students and which, significantly, is not controlled by — or, we might say, is not under the thumb of — any university or group of university administrators. It's something which anyone can take advantage of and which teachers, wherever they are, can have their students take advantage of. And just as a way of putting my money where my mouth is, I am donating the honorarium that comes with the Aquinas Medal to the Thomistic Institute.

In short, the future is bright for Catholic philosophy. We are engaged in one of the most noble and most important of the works of mercy, instructing those who do not know. It is a role that Christ the King has entrusted to us and for which He has given us the wherewithal to do well. And at the end of my career I am given the consolation of seeing a myriad of young successors to those of us — including last year's Aquinas Medal recipient, Ed Houser — who toiled through leaner times.

I want to end on a personal note that seems appropriate for a Catholic widower during the month of November. I'm sorry that my wife didn't live long enough to be here in the flesh with me tonight. Not that she would have been impressed — Debbie was never much taken with academic hoopla. For that very reason and many others, she was the perfect spouse for me, even if I did not always perceive this. I, on the other hand, have been allotted a few extra years to atone for not having been anywhere near a perfect spouse for her. For this opportunity I am grateful.