

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series  
*The Mystery of Israel and the Church*

Fall 2013 – Series 13  
*Creation and Covenant*

Talk #5

*Transcendental Properties of Being and the  
Hierarchy of Creation*



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It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by  
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# *Transcendental Properties of Being and the Hierarchy of Creation*

We have seen that God willed to create a great many levels of being, so that His infinite goodness may be more completely manifested. Now I would like to look again at the different levels of being. Philosophers in the scholastic tradition speak of the “transcendental properties of being.” The term “transcendental” refers to the fact that there are certain properties that are *common to all beings* and thus transcend all categories of being. St. Thomas identifies five transcendental properties: nature, unity, distinction, truth, and goodness. Many other philosophers consider there to be a sixth property, which is beauty. I would also add the transcendental property of natural inclination, which takes two forms: receptivity, and self-communication (the inclination to communicate oneself to others). In other words, everything, insofar as it *is*, has a nature, has unity, is distinct from others, is true, is good, has beauty, and has a natural inclination to the good. Insofar as it falls short from the fullness of being it ought to have, it will also be lacking conformity with its nature, unity, individuality, truth, goodness, beauty, and dynamism to the good.

Each of these properties are manifested on all levels of being, but they are manifested in higher ways in the higher created beings. In particular, they are present in a very special way in created persons (human beings and angels). They are infinitely present in God Himself.

## *Nature*

The transcendental of nature has received very little development, and St. Thomas only briefly mentions it under the name of “*res*,” or “thing,” which can be translated as “endowed with an essence or nature.” “Essence” is that by which a thing is what it is; “nature” refers to an intrinsic principle of movement or operation. In reality, essence and nature are one, for a thing’s intrinsic principle of movement or operation is that by which a thing is what it is.<sup>1</sup>

The hierarchy of being that we observe in the world (as seen so graphically in a zoo!), corresponds to a hierarchy of natures. The higher the being, the higher the nature according to which it exists. Every created nature is a finite participation of the fullness of God’s being. The higher the being, the greater the participation.

This property of being is indicated in the first chapter of Genesis when the text emphasizes that God made each living thing “according to its kind.” For example, Genesis 1:25 says: “And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the cattle according to their kinds, and everything that creeps upon the ground according to its

kind. And God saw that it was good.” God made a world in which there are stable natures, each endowed with its own essence, natural inclinations, and properties. The world is not a chaos, but a marvelous symphony of different natures. The higher the nature, the more marvelous the natural inclinations and operations that spring from the nature.

## *Unity*

Unity is a transcendental property of being. This means that everything that is, insofar as it is, is one. If a thing completely loses its unity and becomes divided, it will no longer be one thing, but two. For this reason unity is a transcendental. Everything that is must have a certain unity by which it is one thing. The loss of unity means the loss of being. In other words, when a substance can be divided in two such that two new identical substances are formed, such as a rock, the unity is very low. The two new substances are hardly distinguishable. When a substance can lose various parts but still retain its essential identity, such as a human being who may lose a leg or arm, etc., the unity of the human being can be seen to be much greater, for the disintegration must be grave in order to cause the subject to lose its identity.

There are grades of unity just as there are grades of being. The higher we ascend in the levels of being, the higher the unity. The unity of a compound thing (material things) will be lesser than the absolute unity of a simple, spiritual thing (God, angels, and the human soul). We can see the lesser degree of unity in material things like rocks in the ease with which they can be broken apart and divided into two new rocks each with its own new property of unity. Living beings have a greater unity given by their animating principle (soul). Of living beings, animals have a greater unity than plants, and rational animals have a greater unity than brute animals. This greater unity can be seen in the self-consciousness of man who can reflect on himself.

Man’s soul, finally, has a much greater unity than his body, or even than the composite of body and soul. For that composite can be divided in death, but man’s soul is naturally indestructible. Purely spiritual beings, finally, have a still greater unity, since no part of them can be destroyed, and thus they cannot undergo substantial change.

Spiritual creatures, however, are not completely simple as God is simple. Every spiritual being is simple in that it is not composed of form and matter, but is pure form. Nevertheless, the angels are not entirely simple because they have the composition of act and potency, substance and accidents, and essence and the act of being. The accidents of the angels would be their moral qualities—virtue

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<sup>1</sup> See St. Thomas Aquinas, *De esse et essentia*, ch. 1.

or vice—and their infused ideas. In this latter regard the higher angels are simpler, with a more unified and overarching knowledge, than the lower angels.

St. Thomas explains this by supposing that the higher angels have a more synthetic intelligence. Instead of supposing that the higher angels have more concepts than the lower angels, he thinks that the opposite is the case. The higher angels know all things through fewer, more all-embracing principles. The same is true in human spiritual activities. The greatest philosopher is not the one who knows the most facts or can memorize the history of philosophy, but the one who grasps universal truths through the highest and most universal principles. Likewise in the spiritual life, the holiest souls are the simplest and most transparent, in that they are focused on just one end: the glory of God and conformity with His will. Generally we are too complicated, going in all different directions.

The principle that being and unity go together has many applications in social life and in the Church: “Every city or house divided against itself will not stand” (Mt 12:25). For example, the Church cannot lose its essential unity, as it cannot lose its being, according to the promise of Christ. The Church does not lose its unity in the schisms and lacerations it suffers, for that unity always remains in the part that remains in communion with the successor of Peter.

God is maximally one. His unity alone is that of absolute simplicity. All other unities imply some composition. All the transcendentals are hierarchically ordered, from the lowest kind of being up to God, who is maximally Being, One, True, Good, and Beautiful.

### ***Individuality and Personhood***

Another transcendental mentioned by St. Thomas is *distinction*, which he refers to as *aliquid*. I prefer to translate this as *individuality*. Everything that exists is individual, which means distinct from other things and thus unique. And the higher it is, the more individual it becomes. The *person* is precisely what is most individual in being. Just as persons have much greater unity than rocks or brute animals, so too they have immeasurably greater individuality.

The classical definition of “person” was given by the sixth-century Roman Christian philosopher, Boethius (480-524), who calls a person “an individual (substance) of a rational nature.” A person therefore is a complete (subsisting) individual of an intellectual or spiritual nature—an individual endowed with rationality or intellect.

St. Thomas takes up and explains this definition in his *Summa of Theology*.<sup>2</sup> The central idea is that “person” is

2 St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1: “In a more special and perfect way, the particular and the individual are found in rational substances, which have dominion over their own actions, and which are not only made to act, like others, but which can act of themselves; for actions belong to singulars. Therefore also the individuals of a rational nature have a special name even among other substances; and this name is ‘person.’”

a name that indicates a special perfection of individuality, which consists in *self-dominion*, being a master of one’s own actions, making oneself distinct through one’s own acts. Persons are those who are capable of acting of themselves and determining themselves, and thus are capable of giving themselves to others and entering into communion. The person has an individuality that is forged through a moral history, a history of free actions which form personal identity.

St. Thomas observes that the notion of person “signifies what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature.”<sup>3</sup> Thus it applies not only to men and the angels, but also, in a more excellent way, to God.

The etymology of “person” is curious. Boethius notes that the etymology of the word comes from the theater:

The word “person” seems to be taken from those “persons” who represented men in comedies and tragedies. For person comes from *sounding through* [*per sonare*: to sound through], since a greater volume of sound is produced through the cavity in the mask. These “persons” or masks the Greeks called *prosopa*, as they were placed on the face and covered the features up to the eyes.<sup>4</sup>

The term “person” was later transferred from the mask to the personage represented by the actor. In this sense of “protagonist” it came to signify a figure of special dignity. St. Thomas explains why a theatrical term could come to be applied to the Blessed Trinity:

Although this name “person” may not belong to God as regards the origin of the term, nevertheless it excellently belongs to God in its objective meaning. For as famous men were represented in comedies and tragedies, the name “person” was given to signify those who held high dignity. Hence, those who held high rank in the Church came to be called “persons.” For this reason some define the person as a “hypostasis [individual substance] distinct by reason of dignity.” And *because subsistence in a rational nature is of high dignity, therefore every individual of a rational nature is called a “person.”* Now the dignity of the divine nature excels every other dignity; and thus the name “person” pre-eminently belongs to God.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, “person” is a term indicating a special dignity, the dignity of being able to act for oneself and of being an end in oneself. Every human being is equally a person by nature, and God is pre-eminently *Personal*. *Personality* is realized in Him in an infinitely higher way, so much so that He is a communion of three divine Persons!

Personhood thus signifies that aspect of being which is most incommunicable, whereas nature signifies precisely

Thus the term ‘individual substance’ is placed in the definition of person, as signifying the singular in the genus of substance; and the term ‘rational nature’ is added, as signifying the singular in rational substances.”

3 St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 29, a. 3.

4 Boethius, *De duabus naturis*, ch. 3 (*PL* 64, 1344).

5 St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 29, a. 3, ad 2.

the aspect of being which can be shared. For this reason the three subsisting relations in God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are termed “Persons,” for the relation alone in God is incommunicable. The Father alone is Father; the Son alone is Son; and the Spirit alone is Spirit proceeding from Father and Son. Those relations are incommunicable. However, at the same time the three Persons are consubstantial: sharing the divine nature. God is one in nature, but three incommunicable Persons distinct only in relation.

### Truth

We have seen that everything that is has the property of having a determinate nature. Because it has a determinate nature, it is intelligible, for a nature is capable of being grasped by a mind that is in conformity with it. This leads us to the transcendental property of *truth*.

If things made by man are said to be true when they correspond to the idea of their makers, then this would be no less true of all natural things with respect to the divine mind and the divine plan which is their blueprint. Insofar as a thing corresponds to the divine idea that is its source, it is said to have ontological truth. However, insofar as it falls away from its exemplar in the divine mind through some defect, it is said to fall short of full ontological truth. In this sense, sin and vice can be said to have an ontological falsity, for they are not true to the divine plan.

Given that truth is in things insofar as they correspond to the intellect from which they were created, it follows that all things are true, insofar as they have being. Clearly all things are knowable to God, and they are knowable to the degree that they participate in being. Greater being means greater knowability, for there is a higher level of being to be known.

St. Thomas shows that ontological truth is a transcendental property of being (convertible with being) as follows:

As good has the nature of what is desirable, so truth is related to knowledge. Now everything, in as far as it has being, so far is it knowable. Wherefore it is said in book III of *De Anima* that “the soul is in some manner all things,” through the senses and the intellect. And therefore, as good is convertible with being, so is the true. But as good adds to being the notion of desirable, so the true adds relation to the intellect.<sup>6</sup>

Since truth is a transcendental, it follows that God, who is the first being and Being itself, is also the first truth and Truth itself. St. Thomas shows this as follows:

Truth is found in the intellect according as it apprehends a thing as it is; and in things according as they have being conformable to an intellect. This is to the greatest degree found in God. For His being is not only conformed to His intellect, but it is the very act of His intellect; and His act of understanding is the measure and cause of every other being and of every other intellect, and He Himself is His own

existence and act of understanding. Whence it follows not only that truth is in Him, but that He is truth itself, and the sovereign and first truth.<sup>7</sup>

Just as everything has ontological truth insofar as it conforms with the divine Idea of it, so we can speak of the lack of ontological truth—ontological falsity—when something falls away from God’s Idea of it. This occurs when our free will culpably deviates from the divine Will through disordered free choice. Sin thus destroys not only goodness, but also ontological truth and beauty. It also destroys unity by introducing division between man and God, between men, and within a man himself.

### Goodness

What is the good? Aristotle defines goodness as “what all things desire.”<sup>8</sup> This is not a proper definition, because good, like all the transcendentals, is such a primary notion that it cannot be defined by something more primary. Good is “defined” by its effect, which is to attract an appetite as an end. Thus *the good is what is suitable as an end for something*—that is, for an appetite or a natural tendency. Something is the end of something else insofar as it perfects and preserves it. Thus the good is that which perfects; it is the final cause. St. Thomas says: “The notion of goodness consists in the fact that something is capable of perfecting another by being its end.”<sup>9</sup>

We have stated above that goodness is a transcendental property of being. This means that everything, insofar as it is, is good. However, insofar as it is lacking the being that it ought to have, it will be lacking in goodness, and thus will be evil. For something will be capable of perfecting and attracting other beings only insofar as it has the full being that it ought to have. Goodness differs from being in the consideration of the mind, for goodness adds a relation to appetite; it is being considered as desirable in some respect, and thus worthy of love in some way.

That being, insofar as it is, is good, can be seen from revelation in the account of Genesis 1, in which after each day of creation God saw that it was good. Similarly, Wisdom 1:14 states: “For he created all things that they might exist, and the creatures of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them.” St. Paul, in 1 Timothy 4:4, says that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”

How do we demonstrate philosophically that everything, insofar as it is, is good? St. Thomas gives two demonstrations. The simplest is that everything naturally desires its

<sup>7</sup> *ST I*, q. 16, a. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, I. See St. Thomas, *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 1: “All who rightly define *good* put in its notion something about its status as an end. The Philosopher accordingly says that they excellently defined good who said that it is “that which all things desire.”

<sup>9</sup> St. Thomas, *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 2.

<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 16, a. 3.

own being and tries to preserve it as much as it can. We see this in ourselves and in the animal world. However, in an analogical sense, it can also be seen in the world of plants and inanimate things, for each thing naturally resists corruption and substantial change. From this we can infer that the being of everything is naturally desirable, just as corruption is naturally repugnant to every being. Thus the being of everything is good, in that its preservation is naturally desired.

Finally, the most common objection against the thesis that goodness is a property of being, is the experience that some beings are evil, whether physically or morally. The answer to this powerful objection, as we saw last week, lies in grasping that evil consists essentially in the lack of the being that ought to be present. Hence evil always goes together with the lack of due being, just as goodness always goes together with the presence of a certain level of being.<sup>10</sup>

### Beauty

Although St. Thomas does not mention beauty as a transcendental property of being in the three early articles in which he explains the nature of the transcendentals (*De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1; q. 21, a. 1; *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 3), it would appear from his commentary on Dionysius that he also, following Dionysius, regards it as a universal property of being, for he says that beauty is in all things, each according to its kind.<sup>11</sup>

Although all the transcendentals are really convertible with being, they nevertheless add something to our understanding of being. What does the notion of beauty add to that of being?<sup>12</sup> We have seen that St. Thomas explains

10 See St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 2: “No being can be spoken of as evil, formally as being, but only so far as it lacks being. Thus a man is said to be evil, because he lacks some virtue; and an eye is said to be evil, because it lacks the power to see well.”

11 Jan Aertsen, in his excellent book, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas*, 336, argues that St. Thomas did not consider beauty to be a transcendental, in part because it does not figure in these three texts (especially *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1). However, these texts do not claim to make an exhaustive list. This can be seen through the fact that only in *De veritate* q. 1, a. 1, does St. Thomas give five transcendentals. In the earlier text *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 3, and in the later text *De veritate* q. 21, a. 1, he lists only three transcendentals: one, true, and good. The fact that he neglected to mention *res* and *aliquid* in the two latter texts does not mean that he changed his mind and did not consider them as transcendentals. It seems rather that St. Thomas did not intend to make an exhaustive list, but to consider those most important for the subject at hand. By the same token, the fact that beauty is lacking in *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1 does not mean that he did not consider it a transcendental. Nowhere does he deny that beauty is a transcendental.

12 On this question, see Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* trans. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), ch. 5; Francis Kovach, *Die Ästhetik des Thomas von Aquin* (Berlin and New York, 1961); “The Transcendentality of Beauty in Thomas Aquinas,” in P. Wilpert (ed.), *Die Metaphysik im Mittelalter* (Miscellanea

the distinction between truth and goodness through the relation to our spiritual faculties. Truth lies in the relation or correspondence of being to our intellect, and goodness implies correspondence to an upright will, for the good is what all desire. Where does that leave beauty? Beauty cannot be a relation to a third spiritual faculty, for there are only two: intellect and will.

In the common sense notion of beauty—that which is pleasing to sight—we find a reference to the cognitive *and* the appetitive faculties at once, and on both the intellectual and sensible levels. The cognitive faculties are indicated by sight, both intellectual and sensible, and the appetitive are indicated by the fact that beauty is pleasing or delightful to the intellectual and sensible appetites. Thus beauty adds to being a relation to both cognition and affectivity, on both the intellectual and the sensible levels. For beauty, after being grasped by the cognitive faculties, is what attracts one to love and arouses affectivity. It thus has to do both with the cognitive and appetitive faculties of man—both the intellect and senses, on the one hand, and the will and emotions, on the other.<sup>13</sup>

Beauty is what is good and pleasing to the cognitive faculties. It is this that distinguishes beauty from goodness in general. The beautiful can be said to be a “kind of good”<sup>14</sup>: the good precisely for the intellect and senses. In an article on the causes of love, St. Thomas compares beauty and goodness as follows:

The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms the desire; while the notion of the beautiful is that which calms the desire, by being seen or known. . . . Thus it is evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty: so that “good” means that which simply pleases the appetite; while the beautiful is something pleasant to apprehend.<sup>15</sup>

Beauty is what the mind’s eye judges to be good and pleasing. Hence beauty adds to the notion of being a relation to the cognitive faculties, which is a relation of goodness or attraction. Jacques Maritain explains:

The beautiful is what gives joy, not all joy, but joy in knowledge; not the joy peculiar to the act of knowing, but a joy superabounding and overflowing from such an act

Mediaevalia, vol. 2) (Berlin, 1963); Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge, MA, 1988); Marie-Dominique Philippe, *Philosophie de l’art*, vol. 2 (Beauchesne: Éditions Universitaires, 1994).

13 See Francis Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty*, 242: “Thomas establishes the place of transcendental truth and goodness by considering the two rational powers of the human soul, the intellect and the will, *separately*. . . . But if this is so, why could not the two powers be considered *jointly*. . . ? If we do so, we may recognize the following proposition to be true: “Every being is cognitively delightful,” and this is a realization resulting from considering ‘being’ affirmatively and relatively, relating it simultaneously to the intellect and to the will.”

14 See Cajetan’s commentary on *ST I-II*, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.

15 St. Thomas, *ST I-II*, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.

because of the object known. If a thing exalts and delights the soul by the bare fact of its being given to the intuition of the soul, it is good to apprehend, it is beautiful.<sup>16</sup>

What makes the beautiful object pleasing to contemplate? The beautiful thing will be pleasing insofar as it manifests *form, order, and clarity*, for that is what delights the cognitive power as its proper good.<sup>17</sup> The senses and the intellect know things by receiving their form and grasping their order and interrelations with clarity. Thus form, order, and clarity are the proper good of the cognitive powers. The clearer the form and the more harmonious the order, the more they delight sense and intellect.<sup>18</sup>

The form of things is that by which things are, that by which they are one, that by which they are knowable, and that by which they are good. The form is also that by which things have a determined essence or nature, a natural inclination, and a specific individuality.<sup>19</sup> Things therefore will also be pleasing to sight insofar as they manifest the other transcendentals: nature, natural inclination, unity, individuality, truth, and goodness. Things will be especially pleasing to sight to the degree that they manifest form with clarity or splendor. For this reason we speak of beauty with regard to the highest senses, which are sight and hearing. Only these senses can grasp proportion and the splendor of form.<sup>20</sup>

In an article on goodness as a final cause, St. Thomas explains how beauty differs logically from goodness:

Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally, for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and consequently goodness is praised as beauty. But they differ logically. Goodness properly relates to the appetite, for goodness is what all things desire. Therefore it has the aspect of an end, for the appetite is a kind of move-

ment towards a thing. On the other hand, beauty relates to the cognitive faculty; for *beautiful things are those which please when seen*. Hence *beauty consists in due proportion*; for the senses delight in things duly proportioned, as in what is after their own kind—because even sense is a sort of proportion, just as is every cognitive faculty. Now since knowledge is by assimilation, and similarity relates to form, beauty properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause.<sup>21</sup>

This text gives the foundation for proposing beauty as a transcendental property of being. St. Thomas says that it is identical fundamentally with the good, which we know is identical fundamentally with being. Thus beauty, like goodness, is co-extensive with being. However, the notion of beauty differs from the notion of goodness. For goodness is based on a relation to the appetite, whereas the beautiful adds a relation to the cognitive powers (the intellect and the sense faculties).<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, beauty, like truth, is connected with the formal cause, whereas the good is a final cause. Thus beauty is spoken of as “the splendor of the form.”

How then does beauty differ from truth? For both truth and beauty are based on the form and imply a relation to the intellect. *The notion of beauty adds to truth the power to please and delight the intellect and the senses*. Thus the notion of beauty presupposes that of goodness, which is not the case of truth. *Beauty is the good for the cognitive faculties*.<sup>23</sup>

St. Thomas makes the very interesting observation in *ST I, a. 5, a. 4, ad 1* that the senses and the intellect delight in harmony and proportion because the cognitive powers are themselves a kind of harmony and proportion. They are a harmony in that they represent exterior things by possessing their form. Each thing delights in what is similar to it. The beautiful, therefore, pleases the mind’s eye because the beautiful object has a certain connaturality with the mind, precisely by exhibiting order, harmony, and clarity of form.

But do all things have order, harmony, and clarity of form? Because God created all things with order and harmony, He has implanted this order and harmony within them, in their very natures and in their relationships with one another.<sup>24</sup> Thus all things, insofar as they have the perfection of their being, will also have beauty. The variety

16 Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), 19.

17 See St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 39, a. 8: “Beauty (species) has a likeness to the property of the Son. For beauty includes three conditions, (1) ‘integrity’ or ‘perfection,’ since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; (2) due ‘proportion’ or ‘harmony’; and lastly (3), ‘brightness’ or ‘clarity.’”

18 See Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 20: “If beauty delights the mind, it is because beauty is essentially a certain excellence or perfection in the proportion of things to the mind. Hence the three conditions assigned to it by St. Thomas: integrity, because the mind likes being; proportion, because the mind likes order and likes unity; lastly and above all brightness or clarity, because the mind likes light and intelligibility.”

19 Matter is the principle of individuation within a given species. However, things are primarily individualized by their forms. Thus in the angelic world, every angel is individualized by his particular angelic nature.

20 See St. Thomas, *ST I-II*, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3: “Those senses which chiefly regard the beautiful, which are the most cognitive, viz. sight and hearing, as ministering to reason; for we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds. But in reference to the other objects of the other senses, we do not use the expression “beautiful,” for we do not speak of beautiful tastes, and beautiful odors.”

21 *ST I*, a. 5, a. 4, ad 1.

22 See St. Thomas, *ST I-II*, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3; and *In De divinis nominibus*, book 4, lectio 5 (my translation): “Although the beautiful and the good are the same with regard to the subject, because both clarity and harmony are contained in the notion of the good, nevertheless, they differ according to reason. For the beautiful adds something to goodness, namely, a relation of that being to the cognitive power.”

23 See St. Albert the Great, *Super De div. nomin.*, ch. 4, no. 71 (*Opera Omnia* 37/1, p. 181): “The beautiful proceeds from the apprehension of the true, insofar as it has the aspect of good.” This work dates from the period in which St. Thomas was St. Albert’s student.

24 See Wisdom 11:20: “But you have arranged all things by measure and number and weight.”

of modes of being is manifested in the manifold variety of beauty. But to the degree that things lack the perfection of being they ought to have, and thus come to lack their proper order and harmony, they will also lack beauty. Beauty, therefore, like all the other transcendentals, exists analogously in each thing, according to its level of being, as Plato points out in the *Symposium*. The beauty of rocks is different (and less) than that of plants, irrational animals, created persons, and God. And within each species, beauty differs according as the creature is endowed with the fullness of accidental perfections that it should have.

If the whole of creation is marked by beauty, that beauty culminates in the Word Incarnate. In his discussion of the Persons of the Trinity, St. Thomas Aquinas remarks that beauty, although proper to the whole Trinity, is appropriated in a special way to Christ, as power is appropriated to the Father, and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. The Son of God is associated with beauty, both in His divinity and His humanity, because He is the perfect image of the Father—“the image of the invisible God”—in which nothing is lacking. Thus He perfectly embodies integrity because he is consubstantial with the Father. In the same way He embodies proportion and harmony, because He is the perfect likeness of the Father. He who sees Jesus, sees the Father. By the same token, as the Word of God, He is infinite Splendor and Clarity. St. Thomas writes:

The third [splendor] agrees with the property of the Son, as the Word, which is the light and splendor of the intellect, as Damascene says (*De Fide Orthodoxa* 3.3). Augustine alludes to the same when he says (*De Trinitate* 6.10): “As the perfect Word, not wanting in anything, and, so to speak, the art of the omnipotent God,” etc.<sup>25</sup>

Pope Benedict alluded to this text of Augustine and Aquinas connecting the beauty of God’s Word with Art in his brief address at the conclusion of the Spiritual Exercises on Feb. 23, 2013, a few days before his abdication. The spiritual exercises had focused on the psalms and the *art* of believing and praying:

The medieval theologians translated the word ‘logos’ not only as ‘verbum,’ but also as ‘ars’: ‘verbum’ and ‘ars’ are interchangeable. Only with these two words together does there appear, for the medieval theologians, the full significance of the word ‘logos.’ ‘Logos’ is not only a mathematical reason; ‘logos’ has a heart: ‘logos’ is also love. Truth is beautiful and truth and beauty go together: beauty is the seal of truth.<sup>26</sup>

Beauty is how we find the truth and fall in love with it, and it continues to sustain us in our service to the Truth.

Since beauty is the “seal of truth,” contemplation of the things of God is essentially ordered not simply to God’s truth as such, but to the beauty and splendor of the truth. It should be a loving contemplation of the truth that attracts through its beauty.

### *Natural Inclination*

Since every creature has a given nature, every creature has a natural principle of movement and rest, which we can refer to as natural inclination. I suggest that natural love or inclination can be considered as a kind of transcendental property of being. Every being, through its nature, is naturally inclined to its proper ends. This natural inclination is spoken of by St. Thomas Aquinas as natural love, appetite, or desire.<sup>27</sup>

Dante gives a beautiful description of this transcendental property in Canto 1 of the *Paradiso*:

So she made matters plain: “All things possess  
 order amongst themselves: this order is  
 the form that makes the world resemble God.  
 Thence the high beings read the signs, the trace  
 of that eternal Power who is the end  
 for which the form is set in time and place.  
 All natures in this order lean and tend  
 each in distinctive manner to its Source,  
 some to approach more near and others less.  
 Whence from their various ports all creatures move  
 On the great sea of being, with each one  
 ferried by instinct given from above.  
 This is what makes the fire rise toward the moon;  
 this, the prime mover of the mortal heart,  
 this makes the heavy earth condense in one;  
 Nor does this bow with target-cleaving art  
 strike only things that lack intelligence,  
 but beings made with intellect and love.  
 The glorious world-ordaining providence  
 forever stills the highest heaven with light,  
 beyond the spinning of the swiftest sphere,  
 And to that place as to our destined site  
 we’re speeded by the power of that cord  
 shooting each arrow in its happy flight.  
 Often it’s true a form may not accord

<sup>25</sup> *ST I*, q. 39, a. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Benedict XVI, Address at the conclusion of the Spiritual Exercises, Feb. 23, 2013, available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20130223\\_esercizi-spirituali\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130223_esercizi-spirituali_it.html). English translation at <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350442?eng=y>.

<sup>27</sup> See St. Thomas, *ST I-II*, q. 27, a. 2, ad 3: “Natural love, which is in all things, is caused by some knowledge. This knowledge does not exist in the natural things themselves, but in he who instituted their nature.” St. Thomas cites Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, ch. 4, as the source for the thesis that love can be found in all things.

with the intent of him who works the art  
because the matter's deaf and won't respond:

So, from this course, a creature may depart  
if it should have the power, despite the push,  
to swerve away and veer off from its start,  
And as you'll see a fall of lightning flash  
from the high clouds, so cheating pleasures skew  
that first urge, and they plunge it to the earth.

No more amazement should it bring to you  
that you ascend, than if a mountain stream  
should tumble rushing to the plains below.

But it would be a cause of just surprise  
if, free of every bar, you should remain  
like a still flame on earth, and not arise.”

Then to the heavens she turned her gaze again.<sup>28</sup>

The natural inclination or love that is in each thing is the principal means by which God draws creatures to Himself.

Man as a personal creature is endowed with natural inclinations that are very different from other creatures. We do not simply incline to the center of a gravitational field, like rocks, or to pleasures of sense, like animals. We also have natural inclinations that correspond to our spiritual nature. We naturally seek to know the truth, and especially the truth about the first causes of things. This natural desire to know is man's dignity as a rational creature. In addition, we have a natural desire for communion and to give ourselves in love to another person and to receive the reciprocal gift of self of that other.<sup>29</sup>

These spiritual inclinations make us naturally desire God, as the First Cause, the Final End, and as the Infinite Lover who has loved us first and seeks our heart in return.

St. Thomas thus holds that every rational creature has a natural desire for God, and for the greatest possible union with Him. St. Augustine gave classical expression to this idea in the first chapter of his *Confessions*: “You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they repose in You.”

As the object of desire, Beauty (like Goodness), is intimately connected with love. On the one hand, beauty engenders and nurtures love. St. Augustine began his first work, *De pulchro et apto*, with the question, “What do we love, if it be not beauty?”<sup>30</sup> And in the *Confessions* he laments, “Late have I loved Thee, Beauty, ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved Thee!”<sup>31</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius ends his

chapter on beauty and goodness in *The Divine Names* with a magnificent description of how beauty engenders love:

And so it is that all things must desire, must yearn for, must love, the Beautiful and the Good. Because of it and for its sake, subordinate is returned to superior, equal keeps company with equal, superior turns providentially to subordinate, each bestirs itself and all are stirred to do and to will whatever it is they do and will because of the yearning for the Beautiful and the Good.<sup>32</sup>

This Love for the Beautiful and Good is infinitely in God, or rather, God is Love. Pseudo-Dionysius continues:

And we may be so bold as to claim also that the Cause of all things loves all things in the superabundance of His goodness, that because of this goodness He makes all things, brings all things to perfection, holds all things, together, returns all things. The divine longing is Good seeking good for the sake of the Good.<sup>33</sup>

28 Dante, *Paradise*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: The Modern Library, 2007).

29 See John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* 10.

30 St. Augustine, *Confessions* 4.20.

31 *Confessions* 10.38.

32 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names* 4.10, in *Pseudo Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 79.

33 Ibid.