

Colloquī

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A journal for restless minds

Catholic Heterodoxy

Searching for the dox in orthodox

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Catholic Heterodoxy

Searching for the dox in orthodox

WORDS MATTER. Such a sentiment is suggestive of a by-gone age when there were far fewer words from which to choose, of an age then unencumbered by the fuzzy fog of swirling spin and tortured logic, of emojis, acronyms, and indecipherable alphabetic cyber-soup.

There was a time when what was meant of what was said flew straight and true as an arrow should; no equivocating, no conjugational tête-à-tête, no allusive parsing to pare the mumbo from the jumbo.

Once upon a time yes meant yes, no meant no, and maybe ... well ... meant maybe or perhaps. Right was right, it could never be that which it was rightly

not, which is to say it could be neither wrong nor left nor anything else but "perfectly" correct. Truth could not be bought nor compromised; true was true of its nature, never false nor warped by the bending. Up always pointed up, never down nor somewhere in-between. Good and evil were never friends but relentless foes engaged in never-ending battle for the soul of man.



And men were men and women too, souls created by God in his image and likeness, so wonderfully made and equal in his sight, the same yet different, co-dependent for without the other each was incomplete, barren, sterile and ill-conceived.

Of that time few dare recall lest they be taxed the more in poor pursuit of foolish folly. "The past is best forgotten for where's the profit recollecting ancient dust!" shouts

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

the fool who would deny today's connection to the endless unbroken chain of yesterdays. There is no purpose worth remembering what was then for as in the line from *The Go-Between*, "the past is a foreign country. They do things differently there."¹

There is of late a troubling trend toward dangling participles and worried tenses, bitter verbs, disreputable objects and obsessive possessives, misspelt youth with vial cursives, fractured phrases, vulgar gutturals and uttered nonsense. It is enough to drive a sober pin to ink!

God gifted man with an incorporeal mind and the uniquely human ability to convey transcendent thought beyond himself. Words have meaning and purpose and it is through language—the use of words in a structured way—that man can convey thoughts, concepts and abstract ideas. It is through language that God reveals himself to man and through it man comes to know God.

And yet, like heirs to unearned fortune, we care but little for the inheritance. Like the prodigal son, we believe we deserve it, we desire it because it is ours by right, and when it does come into our possession we carelessly abuse it.

A thought is produced by thinking, the exclusive activity of a conscious, transcendent mind. Thoughts are as unique and fleeting as snowflakes, as welcome as a soft summer's breeze or as ill-attended as a robocall over dinner. The quality of a thought depends on the quantity and effort

employed by the mind to its unique purpose, thinking.

There are, of course, differed minds as varied as the vessels in which the mind resides. Some have a bent for genius, others of more modest means, still others of a simpler nature and then there are those who dwell among the angels. Whether genius or of a more common stature, a mind must be nourished and well-fed for it to reasonably and rationally think so as to produce good thought. A starved mind is a mind so atrophied it cannot think the smallest thought without serious penalty.

Once there were lost islands, but most of them have been found; once there were lost causes, but many of them have been retrieved; but there is one lost art that has not been definitely recovered, and without which no civilization can long survive, and that is the art of controversy. The hardest thing to find in the world today is an argument. Because so few are thinking, naturally there are found but few to argue. Prejudice there is in abundance and sentiment too, for these things are born of enthusiasms without the pain of labor. Thinking, on the contrary, is a difficult task; it is the hardest work a man can do — that is perhaps why so few indulge in it. Thought-saving devices have been invented that rival labor-saving devices in their ingenuity. Fine-sounding phrases like "Life is bigger than logic," or "Progress is the spirit of the age," go rattling by us like express trains, carrying the burden of those who are too lazy to think for themselves.²

How discomfiting to consider controversy an art somehow somethen lost and yet so few have cared to notice or be-

moan its loss, especially with civilization hanging in the balance.

The causes underlying this decline in the art of controversy are twofold: religious and philosophical. Modern religion has enunciated one great and fundamental dogma that is at the basis of all the other dogmas, and that is, that religion must be freed from dogmas. Creeds and confessions of faith are no longer the fashion; religious leaders have agreed not to disagree and those beliefs for which some of our ancestors would have died they have melted into a spineless Humanism. Like other Pilates they have turned their backs on the uniqueness of truth and have opened their arms wide to all the moods and fancies the hour might dictate. The passing of creeds and dogmas means the passing of controversies. Creeds and dogmas are social; prejudices are private.²

Those who, when standing before a mirror, see nothing but the fairest of them all will undoubtedly see nothing of themselves reflected in the prophetic words of the Venerable Archbishop fast approaching a century past.

The second cause, which is philosophical, bases itself on that peculiar American philosophy called "Pragmatism," the aim of which is to prove that all proofs are useless. ... As a result, there has sprung up a disturbing indifference to truth, and a tendency to regard the useful as the true, and the impractical as the false. The man who can make up his mind when proofs are presented to him is looked upon as a bigot, and the man who ignores proofs and the search for truth is looked upon as broadminded and tolerant.

Another evidence of this same disrespect for rational foundations is the general readiness of the modern mind to accept a statement because of the literary way in which it is couched, or because of the popularity of the one who says it, rather than for the reasons behind the statement. ... To some minds, of course, the startling will always appear to be the profound. It is easier to get the attention of the press when one says, as Ibsen did, that "two and two make five," than to be orthodox and say that two and two make four.

The Catholic Church perhaps more than the other forms of Christianity notices the decline in the art of controversy. Never before, perhaps, in the whole history of Christianity has she been so intellectually impoverished for want of good sound intellectual opposition as she is at the present time. Today there are no foemen worthy of her steel. And if the Church today is not producing great chunks of thought, or what might be called "thinkage," it is because she has not been challenged to do so. The best in everything comes from the throwing down of a gauntlet — even the best in thought.

The Church loves controversy, and loves it for two reasons: because intellectual conflict is informing, and because she is madly in love with rationalism. The great structure of the Catholic Church has been built up through controversy. It was the attacks of the Docetists and the Monophysites in the early centuries of the Church that made her clear on the doctrine concerning the nature of Christ; it was the controversy with the Reformers that clarified her teaching on justification. And if today there are not nearly so many dogmas defined as in the early ages of the Church, it is because there is less controversy

— and less thinking. One must think to be a heretic, even though it be wrong thinking.

... The fact is that there is now less intellectual opposition to the Church and more prejudice, which, being interpreted, means less thinking, even less bad thinking.

Not only does the Church love controversy because it helps her sharpen her wits; she loves it also for its own sake. The Church is accused of being the enemy of reason; as a matter of fact, she is the only one who believes in it.

The Church loves controversy, and loves it for two reasons: because intellectual conflict is informing, and because she is madly in love with rationalism.

The intervening years have been terribly unkind, for the lost art has remained confoundingly lost. In its absence, thinking has taken a moribund turn, so much so it may soon no longer be considered extant. Our growing refusal to strenuously exercise our minds by engaging in serious rational thinking will only serve to hasten the inevitable collapse of human civilization.

The Church asks her children to think hard and think clean. Then she asks them to do two things with their thoughts. First, she asks them to externalize them in the concrete world of economics, government, commerce, and education, and by this externalization of

beautiful, clean thoughts to produce a beautiful and clean civilization. The quality of any civilization depends upon the nature of the thoughts its great minds bequeath to it. If the thoughts that are externalized in the press, in the senate chamber, on the public platform, are base, civilization itself will take on their base character with the same readiness with which a chameleon takes on the color of the object upon which it is placed. But if the thoughts that are vocalized and articulated are high and lofty, civilization will be filled, like a crucible, with the gold of the things worthwhile.

The Church asks her children not only to externalize their thoughts and thus produce culture, but also to internalize their thoughts and thus produce spirituality. The constant giving would be dissipation unless new energy was supplied from within. In fact, before a thought can be bequeathed to the outside, it must have been born on the inside. But no thought is born without silence and contemplation. It is in the stillness and quiet of one's own intellectual pastures, wherein man meditates on the purpose of life and its goal, that real and true character is developed. A character is made by the kind of thoughts a man thinks when alone, and a civilization is made by the kind of thoughts a man speaks to his neighbor.

"Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people." An observation, questionably attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt, which suggests that the mind can be neatly sorted, labeled, then tossed in one of three boxes, neatly wrapped and tied with a pretty bow. While it makes for a clever meme, it is indicative of the creeping mental indolence (laziness) now so pervasive.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

To put it crudely, the mind is designed to think, by design its sole function is the faculty to think and in thinking to produce thought. The Angelic Doctor rightly equates the human soul to the intellect or the mind and the principle by which we acquire knowledge and understanding is the *intellect* or the *intellectual soul*.

In answer to the objection that the human soul is not subsistent (that is, nonexistent, not in reality) Aquinas answers:

On the contrary, Augustine says (De Trin. X. 7): Who ever understands that the nature of the soul is that of a substance and not that of a body, will see that those who maintain the corporeal nature of the soul, are led astray through associating with the soul those things without which they are unable to think of any nature—i.e., imaginary pictures of corporeal things. Therefore the nature of the human intellect is not only incorporeal, but it is also a substance, that is something subsistent.

I answer that, It must necessarily be allowed that the principle of intellectual operation which we call the soul, is a principle both incorporeal and subsistent.

Therefore the intellectual principle which we call the mind or the intellect has an operation *per se* apart from the body. Now only that which subsists can have an operation *per se*. For nothing can operate but what is actual: wherefore a thing operates according as it is; for which reason we do not say that heat imparts heat, but that what is hot gives heat. We must conclude, therefore that the human soul, which is called the intellect or the mind, is something incorporeal and subsistent.³

To those who would argue that man and animals are alike in as much as they are living beings they therefore must have alike souls, Aquinas responds:

... the saying that man and animals have a like beginning in generation is true of the body; for all animals alike are made of earth. But it is not true of the soul. For the souls of brutes are produced by some power of the body; whereas the human soul is produced by God. To signify this, it is written as to other animals: *Let the earth bring forth the living soul* (Gen. 1:24): while of man it is written (ibid.2:7) that *He breathed into his face the breath of life*. And so in the last chapter of Ecclesiastes (12:7) it is concluded: *(Before) the dust return into its earth from whence it was; and the spirit return to God Who gave it*. Again the process of life is alike as to the body, concerning which it is written (Eccles. 3:19): *All things breathe alike*, and (Wisd. 2:2), *The breath in our nostrils is smoke*. But the process is not alike of the soul; for man is intelligent, whereas animals are not. Hence it is false to say: *Man has nothing more than beasts*. Thus death comes to both alike as to the body, but not as to the soul.⁴

Aquinas then adds that the action of understanding is the action of a particular man, that each is conscious that it is himself who understands.

There remains, therefore, no other explanation than that given by Aristotle—namely, that this particular man understands, because the intellectual principle is his form. Thus from the very operation of the intellect it is made clear that the intellectual principle is united to the body as its form.

The same can be clearly shown from the nature of the human species. For the nature of each thing is

shown by its operation. Now the proper operation of man as man is to understand; because he thereby surpasses all other animals. Whence Aristotle concludes (*Ethic. x.7*) that the ultimate happiness of man must consist in this operation as properly belonging to him. Man must therefore derive his species from that which is the principle of this operation. But the species of anything is derived from its form. It follows therefore that the intellectual principle is the proper form of man.

The human soul is the highest and noblest of forms. Wherefore it excels corporeal matter in its power by the fact that it has an operation and a power in which corporeal matter has no share whatsoever. This power is called the intellect.⁵

As Kevin Vost writes as a pre-view to his book *How to Think Like Aquinas*,

Thomas knew well that the powers of thought that arise from our human nature are “also aided by art and diligence.” In other words, intelligent thought and accurate thinking are not just capacities that you and I have in some fixed measure but are flexible potentials that can be built, improved, and actualized by training and practice (“diligence”) in the right methods (“art” being short for “artificial” or man-made). Your powers of memory, for example, or of logical reasoning, are fluid capacities that *you can build and improve by using them in the right ways*.⁶

This then is the crux of the objection to those who would label the mind as so much packaged meat: by affixing a stamp on it, arbitrarily assigning a grade of G(enius), A(verage), or S(imple). What a GAseous thought!

There should be little doubt—there should be no doubt at all—that the quality and depth of our thoughts are predicated not upon some fixed, finite and therefore unchangeable mind machine but rather upon the intellectual effort we are willing to expend (mental exercise) to pursue and expand our knowledge and our intellect.

God creates each of us, both in body and in spirit, and knows no partiality in his creation. We are created equal by him, what happens then he leaves entirely up to us. The rather trite aphorism, “Use it or lose it” can be applied to the mind as justifiably as it is generally applied to the physical body.

Earning an Olympic gold medal requires years of dedication and concerted effort. An Olympic athlete must train and train and train for years in order to achieve his or her dream. No one can win gold unless they are willing to expend the effort and the time to become the best at their chosen sport. Dreaming while reclining before the television popping popcorn while watching athletes compete will not win you any medal, let alone gold. It is the same with the mind. You use it or you lose it.

Descartes proposed “*Cogito ergo sum*” (I think therefore I am) which, despite being so much nonsense, clearly has the cart pulling the horse, or the cause (existence) predicated on the effect (thinking.) The meme mentioned earlier makes much the same errors as did Descartes.

First, it assumes the mind is a fixed intellectual faculty (GAS) which is provably and demonstrably a false assumption. As Kevin Vost asserts, “Your powers of memory ... or of logical reasoning, are fluid capacities you can build and improve by using them in the right ways.” Second, it ascribes a faculty (speech) which the mind does not possess. And third, it assigns thinking (cause) to be the result of thought (effect.) On this particular point, let’s briefly return to the meme in question. The implied assumption of this meme is that thought (ideas, events, people) is the determinant for what the mind is capable of thinking, which necessarily circumscribes the mind to a caste from which it dare not hope to escape. Just as it restricts the “simple” mind, so too the “genius” and the “average” minds are likewise restricted. This is not only illogical but irrational and above all, pure nonsense.

What is left is a sad refrain, sung for a different season and another reason, but it still applies:

*We are the world
We are the children
We are the ones who make a brighter day,
So let's start giving
Oh, there's a choice we're making
We're saving our own lives
It's true we'll make a better day*

God gave us a mind and a will,
what will you do with yours?

1. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953).
2. Venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Old Errors and New Labels*, (New York: Century Co., c1931).
3. St. Thomas Aquinas (Doctor Angelicus), *Summa Theologica*, I q.75 a.2.
4. *STh.*, I q.75 a.6 ad 1.
5. *STh.* I q. 76 a.1 resp.
6. Kevin Vost, Ph.D., *Why You Should Start Thinking Like Thomas Aquinas*, Catholic Exchange, September 18, 2018.

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

Thoughtful Theism

Fr. Andrew Younan

Emmaus Road Publishing
2017, 200 pages.

To Change the Church

Ross Gregory Douthat

Simon & Schuster
2018, 256 pages.

Strangers in a Strange Land

Charles J. Chaput

Henry Holt and Co.
February 21, 2017, 288 pages.

PERIODICALS

First Things

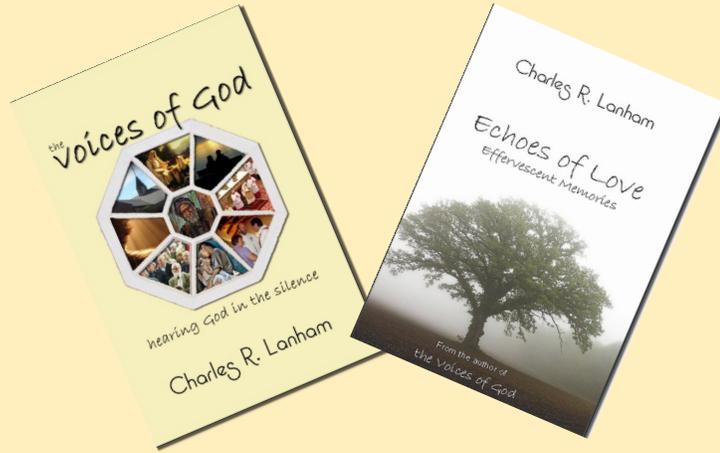
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Touchstone

A Journal of Mere Christianity
Editor: James M. Kushiner
Bi-Monthly.
www.touchstonemag.com

Catholic Answers Magazine

Share the Faith, Defend the Faith
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Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

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