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# Knowing God by reason alone: what Vatican I never said

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**Abstract**

While the First Vatican Council (1869–70) decreed that for Catholics it is a dogma of faith that we can have certain knowledge of God by the natural light of reason it was only in the Anti-Modernist Oath (1910) that this knowledge was defined as rationally demonstrable by cosmological arguments.

**Keywords**

Vatican I, demonstrability of God's existence, traditionalism, Denys Turner, Catholic Catechism

## I

> If anyone says that the one, true God, our creator and lord, cannot be known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of human reason: let him be anathema.[1]

That is what the bishops declared unanimously at the First Vatican Council (24 April 1870), in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith. What did the bishops mean when they agreed that God 'could be known with certainty': 'certo cognosci posse'?

Fifty years ago it was commonly accepted, by those who approved as well as by those who disagreed, that what was meant is that the existence of God could be proved by rational argument. Consider, for example, what the Oxford theologian Austin Farrer asserted about the doctrine:

> We believe in God (it was said) by force of reason; by faith we trust the promises he gives us through accredited channels of revelation, once they are accredited; our acceptance of the channels as authoritative cannot itself repose on faith. Such is, or was, the high and dry scholastic doctrine.

[1] *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* edited by Norman P. Tanner SJ (1990), volume 2, page 810.

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Of course Farrer was wrong if he was suggesting that belief in God as such was regarded by Catholics as resting on rational arguments. The claim was, rather, that knowledge of God's existence is possible in the natural light of human reason — something significantly different from the suggestion that faith in God is founded on or somehow procured by reason. In any case, Farrer did not regard the claim as up to much:

> As a positive account of the matter, it is utterly useless . . . It is useless, because it involves us in accusing all well-informed atheists either of mental imbecility or of intellectual dishonesty, or of both.[2]

As an Anglican, elsewhere disclosing his dislike of Roman Catholicism, Farrer was not out to make the best case. On the other hand, for those who remember textbooks such as Sheehan's *Apologetics*, a classic of the genre, on which generations of high-school students were formed throughout the English-speaking world, Farrer's summary is hardly a caricature.[3]

Perhaps Farrer's qualification — 'is, or was' — indicates that he was aware, by the early 1960s, of changes in the air. Perhaps he knew of books like *The Discovery of God* by the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac (English translation 1960), in effect an alternative to neoscholastic apologetics, though somewhat disingenuously presented as a supplement.[4]

## II

More recently, in his fascinating book *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (2004), Denys Turner, formerly professor at Cambridge and now at Yale, argues for the view that the existence of God is demonstrable by rational argument. Most philosophers and theologians these days, including Catholics, so he asserts, regard this as an impossibility. For Catholics, however, he insists, the question was settled at Vatican I: the thesis that God's existence may be known for sure by reason alone is a dogma of the Catholic Church, to which loyal Catholics must simply submit. For Catholics it is a matter of faith that the existence of God is 'rationally demonstrable', 'rationally provable' (cf. p. ix). 'Christian faith entails the possibility of speculative rational proof of God' (p. 8). And much else in the same

[2] A.M. Farrer, *Saving Belief: A Discussion of Essentials* (1964): 15–16.

[3] Born in Ireland in 1870 where he died in 1945, Michael Sheehan was Co-adjutor Archbishop of Sydney from 1922 to 1937: educated at Oxford and in Germany before going to Maynooth; wrote books on Irish language and botany as well as in theology. His *Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine*, published in the 1890s, was revised and republished, with the 1952 edition being widely used on the eve of Vatican II.

[4] This is a translation by Alexander Dru of *Sur les chemins de Dieu* (1956), itself a revision of *De la connaissance de Dieu* (1945).

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vein. Moreover, this is what Thomas Aquinas taught; it is what the bishops at Vatican I believed (p. xi).

In particular, Turner wants to resist the 'programme of "revisionist" Thomism once popular among French Catholic theologians' (p. xi). These outdated scholars wanted us to read Aquinas as 'more of an Augustinian and Platonist' than admirers and adversaries of Aristotelian Thomism assumed (p. xi). They presumably included French Dominicans such as Louis-Bertrand Geiger (*La Participation dans la philosophie de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 1942) and M.-D. Chenu (*Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 1954). However, this reading of Thomas in the light of Neoplatonist metaphysics of participation and the *Corpus Dionysiacum* has not gone away. The most important study currently is not by a Frenchman, as it happens, but by the Irish scholar Fran O'Rourke: *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (1992), hailed in the pages of *Angelicum* (the journal edited by the Dominicans at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas in Rome) as 'a truly magnificent study'; and commended by Alasdair MacIntyre even more extravagantly, on the back of the paperback edition, as 'one of the two or three most important books on Aquinas published in the last fifty years'.

True enough, some commentators remain deeply unimpressed by the turn to Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite in the interpretation of Aquinas. In his splendid essay *How to Read Aquinas* (2007), for instance, Timothy McDermott makes no concessions to the Neoplatonist turn. In one of his last books, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (2006), Ralph McInerny (almost the last of the great generation of North American Thomists) complements his Glasgow Gifford Lectures, *Characters in Search of Their Author* (2001), with a robust attack on theologians who try to drive a wedge between Aquinas and Aristotle, as he thinks, including celebrated names like Gilson, Chenu and Henri de Lubac.

## III

However we finally, or even provisionally, weigh the influences on Aquinas need concern us no further here. The question is rather whether the rational demonstrability of the existence of God as Thomas conceived it coincides with what the bishops envisaged in 1870.

According to Turner, the bishops at Vatican I (like himself) acquired their conviction of the demonstrability of God's existence from their study of Thomas Aquinas (p. xi). This seems unlikely. By 1870 the majority of them were past middle age. Few of them, as seminarians, back in the 1820s and '30s, could have studied Aquinas. John Henry Newman, visiting Rome in 1846, was shocked to hear of the

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lack of interest in Thomas.[5] True, the German Jesuit Joseph Kleutgen (1811–1883), credited with drafting the text of the constitution *de fide catholica*, was certainly an admirer of Thomas: he played a leading role in Rome from the late 1840s in the revival of Aquinas, designed to counteract the deleterious influence of post-Kantian philosophy on Catholic theologians. Much later, Kleutgen drafted the encyclical 'Aeterni Patris', issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1879, which sealed papal approval of *philosophia aristotelico-thomistica*. This encyclical established the hegemony of neoscholastic theology. The study of philosophy and theology *ad mentem sancti Thomae* became mandatory for seminarians in the 1917 Code of Canon Law. But it would be anachronistic to ascribe much interest in Aquinas among the bishops at Vatican I. Indeed, judging from their speeches, many were more concerned to save some form of 'traditionalism' (which we come to below) rather than to authorize the rational demonstrability of God's existence.

Denys Turner repeatedly glosses the Vatican I dogma that God 'can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things in the natural light of human reason' in terms of the 'rational demonstrability' of God's existence. Unwittingly, it seems, he equates the Vatican I dogma with the gloss put on it in the Anti-Modernist Oath (1910), issued by Pope St Pius X, which all seminary professors had to swear, as also bishops and parish priests. In this of course very important document, the knowledge of God, which is affirmed as attainable in the natural light of reason, is indeed understood as attained by demonstrative proof from effects to cause. There is a difference in status between the Vatican dogma and the Oath, which we need not explore here. More to my point, there is also a significant difference between the terms *demonstrari* and *cognosci*, that is to say, between demonstrability by speculative argument and the much more open-ended (not to say even fuzzy) 'knowableness' of God from contemplation of things in the world, to which the bishops in 1870 signed up.

The Oath goes as follows:

> First of all, I profess that God, beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty, and therefore also proved, as the cause from its effects, by the natural light of reason from the things that have been made, that is, from the visible works of creation.

Thus the phrase 'can be known with certainty' is assumed to mean 'can also be proved': moreover, the 'proofs' are envisaged specifically as arguments from 'effects' to their 'cause', thinking of chains of inference from such natural phenomena as movement, change, etc. to the unmoved mover, and so on.

[5] See *The Letters and Diaries*, volume XI (1961): pages 260 and 263.

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Seminary courses in natural theology were further defined in the light of the twenty-second of the XXIV Thomistic Theses, issued by the Roman Congregation for Studies on 27 July 1914, as guidance to Catholic philosophers and theologians:

> We do not perceive by an immediate intuition that God exists, nor do we demonstrate it a priori [ontological arguments] but a posteriori [cosmological arguments]
>
> i.e., from the things that have been created, following an argument from the effects to the cause: namely, from things which are moved and cannot be the adequate source of their motion, to a first unmoved mover;
>
> from the production of the things in this world by causes subordinated to one another, to a first uncaused cause;
>
> from corruptible things which equally might be or not be, to an absolutely necessary being;
>
> from things which more or less are, live, and understand, according to degrees of being, living and understanding, to that which is maximally understanding, maximally living and maximally a being;
>
> Finally, from the order of all things, to a separated intellect which has ordered and organized things, and directs them to their end.

These are more or less the Five Ways of Aquinas (as in *Summa Theologiae* 1.2.3).

## IV

But does any of this follow from the Vatican I dogma? College natural theology courses, school apologetics classes, in the heyday of neoscholasticism, were concerned with proofs, deductions from empirically observable natural effects through to their first cause, inferences that any rational person could follow and indeed would have to accept if he or she was thinking clearly, free of prejudice, and so on. But was that envisaged at Vatican I?

The evidence that this was never intended is to be found in the seventh volume, edited by the first and still the greatest expositor of Vatican I proceedings, Theodor Granderath (1839–1902)[6], of *Acta et decreta sacrorum Conciliorum recentiorum (1789–1870)* in the *Collectio Lacensis* (1890).[7] This contains the drafts, minutes of the

[6] In 1860, after theological studies at Tübingen, Granderath entered the Society of Jesus; from 1874 until 1887 he taught at Ditton Hall, Cheshire, home of the Stapleton-Bretherton family, placed at the disposal of exiled Jesuit students during the *Kulturkampf*; then drafted into preparing the *Acta* of Vatican I for publication.

[7] The 'lake' for which the volumes were named is the Laacher See, near Andernach, where the great Romanesque abbey, secularised in 1802, was occupied from 1820 by Jesuits, who named it Maria-Laach, until they too were obliged to leave in the 1870s: the Benedictines returned in the 1890s.

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speeches, the responses by the steering committee (*deputatio de fide*) to additions and amendments proposed by the bishops — all the material from which it is quite easy to reconstruct the debate.

This material is of course entirely in Latin. More accessibly, for those who read French, the monograph-length entry on 'Dieu (Connaissance naturelle de)' by Marcel Chossat SJ (1862–1926), which appeared posthumously in the fourth volume of the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (1939), offers a splendidly documented and sometimes quite entertaining reconstruction, relying on Granderath, of the discussions from which the constitution *de fide catholica* emerged.

In particular, as regards the dogma that the existence of God can be known for certain in the light of natural reason, the evidence that Chossat sets out shows that Vatican I never authorized what became standard Catholic teaching with the imposition of the Anti-Modernist Oath. Chossat (a very interesting theologian now almost forgotten) was writing his monograph in the early 1920s, when the Anti-Modernist Oath and the XXIV Thomistic Theses determined what was taught in Catholic colleges and seminaries. It seems likely from the dry humour that sometimes breaks into what he writes that Chossat was well aware that, in the most heavyweight encyclopaedia of Catholic theology in any language at the time, he was undermining the prevailing anti-Modernist theology. He never saw his account into print, or even knew for sure that it would appear. Unhappily, especially in the English-speaking world, few students seem ever to have consulted his account, let alone the Granderath volume.

## V

The bishops in 1869–70 were out to condemn atheism, materialism, pantheism, etc., all allegedly the evil fruits of Protestantism. However, when one examines what they talked about, their main concern was with the internal Catholic phenomenon of 'traditionalism' (cf. *Acta* 79, *DTC* 824): the very widely held view, especially by French Catholic clergy and lay elites, according to which all metaphysical, moral and religious knowledge whatsoever derives from a primitive or natural revelation at the creation, which has been handed down from one generation to the next in an unbroken (if often threatened and corrupted) tradition.

According to the counter-Revolutionary thinker Louis Gabriel Ambroise Vicomte de Bonald (1754–1840), for example, all knowledge is grounded on an initial act of faith, and truth is guaranteed by the general consent of humankind. As social beings our development as moral and religious creatures comes through belonging to and participating in different levels of society. The principal organ of sociability

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is language; speech is as natural to us as our social nature itself. We could not have invented language: God gave humankind language at creation. Or as Hugues Felicité Robert de Lamennais (1702–1854) concludes: we must respect 'the law of human nature', since outside of that 'there is no certitude, no language, no society, no life'. Knowledge of metaphysical and moral truths is required for us to act reasonably. This knowledge we acquire as children through being taught (tradition, then) before we can use our reason. And where else can this tradition have its source except in a primitive revelation contemporaneous with the creation of humankind?

It is not an entirely implausible theory. It was a protest and reaction by Catholics against what they perceived as the rationalism of Enlightenment thinkers and the ludicrous cult of reason at the French Revolution. Obviously they went to the other extreme — denying to human reason the power of attaining by itself any truths whatsoever. They preferred to exalt the role of community and tradition in the discovery and transmission of truth. Moreover, as Christians, they emphasized the weakness and insufficiency of human reason, which they believed to be fallen and prone to sin. They saw nothing but anarchy in the absence of society. After all, since the Revolution and Napoleon's rampaging all over Western Europe, these traditionalist Catholics had experience of the collapse of the most basic social institutions.

## VI

The knowledge of God's existence by the natural light of reason that Vatican I defended was never separated from knowledge of our primary duties towards God. We know this because one bishop proposed that the text should state this explicitly. However, his proposal was rejected by the *deputatio de fide* on the grounds that saying so would be superfluous: no one can know of God as *finis* without acknowledging his or her obligations to worship God, obey God's commandments and so on (*DTC* 824). In other words natural theology is always already natural law ethics.

Another question, which much exercised some of the bishops, was whether this knowledge of God in the natural light of reason should be regarded as only a *possibility* (*DTC* 825). Has anyone ever actually achieved this knowledge? Pagans did not and do not actually know God as *principium et finis omnium rerum*, one bishop objected: fine, he was assured by the steering committee, we are only saying that it's a *capacity*, we are not saying this *potentia* has always or ever been exercised.

What about the wild man in the woods, or a deaf mute, another bishop objected: how could they know by reasoning that God exists?

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Clearly he was suggesting that tradition, community, education, upbringing, and language, are indispensable. Fine, the reply came, we are only saying it is a possibility in *human nature*, not that *every individual* is in a situation to exercise it.

There is no religion, no morality, without society, another bishop objected — again obviously speaking from a traditionalist standpoint. Right, he was assured, we are saying nothing about the historical conditions required for the development of our capacities. What the Council wants to establish is only that it is a truth of Catholic faith that human beings generically have a natural capacity to attain moral and religious truths — using their reason — that's all. (*Acta* 239; *DTC* 826).

On a different point: how can we speak of the 'natural' light of reason, some asked, when in fact, since the fall of Adam, we have never lived in the state of pure nature? Here again the steering committee refused to get into more detail: 'nos solummodo loquimur de principiis rationis, quod Deus ex principiis rationis certo cognosci possit; quidquid sit de exercitio rationis' — 'we are speaking only of the principles of reason — God can be known for sure from the principles of reason — whatever about the exercise of reason'.

That 'quidquid sit de exercitio rationis' may sound offhandedly dismissive — but, as the theologians of the *deputatio de fide* knew, and as Chossat details at some length, if the bishops were allowed to get into questions about how 'fallen' human beings might actually exercise their 'natural' reasoning powers, that would open up the *de Auxiliis* controversy that had bitterly divided theologians since the sixteenth century: about the 'helps' by grace that fallen creatures need to achieve whatever may in principle lie within our natural power. The *deputatio de fide* simply ruled that the expression 'natural light of reason' has a clear sense — cutting off further debate. Thus it remained unsettled at Vatican I whether the natural light by which reason can attain knowledge of God should be equated with the prelapsarian light enjoyed by Adam in the Garden of Eden or the light in which someone in a state of grace might exercise his reasoning powers, or the light which someone might supposedly have independently of the effects of sin and grace.

It is quite comic to see how resolutely the *deputatio de fide* sought to exclude every suggested amendment that would have engaged the bishops in any more controversy than was absolutely unavoidable.

This takes us to the words *probari* and *demonstrari*. Of course these were proposed (*DTC* 847). Again, however, the *deputatio de fide* refused to incorporate them — not, as we might have expected, on the grounds that they would be superfluous. It was not taken for granted that *demonstrari* is implicitly included in *cognosci*. One amendment was rejected with the following comment: 'quamvis aliquatenus certo cognoscere et demonstrare sit unum idemque, tamen

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phrasim mitiorem deputatio de fide sibi eligendam censuit et non istam duriorem' — 'although in a certain sense knowing for sure and demonstrating are one and the same, yet the *deputatio de fide* has decided to choose the milder (softer) expression and not that tougher (harder) one'.

That may seem a little disingenuous. For Chossat, anyway, it means that the power we have to know God's existence from the world by the natural light of reason does not necessarily involve 'inference'. Indeed, with unmistakable glee, Chossat claims that he cannot understand how Enrico Buonpensiere (1853–1929), one of his most eminent contemporaries in Rome (but a Dominican), in a commentary on Aquinas published in 1902, could assert that the rational demonstrability of God's existence is a dogma of faith since Vatican I.

On the contrary, as Chossat concludes, the Vatican I decree left open a whole array of ways of knowing God's existence (some, as he must have thought, rather weird and implausible): Cartesian innate ideas; Augustine's illumination doctrine; the theory of Gabriel Vazquez SJ (1549–1604) about the need for natural grace for first knowledge of God; and much else, including the theory that we know God non-inferentially and immediately through the 'interior mirror of the soul'.

It was a little shocking – a little audacious — when in 1958/9 our professor in the English Dominican study house, Cornelius Ernst, observed that we ourselves might be included among 'the things that are made' — which would allow us to set up an argument from effects to cause by reflecting not just on change, causation, and so on, in the world, but rather on the nature and capacities of the rational animal. I don't know if he ever read Chossat. This was anyway what some and perhaps even most of the bishops in 1870 had in mind. According to Chossat (*DTC* 842) 'our soul and the whole interior life' might be included, quoting the theologian at Vatican I who said exactly this: 'per creaturas, id est per vestigia quae creaturis omnibus impressa sunt; multo minus excludimus imaginem quae animae immortali hominis impressa est' — 'it's from creatures that the arguments begin, that is from the marks or traces which are imprinted on all creatures; and we certainly do not exclude the image which is imprinted on the human being's immortal soul'.

## VII

Summing up his analysis of the debates Marcel Chossat refers again (*DTC* 874) to the unhappy Buonpensiere and also to Louis de San, a prolific Louvain commentator on Aquinas (not a Dominican) in whose *Tractatus de Deo uno* (1894) the Vatican I dogma is also

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equated with rational demonstrability of the existence of God. (These theologians obviously predate the Anti-Modernist Oath.) Most theologians disagree with this, Chossat says (remember that he died in 1926); and anyway, so he concludes, the proceedings of the Council show that it is not so. The dogma does not say that knowledge of God's existence is a 'conclusion reached by a chain of inferences', let alone that the certainty depends on a 'syllogism'. Human reason is capable by nature of attaining sure and certain knowledge of God's existence, but it is equally clear that Catholics were never committed by the Council to the possibility of proving this a posteriori by anything like the Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas.

Rather, as Chossat explains at great length, we have to distinguish between knowledge of God's existence, which is spontaneous and universal, and knowledge of God's existence, which is reflective or 'scientific' in the French sense (*DTC* 874). After much explanation of the former kind of knowledge Chossat eventually comes to Aquinas's proofs (*DTC* 923–930). These are not to be regarded on the model of demonstrations as in mathematics or Euclid (*DTC* 924), Chossat thinks it necessary to say. These are not proofs that 'gain assent and produce conviction in absolutely anyone'. He goes on to expound the Five Ways (*DTC* 941–948): 'the five classical proofs of God's existence a posteriori'. Thus these 'proofs' finally appear, in the concluding paragraphs of his monograph, perhaps even as the culmination — but, as he has shown at great length, the 'classical proofs' were never envisaged at Vatican I as the only or the best or the commonest way of establishing the truth of the proposition 'God exists' by the exercise of the natural power of human reason.

## VIII

What happened in Catholic thought in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and in particular why the Vatican I dogma was equated with the much 'tougher' assertion in the Anti-Modernist Oath and the Thomistic Theses, are questions for another occasion.[8] Let us conclude by a considering how late the arguments for the existence of God come in the opening chapter of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1992, English translation 1994).

The opening chapter deals with 'Man's capacity for God' — human beings are 'capax Dei' (§27):

[8] There is a vast scholarly literature on this subject but nowhere better to start than Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism* (1980).

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> The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for. The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being.[9]

'Desire for God', 'the human heart', 'searching', being 'called to communion with God', an invitation 'addressed to us as soon as we come into being', and so on — this is the language not so much of Thomas Aquinas as of St Augustine. It is very reminiscent of the language of Henri de Lubac in The *Discovery of God*.[10]

The next paragraph goes as follows (§28):

> In many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behaviour: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a *religious being*.

So this *ens religiosum* — whatever the 'ambiguities' — expresses his (and her) search for God primarily in a whole variety of practices.

The quest has never been easy (§29) — on the contrary, God 'can be forgotten, overlooked, or even explicitly rejected'. The reasons are spelled out: (1) revolt against the amount of evil in the world; (2) ignorance and indifference; (3) the cares and riches of this world; (4) scandalous conduct on the part of church-going people; (5) the amount of anti-religious propaganda in modern secular societies — and only then (6) because sinners reject God explicitly without any excuse.

Then (§30) the search for God demands moral as well as intellectual effort on the individual's part: our state of soul, purity of heart, and suchlike, come into it. Moreover the individual relies also on the testimony of his or her community. As the Catechism moves towards saying something about proofs of the existence of God there is an unmistakable echo of some of the suggestions made at Vatican I. As regards the witness of the people who have taught one to seek God — 'testimonium aliorum qui [te] doceant Deum quaerere' — it is interesting to note that they teach you more than the propositional truths of the Catholic faith, by their example they teach us *how to seek God* — 'Deum quaerere'.

[9] The translators have no problem with exclusive language, or perhaps had to do as some Roman dicastery decreed.

[10] Since he died in 1991 aged 95 Henri de Lubac did not have a hand in the Catechism but his influence is unmistakable.

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This whole section (§§ 27–30) concludes with Augustine's famous affirmation: 'You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you'.

With this summary phenomenology securely and eloquently in place, of human beings as naturally religious, desiring, searching, expressing this in rituals and meditations, and so on, the Catechism moves on to consider 'Ways of coming to know God' — 'de viis, quibus ad Deum cognoscendum habetur accessus' (§31):

> Created in God's image and called to know and love him, the person who seeks God discovers certain ways ['vias' in scare quotes in the Latin, but intriguingly not in the English] of coming to know him. These are also called proofs for the existence of God, ['argumenta existentiae Dei', again in scare quotes in the original], not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences [as who might have thought?], but rather in the sense of 'converging and convincing arguments' ['argumenta convergentia et persuadentia': quotation marks also in the English this time], which allow us to attain certainty about the truth.

It would not be difficult to show that the quotation marks in the original signal a certain delicacy in handling the whole issue: in effect, the authors of the Catechism, whether deliberately or not, have moved away from the natural theology and apologetics of the Anti-Modernist Oath and returned to something more like Vatican I as analyzed and documented by Marcel Chossat.

Finally these 'ways' of approaching God from creation may begin not just from the physical world (§32): 'movement, becoming, contingency, and the world's order and beauty' — which at once recalls another famous outburst by St Augustine (Sermo 241):

> Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air distending and diffusing itself, question the beauty of the sky . . . question all these realities. All respond: "See, we are beautiful." Their beauty is a profession [*confessio*]. These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One who is not subject to change?

but also from the human person (§33): 'with his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience, with his longings, for the infinite and for happiness'.

And how do these arguments work? (§34):

> The world, and man, attest that they contain within themselves neither their first principle nor their final end, but rather that they participate in Being itself ['Esse' in scare quotes], which alone is without origin or end. Thus, in different ways [scare quotes again absent in the English text], man can come to know that there exists a reality, which is the first cause and final end of all things, a reality 'that everyone calls God'.

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The final phrase is attributed in a footnote to St Thomas, specifically in the *Summa* article on the Five Ways. The text surely also hints at the participationist metaphysics highlighted in Aquinas by the likes of Geiger and Chenu.

The chapter concludes (§35):

> Man's faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man, and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith. The proofs of God's existence, however, can predispose one to faith and help one to see that faith is not opposed to reason [Nihilominus argumenta existentiae Dei ad fidem disponere possunt atque adjutorio esse ut fides humanae rationi non opponi perspiciatur].

But it's only in the next chapter — 'The knowledge of God according to the Church' — that we at last get the Vatican I dogma (§36):

> Our holy mother, the Church, holds and teaches that God, the first principle and last end of all things, can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason.

In practice, however, it's difficult to come to know God's existence by the light of reason alone (§37):

> In the historical conditions in which he finds himself, however, man experiences many difficulties in coming to know God by the light of reason alone ... Though human reason is, strictly speaking, truly capable by its own natural power and light of attaining to a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God, who watches over and controls the world by his providence, and of the natural law written in our hearts by the Creator; yet there are many obstacles which prevent reason from the effective and fruitful use of this inborn faculty. For the truths that concern the relations between God and man wholly transcend the visible order of things, and, if they are translated into human action and influence it, they call for self-surrender and abnegation. The human mind, in its turn, is hampered in the attaining of such truths, not only by the impact of the senses and the imagination, but also by disordered appetites which are the consequences of original sin. So it happens that men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful [citing Pope Pius XII: *Humani generis*]

In the end, however, the fundamental reason for holding out for the indispensable role of reason is as follows (§39):

> In defending the ability of human reason to know God, the Church is expressing her confidence in the possibility of speaking about him to all men and with all men, and therefore of dialogue with other religions, with philosophy and science, as well as with unbelievers and atheists.

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What has happened, it seems to me, whether deliberately or not it is hard to tell, is that the perspectives opened up by the Catechism on the possibility of knowing God as 'beginning and end of all things' in the natural light of reason returns to the position at the First Vatican Council — as if the Thomistic Theses, the Anti-Modernist Oath, and generations of natural theology and apologetics textbooks never existed — placing the 'arguments for the existence of God' in the context of searching for meaning, self questioning, desire for the ultimate and infinite, and so on. It's as if even trying to prove 'God exists' [not that the language of proof and demonstration occurs in the Catechism] could never take hold — never even interest you — unless you were already engaged, morally, imaginatively, in a certain awe and wonder.[11]

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[11] This paper is substantially as presented at the Katholische Akademie in Münster on 14 March 2009 and as the Gonzaga Lecture in Glasgow on 9 March 2010.

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