

Aidan Nichols, O. P.

# Chalice of God

A Systematic  
Theology  
in Outline



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For Christians believed not only that the temporal world was an expression of God's will and wisdom—in something like the way that pagans had believed that it was ruled and shaped by the gods, or that it was a shadow of the world of the Ideas—but that God had entered into that world, using its analogous resemblance to him in order to form it into a vessel for his actual presence.

S. Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake*



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## *Preface*

I am using this preface to explain to the reader why this book has the unusual format that it does.

The first thing that will strike him or her is that the first person singular occurs more than is customary in a theological work. This is because, as the introduction will start by saying, this text is meant to be something of a manifesto, where my own personal convictions about how best to proceed in expounding theology are aired. I hope it is not too much to claim for it the status of a fresh approach to the Catholic understanding of the world and human existence in revelation's light. To see just what this "fresh approach" amounts to, readers will have to read the book. And, since it is a kind of manifesto, this need not take them too long. In any case, the epigram from the writings of Stratford Caldecott which precedes this preface will give them a taster.

It is because the book is in the nature of a personal declaration that I include a list of my published writings hitherto. I have not put that in so as to give myself a pat on the back. Rather, the list is there for two reasons. The first is straightforward: it is to show that plenty of solid reading and writing has gone on in my life before I've ventured to present anything as adventurous as a theological manifesto.

The other reason is more subtle: I think my attraction to a particular set of theological writers, or my approach to theological topics I've considered in the past, was guided by an implicit sense of the theological vision I have here articulated in concise form.

Then there is something else the reader will pick up. After the introduction, this book does not consist of continuous prose. Rather, each chapter is made up of distinct theses separated from each other by numbers. This has two explanations, one theoretical and the other practical. The theoretical explanation is that there may well be people who do not want to "buy into" the whole package I am offering, but who nevertheless would like to take away from it particular parts to be used again elsewhere, fitted into other patterns of thinking. The practical explanation is that the distinct theses could well serve as starting points for discussion in, for example, classes for students of theology in universities or seminaries or even online.

The next peculiarity is that particular theses are frequently punctuated by cross-references to other theses in the book, whether these have preceded or are going to come after. This is not relevant to the manifesto form so much as to the other category in which a librarian might choose to catalogue this book—namely, as a short systematics. The whole point of a systematics, as distinct from a dogmatics or what I have elsewhere called a "theological introduction to Catholicism," is that everything is quite consciously made to interlock with everything else. The whole thing is organic, or, to change the metaphor, it moves in a circle. The cross-references will, I hope, help the reader to check this out.

Finally, there are a number of images drawn from Byzantine and Russian art. They are included for their own

beauty as Christian artworks. But this precisely means these images are there as an inspiration to readers, to let minds and hearts travel up toward the mysteries of which I have written inadequately and yet as well as I could.



### *Acknowledgments*

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# **Other Works by Aidan Nichols**

## **Foundations of the Faith**

### **Theology of Revelation**

*The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Image in Christian Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980)

*Lovely, Like Jerusalem: The Fulfillment of the Old Testament in Christ and the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007)

### **Philosophy of Religion**

*A Grammar of Consent: The Existence of God in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991)

### **Theological Catechetics**

*The Splendour of Doctrine: The Catechism of the Catholic Church on Christian Believing* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1995)

*The Service of Glory: The Catechism of the Catholic Church on Worship, Ethics, Spirituality* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1997)

*Come to the Father: An Invitation to Share the Faith of the Catholic Church* (London: St. Paul's Publishing, 2000)

### **Ecclesial Dogmatics**

*Epiphany: A Theological Introduction to Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996)

### **Theological Method**

*The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to Its Sources, Principles and History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991)

### **Apologetics**

*Criticising the Critics: Catholic Apologias for Today* (Oxford: Family Publications, 2010)

## **Theological Ressourcement**

### **Ancients**

*Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1993)

*Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to His Life, Work and Influence* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002)

### **Moderns**

*The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger: An Introductory Study* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1988; re-printed as *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI*, London: Continuum, 2005; 2nd edition, London: Continuum, 2007)

*Yves Congar* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989)

*From Newman to Congar: The Idea of Doctrinal Development from the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1990)

*Dominican Gallery: Portrait of a Culture* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1997)

*Catholic Thought Since the Enlightenment: A Survey* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998)

*The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1998)

*No Bloodless Myth: A Guide through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2000)

*Say It Is Pentecost: A Guide through Balthasar's Logic* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2001)

*A Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2003)

*Scattering the Seed. A Guide through Balthasar's Early Writings on Philosophy and the Arts* (London: Continuum, 2006)

*Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide through Balthasar's Writings beyond the Trilogy* (London: Continuum, 2007)

*Reason with Piety: Garrigou-Lagrange in the Service of Catholic Thought* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2008)

*From Hermes to Benedict XVI: Faith and Reason in Modern Catholic Thought* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2009)

*Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Denver, CO: Augustine Institute Press, Nova et Vetera Book Series, 2010)

*A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2011)

### **Cult and Culture**

*Holy Order: The Apostolic Ministry from the New Testament to the Second Vatican Council* (Dublin: Veritas, 1990)

*The Holy Eucharist: From the New Testament to Pope John Paul II* (Dublin: Veritas, 1991)

*Looking at the Liturgy: A Critical View of Its Contemporary Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996)

*Christendom Awake: On Reenergizing the Church in Culture* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1999)

*Scribe of the Kingdom: Essays on Theology and Culture*. 2 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1994)

*Beyond the Blue Glass: Catholic Essays on Faith and Culture*. 2 vols. (London: Saint Austin Press, 2002)

*Hopkins: Theologian's Poet; An Introduction and a Commentary on Selected Poems* (Ann Arbor, MI: Sapientia Press, 2006)

*Redeeming Beauty: Essays on Sacral Aesthetics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007)

*The Realm: An Unfashionable Essay on the Conversion of England* (Oxford: Family Publications, 2008)

*G. K. Chesterton, Theologian* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2009)

*The Poet as Believer: A Theological Study of Paul Claudel* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011)

*The Latin Clerk: The Life, Work, and Travels of Adrian Fortescue* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2011)

*Lost in Wonder: Essays on Liturgy and the Arts* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011)

### **Ecumenical Evaluation**

*Theology in the Russian Diaspora: Church, Fathers, Eucharist in Nikolai Afanas'ev, 1893–1966* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

*Rome and the Eastern Churches: A Study in Schism* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1991; 2nd edition, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010)

*The Panther and the Hind: A Theological History of Anglicanism* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1992)

*Light from the East: Authors and Themes in Orthodox Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1995)

*Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Father Sergei Bulgakov* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2005)

## *Introduction*

*Chalice of God* aims to be a work of Catholic systematics. It is also something of a manifesto for the theological scene. I claim it to be innovatory not in its doctrinal content (I am, I trust, fully orthodox) but in its organization, as indicated by its governing metaphor—the “chalice” of the world, filled by the libation of God. The building blocks I have used are no doubt in place in a variety of other writers (I give some references in the text and its endnotes), but the way I have put them together in the architecture of this systematics is my own.

My fundamental commitment is to high mediaeval scholasticism and the mid-twentieth-century movement of *ressourcement* which accessed ancient springs: the holistic reading of Scripture typical of the best patristic exegesis, the fathers themselves, the liturgies and iconography of Tradition. In that latter respect, I am Byzantinising, though I by no means discount the Roman liturgy and the resources of Western Christian art. I do not consider the scholastic dimension to be in competition with the Greek East: the Byzantines too had their schoolmen who studied with Aristotle as well as Plato. My masters are St. Thomas in his relation to the fathers and Hans Urs von Balthasar in his relation to both at once.

While I find merit in romanticism, and therefore in the tradition of German thought that is its backcloth, I have no wish to be thought modern, recalling the regrettable commonality that joins together the *via moderna* of late mediaeval philosophy and twentieth-century cultural modernity. Both the nominalist and *homo modernus* live in a world that lacks the presupposition of ontological order. They thus find themselves confronted by an array of merely individual facts, to be discovered empirically and used pragmatically. Reason gets reduced to the dimensions of an instrument (its primary expression will be technology and its achievements) rather than recognized in the ampler way truly *philosophical* reason deserves—a way of wisdom about the world and human existence.

Nor do I have hankerings after association with post-modernism, whose therapy for the condition of modernity—the shaking of all identity in the name of endless decentering—exacerbates the disease it would cure. On the contrary, I gladly embrace metanarrative; I find the ability to tell the story of one's life the chief symptom of selfhood, and I take the biblical narrative, read realistically, to signal the advent of consummatory divine interaction with human beings. Likewise, far from deploring it, I affirm "logocentrism," for the Word has guaranteed words, not least those of his holy prophets and apostles. Through the gift of language he has secured not only the reference and meaning speakers characteristically intend, fortified in the hagiographs by the charism of inspiration, but also the capacity of inscribed words cumulatively to deploy their own virtualities, which, for Scripture, culminates via a homogeneous process of interpretation in a Christological understanding of the biblical canon as a whole. I certainly do not flinch from the idea of totality (yet another



bugbear of postmoderns), since revelation constitutes a *totum* greater than which none can be conceived, able as it is to accommodate all elements of truth and goodness within itself. And finally, I am not fearful of the notion of unity, since I place my enterprise under the auspices of the *one*, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. In fact I accept the “scandal” (the claim is a stumbling block for many) whereby the mystic Church of the Creed finds, or so I believe, institutional embodiment in the assembly gathered around the holder of the office of Peter.

*Chalice of God* is an attempt to decant the wisdom of the various authors—primarily Catholic, but also Orthodox and Anglican—studied by the present writer in a working lifetime. (Absence of their names in footnotes, in certain cases, should not be taken as implying they have not shaped my thinking.) From the standpoint of its *form*, the aim of my corpus (see the list of titles presented above and their categorization) has always been to explore the riches of Tradition so as to present the faith as an organic whole that is characterised by divine-human truth, beauty, and goodness. My output has used, philosophically, elements of both metaphysical and phenomenological approaches and, theologically, both rational-scholastic and imagistic-poetic modes of discourse. The objective has been to show how divine revelation emerges in human experience and thought as *coherently epiphanic* in character; that is, as manifesting a superabundant fullness of truth, beauty, and goodness, which exceeds those available by other routes. In this way, the incarnate revelation of the Trinity, from which issues the doxological life of the Church, provides the ultimate overall context in which all other reality is to be viewed.

From the standpoint of the *content* of my corpus, the beginning (in 1980) was enquiry into Jesus Christ as the

supreme divine artwork which irradiates, so Christian theology and iconography attest, not only the biblical history but human existence and cosmic nature too. From there the work moved out to consider the rational-experiential basis of belief in God and the content of Christian faith, both in its catechetical building blocks and in its ecclesial-dogmatic structure, as well as the theological method best suited to its exploration ("Foundations of the Faith"). That project required for its realisation study of the range and depth of theological tradition, not only as found in pre-modern writers but in those moderns who saw themselves as engaged in recycling, albeit with new insights, that tradition's stored-up wealth ("Theological *Ressourcement*"). It took the liturgy as a key locus for theology and Church, and it treated culture as the field of the world that a Gospel expressed doxologically must transform ("Cult and Culture"). Finally, for the reintegration of a catholicity impaired by Christian disunity, the concern has been to repatriate elements of Eastern Orthodox and Anglican theology, and this in a perspective which, without infidelity to the doctrine of the Roman magisterium, encourages reunion with Constantinople and, in a more limited sense, Christians formed by the patrimony of Anglicanism ("Ecumenical Evaluation").

Aidan Nichols  
Blackfriars, Cambridge  
Passiontide, 2011





Source: M. V. Alpatov, *Early Russian Icon Painting* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1984), plate 165.

## Chapter 1

### *Prolegomena*

*Dionysius, St. Gregory the Theologian  
Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg*

I place this enterprise under the patronage of St. Gregory Nazianzen, called by the Eastern Church “the Theologian.” The theological approach of my “manifesto” or “systematics in outline” mirrors Gregory’s by its integration of philosophy and theology within a consciously ecclesial and indeed liturgical context. For me as for him, in both revelation and theology concepts and images are employed together in the service at once of reasoned understanding and of doxology, the praise of God’s glory.

## **1.1 A Basic Concept of Theology**

I take systematics to be one possible embodiment of theology at large. I understand theology to be the disciplined exploration of revelation, where the term “disciplined” connotes the application to revelation of the modes of human understanding when exercised at their highest pitch. I hold that the content of revelation is made available by the resources found in Scripture and Tradition, with, as aids to the discernment thereof, the distinctively Christian experience generated by the *sensus fidelium* and, ultimately, the ecclesial magisterium, whose task it is to test that experience by authoritative judgment as well as to forward it by proclamation and teaching as an expression of Tradition. Theology so understood, though affirming the uniqueness of its cognitive standing, also requires the practice of philosophy, from which it draws certain prior affirmations about nature and existence and, not least, about the Source of nature and the Goal of existence in God.

**1.1.1** On Scripture and Tradition, I stress their inseparability and the role of the fathers, the historic liturgies, and iconography in establishing the bearings of biblical revelation. I shall speak more of Scripture in chapter 3 and of Tradition in chapter 4.

**1.1.2** On the *sensus fidelium*, I emphasise its constitution by the revelation given in Scripture and Tradition. Formally speaking, it differs not at all from the *sensus fidei* of the Church as Bride of Christ. I radically distinguish my position from those who would understand the “sense of the faithful” as the fruit of contemporary human experience, registered as public opinion. The “sense of faith” of each person derives from the spiritual anointing of bap-

tismal grace (cf. 1 John 2:20, 27), and it is exercised within the communion of all the faithful, in a universality of both time and space, since the “faith” in question is that of the whole Church. I draw attention to the importance for its operation of connaturality with divine realities. Along with the monastic theologians of the twelfth century, I consider such connatural knowledge to be grounded in an affinity with the divine disclosure as its recipient’s nature is made “like to God” through grace.<sup>1</sup> Such connaturality with divine things “results from the charity which unites us to God: ‘he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.’”<sup>2</sup> Within the body of the faithful, especial weight is to be attached, therefore, to the testimonies of the saints. The spirituality of the saints is authority bearing for theological dogmatics.<sup>3</sup> I do not necessarily ascribe value to “spirituality” in general, since I follow St. Athanasius in treating piety (*eusebeia*) as essentially dependent on the orthodox understanding of faith, itself embodied in the Tradition of faith and worship derived from the apostles (cf. 1 Tim 3:15-16).<sup>4</sup> While a theology is “inadequate if it does not end in mysticism, in a living encounter with the living God,”<sup>5</sup> in systematics it suffices to show how the spirituality of the saints enters into the circle of theological thought.

**1.1.3** I foreground the role of the ecclesial magisterium in identifying, through doctrinal *proclamation and definition*, the contours of the revelation that generates the *sensus fidelium*. I distinguish myself from those for whom only solemn judgments of ecumenical councils, or of popes speaking *ex cathedra*, have authority in the construction of theological doctrine (“definition”). It should be recalled that, in Catholic Christianity, the guidance of the Spirit

is also accorded to the ordinary magisterium of the Church, whether universal or that of the see of Rome in the succession of its pastors, and this attaches not to some isolated act but to a teaching found in the simultaneous or continuous convergence of a plurality of affirmations or explanations (“proclamation”), no one of which, however, could bring positive certitude if taken by itself alone. Though, in the wake of the classical German philosophers, I am committed to a high estimate of rationality (*Vernunft*), I do not consider the charge of “dogmatism” an insult; I hold doctrine to be an intellectual intuition of the mind that anticipates the banquet of the Kingdom in the vision of God, and thus it is “aretegenic,” or excellence promoting, since all such anticipation effects human transformation in the direction of salvation, which is the enjoyment of the supreme Good.

**1.1.4** I regard the pluralism of Catholic theology as both the de facto historical case and the de jure right of Christian thought, which may take up a variety of starting points in scanning the noetic whole. Though the integration into a single whole of all legitimate theologies is an eschatological desideratum, it can only be approached asymptotically in time. I note that the Church has never required in her schools absolute unity of thought.<sup>6</sup> In any given example, a theology will establish its own profile by the manner in which it selects and arranges in a hierarchy philosophical and theological concepts and themes, seeking to organize its content in their light. It is the work of historical theology to investigate and record this process. I name the selection and hierarchisation involved the establishing of the “philosophical and theological principles of order” (cf. 1.2; 1.3–1.3.2; 1.4–1.4.2).



## **1.2 *The Specificity of Systematics***

So far I have laid out my basic concept of theology (while delegating to chapters 3 and 4 a fuller account of Scripture and Tradition). It is the specifying feature of systematics that, compared with other forms of theology, it pays greatly enhanced attention to the philosophical and theological principles of order. This is because systematics wishes to highlight not only the rational coherence of its enterprise but also its character as a nexus of conceptually articulated interrelations that add up to a totality for thought.

**1.2.1** A systematics highlights both rationality's wide scope and revelation's comprehensive coherence. The idea of God belongs to reason. Indeed, the idea of God as found within reason posits God as the author of reason (since God is the author of all things, including the laws of thought), to which the Church, in receipt of a sacral thinking more penetrating as well as even more comprehensive in scope, adds that God is also the author of just such sacral understanding, that is, of revelation in its noetic aspect. I consider that the coincidence of the origin of reason, on the one hand, and of the revelation laid out in Catholic theology, on the other, enables us to call the Christian religion "absolute religion," religion in spirit and truth.<sup>7</sup>

**1.2.2** My use of the word "sacral" may be questioned; I justify it by saying it refers globally to the way the infinity of the divine manifests itself to finite human beings.

## **1.3 *A Philosophical Principle of Order***

A philosophical principle of order in theology serves two offices. The first is common to all versions of such a principle.

It consists in supplying a systematics with its conceptual repertoire. The second is distinctive to this or that version of systematics as found in this or that author. In the case of the present writer, it will consist in identifying the family of concepts deemed most able to render the range of being at large (which corresponds to the scope of reason), and at the same time most able efficaciously to serve the presentation of the realities theology describes (which corresponds to sacral thinking, with its enlarged space).

**1.3.1** How, then, would I describe the philosophical principle of order in the particular outline of systematics I am attempting here? In accordance with the defining metaphor of this systematics embodied in its title, *Chalice of God*, I choose to deploy a philosophical principle of order that will exhibit the world as a beautiful receptacle for the gift to creatures of the divine life. The philosophical principle of order corresponding to this description will entail an ontology approached phenomenologically in a primarily aesthetic manner and treating as key the concepts of being, cosmos, history, form, and person.

**1.3.2** I concede that, materially speaking, the selection of this approach to philosophy is influenced by my acceptance of revelation (it is an example of a “Christian philosophy”). But I do not regard this as in itself a dereliction of philosophical duty. While disclaiming a philosophical vocation, I consider that my choice exemplifies the following claims by a professional philosopher: “Reason alone underdetermines coherence, and it does not give one’s belief system a style. Religious faith helps to produce such a style, and that is probably why the minds of the greatest theistic philosophers of the past are interesting

in a way that is rare among the more arid minds of even the best non-theists."<sup>8</sup>

## ***1.4 A Theological Principle of Order***

A systematics needs not only a philosophical principle of order but a strictly theological one as well. All theological principles of order will make it their task to present the overall content of theology in the light of some major theme or themes drawn from within that content. It will be the contention of any given theology that the preferred theme yields especially satisfactory results when taken as furnishing the primordial perspective in which revelation is viewed. This the chosen perspective will do if it enables all aspects of revelation, the source of sacral thought, to be illuminatingly displayed and, moreover, interrelated in organic fashion. German romantic theology, to which, in this regard, I declare a debt, has termed this the "encyclopaedic" imperative, emphasizing the origin of that adjective in the noun "circle," and explaining the subjacent notion by appeal to the idea of organism. "Organism is a completed circle of living relationships which mutually determine and verify each other."<sup>9</sup> In theological science, so conceived, what is particular is possessed only in the whole—that is, in the system. In the circle of doctrines can be found no truth which, as such, is unnecessary, and yet each truth is free for itself, since the necessity in question arises "from the whole and from the inner relationships in which each truth stands towards the others, completing them and determining them" as it does so.<sup>10</sup>

**1.4.1** What theological principle of order have I chosen? In keeping with the metaphor found in this book's title

(cf. 1.3.1), I select a theological principle of order which finds the heart of Christian revelation in the outpouring of plenitude on the world (cf. 2.4.3), through the self-emptying of the Holy Trinity in Jesus Christ whereby a reconciling and deifying share in divine life is accorded us.

**1.4.2** The writing of systematics is feasible, but not because philosophy can supply the adequate ontological undertow for fully comprehensive thought. Here, I register a refusal to allow philosophy rights of governance over theology. Systematics is, rather, a feasible intellectual exercise because it is the case that in history God himself has revealed his all-round relations with the world. God has thus enabled the raids of reason on the intelligible to be unified by the influence of his Spirit around the centre that is his incarnate Word. Here, I affirm the capacity of orthodox theology to restructure the insights of rationality in what is, pre-eschatologically, the fullest conceivable way. In so saying, I also affirm the primacy of the theological principle of order in systematics—though I insist as well on the indispensability of its accompanying philosophical counterpart. I do not consider that the concept of systematics transgresses the mysteric character of revelation; I shall describe in chapter 4 how I understand “mystery” (cf. 4.1–4.1.3), but meanwhile I note how I have already accepted as authority bearing for theology at large the spiritual experience of the saints (cf. 1.1.2).