# Final Statement of the Workshop on Aquinas' Social Ontology and Natural Law in Perspective

## Insights for and from the social sciences



Today's intricate world calls for a social science that explains this complexity and aids in formulating appropriate solutions to societal issues. However, two persistent challenges hinder the social sciences from doing so:

1. The fragmentation of theoretical frameworks, which complicates any collaborative efforts aimed at problem-solving.

2. The fluctuation between individualist and collectivist, as well as realist and constructivist approaches, which distorts our understanding of the relational and practical aspects of human life.

Addressing these issues requires **a renewed theoretical drive**. Integrating Aquinas' "social ontology"[1] with contemporary social sciences may foster this renewal, promoting a **constructive dialogue between the social sciences and Catholic social thought**, which, for various historical reasons, has been blocked on both sides. Such a dialogue could helpfully start by highlighting several converging aspects between both intellectual traditions:

a.   Recognition of the uniqueness and **sacredness of the human person**.

b.   Acknowledgment of the **intentional structure of human actions** and the relational constitution of social wholes.

c. Assigning **ontological status to relationships**.

d. Acknowledgement of **natural law theory as a contribution to moral universalism**.

(a) Aquinas' perspective on human beings as not just social animals but as rational beings, created in God's image, provides grounds for the **sacredness** of the human person, thus opening up a promising field of dialogue with contemporary social theory, specifically in the sociology of religion and its development of fields of work around terms such as the "power of the sacred" and the "sacrality of the person".

(b) Likewise, his insights into intentional human actions and the significance of our natural relationships offer a distinctive societal view. Specifically, the practical and **relational approach to the constitution of "social wholes"** is particularly capable of accounting for the dynamics of social change. In turn, modern social sciences have developed a clearer understanding of the autonomy of certain social institutions, such as the market, whose logic is not simply reducible to the intentions of individual agents. This modern discovery invites further reflection on the different logics involved in the configuration of the social world.

(c) Furthermore, Thomas' metaphysical realism combined with his Trinitarian theology fosters an enriched **ontology of relationships** that is particularly compatible with the best of contemporary social and human sciences.

Indeed, to expand on this last point, Thomas' social ontology relies on a metaphysics and a theology that cannot be ignored by those who approach his thought because it imprints a unique depth to his understanding of the human world. This metaphysical framework posits that the world is absolutely dependent on God the Creator, whom Thomas philosophically characterizes as **Ipsum Esse**, from whom all beings originate from and ultimately return to, a perpetual source of the being of Creation, the hub connecting all finite entities, and the ultimate purpose of all beings. The human being is accorded a unique position among all creatures in this return to God: endowed with reason, the human being enjoys a special participation in God's being, which Aquinas' theology of grace further amplifies immeasurably. This "participation in the divine nature" overflows into social life through human relationality. Thus, while we can live together reasonably well on the basis of our natural capacities for fairness and community devotion, Aquinas asserts that infusing charity into our social life can strength and purify it. Charity, in fact, forms the core of a fundamental Christian ethical innovation: boundless or asymmetrical responsibility for others. The act of loving God and loving one's neighbour through deeds of love and a spirit of service is the paramount virtue that human beings can cultivate during their earthly existence.

Moreover, Aquinas' portrayal of God as Truth implies that for the human person, being ordered towards God **equates to aligning with Truth.** This alignment is also pivotal in human communication and the practical realization of the human **common good**. Christian faith in the

Triune God elevates this concept to a higher, theological level, since being referred to Truth means being referred to Christ, signifying a personal relationship with God.

This theological and metaphysical perspective has significant implications for Aquinas' approach to fundamental social concepts. Interestingly, **to articulate the transcendent dignity of the human person within the immanent dimensions of our social nature, Aquinas resorts to the "order of reason" (S.th. I.II q. 72, a. 4).** His perspective on human affairs, the core subject matter of social sciences, is encapsulated in practical terms within his renowned **doctrine of natural law**. This doctrine inspired Jacques Maritain's formulation of human rights, which influenced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Here we find a fourth point of convergence with classical social theory, namely, Aquinas' qualified **moral universalism**:

> (d) Indeed, in his theory of natural law, Aquinas refers to **universal principles**, which nevertheless may result in different practical articulations (S.th. I.II q. 94 a. 4). In doing so, Aquinas' conceptualization of Natural Law delivers **normative standards** while allowing for historical evolution. In this way, he adeptly **explores the tensions between ethical principles and imperfect historical implementations of the common good**, and introduces a hermeneutical principle to account for social progress (S.th. I.II q. 97 a. 1).

Economic and political matters, inherently tied to specific historical periods, offer a unique lens to examine underlying tensions. For example, **how should we conceptualize the common good within the framework of a modern, affluent economy**? Specifically, how should we perceive the interplay between work, finance and the global common good? All societies are tasked with providing a satisfactory account of the social disparities emerging from different kinds of work. Yet, in affluent societies, the very **meaning of work** becomes a pressing concern. Contrary to initial impressions, a medieval philosopher like St. Thomas may offer valuable insights into this matter, by contextualizing, for instance, the issue of work within a hierarchy of human goods and encapsulating it within an ethical framework centered on the common good.

What is sure is that in today's world, facing a myriad of complex and interconnected crises, including stark economic disparities, pervasive environmental decay and widespread wars, there is a **growing demand for a new global ethics** that balances individual and collective responsibility. Aquinas' ethical framework, rooted in the ontology of social groups, natural law and virtue ethics, within an **articulated account of the common good**, offers insights towards achieving this balance, drawing the appropriate consequences to address contemporary issues, exacerbated by globalization and technological interconnectedness, but also by alarming polarization and reciprocal distrust that threaten humanity and our planet.

**Virtues such as humility, mercy and charity**, absent from Aristotle's ethics but emphasized by Aquinas, appear to be particularly pertinent for the flourishing of fully humane political communities where every member contributes to the **common good.** Aquinas often equates this common good

to "peace and justice". Interestingly, **he believes that peace is an indirect result of justice but a direct effect of charity** (S.th. II.II q. 29 a. 3), and identifies **war as a principal vice against peace** (S.th. II.II q. 40). Although he considers that "the peace of the state is a good in itself" (S.th. II-II 123, a. 5 ad 3), Aquinas concedes that war can be necessary under specific circumstances – when sanctioned by a legitimate authority, justified by a valid cause, and aimed at restoring peace. The role of war in the context of modern warfare, however, remains a matter of debate. **Political justice**, in turn, requires that human law be animated by natural law. Even though explicit references to natural law are scarce in contemporary juridical debates, its influence is implicitly present whenever legal and juridical procedures strive for fairness in the light of the common good.

In today's context, the **ontology** of Aquinas, where love and charity are pivotal, appears particularly suited for **reconfiguring our societies by fostering harmonious relationships** among individuals, and God. Technological advancements, including AI, do not supersede the inherent capabilities of human nature. Despite its vast potential, **AI remains a tool that can be used for both beneficial and detrimental purposes. It can either be a dehumanizing or humanizing social force, depending on its integration into morally constructive or harmful practices.** Families, by contrast, due to their intrinsic relational nature, **have a direct humanizing mission in society.** As long as they are driven by love, families are a genuine source of innovation, inherently generating the relational goods necessary for the flourishing of truly human communities. In safeguarding the family's distinct participation in and contribution to the common good, laws should not contradict or replace the reality of the family. The social sciences can assist lawmakers by identifying innovative ways to depict the social reality of the family in a way that corresponds with human experience.

[1] The term "social ontology" has a somewhat obscure origin, tracing back to the late 19th Century, with roots in both Catholic and secular contexts (cf. Schmidt, H.B. Introduction to Oxford Handbook of Social Ontology. In: Hans Bernard Schmidt, & Sally Haslanger & Stephanie Collins & Brian Epstein (eds.), forthcoming in late 2024). It was not until the 1970s, following the publication of Carol Gould's "Marx' Social ontology" that the term began to gain prominence. It has since been widely accepted in contemporary social theory, particularly through the work of Margaret Gilbert and John Searle. Social ontology has evolved into a systematic field of study, focusing on the ontological status of society and the various elements that constitute the social realm, including language, culture, institutions such as property, law, money, and the dynamics of social change. Former PASS President Margaret S. Archer was a prominent contributor to this field. Since the term "social ontology" does not have a direct reference in Aquinas' writings, it is rarely used in studies of Aquinas, where it is more common to analyze society through the lens of his doctrine of natural law, thus emphasizing the normative dimension inherent in social life. Despite the rich tradition supporting this approach, it is worth noting that the Church's social teaching relies on a social ontology that owes much to Aquinas' social thought.