2 Mediation and Saint Thomas Aquinas

An understanding of some of the views of Thomas Aquinas is essential in order to come to an appreciation of the current stance of the Catholic Church on questions concerning in vitro fertilisation, embryo research, and ethical issues in general, and their perceived implications for civil legislation. This arises first because of the status of Thomas in ‘the mind of the Church’; secondly because the salvation-through-mediation theme (enlarged upon in what follows), which was nurtured by, if not rooted in, Thomas’ Christianising of Aristotelianism, has been adopted by the Church as its own; and thirdly, because Catholic moral philosophy has become natural law moral philosophy, that is, the prevailing approach to moral issues is characteristically Thomistic, and the Thomistic approach is claimed to be universally applicable.

Further, an understanding of Thomas’ views, and the contrast with the other principal pole of the Christian tradition, Lutheran-based Protestantism, will be assisted by a brief consideration of some of the pivotal notions of the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. In the conflicting approaches to human psychology of these two ‘pagan’ philosophers lies one of the main roots of the division of opinion among Christians concerning the relation between the divine and the natural orders, and, consequently, of a difference of view on the bearing of divine revelation on moral and legal issues.

SALVATION THROUGH MEDIATION

Let us begin with the salvation-through-mediation theme, the most distinctive hallmark of Catholic thinking within the Christian tradition. By ‘salvation-through-mediation’ I mean the notion that, except in the most extraordinary circumstances, God’s will and grace are believed to be conveyed or channelled to us through some natural medium, rather than directly, or by
supernatural channels. It is essential to have a grasp of the sources and of the significance of this emphasis in order to assess the teachings and arguments considered later in this book.

The paradigmatic instance of mediation is the divine incarnation in Jesus Christ, which is itself presented to us through the medium of the scriptures. Of course, all Christians, by definition, accept the doctrine of the incarnation, but not all accept the Catholic interpretation that it signifies and confirms the essential goodness of human nature. This interpretation is seen as further reinforced by Christ's appointment of the apostles and their successors as his mediators, a role which is understood to be fulfilled by the pope and the bishops ever since (although it ought to be added that their authority is not held to be directly comparable with that of the scriptures or of Christ; rather they are *interpreters* of the message which has already been given through these primary media).

But mediation does not stop there. The benefit of the incarnation, the grace by which the faithful Christian is saved, is mediated through human agency and the sacramental use of natural materials: water in baptism, oil and laying on of hands in confirmation, bread and wine in the eucharist, and even the forgiving of sins is mediated through the priest in confession. Prayer is regularly directed through Mary, hailed as the Mediatrix, and the various saints. Further, both to underline the key role of the saints as mediators, and in recognition of the holiness of the body, their physical relics are treated with the deepest veneration.

But also, God is thought to operate and to be revealed, not only through these select human agents and sacramental materials, but through nature in general: the existence of God is said to be evident in the natural order of creation and the divine will is believed to be expressed in that natural order. The discerning of God's revelation in nature can be achieved through the exercise of unaided human reason, whereas the revelation given through specific human agents has to be accepted on faith alone, except in a limited domain wherein its content can also be apprehended through reason (we shall be returning to this last point later).

There is a sharp contrast between this approach and that which formed the fundamental thrust of Reformation Protestant thinking, and is currently most in evidence in 'austere' Protestant-