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## Emergent Catholicity: Forming the Mind of Vincent

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# Emergent Catholicity: Forming the Mind of Vincent

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SCOTT KELLEY, PH.D.



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In her article “The Core Values of Vincentian Education,” Louise Sullivan, D.C., argues that there is an “all-too-pervasive view of Vincent de Paul as an ‘anti-intellectual.’”<sup>1</sup> While it would be impossible to describe precisely how pervasive this view is, it is important to note that the view does exist and, more importantly, might have subtly steered Vincentian studies from focusing on Vincent de Paul’s intellectual formation and educational achievements. The idea that Vincent may have appeared somewhat “anti-intellectual” is understandable given his own description of his educational background, the dominant focus of many of his biographers on Christian virtue, the scant records of his scholastic achievement, and the type of documents left to history. Vincent did not appear to view the intellectual apostolate as an important endeavor for the mission in his times, as Dennis Holtschneider, C.M., former president of DePaul University explains: “universities were not required or even able to achieve his ends for the poor.”<sup>2</sup> They were certainly not like the modern Vincentian universities of today, able to alleviate poverty in profound ways and an important expression of the mission.<sup>3</sup> As such, there appears to be a paradox in Vincentian heritage: on the one hand, Vincent downplayed his own education, but on the other, education has become a significant manifestation of the Vincentian mission today. Therefore, what lessons for the intellectual apostolate might a careful analysis of Vincent’s educational background reveal?

It is clear, judging from his own words, that Vincent did not wear his educational achievement as a badge of accomplishment. In a conference to the confreres on the Kingdom of God, Vincent explains “[y]ou, Messieurs, have studied theology and I’m an ignorant man, a fourth form student.”<sup>4</sup> And later in a conference on Moral Theology, Vincent told the confreres:

...[i]f the occasion presented itself where it would be necessary to enlighten a Huguenot on the difficulties he might put forward to us, we’d find this very hard — at least I would because I’m a poor, wretched, fourth level student. If I were to meet a minister who presented his difficulties and objections to me, I must confess that I’d really be at a loss.<sup>5</sup>

Vincent claims to be a scholar of the fourth form, completed when he left Dax, which is roughly equivalent to a modern day high school diploma. Members of his own Congregation

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Sullivan, D.C., “The Core Values of Vincentian Education,” *Vincentian Heritage* 16:2 (1995): 17. Available online: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol16/iss2/3>

<sup>2</sup> Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., “The Heart of Vincentian Higher Education. Remarks by the Rev. Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., at St. John’s University Annual Vincentian Convocation,” 22 September 2016, available at: <http://scholar.stjohns.edu/jovsa/vol1/iss2/5/>

<sup>3</sup> Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., and Edward R. Udovic, C.M., “The Vincentian Higher Education Apostolate in the United States,” *Vincentian Heritage* 22:1 (2001). See: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol22/iss1/3>.

<sup>4</sup> See Conference 198, “Seeking the Kingdom of God,” 21 February 1659, *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. By Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, vols. 1-14 (New York: New City Press, Brooklyn: 1985-2009), 12:114. Hereafter cited as *CCD*. Available online: [http://via.library.depaul.edu/coste\\_en/](http://via.library.depaul.edu/coste_en/)

<sup>5</sup> Conference 210, “Moral Theology, Preaching, Catechizing, and Administration of the Sacraments,” 5 August 1659, *CCD*, 12:238.

had been unaware of the documentation of his degrees from the University of Toulouse and the University of Paris, and were surprised to find them among his papers after he died.<sup>6</sup> It is peculiar that Vincent would refer to himself as a “scholar of the fourth form” when in many legal documents his degrees are featured prominently. As was customary in formal documents of the time: “...Vincent de Paul, priest of the Dax dioceses, Bachelor of the sacred science of Theology,” and in his Last Will and Testament, “Vincent de Paul, priest, Licentiate in Canon Law.”<sup>7</sup> This may well be an expression of Vincent’s humility, especially when comparing his theological credentials to professional theologians like Louis de Guyard, described in legal documents as “priest and Doctor of Theology.”<sup>8</sup> It was customary for one’s educational pedigree to feature prominently as a credential, a kind of qualification, in many types of formal documents, not unlike the way M.D., Ph.D., M.B.A., or S.T.D., often append the signature at the bottom of our documents today.

In a number of important directives, most significantly in the *Common Rules for the Congregation of the Mission*, Vincent warns the confreres to seek out Christ’s teaching, “which will never let us down, while worldly wisdom always will.”<sup>9</sup> Vincent appears to adopt the polemic of opposition between Christian revelation, on the one hand, and the kind of wisdom sought by Greek philosophers on the other, a kind of wisdom that Saint Paul refers to as “the wisdom of the world.” Saint Paul’s warning against “philosophy and empty deceit” in 1 Corinthians 1:20-24 and Colossians 2:8 are examples of the long-standing dialectic between the truths revealed in sacred scripture and truths discovered in the philosophical habit of mind.<sup>10</sup> Vincent’s caution could be interpreted as an intentional association with the more mystical-religious side of the dialectic, and not the rational-philosophical. On the surface, truth for Vincent appears to be revealed in Providence, not discovered through the achievement of reason.

Vincent’s biographers also downplayed his education. In the first biography of Vincent de Paul, published in 1664, Bishop Louis Abelly interprets Vincent’s statements about his own education as an expression of Christian humility:

[h]e was not one of those puffed up by the little they know. On the contrary, he strove to hide what he had acquired. Out of an extraordinary sense of humility, he tried to persuade others that he had little education. Saying this

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, ed. John E. Rybolt, C.M., trans. William Quinn, F.S.C. (New Rochelle, N.Y.: New City Press, 1993), 40.

<sup>7</sup> See Document 11, “Act of Taking Possession of the Parish of Clichy,” 2 May 1612, CCD, 13a:23; and Document 31a, “Last Will and Testament of Saint Vincent,” 7 September 1630, *Ibid.*, 13a:98.

<sup>8</sup> Document 25b, “Act of Taking Possession of the Bons-Enfants by Antoine Portail in the Name of Vincent de Paul,” 6 March 1624, CCD, 13a:72.

<sup>9</sup> See “Chapter II: Gospel Teaching” in Document 117a, *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, 17 May 1658, CCD, 13a:431. Available online: [http://via.library.depaul.edu/cm\\_construles/3](http://via.library.depaul.edu/cm_construles/3)

<sup>10</sup> See Steven Marrone, “Medieval philosophy in context,” *Cambridge Companions Online* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11; available at <http://ernestopriani.com/wp-content/uploads/Medieval-philosophy-in-context.pdf>

he did not offend against the truth, for indeed he had passed through the fourth class, but it was an artifice of the virtue of humility. He maintained silence about his later studies.<sup>11</sup>

Abelly's account alludes to the claim in Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."<sup>12</sup> This subtle reference contributes to an organizing theme in Abelly's biographical narrative that Vincent was a pious man of Christian virtue in all respects. In devout religious circles especially, academic achievement was often viewed as worldly hubris and accomplishment, over and against the Christian virtue of humility and gratuitous nature of grace. More pointedly, 'the unmerited gift of faith' is always superior to the achievement, and hubris, of reason. By Vincent's time, the dichotomy between faith and reason was well worn, a simmering subtext in the debates between Dominicans and Franciscans or Jesuits and Jansenists. Pierre Coste, C.M., echoed Abelly's interpretation in his 1932 biography of Vincent de Paul by writing "[t]he glory of a saint does not lie in his university degrees, but in the nobility of his character and the splendor of his virtues."<sup>13</sup>

Even Bernard Pujo's more contemporary biography describes Vincent as "an impatient student," creating the impression that Vincent's time at the University of Toulouse was shaped more by external circumstances and his precarious financial situation than by anything he studied or learned there. Pujo's account provides some context for this period in Vincent's young adult years, but focuses on distractions to his learning such as violent conflicts among students that were prominent at the university during the time. The university years, both in Toulouse and in Paris, do not seem significant to Vincent's biographers; he went there and he received a degree. In his brief chronology of Vincent de Paul's life, Pujo fails to include that Vincent received a Licentiate in Canon Law from the University of Paris in 1624.<sup>14</sup> Considering the stature of the universities he attended, the social value of a Bachelor's degree in Theology and a Licentiate in Canon Law, and the kind of public authority required to draft and execute complex ecclesial and royal contracts, it is a curious omission. Why has such little attention been paid to his educational background?

Another possible reason for the misconception that Vincent was "anti-intellectual" is the type of his writings left to history. Pierre Coste's fourteen-volume collection of material includes correspondence, conferences, and documents pertinent to Vincent de Paul and the organizations he founded. While the Coste collection does provide considerable theological insight and spiritual wisdom, the items within it must always be contextualized by their *type*. For example: correspondence to a particular person for a specific reason;

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<sup>11</sup> Abelly, *Life of the Venerable Servant*, 1:41. Available online: [http://via.library.depaul.edu/abelly\\_english/3](http://via.library.depaul.edu/abelly_english/3)

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:1.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M., 3 volumes (Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1987), 1:25. Available at: [http://via.library.depaul.edu/coste\\_engbio/](http://via.library.depaul.edu/coste_engbio/)

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Pujo, *Vincent de Paul: The Trailblazer* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 453.

conferences for a specific community at a specific period in their development; community rules to ensure consistency and integrity over time; and formal documents that function as financial securities, charters, or other legal instruments. As such, the tone and content of Coste's material is significantly different from what is generally considered systematic theology. One expects systematic theology to be presented *systematically*, as for example in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, any of the treatises of the mystics or the early Church Fathers, or in the form of Papal Encyclicals written to the Christian faithful. Judging from extant documents it appears that Vincent was not a systematic theologian, at least not in the way Peter Lombard was. Vincent did not spend much time writing this type of theology. If he did, there appears to be no record of it. This lack of a systematic theological treatise may reinforce the notion that Vincent was more interested in practical matters than speculative ones, or that he simply borrowed his theological worldview from other theologians and did not construct his own.

For all of these reasons, and perhaps others, it is easy to see why there has been little focus on Vincent's *intellectual formation*. Nevertheless, I believe we should consider Vincent's formation as a student and as a thinker under the assumption that his time at the University of Toulouse was indeed formative, helping him develop many of the intellectual capacities he came to depend upon for his later works.

Before we proceed, it is important to describe what is meant by the terms *intellectual* and *intellectual formation*. Misleading and imprecise distinctions between "head" and "heart" aside, there are substantive distinctions to be made between reason and faith.<sup>15</sup> The Greek term '*nous*' [νοῦς] and the Latin term '*intellectus*' generally refer to the ability of the mind to come to accurate conclusions about what is true or real after careful investigation, as evidenced by an increased capacity for problem solving. Socrates, as portrayed in the *Dialogues of Plato*, is often viewed as a symbol or model for the way truth is discovered: progressively and cumulatively through precise definition, pointed questioning, and careful reasoning. In this interpretation, reason begins from a hermeneutic of doubt: is this really so? Have I understood things correctly? What is missing? Is this definition accurate? Conversely, the Latin term '*fidere*,' from which the term 'faith' is derived, means 'to trust.' A person of Catholic faith assents to the truths revealed by God through the person of Jesus Christ, as articulated by the Church. Unlike reason, faith begins from a hermeneutic of trust: "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."<sup>16</sup>

The long-standing dichotomy between these two ways of knowing is best captured by the question Tertullian asked in the second century: "what has Athens to do with

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<sup>15</sup> For a neurological distinction between reason and emotion see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (London: Penguin Books, 2005). Damasio finds that Descartes' distinction between "reason" (*res cogitans*) and "emotion" (*res extensa*) is totally untenable, very misleading, and unhelpful in understanding the functions of the human brain. Reason, for Damasio, is more like a mood that is profoundly impacted by emotional imprints. For a theological analysis of faith and reason, see Pope Saint John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Fides et Ratio of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship Between Faith and Reason*, Saint Peter's, Rome, 14 September 1998. Available online at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html)

<sup>16</sup> John 20:29.

Jerusalem?" Athens was a symbol of the philosophical habit of mind, Jerusalem a symbol of faith in God's revelation to humanity. In *Fides et Ratio*, Pope Saint John Paul II artfully positions both faith and reason as *mutually informative* realms of knowledge, functioning like the wings of a bird that are both necessary for an ascent to truth: we believe to understand and we understand to believe. He presents a thoughtful integration of what had been falsely sundered.

Vincent de Paul exhibits a range of higher order thinking, a mastery perhaps best exemplified in Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Evidence for this can be found in the explicit permissions his degree from the University of Toulouse granted, his capacity to create and negotiate contracts for the acquisition of land or capital, to convince ecclesiastical and royal authorities to bestow much needed resources, to draft founding documents for the establishment and Papal approval of new forms of religious life, and to make new theological arguments in response to the pressing theological questions of his day. These are all activities that Vincent embraced after his time as a student at the University of Toulouse and at the University of Paris, and they presuppose a mastery of Catholic theology, Canon Law, and many other disciplines. It would be a significant mistake to assume that "an ignorant peasant," a "scholar of the fourth form," could accomplish these types of things *without* the kind of education he received. He was, by all accounts, a very intelligent man whose education gave him the skills necessary to do these things.

Considering Vincent's views on his education and the subsequent impression that he was "anti-intellectual," an important question emerges: to what extent did Vincent's intellectual formation, especially his time as a student at the University of Toulouse, influence his later works? It is most remarkable that a self-described "ignorant peasant" was able to earn a Bachelor's Degree from the university in 1604 and, later, a Licentiate in Canon Law from the University of Paris in 1624. It might be useful, then, to contextualize Vincent's experience as a student of theology to locate his intellectual milieu in an evolving arc of scholastic thought, and to position his intellectual formation as a movement toward wholeness.

## **The Medieval University**

With the fall of the Roman Empire, "the torch of learning in the West flickered and nearly died out."<sup>17</sup> There was a sharp decline in the traditions of critical history, philosophy, and literature that had developed steadily for centuries on Greco-Roman foundations. During the great intellectual awakening of the twelfth century, as Thomas Bokenkotter describes, the birth of the university as a distinct institution is remarkable. Much intellectual life during the early middle ages had been confined to secluded monasteries. "Almost imperceptibly," around 1170, the cathedral schools gave way to the first universities in Paris and Bologna.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Double Day, 2005), 158.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

As great crowds of students gathered, most of whom were clerical, they participated in a great intellectual awakening that synthesized the wisdom of Jerusalem, Athens, Cairo, and many other cities. Students and teachers began to organize themselves into guilds, much like their merchant counterparts, to protect their mutual interests as scholars, learners, and as seekers of wisdom. Protected and favored by Popes and secular rulers alike, the university-as-distinct-institution began to multiply: Salerno (c 1200), Oxford (c 1200), Cambridge (1209), Salamanca (1220), Padua (1222), Naples (1224), Toulouse (1230), Pisa (1303), Prague (1348), Heidelberg (1385), and Louvain (1425).

For the early university, only three branches of knowledge were worthy of advanced study: medicine, law, and theology. While there were great advances in the study of law, which included both Canon and Civil Law, the study of medicine was for a long time nothing more than “a science of folklore.”<sup>19</sup> The queen of medieval intellectual endeavors was always theology.

The university that Vincent experienced at the dawn of the seventeenth century had developed its texts and traditions of learning over centuries. It was a vibrant, intellectually fertile place where students came to explore, examine, challenge, and synthesize the vast array of ideas, beliefs, principles, and claims that had gradually coalesced during the twelfth-century intellectual renaissance. Medieval life had provided the conditions — agricultural surpluses, the development and expansion of markets and trade, the rise of town populations, and increased leisure time — for people to indulge their intellectual curiosities, as expressed through the careful examination of accepted beliefs.<sup>20</sup> As such, the university was not only a distinctly medieval institution, it was “the great achievement of the Middle Ages in the intellectual sphere,” which “affected the progress and intellectual development of Europe more powerfully, or (perhaps it should be said) more exclusively, than any schools in all likelihood will ever do again.”<sup>21</sup>

Medieval usage of the term ‘university’ refers merely to “a number, a plurality, an aggregate of persons,” while the term ‘*studium generale*’ is closer to modern conceptions of its meaning. It refers not to a place where all things are studied, but rather to a place where students from all parts are received. In fact, few medieval *studia* possessed all faculties. In general, the medieval *studium generale* had three primary characteristics:

1. The school attracted or at least invited students from all parts, not merely those of a particular country or district;
2. It was a place of higher education; that is to say, at least one of the higher faculties of theology, law, or medicine was taught there;
3. Those subjects were taught by a considerable number, at least a plurality, of masters.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>20</sup> John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age*, 50th edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 14.

<sup>21</sup> Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages: Salerno, Bologna, Paris*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 1:3. All further references to Rashdall, *Universities*, cite material from volume one.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-7.





Detail from a period map of the Collège de Foix, Toulouse, France.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>



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With institutional form, legal protection, financial resources to support students, a long history of intellectual engagement, and scholars devoted exclusively to their craft, the medieval university was fertile ground for innovation, inquiry, and the development of intellectual culture. It was, by far, the dominant institution of intellectual life in Christendom:

[a]s all priestly power had its visible head and source in the city of the Seven Hills, as all secular authority was ultimately held of the Holy Roman Empire, so could all the streams of knowledge by which the Universal Church was watered and fertilized, be ultimately traced as to their fountain-head to the great universities, especially to the University of Paris.<sup>23</sup>

## The University of Toulouse

Little is known about Vincent's early life and perhaps even less about his early education, but a rough sketch is possible nonetheless. In 1594, at around age fourteen, Vincent was sent to Dax to study at the College des Cordeliers. Here he learned to master Latin sufficiently enough to secure the patronage of Monsieur de Comet, receive minor orders, and eventually begin his theological studies at the University of Toulouse in 1597.<sup>24</sup> The school in Dax may have been under the direction of the Franciscan Friars Minor.<sup>25</sup> It is reasonable to assume that Vincent achieved sufficient mastery of the 'seven arts,' the traditional preparatory curriculum for admittance to a school of theology: the *trivium*, which consisted of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic; and the *quadrivium*, which consisted of music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy.<sup>26</sup> At the center of his preparatory education for the higher study of theology was dialectic or logic.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Sullivan, "The Core Values," 17.

<sup>25</sup> Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:13.

<sup>26</sup> Rashdall, *Universities*, 35.

Vincent, like many other young men of his time, might have carried on his theological studies without leaving his own native place, but he was ambitious to acquire knowledge and realized that, under the guidance of the learned and experienced masters of some famous University, his progress would be more rapid; he also knew that University degrees would give him a right to apply for certain ecclesiastical dignities, and furthermore, by making the acquisition of a benefice more easy, put him more quickly in a position in which he need not worry about the future.<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of the motivations his biographers ascribe to him, Vincent chose to study at the University of Toulouse rather than Bordeaux, most likely because Toulouse had a faculty that taught theology. It was one of a dozen universities in Europe that housed some of the brightest minds in all medieval Christendom.

Gregory IX founded the University of Toulouse in 1229, not long after the University of Paris; however, it never enjoyed the same academic reputation. Not even a Papal Bull issued in 1233, declaring that anyone admitted to mastership at the younger universities should be freely allowed to teach at the older institutions, could diminish the exclusivity so deeply embedded in the reputations of Paris and Bologna.<sup>28</sup> Although Toulouse did enjoy its standing as one of Europe's great medieval universities, it was never viewed in the same way as Oxford, Paris, or Bologna, the three premiere universities in Europe. Nonetheless, it still earned a significant reputation as an established institution of higher learning.

The University of Toulouse clearly exemplified all three characteristics of a university. As Coste describes, thousands of students from all parts of France and even other countries came to study there. There were seven chairs in the Faculty of Theology, three of royal foundation and the remaining four held by Carmelite, Dominican, Augustinian, and Bernardine Fathers. The students at Toulouse were grouped according to their native provinces and native dialects, which often exacerbated simmering tensions and frequently broke into violent conflict. University life was not always a peaceful, nonviolent, engagement of ideas, cultures, or worldviews.<sup>29</sup>

Mastery of the *Trivium* was essential for the study of theology, but dialectic or logic was considered "the heart and centre" of right comprehension.<sup>30</sup> Higher order thought, it was believed, required an ability to apply, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate knowledge, with a certain facility in the precise use of language, the capacity to draw clear distinctions, the consistency of thought to synthesize positions from different theorists

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<sup>27</sup> Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:16.

<sup>28</sup> Rashdall, *Universities*, 8-9.

<sup>29</sup> Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:16-17.

<sup>30</sup> Rashdall, *Universities*, 37.



A plaque that commemorates Vincent de Paul's time spent as a student in Dax.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>



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in drastically different contexts, and the ability to evaluate the merit of a position based on its consequences. Vincent spent seven years (1597-1604) between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three at the University of Toulouse developing, cultivating, refining, and honing the skills of higher order thinking. By the time he left, he was well schooled and well versed in the broad evolution of Western Theological thought. By the age of twenty-three, Vincent was no longer “an ignorant peasant” by any stretch of the imagination. He had been blessed with an educational opportunity that few in his time, or few in any time really, ever have. He grew in awareness of the evolution of human thought, the evolution of Church doctrine, and, more importantly, he cultivated the intellectual skills necessary to address pressing social challenges.

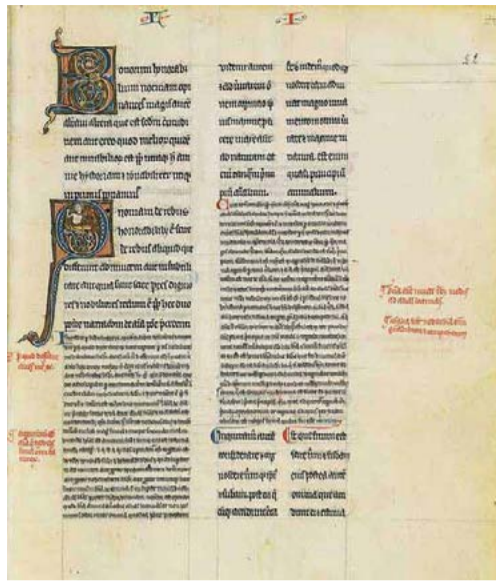
## Scholastic Theology

While there may not be any extant records of Vincent's exact curriculum or a detailed account of the pedagogy he experienced, it is reasonable to assume that the theology and the pedagogy at Toulouse was predominantly, if not exclusively, scholastic. According to Pujo, Vincent's theology courses were taught by Dominicans and their “beautiful church stood at the very center of the university.”<sup>31</sup> Even today, the reliquary of St. Thomas Aquinas, the intellectual giant of medieval Theology and Doctor of the Church, looms large in Toulouse. It is reasonable to assume Vincent's education was in the scholastic tradition because he himself explicitly references the scholastic method for the formation of confreres on occasion and holds it in high regard.<sup>32</sup> For him, it was a necessary part of the formation of priests and the mission of the Church.

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<sup>31</sup> Pujo, *The Trailblazer*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> In Letter 747, “To Lambert Aux Couteaux in Riechelieu,” 18 April 1645, *CCD*, 2:564, Vincent describes the death of a student confrere as “leaving scholastic theology to go learn celestial theology.” In Letter 2942, “To Jacques Pesnelle, Superior, in Genoa,” 15 August 1659, *Ibid.*, 8:93, Vincent recommends that a class be deferred because the Jesuits were no longer teaching scholasticism and “it is likely you will have few students capable of learning it.”



Detail picturing Averroes from Raffaello Sanzio's fresco *The school of Athens*, c. 1509; and Averroes' commentary on *De Anima*.

Both Images are in the Public Domain



For some philosophers the term 'scholastic' is used with great contempt. In the broad arc of philosophical thought, the medieval period is seen by some as an "insignificant intermezzo" between the grandeur of Greco-Roman antiquity and the piercing insight of modernity. For critics, scholasticism is "busied with sterile subtleties, written in bad Latin, and above all subservient to Roman Catholic theology."<sup>33</sup> The famous philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said he would "put on seven-league boots" to skip right over the thousand years between the sixth and seventeenth centuries and arrive at René Descartes, crying "land like the sailor."<sup>34</sup> In the critic's estimation, scholasticism was weak philosophy built on dry syllogisms and held captive by the tyranny of dogmatic superstition.

Criticisms of scholasticism have been significant and remain worthy of careful consideration. In reaction to the dominance of scholasticism, the rise of humanism in the sixteenth century may well have been because "the world was sick of syllogisms."<sup>35</sup> Despite these criticisms and its ultimate demise as a method for Catholic theology, the scholastic spirit of inquiry, if not the system itself, has rightly been cherished for its contribution to the development of Catholic doctrine. There is little doubt that scholasticism greatly influenced the development of Catholic theology and that Catholic theologians regard Thomas Aquinas as a prominent scholastic thinker.<sup>36</sup> The scholastic imprint on Catholic theology and the Catholic moral imagination is considerable, and Vincent was a student of it.

Scholastic theology sought to harmonize the doctrinal traditions, the deposit of faith, inherited from the early church Fathers with the great intellectual achievements of classical

<sup>33</sup> "Scholasticism," in the *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014). See: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scholasticism>

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Rashdall, *Universities*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> See "Aeterni Patris: Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on the Restoration of Christian Philosophy," St. Peter's, Rome, 4 August 1879. Online at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_04081879\\_aeterni-patris.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html)



Engraved portrait of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204).

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antiquity, most notably philosophy. For centuries, Neoplatonism had been the dominant philosophical influence on Catholic theology, most notably in the thought of Augustine of Hippo. It was not until the complete works of Aristotle had been recovered, imported from Muslim culture and translated into Latin from Arabic, that a new way of practicing philosophy emerged.<sup>37</sup> Hence, an “entirely new intellectual influence was introduced into the schools of the West.”<sup>38</sup> With the full complement of Aristotle’s thought emerging in Latin, both theology and philosophy were irrevocably changed as a result. Hellenic influence had been deeply absorbed into Arabic science and philosophy, and the School of Bagdad flourished in the ninth century as institutions of higher learning were falling into decay in the Christian West. Aristotle had been brought to Muslim Spain and from Muslim Spain to the rest of Europe. The re-introduction of Aristotle’s thought “revolutionized the intellectual life of Christendom far more completely than he had revolutionized the intellectual life of Islam.”<sup>39</sup>

The transmission of Greco-Arabic philosophy from Islam to Christian philosophy and theology in the Western Church was enhanced considerably by Jewish thought.<sup>40</sup> Writing in Arabic, thinkers like Moses Maimonides, a Jewish physician in Cairo, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes), a physician and lawyer from Cordoba, had created a systematic approach for philosophical inquiry. They developed a number of commentaries on Aristotle’s writings,

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<sup>37</sup> See Paul Vincent Spade, Gyula Klima, Jack Zupko, and Thomas Williams, “Medieval Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2013). Online at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/medieval-philosophy/>

<sup>38</sup> Rashdall, *Universities*, 350.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

which shaped some of the most important philosophical debates in following centuries.<sup>41</sup> When these texts were translated into Latin, Western theologians began to rediscover the breadth and depth of their culture's Greco-Roman heritage.

The Scholastics of the thirteenth century faced a daunting challenge. The Latin they spoke did not have the same categories and concepts as the Arabic of Maimonides and Ibn Rushd. As a result, they had to create or re-interpret their own conceptual categories to accommodate Aristotle's highly technical and precise language. They accomplished the difficult task of translation in an honest and humble way, by translating Aristotle's phrases literally. The result was a form of Latin that was neither elegant nor poetic, but one that was rigorous and logically consistent.<sup>42</sup>

The linguistic and conceptual synthesis that began with the translation of Aristotle into Latin was coupled with the open, evolving, and critical mindset of scholastic inquiry, as illustrated by three thinkers in particular: Peter Abelard (1079–1142), Peter Lombard (1096–1164), and Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274). Each one spent considerable time at the University of Paris, which functioned as an epicenter of theological inquiry for centuries. Because Vincent de Paul's Bachelor's degree in Theology from the University of Toulouse gave him permission to teach the second book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, it is important to contextualize Lombard's contribution within the broader evolution of scholastic inquiry.

### **Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non***

The scholastics believed that different, even contradictory positions on a given topic were nothing to be feared, dismissed, or destroyed. Rather, difference of perspective was something to be respected, examined carefully and, when possible, reconciled. The scholastic intuition held that there was always the possibility that some underlying, unifying truth may be uncovered. The scholastic mind sought a greater whole, a grand unity of Being.

In the prologue to *Sic et Non*, Peter Abelard explains that the goal of his approach to theology is to analyze and synthesize what appears to be incompatible or contradictory on the surface in order to discover an underlying unity. "[W]hen, in such a quantity of words, some of the writings of the saints seem not only to differ from, but even to contradict, each other, one should not rashly pass judgment concerning those by whom the world itself is to be judged."<sup>43</sup> If there appears to be a contradiction within the tradition, it is only because of one's "weakness in mind" rather than in the saints' lack of felicity in writing. For Abelard, the apparent inconsistencies within his tradition were to be found in truncated habits of mind, not something inherent in Being itself. Abelard sought out difference and distinction because it held within it the possibility of discovering a greater truth, a greater insight into Being.

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<sup>41</sup> Marrone, "Medieval philosophy," 21.

<sup>42</sup> William Turner, "Scholasticism," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912). Available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13548a.htm>

<sup>43</sup> "Peter Abelard (1079-1142): Prologue to *Sic et Non*," in *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Fordham University, trans. by W.J. Lewis from the Latin text in the critical edition of *Sic et Non*, ed. by Blanche B. Boyer and Richard McKeon (University of Chicago Press, 1976); available at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/Abelard-SicetNon-Prologue.asp>



*Les Amours d'Héloïse et d'Abelard.*

Oil on canvas, by Jean Vignaud, c. 1819.

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To arrive at a position that retains the yes (*sic*) *and* the no (*non*), it is critical for the scholastic thinker to note carefully that words have different meanings in different contexts. As Abelard writes:

[i]t is a noteworthy quality to love the truth in the words, not the words themselves. For what use is a golden key if it cannot unlock what we desire? And what is wrong with a wooden key, if it can unlock what we desire, when we wish nothing but to open what is closed?<sup>44</sup>

The meaning of the text, according to Abelard, is to point to something that *transcends* the text, to the truth that is sought by the one who seeks, the inquirer. In this way, the scholastic thinker would have been quite at home with the Buddhist adage about not mistaking the pointing finger for the moon, the thing itself with the signifier.

Abelard believed that the various positions of the saints must be engaged *charitably*, that is, accurately and fairly in a spirit of exploration, discovery, and favorable interpretation, especially when a certain position appears to contradict another position that is also held to be true. Scholastic thinkers must take great care to ensure there are not false attributions of authorship or corruptions in the text that might explain contradiction. Unsurprisingly, Abelard had a deep appreciation for the challenges of translation. By following the rigors of logic and careful analysis, he did not seek to disprove, discredit, or draw a perfect line around orthodoxy. To the contrary, he sought to engage the apparent conflicts and inconsistencies that had naturally evolved over centuries within the multivalent Christian tradition in a spirit of humble and charitable inquiry.

Ironically, the great care he took to examine positions charitably was interpreted,

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, section 18-43.

most uncharitably, as a failure to embrace orthodoxy. He was accused of contradicting orthodoxy and having an excessive laxity with regard to heresy. As a result, his work was included on the forbidden books list, and his influence on theology was always tinged with suspicions of heresy.<sup>45</sup> Ironically, it was Abelard's interest in the synthesis and development of doctrine that positioned the scholastic movement as a precursor to the university. As Rashdall describes, Abelard "inaugurated the intellectual movement out of which they [medieval universities] sprang," a method that was transferred from philosophy to theology and to the whole cycle of medieval studies.<sup>46</sup> With Abelard, the "desire to apply the tools of reason, honed by dialectic, extended to every area of learning" and "the methodical study of religious belief took flight."<sup>47</sup>

As Richard Rohr, O.F.M., a contemporary commentator on the history of spirituality observes, Abelard was a model for the humble pursuit of wisdom. In *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Judaeum et Christianum*, Abelard used Luke 2:46 to describe the way that Jesus, symbol of all wisdom and truth, sat among the teachers in the temple listening to them and asking them questions; "If Jesus can listen and ask questions," Abélard writes, "who are we to think we are better than him?"<sup>48</sup>

### **Peter Lombard, *Sentences***

Vincent's degree from the University of Toulouse allowed him to teach and lecture on the Second book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, the standard theological text of the time.<sup>49</sup> *Sentences* is best viewed as a theological casebook intended for training experts in a wide range of ecclesial and secular professions. These included academic theologian, pastor, abbot, presiding officer of a community, episcopal or papal official, bishop, Pope, or even being in an advisory capacity for the assistance of secular rulers.<sup>50</sup> Lombard was a colleague of Peter Abelard's, but it is "little more than accident that the odour of heresy still cleaves to the name of Abelard." Meanwhile Lombard went on to become Bishop of Paris, was consulted by a Pope on a theological question, and authored the text that became the standard theological manual for centuries to come.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> According to Rashdall, the reason three of Abelard's positions were condemned was not because of "this or that particular error, but the whole tone, spirit, and method of his theological teaching." See Rashdall, *Universities*, p. 57, fn. 2. Even though many of his positions had been accepted as orthodox, later appearing in Lombard's *Sentences*, the standard medieval textbook of theology, and Aquinas' *Summa*, his bold attempt to explain the mystery of the Trinity and to put it into a coherent system was considered supremely arrogant (fn. 3). During the proceedings, as Rashdall describes, "an intolerant ecclesiastical imbecility" prevented ecclesial authorities from understanding his positions, which stifled theological inquiry (p. 58). Peter Lombard escaped this same scrutiny because his project was to distil doctrine, not to synthesize or develop it.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Marrone, "Medieval philosophy," 24.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, "Yes, And," Monday, 6 January 2014; available at: <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Listening-and-Asking.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=wptHOk6bNS4>

<sup>49</sup> Pujo, *The Trailblazer*, p. 21, fn. 23.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Lombard, Book 2 "On Creation," in *The Sentences*, trans. by Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), vii.

<sup>51</sup> Rashdall, *Universities*, 58.





Chapel of the Sorbonne, detail of the façade, Paris, France.

Left, a statue of Thomas Aquinas. Right, a statue of Peter Lombard.

In the middle, two muses support a clock and the coat of arms of Cardinal Richelieu.

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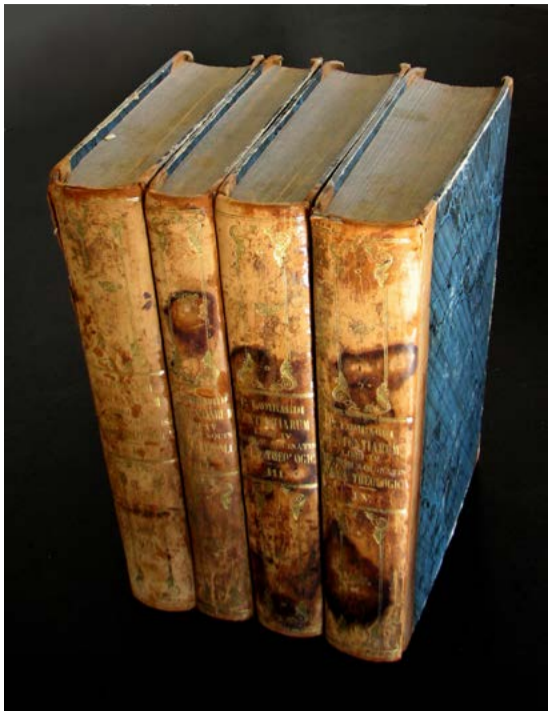


Although Lombard had adopted Abelard's dialectical method, his thought was viewed in a very different light. Abelard's works were included in the Index of Forbidden Books for a long period because he appeared to leave questions of doctrine open for discussion,<sup>52</sup> implying that doctrine is not fixed, static, or immutable but that it develops over time. He was a precursor to the historical consciousness that is presumed in Catholic theology today. Where Abelard may have been viewed as an agitator or a gadfly for his doctrinal inconsistencies, Lombard was viewed as a great harmonizer, a great synthesizer. For this reason, nearly every theologian in the Middle Ages wrote a commentary on the *Sentences*, including St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas himself.<sup>53</sup>

Taken as a whole, Peter Lombard's *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum* (the Four Books of the Sentences) describes a comprehensive, systematic theology that synthesizes Church doctrine in a framework wherein all of creation emanates from God (*exitus*) and returns to God (*et reditus*) through revelation, principally in Jesus Christ. The very structure of the *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum* makes the *exitus et reditus* framework explicit: on the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead (Book I), on the emanation of God's creative activity (Book II), on the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ (Book III), and on the meaning of signs as a return to God (Book IV). It is not clear why Vincent de Paul's studies focused on Book II. It seems unlikely that Vincent would have had the same freedoms university students enjoy today in choosing an area of focus, especially given his status pre-ordination and during ordination, which occurred half way through his theological studies, in 1600. It also may have been that the Doctors at Toulouse only had expertise in Book II of *Sentences*, that the experts on the other Books were unavailable, or that Book II was an established course of study for a diocesan priest. It is similarly possible, however, that Book II captured Vincent's imagination in a way that the other Books did not, and he chose to study it rather than the others.

<sup>52</sup> See "Prologue to *Sic et Non*," *Medieval Sourcebook*.

<sup>53</sup> Lombard, "On Creation," vii.



1841 Latin editions of *Sententiarum libri quatuor* by Peter Lombard, and *Summa theologia* by Thomas Aquinas.

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Regardless of the reasons why Vincent's studies focused on Book II, it is clear that Vincent's degree allowed him to expound on it. In the context of the broader *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum* corpus, Book II frames the human predicament and the fall of man within the Catholic understanding of Christian revelation. Put differently, the human longing for meaning, for freedom, for happiness, for the vision of the gospel promise unfolds within an ecology of Creation. With permission to expound on Book II, Vincent would have been able to demonstrate a comprehensive grasp of the Catholic worldview in its entirety. He had a sense of the whole.

As Pujo explains, Vincent's degree gave him permission to apply for a position as a "sententiary bachelor," an assistant to a master, which allowed him to comment freely on Book II of the *Sentences*.<sup>54</sup> Becoming a bachelor in theology was much like becoming a knight; the solemn reception of the novice into the brotherhood of arms came through the touch of the veteran's sword after numerous demonstrations of knightly skill and virtue.<sup>55</sup> In guilds of scholars and teachers, the aspiring bachelor honed and refined his intellectual skills in the pursuit of truth until the veteran master deemed the candidate fit to engage in public dispute and public exploration. It usually took five to six years to become a bachelor and eight years to become a master-doctor-professor.<sup>56</sup> It is consistent with medieval practice that Vincent spent seven years at Toulouse to obtain a bachelor's degree in theology after his preparatory studies in Dax.

In schools of theology, there were three distinct degrees of bachelorship: *cursor*, *sententiarius*, and *baccalarius formatus*.<sup>57</sup> Bachelorhood marked a significant, explicit, and public transition from lower order thinking (comprehension) to higher order thinking

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<sup>54</sup> Pujo, *The Trailblazer*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Rashdall, *Universities*, 287.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 471-472. The titles master, doctor, and professor were absolutely synonymous in the Middle Ages. *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, beginning at p. 477.

(application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation). Progress toward any of the bachelor degrees was divided into two distinct periods. As an *auditor* the student took careful dictation and copious notes from master lecturers on the Bible and then the *Sentences*. After a board of examiners determined that the candidate had completed the residency requirement, attended lectures, and had suitable knowledge of the contents of the books, the candidate would be made a bachelor at the *cursor* level.<sup>58</sup> Although ordinary lectures were reserved to doctors, a student-scholar who was of a certain standing, as determined by a rector, could deliver “extraordinary lectures” on limited texts.<sup>59</sup> By the sixteenth century, the doctors of theology were mere dignitaries, officiating at disputations, examinations, and other faculty meetings, while “the only real teachers were the bachelors.”<sup>60</sup> Given his status as a sententiary bachelor, it appears that Vincent may have begun to pursue a professorship.<sup>61</sup> The highest level, *baccalarius formatus*, was the final stage before becoming a master-doctor-professor. Judging from modern educational sensibilities, a *cursor* could be considered equivalent to an associate’s degree, a *sententarius* similar to a bachelor’s degree, and a *baccalarius formatus* similar to a master’s degree.

The progress toward higher levels of bachelorhood was punctuated by significant moments of public debate, including *principium*, a public discourse on a difficult theological problem, a *tentative*, where the master assigned a question to be disputed, and a *collation* or conference. In the popular *Sorbinic*, bachelors engaged in a combative disputation requiring significant stamina,<sup>62</sup> almost like gladiators in a Roman arena. The trial by ordeal that constituted university life consisted of examinations, lectures, and contentious public disputations, which were meant “to shut the door of the faculty to hopeless incapacity or gross ignorance.”<sup>63</sup> Degrees were earned, not casually conferred. While Vincent developed considerable skills in public disputation during his time at Toulouse, skills that served him well later in life, one can understand why he may have had little interest in pursuing a professorship. Especially after the Foleville experience of 1625, the self-described “ignorant peasant” and “scholar of the fourth form” may have sought to avoid the very public, very argumentative disputations that were the foundation of university life — practices that did little for the rural poor in his estimation.

### **Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae***

While Vincent’s degree gave him permission to teach Book II of Lombard’s *Sentences*, he also appears to have had a relatively sophisticated knowledge of the thought of

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 450-455.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 473.

<sup>61</sup> Pujo, *The Trailblazer*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Rashdall, *Universities*, 474-479.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

Thomas Aquinas.<sup>64</sup> As is well known, Father Andre Duval, a professor of the Sorbonne, was a counselor to and significant influence on Vincent de Paul. Duval is credited with introducing Vincent to the ideas of Benet of Canfield, especially his notion of Providence.<sup>65</sup> Duval was a devoted student of the thought of Thomas Aquinas who was viewed as a necessary foundation for refuting heresy and reviving Catholicism. Duval's devotion to Aquinas likely developed in the Catholic intellectual milieu at the University of Paris, and subsequently influenced the worldview of Vincent de Paul as well.<sup>66</sup> Like the theologians at the Council of Trent who turned to the well-developed sacramental theology of the medieval Scholastics,<sup>67</sup> Duval believed that the approach of Thomas Aquinas was foundational for the intellectual life of the Catholic Church. Centuries later, Pope Leo XIII concurred:

But the chief and special glory of Thomas, one which he has shared with none of the Catholic Doctors, is that the Fathers of Trent made it part of the order of conclave to lay upon the altar, together with sacred Scripture and the decrees of the supreme Pontiffs, the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, whence to seek counsel, reason, and inspiration.<sup>68</sup>

The achievement of Trent from 1545-1563 is unique in Church history because no council "has ever had to accomplish its task under more serious difficulties, none has had so many questions of the greatest importance to decide."<sup>69</sup> The Tridentine reforms emerged from a Catholic intellectual tradition that had evolved over centuries. Vincent de Paul was thirty-three years old when the Assembly of the Clergy endorsed the Tridentine reforms in 1614. It is reasonable to assume Vincent would have been quite familiar not only with the Tridentine Profession of Faith, as a body of doctrine, but also with the systematic theology that justified it and, more importantly, with the method of scholastic inquiry that made it possible.

### **Scholastic mindset and method**

That which was implicit and emerging in the thought of Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard was explicit in the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas. The structure of the

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<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., the reference to Thomas Aquinas in Document 110, "Study of the Vows Taken in the Congregation of the Mission and of the Privilege of Exemption," between 1653-1655, *CCD*, 13a:403.

<sup>65</sup> Hugh F. O'Donnell, C.M., "Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way" in *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, and Writings*, ed. by Frances Ryan, D.C., and John E. Rybolt, C.M. (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 16.

<sup>66</sup> See Tim Williams, C.M., "Many Strokes of the Lash: André Duval," *Vincentian Heritage* 28:1 (2008), pp. 21-32. Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol28/iss1/2>

<sup>67</sup> John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council*, Sew edition (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2012), 119.

<sup>68</sup> Section 22, "Aeterni Patris."

<sup>69</sup> Johann Peter Kirsch, "Council of Trent," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 15 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912). See: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15030c.htm>



*The Council of Trent.* Painting by Elia Naurizio, c. 1633.

Museo Diocesano Tridentino, Palazzo Pretorio.

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*Summa* itself reflects the method of scholastic inquiry itself: the profound interchange between question, assumption, and judgment, its approach to different perspectives, and its movement toward wholeness. “At the heart of it all,” writes Steven Marrone, “stood logic,” which had become a new paradigm for investigation and summary in all fields during the scholastic period.<sup>70</sup> The scholastic classroom was a laboratory for the *Trivium*: careful reading (grammar) and literal exposition (rhetoric) of the fundamental texts on a subject would develop into a structured system of question and answer (dialectic or logic), called a *disputatio*. Students would develop and exercise their intellectual skills in debate and carefully analyze the positions of authorities, advancing toward greater comprehensiveness, clarity of thought, and capacity for synthesis. The *Sentences* served as a collection of debating points, touching on all the significant aspects of a subject.

The Medieval *disputatio* was like a riverbed that controlled the flow of theological insight.<sup>71</sup> Although debate and argumentation are “as ancient as civilization itself,” part of the fabric of the human mind,<sup>72</sup> their function in the twelfth-century renaissance is unique. Anselm of Bec (1033–1109), best known for his ontological proofs of the existence of God, was the first to pioneer the use of dialogue and disputation that eventually gave rise to a

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<sup>70</sup> Marrone, “Medieval philosophy,” 28.

<sup>71</sup> In “The Future of Thomism,” Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan describes the need for a common method in light of the vast expanse of human knowledge that continues to grow exponentially. His analysis of method in modern theology mirrors the function of scholasticism for the medieval mind. “When the natural and the human sciences are on the move, when the social order is developing, when the everyday dimensions of culture are changing, what is needed is not a dam to block the stream but control of the river-bed through which the stream must flow. In modern science, what is fixed is not the theory or system but the method that keeps generating, improving, [and] replacing theories and systems.” This selection comes from Bernard Lonergan, William F.J. Ryan, and Bernard J. Tyrrell, *A Second Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), as quoted in Elizabeth A. Morelli, and Mark D. Morelli, eds., *The Lonergan Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 406-407.

<sup>72</sup> Alex J. Novikoff, “Toward a Cultural History of Scholastic Disputation,” *American Historical Review* 117:2 (April 2012): 331-364.

culture of disputation. In the course of open dialogue, Anselm would share an insight he had gleaned from meditation. His brothers asked him to express himself in plain language with intelligible arguments and *simplicique disputatione* (simple disputation) so they could engage his thought.<sup>73</sup> Vincent's commitment to the virtue of simplicity mirrors the basic conditions that underlie scholastic disputation; one must speak the truth as one sees it (or as it is presented by another) and follow "the little method" for preaching that clearly presents motives, definitions, and a means for putting into practice. Simplicity requires an openness that does not hide what might appear to be contradictory or even embarrassing.<sup>74</sup> The spirit of critical inquiry and critical engagement in the medieval *disputatio* was so successful as a method of theological inquiry that it was adopted in Italy and northern France. Thus, after Anselm, it became central to the new intellectual milieu of scholasticism and it was adopted by theologians, scientists, and lawyers alike.<sup>75</sup>

As the popularity and sophistication of the scholastic method evolved, the question-and-answer format of the *questiones disputatae* (disputed question) became an important tool for harmonizing conflicting interpretation in legal disputes.<sup>76</sup> Prior to his death in 1197, Peter the Chanter of Notre Dame had come to understand that the master theologian was like an architect: careful reading provided the basement, disputation the structural walls, and preaching the roof. He encouraged his fellow theologians to avoid useless questioning (*inutilitate questionum*) and altercations and to seek out more productive conversations (*collations*) which proceed as a common inquiry after truth.<sup>77</sup>

The disputation was absorbed into the curriculum of the medieval university, and it was in this context that the University of Paris grew. In the statutes of 1215, the corporation of masters and students (*universitas magistrorum et scholarium*) laid down the structure of a university education and the *disputatio* became an essential ingredient in the basic organization of academic learning.<sup>78</sup> The *disputatio ordinaria* was scheduled at regular intervals with topics determined well in advance, so that the *opponens* bachelor would make counter-arguments against a thesis and the *respondens* would attempt to address them. The master would typically give a summing-up, or *determinatio*, at the end. With Thomas Aquinas a new form of disputation emerged, the *disputatio de quolibet*, wherein the master would address questions *de quolibet* ("about anything at all"), rather than on predetermined topics.<sup>79</sup>

The text of the *Summa Theologiae* is a written testament to the profound achievement of scholastic inquiry and to the scholastic mindset. Under the guidance of the master,

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>74</sup> Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *The Way of Vincent de Paul : A Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1992), 38-39. Available at: [http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian\\_ebooks/1](http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/1)

<sup>75</sup> Novikoff, "Cultural History," 341.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

students would take positions that supported or refuted a particular position until the master made a determination having carefully weighed the evidence on both sides. The search for truth embedded in the question itself was joined with a definitive judgment based on a transparent consideration of evidence and consistency of thought. As such, the interplay between question-position-judgment formed the structure of an integrated and dynamic search. The *Summa* put this method on full display.

The disputation was a movement *kata holos* (“toward wholeness”), a kind of emergent catholicity.<sup>80</sup> Not only would a single question in the *Summa* be a movement toward wholeness by integrating the truths of different positions, but also the entire work itself is a movement toward a synthesis of perspectives in the “exit” and “return” flow of Christian cosmology. For the scholastic mind, the emergent catholicity within the *Summa* itself reflected the very nature of God in the great chain of Being:

For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.<sup>81</sup>

### **Vincent, the Scholastic Master**

In a Council with the Daughters of Charity dated 29 February 1658, Vincent’s mastery of and respect for the scholastic method is clear. Vincent had assembled M. Portail, Jeanne Delacrou, Geneviève Poisson, and Madeleine Menage, three Sister officers in the Daughters of Charity chosen on 22 May 1657.<sup>82</sup> They had the unenviable task of considering whether to dismiss a young woman from Troyes from the Daughters of Charity. By carefully weighing the arguments for and against, the Council eventually decided to dismiss her because, as Vincent noted, the Companies can only keep those who have a vocation, otherwise the Companies could not subsist. What is remarkable is not the unfortunate but necessary decision to dismiss the young woman, but the way the Council arrived at the decision. It was a *collatio*, a common inquiry in pursuit of truth.

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<sup>80</sup> In *Where is Knowing Going*, John Haughey describes the etymology of *katholikos* (“catholicity” in English). The Greek *kata* (toward) and *holos* (wholeness) are the etymological foundations of the term ‘catholic,’ a word that has been used in various contexts by theologians such as Justin Martyr (d. AD 165), Tertullian (d. AD 222), Cyril of Jerusalem (d. AD 386), and Augustine (d. AD 430). As Haughey describes, an emergent catholicity is one that seeks to discover greater unity, greater connectedness between positions and perspectives. For more, see John C. Haughey, *Where Is Knowing Going? The Horizons of the Knowing Subject* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 40-59.

<sup>81</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, “Article 1. Whether the multitude and distinction of things come from God?”, Question 47. The distinction of things in general, in *Summa Theologiae*; available at *New Advent*: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1047.htm>

<sup>82</sup> Document 179, “Council of February 29, 1658,” *CCD*, 13b:359-363.

Vincent asked each of the Sisters their opinion of the young woman's vocation. One of the Sisters, who had never been called to Council before, claimed "I'm not able to make a judgment on this, Monsieur; that's for Your Charity to decide." Vincent responded pointedly, "Perhaps, Sister, you'll feel more at ease after hearing what the others have to say; and, when you've heard them, you must give your own opinion freely, saying 'For the reasons stated, I think such and such,' or you may present other reasons if they occur to you, such as, 'she's not suitable,' or 'she'll do well if she stays.'"

Like the master of the scholastic classroom, Vincent demanded that *each* person state an opinion *and* a justification for their decision before he offered his. The Council proceeded from person to person until all positions and the reasons for those positions had been stated clearly. After each position had been detailed, Vincent concluded, "I agree with you, dear Sisters."

While this particular Council is not an examination of a theological topic, as are many of the other conferences, it illustrates the extent to which Vincent de Paul had mastered the Scholastic *collatio*, even as a form of decision-making. By method, the Council is a performance of the very structure of the *Summa* itself: a question is posed, members state their response in clear and simple terms including their justifications ("it appears that..."), and the master concludes with his own judgment ("I agree with...") based on explicit values (in this case, the necessity of an authentic vocation). Vincent does not merely declare his position at the beginning nor does he let any of the Sisters defer to his position of authority as a way to avoid making their own judgment. While Vincent's firm belief in Providence was an organizing principle for his management style, the scholastic *collatio* gave it form like the control of the riverbed, or the walls of a building.

Vincent de Paul was considered a formidable theologian in his lifetime. Unfortunately, historians overlook his contribution to the Jansenist controversy in favor of the Jesuits. Although Vincent de Paul wrote many letters on Jansenism, only eighty-one are extant. Fifty-two of them were written during his tenure on the Council of Conscience, which helped solidify his reputation as a theologian.<sup>83</sup> Gabriel Gerberon, a Jansenist historian, said Vincent "was one of the most dangerous enemies that the disciples of Saint Augustine [the Jansenists] have ever encountered."<sup>84</sup> A theologian from the Sorbonne declared "just as God had raised up Saint Ignatius against Luther and Calvin, so did he raise up Monsieur Vincent against Jansenism."<sup>85</sup> And as the Abbé Bremond described:

Although the Jansenists generally considered [Vincent de Paul] inept, he was not less intellectual than the great Arnauld; less bookish certainly... but more

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<sup>83</sup> Bernard J. McCoy, "St. Vincent de Paul's Letters on Jansenism," *The Catholic Historical Review* 27:4 (Jan. 1942): 442-449. Published by Catholic University of America Press: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25014077>

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*



serious, keener, more large-minded and elevated... His letters against Arnauld's *Frequente Communion* are evidence of this. Volumes have been written on the subject, but Vincent de Paul... says everything with a vigorous logic, clear-sightedness, and irony, that are quite remarkable.<sup>86</sup>

Vincent had clearly mastered the *disputatio* and had a comprehensive knowledge of Catholic doctrine. One can imagine Vincent in the discourses of the Council of Conscience, carefully weighing Arnauld's arguments and addressing them point-by-point in an unassuming manner that highlighted precisely where they deviated from Catholic orthodoxy.

While the concerns and theological questions that animated the Jansenist controversy have long since passed, Vincent's participation in them reveals a cautious, reasoned mind operating in a mission-centered horizon. First, it is most remarkable to note that Vincent de Paul maintained a friendship with the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, leader of the Jansenist movement in France until his death in 1643.<sup>87</sup> Vincent's desire for papal condemnation of Jansenist positions did not come at the expense of his friendship with the Abbé. Perhaps Vincent's experience at Toulouse taught him that one must separate the dignity of the person from the truth of the positions they held. Perhaps he wanted to avoid the kind of public altercations that erupted into violence and bloodshed in his time as a student at Toulouse, but instead engage in disputations in a way that did not tear at the social fabric. Considering today's polarized political discourse, one can hardly imagine a friendship between public figures who hold very different opinions on serious matters.

The scholastic disputation that had been developed by Abelard, Lombard, Peter the Chanter, and Thomas Aquinas provided Vincent a systematic way to examine and explore the truth of a position without reverting to violent condemnation of the individual. However, make no mistake, Vincent found the Jansenist position erroneous and stated his position publicly.

At least one confrere, Jean Dehorgny, was sympathetic to the Jansenist arguments concerning the frequency of receiving the Eucharist. Dehorgny was a notable figure in the Congregation of the Mission, having held a number of leadership positions, including superior in a house in Rome and assistant to the Superior General among others.<sup>88</sup> It seemed reasonable to Dehorgny that the Eucharist, the heart of the Catholic liturgy, should not be received without appropriate penance and preparation. In a letter to Dehorgny dated 10 September 1648, Vincent carefully addressed the Jansenist arguments in a true spirit of brotherly disputation. Vincent acknowledged that certain persons in France and Italy may well benefit from Arnauld's recommendations to abstain from frequent communion without proper penance, but "there are at least ten thousand it has harmed, by causing them to

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<sup>86</sup> As quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> For a brief summary of their long-standing friendship, see Pujo, *The Trailblazer*, 125-128.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Letter 26, "To Pope Urban VIII," [June 1628], *CCD*, 1:39, fn. 6.

abstain from it altogether.”<sup>89</sup> Vincent offers a pastoral response, perhaps judging from his Foleville experience where he came to know first-hand the poor country folks who did not have regular access to a confessor, or one that knew the formula for absolution. Arnaud’s position would have only encouraged them to abstain from receiving the Eucharist through no fault of their own.

Vincent’s response to Dehorgny’s argument included careful, measured interpretation of the teachings of St. Charles Borromeo, Tertullian, and the early Church Fathers. Ultimately, Vincent concluded that Arnaud’s position is “to revive the ancient penitential practice as a requirement for being restored to God’s grace.” He believed the Jansenist heresy dismissed the development of doctrine that had occurred since the early Fathers, especially with the Thomistic synthesis of operative and co-operative grace. Vincent’s pastoral and theological responses demonstrate higher order theological thinking, the kind only a master can develop through years of disputation.

## Conclusion

In contrast to the all-too-pervasive view that Vincent de Paul was ‘anti-intellectual,’ a careful analysis of Vincent’s educational achievement and intellectual formation demonstrates that he was not. Rather, he had developed a comprehensive understanding of Catholic theology, the capacity to engage viewpoints different from his own, and the kind of intellectual mastery required to articulate sophisticated concepts in ways that were understandable to people who did not have his educational background. He was not at all “an ignorant peasant,” but rather a very well educated man who used his considerable intellectual gifts to serve the poor in various ways throughout his life. In his time as a student at the University of Toulouse mastering the scholastic method, Vincent learned to engage the goodness that is “simple and uniform” in God but is “manifold and divided” in creation.

Vincent’s educational experience and mastery of the Catholic theological tradition, in dialogue with many others, was foundational for his life and works. While it is important to portray a more holistic and historically accurate view of Vincent de Paul as a well educated man, it is even more important to dispel the notion that he was ‘anti-intellectual,’ and to dispel that, by extension, Vincentian heritage does not have as much to offer the intellectual apostolate as other traditions. To the contrary, the legacy of Vincent offers three crucial insights for higher education. One, Vincent himself embodied the kind of intellectual hospitality that ought to make Catholic higher education distinctive.<sup>90</sup> Through

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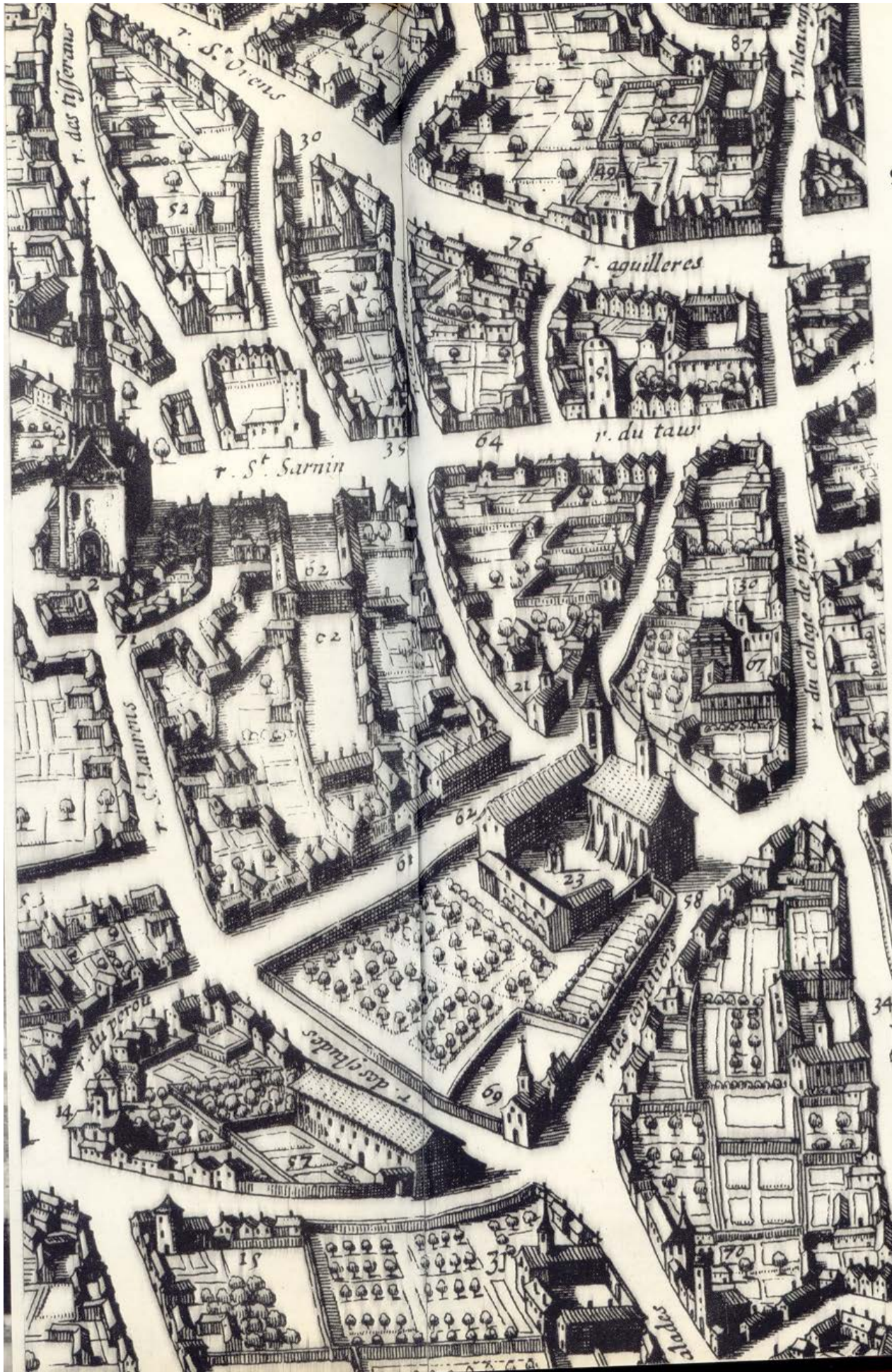
<sup>89</sup> Letter 1064, “To Jean Dehorgny, In Rome,” 10 September 1648, *Ibid.*, 3:358.

<sup>90</sup> For more on the theme of hospitality in Catholic higher education, see Haughey, *Where Is Knowing*; John B. Bennett, “The Academy and Hospitality,” *Cross Currents* 50:1-2 (Spring/Summer 2000), at: <http://www.crosscurrents.org/Bennett.htm>; John B. Bennett, “Hospitality and Collegial Community: An Essay,” *Innovative Higher Education* 25:2 (2000): 85-96, at: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1007520705448>; Luke Bretherton, “Tolerance, Education and Hospitality: A Theological Proposal,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17:1 (April 2004): 80-103, at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/095394680401700106>; and Aurelie A. Hagstrom, “The Role of Charism and Hospitality in the Academy,” *Integritas: Advancing the Mission of Catholic Higher Education* 1:1 (2013), at: <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/integritas/article/view/5318>

the ancient *Trivium*, Vincent learned to “listen to the text” carefully (grammar), to adopt the most charitable interpretation of the other’s position (rhetoric), and then, through careful reasoning, to seek an underlying truth that was not apparent on first reading (dialectic). Two, Vincent’s worldview gradually emerged *kata holos*, toward wholeness. This emerging holistic and integrated vision of creation inspired him to find the hidden truths of other perspectives. He was not threatened by otherness; rather he saw it as a potential source of Providence. Practically speaking, this commitment made him an exceptional facilitator of communal discourse in a time of great theological, political, and social strife. He valued humility, simplicity, meekness, mortification, and zeal not because they were pious virtues of his day, but because they were the conditions necessary for discovering the Divine hidden in ordinary life, particularly in the poor. Three, Vincent put his knowledge in motion. He was not satisfied with useless questioning (*inutilitate questionum*) or intellectual eccentricities, but instead he evaluated positions according to their ability to address the pressing issues of his time. He was a pragmatist, not an idealist. His arguments against Jansenism were not for the sake of developing a perfectly articulated theological doctrine, but that it had real consequence for the place of the uneducated poor in the Catholic Church.

While the modern mind may not share Vincent’s seventeenth-century French Catholic culture, the stilted approach of medieval scholasticism, or even ask the same questions he asked, it has much to learn from Vincent’s capacity to engage otherness in search of truth. Vincent is not just a model for charity, but also for the pursuit of truth. Viewing Vincent as “anti-intellectual,” an “ignorant peasant,” or a “scholar of the fourth form” are all misconceptions that draw attention away from his remarkable intellectual development and his legacy as a theologian, founder, reformer, and advocate for the poor.





Detail from a period map of the Collège de Foix, Toulouse, France.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>





A plaque that commemorates Vincent de Paul's time spent as a student in Dax.

*Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online*

*<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>*





Detail picturing Averroes from Raffaello Sanzio's fresco *The school of Athens*, c. 1509; and Averroes' commentary on *De Anima*.

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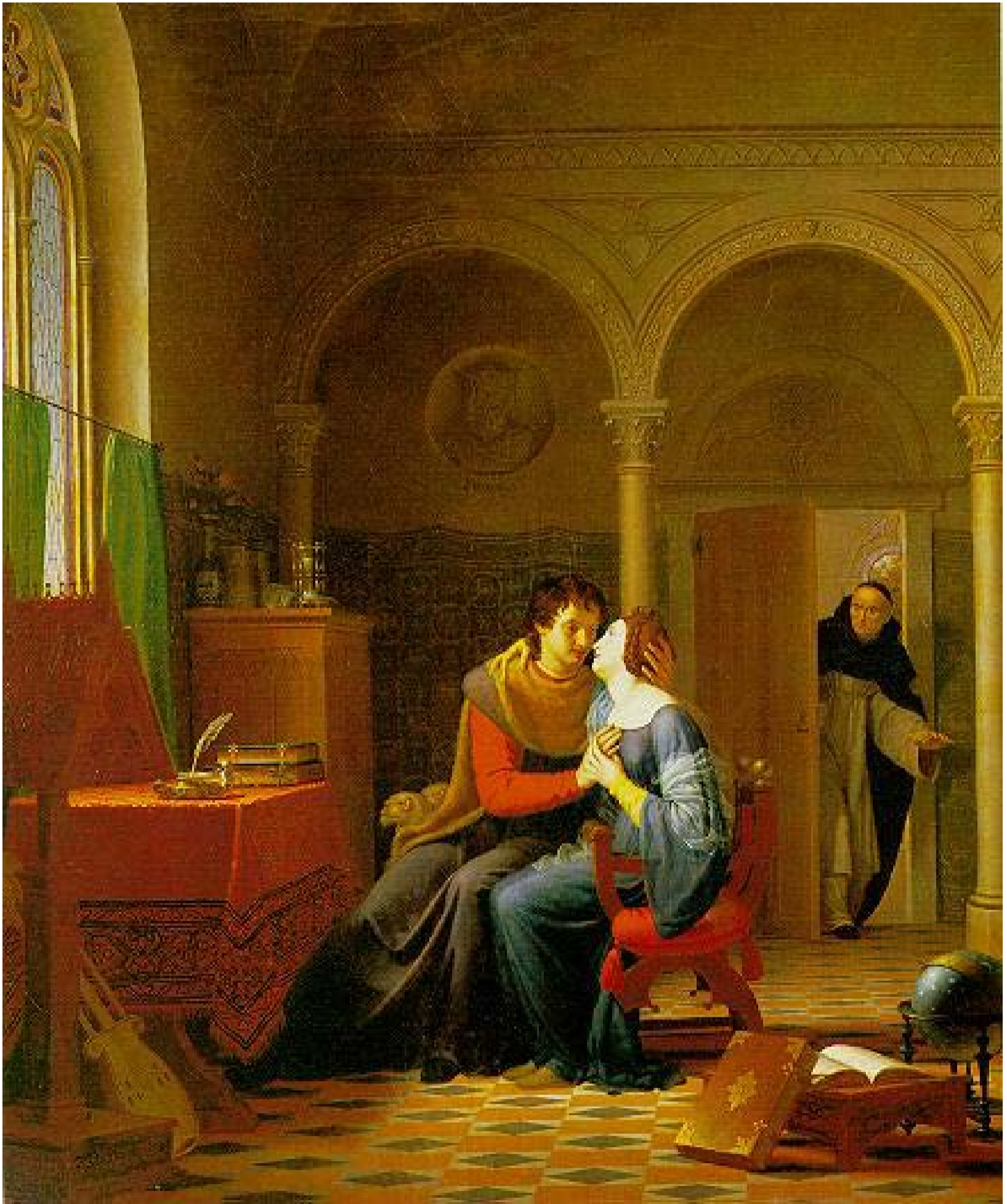




Engraved portrait of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204).

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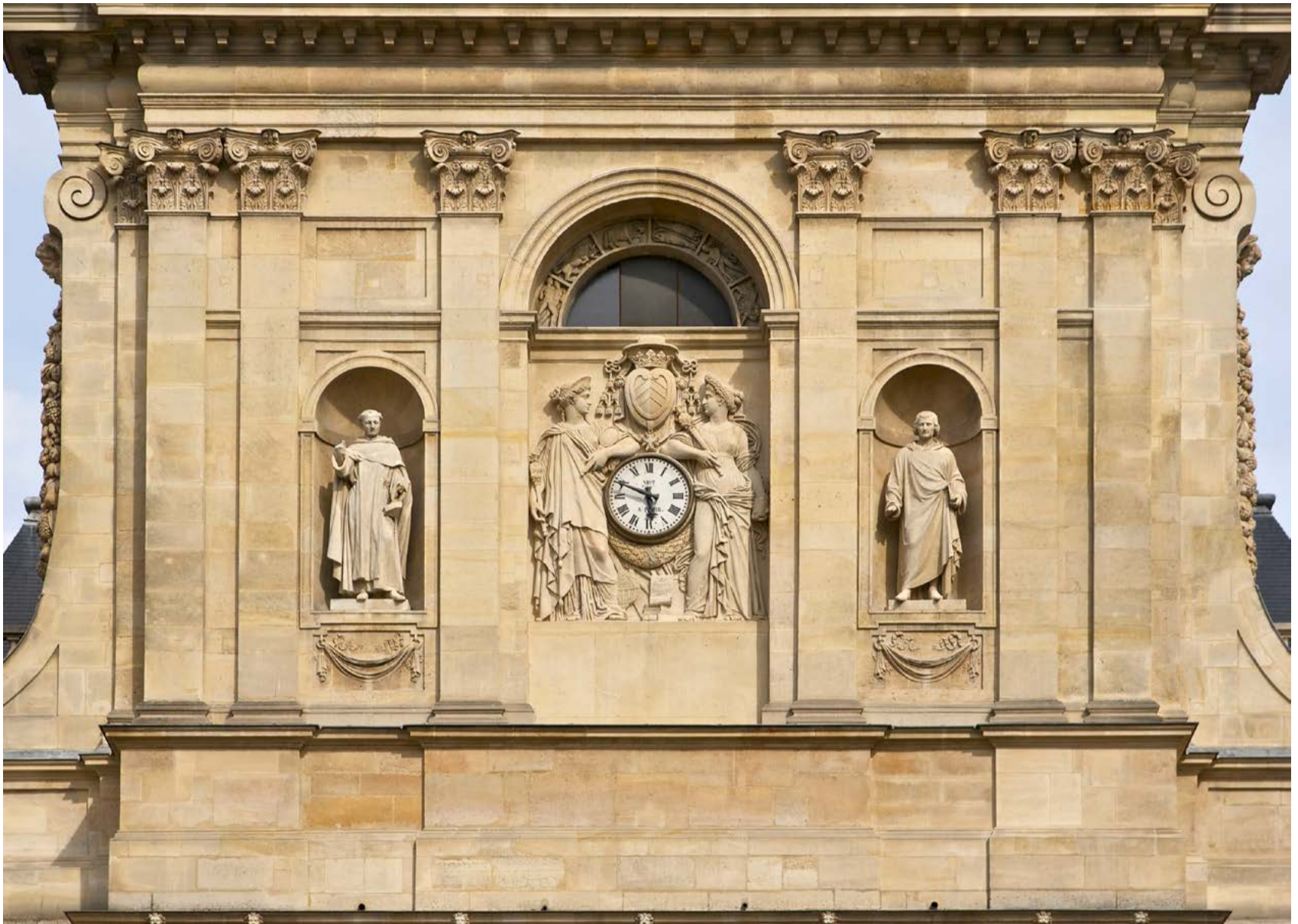
*Les Amours d'Héloïse et d'Abailard.*

Oil on canvas, by Jean Vignaud, c. 1819.

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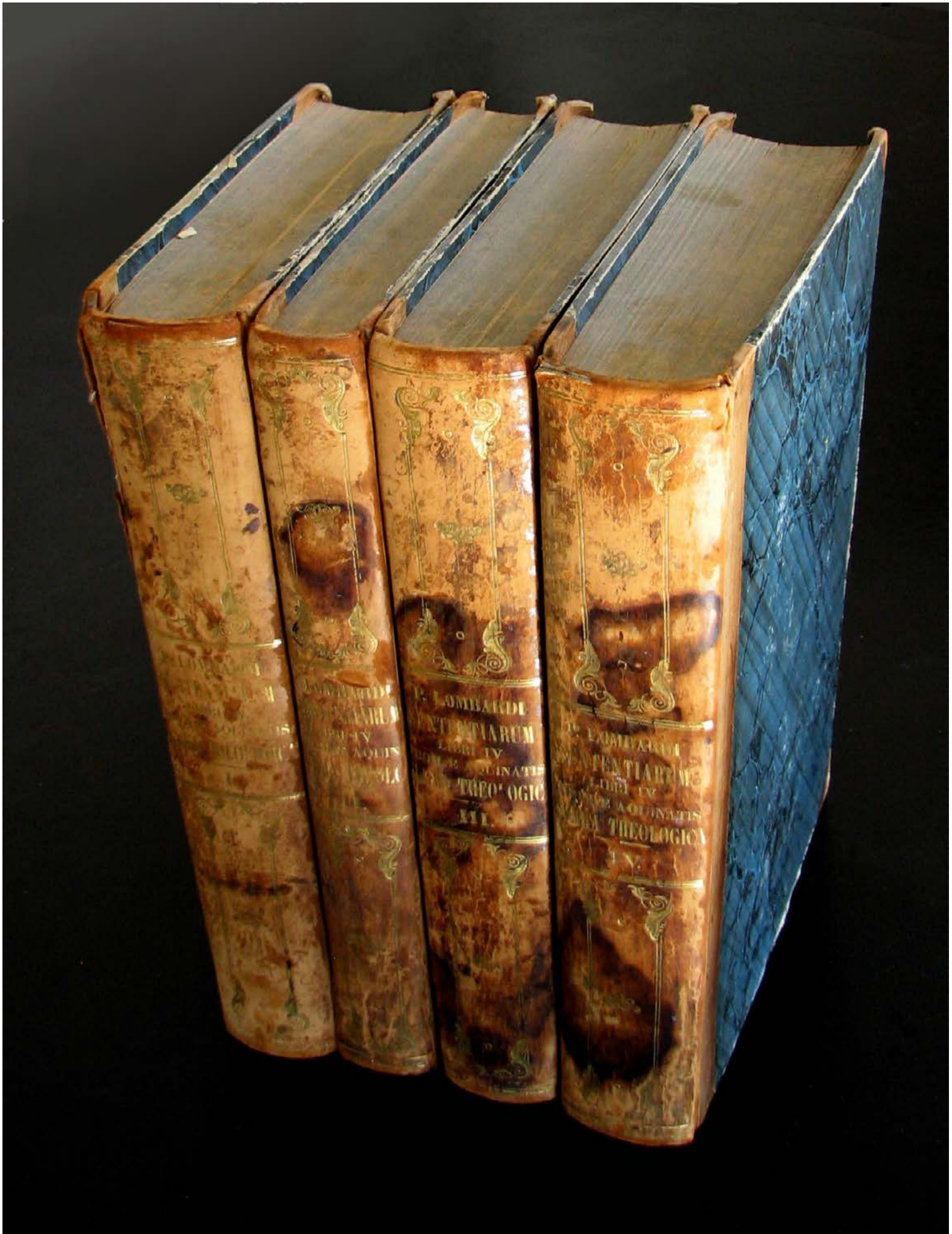
Chapel of the Sorbonne, detail of the façade, Paris, France.

Left, a statue of Thomas Aquinas. Right, a statue of Peter Lombard.

In the middle, two muses support a clock and the coat of arms of Cardinal Richelieu.

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1841 Latin editions of *Sententiarum libri quatuor* by Peter Lombard, and *Summa theologiae* by Thomas Aquinas.

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*The Council of Trent. Painting by Elia Naurizio, c. 1633.*

Museo Diocesano Tridentino, Palazzo Pretorio.

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