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# The Unity of the Virtues in a Missionary Key

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# The Unity of the Virtues in a Missionary Key

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## Abstract:

The thesis of the unity of the virtues—one must possess all of the virtues to possess even one of them—was upheld in different forms by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. However, contemporary moralists almost universally decry this thesis as distorting the nature of virtue as it is materialized in the lives and actions of ordinary people. Unfortunately, academic discourse regarding the unity of the virtues has tended to be either entirely theoretical or narrowly limited to particular individuals or groups as “test cases” regarding the validity of the thesis. It is both significant and reinvigorating, therefore, that in his apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis evokes the thesis of the unity *Evangelii gaudium* of the virtues as pivotal to the task of evangelization. The purpose of the current essay is to reevaluate the merit and practical applicability of the unity of the virtues in light of the “missionary option” as proposed by Pope Francis.

The unity of the virtues, often referred to as the unity thesis, holds that in order to possess a single virtue one must possess them all. Contemporary moralists almost universally decry the unity thesis as distorting the reality of virtue as it manifests in the lives of those who possess it. However, I have argued that the Thomistic version of the unity thesis illuminates the reality of virtue in a manner that attends to the objections raised by critics of the thesis more coherently than the alternative definitions of virtue proposed by the very same critics.<sup>456</sup>

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis establishes a new frontier for this ongoing debate by defining the “organic unity of the virtues” as an indispensable criterion for authentic evangelization.<sup>457</sup> This raises the issue of whether the vision for evangelization put forward by Francis is subject to the kinds of objections that are commonly brought to bear upon the unity thesis. Primarily at issue here is whether Francis, by employing the unity thesis as a criterion, has defined “authentic evangelization” in a manner that puts the task of evangelizing out of reach for ordinary or even extraordinary individuals. In this chapter, I argue that by utilizing a Thomistic version of the unity thesis as a criterion for authentic evangelization, Francis is not only responsive to the objections just mentioned but also shines new light upon the radical distinctiveness of the Thomistic unity thesis considered within a theological framework.

The argument of the current chapter unfolds in three sections. The first section examines two primary and interrelated objections to the unity thesis. The next section offers a close read of select passages from *Evangelii gaudium* for the purpose of demonstrating that Francis employs the unity of the virtues as a criterion for authentic evangelization, thus raising the issue of whether the understanding of evangelization he puts forward is susceptible to the criticisms of the first section. This section then goes on to elucidate the manner in which the objections of the first section may be applied to authentic evangelization as characterized by Francis. The final section distinguishes between the Thomistic version of the unity thesis employed by Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* and the Stoic version of the unity thesis Francis rejects in the same paragraph, and in so doing, makes clear that Francis’s utilization

of the unity of the virtues as a criterion for authentic evangelization is capable of being responsive to the concerns which animate the objections derived from the second section. This final section then concludes by reiterating the thesis of this chapter by drawing from the prior sections as well as key passages in *Evangelii gaudium* in order to show that by contextualizing the Thomistic unity thesis as a criterion for authentic evangelization, Francis is able to shed new light upon the radical distinctiveness of the same thesis evaluated within a theological framework.

## I. Two Common Objections to the Unity Thesis

The purpose of this section is to clarify and assess two interrelated but importantly distinct objections to the unity thesis. The first objection contends that if the unity thesis is true, then those who possess virtue are “capped off” and thus unable to grow in the moral life.<sup>458</sup> I refer to this as the “impossibility of growth objection.” The second objection argues that if the unity thesis is true, then those who lack virtue will only be able to attain it by a dishearteningly demanding and astonishingly abrupt transition from lacking virtue entirely to possessing it completely. I refer to this as the “impossibility of transition objection.” Both objections share

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the unexamined assumption that to affirm the unity of the virtues is to define virtue as a range quality rather than a scalar quality.<sup>459</sup> Also, both objections operate on the basis of a perceived binary conflict between virtue considered as an abstract ideal and virtue as manifested in the lives of actual people. In this view, the former creates an unrealistic and unattainable standard for virtue which is then arbitrarily employed to discount the latter. Those who reject the unity of the virtues on this ground, therefore, regard the unity thesis as a hindrance to an accurate understanding of character in general and virtue in particular.<sup>460</sup>

To begin, the impossibility of growth objection decries the unity thesis for discounting virtue as embodied in the lives of actual people. According to this view, the unity thesis operates on the false premise that there exists such a thing as “complete human virtue” or a “fully good human life if that means a human life that could not be improved in any way.”<sup>461</sup> This objection, then, regards definitions of virtue rooted in the unity thesis to be profoundly distorted.

The impossibility of growth objection is particularly useful with regard to assessing the unity thesis inasmuch as it invites us to scrutinize fundamental questions regarding the manner in which one defines virtue. More precisely put, this objection, though employing different terminology than I use here, helps us to clarify the important distinction between virtue considered as a “range” quality versus virtue understood as a “scalar” quality. According to the manner in which I use the concepts here, a “range” quality is a quality that exists in an absolute state and is therefore not subject to gradation. For example, one is either a citizen of France or not. Living in Paris as opposed to Marseille does not make one either more or less French as “being French” is a range quality. One either is or is not. A “scalar” property, on the other hand, is a property that is subject to gradation and may, as a result, be possessed by different individuals to varying degrees. For instance, one may be able to speak French with varying degrees of fluency.

Now, a major assumption implied but not examined by the impossibility of growth objection is that to uphold the unity thesis is to understand virtue as a range quality. It is certainly true that one can find historical examples of groups that understand virtue as a range quality and affirm the unity thesis. For instance, the link between the unity thesis and virtue as a range quality is on full display in Stoic thought about virtue. Diogenes Laertius (ca. 250 AD) reports that the Stoics repudiate the Peripatetic view that there exists a “middle state” in which one might be understood as “progressing” toward virtue

without yet possessing it. The moral absolutism of the Stoics is summarily expressed in a striking metaphor:

For just as those who are submerged in the ocean cannot breathe, whether they are so close to the surface that they are just about to emerge or they are down deep . . . so too whoever is making little progress toward the habit of virtue is no less in misery than one who has not progressed at all.<sup>462</sup>

The Stoics, then, appear to understand virtue as a range property. Virtue denotes a state of moral perfection that does not admit of degrees. Such a view when combined with the unity thesis leads to the conclusion that to accurately attribute any virtue to an individual, one must attribute all of the virtues in an absolute state to that same individual. If we do not want to attribute all of the virtues in an absolute state to an individual, then we cannot attribute any virtue to her or him at all. We see here how the impossibility of growth objection functions on the basis of what I referred to earlier as a perceived binary conflict between virtue as an abstract ideal and virtue as manifested in the lives of actual people. This objection seems particularly apt with regard to Stoic thought. J. M. Rist helps to clarify the underlying logic of Stoic thought in the following passage:

If the concept of moral goodness admits of degrees, who can say that it could reach a term? If Smith is better than Jones, who is better than Thomas, how can any man be said to be perfect? Could not some moral improvement be imagined? In other words, how could there be a sage or wise man? The Stoics in fact reject a form of the ontological argument in advance. For them, if there are degrees of moral goodness, there cannot be a good, only a relative good.<sup>463</sup>

Herein lies precisely the view against which the impossibility of growth objection responds. If virtue is a range quality, and if one must possess all of them to possess even one of them, then not only is it the case that there exists such a thing as “*complete* human virtue” or a “*fully* good human life,” it would also hold that, by definition, the virtuous person has no need of and is indeed impervious to moral growth whereas those lacking virtue lack it absolutely.<sup>464</sup> The enormous canyon between those possessing virtue and those lacking it, then, forms the basis for the second objection of the current section to which I now turn.

The impossibility of transition objection recognizes that if virtue is a range quality and if the unity thesis is true, then there must be only two kinds of people: those with all of the virtues, and those with none of them. Whereas the previous objection concerns the impossibility of growth for those in Group A, the current objection is concerned with the situation of those in Group B. In short, if Group A is “capped off” in moral perfection and Group B utterly deprived of virtue, then there would not exist a common space in which members of Group A could assist members of Group B. A representative sample of this objection may be found in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre

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MacIntyre associates the unity thesis with virtue understood as a range quality and argues that virtue so understood renders moral progress impossible for Group B who would lack a “point of moral contact” with Group A. MacIntyre explains his view through a thought experiment involving a courageous and temperate Nazi:

Consider what would be involved, what was in fact involved, in the moral re-education of such a Nazi: there were many vices that he had to unlearn, many virtues about which he had to learn.

Humility and charity would be in most ways, if not quite in every way, new to him. But it is crucial that he would not have to unlearn or relearn what he knew about both cowardice and intemperate rashness in the face of harm and danger. Moreover, it was precisely because such a Nazi was not devoid of the virtues that there was a *point of moral contact* between him and those who had the task of re-educating him, that there was something on which to build. To deny that that kind of Nazi was courageous or that his courage was a virtue obliterates the distinction between what required moral re-education in such a person and what did not. Thus, I take it that if any version of moral Aristotelianism were necessarily committed to a strong thesis concerning the unity of the virtues (as not only Aquinas, but Aristotle himself were) there would be a serious defect in that position.<sup>465</sup>

Hence, even if there were a Group A, it is imperative, in MacIntyre's view, that those who lack certain virtues not be conceived of as "devoid of the virtues." Group A must accurately assess the condition of Group B in order to "re-educate" Group B. Thus, MacIntyre appears to regard "a strong thesis concerning the unity of the virtues" as a corollary of the view that virtue is a range quality. When combined, these two views, in MacIntyre's assessment, would place an implacable divide between Group A and Group B. Furthermore, if someone were to transition from the latter to the former, however mysteriously, this transition would need be, as John Langan has observed, "surprisingly sudden and implausibly difficult."<sup>466</sup>

In conclusion, this section has evaluated two prominent objections to the unity thesis. Both objections imply that if the unity thesis is true, then no one possesses virtues. The impossibility of moral growth argument contends that if the unity thesis is true, then those who, in theory, possess virtue are "capped off" and thus invulnerable to growth in the moral life. Finally, the impossibility of transition objection regards the unity thesis as negating the possibility of attaining virtue for those who lack it. Both objections infer a causal link between the unity thesis and virtue understood as a range quality. Having summarized these critiques, then, we may now advance to an examination of the unity thesis as a criterion for authentic evangelization as expounded by Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*.

## II. The Unity of the Virtues as a Criterion for Authentic Evangelization

This section scrutinizes select passages from *Evangelii gaudium* for the sake of making clear that Francis employs the unity of the virtues as a criterion for authentic evangelization in a manner that raises the issue of whether the program for evangelization he proposes is susceptible to the objections of the preceding section. As we shall see, a cursory read of the passages that follow could lead one to raise objections structurally similar to those just considered. This section concludes, then, by discerning the shape of these objections as applied to Francis's presentation of authentic evangelization. Having accomplished this, we will then be in position to assess these objections.

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis constructs a dichotomy between two groups which I shall again refer to as "Group A" and "Group B." Those in Group A have encountered Jesus, accepted "his offer of salvation," and thus been "set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness." In addition to the characteristics just mentioned, those in Group A also lead lives that are "dignified and fulfilled," because they are rooted in "the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ." Hence, the most distinctive feature of Group A is that they possess a "joy that is constantly born anew."<sup>467</sup>

Distinctive characteristics of Group B include the following: "the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience" as well as a caved in "interior life" marred by selfishness, an inability to hear God's voice or feel God's love, apathy for the poor, and indifference with regard to doing good. Apparently, a large portion of those in Group B wrongly imagine themselves to be in Group A when, in reality, they also have

succumbed to the aforementioned selfishness and are thus, according to Francis, “resentful, angry, and listless.” I refer to this group as “Subgroup B.” The purpose of Francis’s exhortation, then, is to commend a method of evangelization informed by the kind of joy possessed by Group A in a manner that will forge “new paths for the Church’s journey in years to come.”<sup>468</sup>

Since they possess a “joy that is constantly born anew,” Francis “invites” those in Group A “to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.” Francis implores Group A to “do this unfailingly each day” by saying to Jesus as follows: “Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once

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more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace.” Failure to constantly renew this covenant places one into the earlier mentioned Subgroup B, that is, the “resentful, angry, and listless. . . Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.”<sup>469</sup>

Francis recognizes that there may exist a set in Group A mired in “grief” and “great suffering” but reaffirms nonetheless that it is incumbent upon this set to allow the “joy of faith to slowly revive them.” Francis states that this joy is regained through a “renewed encounter with God’s love” that enables one’s faith to persevere through “detachment and simplicity.” The great barrier to receiving God’s love, according to Francis, is the “slow suicide” of self-absorption.<sup>470</sup>

In Francis’s view, then, it follows that in order for evangelization to be fruitful, it must be rooted in the distinctive kind of joy possessed by Group A which turns out, upon further examination, to be but a corollary of encountering God and receiving God’s love. It is, therefore, a fundamental duty of those in Group A to continually accept this love. Thus, for Francis, receiving God’s love and evangelizing are axiomatic, since to receive love is to share it.<sup>471</sup>

In addition to being a duty, then, evangelizing is also the means to a paradoxical and transcendental self-fulfillment achieved only by the emptying of self. Thus, “when the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfillment” and thereby witnessing to “a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means.” In Francis’s view, it is unlikely that those in Group B will be drawn into the good news of the Gospel by evangelizers who are “resentful, angry, and listless . . . Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter,” and who evangelize in a manner that is “dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious.” Indeed, it appears as though one of Group A’s chief obstacles to evangelizing emerges from the activities of Subgroup B.<sup>472</sup>

Francis seems to think that those in Subgroup B exist at opposite poles of a dialectical tension. At the one extreme are those who, failing to recognize the primacy of God in mission, regard evangelizing as a “heroic individual undertaking” and thereby close themselves off from “the newness which God himself mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand ways.” At the extreme opposite end of the dialectical tension are those who make an idol of newness itself and thus cut themselves off from “the living history which surrounds us and carries us forward.” Authentic evangelization seems to require advancing beyond these two poles into a higher synthesis.<sup>473</sup>

To specify in a more concrete manner, Francis explains that Group A consists of “the faithful who regularly take part in community worship and gather on the Lord’s day to be nourished by his word and by the bread of eternal life.” Group A also includes “those members of the faithful who preserve a deep and sincere faith, expressing it in different ways, but seldom taking part in worship.” Subgroup B is comprised of “the baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism.” Though they have been

baptized, they “lack a meaningful relationship to the Church and no longer experience the consolation born of faith.” Group B also includes “those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him.”<sup>474</sup>

The evangelization efforts of Group A are primarily ordered to Group B and then secondarily to Subgroup B. Put another way, if Group A is to reach Group B, then the latter must be protected from Subgroup B. Therefore, in order to authentically evangelize Group B, the Church must continually undergo a missionary transformation of its own whereby it renews the faith of those within its own ranks whose actions do not reveal, but rather conceal, God’s presence in the world. It is for this reason that Francis urges “each particular Church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform.”<sup>475</sup>

Francis maintains that failure to undergo the missionary conversion of which he speaks on both the individual and collective level causes the central meaning of the Gospel to be distorted. While Group A accepts that “all revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith,” they also are aware that one must prioritize certain truths over others if one is to give “direct expression to the heart of the Gospel.” The central message of the Gospel moves the mind beyond mere propositions to a direct experience with the “beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.” It is this message, above all else, that the members of Group A desire to communicate with the members of Group B.<sup>476</sup>

The members of Subgroup B, on the other hand, are “obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed.” They are careless with the Gospel causing what are in reality secondary aspects of Christ’s message to be prioritized over the central message. This doubly harms Group B inasmuch as the central message of the Gospel is not communicated to them at all while the secondary aspects are communicated to them in an alien context rendering those aspects into unintelligible propositional assertions lacking in substance and meaning.<sup>477</sup>

In addition to correctly prioritizing the Gospel message, those in Group A also recognize the role one’s actions play in evangelizing. Thus, the actions of Group A embody “faith working through love.” These “works of love directed to one’s neighbor [are] the most perfect external manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit.” In addition to faith and love, then, the members of Group A also possess mercy which “is the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their deficiencies.” Their mercy flows from God’s mercy which reveals God’s omnipotence “to the greatest degree.”

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Alternatively, the members of Subgroup B prioritize “the law above grace, the Church above Christ, and the Pope above God’s Word.”<sup>478</sup>

Those in Group A realize that a Christian morality not rooted in the Gospel is not a Christian morality at all. Since the “Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us,” and since “all of the virtues are at the service of this response of love,” it follows that a truly Christian morality must affirm “the organic unity existing among the virtues.” There exists, then, in Francis’s view, a kind of symbiosis between “the harmonious totality of the Christian message” and the harmonious totality of the group or individual from which that message emanates. Absent this harmonious totality, Christian morality is distorted into “a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults,” and the Gospel itself is reduced “to certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options.”<sup>479</sup>

The unity of the virtues, then, is a criterion for authentic evangelization. The “joy of the Gospel” is nothing other than a “renewed encounter with God’s love.” In order for this love to achieve its end, it utilizes all of the virtues. In Thomistic terms, charity needs the other virtues to be perfect in act, since

actions ordered by charity are much more than mere expressions of charity. Aquinas held that charity cannot achieve its end without the moral virtues, because it is through the moral virtues “that man performs each different kind of good work.”<sup>480</sup> Therefore, charity would be unable to achieve its end of loving God without the other virtues, yet the other virtues also require charity in order to be true and perfect.

Having explicated the key role played by the unity thesis in *Evangelii gaudium*, we may now proceed to discern the shape of the objections of the prior section as applied to Francis’s presentation of authentic evangelization. In order to do so, we must first make clear two distinctive features of the version of the unity thesis endorsed by Francis. First, Francis is referring to infused virtues. Second, Francis is employing a Thomistic version of the unity thesis insofar as he prioritizes the formal and final cause in understanding virtue.<sup>481</sup> We must, therefore, consider whether the objections of the first section are applicable to the unity thesis so understood.

At this point, we may benefit from Jean Porter’s analysis of the unity thesis employing Martin Luther King, Jr. as a counterexample to the unity of the virtues.<sup>482</sup> One may derive the central argument of Porter’s essay from the following passage:

There *are* counterexamples to the [unity] thesis which are . . . difficult to address, precisely because they call attention to people who apparently combine real and even heroic virtues with equally real and crippling vices in one character and one lifetime. King . . . offers such an example. Together with his heroic and saintly virtues, he displayed clear weakness, particularly through repeated extramarital affairs which he clearly regretted, yet could not forswear.<sup>483</sup>

Porter’s argument takes the objections of the previous section up a notch as she not only contrasts an abstract ideal of unified virtue with an equally, and ironically, abstract notion of “the average individual” but with an actual human being who is generally regarded as having possessed heroic virtue. If the unity thesis is true, according to Porter, then the courage and justice of King would not qualify as virtue. If the virtue of King cannot pass muster, then whose can? In Porter’s judgment, then, it is only a seriously flawed definition of virtue that would be unable to account for the virtues of an individual who, like King, seemed to possess a character capable of seamlessly and repeatedly moving between displays of heroic virtue at one moment and serious sin the next.

Furthermore, Porter’s essay is directly responsive to the issue of whether the infused virtues, particularly as understood within a Thomistic framework, may be able to overcome the problem of moral conflict as existing in individuals such as King. The problem with Aquinas’s understanding of acquired virtue, according to Porter, is that it “seems to imply that anyone whose life is marked by a pattern of serious moral struggle, in any respect, is therefore not a person of true virtue.”<sup>484</sup> Thus, the courage of King would have to be placed in the same category as the brave bank robber, and she thinks “there must be something wrong with that conclusion.”<sup>485</sup>

Porter acknowledges, then, that objections to the unity thesis need to account for important differences in the kind of unity thesis under review. To illustrate, Porter clarifies that for Aquinas “the normal context for the development and exercise of the virtues is the life of grace.”<sup>486</sup> According to Aquinas, those who partake of this life have all of the virtues infused into them directly by God through charity.<sup>487</sup> However, such a person may continue to experience moral conflict and struggle due to “the effects of past habits or some other cause.”<sup>488</sup> Thus, Aquinas’s thesis “can account for the possibility that someone who is truly virtuous is nonetheless also morally flawed in some ways.”<sup>489</sup> This Thomistic view, then, could explain individuals such as King who seem to exhibit moral heroism despite moral struggles.

Ultimately, however, Porter argues that the Thomistic thesis fails because it can only account for “moral flaws” that “are not *too* serious.”<sup>490</sup> In Porter’s view, “repeated infidelity” implies a persistent and severe “kind of callousness” that even the Thomistic



thesis is unable to harmonize with the life of grace.<sup>491</sup> Drawing from Porter's analysis, then, we may now consider the shape of the objections of the preceding section as applied to Francis's presentation of authentic evangelization.

Beginning with the impossibility of growth objection, it would not be difficult to read a definition of virtue as a range quality into the passages from *Evangelii gaudium* referenced earlier. For example, characteristics belonging to Group A such as having accepted Jesus's "offer of salvation," being "set free from sin," and possessing a "joy that is constantly born anew" could be interpreted as absolute states not subject to gradation.<sup>492</sup> One has either accepted Jesus's offer of salvation, or one has not. One has either been set free from sin, or one has not. One either is constantly born anew, or one is not.

In keeping with Porter's just mentioned critique, one may also observe that the characteristics possessed by those in Group B seem to be mutually exclusive from the characteristics possessed by those in Group A such that one could not possess both at the same time. It is difficult, for example, to imagine an individual who is endowed with the capacity to transmit the "beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead," while simultaneously remaining "obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed."<sup>493</sup> It is, again, hard to imagine one and the same person evangelizing in a manner informed by love and selflessness while remaining "dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious."<sup>494</sup> More concretely, perhaps, one either possesses a "deep and sincere faith" in Jesus, placing her or him in Group A, or "does not know Jesus, or rejects Jesus," placing her or him in Group B.<sup>495</sup>

This brings us to the impossibility of transition objection as applied to Francis's presentation of authentic evangelization. This objection is particularly salient here as evangelization by its very nature is directed to the other. Thus, if an implacable divide exists between Group A and Group B, then all attempts at evangelization would turn out to be nothing other than self-referential, tendentious, and vain endeavors.

As MacIntyre observes, if there is no "point of moral contact" between those in Group A and those in Group B, then no improvement can take place. Further, to apply MacIntyre's argument to the issue here under review, if Group A is utterly perfect in virtue and suffer from no serious sin, while Group B is "devoid of virtue" and mired in sin, then there would, it seems, be no such point of contact. The question, then, is whether the infused virtues can bridge the chasm between Group A and Group B in a manner that the acquired virtues cannot.

John Langan has argued that rooting the unity thesis in Christian faith and charity leads to a version of the unity thesis that causes more problems than it solves as it "produces a double standard in the evaluation of Christian and non-Christian persons." Langan rightly recognizes that Augustine's version of the unity thesis is able to account for the "possibility that virtue and sin can coexist in the individual agent" while at the same time "giving a gradualist account of the development of the life of true virtue." However, Langan criticizes Augustine's thesis for denying non-Christians not only "the moral virtues which classical antiquity regarded as the height of human achievement," but also "the theocentric virtues of faith and charity."<sup>496</sup> This "double standard" arising from Christian versions of the unity thesis, then, is particularly relevant in light of MacIntyre's critique insofar as it would amount not just to unfairness but the impossibility of moral communication and growth. When considered in reference to evangelization, then, these observations become quite troubling. If this view is correct, then, as I said before, evangelization would be at best a fool's errand and at worst delusional vanity.

### III. Scalar Virtue

The purpose of this final section is to assess the objections to the unity thesis heretofore considered both in and of themselves and as applied to Francis's understanding of authentic evangelization. In order to do so we first need to make clear that the unity thesis does not axiomatically imply that virtue is a range quality and examine the implications of this. Having accomplished this task, we may then advance to a more accurate evaluation of Francis's understanding of authentic evangelization. In this way, I maintain that Francis's view overcomes the objections of the previous section while also casting new light upon the radical distinctiveness of the Thomistic unity thesis considered within a theological framework.

Christian accounts of the unity of the virtues generally follow the Augustinian move of defining virtue as a scalar quality. Were it not for Protagoras and Aristotle, one might even trace the historical emergence of this definition back to Augustine's critique of the Stoics:

It seems to me that the Stoics are wrong in refusing to admit that the man who is increasing in wisdom has any wisdom at all, and insisting that he has it only when he is absolutely perfect in it; not that they refuse to admit the increase, but for them he is not wise in any degree unless he suddenly springs forth into the free air of wisdom after coming up and, as it were, emerging from the depths of the sea.<sup>497</sup>

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Repudiating the Stoic definition of virtue as a range quality, Augustine likens the attainment of virtue to emerging from a dark cave and gradually adjusting to the light<sup>498</sup> Defining virtue as a scalar quality, then, Augustine argues that virtue is achieved by degrees (*progrediendo*). Additionally, as mentioned earlier, Augustine transposes the unity thesis into a distinctively Christian framework as may be observed from the following:

To sum up briefly the general view I have about virtue so far as relates to right living: Virtue is the charity by which what ought to be loved is loved. This charity exists more in some, less in others, and in some not at all; but the greatest charity, which admits no increase, exists in no human living on earth. So long as it admits of increase, what makes it less than it ought is due surely to vice.<sup>499</sup>

Aquinas follows not only Augustine but also Aristotle in defining virtue as a scalar quality noting that, for the philosopher, "virtue is the tendency of something complete towards what is best. However, someone can be more disposed or less disposed towards what is best; accordingly, he has virtue to a greater or lesser degree."<sup>500</sup> Aquinas borrows the Augustinian move of differentiating his scalar quality definition from the range quality definition of the Stoics who erred when they said "that no one possesses a virtue without possessing it supremely." According to Aquinas, the Stoic position "does not seem to follow from the character of a virtue, because there is such a variety of ways in which people share in a virtue."<sup>501</sup>

Obviously Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas did not recognize an intrinsic conflict between the unity thesis and virtue defined as a scalar quality. Indeed, as demonstrated earlier, the Stoic view was a critique of the Aristotelian view while the Augustinian and Thomistic views are, in several ways, a critique of the Stoic view. It makes sense, then, that there would be noteworthy differentiation here. However, the question still remains of how the unity thesis operates when joined to an understanding of virtue as a scalar quality. Daniel McInerney examines this issue in the following passage:

While admitting that no one said the virtuous life was going to be easy, we should add that no one ever said (except the Stoics) that the virtuous life had to be capped off in order to be fully virtuous. There are, in other words, degrees of perfection and of unity in attainment of the virtues, and it is reasonable to suppose that we can achieve a certain level of perfection and unity in the life of virtue without having yet achieved absolutely perfect unity of the virtues. Accordingly, the virtuous life might most realistically be described as the life devoted to achieving perfect unity of the virtues, with the recognition built-in that we are always on the way towards that perfect unity.<sup>502</sup>

This view harmonizes with Francis's reference to the Thomistic notion of mercy as "the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their deficiencies."<sup>503</sup> It wouldn't make much sense for Aquinas to simultaneously assert that virtue does not admit of deficiency and also that mercy "makes up" for the deficiencies of certain virtues. That mercy is able to do this would indeed be an untenable position if virtue is a range quality but is congruous with virtue understood as a scalar quality.

While defining virtue as a scalar quality attends to the impossibility of growth objection, it does not, in and of itself, respond to the impossibility of transition objection. Even were one to recognize the possibility of "true but imperfect virtue" there still remains the possibility that the individual who is virtuous to degree X might be so far removed from the person who is virtuous to degree Y that there does not exist a "point of moral contact" between the two.<sup>504</sup> Brought back into the realm of authentic evangelization as put forward by Francis, then, there would still be the problem of evangelization achieving its end. Envisioning virtue and the moral life in a scalar context enables Francis to characterize Group A's interactions with Group B not as demanding "surprisingly sudden and implausibly difficult" transitions but rather as accompanying others "with mercy and patience" as one transitions between multiform gradations "of personal growth as these progressively occur."<sup>505</sup> This "accompaniment" language is of fundamental importance, because "in every activity of evangelization, the primacy always belongs to God, who has called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit."<sup>506</sup> It is God alone who "gives the growth."<sup>507</sup>

In addition to being responsive to the objections heretofore considered, then, Francis's utilization of the unity thesis as a criterion for virtue also sheds new light upon the radical distinctiveness of the Thomistic unity thesis considered within a theological framework. By making God's mercy communicated to us through Christ, the impetus of the moral life, Francis reminds us that theological versions of the unity thesis must be sufficiently theological. More precisely put, the Augustinian and Thomistic versions of the unity thesis are not merely the Platonic and Aristotelian theses wearing theological hats. Rather, the respective theses of Augustine and Aquinas differ from those of Plato and Aristotle not only in degree but in kind. The latter root virtue in human effort alone, while the former root virtue in a response to the God who "has loved us first."<sup>508</sup>

Notwithstanding, there remain several issues interrelated to but importantly distinct from the arguments of this chapter that

require serious reflection. One main issue, in my view, may be gleaned from Langan's contention that the very notion of distinctively Christian virtue creates "a double standard" which is problematic for any moral system, but particularly problematic with regard to moral systems, "whether philosophical or theological," that wish "to be universal." Langan views this as exceptionally troublesome for "Christians who live in a world that is characterized by both religious pluralism and secular unbelief."<sup>509</sup> On one level, Francis seems resigned to a sectarian view of Christianity as he admits that Christians "will never

be able to make the Church's teachings easily understood or readily appreciated by everyone. Faith always remains something of a cross; it retains a certain obscurity which does not detract from the firmness of its assent." Moreover, Francis does not seem to think that reason can play a decisive role in addressing the just mentioned problem since "some things are understood and appreciated only from the standpoint of this assent, which is a sister to love, beyond the range of clear reasons and arguments."<sup>510</sup> In view of this problem, Francis urges us to "remember that all religious teaching ultimately has to be reflected in the teacher's way of life, which awakens the assent of the heart by its nearness, love and witness."<sup>511</sup> Such a way of life, in Francis's view, would subsist in a soul possessing all of the virtues and, by the power of the Spirit, be communicated to others in a "missionary key."<sup>512</sup>

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456. Kim, "Thomas Aquinas on the Connection of the Virtues."
457. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (EG hereafter).
458. Here I borrow a term used by McInerney. See *Difficult Good*.
459. See Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 506. Also see Waldron's discussion of this topic in *Species and the Shape of Equality*, 76–82. I employ the concepts of a "range" property versus a "scalar" property to delineate between competing definitions of virtue.
460. For example, see Doris, *Lack of Character*. For a critique of the metaphysical assumptions underlying situationist psychology as articulated by Doris, see my "Have the Manicheans Returned?" For a broader discussion of this topic see Miller, "Should Christians Be Worried about Situationist Claims in Psychology and Philosophy?" Miller affirms the general premise of my just mentioned article insofar as he insists upon the need for Christian ethicists to take the claims of situationist psychology more seriously than they currently are (49). However, more relevant to the current chapter, Miller upholds the definition of virtue espoused by situationist psychology as more in keeping with Christian faith than idealized definitions. As we shall see, the current chapter disagrees with this claim.
461. Adams, *Theory of Virtue*, 173.
462. Cicero, *De finibus* 3.14.48.
463. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy*, 84.
464. Adams, *Theory of Virtue*, 173.

465. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 180; my italics. For a critique of MacIntyre's view as put forward in *After Virtue*, see Lutz, "Is MacIntyre's Theory of Tradition Relativistic?" MacIntyre later revised his view. See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* One might observe how the objection considered here corresponds with MacIntyre's work regarding the possibility of dialogue across moral traditions. For more on this topic, see Fowl, "Could Horace Talk with the Hebrews?"; Hare, *Language of Morals*; Hauerwas, "The Church as God's New Language"; Stout, *Ethics After Babel*.
466. Langan, "Augustine on the Unity and the Interconnection of the Virtues," 89. Kent has also explored the "acquiring the virtues all at once problem." See Kent, "Rethinking Moral Dispositions: Scotus on the Virtues."
467. EG 1–2.
468. EG 1–3.
469. EG 1–6.
470. EG 6–7; 272.
471. EG 8.
472. EG 10.
473. EG 11–13.
474. EG 14.
475. EG 30; Also see *Gaudium et spes*, 19–20.
476. EG 34–36.
477. EG 35.
478. EG 37–38, referencing Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (*ST* hereafter) IIa IIae q. 30 a. 4.
479. EG 39.
480. *ST* Ia IIae q. 65 a. 3.
481. For more on the distinction between infused and acquired virtue, see McKay-Knobel's "Two Theories of Christian Virtue." For a recent defense of what Knobel refers to as "unification theory," see Mattison, "Can Christians Possess the Acquired Virtues?"
482. Porter, "Virtue and Sin." For a critique of Porter's argument, see Titus, "Moral Development and Connecting the Virtues." For a critique of both views, see my "Progress in the Good." Some have taken issue with my argument regarding the distinctiveness and value of the Thomistic version of the unity thesis. For example, see Murray, "Wandering Virtues," 35. Others, however, have found the argument compelling. For instance, see Fitzgerald, "No Woe to You Lawyers."
483. Porter, "Virtue and Sin," 528; her italics.
484. *Ibid.*, 529.
485. *Ibid.*
486. *Ibid.*
487. *ST* Ia IIae q. 65 a. 3.
488. Porter, "Virtue and Sin," 530; *ST*

490. *Ibid.*; Porter's italics.
491. *Ibid.* This is why Porter argues that Aquinas's thesis is "inadequate." See Porter, "Virtue and Sin," . In my view, Porter's 537 argument takes insufficient notice of Aquinas's view which, while acknowledging that charity can be lost through a single act, also makes clear that charity can "be restored through a single act of repentance: An act of repentance is, by virtue of grace, able to destroy a vicious habit that has been generated. That is why if someone has the vice of intemperateness, when he repents it no longer remains there alongside the infused virtue of temperance in the character of a vice. Rather, it is already in the process of being destroyed, and

- has become instead a sort of tendency. However, a tendency is not the contrary of a perfected habit." *De virt. comm.* a.10 ad. 16.
492. *EG* 1–2.
493. *EG* 34–36.
494. *EG* 10.
495. *EG* 15.
496. Langan, "Augustine on the Unity and the Interconnection of the Virtues," 95. What Langan refers to as a "gradualist account" is, I think, much more significant than Langan recognizes. How one evaluates the unity of the virtues is contingent on whether one presumes an understanding of virtue as a range quality or scalar (gradualist in Langan's language).
497. Augustine, *Epist.* 167.2.4.
498. *Ibid.*
499. *Ibid.* See Houser, *Cardinal Virtues*, 215.
500. *De virtutibus communis* a. 11 ad 15.
501. *De virtutibus cardinalibus* a. 3. Francis seems importantly aware of this distinction as he warns against distorting Christian morality into "a form of stoicism" as referenced earlier.
502. McInerney, *Difficult Good*, 85.
503. *EG* 37-38, referencing Aquinas *ST IIa IIae* q. 30 a. 4.
504. *De virtut. card.*, a. 2. Also see *ST Ia IIae* q. 65 a. 2. "It is therefore clear from what has been said that only the infused virtues are perfect, and deserve to be called virtues simply: since they direct man well to the ultimate end. But the other virtues, those namely, that are acquired, are virtues in a restricted sense, but not simply, for they direct man well in respect of the last end in some particular genus of action, but not in respect to the last end simply."
505. *EG* 44.
506. *EG* 12.
507. *Ibid.*, referencing 1 Cor 3:7.
508. *EG* 12, referencing 1 John 4:19.
509. Langan, "Augustine on the Unity and the Interconnection of the Virtues," 95.
510. *EG* 42. For a Thomistic reply to the sectarian problem, see my "Aquinas and Hauerwas on the Religious and the Secular."
511. *EG* 42.
512. *EG* 33. It seems, then, that more attention to the role of the virtues in evangelization in general and dialogue in particular is needed. For more on this topic, see my "Dialogue and Communion."