

Article

The Courage to Think: What the Legacy of St. Catherine of Alexandria Means Today

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Abstract: This piece is the text of the lecture delivered at an academic forum held last November 25, 2024 on the occasion of the feast day of St. Catherine of Alexandria. The event was organized by the Faculty of Philosophy Students' Forum under the auspices of the Faculty of Philosophy of the UST Ecclesiastical Faculties. As the title suggests, the talk focuses on the "courage to think," a virtue closely identified with St. Catherine of Alexandria. In my remarks, I identified three possible areas where the "courage to think" may be practiced today, namely, the life of the mind, truth-telling and the act of believing. The three areas do not exhaust the possibilities where the virtue of "courage to think" may be demonstrated but they represent the normative domains closest to the experience of the young seminarians and aspiring apprentices of philosophy in the audience. The selection and identification of the said areas also serve as a reminder for potential readers of the need to discover new ways of appropriating the legacy of St. Catherine of Alexandria.

Keywords: St. Catherine of Alexandria, courage, philosophy, virtue

In this paper, I wish to dwell on the virtue of courage vis-à-vis the practice of philosophy against the backdrop of the commemoration of the legacy of St. Catherine of Alexandria¹ which happily coincides with the observance of World Philosophy Day. Courage in relation to philosophy is an

¹ St. Catherine of Alexandria (287–305) is the patroness of the Faculty of Philosophy and the second patroness of the University of Santo Tomas, after St. Thomas Aquinas himself. She is revered as probably the first Christian woman philosopher and the first Christian woman intellectual martyr. See also Gregory Sadler, "Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Patroness of Christian Philosophers, Inspiration for Contemporary Christian Philosophy?" in *The Alexandrian*, 1: 1 (2007), 1–13; John Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, trans. by Karen A. Winstead (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).

imposing topic, hence my decision to take it up in a tangential manner. In other words, rather than discuss courage directly, I would dwell on situations or circumstances which require courage and on personalities who could be taken as exemplars of courage. In doing so, hopefully, I could show that no two acts of courage are the same and that individuals display their courage differently. It would have been easier if I were to talk of courage as a generic act of heroism. But the theme of the gathering requires me to talk about a specific kind of courage, that is, courage as a virtue in doing philosophy. This specie of courage has less to do with the courage of combat soldiers in the battlefield or the courage of Marvel heroes scouring the multiverse for the lost infinity stones and more in common with the kind of courage which crowned the life and memory of St. Catherine of Alexandria² or led Boethius to write, *The Consolation of Philosophy*,³ in his last days or inspired the character of Winston Smith in George Orwell's *1984*⁴ to push back against the machinations of his political masters. It is also akin to the courage of Maria Ressa⁵ or Leila de Lima⁶ who endured yet survived various measures of persecution employed against them by the Duterte regime to harass them and ultimately silence them, so the public and the world wouldn't know the kind of evil they were up against. In itself, the topic of courage is daunting enough. But to talk of courage vis-à-vis philosophy is a different terrain as one is not simply looking for a triumphant hero. Courage blended with critical thought could in fact make one, ironically, an anti-hero, as in the fates of Socrates⁷ and Aristotle⁸ who were villified by the Athenians or St. Thomas Aquinas who was condemned for dabbling in Greek and Islamic philosophies⁹ or Apolinario Mabini who was isolated for his vocal dissent against the political posturing of the leaders of the incipient Philippine republic¹⁰ or St. Catherine

² Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 141–175.

³ See Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by David R. Slavitt, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁴ See George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classics, 2023).

⁵ See Maria Ressa, *How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future* (New York: Harpercollins Publishers, 2022).

⁶ See Leila de Lima, "How I Survived 2,454 Days in Arbitrary Detention," in *Amnesty International* (20 March 2024), <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2024/03/leila-de-lima-philippines/>>.

⁷ See Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo*, Hugh Tredennick & Harold Tarrant (New York: Penguin Books, 1993); see also I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1989).

⁸ Carlo Natali, *Aristotle: His Life and School* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 60–64.

⁹ James Weisheipl, O.P., *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 331–350.

¹⁰ Apolinario Mabini, *La Revolucion Filipina: The Political Writings of Apolinario Mabini*, Vol. 1 (1898–1899) (Manila: The National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 2022), 66; Cesar

of Alexandria who was martyred for her staunch allegiance to Christian faith.¹¹ I shall describe this kind of courage in three themes, or should I say, three domains which show the compelling need for the courage to think, to wit, *the life of the mind*, *truth-telling* and *the act of believing*. By focusing on these domains, hopefully, I can provide a picture of what the courage to think entails.

On The Life of the Mind

I will take up the theme of the life of the mind taking into consideration the contemporary crisis of thought. Briefly, I describe the crisis of thought as a steady decline of our practice of and appreciation for thinking.¹² I refer to it as crisis although if one looks around, it would appear as if there is no crisis at all. If indeed there were a crisis, it would probably be a crisis mainly among the intellectuals and academics¹³ whose relevance and impact have been significantly eroded by influencers and content creators who are now the acknowledged gurus directing the subject matter, flow and direction of public opinion within the cyber realm.¹⁴ These new masters are aided (or should I say, lorded over) by another set of experts whose job is to keep the traffic of information continuously mobile and accelerated through the infinite combinations of algorithms that are constantly created and deployed in an ever circulating digital stream. Thanks to these strings of numbers, we can exchange messages and paste emojis, deliver classes online, binge-watch on Netflix, catch up on the latest Tiktok craze, buy cheap wares on Facebook marketplace plus a host of other things that we do in this brave, new world, which took only less than a decade to radically and completely migrate online. Once upon a time, the boundary between online and offline still made sense. Today, one can no longer think of an instance that is in fact completely offline in as much as, to borrow the expression of Yuval Harari,

Adib Majul, *Mabini and the Philippine Revolution* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1996), 217–221.

¹¹ Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 99–140.

¹² Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 38–41; Byung-Chul Han, *Vita Contemplativa: In Praise of Inactivity*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024), 18–19; and Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 115–148.

¹³ Brie Lee, “Are Influencers The New Public Intellectuals?” (14 March 2024) <<https://www.elle.com.au/culture/are-influencers-the-new-public-intellectuals/>> and Steven Mintz, “More Than Sound Bites: Reclaiming the role of public intellectuals in the age of social media,” (20 February 2025), <<https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/2025/02/20/reclaiming-role-public-intellectuals-social-media-age>>.

¹⁴ See Sara McCorquodale, *Influence: How Social Media Influencers are Shaping Our Digital Future* (New York: Bloomsbury Business, 2020).

“the network is always on.”¹⁵ Almost everyone, it seems, wittingly or unwittingly, is simply online.¹⁶ In the former times, a usual day was partitioned into episodes of distinct engagements. Breakfast was not interrupted by anything. Running errands was a bracketed task. Doing homework was a secluded moment. Shared family meal was a sacred rite. In the present age, all these activities are flattened in a singular simultaneity, along with other online interfaces happening in one seamless digital present.¹⁷ One is online the rest of the day until the rest of the night and the only threat that one imagines with mortal dread is the fear of becoming disconnected. Every digital native abides by the conviction that, “I click, therefore, I am.” To paraphrase the words of both the philosopher Mary Midgley¹⁸ and Pope Benedict XVI,¹⁹ ours today is a mathematized world whose impact extends to the inner regions of various knowledge domains including philosophy.²⁰ What we are seeing today is the fulfillment of a vision once dreamed of by Plato²¹ and revived by Descartes:²² a world defined and designed on the foundation of mathematics. With mathematics setting the tone, the goal was to re-create the world according to the rules of calculation, clarity and speed, free from the contamination of the arbitrary sway of human whims or caprices and the margin of error reduced either to a small percentage or none at all. That was the aim. Neither Plato nor Descartes, however, anticipated that mathematics could be a weapon of mass deception as shown by the election of Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 (documented in the report *Architects of Networked Disinformation*²³) or the election of Ferdinand

¹⁵ Yuval Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI*, (New York: Random House, 2024), 338.

¹⁶ Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 2018), 31–62.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 65.

¹⁸ Mary Midgley, *What is Philosophy For?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 129–137.

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI. “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” (12 September 2006), 5–6, <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.pdf>

²⁰ Gian-Carlo Rota, “The Pernicious Influence of Mathematics upon Philosophy” in *Synthese*, 88:2 (Aug. 1991), 165–178. See also Andrew Hacker, *The Math Myth and Other STEM Delusions* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

²¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 47a–b in Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. by Robin Waterfield, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²² Rene Descartes, “Fifth Meditation,” *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 47 and 51.

²³ Jonathan Corpus Ong and John Vincent A. Cabañes, “Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines,” (February 2018), <<https://newtontechfordev.com/wp->

Marcos, Jr. in the year 2022²⁴ or the victory of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, also in the year 2016.²⁵ They also did not foresee how mathematics via algorithmic permutations could alter (as it does today) the notion of what is real via the application of artificial intelligence. Plato would probably turn in his grave once he learns that the “world of forms” he conjured and expounded has been displaced today by the sphere of metrics as the supreme paradigm of what is now taken as “real.”²⁶ What counts today as true, good and beautiful is contingent no longer on any metaphysical or moral or epistemological norm but mainly on algorithmic sequences designed to determine what ranks higher and what does not based on the most effective combinations of digits.²⁷ The academia, for example, no longer subscribes, as its goal and measure, to the idea of a university espoused by Cardinal Newman²⁸ but to a set of metrical indexes imposed by ranking, accrediting or auditing bodies.²⁹ Schools who get the right numbers earn the distinction of being top performers. Academic excellence has become a contest for numbers rather than an engagement in sustained cultivation of scholarship and social responsibility. The only thing that seems to matter now is to be on top by piling up scores and ratings regardless of how the numbers are configured or how or where they are extracted or sourced.³⁰ The same proclivity is passed on by the same schools to their faculty members who

content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf>.

²⁴ Raisha Jesmin, “The Age of Disinformation: How Online Media Propelled the Son of A Former Dictator to Power in the Philippines and what It Means for Democracy,” in *Human Rights Pulse* (27 May 2022), <<https://www.humanrightspulse.com/mastercontentblog/the-age-of-disinformation-how-online-media-propelled-the-son-of-a-former-dictator-to-power-in-the-philippines-and-what-it-means-for-democracy>> and Merinette Retona, “Marcos benefited most from election-related disinfo in 2021,” in *Vera Files* (28 December 2021), <<https://verafilms.org/articles/vera-files-fact-check-yearender-marcos-jr-benefited-most-ele>>.

²⁵ Hannah Marshall and Alena Drieschova, “Post-Truth Politics in the UK’s Brexit Referendum,” in *New Perspectives*, 26:3, (2018), 89–105.

²⁶ Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, 65–69. See also David J. Chalmers, “Reality” in *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023).

²⁷ Harari, *Nexus*, 308–314.

²⁸ See John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1992).

²⁹ Jerry Z. Muller, *The Tyranny of Metrics*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), 67–87.

³⁰ See Bomen Guillermo, “Ang ISI at ang Alamat ng Internasyonal na Komunidad ng mga Syentista,” in *Asian Studies*, 36:2 (January 2020), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306111992_Ang_ISI_at_ang_Alatam_ng_Internasyonal_na_Komunidad_ng_mga_Syentista> and David Michael M. San Juan, “A Critique of Scopus-Centrism in Philippine Universities and Educational and/or Research Agencies: Why Filipinos Should Write Research in Filipino,” in *Humanities Diliman*, 21:2 (July–December 2024), 133–171. See also Michelle Stack, *Global University Rankings and the Mediatization of Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

have been habituated to look at teaching as a point-earning venture.³¹ In their course plans and researches, they are expected to turn in points which are now considered as primary indicators for measuring the performance of students and theirs. We now call teaching, “course delivery” and learning, “academic performance” to highlight the imperative for such activities to produce quantifiable outcomes which, needless to say, are set in numbers. No wonder most students today think of coming to school in terms of accumulating the numeric results they aim at getting, that is, grades. Since learning is a mere performance, they make it a point to bring their A-game and “perform” accordingly.³² And with that mindset, they commonly fall prey to the illusion that keeping up appearances of “excellence” is excellence enough. This is no different from a government official for whom public service means public display of its semblance for the sake of the keenly sought social media mileage. What is missing, in other words, is the students’ real immersion in the rigors of the discipline. There is hardly no real oral engagement happening inside the classroom. Their written outputs too are often mere derivations from some random websites. Education, after all, so they assume, is a mere performance, which often is reckoned as going through the motions of learning. It does not help that the same is seen by them in their mentors who also “perform” teaching as a mere routine, following the cue from the school honchos themselves who value points and numeric indicators more than anything. Bottom line, education has become a repetition of cycle of excellence turned upside down, all because of our fixation with numbers at the expense of actual teaching and learning or should I say, the actual life of the mind. In what way then can one demonstrate the courage to think in this scenario? The courage to think begins when one identifies where we are right now as a problem and confronts it as a problem. Our identity as human persons was once described by Aristotle³³ and St. Thomas Aquinas³⁴ in terms of thinking. Our nature compels us to think and our common destiny as a human community is also bound with our ability to think.³⁵ This is the ability that we are now all too willing to

³¹ See for example, Mary Evans, *Killing Thinking: The Death of Universities* (London: Continuum, 2004), 29–47.

³² Eleanor Pinugu, “The costs of a grade-obsessed mindset,” in *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (27 May 2024), <<https://opinion.inquirer.net/173989/the-costs-of-a-grade-obsessed-mindset>>.

³³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, 1098a in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Roger Crisp (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, <<https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>>. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Anima*, art. 1, reply 11, <<https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/QDdeAnima.htm>>.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. 1, 1235a25–35 in Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. by CDC Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, q. 90, art.2; *De Regno*, I.1,8.

concede to its simulacra. The crisis referred to at the beginning of this paper could become more acute if we keep ourselves deluded by the “myth” of the innovations of human thought when human thought itself is held captive by the electronic artifacts of its own making, electronic artifacts that are intended and crafted to provoke and stimulate thought to its barest minimum.³⁶ The banality of evil coincides with our failure to think, says Hannah Arendt.³⁷ And that banality grows twice as worse when the same failure, rather than being called as it is, is construed otherwise. It takes courage to realize that the phenomenon staring us right now, to borrow the description of Theodor Adorno, mirrors a severely “damaged life.”³⁸ And it becomes doubly damaged when we see and hear people (particularly those who should know better) persist in denying or simply refusing to acknowledge the tragic state we have brought ourselves into.

On Truth-telling

Since time immemorial, truth-telling (along with truth-seeking) has always been a thorny and burdensome undertaking. The Gospels assure us that truth will set us free, although for Oedipus, it meant the unmasking of his tragic end. He ventured to seek the truth and eventually found it, along with the curse that befell his family and himself.³⁹ Today, truth is yet again at stake as the war between Israel and Hamas ravages places like Gaza and Lebanon. Our sympathies are torn between one side and the other knowing how difficult it is to discern the markers that would clearly delineate the aggressor from the aggrieved.⁴⁰ Almost daily we are also feted with the spectacle of the grand truth-hunting staged by the Philippine Senate and the House of Representatives on various issues ranging from POGO,⁴¹ human

³⁶ Frank Furedi, *Wasted: Why education is not educating*, (London: Continuum, 2009), 22–42. See also Justin E.H. Smith, “It’s All Over,” in *The Web* (3 January 2019), <<https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/its-all-over/>>.

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 49. See also Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 159.

³⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso Books, 2005), 15–18.

³⁹ Sophocles, “Oedipus The King” in Hadas, Moses (ed.) *Greek Drama. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 111–149.

⁴⁰ Slavoj Zizek, “Israel-Palestine conflict: Who is to blame?,” in *The New Statesman* (19 October 2023), <<https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2023/10/israel-palestine-blame>> and Alexander Gale, “Narrative Warfare: Competitive Victimhood in the Israel-Gaza Conflict,” in *Modern Diplomacy* (19 November 2023), <<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/11/19/narrative-warfare-competitive-victimhood-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/>>.

⁴¹ Dominique Nicole Flores, “Rundown: What was revealed in House quadcom hearing on POGOs,” in *The Philippine Star* (6 September 2024),

trafficking and other criminal activities of Pastor Apollo Quiboloy,⁴² the extra-judicial killings under the Duterte regime⁴³ and the questionable expenditures of the Department of Education⁴⁴ and the Office of the Vice-President.⁴⁵ The public is supposed to gain something from this kind of legislative proceeding but given the partisan nature of the hearings, not to mention the personalities and the characters involved, it is hard to tell whether the truth they claim to be pursuing will ultimately serve the cause of justice and not merely the political advantage of the inquiring legislators most of whom are just too eager to hog the limelight in aid of re-election.⁴⁶ Surely the public deserves to know the truth but once mishandled, the same truth could swiftly turn into a mere lip service.

Truth is not meant to be instrumentalized. It cannot be subordinated to an agendum or advocacy purported to be higher than itself. St. Thomas tells us that truth should be sought for its own sake.⁴⁷ It serves as the

<<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2024/09/06/2383319/rundown-what-was-revealed-house-quadcom-hearing-pogos>> and Marc Jason Cayabyab, "Senate to hold last POGO hearing next week," in *The Philippine Star* (22 November 2024), <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2024/11/22/2402091/senate-hold-last-pogo-hearing-next-week>>.

⁴² Karen de Guzman, "Quiboloy faces Senate probe on alleged trafficking, sexual abuses," in *ABS-CBN News*, (23 October 2024), <<https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/2024/10/23/quiboloy-faces-senate-probe-on-alleged-trafficking-sexual-abuses-917>>.

⁴³ Rowegie Abanto, "Duterte sits beside De Lima at House quad comm inquiry," in *ABS-CBN News* (13 November 2024), <<https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/2024/11/13/duterte-sits-beside-de-lima-at-house-quad-comm-inquiry-1102>> and RG Cruz, "Duterte statements at Senate probe can be used to file cases: Escudero, Diokno," in *ABS-CBN News* (29 October 2024), <<https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/2024/10/29/duterte-statements-at-senate-probe-can-be-used-to-file-cases-escudero-diokno-1442>>.

⁴⁴ Charie Abarca, "Hontiveros wants Senate probe into Duterte-led DepEd's secret fund," in *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (3 September 2024), <<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1979620/hontiveros-wants-senate-probe-into-depeds-2023-confidential-fund>> and Cristina Chi, "House hearing surfaces conflicting claims on DepEd's confidential funds for 'leadership summits,'" in *The Philippine Star* (17 October 2024), <<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2024/10/17/2393266/house-hearing-surfaces-conflicting-claims-depeds-confidential-funds-leadership-summits>>.

⁴⁵ Llanesca T. Panti, "4 subpoenaed OVP employees finally attend House hearing," in *GMA News Online* (25 November 2024), <<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/928062/ovp-employees-house-budget-use-probe/story/>>.

⁴⁶ Dwight de Leon, "Test of popularity: Who are the quad committee members with opponents in 2025?," in *Rappler* (26 February 2025), <<https://www.rappler.com/philippines/elections/list-quad-committee-lawmakers-running-against-opponents-2025-midterms/>>.

⁴⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, 1.2, <<https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/ContraGentiles1.htm>>.

overarching goal of what he refers to as ‘the office of the wise man.’⁴⁸ In effect, he is saying in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* that the quest for truth is itself a demonstration of the love of wisdom.⁴⁹ Unfortunately for us, this organic unity between truth and philosophy, or any domain of knowledge for that matter, has been severely undermined by post-modernity. While modernity previously held that truth was restricted to human subjectivity or categories of reason, post-modernity radically changed this worldview by dissolving any notion of truth via its renunciation of the efficacy of human reason itself.⁵⁰ Post-modernity, in a sense, may also be described as post-objectivity because of its partiality to a rigidly perspectival or relativist rationality.⁵¹ This stance runs counter to what St. Thomas shows in *Summa Contra Gentiles* where he extols human rational aptitude in relation to truth-seeking and truth-telling that go beyond the confines of parochial relativism.⁵² The dominant cultural and intellectual consequences of post-modernity induce most people today to give up on truth. Lectures or books abound as well from prominent scholars who suggest that truth has gone out of fashion.⁵³ What adds another layer of complexity to the already tortuous matter of truth-seeking and truth-telling is the prevailing oversimplification of our understanding of truth. Most of the time, we take the question of truth as simply a matter either of affirmation or denial. Those in the affirmative side, convinced that they are on the side of truth, assume that finding it is as easy as selecting one’s favorite merchandise in Lazada or Shopee. They do not feel compelled at all to examine truth and its surprising epiphanies; they take truth to be monadic, gratuitous and exclusive. Those who relate to truth in this manner also think that its preservation and articulation is a birthright and privilege bestowed on them by their religious, political, cultural or disciplinal identities. They consider others with alternate voices as outliers of what they take to be the “truth.” On the other end of the spectrum, those who deny truth do not seem to realize as well the contradiction inherent in their denial. They take it for granted that one cannot offer a truth-claim, in this case, the denial of truth, while denying truth at the same time. Their error reminds us why Aristotle

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1, 1.1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, 2.

⁵⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27–29.

⁵¹ Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2003), 22–32 and 70–72.

⁵² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, 3

⁵³ See, for example, Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

treats the principle of non-contradiction as the *sine qua non* for making any philosophic statement worthy of itself.⁵⁴ The question of truth, in other words, will not be settled by mere intuitive affirmation or crass negation. There are occasions when championing truth can lead to its ambiguities just as sometimes its denial can help disclose truth in clearer light. There is truth, for example, in saying that Christianity must have a place in politics but to claim that Christianity finds its best representative in Donald Trump seems to be a distortion rather than a validation of truth.⁵⁵ There is also truth in the advocacy to eliminate drug addiction in the country but to argue that murder is the key to achieving this goes against the basic sense either of truth or justice.⁵⁶ The same may be said about the negation of truth. In *Noli Me Tangere*⁵⁷ as in his other writings,⁵⁸ Jose Rizal refuted the colonial notion of religion but in so doing, he managed to introduce an alternative way of looking at religion that was more expressive of the Filipinos' moral and religious consciousness.⁵⁹ Nietzsche likewise declared the death of God.⁶⁰ His statement was disconcerting and scandalous to many but it was the same pronouncement that called our attention to how religious attitudes and practices can become, sometimes, the very thing that renders God lifeless.⁶¹ The courage to think demands us to be conscious, cautious and critical of the hidden possibilities involved in affirming and negating truth. It turns out that neither a ready affirmation nor a quick negation could help us achieve this.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Gamma, 1005b1–25 in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016).

⁵⁵ See Helgard Muller, *President Donald Trump: The Son of Man—The Christ*, (Colorado: Outskirts Press, 2022); see also Matthew D. Taylor, “The second coming of Donald J. Trump,” in *New Humanist* (13 February 2025), <<https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/6380/the-second-coming-of-donald-j-trump>> and Aleem Maqbool, “‘Anointed by God’: The Christians who see Trump as their saviour,” in *BBC News* (17 November 2024), <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20g1zvqj4do>>.

⁵⁶ Randy David, “A truth commission on Duterte’s war on drugs,” in *randy david.com* (22 September 2024), <<https://www.randydavid.com/2024/09/a-truth-commission-on-dutertes-war-on-drugs/>>.

⁵⁷ Jose Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*, trans. by Harold Augenbraum (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁵⁸ Jose Rizal, *Political and Historical Writings (Volume VII)* (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1996).

⁵⁹ Raul J. Bonoan, (ed.) *The Rizal-Pastells Correspondence: The Hitherto Unpublished Letters of Jose Rizal and Portions of Fr. Pablo Pastell’s Fourth Letter and Translation of the Correspondence Together with a Historical Background and Theological Critique*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1994). See also John Nery, “Rizal as Catholic,” in *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (20 December 2014), <<https://opinion.inquirer.net/81338/rizal-as-catholic>>.

⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109, 119–120, and 199.

⁶¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Adrian del Caro, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 212–214.

In fact, the mistaken notion that truth can be conveniently acquired by sheer affirmation or be casually negated by a candid rejection is what leads us to where we are right now: the age of post-truth. The culture of post-truth highlights our inability to recognize the complex nature of truth and our credulity to mistake truth for something else. We become helpless targets of various forms of misinformation because we ourselves often take for granted the imperative to be critical and reasonable. We equate truth with facts, information, social media content or data, unmindful of how these things can be manufactured or manipulated by those who can pay more and gain even more by paying. The courage to think, then, in relation to truth-telling, compels us to be assertive of the rational dimension of our being human and to engage truth in its multi-faceted unity. We need to realize that truth may appear in strangest ways; it may convey itself in the guise of a problem or question and not, as we usually expect, in a clearly spelled out pronouncement. He who thinks that truth always comes to us with a flashy and glittering label is missing the point. Part of truth's authenticity is its simplicity but being simple does not mean simplistic. The need therefore to pay attention to truth, disclosed or otherwise, with as much patience and care, cannot be overstated. This is all the more necessary when one talks of God who, as the simplest of all truths, always exceeds the grasp of human mind.

On the Act of Believing

In saying that God is the simplest truth that exceeds the capacity of human mind, I do not mean that God is a mere thought content unattainable by our rational capacity. On the contrary, God as the simplest truth suggests that he is what kindles the mind only to elude it at the very moment of such encounter.⁶² God can be thought but only in his faint semblance or be identified albeit in his hazy, distant traces.⁶³ This ordeal is captured by the *Song of Songs*' depiction of the lover's ceaseless search for the beloved who is constantly out of sight: "All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him. I will get up now and go about the city, through its streets and squares; I will search for the one my heart loves. So I looked for him but did not find him."⁶⁴ The same torment that comes with meeting God in his absence was once described by St. John of the Cross as "the dark night."⁶⁵ St. John of the Cross' dark night is Jonah's

⁶² Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, "Sermon One," trans. by Maurice O'C. Walshe, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 33–34.

⁶³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.q.13.a.1–3.

⁶⁴ Song of Songs, 3:1–2, NIV.

⁶⁵ St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, Book I, Chapter VIII., trans. by E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 2005), 62–64.

three days in the belly of the whale⁶⁶ and Moses' desert crossing to Mt. Sinai.⁶⁷ Peter, John and James underwent the same bittersweet experience of finding God in his unfinding at Mt. Tabor where they thought they had a divine sighting through the thick clouds that blocked their view.⁶⁸ One may also recall the tale shared by the two disciples at Emmaus who realized they had seen the risen Christ in the instant he vanished after conversing and breaking bread with them.⁶⁹

The references above somehow give us snippets of what goes with the act of believing. It involves struggles and ones that are intense, lifelong and consistent. Other than the need to keep the fight and finish the race, one must also struggle against his own frailty, against the natural tendency of the human will to yield and to run towards the quickest way out when the odds are stronger. While self-mastery is not an impossible task, its attainment is found among individuals who are rather rare and few. Aside from the figures already cited, one may also count among them the likes of St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and St. Catherine of Alexandria herself. We consider them heroes of faith for in their actions and their entire life stories, they served as authentic models of witnessing. In their triumphs and failures, they championed the cause of faith and in a very special way, showed us why it takes a huge amount of courage to believe. The catechism plainly teaches that faith is an intellectual assent⁷⁰ but it does not really detail the hazards and risks involved when one commits himself to believe. For in real life, intellectual assent is but a tiny portion of the act of faith. More than intellectual assent, believing also requires character formation, moral commitment, living in communion, acts of service, promotion of justice and peace and perfection of charity among others.⁷¹ The trickiest part of believing, however, comes with believing against belief itself. At one point, one needs to believe against belief in order to make room for authentic faith. To be worthy of Yahweh's promise, Abraham had to believe against the belief he might lose his only son.⁷² To turn over a new leaf, the Samaritan woman had to believe against the belief her life was but one redundant sad story.⁷³ To be free from her past, the accused adulteress had to believe against the belief that she did not deserve to be forgiven.⁷⁴ Believing

⁶⁶ Jonah 1:17–2:10, *NIV*.

⁶⁷ Exodus 15:22–20:21.

⁶⁸ Matthew 17:1–11.

⁶⁹ Luke 24:13–33.

⁷⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 155.

⁷¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae and IIaIIae.

⁷² Genesis 22:1–19.

⁷³ John 4:1–26.

⁷⁴ John 8:1–11.

against belief, however, is not for the faint-hearted. Only those who have the gumption to face the unforeseeable can believe against belief and, hence, prove one's openness to faith. Faith may truly be inconvenient and exacting and the amount of uncertainty it involves may be too overwhelming which makes turning away from God or abandonment of faith an appealing alternative for some. They find it hard to come to terms with the apparent ambiguities or contradictions intrinsic to faith. If faith or any of its aspects resists rational explanation, the only option, so they think, should be to explain it away. This is the direction taken by the likes of Hume,⁷⁵ Sartre⁷⁶ and Russell.⁷⁷ They assume there is no room for faith in human experience and they reckon human reason as the other of faith. They view reasonability as mere rationality, that is, mere compatibility of human thought and human affairs with the stipulations of language, philosophy, science or mathematics. The Gospels, the Fathers of the Church and the great Christian thinkers like St. Catherine of Alexandria, Boethius, St. Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas, however, teach us otherwise. What they offer us is a more nuanced and a more layered understanding of reasonability. At one level, faith is reasonable because our discernment of its content relies on our natural receptivity for such; but at another level, faith is reasonable because it can serve as a pathway to finding certain truths that lie beyond the traditional landscape of knowing. Most modern thinkers, particularly the champions of Enlightenment, try to convince us that knowing or knowledge can only be gained via epistemic cognition.⁷⁸ But Christian religion, together with Eastern thought and other monotheistic traditions like Judaism and Islam, remind us that there is more to knowledge than knowing in the epistemic sense. In fact, faith too is a form of knowing.⁷⁹ There is knowing in the practice of faith that comes with the cultivation of love and moderation of one's desires as in St. Augustine⁸⁰ or the search for that which nothing greater can be thought as in St. Anselm⁸¹ or the invocation of truth in the eloquence of silence as in St. Thomas Aquinas⁸²

⁷⁵ See David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. by Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁷⁶ See Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans by Sarah Richmond (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁷⁷ See Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Touchstone Book, 1967).

⁷⁸ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), 3–36.

⁷⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, q.4, art. 2.

⁸⁰ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (Pennsylvania: The Franklin Library, 1982), Book X, 189–227.

⁸¹ Anselm, "Proslogion," Chapter 2 in Anselm, *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), 81.

⁸² Joseph Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas Aquinas: Three Essays*, trans. by John Murray, S.J. and Daniel O'Connor (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1966), 38–41.

or abiding in the tranquility of one's spiritual forbearance as in St. Catherine of Alexandria.⁸³ For these spiritual masters, the ambiguities of faith are provocations not for scientific explanation but for God's revelation. God makes himself known too through the so-called "sign of contradiction" spoken of by Simeon in the Gospel of St. Luke⁸⁴ and amplified by Edith Stein⁸⁵ and the Popes John XXIII,⁸⁶ John Paul II⁸⁷ and Benedict XVI.⁸⁸ Revelation as a sign of contradiction evokes surprising ways by which God's self-communication disrupts human history: the king appearing as a helpless infant, the master in the guise of lowly servant, the savior crossing himself out literally in the humiliation of the crucifixion. Pope John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio* speaks of the cross as the most radical expression of divine wisdom dramatized by the original "death of God," that is, in Jesus' emptying of himself in the very act of self-giving.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, we often confuse revelation with explanation and by explanation we often mean quick fix and bite-size answers. We need to recover a sense of revelation similar to what was alluded to by T.S. Eliot in the poem, *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for

⁸³ Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 71–97.

⁸⁴ Luke 2:34.

⁸⁵ Edith Stein, *The Hidden Life: Essays, Meditations, Spiritual Texts (The Collected Works of Edith Stein IV)*, trans. by Walraut Stein, (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1992), 101.

⁸⁶ Pope John XXIII, "Address on the occasion of the solemn opening of the Second Vatican Council" (11 October 1962), <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html>.

⁸⁷ This is a pre-papacy text. See Karol Wojtyła, *Sign of Contradiction* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979).

⁸⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (15 March 2006), <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20060315.html>.

⁸⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio, on the Relationship between Faith and Reason* (Vatican City: Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.pdf>.

But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.⁹⁰

The description, therefore, of faith as an intellectual assent may seem deceptively harmless for it conceals more than it discloses faith's spiritual, moral and existential demands. More than mere voluntary concurrence, faith requires us to recognize the uncertainties and contradictions which mark the act of believing. The current market-driven and digital civilization, however, disposes us against this. What predominates today is the phenomenon of a brand of Christianity which induces believers to take faith as a prompt for wish-fulfillment and to reckon God as a guarantor of certainty. For example, it has become a common practice among believers to "claim" something they are praying for (often, with the caveat, "in Jesus' name") or seal their optimism via what they call "manifesting" in the hope of convincing God to grant their prayers favorably. What they call prayer is actually spiritual blackmail and faith in this context is no more than a *quid pro quo* with God taken as hostage by the supposed worshippers. This practice of belief has reconfigured atheism from being the opposite of religious faith into an awkward, subterranean dimension of the very act of believing. This is a unique kind of atheism for it is found specifically among those who profess belief in God whom they have reduced, consciously or not, into an instrument of their cherished wishes. They need God and faith in God in order to eliminate any trace of uncertainty or doubt. But the way I see it, doubt or uncertainty, is not inimical but actually is conducive to faith. It can only be antithetical to faith if we allow doubt or uncertainty to get the better of us and get ourselves confined to the illusions either of despair or intellectual pride. The other name of faith, then, is courage and Jesus' invitation to believe is reiterated more clearly in his words, "Do not be afraid."⁹¹ Courage, truly, is the alter-ego of faith and in our postmodern world that daily is becoming more and more dangerously unmoored and uncertain, cultivating it is something anyone who claims to believe in God must take to heart. The call to believe, then, is a call for us to find the courage to cast our nets against the bleak promise of a good catch⁹² or leave our boat and brave the raging waters⁹³ or feed the multitude with only five loaves and a pair of fish.⁹⁴ It is the kind of faith that should allow us to pray with the Psalmist: *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*⁹⁵

⁹⁰ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 43–44.

⁹¹ Matthew 28:10; John 14:1.

⁹² John 21:1–10.

⁹³ Matthew 14:22–34.

⁹⁴ Matthew 14:13–18.

⁹⁵ Psalm 23:4.

Conclusion

In the preceding discussion, I offered some thoughts on courage within the limited context of the “courage to think.” I did not actually dwell on the virtue of courage directly but mainly on what I referred to as domains that warrant courage. I identified these domains as the life of the mind, truth-telling and the act of believing. It was difficult to talk of courage as “courage to think” given that neither Aristotle nor St. Thomas Aquinas considered courage as an intellectual virtue. Both Aristotle and St. Thomas counted courage (*andreia* for Aristotle; *fortitudo* for St. Thomas) as member of the so-called cardinal virtues but neither of them ever thought of it as something related to intellectual life. Courage, then, as presented in this paper, was conceived in a broader sense via its iteration in the three domains mentioned above. The three domains were chosen to showcase as well the possible loci where the unity between faith and reason could be demonstrated and the legacy of St. Catherine of Alexandria, appropriated. The word *courage* is intimately related with the Latin term for heart which is *cor*. With this in mind, one may look at courage as a virtue expressive of the integrity of who we are as human persons. It reminds us of the need to think with our hearts and to feel with our minds and not allow ourselves to be swayed by various forms of false dichotomies that are quite rampant today, particularly in the social media. The domains I mentioned also remind us of our spiritual and moral rootedness as Christian believers. Precisely because courage is part of the so-called cardinal virtues, courage may not be taken as a stand-alone virtue. As such, it can greatly complement and supplement the practices of thinking, truth-telling and believing, all of which are necessary for the attainment of our individual and collective human flourishing.

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