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HERITAGE OF AQUINAS'S VISION OF NATURAL LAW IN CONTEXT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CARE

"Nature" is the most complex term in the English literature (Plumwood 1994). This concept describes in classical philosophy beings (objects) including world and matter (Johnson, 2015) without explicit distinction between environmental and other realities, as humanity. It is a philosophical term especially in its Latin and Greek form: *ousia*, *substantia* that refer to the "bodies" or "beings" in general and this notion was even used to describe a singularity of Jesus Christ as a divine person in two "natures": divine and humane. This person got embodied. Trinitarian relationality (*perichoresis*) involves social relations but goes beyond as the Creator-Spirit (*Ruah*) would also bring every-being (embodiment) to the resurrected life.

We could say that the term "nature" remains a key notion not only for philosophy, natural sciences and theology, but for all the humanity in horizon of the environmental crisis. That is what inspires the main question of this paper, namely, if it is possible to establish a connection between the meaning of the term "nature" in the discourse of Aquinas and a current meaning related to the environmental care. On the answer to this question would depend if – and to what extend – the idea of natural law, as an application of the meaning of "nature" to establish hierarchies of values could be also helpful to reenforce environmental care motivations.

To respond the stated question, firstly, a narrative analysis of three most recent interpretative contexts of the term "nature" in *corpus Aquinas* will be

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conducted. Secondly, the debates on the application of the natural law will be presented. Helpful will be also a short contextualization of the doctrine of natural law in the recent Teaching of the Church, acknowledging certain shift in its comprehension – as a comparison of the document of International Theological Commission 2009 "In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law" and Pope Francis's 2015 *Laudato si'* shows – pointing to a practical ethical application but from different perspectives.

The aim of this paper consists in providing a synthetic overview of contemporary interpretations of the concept of "nature" within recent Thomistic scholarship and to identify a significant hermeneutical shift from classical natural law discourse toward the relational and ecological vision articulated in *Laudato si'*. Contemporary Thomistic reinterpretations reveal that Thomas Aquinas himself did not address the environment in terms of "nature" as this concept is commonly understood in contemporary ecological discourse. Nevertheless, recent magisterial documents draw upon Aquinas's teachings on natural law and creatively reinterpret them in relation to environmental responsibility and the care of creation. In this way, Thomistic natural law is extended beyond its traditional anthropological and moral framework to support an integral ecological vision that emphasizes the interconnectedness of human beings, society, and the natural world.

The limited scope of the present study does not allow for a full development of the thesis stating that *Laudato si'* and contemporary ecological ethics fundamentally revise Thomistic natural law. Rather, the paper seeks to raise questions that may serve as starting points for further inquiry. One such avenue concerns the relationship between nature and grace, a theme that occupies a central place in Aquinas's thought, though it is merely mentioned in Francis's text. In this regard, it may be fruitful to ask whether the concept of nature can be reconsidered from the perspective of creation's participation in grace and, consequently, whether an ecological understanding of nature may emerge from such a framework.

Such an investigation, however, would require a considerably greater degree of conceptual precision and theological elaboration than it is possible here. At this preliminary stage of the research, the primary objective is more modest: to highlight the creative reappropriation of Thomistic natural law within the framework of "human ecology" and to draw attention to the hermeneutical developments through which contemporary Catholic ecological thought engages the Thomistic tradition.

1. ANALYSIS OF CURRENT INTERPRETATIVE CONTEXTS OF THE TERM "NATURE" IN *CORPUS AQUINAS*

Our main source is provided by the recent issues of the Journal *Revue Thomiste* through the years 2021–2025 and also recent Thomist studies by Franciscan authors in the Journal *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* that compile finding of the congresses and thematically structured papers. From the total of 250 papers covered in the Journal *Revue Thomiste*, twenty-five suit our thematic and make it possible to structure a three-folded contextual interpretations of Thomistic concept of "nature" in reference to: 1) creation, generation and resurrection; 2) body, matter and their relationship to the intellect, soul, spirit which lead to the establish different layers of hierarchies of values corresponding to a rational order where a strong anthropocentrism can be recognized; 3) nature and grace debate.

These three debates show that theological reference is always present in the Thomistic context, in the following sense: although he debates with Aristotle and his interpreters on philosophical field, the purpose is always theologically grounded. Thomas's method consists not only of an abstract intellectual exercise but an affective desire to know – and somehow – reach the experience of God. Mongeau (2016, 285) emphasizes the fundamentally oral character of the *Summa Theologiae*, which was dictated to scribes and reflects the dynamics of live academic disputation with fellow scholars and students. Its structure mirrors oral debate, particularly in the articulation of objections and responses, and this feature has prompted a renewed hermeneutical appreciation of Thomism. On this view, theology is not conceived as an abstract or purely speculative science but as a pathway toward the lived experience of God. Consequently, theological instruction aims not only at intellectual comprehension but also at the formation of virtue, drawing students affectively toward God through persuasive and dialogical methods.

1.1 NATURE IN REFERENCE TO CREATION, GENERATION AND RESURRECTION

Creation, based on the objections posed in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 44, a. 2, would be connected in Christian doctrine more with the idea of generation than with the philosophical idea of movement. "It must be clarified that creation is something completely different from physical movement and change," Schmidt writes (2006, 212). "Nature is that by which things first and foremost happen in the course of a generation. It is a principle due to a focal unity of meaning, because nature is in a mobile set that which has its origin in its generation" (Brochier 2022, 69).

That is how Thomas's reinterpretation – from the perspective of faith – of the Aristotelian concept of cosmogony can be easily recognizable in the sense that only God is capable of creation (Soskice 2023). The concept of creation has two characteristics: "creation presupposes nothing in the thing to be created and the thing to be created receives its being from a higher cause, so that in it being follows non-being" (Schmidt 2006, 219). It is only on the basis this reference to the Creator that the creation can be thematized. This point is crucial to the ulterior anthropological descriptions, as without explicit reference to God, anthropology may fall into anthropocentrism, even in androcentrism.

However, the purpose of Thomistic commentary on Aristotelian *Physics* is to show that the concept of nature is not elaborated from artificialist and anthropomorphic models, but from an analysis of language. Some things are said to happen by nature, others not, when they happen by art or by chance. It is therefore a matter of clarifying language (Brochier 2022, 68).

Thomas in questions 75 and 76 of the *Prima Pars* and in the second part of the *Summa Theologiae* also underlines three important points of his anthropological doctrine: the status of the human-being in Creation, the human soul as both a bodily form and a spiritual substance and the immortality of the rational soul, which pose difficulties for some interpreters as "only the human composite of soul and body deserves the names of *suppositum, res naturae, subsistentia, hypostasis*, or *substantia* and *persona*" (Perrin 2024, 575). The spiritual and corporeal nature of a human-being, considered in light of Revelation, obliges the theologian, according to Thomas,

> to take the most difficult path – that which begins in the soul – in order to expound what may be known about a human being. The theologian then resembles a seasoned mountaineer who rappels down the most arduous route, certainly, but the one that offers the most magnificent, profound, and accurate views of the human being. The soul is the least visible part of human nature, but the noblest. (Perrier et al. 2024, 467)

Antonia Fitzpatrick (2017) states that the debate on the truth of human nature took place in the context of the disputes on the resurrection of bodies after death starting with the resurrection of Jesus's body (Fitzpatrick 2017, 15) especially in times of Peter Lombard and then Thomas from Aquin. The latter explored individuality through body, soul, and shared material, emphasizing participation in God's goodness. Early reflections embraced bodily resurrection, interpreting differences through eschatological dimorphism as witnesses to divine beauty and goodness (Felker 2007; Petrey 2016).

The problem was how the body recovers its integrity after the corruption of death. The discussion will need three councils to become cleared and, apparently, accepted. The reason was given to Thomas from Aquin, on the contrary of some

Franciscans and Augustine's views approved by the IV Council of Lateran and Lyon: "the soul is the proper body only substantial proper form." This means that an individuality goes in an individuated body, not in a composed mode, nor in two pieces. Individuation is a differentiation on the level below the species. Individuality exists in an individual body. The disputes about human generation between the body and the flesh were differentiated in terms of species, being similar in genus. According to Thomas Aquinas, "the soul is the body's only substantial form."

Various traditions of Thomas in different writings with diverse aims need to be recognised in this regard, like: "inequality is natural" (Fitzpatrick 2017, 112), "male body is more perfect than female body" (Fitzpatrick 2017, 114–15), the truth of human nature consists in the essence (as potentiality of act) composed of the common soul and common material, so that all animate creatures – contradicting previous statements – would fall into the human species, whose substantial form (soul) is reintegrated after the resurrection (Fitzpatrick 2017, 153–55).

The consequences of recovering these traditions are significant for theological studies on the identity and dignity of embodiments: they manifest the multiplicity of Thomas's texts that should not be eclipsed by a mainstream hermeneutical tradition. These topics may have today a great significance, especially, in contexts of discussions on anthropology or gender studies (Traina 2010). They are also a powerful inspiration of theological thought on transhumanism and posthumanism. Of course, it impacts also our view on cosmology and environment.

1.2 NATURE IN REFERENCE TO BODY, MATTER AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE INTELLECT, SOUL AND SPIRIT

Some authors (Rhonheimer 2000; Schmidt-Biggemann 2020) underline the connection of the Aristotelian philosophy – a source of Thomistic theological discourses – with physics and mathematics, that needs metaphysics (Golfin 2022, 51). The logical question arises, namely: how neo-scholastic thought – based on the Aquinas – can correspond to modern and contemporary natural sciences (Benk 2001). The aim is to find connections and relations to make theology relevant and credible in empirical contexts. Per analogy to the need of metaphysics as what gives meaning to the physics, theology would give sense, direction and orientation, which means also motivations to sciences whose limits are just to explain how the nature functions (Woźna 2025).

In response to the apparent collapse of the classical cosmological worldview following quantum theory (Planck), some Thomistic scholars have sought to demonstrate the continued relevance of Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics. As Perrier argues, "the revolution introduced by quantum physics concerns the concepts, the structure of the physical universe, and the principles of the origin of

its order" (Perrier 2024, 467). While critics claim that classical notions of substance are incompatible with modern science (Benk 2001, 141), Perrier maintains that quantum realities can be understood through metaphysical categories. According to this view, bodies exist in different degrees of perfection – ranging from inanimate matter to living beings with spiritual souls – while quantum entities are not actual bodies but movements within elementary fields ordered toward the constitution of bodies. This interpretation rejects atomism and restores the significance of matter as a principle of potentiality. Perrier's aim is to show that Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy remains a valuable framework for understanding the corporeal universe and it is compatible with Christian faith.

A different perspective is offered by Benk (2001), who examines the historical difficulties ecclesial authorities encountered in engaging modern science, particularly the theory of relativity. He identifies three phases in the neo-scholastic response. The first, lasting until roughly 1920, was characterized by polemical rejection: relativity was dismissed as a mathematical fiction because neo-scholastics defended absolute space, time, and motion. The second phase sought to refute relativity physically or replace it with alternative theories, often reviving outdated concepts such as the ether. In the third phase, after 1945, relativity was largely accepted as empirically confirmed, although theological engagement with it substantially declined.

Drawing on Klaus Hentschel's study of interpretations and misinterpretations of relativity, Benk argues that philosophical presuppositions imposed significant "intellectual constraints" on scholars (Benk 2001, 152). Neo-scholasticism provides a particularly clear example, as entrenched ontological commitments predisposed many Catholic thinkers toward skepticism or rejection of relativity. Ultimately, neo-scholastic reflections neither advanced the understanding of relativity nor produced a compelling critique of it. This failure contributed to the long-standing impasse between Catholic theology and modern physics (Benk 2001, 151).

What is clearly seen in the authors in the intention to progress in the dialogue between sciences and metaphysics. With regard to nature, the prevailing view continues to maintain that genuine scientific knowledge began only with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the subsequent rejection of Aristotelian physics. Yet a closer examination of scientific reasoning suggests that this narrative is less straightforward than is often assumed, raising doubts as to whether modern science has consistently retained nature itself as its proper object. In this context, it may be argued that the nominalist logical interpretation of nature helped to create the idealistic framework of modern mathematical physics. Such scientific idealism effectively translated nature into the realm of abstraction, depriving it of the intrinsic dynamism and ordering principle that had been attributed to it in the thought of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas (Golfin 2022, 52).

1.3 NATURE AND GRACE

Two approaches are proposed to describe the intersection of nature and grace in Thomas's work: 1) the case of angels whose particularity is manifested at the level of the operations through which beatitude is attained and the idea that the nature is the reason for divine art inscribed in things, 2) which manifests afterwards in natural law, that is illuminated and transcended by grace.

Marie de l'Assomption (2021) is convinced that any analysis of the relationship between nature and grace in Thomas Aquinas cannot overlook the case of angels, who – as intellectual creatures endowed with a natural desire for the vision of the divine essence, like human beings, according to Aquinas – can have no ultimate end other than supernatural beatitude, which cannot be attained only through their natural capacities. Consequently, they require grace in order to merit this beatitude through a free act, which underlies the commonly held view that they were created in a state of grace. However, the natural superiority of the angelic condition over human nature does not imply an identical relationship between nature and grace in both cases.

The shared features and the distinctive aspects of this relationship in angels and humans lies, first, in the natural superiority of angels over humans, "due to their mode of knowing, that allows them to know God through their own essence, which is a likeness to Him, but does not give them the ability to know the divine essence, since no creature can be adequate to represent God" (*STh*, I, q. 56, a. 3, c). Secondly, as in the case of men, grace and glory perfect the nature of angels, without ever destroying it. Unlike men, whose nature is realized in different ways and to varying degrees, so that "the human soul of Christ has the greatest capacity for grace of which a man is capable" (*STh*, I, q. 62, a. 6, c.), in angels, however, whose nature can only belong to one subject, "the capacity for grace and the corresponding gifts are proportionate to their nature" (*STh*, III, q. 7, a. 9, 11).

Although the perfection of angelic nature modifies the manner in which nature and grace are related, it does not alter their fundamental structure. According to this structure, every intellectual nature is created by God with the end of sharing in divine beatitude and the joy that flows from it, within the communion of all the saints – angels and human beings – united in the Church (Margelidon 2022, 255).

The idea that nature is the reason for divine art inscribed in things can be misleading for the interpreters of Thomas who follow the order of reading that he suggests regarding Aristotelian *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. As all of nature is ordered toward its end by an intellectual principle, the *opus naturae* seems to be the work of an intelligence (Brochier 2022, 66). To the artificialist and anthropomorphic models, Thomas therefore adds a theological model, the model of a creator God and the grace that joins nature and does not overlap it. Thomas actually returned at the end of his career to the question of nature from the point

of view in which grace does not appear, and in which theology does not suppress *a priori* the autonomy of the philosophy of nature. His orientation and reference toward the Creator are the key to understanding the destiny of the world and all the creatures (Grange 2022, 28).

It will be the parallel between natural law and human law that will reveal the final aspect of nature: nature is that in relation to which grace presents itself as being *above*, and as being added. In this sense, grace is implicitly revealing what is merely natural, and which is insufficient for man to move toward the ultimate purpose, which is, in itself, supernatural. "The threefold result obtained here converges with other approaches to nature in Saint Thomas, nature which, at the end of this examination, appears to be fundamental, given, and transcended by grace" (Lanavère 2022, 86).

1.4 PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Three approaches on what could "nature" mean focus on: 1) the relations between natural sciences; 2) theology, embodiments, creations and identities; and 3) relations between nature and grace. The most important point of reference or premise is the orientation of Aquinas toward the Creator and human desire to know and taste God's grace.

Some arguments may become more conclusive than others, especially when it comes to claim neo-scholastic contributions to modern sciences, but what seems to appear with clarity is the fact the concepts of nature – as understood by Thomas – are not unequivocal, definitive and their meanings depend on the context, which implies a methodological challenge for current readers, namely, to re-read multiple texts synchronically without following the only mainstream tradition of the Thomist interpretations (Fitzpatrick 2017).

Anthropocentric orientation that seems to manifest in the texts of Aquinas may derive from his purpose and method: to inflate love of God in the disciple. What seems clear is that the hierarchical order of beings – according to the capacity of grace – has been projected by the interpreters down into hierarchy of values and applied to the different species even within human gender (Sowle Cahill, Haker, and Metogo 2010; Pope 2010) which legitimized relational asymmetry also between females and males (Perrin 2022, 437).

Regarding the possibility to understand nature in an environmental sense that would include the animal world and not just emphasize the superiority of human species (in rational and intellectual terms), the only reference to animality found in recent research falls into the discourse of love and the place of animality in the evolutive chain (Ide 2023).

Finally, the linguistic vision of nature (Brochier 2022) is questioned by researchers on the intersection of animal ethics and discapacity studies (Singer

1994; Taylor 2017). They critique the ableist perspective of valuing non-human nature proposing a shift from neurotypical intelligence as the basis for human dignity to identity-based ethics (Austriaco 2021, 402). This topic will be expanded in the following paragraph regarding the natural law and also requires further contextualization.

Contemporary perspectives, however, have increasingly questioned the anthropocentric bias inherent in classical natural law theory through questioning the status of rationality and the underlying definition of intelligence beneath these "natural" values.

> If rationality remains the only specific difference that identifies our kind, then would a human chimp hybrid who is rational be no different in essence from one of us? How would this definition apply to a disembodied brain in a computer? (Austriaco 2021, 402)
> When neurotypical and able-bodied human capacities are used as the measure of a being's value, both non-human animals and disabled human beings lose out. The criteria are both anthropocentric, because they reward only recognizably human capacities, and ableist, often leading to discount the abilities of those with disabilities. (Taylor 2017, 35)

Moreover, theological visions of resurrection redefine rationality, incorporating spirituality and mysticism (Grosz 2017).

2. APPLICATION OF NATURAL LAW OF THOMAS OF AQUIN

Thomas of Aquin discerns four levels of laws: eternal (mystery), divine (reveled in the Scriptures), natural (guides the social order) and human (law as regulation) that are conceived in pairs, in terms of analogy and are ordered hierarchically. Bottom up, we could start with the assumption that the "rule and measure of human act is reason," "the legislator impose laws but the Legislator (God) imprints rules that are principles of actions," that is why "human beings have a natural inclination to accomplish the general ends of their nature" (*STh*, I-II, q. 90, 91 and 93). The Angelic Doctor insists on a social, collective (not individual) character of the chain of laws, and on the term "participation" of each level of laws in the other.

Aquinas's vision of natural law is deeply rooted in the metaphysical and teleological structure of creation (Rhonheimer 2000, 59). Aquinas understands natural law as the rational creature's participation in the eternal law, which is the divine wisdom governing all things (Goyete, Latkovic, and Meyers 2004, xiii). For Aquinas, natural law is not merely a set of external rules but an expression of the order inherent in human nature and the cosmos. It is accessible through reason, which enables humans to discern the basic goods toward which their nature inclines: life, procreation, social living, and the pursuit of truth.

Rhonheimer (2000, 27) emphasizes that Aquinas's natural law is grounded in the concept of practical reason, which allows individuals to recognize and pursue these goods in concrete circumstances. The moral precepts of natural law are universal, yet their application requires prudence and contextual judgment. Goyete, Latkovic, and Meyers (2004, 120) further clarify that Aquinas's natural law is not static but dynamic, shaped by the unfolding of human experience and the development of moral understanding. Natural law is not arbitrary but rooted in the intelligible structure of reality. The law is "natural" because it corresponds to the ends inscribed in human nature by God. Aquinas's vision is thus teleological and realist, affirming that moral norms are grounded in the objective order of creation and oriented toward human flourishing. This approach provides a foundation for moral reasoning that is both universal and adaptable, capable of guiding ethical reflection across diverse contexts.

Lanavère (2022, 71), however, asks frankly: "Why natural law is natural?" and points to the paradox of a law that addresses a nature quoting the discussion of Thomas:

> It is by a law that man is ordered in his actions to his end, as has been established above [*STh*, I-II, q. 90, a. 2]. Now, the ordering of human actions to the end does not occur by nature (*non est per naturam*), as happens with non-rational creatures, which act toward the end by their natural appetite alone, whereas, for a human, one acts toward the end by reason and will (*per rationem et voluntatem*). Therefore, there is no law that is natural to man. (*STh*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2, 2)

As rational creatures, human beings are distinguished from other creatures in the way of participating in the eternal law. Whereas in a creature devoid of reason this participation is due to a law by participation, in the case of human being, a rational creature, it gives rise to a law in the proper sense. Natural law is a participation in the eternal law, but it is in no way a law by participation (Goyete, Latkovic, and Meyers 2024). Saint Thomas expresses this with all the clarity:

> It is because the rational creature, bound to the eternal law, participates through its intellect and reason that the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is properly called *law*. This is why this participation in man in the eternal law, which is natural law, takes place both in the form of inclinations and in the form of precepts. (*STh*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2, 2)

For Thomas, the natural here is, therefore, the principle for practical rationality, to which it nevertheless belongs to proceed by reason and will. Even reason and will need principles, of which natural law derives precisely its name. That is why:

> Nature is said to be any substance, or even any being. And, according to this sense, what is said to be natural to a reality is that which is appropriate to it according to its substance. And this is

> what is present in itself in that reality. Now, in all things, what is not present in itself is reduced to what is present in itself, as to its principle (*reducuntur in aliquid quod per se inest, sicut in principium*). And this is why it is necessary, according to this understanding of nature, that the principle, among the things that are appropriate to a reality, should always be natural (*necesse est quod, hoc modo accipiendo naturam, semper principium in his quae conveniunt rei sit naturale*. (*STh*, I-II, q. 10, a. 1 c)

The main interest of this approach to nature through the access offered by natural law is to show how nature, for Thomas, is a concept that also falls within the domain of practical rationality, and not only theoretical rationality (Lanavère 2022, 86). It is important at this point to remember what modern exegesis, in dialogue with etymology, highlights regarding spirituality and the body. Greek etymology reveals that *pneumatikos* refers to the intellect rather than to the spirit, aligning spirituality with metaphysics – what transcends and underlies the physical (Petrey 2016). Paul unites "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*) and "of the flesh" (*sarkikos*) in 1 Cor 3:1, emphasizing intellectual nature. Resurrection transforms *psychikos* (living) bodies into *pneumatikos* (spiritual) ones, where *pneuma* constitutes substance and *sarx* refers to flesh. Early theologians like Irenaeus and Tertullian equated *necros* with *sarx*, contrasting Jesus as the resurrected antithesis. Justin viewed humans as a composition of *soma* and *psyche*, elevating the status of mere *sarx*. Later interpretations equated *soma* and *sarx* in essence (Calhoun 2011). Thomas of Aquin probably refers natural law to a coherence between intellect and will, according to the nature humanity is created and destined to: the one that participates in the Resurrected, divine nature of Jesus Christ.

The application of natural law can be seen not only in theological fields, like moral doctrine (De Franceschi 2025, 178), with an example of the encyclical letter *Humane vitae* (Grisez 1965; Finnis 1970) or theological epistemologies but also legal studies.

In terms of legal studies John Finnis and Alasdair MacIntyre are two major figures in the contemporary revival of natural law. Both thinkers respond to the crisis of relativism and legal positivism by recovering a Thomistic insight: law must be grounded in human nature and oriented toward rational deliberation about the good. For both, law is genuinely human only insofar as it reflects practical reason and guides action toward meaningful goods rather than functioning as a mere technical system of regulation.

However, while Finnis and MacIntyre share a common Thomistic inspiration and a commitment to grounding law in rational reflection on the good, Finnis prioritizes universal goods and individual reasoning, whereas MacIntyre stresses tradition, community, and the social conditions of moral inquiry. Both contribute to the renewal of natural law, though each departs in different ways from Thomas Aquinas's original framework (Perrier 2025, 419).

The ecological crisis and the growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all life forms have prompted theologians and ethicists to reconsider the meaning of "nature" and the scope of moral concern. While Aquinas's natural law is grounded in the rational order of creation, it has often been interpreted in ways that prioritize human interests over the intrinsic value of non-human creatures and ecosystems.

A shift toward an ecological understanding of natural law would involve reinterpreting Aquinas's insights in light of contemporary ecological knowledge. This would mean recognizing that the "order of nature" encompasses not only human goods but also the flourishing of the entire community of life. Such a perspective calls for an expanded moral horizon that includes respect for the integrity of ecosystems, the intrinsic value of non-human beings, and the responsibility to preserve the conditions for life on Earth. The principle of the common good, central to Aquinas's ethics, could thus be extended to embrace the well-being of the planet as a whole.

3. FROM "NATURAL LAW" TO "LAWS OF NATURE": HERMENEUTICAL SHIFT IN CHURCH'S MAGISTERIAL COMPREHENSION

Coming back to the initial question if Thomist's concept of nature is capable to influence the environmental ethics, at this stage we would need to establish that semantic implications of the term and interpretations given to the notion of "nature" in the work of Thomas can hardly apply to the environmental meaning of the concept of "nature."

A comparison between the International Theological Commission's *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law* (2009) and *Laudato si'* (2015) reveals a significant shift in Catholic reflections on natural law, moving from a predominantly anthropocentric framework toward a more relational and ecological vision. The 2009 document still places human beings at the center of ethical responsibility (no. 81). While it acknowledges ecological concerns and introduces concepts such as "ecological balance" (no. 1), "ecology of values" (no. 3), and "integral ecology" (no. 10) it explicitly rejects deep ecology for allegedly denying humanity's unique role and responsibility within the biosphere. Ecology is thus interpreted through the lens of human moral agency and natural law remains the primary conceptual framework.

This anthropocentric orientation reflects the broader natural law tradition represented by John Finnis. In the 1970s, Finnis identified the basic forms of human good as knowledge, life, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, practical reasonableness, and religion (Finnis 1970, 373). Although influential, these ca-

tegories remain focused on human flourishing and rational agency, revealing both anthropocentric and linguistically mediated assumptions about moral order.

By contrast, *Laudato si'* rarely employs the term "natural law." Instead, it emphasizes the "laws of nature," the intrinsic equilibria among creatures, and humanity's responsibility to respect these relationships. Environmental protection is not grounded primarily in human rationality but in the interconnectedness of creation. While human dignity and intelligence remain important, they are situated within a broader community of creatures whose value derives from their participation in God's creation.

The theological foundations of the two documents further illustrate this development. The 2009 text grounds natural law in the Logos and in Christ as the fulfillment of the natural law, privileging rationality as the basis of ethics. *Laudato si'*, however, develops a Trinitarian and relational ontology, describing each creature as bearing a "specifically Trinitarian structure" (*LS* 239). Ethical reflection thus expands beyond human-centered rationality toward a vision of communion among creatures. Rather than abandoning natural law, *Laudato si'* reinterprets it through the lens of integral ecology and human ecology, broadening its scope from the moral order of human beings to the ecological relationships that sustain the entire community of life.

This Magisterial interpretation highlights ecological implications of natural law in the following sense:

> Human ecology also implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of an 'ecology of human,' based on the fact that man too has a nature that he [*sic*] must respect and that he [*sic*] cannot manipulate at will. (Francis 2015, 155)

However, *Laudato si'* (Francis 2015) reframes the discussion by largely avoiding explicit reliance on the term "natural law" and instead emphasizing a relational, theological, and ecological vision. Here, "law" appears more in plural, often critiqued as insufficient or ineffective in addressing environmental crises, while divine or biblical law is presented as a source of balance and justice. The encyclical shifts from an anthropocentric model toward an integral ecology rooted in interdependence, highlighting the limits of legal and political systems and calling for broader ethical and spiritual resources.

In sum, while the International Theological Commission articulates ecology through a traditional natural law framework centered on human stewardship, *Laudato si'* reconfigures this approach by integrating ecological, theological, and relational dimensions that challenge anthropocentrism and expand ethical concern to the whole of creation. Natural law searches for a universal ethic

and points to some kind of rationality that converges with the environmental currents of wisdom present in many traditions and religions of the world.

The hermeneutical shift of Magisterial creative re-interpretation or even re--appropriation of the term "nature" and "natural law" consists in inverting the question of the hierarchies of natures. *Laudato si'* asserts the environment as the substance of (not only but also) human nature. Ethically, the attitude of stewardship toward creation, if the orientation and direction of Aquinas (the Creator) is followed, would no longer consist in searching for a kind of value the nature may have (for human beings), but on the human necessity to learn from the functioning of the nature (environment) not only for the sake of humans but of the entire creation. It implies a non-hierarchical model of governance of the planet, where human responsibility is not left behind, but the role of humanity does not legitimize asymmetries and relations of domination.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The text aimed to examine the development of the concept of nature and natural law within the reception of Thomas Aquinas and its contemporary re-interpretation in *Laudato si'*, highlighting its significant paradigm shift.

First, the Thomistic framework presents a three-fold structure of nature: (1) nature in relation to creation, generation, and resurrection, grounded in God as Creator; (2) nature as embodied reality, integrating body, matter, and intellect within a hierarchical metaphysical order; and (3) nature in relation to grace, where natural law emerges as a participation in eternal law and is fulfilled by divine grace. In this classical view, nature is teleological, ordered, and oriented toward a supernatural end.

Second, the interpretations of Aquinas emphasize the term "nature" as a principle of rationality and hierarchy. Natural law belongs to practical reason and guides human action toward the good, reflecting an anthropocentric structure in which humans, as rational beings, (would) occupy a privileged place. This framework shaped later interpretations, including modern natural law theories (with the example of Finnis and MacIntyre), which maintain the centrality of reason, though with differing emphases on individual goods or communal traditions.

Third, the text identifies a paradigm shift in *Laudato si'* (Francis 2015). While earlier magisterial teaching (specifically the International Theological Commission document of 2009) interprets ecology within a traditional natural law framework of human stewardship, *Laudato si'* reconfigures both "nature" and "natural law." It moves from an anthropocentric and hierarchical model toward a relational and ecological vision of "integral ecology," where nature is no longer merely an object of human rational ordering but a network of inter-

dependence. Here, natural law is less a fixed rational structure and more an ethical call emerging from the interconnectedness of all creation.

In sum, the shift consists in expanding the Thomistic notion of nature – from a metaphysical and anthropocentric principle – to an ecological and relational reality, thereby reinterpreting natural law as a foundation for environmental responsibility and care for the common home.

DZIEDZICTWO WIZJI PRAWA NATURALNEGO ŚW. TOMASZA Z AKWINU W KONTEKŚCIE TROSKI O ŚRODOWISKO

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie refleksji na temat współczesnych perspektyw w ramach tomistycznej tradycji prawa naturalnego w świetle pojęcia „natury", rozumianej w dwojakim znaczeniu: (1) jako środowisko naturalne w kontekście aktualnych wyzwań ekologicznych i klimatycznych oraz (2) jako „esencja", co odzwierciedla wpływ Arystotelesa na św. Tomasza z Akwinu. Głównym pytaniem jest to, czy filozoficzny podtekst terminu „natura", jego użycie w dorobku tomistycznym oraz znaczenie, jakiego nabrał on dzisiaj w kontekście „integralnej ekologii ludzkiej" (*Laudato si'*), można spójnie włączyć w ramy tradycji tomistycznego prawa naturalnego. W związku z tym niniejszy artykuł ma na celu zbadanie tych potencjalnych powiązań, aby sprawdzić, czy tomistyczne rozumienie „natury" jako uniwersalnego podłoża ludzkiej egzystencji można rozszerzyć na kontekst środowiskowy, a jeśli tak, to w jaki sposób. Ewolucja koncepcji prawa naturalnego w dokumencie Międzynarodowej Komisji Teologicznej z 2009 roku oraz w *Laudato si'* wskazuje na wyraźną zmianę akcentów. Współczesne interpretacje tomistycznej tradycji prawa naturalnego mogą przyczynić się do poszerzenia pojęcia „natury" (*ousia*, *substantia*) w kierunku specyficznie chrześcijańskiej – a dokładniej katolickiej – inspiracji do troski i szacunku dla naszego wspólnego domu, jakim jest świat przyrody.

S ł o w a k l u c z o w e: natura, prawo naturalne, Tomasz z Akwinu, etyka środowiskowa, *Laudato si'*.

HERITAGE OF AQUINAS'S VISION OF NATURAL LAW IN CONTEXT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CARE

Abstract

The paper aims to offer a reflection on contemporary perspectives within the Thomistic natural law tradition in light of the concept of "nature," understood in a dual sense: (1) as the environment, in relation to current ecological and climatic challenges, and

(2) as "essence," which echoes Aristotle's influence on Aquinas. The central question is whether the philosophical subtext of the term "nature," its use within the Thomistic *corpus*, and the meaning it has acquired today in the context of "integral human ecology" (*Laudato si'*) can be coherently integrated within the framework of the Thomistic natural law tradition. Accordingly, this paper seeks to explore these potential connections, with the aim of examining whether the Thomistic understanding of "nature" as the *universal substratum of human existence* can be extended to an environmental context, and if so, in what manner. The evolution of the concept of natural law in the 2009 document of the International Theological Commission and in *Laudato si'* indicates a discernible shift in emphasis. Contemporary interpretations of the Thomistic tradition of natural law may contribute to broadening the concept of "nature" (*ousia*, *substantia*) toward a specifically Christian – and more precisely Catholic – inspiration for care and respect for our common home, the natural world.

K e y w o r d s : nature, natural law, Thomas of Aquin, environmental ethics, *Laudato si'*.

DAS ERBE VON THOMAS VON AQUINS' NATURRECHTSVISION IM KONTEXT DES UMWELTSCHUTZES

Abstrakt

Der Beitrag zielt darauf ab, eine Reflexion über zeitgenössische Perspektiven innerhalb der thomistischen Naturrechtstradition im Lichte des Begriffs „Natur" anzubieten. Er wird in einem doppelten Sinne verstanden: (1) als Umwelt im Zusammenhang mit aktuellen ökologischen und klimatischen Herausforderungen und (2) als „Wesen", was den Einfluss Aristoteles' auf Thomas von Aquin widerspiegelt. Die zentrale Frage lautet, ob der philosophische Subtext des Begriffs „Natur", seine Verwendung im thomistischen Korpus und die Bedeutung, die er heute im Kontext der „integralen menschlichen Ökologie" (*Laudato si'*) erlangt hat, kohärent in den Rahmen der thomistischen Naturrechtstradition integriert werden können. Dementsprechend versucht dieser Beitrag, diese potenziellen Verbindungen zu untersuchen, mit dem Ziel zu prüfen, ob das thomistische Verständnis von „Natur" als universelles Substrat der menschlichen Existenz auf einen ökologischen Kontext ausgedehnt werden kann, und wenn ja, in welcher Weise. Die Entwicklung des Naturrechtsbegriffs im Dokument der Internationalen Theologischen Kommission von 2009 und in *Laudato si' deutet* auf eine erkennbare Verlagerung des Schwerpunkts hin. Zeitgenössische Interpretationen der thomistischen Naturrechtstradition können dazu beitragen, den Begriff der „Natur" (*ousia*, *substantia*) im Sinne einer spezifisch christlichen – und genauer gesagt katholischen – Inspiration zur Sorge und Achtung für unser gemeinsames Zuhause, die natürliche Welt, zu erweitern.

S c h l ü s s e l w ö r t e r : Natur, Naturrecht, Thomas von Aquin, Umweltethik, *Laudato si'*.

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