

# THEOLOGY, THE SCIENCES AND THE HUMAN QUEST FOR INTERDISCIPLINARITY

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF GIUSEPPE TANZELLA-NITTI

## BACKGROUND

The guest editors of this special issue are two theologians, a philosopher and an astrophysicist, and that is meaningful. These three broad fields of human knowledge and culture cut across the whole scholarly career of rev. prof. Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti. Passionate about astronomy since his high-school years, the young Giuseppe moved to Bologna to study astrophysics, earning his degree in physics in 1977. During the ten years spent as an astronomer, first as a researcher at the Italian CNR's Radio-astronomy Institute in Bologna and then at the Astronomical Observatory of Turin, he began his philosophical and theological studies, culminating with his ordination to the priesthood in 1987 and, in 1991, with a PhD in Theology at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome.

Besides being theologians, philosophers or astrophysicists—and good friends—the editors of this special issue are all collaborators of prof. Tanzella-Nitti—who we friendly call simply “don Giuseppe”. Two of us (Marco and Claudio) are in the field of Fundamental Theology of the Faculty of Theology at the Holy Cross University, which he coordinates as Full Professor; all of us have collaborated, or are collaborating, with him at the DISF Research Centre, which he founded twenty years ago and directs since then, tirelessly. We all know him by more ten years. Hence, when we realized a couple of years ago that his seventieth birthday was approaching, the idea of celebrating this occurrence academically popped up clearly and spontaneously. A journal special issue immediately appeared the best possible initiative, and choosing *Annales Theologici* to host it was straight—not just as one of us (Marco) is in the Journal's Editorial Board, but especially as don Giuseppe directed the Journal for eleven years, from 2004 to 2015.

The issue gathers twelve contributions—which we will briefly introduce below. The challenge was not in retrieving twelve contributors, rather in selecting them among the many people who interacted with don Giuseppe and would have had significant contribution to make to this project, connecting theology and sciences, and his specific fields of research. The people we eventually contacted all agreed enthusiastically to the project, leaving us editors very happy with the final outcome, but also with the regret of being unable to involve all the authors who—over more than 35 years—have collaborated scientifically with don Giuseppe.

The process started in June 2023 with the first drafting of the issue layout and list of invited authors. On November 3 of the same year, we reached out the selected contributors. By June 2024, one year after the first steps, we were already able to send the first contributions out for peer review, and by January 24, 2025 all the authors submitted the final versions of their papers after peer review.

#### THE PERSON: THE SCIENTIST, THE THEOLOGIAN, THE PRIEST AND THE “ENTREPRENEUR”

Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti is a renowned theologian, and a scholar in “Science & Theology”, based in Rome, where he spent the last 35 years as a Professor of Fundamental Theology. At the beginning of his career as a researcher at the Italian National Research Council he also contributed to astronomy and astrophysics, for example, co-authoring the first catalogue of galaxies’ radial velocities: *A Catalogue of Radial Velocities of Galaxies*, Gordon and Breach, New York 1983. The depth and breadth of his academic production is witnessed by the (selected and briefly commented) bibliography annexed to this volume. The contributions gathered in this Special Issue further speak in favour of the significance of his work. What we want to emphasize here, however, is not just that, and not even the concrete results he achieved in his career—which we will briefly hint at below. We would like to begin with don Giuseppe’s “unity of life”. He acted as a professional scientist at the beginning of his career, as we have seen, and never quitted with science: he currently is Adjunct Scholar at the Vatican Observatory and his last 4-volume work is titled *Fundamental Theology in Scientific Context*. He studied theology, and became a priest before completing

his PhD: we are eyewitness of his fervent commitment in his ministry, always ready to serve the faithful and act as a pastor and formator in every contest he is asked to help, in spite of his many professional commitments as a scholar and university professor. He teaches fundamental theology with the deepest and steadiest conviction that faith is, of course, a gift and a grace, but also needs to be nourished with rational (philosophical) reflection, and with an enchanted look at reality as disclosed by the sciences, and ultimately always understood as God's creation.

His being a scientist, a theologian and a priest conspired to make of don Giuseppe also an "entrepreneur". Not a businessman, of course, but someone who intended to concretely realize contexts, promote initiatives, nurture synergies, and create occasions to the advantage of humanity: not "humanity" as an abstract notion but the real and concrete persons he met all throughout his life. The concrete outputs of his entrepreneurial activity will be mentioned below. What is worth mentioning here is that this adds a further dimension, besides science, faith and culture, to his life and career: *work*. He is not "just" a scientist enquiring the secrets of nature; he is not "just" a priest praising God and serving the faithful; he is not "just" a theologian reflecting on Revelation and teaching theology to new generations of priests and pastoral agents. He is also a professional who founded three websites, a Research Centre, and an Interdisciplinary School addressed to young graduates. He also managed them for twenty years; he coordinated the many people who have collaborated with him; he entertained fruitful relationships with several hundreds among authors, speakers, contributors, researchers, students, etc. Last but not least, he raised funds to support all that, and administered them judiciously and with vision.

All this reflects a "unity of life", in which every front of engagement is coherent with the rest, never juxtaposed but always harmonized. Such a unity of life, by his own admission, can be traced back to the teaching and example of Saint Josemaría Escrivá and to a "radical" fruitful conviction: "every truth, no matter who says it, is always from the Holy Spirit"<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 109, a. 1, ad 1: *Omne verum a quocumque dicatur a Spiritu Sancto est*

## AN ENGAGED THEOLOGY

The unity of life sketched above reflects the fundamental conception of knowledge beneath the work of Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti. Actually, this also explicitly constitutes one of his research topics: the unity of knowledge<sup>2</sup>. Beyond that, this topic is truly foundational in don Giuseppe's scientific production and represents a tenet at the very heart of the "Interdisciplinary Dictionary in Science and Faith" (*Dizionario Interdisciplinare di Scienza e Fede*, Città Nuova and Urbaniana University Press), edited in 2002 along with Alberto Strumia. A significant part of don Giuseppe's career stems from this enterprise, which he realized when he was a professional theologian with a solid scientific background career<sup>3</sup>. The notion of "unity of knowledge" refers to the conviction that there must be a fundamental unity among the natural sciences, the humanities, philosophy at large, and theology understood both as a human science and as the reflection upon the Wisdom that God's Revelation entrusts to humanity. Consequently, a deep interdisciplinary – or, better, trans-disciplinary – mindset follows, according to which not just philosophy, but specifically theology has full right to take part in the human cognitive enterprise. From this viewpoint, theology is regarded on a peer with other disciplines in the effort to understand the cosmos, the world, creation, in all its many facets, levels, and complexities. Hence, its part is both in attentively listening to what other disciplines have to say and in stating its own specific tenets with rigour, clarity and balance. Things being so, theology should never consider itself as an isolated discipline, but as an open one, ready to engage itself in discussions, research and debates. Moreover, it must be able to intercept the deepest feelings of real and concrete human beings – specifically, for don Giuseppe, those of women and men of science. This follows from another fundamental tenet, again already at the core of the *Interdisciplinary Dictionary*: science is never a neutral, impersonal enterprise but one that involves the *personal* dimensions of the researchers, their values, motivations, attitudes, life-experiences, etc. This consideration actually constitutes an existen-

<sup>2</sup> G. TANZELLA-NITTI, *Unity of Knowledge*, "Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Science and Religion", 2002; DOI: 10.17421/2037-2329-2002-GT-8 (<https://inters.org/unity-of-knowledge>).

<sup>3</sup> G. TANZELLA-NITTI, *20 anni fa nasceva il Dizionario di Scienza e Fede*, 2022 (<https://disf.org/editoriali/2022-01>).

tial link between unity of life and unity of knowledge – a link that don Giuseppe made concrete all along his career. A further dimension of his engaged theology is the attention to evangelization – as attested by a research project he is currently directing at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross titled “Towards a Theology of Evangelization”<sup>4</sup>. The aim of the project is to develop a specific theological reflection on the new needs and practices of evangelization: again, unity of life (as a pastor) and of knowledge (as a theologian).

#### A PRODUCTIVE CAREER

After his scientific studies and work, and his theological education, don Giuseppe has been among the first-generation faculty members of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, which is celebrating this year its fortieth anniversary. He has seen the Holy Cross University growing, never sparing his efforts to the cause. A key turning point in his life and career was the accomplishment of the *Interdisciplinary Dictionary in Science and Faith*. This work was never intended to be “just” a publication. Indeed, during the early preparation of the *Dictionary*, in 1999, the web domain *disf.org* was registered. Already at that time, the idea of affecting the larger audience via the web was clear. Moreover, soon after the publication of the *Dictionary*, in 2003, a group of scholars (including a number of authors of the *Dictionary*’s entries) gathered around the *Dictionary*’s Editors, soon joined by a group of young graduates in scientific disciplines eager to complement their specialization with a broader, trans-disciplinary perspective. From here, in the ensuing years, three concrete “lines of action” emerged: the establishment of a research centre, the creation of a website specifically dedicated to “science and faith”, the formation of a context in which graduates and young scholar with their specializations could be nourished with a trans-disciplinary approach grounded on the unity of life and of knowledge. Interestingly, these three lines of action essentially correspond to the three missions of the university: research, teaching, and dissemination (the so-called third mission).

Well, the DISF Research Centre is nowadays an established unit within the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, where interdisci-

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. <https://www.pusc.it/research-project/evangelization>.

plinary research on fundamental topics at the crossroad of science, philosophy and theology are inquired. The Centre also manages three websites: *disf.org*, *inters.org* and *DISF Educational (disf.org/edu)*. The first one hosts a number of entries of the original *Dictionary* as well as a plethora of other documents related to science and faith (it counts more than 20.000 pages among editorials, anthological passages, special issues, articles from the press, bibliographies and biographies). The second website is in English and hinges on the *Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia in Religion and Science* where new entries are published from time to time (along with other material of interest). The third one—the newcomer, launched in 2021—is addressed to school teachers and high-school students and offers contents to deepen issues in science and faith at school or among teenagers in whatever context. Together, the three websites receive more than one million visits each year. The DISF Research Centre also promotes the “International Superior School for Interdisciplinary Research” (*Scuola Internazionale Superiore per la Ricerca Interdisciplinare – SISRI*), which offers an educational program for young graduates in whatever discipline who wish to complement their specialization with interdisciplinary insights on the Big Questions in Science and Faith. The school has had about 500 registered students along the years, has involved more than 50 speakers, has organized almost 100 seminars, 15 annual workshops and several summer activities. The Research Centre, the websites, and the SISRI have been not just conceived, planned and initiated by don Giuseppe, but also directed and managed by him since their birth up to now.

These are the concrete fruits of rev. prof. Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti’s career, which we wanted to honour with the present special issue. Of course, all that adds up to his academic publications (19 books and more than 130 articles or book chapters), his formal teaching activity at the Faculty of Theology, the innumerable conferences and contributions in myriad different public and specialized contexts, his popular articles on newspapers, online contents, interviews, etc.

All that stems from an engaged theology lived and practiced in view of the ideal of unity of life and of knowledge, with a deep trans-disciplinary approach and... much, much hard work.

## THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

In the following pages, the readers will find 12 contributions touching on topics in Science and Theology about which Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti has given invaluable contributions. The first article is a *status quaestionis* authored by Paul Allen and titled *A Fundamental Theology for Doctrine: Science and History*, where the author dialogues with Tanzella-Nitti's interpretation of scientific work and knowledge in the context of fundamental theology in the light of the theologies of authors like McGrath, Lonergan, Rahner and Benedict XVI. Then, Javier Sánchez-Cañizares, with his study *Science-Mediated Natural Theology: Unraveling the Burden of Proof*, addresses the key issue of the possibility of a natural knowledge of God exploring the relations between classical natural theology and the developments of modern science, taking especially into account Tanzella-Nitti's theological reflections on Creation. Alberto Strumia's *Aquinas' Legacy in the Contemporary Dialogue Between Science and Faith* presents epistemological aspects central to the dialogue between science and faith as rooted in Thomas Aquinas' thought, also nicely reporting how this was one of the starting points of his collaboration with don Giuseppe. Giuseppina De Simone, with her contribution titled *Returning to Religious Experience: The Contemporary Challenge in the Dialogue Between Philosophy and Theology*, engages with an issue extensively represented in Tanzella-Nitti's production: religious experience, specifically addressed starting from the interplay between philosophy and theology in view of the *quaestio Dei*. According to the transdisciplinary outlook of don Giuseppe's fundamental theology, Lluís Oviedo reflects on *How the New Scientific Studies of Religion Impact on Fundamental Theology*. Paul O'Callaghan's article about *The perception of Logos ut ratio and Logos ut verbum in Creation* deals with the theology of the *Logos*—a topic often subject of Tanzella-Nitti's reflections—and the interplay between God's transcendence and immanence. Claudio Tagliapietra, in his article about *The Humanistic Dimensions of Scientific Research*, takes on another central topic in Tanzella-Nitti's production—the personal engagement of the scientists in making science—also including personal reports about his interactions with don Giuseppe on this topic. Giulio Maspero's contribution is titled with the very same expression we used above to grasp a core aspect of don Giuseppe's personality and theology: *Unity of Life, Unity of Knowledge*; the paper is also enriched by a “personal” introduction and a “grateful”



conclusion. The metaphor of the “book of nature”—highlighting how the visible world can speak about God the Creator—is another topic at the heart of Tanzella-Nitti’s theology, and it is addressed by Oskari Juurikkala’s paper titled *The Creative and Redemptive Word: Benedict XVI’s Theology of The Book of Nature*. Guy Consolmagno reflects on *Science and Faith from the Viewpoint of the Scientist* as a scholar “with a position in both the world of science and the world of the Church”, quite like don Giuseppe, indeed. Christopher T. Baglow offers a prospective reflection of the opportunities disclosed by the attempt at teaching theology in the light of science, thus capturing another priority in Tanzella-Nitti’s career; his paper is titled, accordingly: *Beyond Conflict: Teaching Theology in the Light of Science*. Lucio Florio’s article *The Use of Experimental Sciences by Theology. Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti’s Contributions in the Context of Fundamental Theology* offers an in-depth analysis of the role that the natural sciences have actually played in the development of Tanzella-Nitti’s fundamental theology.

Thus, the reader of this special issue will be guided by authoritative and expert authors in a journey across the many theological topics addressed by Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti’s in his career. We also assure the readers that, besides that and thanks to the brilliant contributions gathered in the following, they will also find several valuable insights in a number of key and highly debated current theological issues. We are sure, moreover, that don Giuseppe will read them one by one, carefully, eager to learn more and more as it has always been and still is.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, AND GRATITUDE

A project like the one we are introducing involves many people. We would like to briefly thank all those who made this special issue possible. First of all, the Director—Vicente Bosch—and the members—Marco Vanzini, Arturo Bellocq, Fernando López Arias, Catalina Vial—of *Annales Theologici’s* Editorial Board, for having accepted our proposal and for their support at all stages of the process. Special thanks to Maria Veltri, Editorial Secretary, for her competent work to transform all the manuscripts in publishable papers: though the authors have been diligent in following the guidelines, we know that hard work is always needed on the manuscripts.



Sincere and wholehearted thanks to the Authors, of course. Their engagement in this project demonstrates their appreciation of Tanzella-Nitti's work. Above all, we thank them as they produced academic papers of a high standard though they knew their contributions were for an issue celebrating a colleague. We value this enormously.

*Annales Theologici* adopts a double-blind peer review policy; hence, we had to contact a number of scholars asking them to review the papers. Their help has been crucial to ensure the quality of this special issue. All of them could have well been among the authors of this special issue; we are sorry we could not include them as authors, and this increases our gratitude for their help. We list them here in alphabetic order:

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Three of us—Ivan, Marco and Salvatore—would also take this occasion to express their gratitude to Claudio. We acted as a team, planning the special issue together and taking decisions at all stages with friendly collaboration. However, Claudio has led the process and managed the contacts with both authors and reviewers with great competence, much dedication and a lot of work. Many thanks, Claudio.

Finally, we cannot resist to express our deep gratitude to rev. prof. Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti. As we have mentioned, we have all been collaborating with him for years. We received a lot from this collaboration. He has been a teacher for us, both in knowledge and in life. He has been a guide and a trustworthy “advisor” for us, both when difficulties popped up in front of us and when opportunities disclosed. He has been an example to follow, as a respectful researcher, a humble scholar, a hu-

mane boss. We are grateful to him for the concrete results he achieved, which actually constitute the contexts for our professional growth. We are indebted to him for the trust he has placed in us, often listening to our opinions in view of decisions to be taken and letting us independently manage initiatives that he had set up. We also thank him, importantly, for the great laughs we had together, and for the fatherly patience he showed towards us when needed. Above all, we thank him as we are sure he will keep doing all that in the coming years...

*Grazie don Giuseppe!*

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