



MEDIEVAL CLARITY

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"I try to be unoriginal." That quote was attributed to Brother Francis in a recent conversation I had with a friend, who, like me, regards Brother as a beloved mentor. Our teacher's point, which he made in various ways over the years, was that he was trying to be faithful in passing on the wisdom that he himself had received.

This acting as a conduit to pass on what one was received, without being "original," is redolent of two passages from Saint Paul that both serve as wonderful illustrations of the Catholic notion of tradition: "For I delivered unto you first of all, which I also received: how that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures..." (1 Cor. 15:3); and "'For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus, the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread" (1 Cor. 11:23).

Receiving and delivering; "handing on" to others what was "handed to you." That is tradition.

One of the beautiful Catholic traditions that Brother Francis loved to teach us about concerned the four senses of Holy Scripture, or "[the quadriga](#)" as this bedrock of Catholic Biblical studies is known.

Loving this subject as I do, I was delighted to learn more about it through the work of the Catholic medievalist, Dr. Andrew Jones, in a three-part lecture series, "The Liturgical Cosmos: The Worldview of the High Middle Ages."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpdD6a-TYss&feature=emb_logo

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdy6PjqTgyc&feature=emb_logo

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XA1C7U8TdbM&feature=emb_logo

I would like to summarize what Dr. Jones has added to my understanding on the *quadriga*.

First, let me summarize the four senses. We begin with (1) the literal, also called the historical sense. This is what is actually narrated by the text. It is the foundation of the other senses, and, no matter how much more elevated the other senses may be in comparison, they must not be thought of as derogating from or negating the literal sense. That point is imperative, especially in these days when Neo-modernists deny the [inerrancy of Scripture](#).

The remaining three senses are all collectively called "the spiritual sense," but they are divided into three. The first of these is (2) the allegorical sense, which is a reading of some utterance or event as pertaining to a future and higher reality, most often, of Christ Himself. So, we see Adam, Joshua, King David, and various qualities of theirs or episodes in their lives as foreshadowing the greater reality of Christ. So, too, the twelve sons of Jacob, as historically real as they were, were also allegorical of the Twelve Apostles.

Next, we have (3) the tropological sense, which is often referred to under one aspect as the moral sense. This is the application of the passage to our own lives. It is where the "rubber" of the Bible meets the "road" of our own daily living of our baptismal vocation to sanctity. The Parables of Christ are more than merely great stories; they are that, but they also present us with practical illustrations of Christian virtue that we must imitate. Our Lord Himself, of course, is the greatest exemplar. From His most divine life narrated in the Gospels, we can draw a pattern for our own lives.

Lastly, there is the anagogical sense, which pertains to the future life of Heaven. Brother Francis liked to explain this sense in terms of the Holy City, Jerusalem. Literally, this is a terrestrial city, a stretch of land in a specific geographical place. Allegorically, this city can be seen as the Church on earth — and Holy Mother Church explicitly applies the word to herself in the liturgy. Tropologically, Jerusalem is the Christian soul who is called upon to receive the enlightenment of grace: "Arise, be enlightened, O Jerusalem: for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee" (Is. 60:1). Again, tropologically, that same soul is encouraged to adore her God: "Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem: praise thy God, O Sion" (Psalms 147:12). But if we rise still further, Jerusalem is the dwelling of the blessed in Heaven, as seen in Saint John's vision in the Apocalypse: "And he took me up in spirit to a great and high mountain: and he shewed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God" (Apoc. 21:10). This is the anagogical sense. Saint Paul also appears to employ Jerusalem in this sense in his Epistle to the Hebrews (Cf. 12:22-23).

To go deeper, let us take one verse and apply all four senses to it: "And he said to them: With desire I have desired to eat this pasch with you, before I suffer" (Luke 22:15).

In the literal or historical sense, Jesus Christ truly uttered these words to His disciples at the Last Supper. This is an undeniable fact of history; it unquestionably happened. Allegorically, we can see the Paschal meal of the Mosaic Law, wherein was consumed the sacrificial lamb, as pointing ahead to Christ and the Christian Pasch, wherein He Himself, the Lamb of God, is offered as a victim and

consumed as food in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Tropologically, each Christian soul can read this passage and stir himself up to a holy desire, which, in some measure, reciprocates the desire of Our Lord, as if to say, "Yes, Lord, you desired with the desire of your Sacred Heart to institute the Sacrifice of the Mass the night before you suffered. Here and now, as I come to you in the Holy Sacrifice and Sacred Banquet of the Mass, I desire to receive you, and to render, through you, to the Father all glory and honor." Anagogically, this desire of the Sacred Heart and this communion with Our Lord in the Eucharist is fulfilled in the Heavenly Nuptial Banquet of the glorified Jesus Christ with His spotless Bride, the Church Triumphant.

Now, what is it that I learned from Dr. Andrew Jones? This very knowledgeable medievalist makes the point that the quadriga is not simply a set of static, side-by-side interpretations we can choose from while interpreting the Bible. In the modern idiom, it is no mere "hermeneutic tool." The medievals read Scripture in a very dynamic way, in an ascending way, and each individual believer is called by Baptism to rise from the historical through the allegorical to the tropological senses in this life, and even anticipate the life of Heaven by achieving some measure of "anagogy" or contemplation. "Pure anagogy" can only be achieved in the Beatific Vision, but its anticipation by way of contemplation in this life is something to pursue.

While insisting on the reality of the historical sense, Dr. Jones also speaks of the defect of one who remains in that sense and fails rise above it to see Christ in the Old Testament. Such a man is, to use my own expression, "stuck in history," without seeing history's point: Jesus Christ. The person who has ascended to the allegorical sense sees Jesus Christ as prefigured and pointed to throughout sacred history, but he needs to go further, and from that sense rise to the tropological by assimilating, in his daily life, the Faith, morals, and sacraments established by Jesus Christ for our salvation.

To do this is to "make the tropological turn," as Dr. Jones says. Here, he is employing the etymology of the word, for "tropological" comes from the Greek noun *tropos*, which means, "turn" and is related to the verb *trepein*, "to turn." Using the threefold medieval path to living one's Baptismal life, the Doctor notes that whether one (1) prays like a monk or cleric, (2) fights like a knight, or (3) works like a farmer or artisan, we each have our own "tropology" — that is, our own way of living out the virtuous Christian life. It is the especial task of the preacher, a man who has mastered the four senses in his intellect and will, to help others to make the tropological turn, directing them yet higher to the ultimate anagogy of Heaven.

In other words, far from being only a way of studying the Bible, to our medieval forebears, the quadriga was a way of seeing all reality and a way of living life!

In the three lectures, the good Doctor says far more. He speaks of [Pope Innocent III](#) and the ecumenical council he summoned, [Lateran IV](#), setting about the difficult tasks of teaching orthodoxy, bringing about ecclesiastical reform, conquering heresy, and reclaiming the Holy Land. But he speaks of all these as part of this larger sacramental outlook on life, or, as he calls it, the "liturgical cosmos" which forms the "worldview of the High Middle Ages." In so doing, Dr. Jones accomplishes two things: first, he puts in their proper context that great Council and that great Pope, whose pontificate is considered the high-point of the medieval papacy. Second, he gives us a vision of a Christian Civilization towards which we can work. This is not to say that we ought to try to recover the Middle Ages, for it is never a good idea to "go back," to something else. Rather, this era provides us with Catholic ideals towards which we must work to build a Christian social order, the Christendom of tomorrow.

Most valuably, this sublime worldview steeped in the quadriga joins the living of the interior life to the pursuit of evangelism as well as ecclesiastical and social reform. In so doing, it serves as a corrective to modern notions of "activism" that often spoil our best efforts.

After all, the best reformers, the best missionaries - the best prayers, fighters, and workers - are the Saints. This is a very "unoriginal" tradition that is quite worth recovering and passing on.

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The [image](#) shows, "Saint Jerome in His Study," by Jan van Eyck, painted in 1442.

