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GLOSSARY OF THEOLOGICAL TERMS



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The Catholic University of America

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to Joshua Miguel, Ana Isabel, Emmanuel José, and Miguel David Díaz, in honor of their parents.

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Author Introduction

This book is intended as an aid for college instructors who face the task of introducing undergraduate students to Roman Catholic theology and as a helpful companion for students who often find their introductory theology and religious studies courses confusing and challenging, if not overwhelming. This book is meant to be a first step toward Catholic theological literacy.

In a sense, this glossary is like a foreign language dictionary that furnishes the basic meaning of terms. Travelers to foreign lands often carry a pocket dictionary in their backpacks to help them communicate as they navigate through those lands. Similarly, introductory students of theology need a convenient dictionary in their own backpacks to assist them as they communicate and navigate the sometimes rough terrain of theology.

Though this glossary is not a textbook per se, it has been written to serve as a supplement or companion for introductory theology and religious studies courses that are structured in many different ways. It is designed to be comprehensive, yet concise. On the one hand, some of the terms are really topics for book-length treatment; on the other hand, a glossary must be concise if it is to be user friendly. I have chosen terms useful for a basic understanding of Roman Catholic theology in the diverse and pluralistic context of the twenty-first century. I have tried to define the terms succinctly by providing (1) a reference to their language origin, (2) an indication of their theological content, and (3) a summary statement of their contemporary meaning. Like a pocket language dictionary, this glossary cannot and does not give every possible meaning for a term but concentrates only on the basics. Just as a language teacher or translator is needed to explain how a word is actually used, so a theology instructor is needed to put these terms into practice.

In light of the brevity of these definitions, I encourage those who would like further information to consult theological textbooks or encyclopedias for more extensive and definitive explanations of any given topic. As a first step in obtaining additional information, many of the definitions include cross-references to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, a readily available resource for further explanations of Roman Catholic doctrine.

The aim of this glossary is to provide a set of beginning definitions or working explanations to help students enter into theological conversations and serve as the basis for genuine theological dialogue, discussion, and discovery. It is our hope that the development of a common vocabulary will enable students and instructors to move together through the rich, yet complex, heritage of Catholic theology.

Guide to Using This Text

Allows you to quickly identify the first and last entry on each page.

accident / AD 9

type of activity during *Lent*. Abstinence can also refer to refraining from drinking alcoholic beverages and refraining from sexual activity. (See CCC 2043)

Foreign and “root” terms within entries are underlined.

✓ **accident.** This word (from the Latin accidere, meaning “to happen”) in everyday use refers to an unforeseen event, especially one that is undesirable. In *scholastic philosophy* and *theology*, an accident is a nonessential property or quality of a *substance*; although accidents provide distinctive features to, they do not exist apart from, particular substances.

☐ **acculturation.** This word (from the Latin ad-, meaning “to,” and cultura, meaning “cultivation of the land”) refers to the process by which *missionaries* and *evangelists* adapt the *Gospel* to a particular *culture*. Usually acculturation is a process of finding bridges or links between *Christianity* and a culture where the *Christian* message is being preached.

Check box allows you to mark terms you are expected to memorize.

acedia. See SLOTH.

Directs you to another entry in the glossary.

✓ **acolyte.** This word (from the Greek akolouthos, meaning “a follower”) refers to an assistant at a religious service. On an informal basis, *altar boys* and *altar girls* are sometimes called “acolytes”; however, officially, acolytes are men who are formally installed in the *ministry* of acolyte prior to being ordained *deacons* or *priests*; laypeople may also be permanently installed as acolytes to assist in liturgical services. (See CCC 903, 1672)

Mid term Exam

Refers you to a paragraph number in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for further information.

☐ **act; actuality.** These two related terms (from the Latin agere, meaning “to do”) have a wide variety of meanings; two meanings are particularly important in *theology*: (1) in the area of *morality*, “*human act*” refers to a person’s free, deliberate, conscientious decision; and (2) in the area of *philosophical theology*, “act” or “actuality” refers to the realization or actualization of a particular *potency* or the achievement of a desired goal.

Italicized terms within a definition direct you to an entry for that term.

Act of Contrition. See CONTRITION.

☐ **AD.** This abbreviation (from the Latin, anno Domini, meaning “in the year of the Lord”) originated with Dionysius Exiguus (died ca. 544), who proposed beginning the enumeration of years with the birth of *Jesus*

A

- **Abba.** This word for “father” comes from Aramaic, a language spoken in Palestine at the time of *Jesus*; Abba was a term used by children in addressing their fathers. Jesus used Abba to express his relationship with God (Mk 14:36) and taught his *disciples* to pray to God as a loving and loveable parent. (See CCC 2766)
- **abbess; abbot.** These terms (from the Aramaic Abba, meaning “father”) refer respectively to the religious *superior* of an *abbey* of women or the religious superior of an abbey of men. An abbess, who is considered the “spiritual mother” of the abbey, or an abbot, who is considered the “spiritual father” of the abbey, is usually chosen by the members of the abbey and then *blessed* by a *bishop*; in the past an abbess or abbot was usually elected for life, but recently, they have been elected for a specific term of office.
- **abbey.** This word (from the Aramaic Abba, meaning “father”) refers to an institution under the direction of an *abbess* or *abbot*. The term “abbey” originally referred to the complex of buildings erected by *monks*: a *church*, a residence (or a *monastery*), a school, workshops, farmlands, and so on. Sometimes the word is applied to the church alone, as is the case with Westminster Abbey.
- **abortion.** This word (from the Latin aboriri, meaning “to disappear” or “to miscarry”) refers to the direct and intentional destruction of an unborn child. Both the *Hebrew* and *Christian Scriptures* condemn such a serious violation of respect for *human* life. The Church penalizes such an unjustified taking of an innocent life by *excommunication*. (See CCC 2270–2275)
- **absolution.** This word (from the Latin absolvere, meaning “to set free”) refers to the declaration by a *bishop* or *priest* that the *sins* of a *person* who has repented and confessed have been forgiven. Absolution is an essential part of the *sacrament of Reconciliation* (which is also known as *Confession* or *Penance*). (See CCC 1442, 1449)
- **abstinence.** This word (from the Latin abstinere, meaning “to withhold”) refers to a voluntary refraining from, or giving up, specific activities for the sake of spiritual self-discipline. Examples of abstinence include the practice of not eating meat on Friday and giving up some

type of activity during *Lent*. Abstinence can also refer to refraining from drinking alcoholic beverages and refraining from sexual activity. (See CCC 2043)

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Catholic Quick Reference

The Catholic Quick Reference is a mini-encyclopedia of information on Catholicism. Many of the items listed here are more fully defined in the glossary entries. As within the glossary entries, you will also see references to paragraphs in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*. The referenced paragraphs are often just the beginning of a complete discussion of the items that are only briefly named here. If you would like more information on any of the items in the Catholic Quick Reference, look to the *Catechism* for a more in-depth discussion.

The Bible

The Organization of the Bible

The books of the Bible are actually organized into sections, and if you are familiar with these sections, it makes it easier to find your way around in the Bible.

The **Old Testament** has forty-six books divided into the following sections:

- **The Pentateuch** (Genesis through Deuteronomy). These five books are the core of the Old Testament. They tell the stories of Creation, sin, and the origin of God's Chosen People.
- **The Historical Books** (Joshua through 2 Maccabees). These sixteen books tell how the Israelites settled in the Promised Land. They also tell the stories of their kings.
- **The Wisdom Books** (Job through Sirach). These are the seven books of poetry and the collected wisdom of the Israelites.
- **The Prophets** (Isaiah through Malachi). These eighteen books are the collected speeches and biographies of the Israelite prophets. The prophets spoke for God against idolatry and injustice.

The **New Testament** has twenty-seven books divided into the following sections:

- **The Gospels** (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). These four books are the most important books for Christians because they convey the meaning of Christ Jesus' life and teaching as their central message.