The Notion of *communis schola* in the Thought of Jean Gerson (1363–1429)

**Abstract.** The article aims to analyze the meaning and the role of the notion of *communis schola* in the theological and ecclesiological thought of Jean Gerson (1363–1429), Chancellor of the University of Paris, schoolman influential in every intellectual debate of his time, and renowned spiritual advisor. Driven by a constant concern for the unity of the Church, Gerson is aware of the need to realize this unity first of all within the University environment, in order to avoid the circulation and the spread of heterodox or even heretical doctrines; his references to the concept of "common school", in different textual contexts and with various shades of meaning, invest not only the doctrinal contents, but also the methodology, the moral attitudes, and the right theological models of the ideal master and of the ideal student of theology. The article also touches the way in which the Parisian chancellor deals with mysticism and mystical writers, using the concept of “common school” to define the borders and the terms in which it is possible to access the difficult and obscure field of the mystical theology.

**Keywords:** Gerson, Scholasticism, doctrine, theology, common school, unity, Latin, error, heresy, University, mysticism

The works and thought of Jean Gerson\(^1\) have been the object of attention by the scholarly community since the early years of the 20\(^{th}\) century. An abundant scientific literature flourished on basically all the aspects of his multifarious production, with a special attention to the theological and ecclesiological aspects of Gerson's intellectual activity\(^2\): as

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a pastor, a university chancellor, and a spiritual advisor, the intense intellectual speculation of this late medieval master can be brought back to the constant need to preserve unity in the Church from the doctrinal and the ecclesiological points of view. His stances in almost every academic and doctrinal debate of his time, his strong conciliarism, and his active criticism against books perceived as dangerous and suspect of heresy show Gerson’s concern about possible divisions, separations,

3 An assessment on this dimension of Gerson’s activity has been provided by N. McLoughlin, *Gerson as a Preacher between Mendicants and Secular Priests*, [in:] *A Companion…*, p. 249–253.


8 The key elements of Gerson’s attitude towards books perceived as dangerous (for any reasons) can be found in his criticism to the *Roman de la Rose*, the allegorical poem started by Guillaume de Lorris and finished by Jean de Meung; cf. R. Blumenfeld-Kosicki, *Jean Gerson and the Debate on the
and creations of doctrinal streams within not only Christianity as a whole, but also specifically within the university; as a theology professor and a chancellor of the University of Paris, Gerson clearly perceives the role of this institution in determining the spread or the stoppage of texts and ideas. Moreover, he is aware of the philosophical and theological consequences of allowing or limiting their circulation.

If organizing knowledge can be seen as one of the main aspects of Scholasticism, a part of this effort of organization consists of filtering works, doctrines, philosophical categories, and modalities of expressing concepts in order to accept only those which can be useful. This is the meaning of the monumental summae of the golden age of Scholastic philosophy, but also of the shorter treatises that characterize the works of late medieval masters, like Gerson. Scholastic masters filter the philosophical and theological past, select ancient texts perceived as useful in order to support their arguments, and prepare collections of auctoritates that basically create a new corpus of authoritative sources and condemn to the


oblivion many other ancient texts\textsuperscript{13}. This immense intellectual effort is the core of a process of systematization of knowledge that can be finally understood as an attempt to preserve unity in theology. Independently of the presence of various schools of thought characterizing the medieval debate, every school and every master has the ambition to provide works which can represent a synthesis of what the past left, with the aim to reduce everything to the unity of a solid theological system\textsuperscript{14}.

Looking at Gerson’s works from this perspective, his frequent references to unity in theology not only from the doctrinal, but also from the methodological point of view acquire an importance that seems decisive in order to understand the intellectual project of this master, i.e. defending the sana doctrina within the university practice; the chancellor warns both the masters and the students of his university about the dangers of curiosity, vanity, peregrinitas, because they lead to the abandon, meant methodologically and doctrinally, of the safe path traced by the Fathers of the Church and by the previous Scholastic masters\textsuperscript{15}.

In the frame of this search for unity, a relevant place assumes, in our opinion, the notion of communis schola, and the aim of this contribution is to analyze its importance and role in Gerson’s theological thought. This expression appears in a number of gersonian textual passages from different kinds of works (magisterial, spiritual, ecclesiological works, letters, etc.) and is always referred, even if with specific nuances, to the university environment; the understanding of this concept seems of a primary importance when it comes to analyze how Gerson conceives teaching, writing in the field of theology, and the relationship between magisterial authority and defense of the true doctrine from what is perceived (or often simply constructed\textsuperscript{16}) as the falsehood of heterodoxy and heresy.

\textsuperscript{13} The most important example of such a ponderous collections of auctoritates is maybe represented by the Auctoritates Aristotelis; on the story and on the philological reconstruction of this text, cf. J. Hamesse, Les Auctoritates Aristotelis. Un florilège médiéval. Étude historique et édition critique, Louvain 1974, p. 7–16.


In the treatise *Contra curiositatem studentium*, the Parisian chancellor exposes his thoughts about curiosity, vanity, pride, and other intellectual attitudes seen as wrong and dangerous in the study of theology; the reflection on these topics is certainly not new, and Gerson has illustrious models from which he takes inspiration in discussing this sort of matter: Augustine of Hippo warned his readers about the dangers represented by the excess of curiosity, through which the human being is brought to continuously wander in search of intellectual pleasures and finally forgets to follow the path towards God\(^\text{17}\); in such a misuse of the intellectual abilities, the things to be used (*)uti*) are confused with those that need to be enjoyed (*frui*)\(^\text{18}\). Coming to medieval Scholasticism, Thomas Aquinas wrote two *quaestiones* devoted to the discussion of the concepts of *studiositas*\(^\text{19}\) and *curiositas*\(^\text{20}\), respectively seen as the good and the bad moral attitudes leading the human being to exalt his natural inclination to know, driving it to a useful and fruitful knowledge or, to the contrary, to spoil it. By their characteristics, they are seen by Thomas as totally opposite\(^\text{21}\). Also Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, one of Gerson’s great models\(^\text{22}\), linked in several passages *curiositas* and *studiositas*\(^\text{23}\).

Against the background of this authoritative tradition, Gerson warns his students about the dangers of following unapproved paths, driven by a curious approach to the study of the texts: in a passage of *Contra curiositatem studentium* such a wrong intellectual attitude is linked to the bad tendency to choose uncommon terms in the field of theology, and in Gerson’s criticism the notion of *communis schola* has a remarkable place:


\(^{19}\) Cf. Thomas de Aquino, *Summa theologiae*, q. 166, Romae 1894 (cetera: Thomas de Aquino, *Summa theologiae*).


\(^{21}\) Cf. Thomas de Aquino, *Summa theologiae*, q. 167, art. 1: *studiositas curiositati opponitur*.


Quamobrem dum terminos quosdam apud aliquem ex doctoribus approbatis invenimus non usitatos in schola communi illos introducere non debemus, nisi pia et reverenti resolutione praevia ut dicendo: terminus iste a tali sic accipiebatur; qui scilicet usus vel quia usus communis aliter accipit cavenda est auditium offensio in divinis.

The idea of “unusual” here is not at all vague; Gerson doesn’t simply refer to a general and not specified “usual” way of expression or to a not specified “usual” set of terms belonging to an ambiguous tradition; on the contrary, the chancellor refers to a “common school” perceived as concrete and present. This “common school” is innervated by the authority of the masters who went through an approved educational path in order to be able to teach. The message that Gerson sends through this textual passage implies that the theological language must be handled and ruled by those who possess an academic training, i.e. the masters in theology.

Inspired again by Augustine and quoting his famous statement *nobis ad certam regulam loqui fas est*, the author often warns theologians and students about the necessity to use terms belonging to the Scholastic use, and this idea also touches the question about whether it’s possible to use vernacular languages in theology.

In his harsh criticism of the third book of Ruusbroec’s *Die geestelike Brulocht*, Gerson affirms that in the theological field only Latin can be allowed, in order to avoid a dangerous Babel. If in the biblical Babel the human beings couldn’t...
understand each other, now the chancellor highlights the risk hidden behind the possible use of the vernacular languages in theology: this risk consists of losing the perfect correspondence between concepts and words, a correspondence that was consolidated by a very long tradition and that was concretely embodied by what Gerson perceives as an unitarian Scholastic method and by the standardized Scholastic Latin used at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris. In Gerson’s words, the communis schola preserves the unity of the language, of the terminology, and of the method; preserving these aspects of the intellectual activity inside the university is seen by our author as a way to defend, tout court, the unity of the sana doctrina, because the linguistic and terminological confusion can lead to errors, and from the errors heresy can arise. Heresy – Gerson perfectly knows it – is often described in the canonical sources as something which multiplies errors and doctrines, and such a multiplication is depicted through concrete images, like that of a series of tails, all different but connected. For this reason, heresy is seen as the opposite of the doctrinal unity. Preserving unity (in language, terminology, method, and – finally – doctrine) seems to be the only way conceived by Gerson to avoid errors and heresy.

In another magisterial work, De modis significandi, the doctor christianissimus discusses again the relationship between curiosity and theology and, again, he refers to the “common school” in describing how to properly express the doctrinal concepts in a proper way:

prohibendi aedificationem turris davidicae in bonum quam si fieret nominum vel terminorum pro libitum cujuslibet variatio? Non enim tunc intelligeret unus alterum sed in quamdam Babylonis confusionem laberemur.


Theologus in inquisitione speculabilium curiositatem evitet non plus quam expedit, moralia dimittendo. Sequatur insuper modos significandi quibus utitur communis schola doctorum etiam si quandoque posset invenire suo judicio magis idoneos.

Here Gerson specifically refers to the theologian who deals with speculative, doctrinal theology, leaving apart the affective one; in fact, the objects of knowledge described in these lines are the *speculabilia*, investigated through the application of the intellect abstracting informations from the sensitive data: this is the positive, scientific knowledge. Through the analysis and research (*inquisitio*) on the visible things that can be investigated through the intellect, the theologian can know a number of things about God and about His relationship to the created world, not being able anyway to reach the essence of the Creator (which is something impossible *in via*); in the frame of this earthly form of intellectual knowledge and with the need to express the results of this *inquisitio*, the master in theology needs not only a set of terms and a common language, but also a clear way to put the concepts together and to express them in a way in which they can be absorbed by those who will then receive them (no matter if they are other masters or students). The *modi significandi* to be used are those of the “common school of the doctors”: this is a clear reference to the scholastic ways and forms adopted in order to systematize and communicate the theological knowledge, avoiding styles and forms that are not adopted in the university practice.

This passage can be better understood if compared to an extract from Gerson's second letter to Barthélemy Clantier, where the *doctor christianissimus* affirms that it is necessary to follow the examples of Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and other masters who, left apart every terminological embellishment, transmitted theology through questions, in order to have, under certain rules and a precise form, both a very safe speculative and practical theology, reducing all the previous doctors to only one and sure way of expression. This textual passage and its terminological choices

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33 Iohannes Gerson, *De modis significandi*, p. 630, l. 5.
34 The most systematic reflection of Gerson on the topic of the sensorial perception and on the intellectual abstraction from the the sensorial data is contained in the treatise Iohannes Gerson, *De oculo*, [in:] Jean Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. VIII... In this work Gerson discusses the various forms of vision, from the sensorial to the intellectual and the mystical one.
35 This is a key-concept in medieval theology. Cf. Bonaventura, *Commentarius in Evangelium Sancti Iohannis*, 243, 7; 318, 4, [in:] idem, *Opera omnia*, vol. VI, Romae 1893); cf. Thomas de Aquino, *Summa theologiae*, q. 43, art. 7; cf. Hugo de Sancto Victore, *De arca Noe*, 4, 6, ed. P. Sicard, Turnholti 2001 [= CC.CM, 176].
38 Cf. Iohannes Gerson, À Barthélemy Clantier II, ll. 18–20, p. 98: Hac consideratione permotos exstimo doctores novissimos Thomam, Bonaventuram et similis, dum omissa omni verborum ornatu tradiderunt theologiam per quaestiones, ut sub certis regulis et sub praecisa verborum forma tutissimam
is absolutely illuminating in the way in which it perfectly summarizes Gerson’s account of academic theology: the idea of “very safe” (tutissimam) theology goes together with that of “one and sure” (unam securamque) way of expression; the author stresses here the connection between the unity in the modality of expression and the doctrinal safety. It is only in being one that the mode of expression can be sure, i.e. not exposed to the risk of misinterpretations. The “one and sure way of expression” is that of the communis schola doctorum mentioned in De modis significandi, but the extract from the letter to Barthélemy Clantier specifies the nature of this community and its role: the common school of the doctors “transmits theology through questions”, and this is a clear reference to the typical genres of the Scholasticism. Through its typical genres and its typical methodologies, this community of scholars “leaves apart every terminological embellishment” and just focuses on the essence of the theological activity, i.e. systematizing and transmitting knowledge. This is, again, a clear reference to the idea of utility and fruitfulness of the theological inquiry, in the frame of the search for doctrinal unity.

The connection between scholastic models and doctrine can be retraced in another textual passage from a magisterial work of Jean Gerson, De vita spirituali animae, in which the notion of communis schola has the connotation of magisterial consensus compared to other minority positions concerning the concept of venial sin; if Henry of Ghent in his Quodlibet III and Bernard of Clairvaux in De precepto divino classify venial sins as acts against the divine law, Gerson affirms that, according to the position of other masters, venial sin is an act outside of the divine law, and not against it. In particular, the doctor christianissimus writes:

Aliorum opinio contraria, ut Thomae et communis scholae, dicitium veniale non esse contra sed praeter praecipitum.

This passage is significant because it highlights how Gerson conceives the “common school” in an authoritative frame that sees in Thomas Aquinas a reference and cohesive element: not only the school represented by the authority of the masters is “common”, but Gerson is very well aware also of Thomas’ position

haberemus theologiam tam practicam quam speculativam, reducendo doctores omnes priores ad unam securamque locutionis proprietatem.

39 Gerson expresses the same concept in a passage from De directione cordis, p. 107, l. 23–26, [in:] Jean Gerson, Oeuvres complètes, vol. VIII…: Attendatur denique pro praemissis et aliis similibus dubiis resolutive definiendis, quod doctores sancti priores, utentes rhetoricis persuasionibus, in aggravationem vitiorum et laudem virtutum, non ita tradiderunt resolutionem moralum materiarum, immo nec speculabilium, sicut doctores recentiores qui per quaestiones et per argumenta processerunt ad utramque partem et per decisiones processerunt.


41 Cf. Iohannes Gerson, De vita spirituali animae, p. 182, l. 4, [in:] Jean Gerson, Oeuvres complètes, vol. III…
of common master and common example to follow. If the philosophical and theological debate about sin allows different positions, as it is normal in the academic environment, Gerson finds anyway a majority position on the theme and defines it as the one “of Thomas and of the common school”. On one side, Thomas is seen as a seal of quality and approval of a theory: putting his name automatically certifies the validity of a statement; on the other side, Gerson seems to indicate Thomas Aquinas as a sort of caput and cohesive element of the academic tradition of the university of Paris. In the expression *ut Thomae et communis scholae*, we can retrace both a time and space perspective: Thomas is seen as the historical model to follow in the present of the academic speculation, but also as the figure around which the concept itself of “common school” is built up. Therefore, unity is, again, what drives Gerson through his speculation: the “common doctor” seals and authenticates the leading position of the academic community of Paris, a community sharing precise methods and models that became the reference point for the philosophical and theological speculation in medieval Europe.

This concept is confirmed by a passage from a letter to a Franciscan friar, where Gerson explicitly links the academic environment of Paris at the times of Bonaventure with the notion of *communis doctrina*. About the *doctor seraphicus* Gerson writes:

Secutus est doctor iste (Bonaventura), se testante, doctrinam communem et solidam quae Parisius vigebat maxime tempore suo.

If the “common school” is the structure connecting and holding together, in a unity, philosophy and theology in the academic community in Paris, the result of this unity of models, methods, and ways of expression is a “common doctrine” that preserves the unity in faith and avoids the birth and the spread of

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heterodox or heretical positions inside the university. Through the example of Bonaventure, Gerson highlights the necessity to teach and write in a common way and to share common and solid positions deriving from the adoption of certain patterns of argumentation.

Alongside the reflection on how the *communis schola* preserves unity in the field of the speculative theology, we also find in the gersonian works some passages in which this concept applies to mysticism and spiritual theology; in particular, we find references to the role played by the academic environment in handling, judging, and controlling mystical theories and doctrines coming from outside the university. We mentioned above Gerson’s criticism to the third book of Jan van Ruusbroec’s *Die geestelike Brulocht*, which was read by Gerson in the Latin translation of Surius with the title *De ornatu spiritualium nuptiarum*. This criticism, intensively studied by André Combes in four ponderous volumes, is carried out by Gerson with regard to both the content and the style of the work of the Flemish author and is contained in two letters addressed to the Carthusian monk Barthélemy Clantier, who asked the Parisian chancellor to read the *Brulocht* and to provide his opinion about the work. Shortly summarizing, Gerson criticizes some expressions used by the Flemish mystical writer because of their obscurity and of the risk of misinterpretations by the simple reader, especially in some passages that seem to allow the possibility of the essential union between the human being and God already during this life; then, he affirms that theology is a matter for

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45 The notion of *communis doctrina* in the late medieval thought has been deeply studied by A. Robiglio, *Aspetti della nozione di «communis doctrina» all’inizio del XIV secolo*, [in:] *Aspetti della nozione di «communis doctrina» all’inizio del XIV secolo / Durandus and Durandellus. The Dispute behind the Promotion of Thomist Authority*, ed. A. Robiglio, I. Iribarren, Bern 2004, p. 5–6.
46 For some references on Gerson’s account of mystical theology, cf. *supra*, n. 2.
47 Cf. *supra*, p. 5.
49 Cf. A. Combes, *Essai…*
52 Iohannes Gerson, *À Barthélemy Clantier I*, p. 57.
academically trained people who possess all the notions, skills, and lexical background in order to properly speak about God.

It’s exactly writing about this aspect—the necessity of a proper theological training—that the Doctor Christianissimus refers to the notion of communis schola in a meaningful passage that is worthy of being integrally quoted:

Inter tales scripturas numerantur aliquae narrationes aut regulae vel doctrinae particulares aliquorum patrum veterum, quae magis admirandae dicuntur quam imitandae, quemadmodum Johannes qui Climacus dicitur ponit virtutes esse impassibilitates, et quaedam valde austera super poenitentia et peccatis; et Cassianus de libero arbitrio notatus est, et alia alii parum examinata aut nimis rigida tradunt, quae communis schola theologicae veritatis merito non admittit aut rejicit.

After having criticized, in the previous lines, the Flemish writer and his attempt to investigate the obscurities of mysticism without possessing the necessary background, with the risk to mislead simple writers, in the quoted passage Gerson assimilates some doctrines contained in Ruusbroec’s Brulocht to the example of some narrations, rules, or particular doctrines of some old Fathers of the Church, such as John Climacus and John Cassian, that the common school of the theological truth doesn’t admit or rejects. If the faith and the zeal of Ruusbroec, Climacus and Cassian are never called into question by Gerson, their doctrines are seen as not acceptable by the university; the reason is expressed by the terminology itself that is used by Gerson: the “doctrines” of these authors are “particular” (particulares), i.e. they introduce unusual elements from the point of view of the content, of the words, or both, and for this reason they must be avoided.

Therefore, also in the field of the mystical theology a conflict between “common” and “particular” may arise: on one hand, the matter of mysticism is magmatic, fluid, and intrinsically difficult to express because of the obscurity and depth of the experience; on the other hand, preserving unity is seen by Gerson as a need and a duty of the communis schola theologicae veritatis, and this unity goes also through the control of the spirituality of religious people outside the university or even of laypeople. Under the light of this concept we can, for instance, understand why the Parisian chancellor and other late scholastic masters censure the Begardi.

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54 Iohannes Gerson, À Barthélemy Clantier I, p. 62, l. 17–21.
who are considered by Gerson as an element of disorder\textsuperscript{56}, and whose behaviors and doctrines are seen as not acceptable and are the object of some ecclesiastical condemnations in the Middle Ages\textsuperscript{57}.

\textbf{Conclusions}

The textual passages analyzed in this contribution illustrate the meaning and the relevance of the notion of \textit{communis schola}, in its various aspects, within the theological and ecclesiological thought of Jean Gerson. Driven by a constant concern for the unity of the Church at all levels, the \textit{doctor christianissimus} insists on the decisive role played by the theological community of the academic masters in handling and holding the doctrine, preserving it, and protecting it from possible abuses and misleading interpretations both in the speculative and in the mystical sphere. Such a community is strongly perceived by Gerson in the time and in the space, in its deposit of models, and in a set of strongly defined methods, models, linguistic features, and ways to express the concepts. All these elements contribute to select doctrines produced inside and outside the university and, at the same time, they regulate the way in which the academic speculation itself is put into the concrete forms of teaching and writing. Moreover, the notion of \textit{communis schola} finds its roots in its intrinsic opposition to everything that, in theology, is “particular” and may represent an element of destabilization, since Gerson seems to automatically assimilate particularism to division or, at least, to fragmentation of the unity. For these reasons and for their important theological and ecclesiological implications, the concept of \textit{communis schola} represents an important key to understand Gerson as a writer, as a teacher, as a university chancellor, and as a spiritual advisor.


\textsuperscript{57} The most important one is contained in the dogmatic constitution \textit{Ad nostrum} (Council of Vienne, 1312). The text is edited by A. Richter, [in:] Corpus Iuris Canonici, vol. I, Romae 1955, col. 1183–1184.
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