Cornelius Ernst O.P.

When some people die, I suppose we tend to think of them first as having been public figures, people who did important things or wrote important books. And there is no doubt that Cornelius was a public figure, and that he did do important things and produce important writings. He was a figure known and respected in theological and academic circles; his contribution to the English Summa is widely regarded as one of the best, his contribution to Theologie in der Gegenwart led to a rethinking of several isssues; he was for a time one of the theologians involved in Concilium. It was he who launched the English version of Rahner's Theological Investigations, and he played an important part in making Schillebeeckx a household name in English Catholicism. Unlike most of us in Oxford, he was even welcomed into that most exclusive of clubs, the Oxford Faculty of Theology.

He was, I suppose, famous for his contorted style of expressing himself; sometimes it seemed as if he could hardly bring himself to say anything without qualifying it out of existence. But that was, at least in part, because he had such a vivid awareness that one really cannot adequately say anything, without attempting to say everything. His great dream over the past two years or so was to compose a book, or a collection of bits of book, which would start from everywhere and everything, from every conceivable kind of topic and interest, and work back from there to the Gospel of St. John.

He had a truly Thomistic conviction that our way to God begins with the everyday things that confront us in our world, the things that impinge on us through our senses. Although he could be on occasion, a thorough and meticulous scholar, his bias was quite other. I remember once, after we had listened to a lecture from a distinguished foreign theologian, whom it would be tactless to name, his comment was: "there is a man who never looks out of the window".

Like a modern St. Albert, anything was liable to become grist for his mill. A few years ago one used to find him at breakfast poring over his 'Teach yourself Japanese'. Then he took up mathematics.

He probably never would have written his great book showing how everything converged upon St. John. The world of learning has become too large even for a St. Albert. But I think he can stand for us as a kind of symbol of a tension inherent in our Dominican tradition. On the one hand, he was deeply impressed by the achievement of the great French Dominican theologians like Yves

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Congar, and longed to see the day when an English Dominican, maybe even he himself, could produce comparable works. He would sometimes lament that we were only gifted amateurs.

But on the other hand he believed thoroughly—so thoroughly perhaps that he may not even have been conscious of believing it—that a theology which becomes too professional and complete in itself is a very reduced theology. Everything and anything is the matter of theology. And out of the very diversity of interests, which prevents a man from becoming all that professional in any of them, can come flashes of insight, contemplative insight, which may do far more to disclose the mystery of God than any number of competent syntheses.

After all, was it not said of St. Albert and St. Thomas by at least one of their contemporaries that they were untrained amateurs? There is perhaps a legitimate style of theology in our Dominican tradition which seeks its inspiration in anything that comes to hand.

For most of the time that he occupied official positions, he was aware that in some ways he had an easier relationship with those for whom he was not officially responsible. There was a simple, pastoral warmth about him, which I don't think he was ever able to translate into official concern for others. One of my happy memories is of seeing him sitting in a deck chair in the garden for hours, with a particularly disturbed (and particularly ignorant, even illiterate) young man at his feet—one of the casualties of the hippy generation. He gave of his time without the slightest hesitation, saying that he supposed that that was something we could do, having nothing much else to do.

Maybe Cornelius never did solve the problem of uniting official responsibility with personal caring; but he felt them both, and in this again he can stand for us as a token of what it means to be a Dominican. For ours is not a tradition of impersonal competence, nor is it just a tradition of charismatic individuality. Who can tell how far, in the Providence of God, the agony undergone by Cornelius may not have been an agony for us, which will enable us, in some way, to be true with less difficulty to the complexity of our calling?

We can be happy for Cornelius that, in his last years here at Carisbrooke, many of the tensions which had made his life so hard were, to a great extent, resolved. Here he found an easier balance between companionship and solitude, between prayer and study, between theology and encyclopaedic curiosity. The measure of his relief is an indication of how devotedly he had been forcing himself before, year after year accepting, for instance, the cramping limitation of having to teach subjects he did not particularly want to teach, (in part, so that others could be free to teach what they wanted to teach); of having to carry administrative burdens that

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were a nightmare of contradiction to him.

There was in him a spirit of spiritual and theological exploration which made him almost pathologically incapable sometimes of simply repeating the old formulae in which people had expressed their beliefs. In his own way, like Thomas, he was haunted by the question "What is God?". He yearned for a new way of making sense of the doctrine of the Trinity. At times it might look as if he were being a bit cavalier in declaring that one could no longer go on saying things that the church had said for centuries; but I do not believe that this came from any lack of faith. It was rather the sense that he had, however opaque, of the reality underlying credal statements, which made him aware of the inadequacy of some of the concepts used by classic theologians. The programme he outlined for us some years ago was what he called "radical traditionalism", and I don't think he ever really departed from that. What he looked for from tradition was roots; and what he looked for from roots was a continually new life.

As we remember today with gratitude what Cornelius did for us and for the church, and what he was for us his brethren and friends, let us hope and pray that he is indeed now with the Root from which all life springs, and that both the accomplishments and the frustrations of his life here on earth may bring forth from that Root the fruit that shall abide for ever.

SIMON TUGWELL O.P.

(Shortened version of the Funeral Address delivered at Carisbrooke 24 November 1977)

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