New Blackfriars

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Comment: *A Dominican Legacy*

In 1216, St Dominic and his companions adopted the Rule of St Augustine, which as a canon of Osma cathedral he had already been keeping for years. As Fr Vladimir Koudelka OP notes, "they chose the Augustinian Rule, not for what it contains, but for what, by virtue of its universality, it does not contain. This enabled them to specify in the customs which they added to the rule the goal of their order and the new means for attaining their goal, without contradicting the rule". In any case, when they consulted Pope Innocent III, he advised Dominic to adopt an existing Rule since new rules for religious orders had been forbidden by the Fourth Lateran Council. Thus, this year 2016, the Order of Preachers celebrates 800 years of existence.

Of course, over that long a time, there have been ups and downs, much to commend and a good deal of which to repent (though on that score perhaps not notably bad by historical ecclesiastical standards). One of the most surprising things in the history of the Dominican legacy has been the massive failure, not once but twice, to accept and develop the moral theology of St Thomas Aquinas. While Dominicans have long trumpeted admiration for his achievement we cannot claim that his distinctive theological positions have been consistently maintained or even recognized at all.

There are two remarkable discussions by great Dominican scholars, Fr Leonard Boyle and Fr Servais Pinckaers, reprinted most conveniently in *The Ethics of St Thomas Aquinas* edited by Stephen Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2002).

In the first of these Fr Boyle shows that the generation of Dominicans who came after Thomas did not understand the originality of his approach to what we should now call moral theology or Christian ethics: instead of writing one more handy catalogue of sins, with their gravity, appropriate penances, etc., Thomas opened with accounts of the purpose of human life and the kind of a character a person becomes by practising virtue — nobody took this seriously. This was the most adventurous work that Thomas ever wrote. He began what he no doubt expected would be his last set of lectures on *sacra doctrina*, to a select group of young Dominican friars placed under his direction in Rome, but soon changed his mind: a copy of this abandoned course was found quite recently in Lincoln College library, Oxford (Fr Boyle played a key role in identifying it). Only then did Thomas begin to dictate what became the *Summa Theologiae* (not his name for it): with the first part dealing with God, creation

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and human being, leading into the newly conceived second part, on beatitude, the formation of a person's character, virtue and vice, and so on, with all this fulfilled in the third part, with the Incarnation, Redemption, and sacramental dispensation. Within a few years, as Fr Boyle demonstrates, even Dominicans themselves were ignoring the first and third parts while cutting down the second part into something very like the handy list of sins for confessors and mission preachers that Thomas surely wanted to embed in an altogether much richer account of Christian ethics and thus of our moral and spiritual life.

It wasn't until the sixteenth century that the *Summa* began to be widely read. In the later decades of the nineteenth century right into the 1960s Thomas was studied more than ever before, in the various versions of Thomism that were intended to protect Catholics from the nefarious effects of the ideas of Descartes, Kant, Hegel and suchlike. As Fr Pinckaers shows, in quite respectful accounts of some of his recent predecessors in chairs of moral theology, far from following Thomas in his focus on the gift of beatitude, formation of character and practice of virtue, they took it for granted that the emphasis in Catholic moral theology was obligation, what is permitted and what forbidden, what is excusable and what intrinsically evil, and so on — something little different, ironically, from Kant's gloomy Protestant gritting one's teeth to do one's duty, at least according to the caricature.

Much has no doubt changed, in Dominican moral theology. Fr Pinckaers rejoices, mentioning the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*, 1981), there has been a revival of interest in 'virtue ethics' in Anglo-American philosophy, which should enable conversations to be opened with the legacy of Thomas Aquinas. (In fact this may be dated a little earlier: in *The Virtues* (1977) we have the text of the Stanton Lectures delivered at Cambridge by Peter Geach in 1973–4, the first modern exposition of St Thomas on this subject.) Whether any current version even of Christian ethics (let alone any other) is centred on beatitude is another matter.

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