Recent Thomistica: I

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Thomas Aquinas left a course on the Psalms unfinished: the so-called *Postilla super Psalmos* (*postilla*: a gloss on a biblical text, from 'post illa', 'following on these [words of Scripture]', perhaps). Most scholars believe it was simply interrupted by his death (Mandonnet, Weisheipl), though others (Louis Bataillon, Simon Tugwell), doubting that he would have delayed expounding a text that was so central for theologians when, as clerics, they had all undertaken to recite the divine office every day, have argued that it must date from much earlier in his career. Moreover, Bataillon contended, the text that we have hardly reveals Thomas's most mature thought.

Bataillon has changed his mind about the dating, on account of a recently noted allusion to the sanctity of Louis IX, King of France (see A. Bandera, *Ciencia Tomista* 120 (1993): 636). For Bataillon, the text should now be regarded as 'almost certainly the last instruction of Thomas' (see *Angelicum* 71 (1994): 589). No doubt the matter will be thoroughly discussed, and perhaps even settled, when the critical edition is published by the Leonine Commission, in the not too distant future.

As regards the critical edition, by the way, students of Aquinas know they will be dead long before it is completed. Inaugurated in 1882, 'Leonine' in honour of Pope Leo XIII, about a third of the projected fifty volumes have not yet appeared, indeed work on some of these has not even started. The main gaps are the commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, the disputed questions *de Potentia*, the *Catena Aurea*, the courses on Matthew, John and most of those on Paul, and the commentaries on Denys's *Divine Names* and on the *Liber de causis* (though the edition by H.D. Saffrey, begun as an Oxford doctorate, will not be surpassed). Advances in research techniques mean that the first to be published, and particularly the *Summa Theologiae* (1888-1903), will have to be entirely redone. The most recent volumes are extremely beautiful: finely produced as well as irreproachably researched. How much difference such volumes make to the average student may of course be questioned. In any case, one might say, there is no hurry in these matters: scholarly advances are always to be expected, and 150 years (as is now likely) is perhaps not intolerably long.

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There is no English translation of Thomas's course on the Psalms, probably because no one hitherto regarded it as important enough. The recent French version, translated with introduction, notes and appendices by Jean-Eric Stroobant de Saint-Eloy and with a preface by Mark Jordan (Paris: Cerf 1996) puts it firmly among Thomas's most interesting works. Given that, for Thomas, as he says in the prologue, the Psalter articulates faith in Christ so well that it 'almost seems gospel and not prophecy' (a rather extravagant claim, most modern theologians would of course think, revealingly enough), one might expect his exposition to disclose a good deal about the Christ-centred theological presuppositions of a theologian whose *Summa Theologiae* leaves many readers with the impression that he regarded Christ's Passion and Resurrection as somewhat marginal.

Of course, as he says in the prologue to the *tertia pars* , the 'consideration of the Saviour and what he has done for humankind' is the 'consummation of the whole theological business'; but nowadays we are naturally inclined to start from the supposedly empirically accessible beginning when we try to develop a thought rather than to let it all unfold as an anticipation of the end, teleologically so to speak.

While serviceable enough for most students, details in this French version, both in the translation and in the notes, have been subjected to pretty devastating criticism by Martin Morard (see *Revue Thomiste* 96 (1996): 655-662). No one is better qualified to criticize: Morard is in fact engaged in preparing the Leonine edition, from the four surviving manuscripts (the best one having been destroyed when Naples was bombed on 30 September 1943), a demanding work of scholarship.

According to Jean-Pierre Torrell, formerly a member of the Leonine editorial team and as authoritative a judge as there is, the text we have is dry-as-dust course notes, demanding a good deal of expertise on the part of the reader if they are to yield much of theological substance (see Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* volume 1:*The Person and his Work*, 1996, page 260). Having an impeccably edited text does not mean that it makes congenial reading or even that it is particularly worth studying: Leonine editors have already doubted the interest of certain of Thomas's commentaries.

However that may be, there have been two remarkable recent studies of the commentary on the Psalms. These are in addition to Martin Morard's own interesting account of Thomas's understanding of the priesthood of Christ and of every Christian, as found in the *Postilla* (see 'Sacerdoce du Christ et sacerdoce des chrétiens dans le Commentaire des Psaulmes de saint Thomas d'Aquin', *Revue Thomiste* 99 (1990: 119-142): an earnest of the insights into Thomas's theology

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which we might expect Morard's editorial work to generate.

Carmelo Pandolfi, in *San Tommaso filosofo nel Commento ai Salmi: Interpretazione dell' essere nel modo 'esistenziale' dell' invocazione* (Bologna: Studio Domenicano 1993), as the title suggests, contends that, precisely as expounding the Psalter as 'the entire Scripture abbreviated', touching therefore every aspect of human life, the *Postilla* is 'the existential book par excellence' and 'the complete treatment of existence' and thus Thomas's 'most philosophical text'. In effect, for Pandolfi, Thomas's 'final university course' (as he calls it, over-confidently and misleadingly) brings together metaphysics and biblical exegesis: the commentary interprets the Psalter as a privileged hermeneutic of the mystery of Being. In his 'philosophical semantics', so Pandolfi contends, ' being itself is Christ-centred and Christ-effecting, *cristocentrico anzi cristoeffetuale*'.

In the event, wherever the Psalms register God's transcendence, God's presence in the world and in human life, or mention creaturely finitude, etc., Pandolfi finds Thomas's distinction between essence and existence in creatures and the denial of any such distinction in God.

For some readers Thomas's claim that, in God, existence and essence are identical, seems either unintelligible or nonsensical. For many others, Thomas's 'maxim' (as Robert Jenson calls it) is of decisive importance: the God whose nature is revealed in the Christian dispensation is the only God there is.

Alluring or absurd as this thesis may seem, depending on one's Thomistic prejudices, Pandolfi's appeal to it certainly delivers an uncommonly interesting reading of the *Postilla*. Here too, Martin Morard's itemization of misunderstandings raises doubts, yet he concludes that, for all its flaws in detail, Pandolfi's book undeniably displays the *Postilla*'s 'existential and philosophical richness'. It suggests the fertility of ontological considerations in Thomas's theological practice; and raises the question of the conditions of the possibility of biblical knowledge of God (see the article cited, 1996).

Thomas F. Ryan offers a much less contentious study: *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, Indiana 2000). Aware of Pandolfi's monograph and of Morard's review, Ryan contends that, while the Psalms certainly elicit philosophical reflections from Thomas, 'this pervasively christological book of prayer' is (like most of Thomas's theological work) primarily pastoral in intention. Far from being an exercise in hermeneutic ontology, so to speak, Thomas's commentary would rather invite the student to an imitation of Christ at prayer,

Though commenting only on fifty-four Psalms, the *Postilla* takes

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more than 400 columns in the Parma edition (volume 14, reprinted 1948-50, not a delight to read). This, Ryan insists, makes it a major work, even materially. Assuming it is a late work, assuming too that this makes it a 'mature' work, he maintains that it offers a better account of Thomas's thought about Christ, prayer, grace and meritorious works, etc., than we find in the contemporary or perhaps slightly earlier *Summa Theologiae*. While analyzing the Psalms in Aristotelian categories, an extremely difficult methodology for us to deal with, Thomas is not out simply to tell his readers about Christ, prayer, etc., but frequently turns his exposition to exhortation: readers are to imitate Christ and actually to pray. Appealing to work by Mary Carruthers on memory (*The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*: Cambridge University Press 1990), Ryan argues that Thomas's method is intended to affect his readers' lives, as well as extend their understanding of the Psalms. This is evangelical exegesis, for all the (for us uninviting and repellent) Aristotelian analytical method.

In the two principal chapters of the book Ryan compares prayer and Christ as exemplar in the *Summa Theologiae* (chapter 3) and Christ's example of prayer in the *Postilla* (chapter 4). Obviously, it is in the detail that Ryan makes his case. He certainly establishes that Thomas's theology is not to be assessed solely or even mainly on the basis of a reading of the *Summa*. Above all, as he shows very convincingly, when we see Thomas's exegetical practice as dedicated to teaching his students about 'a life of Christian faith, hope, and service as a means of union with God', we might be better able to understand what he means when he says, in the prologue, that the purpose of the *Summa Theologiae* (likely to remain the most consulted text) is 'to teach the knowledge of God'.

We need more books like this one by Ryan to open up the theological interest of the commentaries. That we should read the biblical commentaries is now becoming an accepted view, though as long as nothing better than the Parma edition is available few are likely to make the effort, even if they can cope with Latin.

The lack of decent texts, it has to be admitted, is entirely due to the fact that Thomists themselves have never read the biblical commentaries much. The Aquinas often criticized for being unbiblical is the creation of his self-styled admirers.

In fact, of course, at least since the lengthy, thoroughly documented *entry by the New Testament scholar Ceslas Spicq in the Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (volume 1, columns 694-738, Paris 1946), there has been little excuse for students who can read French to remain ignorant of Thomas Aquinas's biblically grounded

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theological work. There is nothing, as yet, comparable in English. But, in the astonishing recent wave of books about Thomas Aquinas, detailed examinations of the biblical dimensions of his theology are now beginning to appear. By far the most substantial investigation, so far, is by W.G.B.M. Valkenburg, *Did not our hearts burn? Place and function of Scripture in the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Utrecht: Thomas Institut 1990). Since there is no copy in Bodley, Cambridge University Library or the National Library of Scotland, as a quick search of the online catalogues shows, it has evidently not entered into British scholarship or even come to the attention of those who obtain books for such collections. Retitled less dramatically as *Words of the Living God: Place and function of Scripture ...* this book has been reissued (Leuven: Peeters 2000).

Now, however, we have *'Modus et Forma': A New Approach to the Exegesis of saint Thomas Aquinas with an Application to the Lectura super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, the product of a Duquesne University dissertation, by Christopher T. Baglow (Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico: Rome 2002 Analecta Biblica).

According to Baglow, inquiry into the biblical dimensions of Thomas's theology has so far been hampered by interest mainly in his exegetical principles and techniques at the expense of in-depth study of his actual exegetical practice. In the first half of his book, accordingly, Baglow expounds and examines Thomas's exegetical theories and then, in the second half, shows that his exegesis of Ephesians embodies his deepest and most systematic exploration of the nature of the Church. As he says, in the general prologue to his work on the *corpus paulinum*, Ephesians is primarily concerned with 'the origination of ecclesial unity'.

When the Ephesians commentary was composed is unsettled. There is an English version, translated and introduced by Matthew L. Lamb (Albany, NY: Magi Books 1966). There is as yet no critical edition of the Latin text and no sign of one either, in the near future. Indeed, according to Baglow, Lamb's version is 'in many ways more critically astute' than the available Latin editions, since he works with the Parma and the Marietti, discussing and justifying the choice of this or that variation. Following Torrell, Baglow dates the commentary to Thomas's second sojourn in Rome, thus to about 1266-67. He was just beginning the *Summa*; he was also just beginning to compose his commentaries on Aristotle; he was teaching young Dominican friars in a completely non-university context; and the text that we have is itself composed, not by himself, but by his fellow Dominican and secretary Reginald of Piperno.

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In the event, as far as Baglow's reading of Thomas's commentary goes, the state of the text, its place and function in Thomas's career, etc., are of little or no importance. As he says, his 'primary source' (page 122) is the splendid commentary by Markus Barth (son of Karl; Anchor Bible 1974). It is not only that Barth cites Thomas more often than any other pre-Enlightenment commentator besides Calvin; the main inspiration for Baglow is Barth's remark that 'since Ephesians is a theological document it must be explained in theological terms — or else the exposition would not be literal'. In other words, a supposedly literal interpretation of Ephesians would not be truly literal unless it was also thoroughly theological. A plodding line-by-line piecemeal reading would miss the point at every turn unless it was related all along to explicit recognition of the text's main theme and principal purpose. For Thomas, the 'teaching' of all of Paul's epistles 'bears entirely on Christ's grace'. In Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, so he thinks, we have a set of texts that focus on Christ's grace 'according to the work of unity that it realizes within the Church'. The theme in the Ephesians commentary, Baglow argues, is the building of a holy Temple (chapters 1-3) and the maintenance of the Temple (chapters 4-6). Thomas's doctrine of the Church, unsurprisingly, turns out to be free of 'post-Tridentine juridicalism' (page 235). While too many other aspects of ecclesiology are never mentioned for this commentary to constitute a comprehensive *de ecclesia* — it nevertheless offers an ecclesiological model 'much closer ... to the evangelical ideals of the Reformation than it is to any post-Tridentine model' (page 243).

On the more theoretical side, as Baglow notes, we have a handful of studies in English-language journals. Among the more accessible he lists Terence McGuckin, 'St Thomas Aquinas and Theological Exegesis of Sacred Scripture' (*New Blackfriars* 74 (1993): 197-213): not ponderously technical, certainly a good startingpoint. More substantial, however, is the characteristically contentious study by T.F. Torrance ('Scientific Hermeneutics according to St Thomas Aquinas', *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962): 258-89. Baglow commends Torrance's (somewhat neglected) study, speaking even of 'its indispensability for understanding Thomas' theory of biblical interpretation' (page 55). As he says, Torrance is pleased that Thomas departs from the mystical interpretations of his predecessors. On the other hand, he criticizes Thomas for subjugating biblical exegesis to Aristotelian philosophy. As Baglow points out, however, Torrance pays little attention to Thomas's exegetical practice. He cites Thomas over 200 times but only seven of these references are to biblical commentaries. In the Ephesians

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commentary, Baglow points out, Thomas cites Aristotle three times, Ovid once, and biblical sources 1046 times. In short, so he maintains, simply because Torrance does not attend to what Thomas actually does when he interprets a biblical text, he 'succumbs too easily to a stereotype': namely, that his exegesis, not 'mystical' but 'scientific', must of course be 'rationalistic'.

Baglow's title — 'Modus et Forma' — comes from a phrase in the prologue to the *Postilla super Psalmos*, where Thomas distinguishes the different literary genres: 'The mode or form to be found in Sacred Scripture is manifold'. In the event, so Baglow maintains, Thomas preferred non-narrative modes, in particular the 'disputative' mode, such as he found, for example, in Job and Paul. These authors write, Baglow says, 'in a fashion not far removed from Aristotelian argumentation' (page 85). For this reason, Thomas 'accesses them with greater success than he does with any other biblical texts'. As far as the 'laudative' mode of the Psalms is concerned, so Baglow claims, Thomas goes astray from the start, since he mistakenly believes the psalmist to be David, speaking prophetically about Christ and the Church.

Roughly speaking, since the author of Ephesians was historically concerned with the unity of the Church and Thomas saw that, his exposition is fundamentally sound and enlightening for us today (Baglow becomes very ecumenical in his concluding chapter), whereas what he says about the Psalms is radically undermined by his ignorance of their true authorship. On the other hand, whether the voice of the Psalmist is David or David as the prototype of Christ, the historical error might perhaps lose its significance in the typology that is celebrated in the liturgy. Thomas's exegesis of the Psalms may still be as dry as dust, as Torrell says; but, if so, it can surely not be because he was not practised in the 'laudative' performance of such biblical writing.

With Valkenburg and Baglow, students of Thomas Aquinas now have companionable guides to the biblical dimensions of his theology, even if each is only at the path breaking stage. Baglow is fairly critical of Valkenburg, and both are well aware of how much work remains to be tackled — but at least we are beginning to realise that Thomas's main teaching activity was expounding Scripture, not dictating *Summae* — let alone writing commentaries on Aristotle. Whether realising this either will or even should revise anyone's understanding of Thomas's theology is, of course, quite another matter.

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