Comment: *Fides et Ratio*

The encyclical *Fides et Ratio* is very badly translated, as one of our contributors notes. In a recent seminar reading I focused on the reference to the 'seed of desire and nostalgia for God' said to be 'in the far reaches of the human heart': 'a truth which the Church has always treasured' (§ 24); a reference repeated when we are reminded that, in Jesus Christ, 'faith recognizes the ultimate appeal to humanity, an appeal made in order that what we experience as desire and nostalgia may come to its fulfilment' (§33).

The Latin simply has 'flagrans desiderium' in both cases: 'a burning desire' no doubt, but the beautiful if controversial concept of our having a 'nostalgia for God' implanted in our hearts prior to the impact of Christian revelation has evidently been inserted by the translators. Perhaps they were not theologically literate enough to be aware of the controversies since the sixteenth century over the notion of natural desire for the vision of God. Perhaps, on the other hand, they deliberately siding against those who would be wary of ascribing to sinful hearts an 'experience' of nostalgia for God which would subsequently be 'fulfilled' by faith in the Word incarnate.

In that case, the translators would, unwittingly or otherwise, be backing the *nouvelle théologie* in the famous controversies. This may seem unlikely, except that the encyclical is amazingly generous towards Catholic thinkers who would not have been regarded as 'sound' by partisans of 'Aristotelian Thomism' such as Garrigou-Lagrange OP. Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, for example, it would surprise those taught to fear 'ontologism', is 'gladly' mentioned for his 'courageous research' (§74).

We hear (in §59) of 'not a few Catholic philosophers', who, relying on 'more recent currents of thought' [other than Thomism then], 'produced philosophical works of great influence and lasting value', some of which 'stand comparison with the greatest systems of [German] idealism' — apparently *before* Pope Leo XIII's encyclical of 1879.

No names are provided. The next three sentences seem to allude to John Henry Newman (*A Grammar of Assent*,1870), Maurice Blondel (*L'Action*,1893) and Edith Stein ('phenomenological method', c. 1922). But as for 'syntheses', prior to 1879, comparable with Fichte, Hegel and Schelling, it is hard to see who the Pope has in mind, besides Rosmini, except for Friedrich Schlegel, not exactly in that league, and Matthias Scheeben (whose earlier works could not easily be described as Thomist).

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The thinkers commended in this encyclical are a little unexpected. In particular, how many of us had even heard of Petr Chaadev (§74), let alone would regard him as a major Christian thinker? Chaadev (1793-1856) dreamed of a kingdom of God on earth that would reunite Eastern and Western Christianity, and ultimately the whole of humanity, under the aegis of the Holy See. His *Philosophical Letters*, some of which turned up only in 1935, do not seem to qualify him for inclusion with 'eminent scholars' like Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), Vladimir Lossky (1903-58) and Pavel Florensky (who, like Chaadev, does not make the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church).

Petr Chaadev is a bizarre choice; he wrote little and none of it is of much importance. Florensky is a more justifiable choice. According to Rowan Williams (in his survey of Orthodox theology in *The Modern Theologians*), he was 'a brilliant and eccentric polymath who finally disappeared in the Gulag'. His claim to theological attention is, Williams says, that he had considerable influence on Sergei Bulgakov's revision of Soloviev's cosmology of the Divine Feminine.

Bulgakov (1871-1944), not mentioned in the encyclical, is a much more eminent theologian than Florensky — assuming the Pope means Florensky and is not confusing him with G.V. Florovsky (1893-1979), the finest and most 'orthodox' of all modern Russian Orthodox theologians. Indeed, by comparison with Florovsky, and even Bulgakov, Soloviev is a surprisingly wild and unorthodox thinker to be commended in an encyclical alongside Newman, Rosmini, Maritain, Gilson and Edith Stein — even if the Pope is intending 'not to endorse every aspect of their thought, but simply to offer significant examples of a process of philosophical enquiry which was enriched by engaging the data of faith'. It is hard to believe that his mishmash of Hegelian pantheism and neo-Gnostic sophiology, however innovative and challenging, constitutes a particularly convincing paradigm of a 'fruitful relationship between philosophy and the word of God'.

No Christian thinker between the deaths in 1274 of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas and Rosmini's birth in 1797 warrants a mention, except for Francisco Suarez (1548-1617), the greatest theologian of the Society of Jesus (some would say): his *Disputationes Metaphysicae* (1597) is commended for finding its way 'even into the Lutheran universities in Germany' (§62). What about Cajetan, Poinsot, Pascal, Malebranche, even Descartes himself? Butler, the Cambridge Platonists, Jonathan Edwards? But a document that hails Chaadev as an eminent scholar, and never actually names Blondel, offers too random a history of modern Christian thought to warrant this kind of criticism.

F.K.

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