Recent Thomistica: II

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No one in the English-speaking academy would even try to write an exposition of 'Thomism', inhibited as we are by fifty years of the (no doubt salutarily) deflationary effects of analytic philosophy. More positively, the current wave of scholarly works suggests that a systematic exposition of Thomas Aquinas's thought, if possible at all, would be premature. (We have noted some of the studies of his use of the Bible: *New Blackfriars* 83 (2002): 245-251).

Thomism is a tradition, long tracts of which remain unresearched. Two conferences have recently mapped some of the territory. *Saint Thomas au XXe siècle* (Paris: Saint-Paul 1994) contains more than twenty excellent papers tracing the history of Thomism since the foundation of *Revue thomiste*, the quarterly journal of the Dominican friars at Toulouse. The focus is on France, indeed on the Toulouse 'school'; yet, as well as a fascinating picture of that particular tradition, we get a great deal of insight into the principal conflicts in Catholic theology during the twentieth century (how deep these were is not widely appreciated in the English-speaking world, where even Catholics themselves tend to believe that we all agreed, prior to the Second Vatican Council).

Saint Thomas au XIVe siècle, a special issue of *Revue Thomiste* (Janvier-Mars 1997), offers another set of fine essays on one generation of theologians, the first after Aquinas's death, some of whom were devotedly Thomist, others (including Dominicans) much more critical and some even ferociously anti-Thomist. Largely unknown to any but specialists in medieval studies, these controversies show how contested Aquinas's thought has been all along.

Serge-Thomas Bonino notes, in the preface to this latter collection, that Thomism is 'deliberately traditionalist': there is no reading of Aquinas independently of a cumulative tradition of interpretation. The thought of Aquinas, as he puts it, is always *mediated* . (Actually, it is difficult to see how the thought of *any* figure in the history of thought might be accessible in a 'raw' state, as it were.) Ironically, however, as he thinks, the Thomism that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century knew very little about this history, being a Thomism without a past, perennially and timelessly true. Furthermore, according to Bonino, this tradition of some seven hundred years has never been a smoothly

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06283.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

unfolding development. On the contrary, he recognizes a 'pluralism' in the tradition, one hermeneutic approach playing off against another — 'pourquoi pas?'.

David Berger, however, has evidently no doubts about the continuing relevance of Thomism. In *Thomismus: Grosse Leitmotive der thomistischen Synthese und ihre Aktualität für die Gegenwart* (Köln: Editiones Thomisticae, 2001), he offers 'the Thomistic synthesis' (note the definite article), expounding the 'principal motifs' and hoping to demonstrate the 'relevance' for today.

Berger deplores the recent wave of purely historical studies of Aquinas's thought; it only diverts attention (he thinks) from Thomism as a speculative synthesis. Unlike Bonino, he has no patience with any supposed 'pluralism'. For Berger there is only one version of Thomism: 'Thomism of the strict observance' as he calls it, the only 'legitimate organic development of the teaching of Aquinas himself'. 'Adaptations' of Aquinas's thought, such as transcendental Thomism, Heideggerian Thomism, etc., are just misunderstandings.

True, Berger's Thomism does have a history: Thomas's first followers, then the 'golden age' (late fifteenth to late seventeenth centuries), and finally since the late nineteenth century. This history is, however, a pretty untroubled process of gradual explicitation of what was there from the beginning, rather than an always impassioned struggle to understand what Aquinas may have meant.

The greater part of the book, obviously, is devoted to expounding the 'synthesis'. Aquinas's basic insight is his conception of act and potency, which delivers the correct doctrine of the dependence of creation on God: God, then, as *actus purus*. Berger highlights 'physical premotion': terminology no doubt unfamiliar nowadays, shorthand for God's real moving of one's moral act, ontologically antecedent to its being performed, in such a way however that one's freedom is not destroyed but granted together with the rest of one's being (cf *Summa Theologiae* 1.105, famously). Berger also highlights 'obediential potency': the natural capacity we have for the vision of God which is nevertheless granted by divine grace alone. Berger (for all that he seems not to be a Dominican) is ferociously opposed to interpretations of Aquinas by Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner.

The book concludes with expositions of Aquinas on the Incarnation and the sacraments, with a coda on the relation of Thomism and mysticism.

The turning point, for those who began to study Aquinas in the late 1950s, was whether to read his work in the light of his sources, his predecessors, patristic as well as Jewish and Muslim, rather than in that

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of his successors, post-Tridentine commentators and early twentieth century Thomistic manualists (Gredt, Billot et al.). Either way, the themes that Berger highlights come to the fore, incommensurably, depending on whether one approaches them in the light of modern Aristotelico-Thomist metaphysics or in the much longer perspective of Aquinas's very complicated inheritance. Deliberately, even polemically, adopting the former approach, Berger offers a highly sophisticated version, impressively argued, albeit unlikely ever to be translated into English or, more generally, to make headway in convincing readers of Aquinas now, for whom the history of the (divided and conflicted) tradition cannot be ignored.

The market, in the English-speaking world, is currently flooded with books about Aquinas, introductions in particular: Brian Davies OP, *Aquinas,* in the Outstanding Christian Thinkers series which he edits (London and New York: Continuum, 2002); Aidan Nichols OP, *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to his Life, Work and Influence* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 2002); John Inglis, *On Aquinas* (Belmont, CA, Wadsworth 2002); and Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, *Knowing the Love of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press 2002); as well as one reissue: Gerald Vann OP, *The Aquinas Prescription: St Thomas's Path to a Discerning Heart, a Sane Society, and a Holy Church* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1999) and one translation, *Aquinas and His Role in Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002), by Marie-Dominique Chenu OP, done by Paul Philibert OP, the first English version of *St Thomas d'Aquin et la théologie*, published in 1959.

None of these books aspires to rival David Berger's, to the extent of offering a self-standing metaphysical theology with the intention of challenging and disrupting most of what goes on at present in Catholic theology. That does not mean, on the other hand, that these introductions do not recommend, more or less overtly, readings of Aquinas which would and should be interventions in current theology.

Gerald Vann's book first appeared in 1940, then entitled*Saint Thomas Aquinas* , published by Hague and Gill. He was thirty three years of age. This reissue includes 'minor editorial revisions', while (so we are also informed) 'Gerald Vann asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work' (he died in 1963). I doubt if he would have approved of the change of title (but then *The Divine Pity*, one of his finest books, is now *The Seven Sweet Blessings of Christ*).

Vann's purpose, as he says in the preface, is to interest the non-Catholic who finds himself 'repelled by what he conceives as too

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exclusively rational an approach to reality', a conception of Thomism which is 'understandable indeed, but tragically false'. He sets out to show how this conception of Thomism may arise and, by setting it against what seems a truer and more complete interpretation, why it is false.

Vann opens with an attractive account of Thomas's life. He sets the scene by citing the 'Lamento' composed (Vann says) by Thomas's brother Rinaldo: a Sicilian girl's lament for her lover who is going on the crusade, as Rinaldo was about to do. Aquinas belongs to a world of feudalism, chivalry, courtly love, etc., so Vann suggests. Later, in Paris, he was engaged in many intellectual 'struggles', sometimes having to face 'obscurantist opposition'. Vann recounts all the well known anecdotes. He concludes this account with a marvellous page on how Thomas's 'speculative thought and his mysticism were of a piece': his mysticism, like his theology, is a synthesis of the Pseudo-Dionysian *via negativa* and the Fourth Gospel's insistence that the Light has come into the world.

Borrowing freely from Etienne Gilson and A.D. Sertillanges, allying himself with Josef Pieper, Victor White and Yves Congar, Vann presents Aquinas as a theologian who belongs to Eastern as well as Western Christianity but whose legacy has largely been lost in post-Tridentine anti-Protestantism. Never explicitly saying so, and writing handsomely of many Thomists in the post-Tridentine tradition (including Cajetan: 'a first-rank theologian, but also [sic!] a biblical scholar and critic whose writings prepare the way, four centuries ahead, for the school of Lagrange'), Vann clearly lays the blame for the 'degraded' Thomism, so repellent to non-Catholics, on the 'radical infidelity' of self-styled Thomists: 'In the main ... the history of Thomism is ... a history of failure'.

In the second chapter, spelling out all the influences upon Aquinas's thought (Islamic, Jewish, Greek patristic, etc.), Vann appeals to the work of Gabriel Théry OP (1891-1959), one of the greatest of a remarkable generation of French scholars, in confirmation of the 'permeation' of Thomas's mind by the ideals of 'Dionysian "intellectual" ascesis'.

In other words, as long ago as 1940, Aristotelico-Thomism 'of the strict observance', was already being challenged by the alternative interpretation— this 'other' Thomas — highlighting his inheritance, 'Dionysian' rather than 'Aristotelian', contemplative and apophatic in his emphasis rather than deductive and syllogistic.

It is a trifle alarming, on the other hand, that Vann moves rapidly on, through Eckhart, Tauler and Suso and others in a Thomistic mystical tradition, to cite Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), the leading exponent of Indian religions, cultures and arts, who appreciates 'the presence of this trend [Dionysian mysticism] in Christian thought' and claims (Vann says) that 'the Hindu "deification"' is 'precisely what is

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meant' by Jesus (Matthew 5:48) and Paul (1 Corinthians 6:17). At this point, even students of Aquinas, such as Cornelius Ernst (born in Sri Lanka, as it happens, like Coomaraswamy), themselves very sympathetic towards this alternative reading, thought that Vann had gone too far.

It is only in the third chapter that we get to Aristotle, and really only in relation to Aristotle's ethics — 'essentially changed', Vann at once insists, by Aquinas's understanding of the primacy of the beatific vision. While stressing Aquinas's interest in the virtues, and his 'long and subtle treatise on the emotions', Vann insists even more strongly on Thomas's discussion of the suprarational mode of knowledge in general, and on the intellectual gifts of the Holy Spirit in particular.

Indeed, the place of intuition in Thomas's theory of knowledge 'has not received the attention it deserves': it is from an intuitive moment that the work of discursive reason begins. While agreeing that Thomas rejected Augustinian illuminationism, Vann insists that the first principles on which all reasoning depends are a 'participated likeness of the divine uncreated light' (ST 1.84.5). He insists on the 'connaturality' with moral principle which allows one to judge intuitively, without the necessity of reasoning, what the right course is to follow. He insists on the way of knowing which is 'suffering divine things', Pseudo-Dionysius's phrase (ST 1.1.7 ad 3m): 'the soul divinized by grace becomes "connaturalized"', there is a 'quasi-intuitive apprehension of the Godhead', all of which shows that Thomism is 'far from being the philosophy of Aristotle with a pinch of Plato'.

In the fourth and final chapter Vann, rejoicing that 'Christian reunion' was now on the Church's agenda, presents Aquinas, properly understood, as an indispensable help. Catholics have to break away from 'the rational interpretation of Christian truth that is characteristic of post-Renaissance Catholicism'; how we may do this, Vann proposes, is by beginning 'to emphasize the dynamic and the intuitive-affective elements' in Aquinas.

In short, with reunion with the Orthodox primarily in mind, Catholic theologians need to recover the contemplative dimension of Thomas Aquinas's theology, its patristic and especially Pseudo-Dionysian content, its openness towards Eckhartian mysticism and (even) to the perennial wisdom of the East. This is a very different reading from the Aristotelian Thomism taught in Roman Catholic universities and seminaries in 1940, or from David Berger's 'Thomistic synthesis'. It would also, Vann clearly hoped, show Anglicans, at least those at home in Tractarianism and the Cambridge Platonists, a much more attractive version of Thomism.

Of the half dozen introductions listed above, if I had to choose only one, then it would be Chenu's. Henry Donneau, a Toulouse Dominican, has recently demolished the 'myth' that the friars at Le Saulchoir ever

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formed a single school: see 'Le Saulchoir: une école, des théologies', *Gregorianum* 83 (2002): 433-449 (the whole issue is devoted to historical studies of French theology). As a *salicétien* (I went to Le Saulchoir in 1962), I cannot say that I ever actually supposed that there was only one version of Thomism taught there, then or earlier, or that it owed everything to Chenu. He had been teaching at the Sorbonne since 1944, then the Institut Catholique, not at Le Saulchoir. On the other hand, Chenu's friendship with medievalists like Daniel Callus and Beryl Smalley meant that his name was known and respected in Oxford. Indeed, Chenu lectured (in French) in Oxford in 1937: 'The Revolutionary Intellectualism of St Albert the Great', *Blackfriars* 19 (1938): 5-15.

Interestingly, Chenu's article is followed by 'Patristic Revival', in the same issue (pages 16-22), an article in which Gervase Mathew (then aged thirty) sets out, programmatically, much the same approach to reading Aquinas as we found in Gerald Vann's book: 'Only a decadent Thomist would think it treason to supplement St Thomas from the Fathers'; 'Ultimately the theology of the *Summa* is a synthesis between the Augustinianism of the 12th century scholastics and the new knowledge of the Greek Fathers that was slowly drifting westward'.

It is a sobering thought that the way of reading Aquinas in the light of his sources, biblical, patristic, Jewish and Muslim, which is barely admitted in British universities even now, was welcomed and practised by the young Dominicans in Oxford in the late 1930s.

Chenu died in 1990, aged ninety five and practically blind, enthusiastic and good humoured to the end. Apart from the clutch of learned papers published in the early 1930s, which established him as a scholar, his immense influence on the interpretation of Aquinas may be dated to his *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (first edition 1950; translated as *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, 1964, published in Chicago by Regnery and never widely accessible in Britain), still unsurpassed; and *La théologie au douzième siècle* (1957; partly translated as *Nature, man and society in the twelfth century: essays on new theological perspectives in the Latin West*, 1968), which, as the subtitle of the English version suggests, locates Aquinas in the intellectual and religious context regularly ignored by modern Thomists.

Aquinas and His Role in Theology , a text written more than forty years ago, at last available in a good English version, has lost nothing of its 'Aktualität', at least in the Anglo-American academic environment. As Paul Philibert says, polemically, Aquinas must be regarded as a theologian: 'To treat him as a philosopher and to attempt to distill a Thomistic philosophy from his writings through the use of interesting texts taken out of their theological context is a mistake'. (I hope we may

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return, not to David Berger, but to recent studies by the likes of Ralph McInerny, John Wippel and others!) Philibert cites Walter Principe, writing on 'St Thomas Aquinas' in *The Harper-Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (1995): 'Divorced from its living theological context, such a desiccated body of doctrines loses the force and vitality of Aquinas's thought and is at least partly responsible for the current neglect of his teaching in many quarters'. (I imagine Principe has Catholic institutions in mind, mainly.)

Chenu's book — only 150 pages — is interspersed with shortish but rich texts from Aquinas's writings as well as occasional pictures (photographs of 12th century monastic buildings, etc., reproductions of the well known pictures, as well as the delightful sketch of St Thomas, already with a halo, in a manuscript of his lecture course on Matthew, copied within twenty years of his death, looking nothing like any of the portraits).

The first chapter places Thomas in his family and social setting, insisting (as Chenu always did) on the 'evangelical revival' in the early 13th century, of which the friars, Franciscan and Dominican, were a prominent part. The second chapter takes us to Paris, the university context, theological work (for Thomas) as 'faith seeking understanding', *fides quaerens intellectum*, 'properly and truly an aspect of the spiritual life' ('You don't create a theology by adding pious phrases to abstract theses withdrawn from their textual and interpretive contexts': now, who ever did that?). The third chapter insists on Thomas as contemplative: contemplation as the beginning and end of his theological work as well as of his spiritual life. Here Chenu rescues the word 'contemplation' from the ancient Greek associations which alarm so many theologians today. (Chenu's doctorate dissertation, supervised by Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange in Rome, completed in 1920, deals with Aquinas's concept of contemplation.) The 'impersonal objectivity' of Thomas's analysis of theological contemplation should not hide his experience from us. On the other hand, modern dichotomies like mystical/ascetical and mystical/scholastic only conceal from us what he is offering: an invitation to disciplined communion with 'the disorienting mystery of God-as-Object'. The fourth chapter situates Aquinas in the politically fraught intercultural conflicts of his day. The fifth chapter inveighs against the 'devotional imagery' in which Thomas is presented as 'an abstract and solitary personality insulated from the rough and tumble conflict of his century'. Rather, in conflict with most of his contemporaries, he worked his way through to a 'religious metaphysics', an 'ontological optimism', in which 'the real distinction between essence and existence is the key theoretical problem', thus delivering a doctrine

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of creation respectful both of divine creativity and of human freedom. The sixth chapter introduces Aquinas's 'virtue ethics' as we might say now ('a disappointment for a certain kind of mystical mentality'). Here Aquinas follows Aristotle, 'the great theoretician of the life of wisdom'; though the 'originality' of Thomas's ideas about prudence (*phronesis*) are 'still poorly understood and poorly integrated by both moral theologians and spiritual writers'. The seventh chapter deals, very briefly, with the posthumous history of Aquinas's ideas, starting with the condemnation in 1277 of some of his positions as 'dangerous for those of simple faith'. The final chapter categorizes Aquinas's several different kinds of writing, concluding with the *Summa Theologiae* and the following comment: 'It would be a deadly misunderstanding ... to concentrate exclusively on the details of the Aristotelian structure of the work in a rigid and systematic way, while forgetting or skipping over the life-giving sap that comes from the Gospels and the Fathers' (again, one wonders, whom does Chenu have in mind?).

For one way of reading Thomas Aquinas, then, Chenu is still well worth studying. If doubt remains about the viability of this reading it will be put to rest soon. Perhaps even by the time this report appears, we might have *Saint Thomas Aquinas* volume 2: Spiritual Master, an English translation by Robert Royal (Catholic University of America Press) of the epoch making study by Jean-Pierre Torrell (1996) which once and for all establishes that Thomas Aquinas's theology is oriented towards contemplation and is as deeply 'spiritual' as 'doctrinal', not to say 'metaphysical'.

Torrell first establishes that, for Thomas, *sacra doctrina* is a school of God-centred living; there is no conflict between 'spirituality' and theology. Thomas's theology is all focused on the vision of God. Then, at great length, Torrell shows that Thomas's 'spirituality' is thoroughly *Trinitarian.* In the second half of the book he sets out Thomas's vision of the relationship of human beings in the world and in the sight of God. He offers a summary of Thomas's key themes: a Trinitarian spirituality; a spirituality of deification; an 'objective' and 'realist' spirituality; a spirituality of human development; and a spirituality of communion. Thomas's sources, he concludes, are the wisdom of Antiquity; Scripture; liturgy; the Fathers and especially Augustine; and his inheritance as a Dominican friar. It is a reading of Thomas Aquinas that is almost incommensurable with the kind of interpretation in David Berger's 'Thomistic synthesis', and one to which we hope to return.

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