A Man of the Book

Paul Murray OP

A Homily Preached in Memory of Fr Leonard Boyle OP
On the Feast of St Thomas Aquinas
At Blackfriars, Oxford

When news of Fr Leonard's death reached Canada, Michael Attridge, a young doctorate student at the Pontifical Medieval Institute where Leonard had taught for many years, immediately sent a letter of condolence to the convent of the Master at Santa Sabina. In his letter, Michael spoke of his first and only visit to the Vatican Library where he found himself overwhelmed by Leonard's kindness: "Fr Leonard offered to give me a tour of the library ... Our tour culminated with a visit to the beautifully frescoed Salone Sistino. Fr Boyle took me around to each of the paintings of the various ecumenical councils of the Church. At the end he asked me a question that I'll never forget—he asked me what was the common feature in each of the paintings. As I struggled, by reviewing all the paintings, to give an intelligent answer to his question, he simply and quietly said with a smile—'It's the Book, Michael'. I looked up at the walls and there in the centre of each of the paintings surrounded by the council fathers, was the Bible. He continued: 'The Book is always at the very heart of the Church's activity and life—never forget that'."

I have always instinctively thought of Leonard as a man of the Book, and not only because of his enormous talent as a paleographer. Most of the times, in fact, when I heard him speaking in Rome, in public, he was preaching the Gospel. Leonard was a man attentive to the Word of God—to God's Book—but he was also a man possessed of a great love and knowledge of books in general. In fact, one of Leonard's most notable characteristics was a curiosity about knowledge in all its forms. When he was here at Oxford as a student from 1947 to 1955, studying first at Blackfriars, and then at the University itself, he could hardly contain his many enthusiasms. "Naturally", he writes, "some of my mentors worried about me, seeing me as a magpie who picked up pieces of information here and there without any concentration or discrimination. But I went my own way encouraged by the dictum of Hugh of St Victor: "*Omnia disce. Postea videbis nihil esse superfluum*". ("Learn everything. Afterwards you will

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find that nothing is superfluous") The text itself from Hugh continues: "*Coarctata scientia jucunda non est*", which, I suppose, roughly translates as: "A narrow science is no fun"!

Owing to the great esteem in which Leonard was held, permission has been granted, or almost granted, in Rome, by the secular authorities, to have Leonard's remains buried in the lower Church of San Clemente, a very rare privilege indeed. And, what is more, I understand that the stone slab over his tomb will be inscribed with the words of Hugh of St Victor: *"Omnia disce. Postea videbis nihil esse superfluum"*.

Learn everything! Leonard was a wonderful Dominican and priest, and a true son of the Church. But he was also gifted, as I believe St Thomas Aquinas was gifted, with what I can only call a lay spirit or a lay genius. For, no matter how absorbed he was during his life with various religious tasks, Leonard never forgot what Yves Congar tells us the priest, in his enthusiasm for the Absolute, can often risk forgetting, namely "the true inwardness of things", the fact that "things exist in themselves, with their own proper nature and needs". A phrase Congar uses at one point to describe the layman strikes me as a perfect pen-portrait of Fr Leonard: "The layman is one for whom, through the very work which God has entrusted to him, the substance of things in themselves is real and interesting". At this level, needless to say, there is no contradiction whatever between the sacred and the profane worlds.

It could be said, perhaps, that I am not the most objective witness, but I would like to think that, in Leonard, the splendid fusion of apparently opposite qualities had something to do with his being an Irishman! The philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, brilliant though he was, only half understood this kind of fusion or co-incidence of opposites when he wrote in his private journal: "If I didn't know I was a genuine Dane I could almost be tempted to attribute the contradictions astir in me to the hypothesis that I was an Irishman. That nation hasn't the heart to immerse its children totally when it has them baptized; they want to keep a little paganism in reserve. And while usually one immerses the child completely, they leave the right arm free, so that with it he can wield a sword, embrace girls"!

Apart from the Irish factor or element in the mosaic of Leonard's life, another factor of great importance was, of course, the Dominican element. In the Order, both in Ireland and in England, Leonard was fortunate, from the beginning, in being able to imbibe an atmosphere of an authentic Christian humanism. And, as a result, he became what Congar would call a true spiritual son of St Thomas. "The intellectual beginnings [of St Thomas]", Congar reminds us, "were philosophical and naturalist, and the Arts-men of Paris looked on him so much as one of themselves that, when he died, they

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wanted his body, as well as the treatises he had promised them."

A huge number of Leonard's fellow-Dominicans attended his funeral Mass in Rome. But the Church was packed, for the most part, with lay people, many of them colleagues who had worked with Leonard when he was Prefect at the Vatican Library. They came in bus-loads! Italians, as no doubt you are aware, are not famous for remaining still and quiet during liturgical ceremonies. But, on this occasion, there was an extraordinary atmosphere of stillness and recollection. When, to the astonishment of everyone, Leonard had been removed, over a year ago, from his position as Prefect of the Vatican Library, the staff of the Library sent him a card with all their names written on the card, and with one simple message: "You are our Father".

One of Fr Leonard's great gifts was his ability to create, wherever he was working, a sense of a community of learning. And, by his own account, it was here at Oxford that he was, as it were, initiated deeply into that particular spirit: "In those years", he writes, "just after the Second World War, medieval studies had a considerable stature and following in the University because of an exceptionally gifted and inspiring string of teachers, of whom only Richard Southern now survives". Leonard listed other names, among them Beryl Smalley and the Dominican, Daniel Callus. "These medievalists", he says, "were friends of ours. They treated us as equals and always had time for us. They met us regularly for coffee or tea; they discussed, argued, disagreed with us—and encouraged us enormously ... there was always the certainty that if one ever asked a question, however silly, of one's mentors or fellows, one would not be laughed to scorn or ridiculed. There was, of course, plenty of ignorance all around, but at least in that supportive atmosphere it had a fair chance of becoming a "*docta ignorantia*"—[a learned ignorance]—which is about all that any of us ever achieves."

At my last long meeting with Fr Leonard, just as I was about to leave, he said: "Paul, there is something I'd like you to have". And he handed me a copy of an unpublished paper composed by himself and entitled "St Thomas Aquinas and the New Millennium". The paper opens with the following reflection on St Thomas: "Because of his towering reputation, it is easy to forget that Thomas was once an ordinary student, and that he was not at all perfect from the outset of his Dominican life". There still exists, apparently, a page or two of the personal copy Thomas made for himself when at Paris, of a commentary by St Albert on a text by Pseudo-Denis. It was done, Fr Leonard tells us, "less than brilliantly". For there are, according to Leonard, "notable lapses" in the thirty-eight lines of the manuscript. And even one entire line has been left out completely! "This is the young Thomas, then: industrious but far from infallible. It is one of the

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few occasions when we see Thomas as an ordinary Dominican student, struggling away like the rest of us, and not always getting things right."

In this, his last paper, Leonard returns again and again to the theme of human limitation, and also to the theme of "*docta ignorantia*" . The main focus of his attention is on St Thomas, but the personal note is unmistakable: "We are all", he says, "*in via* and hemmed in by our humanity." And he says further: "One never knows just when the stark truth of one's inevitable inadequacy vis-à-vis the Word will hit one. But come it will, when one is glowing all over at some accomplishment". And he adds, "There may have been such a moment in Thomas' life when, in an exalted state the cold wind of truth brought him down to earth".

The example Leonard cites is that moment (which may or may not be historical) when Thomas' fellow masters in Paris asked him to give a magisterial reply to questions then agitating the schools concerning the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. Thomas must have been delighted when, subsequently, according to the story, Christ himself spoke to him and said, "Well indeed have you written of the sacrament of my body, and well and truthfully have you replied to the question put to you". "But", Leonard notes, "what is not so well known and is hardly ever quoted is the qualifier that follows: '*sicut ab homine in via potest intelligi et humanis definiri*' ('Well indeed have you written of the sacrament of my body, and well and truthfully have you replied to the question put to you to the extent that that question can be understood by a man in this life and can be resolved in human terms')." Thomas is being given a lesson here in "learned ignorance"!

Fr Leonard comments: "Any apostle, any teacher, such as Thomas here, any purveyor of the good news of the Gospel ... will have to face up at some point or other to the cruel fact that at best one is a feeble and fleeting instrument, here today, gone tomorrow: "*Venit finis scripturae meae*—that's an end to my writing", Thomas would say to his '*socius continuus*', Reginald of Piperno, when, some three months before his death, he described all he had written as so much 'chaff'. It is something that we professional preachers and teachers all too readily forget, and which I suspect Thomas may have forgotten for a moment at Paris when writing on the Eucharist. We do not have an inside track to divine revelation, though now and then we may have an insight that excites a few colleagues or students for an hour or two ... we are human and, no matter how bright, irremediably at a disadvantage when faced with the divine".

And, of course, added to that, there are also all the complications of personal history which must be faced. "We have to be prepared", Leonard says, "for misunderstanding" and "even for rejection". He writes: "It is a plain, inescapable fact that we who claim to be apostles and preachers, are simply instruments of God's Word [and at some point] we seem to be

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thrust aside ... Should we therefore fall into a decline or become crippled with despair? Not at all. If we have always thought of ourselves as instruments of God's Word and not its masters, then there will be no room for despondency; rather there will be rejoicing that a new generation of instruments is at hand to take over from the old".

I was privileged to be with Leonard in the hospital for his last conscious hours. Although he said nothing especially pious, his single most repeated phrase was "thank you". And almost his last clearly pronounced statement: "I think I should go now". In honour of St Thomas, and in memory of Leonard, our brother, here to finish, is Leonard speaking about our common task today as preachers and scholars:

> We are attempting to make the wisdom of the past part of the present and of the future. It is an unequal task. But if we share our resources, we may at least give the past the possibility of a better future, and, God willing, we ourselves may be enabled to arrive at a *docta ignorantia* that gets *doctior* and *doctior* every day, because shared, humbly and happily.

Anti-Foundationalism and Radical Orthodoxy

Paul O'Grady

1. Introduction

It has often been claimed in the history of philosophy that great thinkers have been badly served by their disciples. Plato's genuine doctrines don't resemble the historical construction known as "Platonism", Aquinas is a more subtle and rigorous thinker than the Thomists, Hume more interesting than the positivists and so on. This claim is currently deployed for certain thinkers who collectively bear the signifier "Postmodern". It's held that Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze et al., are more subtle, deep and dialectically agile than their disciples. In particular, those who regard these thinkers as philosophers maintain that the use to which they are put in other disciplines—literary theory, cultural studies, sociology, and so on, fails to convey the depth of the *echt* thinker.

Be that as it may, it is true that philosophical ideas percolate into other disciplines and have profound general cultural impact, and this is especially true of the so-called postmodern ideas. Theologians in particular

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