

WHEREVER HE GOES: A RETREAT BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN by Marie-Dominique Philippe OP *T&T Clark, Edinburgh 2000. Pp. 350, £12.95 pbk.*

St Thomas Aquinas composed most of his works himself, either with his own hand or through dictation to a scribe; but quite a few of them were transcribed from the notes of people who heard him lecture or preach. One example of such a *reportatio*, as these things are called, is the commentary on the Gospel of St John: Friar Reginald worked up his jottings into a text, which Friar Thomas later checked and corrected.

Wherever He Goes was produced in a similar way, though doubtless the Brothers of St John enjoyed the advantages of modern technology when they made this *reportatio* of a retreat preached by their founder. The temptation to compare Père Philippe with St Thomas, even in such methodological matters, is irresistible. Now in his eighty-ninth year, he is one of the great Thomist metaphysicians and spiritual theologians of our times, and the debt of the disciple to the master is evident on almost every page of this beautiful book. The modern Johannine retreat demonstrates the inexhaustible fecundity of the medieval Johannine *reportatio*.

Père Philippe's purpose is to help his retreatants 'to enter, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, into [the] mystery of Jesus' (p.13), that is, to recognise Him in faith as the sacrificed Lamb, and then to follow Him, in love, 'wherever He goes' (cf Apoc 14:4). The means chosen to attain this end is a meditation on the Prologue of St John's Gospel, which Père Philippe expounds in counterpoint with the first eleven chapters of Genesis. In so doing, the twentieth-century Dominican practices a 'spiritual exegesis' that would have been familiar to his medieval confrère.

Like the Angelic Doctor, he searches not merely for different meanings in words but for deep connections between things, for the interweaving by the revealing God of the realities He has revealed (cf *Summa Theologiae* (I q.1 a.10). First in the history of salvation itself and then in Scripture, there is a divinely decreed and humanly discernible bond between the mysteries of creation and the fall (Genesis 1–11) and the mysteries of the Trinity, Incarnation and Redemption (John 1). 'As Scripture has but one principal author, the Holy Spirit, we have every right to draw such parallels, as did the Fathers of the Church' (p.77). Père Philippe applies this principle throughout the book and thereby shows what a truly 'ecclesial' exegesis should be. The 'goodsoil' needed for the Word to take root and bear fruit is the Tradition of Holy Mother Church: or rather it is the heart of Holy Mother Mary, for she who kept and pondered the Word in her heart *is* the Christian Tradition in its source' (p.67).

When he preaches on the Prologue, Père Philippe hands on to others what he himself has contemplated during a long and classically Dominican life of study, prayer, and meditation on the Gospel. The contemplative gaze is Catholic in its range, and so, too, is the preaching. The mysteries of the faith are presented in the beauty of their credal integrity: here is a spirituality that is at once Trinitarian, Christ-centred, Marian, ecclesial, Eucharistic,

eschatological. On the wings of John the eagle, Père Philippe soars to the summit of theology, to the heights of the Godhead, and contemplates Christ there as the Logos, the 'secret' of the Father (cf. pp.138ff). But then, with the impetus of the same John, he plunges into the depths of what the Fathers call 'the economy', and there he considers the Logos, in His manhood, as the Lamb of God, the divine Victim whose heart was wounded by human sin (pp.55f, 219f, 241f). He encourages us to see and love the Church as the 'verdant pastures' of the Shepherd-Lamb, the Mother who nourishes her children with the three foods of Scripture, the Eucharist and the will of the Father (cf p.37f). And as we continue on this journey through the Prologue, as we try to follow the Lamb wherever He goes, we find that we are in the company of the Blessed Virgin, who is the model and mediatrix of everything Christian. 'The Prologue gives us the gaze we ought to have upon Christ, and as Mary is given to us as Mother, it is her gaze we ought to have. The only true way to look at Jesus is to look at Him as did Mary. Mary's last gaze upon Jesus is at the Cross, where she remained in silence. This gaze is the great secret revealed by John at the beginning of his Gospel' (p.192).

While recognising the many similarities between St Thomas's commentary on St John's Gospel and Père Philippe's meditations on the Prologue, we cannot ignore the large number of obvious differences. *Wherever He Goes* does not cover the whole Gospel, nor does it offer a line-by-line exegesis. Père Philippe retains the conversational approach of the seasoned retreat-master and overflows with anecdotes and good humour, whereas St Thomas speaks in the sober and impersonal tomes of the Schools. (I suspect, though, as Chesterton once suggested about our Lord in the Gospels, that a bubbling merriment never lies very far beneath the surface of Thomas's smoothly flowing syllogisms; after all, does he not gloss the beatitude of Heaven as a *iucunditas consummata*?)

Still, despite the differences of style, the spirit of this book has an unmistakable affinity with the Johannine commentary of St Thomas, and indeed with all of his works. His name is not mentioned on every page, but his doctrine shapes all of its chief arguments and considerations. Père Philippe's Thomism offers a fresh allurements to those who have been repelled by that Cartesianised Thomism which turns the splendour of truth into the mechanics of correctness. In particular, he reveals the true Thomistic meaning of *intellectus* and thus the contemplative disposition from which the philosophy and theology of the Angelic Doctor, and for that matter the Prologue of the Beloved Disciple, come forth: 'Contemplation is the fundamental and ultimate activity of our intellect. The intellect is not intended primarily for possessing, for measuring, or analyzing. It is above all for receiving, admiring, and contemplating. Contemplation is the most fundamental capacity of our intellect. The intellect is ordered to love: it is made to discover the profound depth of mystery' (p.264). By its own definition, *Wherever He Goes* is a thoroughly contemplative work, for it helps us to discover the depths of God's love in the wounded heart of the Lamb.

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