

Comment:

Thomas Aquinas Theologian

Thomas Aquinas is mentioned twice in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. In *Optatam totius*, the decree on priestly formation, we read, in the chapter on the revision of seminary studies, that courses on dogmatic theology should be so arranged that biblical themes are the first to be expounded; then students are to attend to what the fathers of the Church (east and west) have contributed; next comes the later history of dogma, considered in relation to the general history of the Church; and finally, in order to throw as much light as possible on the mysteries of salvation, students are to 'learn, with the aid of speculative reason under the guidance of St Thomas, to penetrate them more deeply and to see their mutual connection' (par. 16). At the same time, students are to be taught to recognize the presence and action of these mysteries in the liturgy, and in the whole life of the Church. In *Gravissimum educationis*, the declaration on Christian education, in connection with universities and suchlike institutions, particularly those that 'depend on the Church', each subject of study 'should be treated according to its own proper principles, its proper method, and the proper freedom of scientific inquiry'. The result of this would be a deeper understanding of whatever the subject might be, bringing in 'new questions and investigations', leading to its being 'more deeply perceived how faith and reason accord in one truth, following the footsteps of the doctors of the Church, especially St Thomas Aquinas' (par. 10).

Optatam totius, on the revision of philosophical studies, speaks of their being 'guided by that philosophical tradition which is of permanent value', but without mentioning St Thomas. Given that, with very few exceptions, the bishops and theologians who composed the Council texts had all sat through courses of lectures in which Thomism predominated, this silence, and those two very discreet mentions, indicate deep revulsion against the neo-scholastic style of thought. Not surprisingly, Catholic theology after the Council turned in almost every direction except to the study of Aquinas. 'This wind of ecclesiastical change', as Anthony Kenny noted ironically, now that Thomas had been 'superseded, in the reading-lists of ordinands, by fashionable authors judged more relevant to the contemporary scene', might 'blow no harm to his reputation in secular circles' (*Aquinas*, 1980). With the emphasis on virtue ethics, as an alternative to the sterile conflict in moral

philosophy between Kantian duty and the utilitarian principle, Aquinas is increasingly discussed. But in the wake of philosophers such as Kenny, Elizabeth Anscombe, Alan Donagan, Peter Geach, Germain Grisez, and Alasdair MacIntyre, there is a wave of new work that John Haldane identifies as 'analytical Thomism'.

Perhaps it is becoming possible now even for theologians to read Aquinas independently of neo-scholastic hermeneutics. Admittedly, quite widely in university theology departments, the standard view of the *Summa Theologiae* is as natural theology (*prima pars*) and natural law (*secunda pars*), with Christology and the sacraments as an afterthought (*tertia pars*). However, in *Thomas Aquinas Theologian* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, pp. 302, hardback £28.95, paperback £13.50) Thomas F. O'Meara OP traces the patterns in the *Summa Theologiae* which open up a whole 'theological world' quite specific to Aquinas and not always visible in the succession and diversity of 'Thomisms' from the fourteenth century until now. The major studies that O'Meara lists are by Ghislain Lafont, Albert Patfoort OP, Otto Pesch, and Jean-Pierre Torrell OP. Whether their very substantial books will subvert the standard view is perhaps rather unlikely; they will be regarded, however unfairly, as survivors from the neo-scholastic era.

Two short pieces may prove much more subversive. Anna Williams, writing from the department of religion, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington, is light years away from neo-scholasticism. With 'Mystical Theology Redux: The Pattern of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*' (in *Modern Theology* January 1997) and 'Deification in the *Summa Theologiae*: A Structural Interpretation of the *Prima Pars*' (in *The Thomist* currently), she demonstrates, particularly in the footnotes in the latter, that she is quite familiar with traditional Thomist literature and controversies.

But her reading of the *Summa* as a paradigm of mystical theology, both an exhortation to contemplation and itself an act of contemplation, should make partisans of the standard view think again. Her insistence that the Five Ways show how Thomas uses ostensibly philosophical issues to advance his version of the classic patristic doctrine of sanctification would make even veteran neo-scholastics blink. She is, of course, not alone — Eugene F. Rogers Jr, Bruce D. Marshall and others, may be listed as outstanding practitioners, in the American academy, of this *theological* reading. Whatever Vatican II may have said, by silence as well as by prescription, there may be an incomparably richer interpretation in the offering of Thomas Aquinas the theologian.

F.K.