

A Century of 'Pontifical' Thomism

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Theological attention to St Thomas Aquinas, from over one hundred years ago to the present day, has featured in the work of a great number of theologians, many of them outstanding in the formation of twentieth-century theology.¹ There is, however, another important aspect to the revival of interest in Aquinas: the very effective official ecclesiastical promotion of Thomistic philosophy and theology led by the succession of popes from Leo XIII to John Paul II.

Pope Leo XIII

A point of entry for these observations is provided by the occasion of the inauguration of the Chair of St Thomas Aquinas at the Lateran University, Rome on 10 March 1963. Archbishop Dino Staffa, as Secretary of the Congregation for Seminaries and Universities, delivered a paper on the 'Revival of Thomism'.² His comments, as indeed much in the early years of the revival of Thomistic studies, had been largely inspired by another inauguration, that of the officially stated fundamental place of St Thomas in Catholic philosophy and theology by the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of Pope Leo XIII, dated August 4, 1879. The specific interest of the encyclical was the restoration of scholastic philosophy in general and that of St Thomas Aquinas in particular. It emphasized the Church's concern for teaching 'true philosophy' because of its relation to theology. Declaring false philosophy to be the root of 'many modern evils' and mentioning the esteem in which St Thomas had been held, the encyclical urged the revival of St Thomas' philosophy and of the spirit of investigation.

Staffa sees a precedent, at the Council of Trent, for the authority assigned to St Thomas by Leo XIII, since at Trent the *Summa Theologica* was called to the support of *Sacred Scripture*. The council, in a symbolic gesture, placed both side by side on the altar in the midst of the assembly. Jacques Maritain has remarked that the Thomist-revivalist words of the popes, especially of Leo XIII, have a drastic note to them, 'the pitch and strength of a cry', so great was the problem and its significance in the minds of the popes.³ Leo XIII solemnly affirmed that the Church had to return once again to St Thomas after long and sad experience, gained principally since the sixteenth century when the traditional path was abandoned and systems of thought multiplied with a consequent clash of opinions, even concerning the fundamental

principles of human knowledge. Staffa reports on Leo XIII's profound sadness caused by Catholic philosophers whose minds 'seemed to be invaded by the love of novelty', a situation which resulted in the neglect of the 'patrimony of ancient wisdom' in total favour of new ideas. The pope was concerned to bring the treasures of the past into enriching interaction with new thought.⁴

Pius XI

Staffa somewhat solemnly suggests that the providential restoration of Thomism 'stemmed the opening of graver and deeper wounds of Modernism' at the heart of the Church. Such comments evoke the tense atmosphere of theology in the earlier days of this century; he quotes words of the pope, Pius XI, from an encyclical written in 1923 when, in Staffa's observation, the Modernist crisis had been overcome, at least in its most acute and manifest form: 'There is no Doctor of the Church whom the Modernists fear as they do Aquinas.'⁵

Pius XII

In 1950, Pope Pius XII's encyclical, *Humani Generis*, confirmed the dispositions of his predecessors concerning the study of St Thomas as a means of resisting 'errors of the day'.⁶ Attending to this approach, Staffa draws on Maritain to state that Thomism is neither left-wing nor right-wing, and highlights a role for Thomism (almost thirty years ago) 'against the gravest error of our time, atheistic and materialistic communism'.⁷ He takes up St Thomas' lapidary phrase on 'the person' signifying that which is most perfect in nature⁸ and summons Thomism to the defence of the supreme value and liberty of the human person. The revived enthusiasm for Thomism gave rise to some high-powered and emotional acclamations and proclamations, among them the saying of Maritain, 'vae mihi, si non thomistizavero'.⁹ Strange thought indeed to our hearing, a scholar's need and even a presumed obligation to be a practising Thomist, thereby to avoid a woeful fate.

Aeterni Patris was the chief subject of reflection and commentary, on the occasion of its centenary, at the eighth International Thomistic Congress. The Acts of the Congress, published in *Studi Thomistici 10*, testify to the renewed attention focused on St Thomas and his teaching. In discussing the intention and programme announced by the encyclical, Cardinal Luigi Ciappi O.P. recognised the pressing need of *aggiornamento*, and of a more extensive knowledge of the biblical, philosophical, patristic and scholastic sources of the thought of Aquinas. He suggested that special importance be given to researching the encounters between the thought of St Thomas and the genuine thought of Aristotle and St Augustine.¹⁰ The philosopher, Cornelio Fabro, identified two basic intentions of Leo XIII's favour of St Thomas: (a) his designation as sole official Master of the Catholic schools of every level, and (b), the revival of Thomistic philosophy—the principal object of the declaration.¹¹

Paul VI

In November 1974, Pope Paul VI addressed his letter, *Lumen Ecclesiae*, to the Dominican Order. Again, the importance of St Thomas was cogently formulated, but in less effusive language than that employed by Leo XIII. Paul VI referred to the vertex of philosophy and theology reached by St Thomas, providing thereby in the Church a central hinge around which Christian thought could develop in secure progress.¹² In a statement, which leaves no doubt about the renewed official ecclesiastical regard for St Thomas, Paul VI declared that the Church, with her authority, convalidates the doctrine of St Thomas and makes use of him as a most elect instrument, extending in some fashion to him, who is outstanding among the doctors of the Church, the ray of her very magisterium!¹³ Attention is drawn to St Thomas' faithfulness to the Word of God contained in Sacred Scripture, to the Fathers and to the magisterium of the Church. He is therefore an 'authentic apostle of truth', full of respect for the value of reason and the results achieved by thinkers, pagan as well as Christian. Pope Paul emphasised that St Thomas' preoccupation with God is found not only in his philosophy and theology, but also and above all, in his prayer.¹⁴

At the Thomistic Congress of 1974, R. Spiazzi presented a lengthy and detailed study of the parallelism between *Aeterni Patris* and *Lumen Ecclesiae*. Leo XIII had spoken in glorious terms of St Thomas, the centuries-old authority conferred on him in virtue of his intellectual and spiritual greatness, and in particular of the consistent approval of the magisterium of the Church. Paul VI, confirming the testimonies and recognition of his predecessors and of Vatican Council II, referred to St Thomas as 'the authoritative and irreplaceable guide of philosophical and theological studies'¹⁵, and recalled (from Pope Benedict XV) that 'the Church had wished to prefer the doctrine of St Thomas, proclaiming it as her own'¹⁶. Spiazzi noted that Paul VI remarked with a certain sadness on the diminished understanding of the work of Aquinas, especially evident in his critics.¹⁷ However, the Pope recognised the limits in Thomistic teaching, notably in relation to medieval conceptions of cosmology and biology.

The extent of papal commitment to Aquinas is demonstrated in Paul VI's repetition of the urgent exhortation of Pius XI: 'Go to Thomas!' ('Itaque et Nos, quemadmodum Pius XI fecit ... hortamur: "Ite ad Thomam."')¹⁸ He strongly advocated the study of the works of St Thomas, not only to find in these 'rich treasures' secure nourishment of mind, but also, and primarily in his assessment, so as to encounter and examine a sublime and important doctrinal content, yielding abundant fruitfulness.¹⁹

Observing that whereas *Aeterni Patris* was an encyclical, *Lumen Ecclesiae* was a simple letter to the Master of the Dominican Order, R. Spiazzi indicated that Paul VI, after *Humanae Vitae*, wrote no further encyclicals, since he preferred to write 'apostolic exhortations', even for

some documents of great spiritual and pastoral value. He asserted that the content of the letter dedicated to St Thomas was without doubt of great importance²⁰ and noted, with emphasis, that Paul VI warmly recommended the translation of the doctrine of St Thomas into language accessible to contemporary culture and mentality.²¹

It is highly significant that Paul VI, in *Lumen Ecclesiae*, not only referred to but quoted from the two paragraphs in Vatican II documents which serve to promote the fundamental importance of St Thomas. The Pope recalled the Decree on the Training of Priests: the mysteries of salvation are to be examined and penetrated with the help of speculation and 'with St Thomas as teacher'.²² Paul VI proceeded to quote from the Vatican II Declaration on Christian Education which outlines the Church's objective in higher education. The Council seeks to demonstrate clearly the convergence of faith and reason in the one truth by a 'careful attention to the current problems of these changing times and to the research being undertaken', in a method which follows the tradition of the doctors of the Church and especially St Thomas Aquinas.²³ Paul VI drew attention to the particular significance of Conciliar statements that single out St Thomas as theologian, commending his doctrine to the universal Church.²⁴

In an address to professors and students of the Gregorian University, Rome (March 12th, 1964), Paul VI re-expressed the consistent ecclesiastical enthusiasm for the teaching of St. Thomas. He later took an extract from that address and re-presented it in *Lumen Ecclesiae*.²⁵ Again, here, the stress is on an understanding of St Thomas as an excellent teacher of truth and as a guide in research committed not only to the fundamentals of faith but also to healthy progress. Echoing an emphasis in *Aeterni Patris*, Paul VI wrote that his concern was not with a conservatism which would be both closed to the sense of historic development and timorous in the face of progress. What was in point, he insisted, was a choice founded on objective reasons which are intrinsic to the philosophical and theological doctrine of St Thomas, and which lead to the recognition of him as a gift to the Church, through the originality of his creative work which determined a decisive turning-point in the history of Christian thought, and principally in the realm of the relation between understanding and faith.²⁶

Both Leo XIII and Paul VI advocated the necessity of a faithful and open Thomism, rooted in faith and in Christian philosophy, yet possessing the capacity to encounter modern culture, ready to respond to questions and, where possible, to resolve problems in the philosophico-theological order, which are posed to the Church. Spiazzi considers that this coincided with what C. Fabro has termed 'essential Thomism'.²⁷ Spiazzi concluded that even though the Church has not stated so dogmatically, nevertheless, the repeated assertions and exhortations of the magisterium constitute a *locus*, a source, possibly even, he suggests, a branch of the Catholic tradition whose value cannot be ignored.²⁸

John Paul II

Pope John Paul II's conviction of the value of St Thomas, and his appreciation of his central place in the teaching of the Church, as well as of his usefulness in contemporary reflection has had, to date, many expressions. Abelard Lobato, a Spanish Dominican, identifies three circumstances which both indicate and contribute to the Pope's position.²⁹

Firstly, the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* occasioned much scholarly Thomistic reflection and new research in celebration of its centenary in the early months of John Paul II's pontificate. Secondly, from the beginning of his papacy, the Pope assumed a dedicated responsibility for the implementation of the Second Vatican Council's programme of renewal for the Church. Lobato recalls the role of singular significance attributed to Aquinas by the Council, noting Paul VI's commentary on this in his letter, *Lumen Ecclesiae*. The third circumstance regarded as favourable to the promotion of St Thomas in the current pontificate is the person of the Pope himself, formed in Thomistic philosophy and theology, and described as the first philosopher to accede to the Chair of Peter.³⁰

In practice, John Paul II has conveyed his appreciation of St Thomas at many levels: in ordinary catechesis, in addresses to students and professors, and in major documents. Particular recommendations of Aquinas have been made to pontifical universities and to Catholic students and teachers, notably in Rome, Altötting, Coimbra and Salamanca. The Pope's speech to UNESCO, 2 June 1980, in Paris, celebrated Aquinas as a man of Paris and one of the greatest geniuses of Christendom.³¹ St Thomas is frequently cited, either expressly or by reference, in the encyclicals, e.g. *Redemptor Hominis*, *Laborem Exercens*, and *Dominum et Vivificantem*.³² Similarly, the Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia* features aspects of the Thomistic doctrine on sin and on the sacraments of the Church.³³

The Apostolic Constitution, *Sapientia Christiana*, written to guide and regulate ecclesiastical universities and faculties, highlights the 'perennially valuable patrimony' which the Church possesses, and which St Thomas pre-eminently represents. The constitution includes a note which acknowledges St Thomas as the exemplary master of the theologian. In terminology inspired by Vatican II, the new Code of Canon Law nominates St Thomas as the especial master for those who are called to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of salvation (Canon 252, 3). Although these documents were in preparation before the pontificate of John Paul II, they were finalized and promulgated under his auspices.

John Paul II has offered contributions to various congresses organized for the study of St Thomas, whose value and giftedness, as interpreted by the Pope, tend to find evocation in three accentuated perspectives presenting him as an exemplary thinker, a man of profound

unforgettable doctrine, a master for dialogue with contemporary problems and culture.³⁴ There are many significant comments from John Paul II, expressive of his own understanding of St Thomas; the emphasis is on the fusion of profound humanity and profound Christianity in his thought and teaching. Moreover, prominence is given to the necessary encounter of the method and spirit of St Thomas with modern scientific achievements. 'The true progress of science can never contradict philosophy, as philosophy can never contradict faith.' —This is stressed as Thomistic teaching, but with a clear basis in the Word of Truth, Jesus Christ.³⁵

Speaking at the Angelicum University on November 17, 1979, Pope John Paul II, recalling Leo XIII's weighty statements, described St Thomas as the highest ideal of the Christian dedicated to research. In the course of the same address he exclaims: 'How beneficial it would be for the Church of God if also today all Catholic philosophers and theologians followed the wonderful example of the *Doctor communis Ecclesiae!*'³⁶ Later, speaking specifically of philosophy, John Paul II declared that that of St Thomas is rightly called the 'philosophy of the proclamation of being, the song in honour of existence'³⁷

Granted the solid philosophical foundation of St Thomas, it is as a theologian that he commands the greatest attention. A particular interest of John Paul II seems to be the theological anthropology of St Thomas, which, for example, is given prominence in the papal allocution to the participants at the International Congress of the Society of St Thomas, January 4, 1986. Having stated that the doctrine of the soul is the centre of Thomistic anthropology, the Pope declares that this anthropology finds its apex and its fundamental theological inspiration in the tract on the humanity of Christ.³⁸ Considering the recent and current concentration on theological anthropology, the Pope's concluding reflection at this congress is significant and noteworthy because of its suggestion of the importance of St Thomas, even in the contemporary developments in theology, and most specifically, in the formation of authentic Christology.³⁹ From a similar perspective, John Paul II asks in the course of his 1979 discourse at the Angelicum, 'Is not Christology perhaps the foundation and the first condition for the elaboration of a more complete anthropology, according to the exigencies of our times?'⁴⁰ In this same paragraph, he refers to his own *Redemptor Hominis*, relating his thought to that of St Thomas in the prologue of the *Tertia Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*.

The 'Angelic Doctor' is perhaps the most familiar of many titles, mainly honourable, assigned to St Thomas. John Paul II, with his interest in Christian humanism, highly appreciative of the theological anthropology of St Thomas, added another title to the already lengthy list of nominations, when he designated St Thomas, *Doctor Humanitatis* (Doctor of Humanity), at the eight International Thomistic Congress (1980). Here he referred to Paul VI's *Lumen Ecclesiae*, which underlined the value of St Thomas as Doctor for the Church. More than this,

however, he is significant as Doctor for humanity, since, in his assessment, St Thomas is always ready and disposed to receiving the human values of all cultures. This is presented as an aspect of St Thomas' breadth of thought and vision which demonstrates from his own time, his mastery in inter-cultural dialogue, but which further renders him an exemplar even for today's needs of cultural and intellectual dialogue.

It is in his doctrine concerning Jesus Christ that St Thomas' thought for 'humanity' is most assuredly expressed.⁴¹ Jesus Christ, the true man, yet Son of God, leader of humanity and Word of God. Whatever may be said of Thomas Aquinas, by popes, theologians, philosophers or historians, what is most fundamental is that Thomas the theologian seeks and sees in Christ the way of salvation for all people, because Christ the Son of God was made man. For Thomas, the event of the incarnation especially manifests the divine Word's assumption of humanity. He sought to understand the mystery of the humanity of Christ, the *Verbum caro*, and, as appreciated by John Paul II, the centre of his theology is Christ, the saviour of humanity.

- 1 Cf. 'St Thomas Aquinas Revisited', *Priests and People*, (February 1990).
- 2 Published in *The Thomist*, 26 (1963) 129–137.
- 3 Cf. J. Maritain, *Le docteur angelique* (Paris 1930) 168.
- 4 Cf. D. Staffa, 'The Revival of Thomism', *The Thomist*, 26 (1963) 132.
- 5 Encyclical *Studiorum ducem*, 29 June 1923: Acta Apostolicae Sedis (AAS) 15 (1923) 323.
- 6 Cf. AAS 42 (1950) 573.
- 7 Cf. D. Staffa, op. cit., 135.
- 8 *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29, a.3.
- 9 J. Maritain, *Le docteur angelique*, 168.
- 10 Cf. L. Ciappi, in *L'Enciclica 'Aeterni Patris' nell' arco di un secolo*, Atti dell'VIII Congresso Tomistico Internazionale, I, *Studi Tomistici 10*, (Citta del Vaticano 1981) 22.
- 11 Cf. C. Fabbro, 'Il significato e i contenuti dell' Enciclica *Aeterni Patris*', *ibid.*, 72.
- 12 *Lumen Ecclesiae* 13, AAS 66 (1974) 686.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 8–12.
- 15 From the discourse to the promotion committee of the *Index Thomisticus* (*Osservatore Romano* 20/21 May 1974), cited in *Lumen Ecclesiae* 1.
- 16 Benedict XV, Encyclical *Fausto appetente die*, AAS 13 (1921) 332, cited in *Lumen Ecclesiae* 23.
- 17 R. Spiazzi, 'Parallelismo tra L'Enciclica *Aeterni Patris* et la lettera *Lumen Ecclesiae* di Paolo VI', (Atti 1), *Studi Tomistici 10* (1981) 134.
- 18 *Lumen Ecclesiae* 3, referring to Pius XI, Encyclical *Studiorem Ducem*, AAS (1923) 323.
- 19 Cf. *Lumen Ecclesiae* 3.
- 20 Cf. R. Spiazzi, op. cit., 138–139.
- 21 Cf. *Lumen Ecclesiae* 26.
- 22 Cf. *Optatam Totius* 16 and *Lumen Ecclesiae* 24.
- 23 Cf. *Lumen Ecclesiae* 24 and *Gravissimum Educationis* 10 (A. Flannery translation).
- 24 Cf. *Lumen Ecclesiae* 24.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Cf. *Lumen Ecclesiae* 14.
- 27 R. Spiazzi, op. cit., 158.

- 28 Ibid., 159.
29 A. Lobato, 'L'attualita di San Tommaso nel pensiero e nell' insegnamento del Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II', *Doctor Communis*, 40 (1987) 3.
30 Ibid., 4.
31 Cf. *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II* (1980) I, 1639.
32 Cf. *Redemptor Hominis* 9, note 63; *Laborem Exercens* 14; *Dominum et Vivificantem* 10, 25, 37, 46, 50 and 58.
33 *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia* 11, 17.
34 Cf. A. Lobato, op. cit., 14.
35 John Paul II, 'Discourse at VIII International Thomistic Congress, 13 September 1980', AAS 72 (1980) 1044—1045.
36 Cf. 'In Pontificia Universitate S. Thomae Aquinatis, saeculo expleto a datis Litteris Encyclicis *Aeterni Patris*,' AAS 71 (1979) 1475.
37 Ibid., 1478.
38 Cf. AAS 78 (1986) 637.
39 Ibid., 637.
40 Cf. AAS 71 (1979) 1481.
41 Cf. A. Lobato, op. cit., 27.

Vision After the Sermon

John Bate

Well you know, within yourselves, the wrestle
with angel, but conceal the struggle
under arched white helmets, hide the juggle
of appetites that won't nestle
as gentle dreams in sleep-smoothed minds.
Come, venture into extravagant
strange places, trumpet like an elephant,
with quick fearful eyes spot exciting finds!
Virtue does not imprison, shut our lives
from generous actions, words that are wise.
Beneath the made-up beauty of your dress,
unsafe from strategems spirit contrives,
day by day, are you learning to despise
the born-with beauty of your nakedness?