

A THOMIST SOCIETY

THE Thomist Society of St Nicholas of Caen was begun in May, 1942, because some women students at the university in that town wanted to have a religious education on the same level as their intellectual training. They therefore decided to become disciples of St Thomas Aquinas, seeing that the Church names him as the surest master and guide.

The intention (and indeed the result) of the first lectures was to introduce the students to St Thomas's thought and principal theses, and to stimulate them to do more than merely consult him, in fact to go right into his monumental *Summa Theologica* and live in contact with his spirit and teaching.

Seeing for themselves how capable St Thomas was of bringing them to the knowledge of God and giving them the basic principles of their own lives, they opened the *Summa* and studied it over a period of two years, 1943-45. This work was directed by Père Fauvergue, the Dominican Prior at Le Havre. They took the first eleven questions of the *Prima Pars*, studying them article by article—God, his existence, his nature—and they were filled with admiration for a teaching so wonderful in itself and so exactly suited to their needs.

After this, being eager to continue these studies, and wanting to make more rapid progress, they asked for three other courses in addition to Theology; first, a course of Ontology, to treat separately the great metaphysical problems that too often kept them back; secondly, a course of Sacred Scripture; and lastly, a course of Spirituality, so that by studying the texts on which St Thomas's thought is based, they might understand it better, rise above the purely intellectual level, and succeed in truly living his doctrine.

The men students in their turn also wanted to be enrolled in St Thomas's school, and they asked the Society to admit them. As soon as they were allowed in, they asked further that this teaching should be made available to a larger number of their fellow students. In their opinion it was desirable to have special lectures for the benefit of those whose days were already very full and who would have neither time nor inclination to take up austere investigations into Metaphysics or Theology. Such lectures should be designed to explain Thomist doctrine more simply, expounding the great problems of Humanism, Art and Politics in its light. Full of zeal and hope, they drew up their programme.

Our students realised that the training given in St Thomas's school is primarily an inner training for the individual, which should enable

him to work out his intellectual and spiritual perfection. These men and women students turn to St Thomas because they feel, perhaps unconsciously, that in a world so dreadfully shattered, so subject to falsehood, so eaten up by feverish activity, it is necessary to learn again the art of thinking, and to give the first place in their lives to the quest and contemplation of Truth.

It is, too, the Thomist student's task to follow his masters, Cardinal Mercier, Gilson, Maritain, in their struggle against all the philosophies of dissolution. With them he has to fight Positivism and that false German philosophy which has been perverting minds beyond the Rhine for more than a hundred years, and has had only too much success among our own countrymen. 'It is the task of present-day French youth, more fortunate after all than the young men of earlier generations whose minds had been contaminated by Kant's subjectivism, to rediscover objectivity, i.e., the reality of things, to have the courage of their philosophical and religious convictions, to be proud of them, and to make their own weapons against every kind of anarchy and barbarism'.¹ It is also their duty to share this discovery with others. Who could keep such a treasure to himself? There are many of their fellow students to whom even study has so far brought nothing but disappointments—though perhaps a salutary uneasiness as well. The Thomist student should try to lead these into the light of natural and supernatural truth. They must use every means to bring about Péguy's wish: 'France and Christianity must go on'.

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That is why our students have set to work without taking the difficulties into account. Queen Matilda's motto, 'Diex aie', is theirs also. In fact, they managed to hold their first, rather secret, meetings during the occupation. Sometimes it was curfew when these broke up, and they would go home through darkened streets where the patrols' heavy boots echoed grimly. They succeeded in coming together again after the chaos of the war in Normandy, though their books and premises had been destroyed; though two of their best members had perished tragically, one in the fire of Caen on the evening of 'D-Day', the other killed at Fleury-sur-Orne on July 20th, just after welcoming the first Canadians; though personal losses have overwhelmed them and material destruction has forced them to scatter; in spite of the unbelievable complications of everyday life; in spite of the unsettling and discouraging spectacle of ruins and

¹ Collin: *Manuel de philosophie thomiste*.

endless distress.

Their first meeting after the liberation took place on November 30th, 1944, when they were present at the reopening Mass offered by Fr Geoffrey Lynch, a London Dominican who was then a British army chaplain in Caen. In January, Père Motte, the Provincial of the French Dominicans, undertook to give one lecture on Theology (*Prima Pars*, q. 12, the Vision of God), and one on Spirituality (St Catherine of Siena, a synthesis of Dominican spirituality); then Père Fauvergue took up again the lectures that had been interrupted on June 6th.

Then the Ministry of Reconstruction gave the Thomist Society one of the eighty huts just sent by America to the town of Caen, and later, two other smaller huts. Also English and American relief organisations (Quakers, Association of Friends of the French Volunteers), and friends in France and abroad gave material and moral help: a site, furniture, books, understanding and good will; the Society was able to set up its premises 'in the country', near St Nicholas's Church and St Stephen's majestic spires.

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Père Bouduelle, prior of the Le Havre Dominicans, inaugurated the new premises on November 13th, 1945; lectures began next day and continued in rotation for the rest of the year. The theological course was given by Père Auvray, who covered the tract on Beatitude and the first part of the tract on Faith. Père Joursaud gave the Scripture course, dealing with the first chapters of Genesis, the Canticles, the sapiential books and their echoes in the New Testament. In the Ontology course Père Lerouge brought Aristotle's metaphysics wonderfully to life, having first made an objective criticism of Descartes, Malebranche and Kant, and proved to us the importance of Logic. He also gave a few lessons on the idea of the religious life according to St Thomas Aquinas.

Various lectures were added to these courses. Speaking at the hut, Père Martin gave an exposition of the principles of better government according to St Thomas, and lectured at the university on Marxist Humanism. Père Fauvergue spoke on the idea of Creation. Père Régamey, who is the director of the review *L'Art Sacré* and a member of the Council of National Museums, spoke to the people of Caen on contemporary religious art and the reconstruction of old churches. In an extremely brilliant talk on 'Art and Spirituality', he underlined the principles by which the Christian artist should be guided. Lastly, the cycle was closed by M. G. Cazin, Commissaire au Remembrement, with his lecture on Wisdom for Directors, explaining

how useful St Thomas's doctrine is in practice, and how it provides a basic discipline for the study of the most pressing social questions.

The real finale of the year's work was on July 16th, when Abbé Gouhier, professor of philosophy at the Minor Seminary, presided over three meetings of a group of secondary school teachers. The problems they studied together were the teaching of a truly Christian philosophy, how to present Thomism, and the philosophical training of pupils, beginning with their secondary Arts studies.

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In 1946-7, the various courses were continued by Père Massonet, who had been professor of Theology at Mossoul for ten years. In the Theology course the tract on God was studied again, to fit in with an enquiry into contemporary atheism, and in Philosophy we treated some of the questions in the programme given that year at the Faculty: liberty, personality, the validity of knowledge. These courses were completed by studies in Spirituality, Action and Contemplation, Christian Humanism; and a further series of lectures, giving explanations of difficult points of religion or morality, was organised for a group of girls.

M. Cazin also gave two masterly lectures: 'Psychology for Workers', and 'Psychology for Employers'. He asserted that christian doctrine contains a philosophy of work, that present-day problems must be studied in the light of Christian spirituality, as defined by Leo XIII and summarised seven hundred years ago in St Thomas's philosophy; that we must endure the arid labours of Metaphysics if we are to deal with social questions. He announced his intention of running a centre for thought about life, together with an institution for the intellectual training and support of young students. This would be a Humanist Section of the Thomist Society, in which groups of students could resume discussion and examination of the problems of the day, investigating and solving them according to Thomist principles. If such an effort as this can only be kept up, a fountain of light and truth will spring up from the midst of our ruins.

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In this present scholastic year the first thing to be done, apparently, after these five years, is to restate the whole question. Numerous are the difficulties of material and organisation that have been met. Thanks to good advice and generous support, we succeeded in overcoming them and we gained most valuable experience in the process. Thanks also to results that are sure and very encouraging,

though not very obvious, the Thomist Society can now visualise still more clearly the task to be done.

Having tried to enlarge its teaching and to make it more accessible, the Society is now going to restrict and clarify its programme. The subjects which were not meant specially for students have already been taken over by the Caen 'Centrale Catholique'. The Thomist Society will devote itself to studying St Thomas's doctrine in the original text, strictly as he presents it, the better to grasp its substantial brilliance. It will strive to keep all its teaching up to university level, worthy of true philosophers, knowing for certain that this work, though austere and technical (perhaps indeed because it is so) is necessary and suited to the times. For that reason Logic has been added to Theology and Metaphysics, and a club is being organised in which students, teachers and all those who are interested in problems of philosophy and teaching, will be able to hold free discussions, explain their own work, look up references in the library or get them from the lecturers. For the same reason we are proposing to prepare our students for the examinations in scholastic philosophy at the *Institut Catholique* in Paris. If the Society can afford it every student who has his *licence-ès-lettres* from Caen University and a diploma in Thomist philosophy will receive a bursary allowing him to complete his studies in a Thomist Institute in Paris, Louvain or Rome.

It seems, too, that our little group's work is bound to gain in depth and effectiveness if it is stimulated by the example and help of older and more experienced bodies. With the idea of contact and exchange, we are turning to the Thomist Societies already in existence, especially in Belgium, England, U.S.A. and Canada.

We do this not only, indeed, that our students may gain personally from the contact, but because it becomes more evident to them every day that the lack of teaching and principles is at the root of all our evils, that 'the prime necessity for a lasting peace is to keep a healthy atmosphere, both intellectual and moral, throughout the world'²; also they are ambitious to join all those in the world who work to spread the knowledge of the glories of our Catholic teaching and the values and resources of our Christian philosophy.

Diez aie: God be their helper.

Caen, August 1947.

GERMAINE GRENET

(Translated by Dom Augustine Grene).

² J. Maritain.