

THE INFLUENCE OF ST THOMAS ON  
FRENCH POLITICS<sup>1</sup>

**W**HEN I was asked to speak in English before your distinguished society and to trace the influence of St Thomas on French politics, I thought: O, I can do that all right. My English is very bad, but it is good enough for that. I shall settle quietly into my chair, I'll repeat the question, I'll look at my audience in silence for some minutes, and I'll say: 'Nothing'. That will be all. That will be the only answer. But after some reflection I guessed that you would not be satisfied with it, you would find it too brief. Then I went on thinking. I remembered plenty of men who had been working with us at the *Vie Intellectuelle*, men who are now ministers, ambassadors, prefects, chiefs of party, deputies, and so on. I remembered that great lecture in which Jacques Maritain, now French Ambassador to the Holy See, had expounded his theory concerning Catholic and political action. André Colin, since a Minister, was present. Georges Bidault, now *Ministre des Affaires Etrangères*, was there too, and he questioned Jacques Maritain, and he himself gave us his idea as to what French politics should be like. A few years later I also met Maurice Schumann, who lived in London during the war and was 'le porte-parole de la France combattante' at the B.B.C. Every month he would write the chronicle of foreign politics in *La Vie Intellectuelle*, using various pseudonyms such as Maurice-Jacques, Sidobre, etc. I remembered my great friend, Robert Delavignette, political director of our colonies, and my coloured friend, Alwin Diop, *Conseiller de la République*, and my Indo-Chinese friend, Man-Ha, who was once Ho-Chi-Mihn's Minister. And a good many others. And I thought: if so many people enjoyed meeting Dominican fathers, it was not because we were clever. There was nothing special about us. It was because we were St Dominic's sons, and St Thomas's brothers. There was sense in the question: St Thomas is surely having a great influence upon French politics today. Let us see how.

If you like we will begin by recalling some historical details. If you wish to understand France and the life of the Catholic Church in France, you must remember that in our country we had no Reformation but a revolution. In your country, on the contrary, there was a Reformation and no revolution. The political life in England, if I understand it well, is an unceasing progress towards democracy. In France it is not so. The middle class did not at first fight against the king together with the nobility and turn afterwards against the latter to gain a greater freedom. But, on the contrary, it was at first

<sup>1</sup> The substance of a paper read to the Oxford Aquinas Society, 18th June 1947

allied to the king and only turned against him afterwards because he had forgotten his former promises. The revolution broke out. The French clergy accepted the absolute authority of the king. *Le trône et l'autel*, 'The throne and the altar' was their motto. The clergy expected to be helped by the king in the maintenance of Christian life in France and considered it their duty to help the king in their turn. And, at the same time, there were very few religious in France, and still fewer priests. The revolutionaries struggled against the clergy, the religious and the Church. At the beginning some priests and Catholics were on the side of the revolutionaries, but when the *Constituante* enacted *la Constitution Civile du Clergé*, the civil constitution of the clergy, the Catholics thought they had better ally themselves with the king and his friends against the revolutionaries. And, after the revolution was over, the king's cause looked more and more like God's cause. And even recently. You know the poet Verlaine who was a friend to Rimbaud. When he was converted and turned to Catholicism again, he also became a royalist; that happened in the beginning of the Third Republic; and in a letter to Rimbaud he said. *Et sept mois passées chez des protestants m'ont confirmé dans mon catholicisme, dans mon légitimisme*. 'The fact that I have been living with Protestants for the last seven months confirms me in my Catholicism, in my legitimism, that is my royalist convictions'. Verlaine's attitude did not differ from that of most Catholics. My father was a republican and not a Catholic; and my grandmother was a Catholic and a royalist at the same time.

But the Catholics were not all like this. A century ago more and more Catholics, priests and monks became democrats and republicans. The Church was not always kind to them, but they stuck to it and they are now numerous and powerful. And the first of them, whose name will remain a symbol for us, was Father Lacordaire, a Dominican and brother of St Thomas. It was the time of the *Monarchie de Juillet*; Louis Philippe was king. Three friends, Lacordaire, Lammenais and Montalembert, founded a Catholic paper: *L'Avenir*. Its motto was: 'God and Freedom'. An idea inspired it: the Church must regain the confidence of the people. It has to be set free again. It must not be the king's servant, nor the prisoner of any party. You know the rest. The thoughts and the doctrine did not always agree with the generosity of the idea, and Lammenais's sayings were sometimes bold and did not spare the Holy See itself. *L'Avenir* was condemned by Pope Gregory XVI on 15th August, 1852. Lammenais refused to submit; Lacordaire yielded. He then began to study St Thomas's theology more thoroughly and re-established in France the Order of the Blackfriars which had been suppressed during the revolution.

In 1848 the third, or rather the second revolution broke out in France. This time the clergy was rather on the side of the revolutionaries because the July government had not proved itself thoroughly Catholic and Mgr Affre, the Bishop of Paris, was killed on the barricades fighting for the people. Lacordaire, together with Ozanam, founded a new paper: *L'Ere Nouvelle*, this time against Montalembert.

You know Frederic Ozanam. He founded St Vincent de Paul's Society. The main purpose of the Society was not only to help the poor. It consisted also in a study of Christian truth and in an inquiry into what that truth demanded from men, especially in connexion with their social life. And it was in order to raise no contradiction between words and action that Ozanam decided to help the poor at every meeting. His ideas were bold and favourable to progress. You will judge for yourselves: during the 1848 revolution he is on the side of the revolutionaries; he thinks that the spirit of the Church is more important than the social institutions granting the Christians a peaceful life. He is the actual animator of the *Ere Nouvelle*, much more so than Lacordaire. But every Catholic did not agree with them, and Montalembert, once a friend of Lacordaire's, began to fight against him. He did not trust the Republic and helped to make of Napoleon III first a *Président de la République*, and then Emperor.

You know how the Second Empire was fatal to France. But it was still more fatal to the French Church and that is the question here. Except for a few Catholics, such as Father Lacordaire, who always refused to meet Napoleon III, the clergy was favourable to the Second Empire and cooperated with it. And when the Third Republic was proclaimed, after the 1870 war, the clergy and most of the Catholics stood at the side of Marechal MacMahon and of the monarchists. That is a reason for the hostility of the workers towards the clergy. But not every priest, not every Catholic took this line. Very soon after the war and the Commune, two men did something for the labourers: Albert de Mun and Latour du Pin; both belonged to the aristocracy and had once been officers. Their work was very charitable, wise and efficient. They founded the *Cercles Ouvriers* which grouped many workers together. Their method, however, is no longer possible today. They thought that the educated gentlemen had to go to the people and give them what they themselves had received by birth or study. They did not think that the workers could rise by themselves and that their duty was only to help them progress. They wanted to work for the people, and with their cooperation, but not really through them, as we wish to work now. They nevertheless performed a useful work as pioneers and opened

the way to their successors. These were very democratic; and their name, *La Démocratie Chrétienne*, the Christian Democracy, is very significant. They want to cooperate with the republicans and the workers. They do not want the altar to be tied to the throne, least of all when the throne is unworthy. They may make some confusion between democracy and religion. And, although I do not agree with them, I think it was a good thing that some men had such an opinion at a time when most Christians were thinking differently. They had their reward when Leo XIII asked the French Catholics to accept the Republic as the legal government. Mgr de Lavigerie, Bishop of Alger, was the first to give the *signal de ralliement*. The enemies of the Republic were furious, but the work of the Christians who had wanted a reconciliation between the Church and the modern world had not been fruitless. That was a reconciliation between the Church and the workers, the early republic having been, as you know, conservative. The work went on however with the Christian trade unions, *Secretariate Social*, the *Semaines Sociales* and the *Chronique Sociale*. All these men, accustomed to work together in these various organizations, formed a great association, *Le Sillon*, whose first leader was Marc Sanguier. They aimed at a reconciliation with the workers and, maybe, at the opening of their minds to modern ideas. Certainly they sometimes forgot, at least in their words, the transcendence and the eternity of the Church and of the Faith; and *Le Sillon* was condemned by Pius X in 1906. But, as the members of *Le Sillon* were good Catholics, they all of them submitted and obeyed. What were the results and reward of their attitude? In any town or village of France, between 1920 and 1940, you would always be sure to find a former member of *Le Sillon*, having submitted and obeyed, at the head of some social organization, working in a good spirit and helping efficiently the poor and the invalids.

These were the men who, after the first world war, were the animators of Catholic life in France. A group played the leading part: A.C.J.F., the French Catholic Youth Association. They had many enemies, even amongst the Catholics; for instance in the federation whose chief was General de Castelnau; they did not clearly see the difference between political and Catholic action and, of course, they only led a conservative politic. Do not be mistaken. I am not against the conservatives. I am no revolutionary. But you may have observed that the action of the Catholics has always been confused with the political Right, and one has had to put up for years with this perpetual compromise. It was most acute at the time of the *Action Française*, with the party of Maurras, Daudet and Bainville. Many old *Action Française* supporters who did not love

the A.C.J.F. were at the side of General de Castelnau.

But this association was efficiently helped by Pope Pius XI. At the same time Catholic Action began in France. The first group to be constituted was, as you know, the Young Catholic Workers (J.O.C.); it was followed later on by other specialised movements: Young Catholic Farmers, Young Catholic Middle Class and so on. All these movements together constituted the A.C.J.F. The Catholic trade unions also got moving. And after the liberation of France these various groups gave birth to a new party. Members of these groups would come frequently to our Dominican house, at the head of which was Father Bernadot, and would work with us, once a month, on a Saturday afternoon. They would read our reviews, our weekly paper, *Sept*, and *Temps Present* which was to replace it later on.

You now see the reason why I have been speaking so long of the Catholic social movements, from Father Lacordaire to Father Bernadot. First because you would be mistaken if you believed that the M.R.P. was quite a new movement. It is only the result of a very long preparation which has been fermenting for more than a century. It is stronger than most people suppose. Of course the M.R.P. is not the only party in which social Catholics can be found. Several belong to the Socialist party. A few are even Communist. I shall be speaking of it again before long. Secondly, because this Catholic social movement was helped, in the beginning, by a Dominican father, Father Lacordaire, and was carried on lately by another Dominican father, Father Bernadot, and some others such as Father Chenu, Father Delos, Father Ducatillon, etc. Every Dominican father is a brother of St Thomas. It was a development of St Thomas's thought that these people expected from them, and once more, there was sense in the title of this paper which implied that St Thomas had an influence upon French politics.

But in what way? And are we justified in saying he was the only one to have influenced these men? No, we are not justified in saying this. Before St Thomas began to make himself felt we find another influence which was very strong in the beginning of the twentieth century: I mean Maurice Blondel's. He was an *Ecole Normale* student. In order to get his doctor's degree he wrote a thesis upon *l'Action*, which was to have a great influence upon the Christian minds. Blondel considered action in its concrete reality, in the way of a phenomenologist, and we can say that Blondel was the first French phenomenologist. With a penetrating dialectic he showed that everything was implicated in any action: love of one's family, of one's native country, of humanity, and finally of God. While, up to that day, the faith of the Catholics had too often been separated from everyday life, Blondel told them that everything was

to be one in God's love and taught them how, starting from human reality, one could gradually ascend to God himself. But that was contrary to the common Catholic thought in France and Blondel had many theological enemies. They accused him of immanentism and of overlooking the transcendence of faith. The Catholic Church did not condemn *l'Action* but some authorities advised Blondel not to reprint his thesis and to keep silent for a few years. He became a professor at Aix en Provence University and published nothing but articles. He published at last his great work: *La Pensée* (2 volumes), *L'Être et les êtres* (1 volume), *L'Action* (2 volumes), and *L'Esprit Chrétien* (1 volume).

Is Blondel in opposition to St Thomas? It would be wrong to say this. Blondel had several thomist friends and amongst them a Dominican, Father Beaudoin, who was Regent of Studies. Father Beaudoin advised him to write his work twice, first in his own way, and secondly in agreement with St Thomas's thought, and Blondel did this. But I must admit that the first version is much better than the second. Nevertheless, he showed his good will in following Father Beaudoin's advice. And anyone may be a Catholic, and a Catholic philosopher, without being a thomist. In fact Blondel is a disciple of St Augustine. In St Thomas's philosophy the emphasis is upon intelligence and truth as a primary basis; in Blondel the emphasis is upon love and the good. That is not to say that Blondel's philosophy is false, any more than St Augustine's philosophy is false. But, to my mind, a real thinker, having once determined his own philosophical approach, will like to meet a philosopher who has chosen a complementary path, for the very difference of emphasis may well help him to a more perfect apprehension of objective truth. I am a thomist, but I rejoice in meeting Maurice Blondel whose Augustinian spirit helps me to a better understanding of my own thomism. But every thomist philosopher is far from being as liberal as I am. There is nothing particularly thomist about this intransigence, but that is how it is. As a matter of fact, too many of Blondel's disciples are no more liberal, and they are wrong too. It must be admitted that Blondel had gathered about him those who were against St Thomas, and if Blondel were the only philosopher amongst the social Christians, the only reply I could give to the question, 'What is the influence of St Thomas upon French politics?' would be, *Nothing*.

But Maurice Blondel was not the only philosopher in the Christian social movement, at least during the last years. The condemnation of *Action Française* by Pope Pius XI had many good results, and one of the greatest of these was the new orientation of Jacques Maritain's thought. Such is the reward of those who submit to the

Church. We have already seen it in the case of *Le Sillon*. It was the same with the condemnation of the *Action Française*. Those who had obeyed discovered some new aspect of the truth which they had not suspected. It was so in the case of Jacques Maritain. He had always been interesting, but how much more thrilling and true he became when, after the condemnation of *Action Française*, he no longer remained Maurras's disciple. Up to the year 1927 he was only a doctrinal philosopher. St Thomas was not content to be a doctrinal philosopher; he was a creator. And Jacques Maritain himself became a creator. It was not enough for him henceforth to repeat what had already been discovered by St Thomas and his commentators. With the greatest loyalty to the spirit of St Thomas he considered the problems of life in our own time and, always in the same spirit, gave an answer to them. Thus he wrote those books which many must have read: *Primauté du Spirituel, Religion et Culture* (I and II), *Du Régime Temporel et de la Liberté, l'Humanisme Intégral*. And that was how he began to influence the social Catholics. You remember that it was at a lecture by Jacques Maritain that we met Georges Bidault, Maurice Schumann, Emmanuel Mounier, André Colin, etc. And the *Vie Intellectuelle* and *Sept* would not have gained such a great number of friends had not we worked in agreement with Jacques Maritain's ideas.

What are the chief points of Jacques Maritain's thesis? I shall recall four of them:

(1) Religion is not bound to a particular culture. Still less to a definite politic. There is no Catholic party.

(2) In the Middle Ages the Christian faith helped to build a civilisation which was to be called Christianity. Now, we have to show how faith transcends civilisation. Civilisation is of its nature human. Faith is Christian and divine.

(3) A Christian has got two duties to fulfil: one is his work inside the city, and the other his work inside the Church. In both he must be a Christian. But in the latter he plays a part in the Church, in obedience to the Catholic doctrine and to the Catholic hierarchy and only in company with other Christians. In the former, enlightened by faith and braced by the hope in Christ and the love of the Church, he will carry on his work of discovery under his own responsibility. He will not merely put on a Christian gown, but he will work in a Christian spirit, and he will cooperate not only with Christians but with every one whose final purpose is the common good of the city.

(4) The present tendency is towards a re-organisation of work, a regrouping of the workers, and a redistribution of wealth.

These theses were a liberation for the social Christians. Men such as Etienne Gilson, Emmanuel Mounier, the late Father Bernadot

helped to expand Jacques Maritain's influence. Such are the men who have been working during the war and the occupation, either in England and America or in France in the *Résistance*. It is through them that St Thomas has had a great influence upon French politics, even upon men who neither knew nor loved him.

Now let us see what this influence may be.

Of course we must have a definite idea of St Thomas's philosophy. And those who have not are wrong when they pretend to be thomist. They think that St Thomas had an intuition of being which made him able—as well as themselves—to discern the law of being, to which every creature is submitted owing to the fact that everything is being. And they consider it impossible to find anything very new. In their idea everything is submitted to what they call the principles of common sense. They do not think that anything very new has happened since St Thomas. In what concerns knowledge nothing new in Descartes or Newton, nor in modern mathematics or sciences. Nothing new in Hegel and modern history, but an application of their principles. In connection with action, nothing new in the discovery of the New World, in modern economy, in the workers' organisations. This is not St Thomas's thought. St Thomas was not proud enough to pretend he had grasped the laws of truth; he only defined, with great humility, the laws of the obedience of human mind to truth. He knew that the human mind does not constitute the measure of things, but that which is actual constitutes the measure of the human mind. Of course St Thomas knew something to be eternal: the fact that God is the measure of things and of human intelligence, because he is the first being, the single being, whose essence is to exist. But the life and run of the world, and the process of intelligence, will make it easier to grasp, every century, what God's first and single measure is. And there is no other way than to accept the world and its history such as they are.

And if faith is transcendent to the world, and if the world has only to become human in order to prove this transcendence, we have to accept the world as it is, and faith as it is.

Thus I discern three points in French politics whereby St Thomas's influence can be traced.

The first one is the relative independence of the various parties towards faith. It is relative indeed because Christians cannot fight against their faith and against that good of which faith is the mainstay. And so there is no Catholic party in France, M.R.P. not being indeed a Catholic party. The Catholic bishops would not accept it and M.R.P. would not accept political directives from the authorities of the Church. The task which the M.R.P. proposes to itself is the good of the city and not that of the Church. The latter cannot



be opposed to the former but it can no longer be considered as its measure. And in fact M.R.P. is not the only party in which Catholics are fighting. You could find Catholics in the R.P.F. whose chief is General de Gaulle, in the P.R.L. and other parties of the Right, as well as among the Radical Socialists. And it is an odd thing that in the last elections many Catholics voted for the Radicals, while many non-Catholics voted for the M.R.P.. Many Catholics, even amongst the leaders belong to the Socialist party and it has been said by such men as Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson that the political book which was most in agreement with St Thomas's doctrine was *A l'échelle humaine* by Léon Blum. A few Catholics, intellectuals as well as workers, can even be found in the Communist party. The priest who converted them did not dream of compelling them to give up their party; it was admitted even that Catholic workers who had to fight together with Communist workers might enter their party. And some Catholic writers or professors entered the Communist party. And the Catholic authorities did not ask them to sever their allegiance. They have finally constituted another political movement, which is not a party but a review and more than a review: *Esprit*. Many Catholics and some non-Catholics belong to it. Their chief is Emmanuel Mounier. They do not agree with the Communist's materialism and atheism, but they do agree with their social reforms.

I do not mean that every Catholic belonging to any of these parties is St Thomas's disciple or does so in accordance with St Thomas's doctrine. Of course he does not know St Thomas's opinion on this subject. But I mean that if Catholics can belong to various parties and still remain Catholics, it is owing to Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, Emmanuel Mounier, and others whose sayings and writings have made them familiar with St Thomas's thought. That is to say: the service of the city is one thing and the service of the Church is another. If we keep this distinction in mind we shall not be tempted to speak of a Catholic party.

But if there can be no Catholic party there are still Catholic political movements where Catholics are more numerous than non-Catholics. The M.R.P. and *Esprit* are movements of this kind. And of course St Thomas's ideas are more alive in those movements than anywhere else. In what way? Chiefly in regard to two points:

The one concerns the meaning of the human person. Our time does not differ very much from St Thomas's. You have read that St Thomas had been fighting against the Averroists, whose leader was Siger de Brabant. The Averroists thought that there existed only one *intellectus agens*, common to all men. and that the individual lost his personality. St Thomas, on the contrary, considered that every man

had an *intellectus agens*, a personality, a destiny. Every man is loved by God, redeemed by Jesus Christ. Now, the Averroists are still with us today. Let me try to explain the meaning of this quaint word: *intellectus agens*. The modern translation might be: totalitarianism, a theory according to which the individual man is lost in the crowd, has lost his personality, is not loved by God (there is no God indeed but an idol). These movements, which include a good number of Catholics, are fighting for the liberation of personality. And this is the reason why they are very much interested in the writings of St Thomas's disciples, when they are treating the question of the rights and duties of man. Such is Jacques Maritain's book which I have already mentioned: *L'humanisme intégral*.

The other point concerns the duties of property and its transformations. The fact that one fights for the rights of the individual does not mean that one overlooks the rights of the societies or communities to which man is necessarily bound. And of course the individual is allowed to possess his own property and wealth, but he will possess it for the good of all. And the development of industry will certainly modify property itself. It is no longer a single individual property but, more often, a common property. How so? It is not my job to tell you here. But it is my duty to remind you of St Thomas's thought according to which individual property must be at the service of all. And such is the second principle of action of those who are working with the help of St Thomas's thought.

This rather lengthy account has perhaps shown you the influence that St Thomas has, and must continue to have, on French politics.

We can, of course, look at this influence in two ways. In one way everybody thinks, and you yourselves have probably thought, that in the closed circles of Catholics and thomists we pretend that the influence is great, while in reality it doesn't exist. We say: St Thomas is a great thinker and a great theologian. He has built up a huge system in which everything has its place, politics like everything else. And since we find in this system the basic principles of politics, Catholics have only got to state them and follow them and everybody else will be willing to adopt them. And in fact certain people do behave in this way. But people in general find that St Thomas lived at a time when America had not been discovered, nor yet electricity, aviation, the atomic bomb . . . nor modern economics, nor capitalism nor yet communism in the sense we now understand it. And therefore they think that the world St Thomas organised has nothing in common with their own and say that such 'thomists' don't interest them. In fact these pretended 'thomists' are the worst enemies St Thomas has: they have forgotten one very important thing—one which Etienne Gilson constantly emphasises: St Thomas

was a great enough philosopher not to put forward any system. There is a thought, a metaphysics and above all a theology of St Thomas but there isn't a system.

The other way of looking at St Thomas's influence is very rarely envisaged; but it is the way in which the influence is great. St Thomas helps our minds to live the full life of the faith; and our intelligence, thus aided, is made free by its recognition of truth. For Christ has said to us, 'The truth shall make you free'. And once our intelligence is freed we are capable of working out (for ourselves) what must be done if the world is to be organised politically in a way that will allow men to be free, and to set the faith of Christ alight with freedom.

Is St Thomas actually great in himself? No! Only our Lord has that greatness. St Thomas is great in as much as he is a disciple of Christ, in as much as he gives Christ to us. But by the power of his faith penetrating his writing and thanks to his intelligence carefully collecting together the fruits of the tradition of Christian thought and those of humanists and even heathen thought, he has shown us how a world which was fairly simple and limited, the world known to his time, had been able to be penetrated by the faith. And if we are his disciples we inherit the knowledge of that faith and we must be inspired to do again for our complicated world what he did for a simpler one. Every time a French Christian turns to St Thomas in order to get a deeper insight into his faith and takes him as a model on the task of making the faith live in the world, he contributes to the only real influence of St Thomas. But it is not St Thomas whom he wishes to triumph over the world—it is Jesus Christ.

For our own world is living through a period of tragedy. Will the faith yet remain in the world of tomorrow? That is the first question to ask ourselves. And will men still be able to live freely in that world?—that is the second. And if we want to answer *yes* to both questions we have to make Jesus Christ known in every possible way and to make him lived by the greatest possible number. And when this is so politics will feel the effects of this presence of Jesus Christ. Once again the words of the Gospel will prove themselves. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things shall be added unto you.'

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