

DOMINICANS AND HUMANISM

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The past decade has seen a quickening of intellectual life among Italian Dominicans of the Roman Province, leading to certain initiatives and achievements which deserve to be better known than they are to Dominicans outside Italy and to others interested in the work of the Order. I refer to the activities of the group of friars, whose centre of operations is the splendid old "studium" of their Province at Pistoia, near Florence, who produce the excellent bi-monthly review *Vita Sociale* and have revived and wonderfully transformed the old historical journal of the Italian Dominicans, *Memorie Domenicane*. It is to this latter production that I want, in these brief notes, to draw attention; and along with it, to two important books from the same Pistoian workshop dealing—in very different ways and in one case, it is true, only indirectly—with that same turning-point in the history of Catholicism, and indeed of western culture as a whole, on which the historical research that has gone into the new *Memorie Domenicane* (= *M.D.*) has tended to concentrate—the turning-point indicated in phrases like 'the rise of humanism', where this term is taken to signify a typically *non*-medieval outlook expressed in a new form of culture whose 'rise' coincided *inter alia* with the decline of medieval scholasticism. It need hardly be said that such a use of terms begs many questions, but that it answers to *some* historical reality needn't be doubted; it being surely unquestionable that Petrarch and Erasmus, though separated by nearly two centuries, were 'humanists' in very much the same sense, and that this entailed in both of them a strongly critical attitude to the scholastic culture and mentality. And if this humanist anti-scholasticism has played an important part in the history of theology—or more precisely, of the view taken of Catholic theology by educated Europeans down almost to modern times and either side of the Catholic/Protestant divide—this is not, of course, because men like Petrarch and Erasmus counted for very much as theologians, but because of the very close historical involvement, since the thirteenth century, of Catholic theology with a 'scholastic' method and mentality.

This method and mentality, as characteristic of a way of doing theology elaborated and established within a datable period, can be historically explained (so far as such explanation goes), and the same is true, of course, of the humanist counter-reaction. And

here it is not irrelevant to make three points with regard to that reaction. First, it did not arise from within those institutions which had collectively accepted the 'scholastic' way of doing theology (or philosophy or anything else); it was not a product, that is, of either the Universities or the Mendicant Orders. Petrarch, the great pioneer, though in youth he read law at Bologna, was not a University man, but, until middle age, an official in the Curia. His scholarship was as non-institutional, as purely personal an achievement indeed as Dante's had been. And it was much the same with most of the other Italian humanists; many were court officials of various kinds; some were lawyers and some clerics; very few were friars. Secondly—an obviously connected point—these men for the most part kept clear of formal theology.¹ Dante's great raids into the theologians' preserves had no counterpart in the fourteenth century; the first humanist to show anything like the same audacity was Lorenzo Valla (1407-57) in whom it isn't perhaps far-fetched to see a precursor of the Reformation; which is one reason why he has been getting a good deal of attention of late from Catholic scholars in Italy, and notably from our Pistoian *confratelli*. Thirdly, not only was this early humanism a predominantly Italian movement but I think it true to say that it has left a deeper imprint on the culture of Italy than on that of any other region in Europe. Taking, at any rate, this view of the matter I find it quite natural that the new *Memorie Domenicane* should display so marked an interest, historical and theological, in the humanists, especially those of the century preceding the Reformation.

Humanism in relation to Christian life and thought, and especially in Italy from the early fifteenth to the late sixteenth century—roughly between the Councils of Florence (1438-39) and Trent (1545-63)—that is what this new series of *M.D.* is mostly about. And this has meant that Dominican history as such, though it gets a lot of attention, is no longer entirely the predominant theme, it falls into place in a wider picture. Moreover it is now regarded with a critical objectivity which not so long ago might have seemed almost indecent in a Dominican publication, or at least in this one, and which in fact is the outcome of a deliberate cultivation, in recent years, of serious historical study in the Pistoian *studium*; and, by the same token, of the cultivation of contacts with the secular University of nearby Florence where the *studium's* two best historians, A. Verde and S. I. Camporeale, have in fact been trained. As a result of these efforts, and of a happy convergence of talents, the *M.D.* has become a very remarkable organ of Christian and cultural historiography, combining a lively concern, in the Dominican tradition, for theology with a high level of

¹ For a good general treatment of this and connected matters see P. O. Kristeller, *Le thomisme et la pensée italienne de la Renaissance*, Montreal – Paris, 1967.

scholarly competence. The same might be said indeed of two or three other Dominican journals at the present time; what distinguishes *M.D.* is the degree of its concentration (from an Italian standpoint) on those two absolutely crucial centuries of Christian history that saw the end of the middle ages, the Protestant revolt and the Catholic reaction.

It will be admitted, I suppose, that this wasn't a very brilliant period for the Dominicans. The Order, by and large, was a conservative force and was in decline. A survival from the creative middle ages, it stood for two things that were now, in the new age, under fierce attack, institutional 'religious life' and scholasticism. In respect of the former the Dominicans were, of course, in the same boat with all the other old Orders, whether monastic or 'mendicant'; but with scholasticism they had a special tie as the acknowledged representatives of Thomism.² With these two aspects then of the Dominican 'presence' in post-medieval Europe in mind, let us now glance at some of the more interesting particular lines of inquiry that the new *M.D.* has opened up.

In several ways the Protestant attack on the religious Orders was anticipated by the humanists, especially between about 1350, the date of the *Decameron*, and 1440, the date of Valla's dialogue *De professione religiosorum*; with, in between, around the turn of the century, Blessed John Dominic O.P.'s clash with Coluccio Salutati. By and large (with the notable exception of Petrarch) the humanists were never on easy terms with the friars. Apart from other considerations, their cultural formation was entirely different from the scholastic training of the friars. But it was Lorenzo Valla who first gave the quarrel a theological dimension by attacking the very notion of religious vows; the basic aim of his *De professione* being to refute the traditional view—upheld by St Thomas in the *Summa* 2a 2ae. 88, 6 — that, as between two men who are both trying to follow Christ, he has the greater 'merit', other things being equal, who has solemnly vowed to do so. This Valla professed himself unable, as a Christian, to accept; thus striking at the root of all organised 'religious life' in the traditional and accepted sense. And herein, of course, is the historical importance of his little book. However it is not discussed in either of the two lengthy articles that have to do with Valla—both by S.I. Camporeale—in this series of *M.D.* (in No 4, 1973, and No 7, 1976); and I mention it here chiefly for two reasons: because it is relevant, implicitly, to an extremely interesting article in this series by M. Miele O.P. to which I shall come presently; and then because I want to draw attention, in passing, to a recent and valuable Jesuit work on Valla as a Christian thinker, which, it seems to me, was

2 P. O. Kristeller, op. cit., especially pp. 49-61: M. Grabmann, *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben*, 1, Munich, 1926, pp. 332-91.

hardly given its due in some notes on 'la recente storiografia su L.V.', in *M.D.* No 3, 1972, pp. 198-218. I refer to the volume by M. Fois, S.J. *Il pensiero cristiano di Lorenzo Valla*, Rome, Analecta Gregoriana 174, 1969. Fois has a very useful chapter on Valla's attack on religious vows.

Not surprisingly, this attack made no difference to official Catholic teaching, but it was one thing to uphold the tradition that attached a special 'merit' to religious vows and quite another to make laws about religious life and the entry into it by 'profession'. Valla might be wrong but many practical questions remained; in particular, as regards 'entering religion', that of fixing a minimum age for profession and a minimum duration for the preceding novitiate. But how could such matters be seriously decided without an honest effort to take into account the underlying *natural* factor of the normal gradualness of human growth to maturity? Granted that the Holy See was competent to legislate about the way of the 'counsels', the perfect following of Christ, was it too much to expect it to call into question the practice of letting teenagers take solemn vows committing themselves for life to 'perfection' in this special sense? But on this point the Counter Reformation Church (the Jesuits excepted) showed itself hardly more sensitive than the medieval Church had been. The medieval Church had not recognised temporary religious vows: once solemnised they were held to be binding for life; and Trent merely fixed at sixteen the minimum age for them and at one year the minimum length of novitiates.³

This was done when the Council was nearing its end and at about the same time an aged Dominican of Naples—where he had been three times a prior—sent to the Curia a *Declaratio* on the reform of religious Orders *utriusque sexus* which is the subject of the valuable article by Fr Miele mentioned above (see *M.D.* No 3, 1972, pp. 76-113). The undeservedly forgotten writer of the *Declaratio* was Tommaso Elisio (c. 1487-1572), a theologian of moderate capacities who in a long life published only two books, one of which was put on the Index in 1590. He was not, says Miele, a 'humanist'. What distinguished him—Miele makes this perfectly clear—was a rare honesty and courage and a deep concern over the morally wretched state, as it seemed to him, of so many friars and nuns in Naples. He saw an immense amount of frustration and unhappiness, and of course he may have exaggerated, but at any rate the remedies he proposed, as a result of long experience, were remarkably fresh and bold for their time. He thought that far too many adolescents of both sexes took perpetual vows and he wanted a trial period, before profession, 'of at least seven years'. But the *Declaratio* was put away in the Vatican archives and forgotten.

³ *Enchiridion de statibus perfectionis*, I, Rome, 1949, Nos. 98-99. pp. 66-7.

Perhaps if there had been at that time more Dominicans of Elisio's stamp the Order might have played a less inglorious role during the three following centuries. In the event it was the Jesuits with their more modern outlook and more carefully thought out organisation who had to bear the brunt of the Church's conflicts with the post-medieval world.

Alluding to Elisio in their joint preface to this 1972 volume of *M.D.* Frs Camporeale and Verde take his 'failure' as both a sign and effect of 'the failure of that humanist inspiration which might have led the movement of Catholic reform to more fruitful results'. On this judgment much might be said, but here I have only space to observe that this use of the term 'humanist' might be misleading. Elisio himself was not a humanist in the sense that Colet or Erasmus was, and for his critique of existing canonical structures he could draw all the *principles* he needed from the scholastic tradition that he had been trained in—in short, from St Thomas. Perhaps, rather than 'humanist inspiration' it would be more exact to say 'humanist sensibility', meaning by this a sensitive awareness of the *human* factor—of the human individuals upon whom he saw an impersonal legal system being often so mercilessly imposed.

Under the spell of old Elisio I have dawdled in the Counter Reformation whereas the bulk of this series of *M.D.* has to do with pre-Tridentine figures and topics. Of this abundant material there is still much that I should like to discuss, but I must be brief and very selective. The material divides broadly into articles concerned with (a) Dominican history and biography, and (b) humanism in relation to traditional theology.

Under (a) perhaps the most important item is made up of contributions to our knowledge of Savonarola and of persons and things connected with him. Thus in *M.D.* No 3, 1972, M. Ferrara deals with problems concerning the ascription of certain works to Savonarola (pp. 114-45) and G. Di Agresti O.P. provides a full bibliography for further study of St Catherine of Ricci, followed by a 'Savonarolian Appendix' (pp. 229-301), which taken together will certainly be found indispensable by future students of Savonarola and St Catherine. In the same number, pp. 10-56, Professor Vasoli studies a sixteenth century disciple of Savonarola, L. Violi (and see the same scholar's contribution to No 4, 1973, pp. 103-79). To another controversial Dominican, the great Florentine anti-humanist Blessed John Dominici (1355-1419), is entirely dedicated the first number of this series (1970); it gives some unpublished texts and a fresh discussion of J. D's attitude to humanism.

(b) Here the scene is dominated by S. I. Camporeale with his two long studies of humanist theology from Valla to More and Erasmus: No 4, 1973, pp. 9-102 and No 7, 1976, pp. 11-194. The latter deals in great detail with Valla's criticisms of St Thomas as contained—such was his boldness—in a panegyric on the saint pro-

nounced before the Dominicans at the Minerva in Rome in 1457.⁴ These two articles by Camporeale—and also, less directly, his detailed critical review of Professor McNair's book on Peter Martyr Vermigli (Oxford, 1967) in No 3, 1972, pp. 180-97—presuppose his *Lorenzo Valla: umanesimo e teologia* (with a preface by E. Garin), Florence 1972, which is the closest study yet made of Valla's theory of Christian theology. For such, in fact, alone among the humanists, Valla tried to work out. Not content—as the rest, including Erasmus, were—to attack the scholastics for excessive use of dialectic and deference to Aristotle, and for their ignorance of Greek and Hebrew, Valla offered a new concept of the nature of Theology—and new, not only in relation to scholasticism but to the whole theological tradition in so far as it had become 'contaminated' by metaphysics. In this respect the scholastics were most to blame, but the rot had set in with Augustine, if not earlier. The one wholly commendable theologian was Paul. Theology was best understood as a form of *rhetoric*—provided that rhetoric, in turn, be understood, not in the narrow pseudo-Ciceronian sense of the art of 'adorning' speech (*eloquentia-ornatus*) but in the wide and full sense expounded by Quintilian of the whole science and art of language. It is not too much to say that Valla wanted to give Quintilian the place in the education of Christian theologians that the scholastics gave to Aristotle and Boethius. It is not, to me, very clear what would then be the function of logic in theology, but Camporeale does at least make it clear that metaphysics would have no part in it—metaphysics as a rational investigation of the real; for all the terms used in traditional metaphysics—the 'transcendentals' and the Aristotelian categories etc.—would henceforth be understood simply in their *grammatical* functions. I cannot, for my part, see that the result would have been a gain for theology; but one must be grateful for the meticulous scholarship that Fr Camporeale has expended on the subject. His work on Valla is, to say the least, an important contribution to the history of Christian thought.

This is one of the two works, other than the new *M.D.* itself, to which, at the start of this article, I said I wished to draw attention. The other is the great history of the University of Florence in the late *Quattrocento* by Armando Verde, O.P.: *Lo Studio fiorentino 1473-1503*, of which four volumes have so far been published, two in 1973 by the National Institute for Renaissance Studies at Florence, and two "presso *Memorie Domenicane*" at Pistoia in 1977. The fruit of extraordinarily patient and meticulous first-hand research, it is a work that every student of the Renaissance will be obliged, sooner or later, to consult, and that every decent historical library should promptly acquire.

⁴ See also P. O. Kristeller, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-9.