

A Short History of Thomism. By Romanus Cessario, O.P. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2005. Pp. 106. \$19.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8132-1386-x

In this fine little book, which features a foreword by Ralph McInerny, Romanus Cessario traces the history of Thomism from the end of the thirteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, adding a few comments in the brief concluding chapter about the last few decades. His aim is duly circumscribed:

“While the present study purports only to fulfill a provisional objective, it nonetheless provides a sketch of the history of Thomism that will be useful until that day when some scholar with the required time and resources undertakes to research and write the multi-volume history of Thomism that this important school of thought both merits and requires. Perhaps this modest effort to draw together the many diverse strands of a complicated history into a single narrative might even prompt the undertaking of such a full-length study” (pp. 33-34).

Moreover, even though the recent past does not figure prominently in Cessario’s account, another of the book’s salutary effects is that it provokes the reader—at least it provoked me—to reflect on post-Vatican II Thomism and on the future of Thomism, over which some of us may have at least a bit of influence. I will return to this point below.

Cessario begins by sketching St. Thomas’s scholarly career and describing the Angelic Doctor’s aspiration to fashion a unified and systematic articulation of Christian wisdom that “does not emerge from” but rather “embraces each of the subordinate and ancillary disciplines within its transcendental unity” (p. 9). He notes that St. Thomas would find the contemporary fragmentation of theological inquiry “very odd” and “would be repelled by the cacophony of competing truth claims advanced by point-of-view theologians claiming hegemonic expertise in one or another theological discipline” (p. 9). Interestingly, this fragmentation has recently been on display in the academic reviews, even the sympathetic ones, of Joseph Ratzinger’s *Jesus of Nazareth* (Doubleday, 2007). The reviewers strain to classify this remarkable work, which combines, in the manner of the *Summa Theologiae*, Scriptural exegesis, Rabbinic and Patristic commentaries on various parts of Scripture, insight into Jewish, Greek, and Roman history and culture, the history of Catholic doctrine, metaphysics, moral theory, philosophical anthropology, and the fruits of thousands of hours of mental and contemplative prayer. “After all,” they protest in effect, “no one can be an up-to-date expert in all the relevant sub-disciplines, and so this must be some sort of ‘popular’ or ‘catechetical’ tract rather than a serious work of theology.”

Something has surely gone amiss when the very idea of an integrated theoretical and practical wisdom baffles many of the ‘scientific’ theologians of our day. And, *mutatis mutandis*, the same sort of fragmentation and loss of direction afflict philosophy, too, as a contemporary academic discipline. In fact, to my mind one of the most destructive effects of academic fragmentation among Catholic thinkers is the sharp dichotomy many presuppose between being a philosopher and being a theologian and between the academic disciplines of philosophy and systematic theology. In short, we need St. Thomas now more than ever, both for his teaching and for his method.

Cessario spends the rest of chapter one setting the stage for the catalogue of historically important Thomists that fills chapters two and three. This stage-setting involves three separate tasks.

The first is to indicate how he will be using the term ‘Thomist’ in his catalogue. St. Thomas is such an important figure in Western thought, and especially in the thought of the Catholic Church, that after his time nearly all major Catholic thinkers—and many others as well (Leibniz, to name but one)—have felt the need to come to terms with him. Inevitably, most of them either depart from St. Thomas in ways

deemed by some to be important or extend his system in ways deemed by some to be unfaithful to his intentions. The variations are seemingly endless, so much so that some have even suggested that there is no such thing as a peculiarly Thomistic tradition. Cessario rightly dismisses this perverse suggestion, but is still faced with a tricky conceptual problem. In the end, he settles for a set of recognizably Thomistic positions in metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and moral theory as roughly definitive of Thomism until the time of Descartes, and then, for more modern times, he invokes the twenty-four Thomistic theses that found their way into St. Pius X's *Doctoris Angelici* (1914), the *motu proprio* that prescribed these theses for Catholic college and seminary education.

Needless to say, this invocation of sets of Thomistic positions does not automatically take care of the second task, viz., specifying just who should count as a Thomist for the purposes of this book. The reason is that there is a veritable continuum of degrees of participation, so to speak, in St. Thomas's thought, and if we stubbornly insist on perfect conformity to full sets of these theses, then there will have been no Thomists other than St. Thomas—and, presumably, only the later (or, perhaps, earlier) St. Thomas at that. But there is no reason to insist on such a rigorous standard.

Cessario follows James Weisheipl in distinguishing three groups of thinkers: (a) mere *eclectic* Thomists, who borrow from St. Thomas but feel no particular allegiance to him, (b) *wide* Thomists, who give “the principles and conclusions of Thomas Aquinas a privileged place in the development of [their] own proper philosophical or theological reflections” (p. 16), and (c) *strict* Thomists, who are engaged, as Weisheipl puts it, in “a systematic attempt to understand and develop the basic principles and conclusions of St. Thomas Aquinas in order to relate them to the problems and needs of each generation” (pp. 13-14). This taxonomy, taken as a broad rule of thumb, is tolerable, though not without its pitfalls. For instance, Cessario classifies the sixteenth century Jesuits as eclectic Thomists (p. 17), even though it seems clear that Molina and Suárez, to name the two I am most familiar with, give “the principles and conclusions of Thomas Aquinas a privileged place,” even when disagreeing with them. Indeed, the great bulk of the works of both Jesuits takes the form of extended commentaries on one or another part of the *Summa Theologiae*, and there is no question that they treat St. Thomas with much more deference than they do any other author. For instance, in a particularly poignant passage in Part IV of his *Concordia*, Molina agonizes over the fact that a crucial text from St. Thomas cannot in all honesty bear the interpretation he would like to give it. I do not mean to quibble here, so much as to underscore the rhetorical dimension of any such broad-stroked taxonomy.

In general, however, identifying the strict Thomists is not all that difficult, as long as this identification is made by ostension, as it were, rather than strictly by definition. Most Thomists before the time of Descartes were Dominicans who not only identified themselves as Thomists but were also identified as Thomists by other Catholic writers who found themselves in conversation with them. (There were, to be sure, a few ‘wayward’ Dominicans who had only the most tenuous claim to be called Thomists of any stripe. In the most entertaining sentence in the book, Cessario dryly notes concerning Durandus of Saint-Pourçain: “His status [as a bishop] however did not preserve him from the scrutiny of the Dominican Order, whose authorities considered his *Commentary on the Sentences* to contain more than a few—235 altogether—positions that were opposed to Aquinas's teaching” (p. 56).) A similar point holds for the post-Cartesian era, though here things get a bit murkier because, in addition to straightforward Thomism, there were various attempts to extend St. Thomas's thought in order to make it answer questions that arise only within the general context of the ‘new way of ideas’. So, for instance, Cessario (perhaps unfairly) classifies the Transcendental Thomists as eclectic Thomists, noting (accurately) that they have had virtually no impact on “the way that the Church authentically expresses the Catholic faith” (p. 88). On the other hand, Karol Wojtyła's extension of Thomism via Phenomenology is more difficult to classify and obviously *has* had an impact on the teachings of the

Church.

The third task is to make a determination about whether or how to divide the history of Thomism into distinct chronological periods. The standard division is tripartite, marking (a) an initial period that reached its high point in the work of such fifteenth century thinkers as John Capreolus and Denis the Carthusian; (b) the sixteenth and seventeenth century revival that took place mainly on the Iberian peninsula and produced the likes of Francis Sylvestri of Ferrara, Francisco de Vitoria, Cardinal Cajetan, Dominigo Soto, Domingo Bañez, and John Poincot, to name just a few; and (c) the nineteenth and twentieth century revival that began in Germany and Italy with the likes of the Jesuit Josef Kleutgen, was enshrined in Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris*, and then spread in earnest to North America. There are subtle variations on this scheme from author to author, but all of them focus on the temporal waxing and waning of Thomism over the centuries. While ascribing a rough accuracy to such accounts, Cessario is reluctant to codify historical divisions of this sort, in part because the story could just as easily be told geographically, in which case it would take on a different character, and in part because the ups and downs of Thomism are traceable to, as much as to anything else, 'external' factors such as the Black Plague, the Reformation, and a long series of ecclesiastical, political, social, and cultural upheavals.

What follows in chapters two and three is a sketchy and yet fascinating narrative about the most prominent Thomists of the last seven centuries, highlighting the salient issues they have dealt with and, in some cases, their roles in promoting the study of St. Thomas for the good of the Church. I will give just a brief sample of interesting tidbits from these chapters.

Although St. Thomas did not actively cultivate disciples during his own lifetime, the controversies surrounding his writings galvanized leading Dominicans—most notably, St. Albert the Great, Peter of Conflans, and Giles of Lessines at first and, later on, Robert Orford, Thomas Sutton, and John Quidort—to come to his defense forcefully within a few years of his death. This established Thomism “as a legitimate school of theology within the Christian Church” (p. 43) even before St. Thomas's canonization in 1323. Another early hero was the English Dominican Richard Knapwell, who was excommunicated by the Franciscan archbishop John Peckam in 1286 for arguing that the rational soul is the sole substantial form of a human being—a position later endorsed by the Council of Vienne.

Thomism continued to flourish amid opposition until the later fourteenth century, when the Black Plague and the Great Western Schism severely disrupted European life in general and ecclesial life in particular. But because of the expansion of the Dominican Order, the movement was still alive at the beginning of the fifteenth century not only in the university centers of England, France, and Italy, but also in lands as far separated as Spain and Armenia. (This highlights the role that Dominican Houses of Study have played, and are likely to continue to play, in the history of Thomism; a modicum of independence from the universities is a definite advantage for any intellectual movement.) The best known figures of this period were John Capreolus, the Dominican expositor of St. Thomas's *Commentary on the Sentences*, and the incredibly prolific Denis the Carthusian.

The sixteenth century remains perhaps the most interesting in the history of Thomism. Cessario first cautions us not to exaggerate the opposition between the scholastics and the humanists (pp. 66-67). However, it is undeniable that the tension between them was exacerbated once the Reformation occurred, and this made it more socially acceptable for the Reformers to heap scorn on St. Thomas and his successors. But as with all the other many crises that have marked the history of the Church, God's grace abounded, and one of its most obvious effects was the proliferation of outstanding theologians, most of them Thomists and all of them heavily influenced by St. Thomas, during the Tridentine and post-Tridentine period. (Cessario, however, dismisses as “a popular but erroneous rumor” (p. 74) the

widespread belief that the *Summa Theologiae* was enshrined next to the Bible on the altar by the Fathers of the Council of Trent.) Near the end of chapter two Cessario gives a rendition of what he takes to be the distinctively Thomistic theses that played an important role in the sixteenth century debates with other traditions in Catholic theology (pp. 69-72), followed by a more specific characterization of some key differences between the Thomists and the Jesuits, especially Francisco Suárez and, to a lesser extent, Luis de Molina (pp. 77-78). Without going into detail, I will simply note that in both cases there were junctures at which I felt a bit uneasy, either because certain points being touted as distinctively Thomist did not seem to me peculiar to Thomism or because the positions being attributed to the Jesuits were not articulated as carefully as I would have liked. This is a minor complaint, given the severe space restrictions under which Cessario is operating. But it is a reminder that writing an extensive history of Thomism will be a philosophically and theologically, as well as historically, demanding task.

As Cessario's narrative enters into the eighteenth and nineteenth century we find him providing an interesting measured defense of so-called 'manual Thomism', which began to develop as early as the late seventeenth century "in order mainly to meet the pedagogical requirements of students preparing for the ministerial priesthood" (pp. 83-84). He is well aware of the limitations of the manuals and of the perspective that disdains them, but suggests that this is not the last word:

"Some intellectual historians have criticized the manual tradition on the basis that it replaced critical engagement in philosophical dialogue, such as that practiced by Aquinas and his first disciples, with a synthesized presentation of principles and conclusions. Canon [Vincenzo] Buzzetti, who began his intellectual life as a disciple of John Locke, learned his Thomism and became convinced of its value, by reading the manuals of [the Dominicans Antoine] Goudin and [Salvatore] Roselli. His personal experience illustrates that the Thomist manuals could serve to open up to well-disposed persons an alternative vision of philosophy that would keep Catholic theology from tumbling into eclecticism" (p. 84).

The manuals represented an attempt to solve a problem that is still with us, viz., how to give at least a modicum of sound philosophical training to a large group of men who will play an important ministerial role in the Church and yet cannot in fairness or in fact be assumed to be prospective philosophers or theologians. Predictably, it was precisely the budding philosophers and theologians among them who found the manuals most frustrating. Some felt most keenly the absence of those classical philosophers and Fathers of the Church with whom St. Thomas had carried on a constant dialogue in his own proper works; others felt most keenly the lack of intellectual contact with more contemporary modes of thought. In the years leading up to Vatican II the first type of frustration led to a demand for *resourcement* in Catholic intellectual life, whereas the second type engendered a demand for *aggiornamento*.

It is at this point that Cessario's narrative invites reflection on the recent past and the future of Thomism. The demands for *resourcement* and *aggiornamento* were acceded to in the wake of the Council, but in the process strict Thomism, along with scholasticism in general, was largely jettisoned by mainstream Catholic intellectuals, especially by theologians but also by most philosophers. As McNerny brought out well in his now classic work, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (Doubleday, 1966), this widespread rejection of Thomism was more a matter of the heart than of the mind. But it has had profound intellectual consequences as well. The most obvious is the parlous condition of the vast majority of large Catholic universities in Europe and North America. But a more subtle consequence is that the most influential pre-Conciliar Catholic theologians of the *aggiornamento* wing have a very sparse following nowadays, forty years after the Council. And why? In his perceptive review (*First Things*, May 2007) of Fergus Kerr's *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Chenu to Ratzinger*

(Blackwell, 2006), R.R. Reno notes that these theological giants are now barely intelligible to the present generation of new Catholic theologians, in large measure because the neophytes lack a solid grounding in the standard Thomistic philosophy and theology in which the great theologians had been trained (in part through the manuals) and against which they had in various ways rebelled.

The fact is that, love him or hate him, St. Thomas provides contemporary Catholic philosophers and theologians, even those who choose in the end to deviate from him in one way or another, with the philosophically most plausible starting points in metaphysics, philosophy of nature, moral theory, and philosophical anthropology, along with the deepest and most thoroughly worked out account of the relation between faith and reason. As a result, given that familiarity with the Angelic Doctor's thought has ceased to be a central aim of Catholic higher education, many aspiring Catholic philosophers and theologians find themselves adrift as Catholic philosophy and theology "tumble into eclecticism," to use Cessario's phrase. For instance, even philosophy and theology majors in contemporary Catholic universities are unlikely to have anything approaching a refined grasp of St. Thomas's views about the relation between faith and reason—and this at a time when these views could bring considerable light to the current confused cultural debate about the interplay between Christian faith and natural science.

Nor are the prospects bright for a reinstatement, or even a mere modest revival, of Thomism in the flagship Catholic universities of Europe and North America. When my own department conducted a search for a Thomist a few years ago, it turned out that some of my younger colleagues had never even heard of a Thomist! One of them, a cradle non-practicing Catholic, asked in astonishment, "Why would we want to hire someone who believes all and only what Aquinas believes?" As I sorted through the confusion about Thomism and Catholic philosophy implicit in this question, it occurred to me that one effective, though admittedly flippant, response might be, "Well, we hired someone who believes all and only what *you* believe. Which is worse?" The bottom line, unfortunately, is that my department and others like it harbor very little sympathy for the idea of serving the Church by cultivating the thought of St. Thomas. They are more concerned with their standing in the secular academic world. Perhaps they will claim, and in some cases sincerely believe, that this concern, far from being sycophantic, is equivalent to an aspiration for intellectual excellence. But any Catholic philosopher who has experience in contemporary Catholic universities and has thought deeply about matters pertaining to faith and reason is likely to have a multitude of good reasons for dismissing this claim.

Despite all this, there are many encouraging signs for the future. The last fifteen years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the works of St. Thomas among a small but significant group of gifted Catholic undergraduates. (I find nothing in my professional life quite as exhilarating as being thanked effusively by students for having recommended to them the works of—who would have believed it?—Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange.) Indeed, many of these young people are now beginning to make a name for themselves as Thomists in the academy. I have participated in some of their tenure reviews and been greatly edified by the experience. Some of them have been able to study the works of St. Thomas both as undergraduates and as graduate students; others have received solid Thomistic training as undergraduates and put St. Thomas aside temporarily during their graduate studies. But all have nurtured the aspiration to contribute in one way or another to Catholic philosophy and theology in general and to the Thomistic tradition in particular. In addition, there are several excellent journals devoted to fostering Thomism, along with the other scholastic traditions. Cessario mentions *The Thomist* and *Revue thomiste*, as well as the recent inception of the English language edition of *Nova et Vetera* (pp. 91-93). What's more, the advent of the internet and the consequent easy access to texts, research, and intercommunication will at least partially offset the loss of those Catholic universities that can no longer be counted on to foster the study of St. Thomas systematically. And there is a lot more good news beyond this.

I especially recommend Cessario's little book in tandem with McNerny's *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* to the younger generation of Thomists and prospective Thomists. Each of these books in its own way transmits a sense of the nobility and depth of an intellectual tradition which has served the Church well over the centuries and which is worthy of intellectual allegiance even today. And together they provide a historical context within which we can face with equanimity the claim, reported by Cessario, that Thomism is not at this time one of the "active theological traditions at work in the Church" (p. 12). As both its remote history and its proximate history demonstrate, even if Thomism is not fully flourishing at present, it soon enough will be, once again.

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