

---

---

# Gilson, *Aeterni Patris* and the Direction of Twenty-First Century Catholic Philosophy

*Desmond J. FitzGerald*

---

---

There have been moments since Vatican II when some of us teachers with a Thomistic background have wondered if the Thomism of our youth could carry beyond our century.

Those of my generation recall the enthusiasm we devoted to the study of St. Thomas Aquinas in those years of World War II and in the decades afterwards; we remember how eagerly we sought each new book by the interpreters of Thomas: Maritain, Gilson, Pegis, Bourke, Owens, Maurer, Klubertanz, Henle, and hastened to pass on their insights to our students. But today we are concerned that we have failed to ignite the generation of our students with the fire we caught from our teachers. Yes, there are exceptions and the graduate schools of the Catholic University of America, Marquette, St. Louis, Toronto and Notre Dame will point proudly to those exceptions in their letters of recommendation.<sup>1</sup>

As Joseph Owens noted in 1979 at the University of St. Thomas's celebration of the centenary of Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris*: "The centenary occurs unfortunately at a low ebb in general Thomistic interest. For the most part, teachers and writers in philosophy at the moment do not seem to like Aquinas, and students are not being attracted to him."<sup>2</sup>

And yet as Owens goes on to imply, this may be the best time to focus on our need to reflect on the place of St. Thomas as our metaphysical teacher.

There are a number of events that give hope that we are passing out of a phase where enthusiasm was declining and entering a new phase where more students are being turned toward Aquinas and meeting him as if they were his discoverers. The translation and publication of

---

1. Cf. James Collins, "Thomism in the College," in *Three Paths in Philosophy* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962) for a discussion of the transition Catholic universities and colleges were going through at the beginning of Vatican II in 1962.

2. Owens, "The Future of Thomistic Metaphysics," in *One Hundred Years of Thomism, Aeterni Patris and Afterwards: A Symposium*, ed. Victor B. Brezik (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, University of St. Thomas, 1981), p. 146.

the Catholic University of Lublin textbooks led by my colleague, Fr. Andrew Woznicki, and Fr. Francis Lescoe,<sup>3</sup> the founding just over a dozen years ago of this Maritain Association and its significant conferences and publications, and the meeting here this week on the "Future of Thomism."

Now our meeting in a special way has Fr. Gerald McCool's *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* as its focal point. As has been noted, Fr. McCool's study is the continuation of his 1977 *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (originally *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century*).

Fr. McCool first studied the revival of so-called Scholastic theology in the 1800s in which the persons of Liberatore and Kleutgen were among the leaders culminating in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of Leo III in 1879.<sup>5</sup> Now his present volume has analyzed how in our twentieth century the unity anticipated by the directives of Leo XIII has evolved into the plurality of Thomisms of today.

Fr. McCool's thesis is that the expectations of *Aeterni Patris* that Thomistic philosophy would serve the progress of theology in the twentieth century have not been realized. The unity that was anticipated has not been achieved and now at the end of this century we are disappointed.

As Fr. McCool says: "Or, to put it in more forceful terms, the hope that had animated *Aeterni Patris* at the very beginning of the neo-Scholastic movement had no real support in the philosophy of St. Thomas himself."<sup>6</sup>

If one were to pick landmarks to identify changes in the roadway, Vatican II through the early 1960s stands there as a recognizable marker. This pastoral council in its return to Scripture for its inspiration seemed

3. See Mieczylaw A. Krapiec, *I-Man: An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Marie Lescoe, Andrew Woznicki, Theresa Sandok et al. (New Britain, Connecticut: Mariel Publications, 1983). An abridged version by Francis Lescoe and Roger Duncan was published in 1985.

4. *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989); *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989). During the discussion Fr. McCool mentioned he was putting together a text on "The Neo-Thomist Movement" for the Outstanding Christian Thinkers series, Chapman Press.

5. The text of *Aeterni Patris* is available in *One Hundred Years of Thomism*; the Etienne Gilson-edited *The Church Speaks to the Modern World: The Social Teachings of Leo XII* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Book, 1954); as an appendix in Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958); and of course collections of the encyclicals of Leo XIII.

6. *From Unity to Pluralism*, pp. 228-29.

to have less use for St. Thomas Aquinas, whose work, while profoundly based on Scripture, reflected the more straightforward reading of the Bible that characterized Catholic teaching before the watershed encyclical on Scripture, the *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII in 1943.<sup>7</sup> The scriptural sophistication of the experts who prepared the documents of Vatican II seemed independent of the so-called Scholastic training these experts would have had to have had, given that they were the products of seminaries of the post-modernist crisis early in our century.

As McCool writes:

As the history of theology after Vatican II was to show, the future lay with the "new theologians," and the form of Thomism which LeBlond used to vindicate the place of history and pluralism in theology is the form of Thomism which survived the demise of the Neo-Thomist movement in the theologies of Rahner and Lonergan.<sup>8</sup>

As I am not a theologian nor have I had the basic training in theology that prepares even the ordinary assistant pastor for the priesthood, I defer to others on these theological issues. I note that Fr. McCool puts more emphasis on the crisis of the "new theologies" of the late 1940s occasioned by the publication of Fr. Henri de Lubac's *Surnaturel* than on Vatican II as such, but, of course, there is a continuity in these events.<sup>9</sup> So with respect to the development of Catholic theology into the next century, I have a sense of speaking as an outsider, like someone attentive to a conversation relating to a topic in which he has no expertise but who ventures a remark or so based on common experience and some years of teaching in areas which are the core of college studies and are fundamental to the preparation of theologians. As the document from Vatican II on Priestly Formation says:

Then, by way of making the mysteries of salvation known as thoroughly as they can be, students should learn to penetrate them more deeply with the help of speculative reason exercised under the tutelage of St. Thomas.<sup>10</sup>

The footnote to this remark reviews the repeated recommendations of recent popes to study St. Thomas as a principal guide, and, of course,

---

7. *Divino Afflante Spiritu* can be found in vol. 4, *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Wilmington, North Carolina: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981).

8. *From Unity to Pluralism*, p. 225.

9. Cf. the discussion of *Surnaturel* by Gerard Smith and Anton C. Pegis in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 23 (Washington, D.C., 1949).

10. "Decree on Priestly Formation" (*Optatam Totius*) in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 452.

these recommendations continued in the later days of Paul VI and John Paul II.

So given that in some sense St. Thomas's theology continues to be our guide, we have the question of which St. Thomas to follow. For as Fr. McCool's study shows, there are a plurality of St. Thomases as far as his interpreters go. These are basically reducible to two schools: the so-called Transcendental Thomists who directly or indirectly were inspired by the work of Fr. Joseph Maréchal, and for Fr. McCool this comes down to today to Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, or the direct realists such as Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson. As to the differences between the latter, McCool has ably underlined their differences on the use of commentators, the attention given to the philosophy of nature, and one might add the differences in the analysis and appreciation of works of art.<sup>11</sup> Yet despite these differences they stand together in their affirmation of the reality of Christian philosophy, their emphasis on the importance of *esse*, the actuality of essence in the metaphysics of Aquinas, their direct realism in epistemology, and their understanding of St. Thomas's theory of the human person as a hylomorphic composite of body and soul.

Since my colleague Professor Dennehy has replied to Fr. McCool out of his own background as a student of Maritain, I have chosen to give my emphasis to the value of using Gilson's interpretation of St. Thomas as a way of fulfilling the intentions of Leo XIII with respect to the development of Catholic theology.

Here, perhaps, is the place to remark that many philosophies have served the theologian; obviously St. Augustine made use of Plotinus, and St. Bonaventure remained in the Augustinian tradition while using the language of Aristotle and so on. Different tools can be used for the work of theology, but we can reflect on whether or not some philosophies may work better than others. My contention is that the philosophy contained in the theological writings of St. Thomas can continue to be a fruitful source for theological analysis into the twenty-first century. And

---

11. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon, 1953); Etienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality* (New York: Pantheon, 1957). The American Maritain Association devoted a session of its 1980 meeting in St. Louis to the different approaches of Maritain and Gilson to painting with papers by Robert McLaughlin, Desmond FitzGerald, and Laurence K. Shook. My paper suggested Maritain approached contemporary abstract expressionism as an epistemologist and questioned the intelligibility of the painter's product; Gilson approached the paintings as a metaphysician and accepted the being of the painting as something made; on the whole in their own book illustrations, Maritain seemed more sympathetic to the work of his contemporaries.

further, the emphasis that Gilson gave to these Thomistic principles can continue to serve theology.

Any one of us could compose a list of features of Gilson's writings which would characterize his philosophy. For my purpose I have chosen only a few: the affirmation of Christian philosophy, the underlining of *esse*, the act of being in Thomistic metaphysics, the realism of his epistemology, and as a special feature, his representation of St. Thomas's philosophy of the human person. These are solid achievements which the theologian can use in the work of faith seeking understanding.

With so much written on Christian philosophy it hardly needs to be reexplained here.<sup>12</sup> As has been noted, one establishes its possibility from the fact that it does exist. Without returning to the often quoted text of Exodus (3: 14) calling attention to the fact that when asked his name God replied in terms of existence: I AM WHO I AM, the very fact that in the light of revelation St. Augustine and St. Thomas looked at this world of experience as a "created world" rather than one which had always existed, meant that they were looking at something that happened to be rather than had to be. Thus they could be legitimate philosophers who experienced the world differently than did Plato and Aristotle in virtue of their faith. They were experiencing the world as philosophers do but they were alerted to experience a contingent world, one in which the things in it had been given existence. Thus there was this sensitivity to *esse* in Christian thinkers which distinguished them from their Greek predecessors.

Another area in which it seems clear that Gilson as a twentieth-century Thomist is closest to his master is epistemology.<sup>13</sup> Where other students of St. Thomas sought to modernize Aquinas after the fashions of Descartes and Kant, Gilson rejected this and returned to the direct realism of his master.

---

12. One can begin with *Christianity and Philosophy*, trans. Ralph MacDonald (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939) [*Christianisme et Philosophie* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1936)]; and then go on to the "Introduction" in *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, L. K. Shook's translation of *Le thomisme: Introduction à la philosophie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 5th ed. (Paris, 1949); and "Revelation and the Christian Teacher," Part 1 of *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1960). Shook is completing his translation of *Le thomisme*, 6th ed. (1955), and its publication will be through the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto.

13. The classic source is *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1936) and *Le réalisme méthodique* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1936). There is a translation of the first by Mark A. Wauck, *Thomist Realism and Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), and the second, *Methodical Realism*, has been translated by Philip Trower and is available from Christendom Press, Front Royal, Virginia, 1990.

For Gilson human knowing begins with the recognition that something is. As he affirmed in his autobiographical *The Philosopher and Theology*, he was preoccupied with *things*.<sup>14</sup> This affirmation of a direct realism is not a naive realism. One who has an intimate knowledge of the range of philosophy, modern as well as medieval thought, cannot be regarded as naive with respect to the problems of knowledge. But a direct realism is one wherein the knower grasps the intelligibility of the thing known through one's human knowledge which is a simultaneous sensio-intellectual experience. What Gilson challenged so much in his epistemological writings of the 1930s were the various attempts by so-called neo-Thomists to dress Aquinas in the fashions of Descartes and Kant. These controversies of over sixty years ago are largely forgotten; the articles and books exist, of course, but they are intriguing only to the historian of the revival of Thomism in our century. Our students are surely not concerned about them. To read about the controversies serves as a reminder of the vitality and concern of the Scholastics before World War II, and I find a nostalgia for the time when our intramural disputes were taken so seriously. Fr. McCool is excellent in his review of Gilson's accomplishments in this and other areas such as the controversy over "Christian philosophy." But in the final paragraph of his assessment of Gilson, there is an ambivalence. For all the credit he gives Gilson for clarifying the meaning of an authentic Thomism, he does not follow through and nominate Gilson as the model or guide for the next century's philosophic support for theology.

As Gilson himself observed, if his criteria for determining Thomism are the right ones, there can still be Thomists but there can be no Neo-Thomists. For the authentic disciple of the Angelic Doctor progress can consist only in his ever-deepening understanding of what St. Thomas himself has written. Progress for the Thomist cannot consist in devising new and different philosophies and claiming St. Thomas' support for positions which were never his own.<sup>15</sup>

In a very special way Gilson's philosophy of man or philosophical anthropology serves to present to our times and to the next century an understanding of the human person which is one part of the foundation of theology. Another way of saying this is to affirm that a sound understanding of the human person is fundamental to the investigation of man's relation to God.

---

14. Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cécile Gilson (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 18.

15. *From Unity to Pluralism*, p. 197.

Dr. Anton Pegis, one of Gilson's early students in North America, never tired in his writings of returning again and again to the theme of the unity of man in Aquinas.<sup>16</sup> Of course this unity was a composite unity of matter and form, but as Pegis pointed out again and again, in St. Thomas's theory of man, you had that unique level of the hierarchy of being wherein a subsistent form, man's soul, is also the form of a body. In one stroke St. Thomas had resolved what was Descartes's greatest stumbling block: how to defend personal immortality and at the same time to affirm the unity of man.

In Gilson's *Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, and in the later textbook written for undergraduates *Elements of Christian Philosophy*,<sup>17</sup> this special feature of Aquinas is made central: the human soul endowed with *esse*, a subsistent form, comes to be as the life of a particular body, an individual quantity of matter, conferring on the body the act of living and making with it a living human person.

Paraphrase cannot begin to do justice to the magisterial way Gilson presents the philosophy of Aquinas in *Elements of Christian Philosophy*. It begs for quotation. Yet such is the presentation that one would be tempted to quote not paragraphs but whole chapters. Suffice it to say that this work written late in his career is both a metaphysical textbook and a historical treatise blended in an extraordinary way. Gilson had always been a historian of philosophy but there emerged out of his epistemological controversies of the thirties, a confident teacher totally immersed in his subject—the doctrine of St. Thomas—and able to present it in a dynamic, exciting way.<sup>18</sup>

The discussion of the problem of the demonstration of personal immortality may be taken as an example. Here Gilson shows how Aquinas could start with Aristotle's theory of man as a composite of body and soul, but in virtue of recognizing that the human soul has an *esse*, an act of being, go far beyond Aristotle's theory. This makes the soul a subsistent entity as well as the form of the body. Gilson goes on to show how neither Scotus nor Cajetan realized this point in their failure to appreciate the originality of Aquinas in his transformation of Aristotelian principles. Thus Gilson's chapter on "The Human Soul" is not just

---

16. Cf. "The Notion of Man in the Context of Renewal" in vol. 1, *Theology of Renewal, Renewal of Religious Thought*, ed. Laurence K. Shook (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968); and "Some Reflections on *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 56" in *An Etienne Gilson Tribute*, ed. Charles J. O'Neil (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1959).

17. *Elements of Christian Philosophy*.

18. Cf. Desmond J. FitzGerald, "Etienne Gilson: From Historian to Philosopher," in *Thomistic Papers, II*, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy and Jack C. Marler (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, University of St. Thomas, 1986).

an exposition of what Aquinas taught but it is, further, a lively analysis of the sixteenth-century debates in which Pietro Pomponazzi and Thomas de Vio, Cardinal Cajetan, were such central characters.<sup>19</sup>

Without going into the details of these chapters, the treatment of "Man and Knowledge" and "Man and Will" are written in the style of the master teacher and so make for Aquinas's philosophy of knowledge and choice an exposition comparable to the discussion of the immortality of the human soul.

In "Neo-Thomism and the Tradition of St. Thomas,"<sup>20</sup> Gerald McCool reviews the revival Thomism in our century, and notes the falling off of attention to "the tradition of St. Thomas" in our present time. McCool treats of Gilson's role in this revival especially clarifying the differences between Aquinas and various later Scholastics such as Suarez, Cajetan, and John of St. Thomas. McCool always treats Gilson with great respect and does an excellent job of presenting the features of Gilson's contributions to contemporary Thomism. But when all is said and done, in his conclusion he ends up favoring Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan as the best hope of neo-Thomistic philosophy serving theology into the twenty-first century.

Since I cannot make a claim to any special knowledge of Rahner or Lonergan, I cannot dispute his preference. But I am puzzled at his failure to include Gilson's Thomism. Having granted that Gilson probably comes closest to an "authentic Thomism" in his grasp of St. Thomas's actual teaching, I fail to appreciate why he is not on the final list.

As Leo XIII says toward the close of *Aeterni Patris*:

Let carefully selected teachers endeavor to implant the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas in the minds of students, and set forth clearly his solidity and excellence over others.<sup>21</sup>

According to my understanding of the expectations of *Aeterni Patris*, Gilson, as well as Maritain, should be among those "carefully selected teachers" we can use as theology moves into the twenty-first century.

---

19. The graduate students of Paul Oskar Kristeller, Professor Emeritus, Columbia University, have explored this controversy in a number of doctoral studies. Cf. Martin Pine, *Pietro Pomponazzi: Radical Philosopher of the Renaissance* (Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1986).

20. *Thought* 62 (June 1987).

21. *Church Speaks to the Modern World*, p. 50.