

## ***A Tribute to Rev. Gerald B. Phelan: Educator and Lover of Truth***

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Monsignor Gerald Bernard Phelan (1892-1965) was a priest from Halifax, Nova Scotia. After studies in the local seminary of Halifax, he was ordained in 1914. Fr. Phelan went to the Catholic University of America for his first graduate work and received a S.T.B. from there in 1915. In 1924, he received a Ph.D. from the University of Louvain, followed by the *Agrégé en Philosophie* in 1925 from the same institution. In this way, he was part of that generation of Thomists who, having studied at Louvain, brought the enthusiasm of the Thomistic Revival to Canada. Interestingly, his Louvain dissertation concerned the experimental psychology of feeling and its modalities, and it was as a professor of psychology that Fr. Phelan came to St. Michael's, University of Toronto, in 1925.

Fr. Phelan was thus at the University of Toronto when the Basilian Fathers, especially Fr. Henry Carr, C.S.B., began planning an institute for medieval philosophy that, at the suggestion of Etienne Gilson, eventually becoming a Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies when it received its papal charter from Pope Pius XII in 1939. Working as co-director with Gilson, Fr. Phelan undertook the work of assembling a library suitable for medieval research, collecting microfilms of manuscripts, the originals of which existed in a number of European libraries. Fr. Phelan also developed a working relationship with the Dean of the graduate school of the University of Toronto, whereby it came about that the courses in philosophy given in the Pontifical Institute would count for credit towards graduate degrees of the University

of Toronto, even though the Institute remained an independent academic entity. Fr. Phelan served as President of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies from its inception until 1946.

The Institute gave an intensive three-year course leading to the Licentiate of Mediaeval Studies (L.M.S.) degree in a range of medieval topics: history, theology, canon law, medieval literature, as well as philosophy. There was also the more rarely earned doctor of medieval studies. In the 1940s, American students would take the L.M.S. and then the Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Toronto before embarking upon their teaching careers.

Fr. Phelan was especially close to Jacques Maritain, who first came to North America to lecture at Toronto in the early 1930s at the suggestion of Gilson (who himself had come to Toronto from Harvard where he was a visiting professor of Medieval philosophy in the 1926-1927 academic year). When Maritain lectured in English and paused for the right word, he would often give his thought in French and Fr. Phelan, sitting in the first row, would suggest the English phrase Maritain was seeking. In fact, one of Fr. Phelan's first books was entitled *Jacques Maritain*,<sup>1</sup> an expansion of a lecture he had given in New York in 1936. Thus it was only fitting that when the American Catholic Philosophical Association came to present the Cardinal Spellman Aquinas Medal to Jacques Maritain in 1951, it was Fr. Phelan who delivered the citation that honored Maritain. Some eight years later, in 1959, when Fr. Phelan himself was the recipient of the medal, it was Jacques Maritain who this time gave the citation that honored his friend. On that occasion, Maritain said:

... I hope I may be able to express today in a not too inadequate manner both my admiration for the riches of his philosophical wisdom and the magnitude of the debt that Christian philosophy and Catholic higher learning owe to his exceptional talents and lofty activities, in which the light of superior and genuine scholarship is quickened by the most attentive and delicate charity.... I also profoundly admire the total self-giving with which he put his time and energy at the service of his colleagues and of the students, helping them, illuminating them in invaluable conversations, spending hours and hours directing innumerable theses. It is with the same selfless generosity that he gives his French friends a uniquely precious assistance when they are confronted with the ordeals of translation.<sup>2</sup>

These last few lines of Maritain's citation bring out several special qualities of Fr. Phelan that cannot be documented in publication. Everyone who

1. Gerald B. Phelan, *Jacques Maritain* (New York: Sheed and Ward), 1937.

2. *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 33, (1959), pp. 9-10.

knew him in that period of the Institute's development spoke of his wonderful conversation. While his publishing record is not in the same league as Maritain's or Gilson's, he nonetheless made his impact on the Thomistic revival by directing a number of dissertations, and by his teaching and expositions on Thomistic metaphysics. Although he was very knowledgeable on a wide range of subjects from St. Thomas's writings, he had a special interest in Aquinas's *De Veritate*. Additionally, Fr. Phelan also participated in the translation of Maritain's *Existence and the Existent*,<sup>3</sup> as well as supervising the translation of the fourth edition of *Distinguish to Unite*, better known as *The Degrees of Knowledge*.<sup>4</sup> He also translated a little known work of Jacques Maritain's wife, Raissa, *The Prince of this World*,<sup>5</sup> published by the Institute in 1933.

In 1946, Fr. Phelan moved to the University of Notre Dame to found their Institute of Medieval Studies; he remained there until the 1950s. He subsequently returned to Toronto where he died on May 30, 1965. Shortly after his death, a member of the Basilian community, Fr. Arthur G. Kim, put together a number of papers that Fr. Phelan had presented during his teaching career.<sup>6</sup> Amongst the selections was the noted Aquinas Lecture of 1941, "St. Thomas and Analogy." This lecture was one of the earliest in the Marquette University series (just after those given by Mortimer J. Adler, Anton C. Pegis, and Yves R. Simon), and it was considered the standard reference work on this fundamental topic of metaphysics until the later, more detailed studies of George P. Klubertanz, S.J. and Ralph McInerny. Fr. Kim's collection also included Fr. Phelan's reflections on "The Concept of Beauty in St. Thomas Aquinas," and a paper that Fr. Phelan wrote just after World War II when existentialism was attracting attention in North America, "The Existentialism of St. Thomas." Some of these papers originally had been presented at meetings of the American Catholic Philosophical

3. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, translated from the French by Lewis Galantiere and Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc. 1948, and New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. Image Books, 1957).

4. Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, translated from the fourth French edition under the supervision of Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, and London: Godfrey Bles, 1959).

5. Raissa Maritain, *The Prince of this World* (Toronto: The Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1933). The biographical material on Phelan was largely based on the obituary written by Anton C. Pegis in *Mediaeval Studies*, Vol. 27 (1965) and the history of the Institute owes much to Laurence K. Shook, *Etienne Gilson* (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984).

6. *G. B. Phelan: Selected Papers*, edited by Arthur G. Kim, C.S.B. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967).

Association, an organization founded in 1926 with Fr. Phelan as a pioneer member. Fr. Kirn's anthology also included Fr. Phelan's very important essay, "*Verum Sequitur Esse Rerum.*" In the 1950s, when epistemology was a required subject in most Catholic colleges and universities, this essay was considered a classic reading and was included in such anthologies as Roland Houde and Joseph Mullally's *Philosophy of Knowledge*, a widely used textbook for epistemology classes in the 1960s.

In "*Verum Sequitur Esse Rerum*,"<sup>7</sup> Fr. Phelan, following a quotation from St. Thomas, notes that, while truth properly relates to our knowledge, it is ultimately based on the being of things. That is, truth is the relationship between what we know and the way things are, and we achieve truth in our knowing when we accurately grasp things as they are in reality. This is what is meant by the traditional definition of truth as the *adequatio rei et intellectus*,<sup>8</sup> the agreement between knowledge and things. In this essay, Fr. Phelan is not trying to be original in any creative sense. Rather, he sought to be faithful to the thought of Aquinas, particularly the *De Veritate*.

Specifically, Fr. Phelan emphasized the point that truth is achieved in the act of judgment, when the intellect, having grasped the essences of several things, puts them together or separates them according as they are together or separated in reality. The presupposition of this exposition is a metaphysical and epistemological realism which affirms that we are capable of knowing things as they are, and that we are able to verify our judgments. As Fr. Phelan affirms, "sense experience and first principles are not only the starting point of knowledge but the ultimate tests of the truth of judgments."<sup>9</sup> In expounding on the way that knowledge achieves its completion in the act of judging, Fr. Phelan continues,

Knowledge ... is not complete until the mind sees the identity of the essence existing in two different modes and thus achieves truth, i.e., recognizes that what is possessed in knowledge is identical with what is held in the physical existence by the thing itself. The fullness of knowledge is therefore, only achieved when the mind reaches on to the *esse* of its object as a physical being.<sup>10</sup>

Thus Phelan is affirming that in our act of judging, the judgment completes knowledge. The knower has put together in the intentional order what is in fact together in the physical, extra-mental order. As imperfect

7. G. B. Phelan: *Selected Papers*, pp.133-54.

8. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 16, 2c.

9. G. B. Phelan: *Selected Papers*, p.148, n. 48.

10. Ibid.

knowers, we take real things apart, as it were, when we know them—we grasp in different acts of understanding, the different aspects of the things; we grasp the substance and its accidents in distinct concepts. But finally, we put it all together in the operation of composing and dividing in which we achieve truth. Thus it is in the judgment that there is truth when we come to know things as they are. And it is from this fact that Fr. Phelan derives his essay's title, "*Verum Sequitur Esse Rerum*," "truth follows from the being of things."

But what of error, one might fairly ask? If knowing goes as it should, we ought to achieve truth every time since our knowledge proceeds directly from our experience of things. Unfortunately, that is not so simple for human beings, since we are possessed of only the lowest grade of intelligence; we know things in a piecemeal fashion, as it were, and we must put what we know in a fragmented way, back together through a series of intellectual judgments. As Fr. Phelan explains:

knowledge of what is comes to us piecemeal. Now we see this aspect, now that. Each separate aspect ... comes to us distinct from the rest. We must gather them up—assemble them as manufacturers of automobiles might say—and restore them to their unity in the thing by asserting that all these aspects which have come to us separately and which, by our judgment we have combined in the unity of mental existence, actually exist unseparated within the thing, which is the object of our knowledge, in the unity of its act of physical existence. This is, alas! a long, tedious laborious task, for, in the last analysis it is nothing less than the whole business of acquiring knowledge.... Because the objects of our knowledge are themselves very complex; because our intellectual insight is too weak to penetrate the real in its full, rich content (for, are we not in the lowest range of the hierarchy of intelligent beings?); because we cannot understand anything but the simplest objects without a multiplicity of concepts, errors inevitably arise. Our effort to put things together in judgments is much like trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle. The danger of error is always imminent. So many parts look alike when they are not alike; we are constantly putting the wrong parts together and we have to watch attentively each step we take; sometimes we do not detect our mistakes until we have finished the picture and find we have some pieces left over.<sup>11</sup>

This paper was originally published in 1939 in Volume I of *Mediaeval Studies*, the annual publication of the Pontifical Institute. It came after the controversies of the early 1930s amongst the so-called neo-scholastics who were asking whether or not Thomism could embrace elements of Cartesianism or Kantianism. Fr. Phelan's position, as expressed in his essay, is solidly in the traditional Thomist camp of Gilson and Maritain in this

11. Ibid.

controversy.<sup>12</sup> It provides a sample of the rich analysis Fr. Phelan gives to his study of the knowing process in this exposition of Aquinas's theory of the metaphysics of truth. Without attempting to present a *précis* of Fr. Phelan's paper, some of the topics that are developed in the original paper include an important section on the notion of intentional existence, and he includes a repudiation of the idealist's statement of the epistemological problem ... there is no "how does the mind go from thought to things;" rather, he provides a strong re-affirmation that our knowledge is always a knowledge of things, and that truth is always the conformity between the mind and things.

My purpose for penning this tribute to Fr. Phelan is to present to a new generation of Thomists an introduction to one of the great teachers in that first generation of the Thomistic Revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, scholars that included Maritain, Gilson, DeKoninck, Yves R. Simon, and Mortimer Adler. Fr. Phelan was the teacher of a number of outstanding second generation Thomistic scholars who studied under him in Toronto in the late 1930s and 1940s. Some of that second generation included such masters as Anton C. Pegis, Vernon Bourke, James Anderson, Robert Henle, George Klubertanz, Leo Sweeney, Robert W. Schmidt, Joseph Owens, Armand Maurer and so many more. They in their turn, having earned their Ph.D. from Toronto or the Pontifical Institute, went on to educate future generations of students who carry on the tradition of a love for truth that characterizes the Thomistic Revival that began in the twentieth century and still continues today.

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