

# Comment

Some thirty five lecturers in philosophy in Dominican institutions all over the world recently gathered in Rome to take part in the centenary celebrations of the philosophy faculty of the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas. Better known as the Angelicum (its old name), this institution rises steeply above the noisy little roundabout at the bottom of the Via Nazionale. In 1983 the Dominicans are committed to meeting in this building to elect a new Master of the Order. The nearest tourist landmark is Trajan's Markets.

For a hundred years, then, the Angelicum has been the **great** Dominican stronghold of Thomistic philosophy. The celebrations took the appropriate Roman form. The visiting Dominicans were greatly outnumbered by their hosts. The two Dominican cardinals put in a ceremonial appearance: the pellucid Ciappi and the fastidious Philippe. The secretary of the Holy Office, the tall and jowled Archbishop Hamer, himself a Dominican, attended the opening and got the assembly to their feet to listen to the Pope's telegram. There were three or four women in the assembly, although no blacks. The festivities, liturgical and gastronomic, displayed immense buoyancy of spirit. The discussions, on the other hand, revealed deep anxiety about the future of Thomistic philosophy, at the Angelicum or anywhere else.

Ordinands in the Catholic Church are obliged by canon law to study philosophy for at least two years. True, the average Catholic priest, as he goes about his ministry, rarely shows much sign of being able to refute Descartes and Kant. Even the average Dominican friar, at least of the Post-Vatican II era, might be flummoxed if you asked him to explain the Real Distinction. They are probably all Suarezians now, unwittingly and by default. Thomism, in many quarters, since Rahner and Lonergan, is incurably "transcendental".

It is not easy to explain why it matters. The function of philosophical studies in the education of the clergy is obscure and contentious. The work in philosophy that Karol Wojtyla has published would have won him a chair in some university, if other commitments had not beckoned. He is, of course, the most famous

alumnus of the Angelicum. But, even with that example, many participants at the centenary obviously feared that philosophy is no longer being taught seriously in Dominican establishments, let alone elsewhere. Some may have been relieved that this might be so. The philosophy faculty at the Angelicum celebrated its centenary without any philosophy, Thomistic or otherwise, actually being practised. It was thus impossible to discover what counts, these days, as Thomistic philosophy.

Many of the participants, whether for or against it, seemed to regard Thomism as a system of truths that could be expounded in a course of lectures. One might wonder if this would not be more like ideological indoctrination than philosophical work. As somebody once said: "Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity". For Thomas Aquinas himself philosophy meant the difficult labour of using the newly discovered texts of Aristotle to place restraints on the endemic Platonism of Christian theology and piety. He had also to clear these texts of interpretations by the Moslem philosophers through whom they had been transmitted. Again and again he returned to the struggle against certain deep metaphysical preconceptions to which Christians are prone. He sought, for instance, to "cure" his students of body/soul dualism and of illuminationist pictures of mental activity. His commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is a philosophical classic. His work on moral philosophy, perhaps his finest achievement, bears directly upon modern discussion in the analytic tradition. Wherever people want to locate and dispel the mythical pictures of man and of God which distort theology and piety, the work of Thomas Aquinas will be found indispensable. Ordinands, and certainly Dominican students, deserve the chance to be initiated into this self-critical practice. But whether this is the Thomism celebrated at the centenary of the Angelicum is another matter.