

# Reviews

**FIFTY YEARS OF CATHOLIC THEOLOGY: CONVERSATIONS WITH YVES CONGAR** edited and introduced by Bernard Lauret. *SCM Press*. London, 1988. Pp. 87. £4.95.

'Autumn conversations' — the French title of this little book — better conveys the informal and undemanding atmosphere of these reminiscences. The allusions are sometimes rather private — 'the Maredsous crisis' (page 47), 'Madame Swetchine' (page 71), for example; and one longs for references to the books and articles which Congar cites. Jean de Saint-Thomas (page 73) might have appeared under his English name. But for readers who already have some familiarity with Congar's work and life these pages are an often moving (if never in the least humorous) testimony to the faith and character of one of the finest Catholic theologians of the century. Although requiring permanent nursing since 1984 he remains as passionate and perceptive about the internal ecclesiological structures and the ecumenical prospects of the Roman Catholic Church as he has ever been.

The format obviously prevents him from developing or defending any of the positions which he sketches. The great innovation at Vatican II was the acceptance of the *historical character of the Church and Scripture* (page 8) — a theme which would be dear to Congar in any case because all his work shows that the investigation of the history of a concept or institution is the only way he sees to understanding it. It was the difference between 'Billot's Neo-Thomism' (page 74) and the approach to studying Aquinas which Gardeil, Chenu and others encouraged at Le Saulchoir. While not dismissing Karl Rahner's notion of 'anonymous Christianity', Congar rightly notes that it depends heavily on his 'transcendental anthropology' — 'which is open to criticism, and has not found much acceptance among us' (page 14). Recalling the 'galloping Mariology' of the 1950s, Congar reveals that he was not in favour of the definition of the dogma of the Assumption — 'historically ancient evidence is very sparse and we can no longer accept that the present faith of the church has a revelatory value, even if one can draw certain consequences from divine motherhood' (page 62) — discuss! On a quite different matter, Congar declares his opposition to the ordination of women to the presbyterate or the episcopate but he hopes for 'a restoration of the diaconate for women': 'Deaconesses did exist. They were ordained at Byzantium and at Antioch — the two places where they were most active — with precisely the same words as the deacons, and at the same place — in front of the altar' (page 58).

Although not uncritical of the effects of Vatican II, for which he worked and suffered so much, Yves Congar displays a 'serenity' (in Bernard Lauret's word) which these conversations catch and for which one would look in vain in the writings of most Catholic theologians today.

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