

# A New Life of St Thomas Aquinas

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Perhaps Fr Weisheipl<sup>1</sup> rather labours the point that it isn't enough to see St Thomas in a 'speculative perspective', that he should be studied with 'historical method' as well as 'philosophical acumen'. Surely, that can be presumed. Can it, on the other hand, be presumed right from the start that to us readers as well as to the author St Thomas's doctrine seems 'sublime' and his insights 'transcendental' (pp. 1-2)? Such encomiums would surely come better further on in the book. Fortunately there is, in fact, far more sense than rhetoric in this work, and far more history than exercise of philosophical or theological 'acumen'; neither of which is really Fr Weisheipl's *forte*. And as a historian—or better, as a biographer—he has done a very good job. Indeed I would say that he has written the best biography in English, and probably in any language, of our greatest theologian.

His aim was the large one of presenting 'a rather full picture of the life, thought, and works of Thomas', but his special achievement is to give the most complete and reliable account so far available of Thomas's external existence, including in this of course the chronology and circumstances of his writings. And this is a great achievement. The subject bristles with problems and difficulties. To be sure, the background and setting of Thomas's life are fairly well documented, intertwining as this does with the history of three great institutions whose official records are preserved: the Dominican Order, the University of Paris, and the Papacy. But such records do not, of course, interpret themselves except to the scholar's eye, and it is often a very delicate matter to assess the exact meaning of this or that technical term (*studium*, for example, in its various official or semi-official connotations) or the relative importance—relative to St Thomas—of this or that contemporary movement or event or series of events. The series of events that pre-conditioned, decisively, the career of Thomas was, of course, the rapid involvement of the Dominicans with the University of Paris in the first half of the thirteenth century. An important consequence of this, to which Fr Weisheipl does full justice, was the anti-Mendicant polemic in its two successive phases of 1252-7 and 1268-72. Between these two periods fell Thomas's nine years in Italy, a period of crucial importance, as we shall see, in his own intellectual and spiritual development. It is in the central chapters of this book, showing us Thomas at work in the University (1252-9 and 1268-72) and in close contact, at Orvieto, with Pope Urban IV (1262-4), that Fr Weisheipl establishes one of his two chief claims

<sup>1</sup>*Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought and Work*, by James A. Weisheipl OP. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1975. 464 pp. £9.

on our gratitude; the other being his careful re-examination of the chronology and the immediate aims and circumstances of Thomas's writings. On all these topics he provides a fresh and for the most part persuasive critical review of received views and opinions.

But before I give an outline of some of his more interesting conclusions I must point out certain defects, as they seem to me, in his work.

1. It doesn't matter perhaps that there is a good deal of repetition, but the writing is sometimes excessively careless. Thus in the same sentence (p. 43) we hear of Albert the Great's 'solid Aristotelianism' and of his 'Platonism'; and on successive pages (39-40) that he was 'already middle-aged' when he 'came upon the new Aristotelian learning' and that he had been 'introduced' to it when a youth in Padua.

2. The treatment of 'Latin Averroism' strikes me, on the whole, as superficial, even perfunctory. So far as I can see, Fr Weisheipl takes no account of recent research on Siger of Brabant (the important work of Kuksewicz, the editions by Bazan and Marlasca, the discoveries of Bataillon and Dondaine).<sup>2</sup> The relationship between Siger and St Thomas is curtly summed up in two crude sentences (p. 279) which might have been written by Mandonnet sixty years ago (only that is hardly fair to Mandonnet). Again, the comment on *Paradiso* X, 133-8 is all wrong; it is absurd to identify—and with such assurance!—the 'truths' for which Dante's St Thomas praises Siger with the propositions condemned by Bishop Tempier in 1270 and 1277 (p. 273). The odd thing is that, having given this quite unfounded interpretation of Thomas's words, which contain the whole crux of the problem posed by Siger's presence in Dante's heaven, Weisheipl adds: 'We will make no attempt to resolve this problem'; and then for good measure refers to Gilson whose interpretation is entirely different!

3. Again, I feel there is something facile and shallow about the passing reference to Scotus in connection with the Franciscan opposition to Thomism (p. 286). This opposition is found, after all, excusable on the ground that the theology of 'all the great Franciscan masters of the thirteenth century . . . was more in harmony with monastic theology than with the Aristotelian rationalism of the Dominicans'. It was a form of that 'Augustinism' which was 'the refuge of thirteenth century conservatives' (p. 285). Moreover, and by the same token, it was 'loyal' to the spirit of St Francis, 'whatever must be said of Duns Scotus or of William of Ockham at a later period'. So Scotus is left unexcused and would even appear, as bracketed with Ockham, to be left out of the century in which most of his short life was passed. But what, I feel, is chiefly wrong here is the cliché implicit in the contrast drawn—or in the way it is drawn—between the two Orders in their respective intellectual achievement. That this is a conventional 'Thomist' cliché is neither here nor there. Of course it is half true, like all clichés; but it ignores the fact that in the history of science and scientific method it was the thirteenth century Franciscans, especially the English ones, who brilliantly innovated; and as regards Scotus, it tends either, as Weisheipl here does,

<sup>2</sup>See the excellent *compte rendu* by V. Leroy in *Revue Thomiste*, July-September, 1973, p. 500-6.

implicitly and ignorantly to belittle him as a constructive theologian, or to take him less than seriously as a philosopher. Scholarship is the only corrective of the cliché habit, but here Fr Weisheipl, an excellent scholar in his way, falls short of his own standards.

4. The bibliography (pp. 407-10) is divided, as one would expect, into 'primary sources' and 'secondary studies'. Confining myself to the latter, I observe that it comprises (a) works of strictly biographical interest, (b) a few books and articles, etc., that are partly biographical but whose main purpose is to bring out aspects of his thought, and in any case were written for serious students (e.g., Chenu's *Introduction*, and the works of Bourke and D'Arcy); (c) other books of a more popular character (Chesterton, Vann, R. Maritain, R. M. Coffey). To classes (a) and (b) may be added a number of items mentioned *en route* in the 'Notes', pp. 411-47, or in the useful 'catalogue of authentic works', pp. 355-85,<sup>3</sup> which is a revision of the well-known list published by Eschmann in 1956. Now all this is excellent as far as it goes, but leaves me wondering about the kinds of reader our author had in mind. Writing as Thomas's *biographer* he evidently had his mental eye on critical readers who would expect him to write as a scholar and a specialist. But he has also, it is clear, aimed at attracting readers who are prepared to be interested precisely by Thomas's *thought*. This word occurs, after all, on the title-page, and in the Preface we hear of the author's 'sincere hope that this book will aid the pursuit of philosophical and theological truth' (p. x). But this intention is not, I think it fair to say, seriously followed up. True, there is quite a lot of potted doctrine scattered through the book; but its quality, frankly, is mediocre.<sup>4</sup> And the bibliography is extremely meagre in this respect; it offers no guidance at all to the serious study of contemporary Thomism. Presumably it was not meant to. But the effect of this lack, and of the indifferent quality of the doctrinal summaries, is that the book as a whole seems intellectually lopsided: different standards are applied in different places.

I glance now at some of the more noteworthy biographical points that Fr Weisheipl claims to establish as certain or at least probable.

(a) He is interesting on Thomas's debt to the University of Naples where he studied as a youth in the early 1240s. This was only a few years after this University's foundation by the Emperor Frederick II who, as everyone knows, was both a splendid patron of learned men and poets and a terrible nuisance to the Church. If not actually a freethinker, he was reputed one. In any case his court, as Weisheipl says, 'was an important centre not only of Aristotelian but . . . of Averroistic studies'. Hence at Naples the young Thomas was exposed to 'a more direct Aristotelianism' than he would have been likely to find elsewhere at that time (at the more clerical Paris indeed he would not have been allowed

<sup>3</sup>Under this heading there is a reference to the new 60 volume translation of the *Summa*, but without naming the man to whom it owes its entire existence, and who in general has done more for Thomist studies in the English-speaking world than anyone else since the war. And, by the way, that translation is published in London as well as in New York.

<sup>4</sup>This may seem harsh, but I would ask the reader to ponder carefully two sample passages: one on p. 132, concerning *Contra Gentiles* I, 22, the other on p. 260 where law and grace are called 'two *external guidelines*' to happiness.

to study the *libri naturales* at all, the papal ban on them being still in force). This emphasis on Thomas's Aristotelian studies antecedent to his becoming a Dominican is against the older view which linked him more closely, in this respect, with Albert the Great. Incidentally, Weisheipl's view of the importance of Frederick II's patronage in the 'latinisation' of Averroes is supported by recent research (see *Revue Thomiste*, January-March, 1973, pp. 134-6).

(b) Thomas had about three years in Paris before going to Cologne with Albert in 1248. This is the view of most scholars (Walz and Eschmann dissenting) but Weisheipl brings out also the improbability of Thomas's having studied under Albert in this period at Paris. Albert was certainly there at S. Jacques, but as already a University 'master', he would not have been occupied with small fry like the novice from Naples.

(c) On his return to Paris from Cologne in 1252 Thomas was appointed to lecture on the *Sentences*, which he did for four years as a 'bachelor': he was never, *pace* Mandonnet, a 'cursor biblicus' (p. 66).

(d) Weisheipl insists, convincingly, on the importance in Thomas's career of the anti-Mendicant movement in the University, both in its first intense phase, coinciding roughly with Thomas's bachelorship, 1252-7, and in its revival in 1268-71. The polemical writings of Thomas that this controversy occasioned, especially the *Contra impugnantes* of 1256, are in effect a reasoned apologia for the Dominican way of life, and as such have had a lasting influence on the way the Order regards itself and its function in the Church (in conjunction with S.T. *2a2ae*, 186-189). A view more personal to Weisheipl is that it was principally the renewal of anti-Mendicant polemic in the University—led by Gerard of Abbeville this time, William of S. Amour having been exiled in 1257—which led to Thomas's being recalled to Paris from Italy in 1268; and *not* the spread of Averroism in the Arts Faculty, even if this was to have far more momentous consequences for philosophy and theology once Aquinas got to grips with it (pp. 236-8). Nothing is said of the very interesting repercussions in vernacular literature (Ruteboeuf, the *Roman de la Rose* and perhaps Dante) of this anti-friar movement at Paris.

(e) Chapters IV and V, on Thomas's stay in Italy from 1259 to '68, show Weisheipl at his best. A number of interesting points emerge. Thomas was never—and here again Mandonnet is corrected—a 'lector' in the papal Curia, nor in any sense 'Master of the Sacred Palace': his job—successively at Naples, Orvieto, Rome and Viterbo—was always to teach young Dominicans; and it was to meet the needs of these young Italians that he seems to have begun the *Summa theologiae*, at Rome in 1266. Meanwhile, as a Preacher General since September 1260, he was much involved in the running of the Roman Province. Nevertheless his contacts with the papacy, and particularly with Urban IV at Orvieto from 1262 to '64, were of crucial importance in Thomas's development as a theologian; for it was Urban who set him to work on the *Catena Aurea* (1263-'67), the first of Thomas's works to show first-hand study (though in translation, of course) both of the acts of the early Councils

of the Church and of Greek patristic sources. Thus the *Catena* 'marks a turning point' not only in Aquinas's own development but 'in the history of Catholic thought and dogma'. 'Beginning with the gloss on Mark', says Weisheipl, 'Thomas's research into the Greek Fathers became more and more intense'. The same development appears of course in the *Contra errores Graecorum*, also commissioned by Urban IV, and it came just in time to affect Book IV of the *Contra Gentiles*.

(f) Against Eschmann, Weisheipl regards the *De regimine principum* as authentic, down to II, c.4; and, a little less decidedly, the Office for Corpus Christi (I personally have no doubt about this). Apropos of the *De regimine*, the sketch given of the Gueff-Ghibelline controversy doesn't take account of Dante's rather special position (pp. 190-5).

(g) Against Mandonnet and many others, Weisheipl rejects the 'legend' that William of Moerbeke's immensely important translations of Greek philosophical texts were undertaken 'ad instantiam fratris Thomae' (pp. 150-2). There is no evidence that Moerbeke met Aquinas at Orvieto in 1262-5. They were, however, together at Viterbo, 1267-8. However, Moerbeke had been translating Aristotle since 1260, and he certainly didn't know Thomas then. Thomas, of course, was very quick to use the new translations, but Weisheipl inclines to a rather late dating of the great series of commentaries on Aristotle. Here he is with Gauthier and against Mandonnet, Bourke and others. He allows that the exposition of *De anima I* may reflect class-room teaching in Italy between 1266 and '68 but insists that all the rest of the immense series was composed after Thomas returned to Paris in the winter of 1268-9 (pp. 214-6). It was the result of a fresh awareness on his part, after a nine-year absence from the University, of the critical situation developing in the Arts Faculty, the growth of a philosophical spirit potentially hostile to theology and to faith. 'In my opinion', says Weisheipl, 'Thomas commented on Aristotle because he felt an apostolic need to help young masters in arts to understand Aristotelian philosophy correctly in harmony with the actual text and the guideline of faith, where necessary.' This seems the right explanation, though it only leaves one the more astonished at the rock-like objectivity of those commentaries.

(h) Picking up suggestions from Eschmann, Lottin and Gauthier, Weisheipl is persuaded that after 1268-'9 an 'unusual development' took place in Thomas's mentality, that he underwent 'some profound . . . psychic experience' which affected all his later writings (pp. 244-5). Eschmann found a significant change as between the first and second parts of the *Summa*, the first being 'coldly metaphysical, precise and curt', the second 'impressively human, considerate and complex'. As Weisheipl describes his sense of it, this change went with an increasing attention to the affective side of man, the love-factor; and also, he suggests, with a 'sudden, new realisation', on Thomas's part, 'of the apostolic character of all his work'. And he adds, with fine perception I think, 'like the young Macedonian in St Paul's vision', beckoning Paul to 'come over and help us' (Acts 16, 9), so too young students were beckoning Thomas 'to come into their world and help them. The *Summa theologiae* was begun for young students in theology . . . the commen-

taries on Aristotle were destined for young masters in arts. Gauthier seems to be right : Thomas was induced to mitigate the excessive intellectualism that he had earlier displayed. Whatever was the specific cause of this change . . . it was of sufficient magnitude to affect all of his later writings' (p. 245).

This interesting passage comes in the chapter on Thomas's second regency at Paris (1269-72) which contains also a fine appreciation of the high-water mark of Thomas's purely biblical output, the commentaries on John and on *Romans* which belong to this same intensely productive period. Fr Weisheipl's remarks on them exemplify his capacity to relish deeply parts and aspects of Thomas's work that are unjustly ignored or underrated. But indeed there were depths below depths in this amazing genius which have scarcely, if at all, been explored. I am thinking particularly of Thomas in his last years, indeed his last months. When shall we have a worthwhile study of that 'trance' which overcame him (the event is well attested) at Naples on December 6th 1273, and which put an end to all his writing ('Reginald, I cannot go on. . . . All that I have written seems to me STRAW compared with what has now been revealed to me')?

I have expressed frankly my disagreement or dissatisfaction with parts of this book. Let me end by repeating that this is the best account I know of the life of St Thomas.



#### POEM FOR THE NEW YEAR

There isn't much blood with circumcision  
They tell me, all clinical or ritual.

With care whatever. It's not anything  
I've thought about for a child of mine though.

Yet, asleep with cats, breathing quietly  
In the night, they share epiphany blood.

And grow from wounds. It's a world of candles  
Tears and blood and prayers they inherit.

And inhabit. Into it, stretch their arms  
And wake. Nothing I see now is childish.

No pain is less, no laugh immoderate.  
Pain does not grow, no slapstick vanishes.

Like Gulliver, stature only changes,  
Hurt and joy, in us in them, together.

RONALD TAMPLIN