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The Church in the Modern World and the French Dominicans

The thesis of this article is that the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church had a hard time adjusting to the cultural and political situation of the two centuries after the French revolution (1789) and that it was a handful of mainly French Dominicans who helped the Church eventually to meet the challenges which the new situation presented. This thesis could appear too chauvinistic and simplistic, but will be proposed anyway. Other contributing persons, whether Dominican or not, will be mentioned along the way.

The thesis will be developed in four parts, each part consisting of a historical period, a problem area or theme, and a leading personality or two.

- I. Mid-nineteenth century; parliamentary democracy; H.-D. Lacordaire.
- II. Turn of the last century; historical-critical approach to the Bible and Christian doctrine; M.-J. Lagrange and A. Gardeil.
- III. Mid twentieth-century; ecumenism and relation to dechristianized urban workers; M.-D. Chenu and Y.-M. Congar.
- IV. Later twentieth century; application of historical-critical method to Christological doctrine; Eduard Schillebeeckx.

I.

Because the French Revolution was so harsh on the Church (all monasteries and religious houses expropriated by the state, many priests, bishops and nuns beheaded or driven into exile, etc.), the Holy See was not disposed to be friendly to the political program of the revolutionaries, not even to those aspects which were in themselves neither anti-Christian nor unjust, e.g., the idea of parliamentary, representative, egalitarian, democracy. I say «idea» of democracy because the practical realization was often anything but democratic. Even on the theoretical level, democracy often had a negative reputation, because it was thought that it could so easily degenerate into demagoguery or tyranny. It had this bad reputation from the time of classical philosophy, with some exceptions: some Catholic religious orders and some countries influenced by Calvinist ideas had a positive, sober practice of democracy.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the Church was further hindered from embracing the new political ideas as a result of at least two factors, one political, one theoretical. On the practical level, the Austrian Prime Minister or Imperial Chancellor, Clemens Prince Metternich, opposed any accommodation between the Church and constitutional democracy. He accomplished this mainly by exercising the imperial right of veto in papal elections. Any candidate could be excluded from the papal office by this veto power (hence the name «*exclusiva*»). All popes between around 1800 to 1848 were thus men approved by Metternich and, to have that approval, they had to be anti-democratic. On the theoretical level, a hindrance was created by the book *Du Pape* (On the Pope, 1819) by the Catholic lay philosopher Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821).¹ He wrote rhapsodically of the union of throne (absolute monarchy) and altar (an absolutistic papacy). De Maistre had been a student of the Jesuits in Savoy and always remained devoted to them. This had the unfortunate effect that, after their restoration in 1814, many Jesuits read de Maistre, their loyal friend and patron, more than they read real theology. This led them to share his and Metternich's zeal for absolutism in state and church, their hostility to constitutional democracy in any form. The result was that this important religious order, which had done so much to help the Church to face the challenge of the Reformation (however one-sidedly), was not in a position to help the Church to come to terms with the new situation. If help was going to come, it was not going to come from the Jesuits, not this time. They had backed a horse that was going to lose, as became gradually clear, in 1848, 1870, 1918, 1945 and 1989.

A more creative response to the revolutionary situation was romanticism, including romantic religious thought. Already in 1802 François René de Chateaubriand, with his book on *The Genius of Christianity*, helped to win over public opinion to the restoration of the Church's (minimal) rights in France, achieved by Napoleon. Romantic theology was further developed by the Catholic Tübingen School (Drey, Moehler, Hirscher, Kuhn) from 1821 on, but without touching the political issue. This was tackled head on by Felicité de Lamennais (1782–1854), a Breton priest, who proposed that the Holy See should lead the movement toward parliamentary democracy and should reject the help it was receiving from European monarchs.² One of Lamennais' collaborators was a young priest from Dijon, Henri-Dominique Lacordaire (1802–1864). Lacordaire had been raised a Voltairean unbeliever and became a lawyer. He received the grace of an adult conversion, studied for the priesthood, and became an outstanding preacher in the great cathe-

¹ Isaiah BERLIN, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1991. Chapter 5: «Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism», pp. 91–174.

² See Alec R. VIDLER, *Prophecy and Papacy: A Study of Lamennais, the Church, and the Revolution*. Cambridge: University Press, 1954.

dral of France. Once Lamennais' project was condemned by Pope Gregory XVI, Lacordaire had to reconsider his options. He eventually decided to undertake the restoration of the Dominican order in France, to renew the ministry of preaching in a spirit of liberal parliamentary democracy. He well knew that the Dominican order had both positive and negative pages in its history. The negative was mainly its long association with the Inquisition, as the hammer of heretics. Its positive side included not only great saints and doctors like Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, and Antoninus of Florence, great mystics like Catherine of Siena and Meister Eckhardt, great reformers like Jerome Savonarola, Giordano Bruno and Thomas Campanella, but also a tradition of democratic self-government going back to the founder, St Dominic himself.³ Here was a tradition of representative democracy imbedded right in the heart of the Catholic Church. It was just what Lacordaire was looking for. It only needed to be updated, expanded and applied to civil society.⁴

Metternich, the policeman of Europe, had his spies everywhere. He got wind of Lacordaire's project and pulled strings at the Vatican to have the plans quashed. In the power struggle, Lacordaire's project was crippled but not crushed.⁵ The French Dominicans were indeed relaunched, and in a spirit best expressed by Lacordaire's words on his deathbed: «I die a penitent Catholic and an impenitent liberal.» Liberal here meant «in favor of parliamentary democracy.» The application of this spirit to civil society was powerfully advanced by two close friends of Lacordaire, the committed laymen Charles de Montalembert and Alfred de Falloux: The Holy See was not expressly won over till 1944 (Pius XII's Christmas allocution) and Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, paragraph 75, 1965), although Pope Leo XIII had made a try. But Lacordaire, unlike Lamennais, had remained in the church and in the priesthood, created institutions that would outlive him, and above all provided a model from deep within Catholic tradition that the Church could draw upon when she decided to.⁶

³ Ernest BARKER, *The Dominican Constitutions and Convocation*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1913.

⁴ John COURTNEY MURRAY, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960.

⁵ Bernard MONTAGNES, «Ouverture ou résistance à la modernité? Le rétablissement de l'ordre dominicain au dix-neuvième siècle», in: *History of European Ideas* 3 (1982) 185–192.

⁶ Lancelot C. SHEPPARD, *Lacordaire*. London: The Catholic Book Club, 1964; Henri LACORDAIRE, *Essay on the Re-Establishment in France of the Order of Preachers*. Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1983.

II.

Although the Bible had always been an object of study, debate and controversy (think of Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, a Jewish rabbi, or Origen's debate with the pagan critic Celsus), by the mid-nineteenth century the study of the Bible had been affected by two factors that had nothing to do with polemical ill will. The first factor was Darwin's apparent demonstration of the evolution of species (1856). This demonstration affected the literal surface truth of the biblical picture of the origin of the world, especially as presented in Genesis 1–11. The other factor was the discovery in Mesopotamia of ancient parallels to biblical laws and legends that were in some cases older than the Bible itself. These discoveries cried out for careful comparison with the biblical texts, a comparison that should be carried out in a spirit of scientific objectivity. But two obstacles barred the way to this being done by Catholics. The first obstacle was political. The Cardinal Secretary of State from 1903 to 1914, Raphael Merry del Val, was opposed to any accommodation with the modern cultural world, because he aimed at a return to absolute, legitimist monarchies in France and Naples, in order to regain the Papal States. This led to the unhelpful decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission at that time and for some time thereafter. The second obstacle was theological. It consisted in an abstract doctrine of biblical inerrancy. This was the essence of the «biblical question», as it was then called. If God was the author of both testaments, as St Irenaeus had taught, how could there be any errors in the Bible, even on matters of geography and biology which had nothing to do with salvation? Thus reasoned the abstract reasoners; these were often theologians (like Louis Billot) who had little interest in studying the Bible in detail. For them it was a matter of mathematical deduction: the God of truth could not allow any error in his book. They could assert this so long as they never looked to see how in fact God had allowed the book to evolve. They also forgot that Irenaeus' point was that God was the author of *both* testaments, a point Irenaeus was making against Marcion who said that Christians should reject the Old Testament.

How was the church to dig herself out of this hole in which she was trapped by some of her zealous servants? In such a central matter there are bound to be many factors, many heroes, and a few villains. Nevertheless, it can be said without too much exaggeration that the man who did more than anyone else to help the church to integrate the historical-critical method into its many approaches to the Bible was Marie-Joseph Albert Lagrange (1855–1938). Born in Bourg-en-Bresse, not far from Lyon, he received his first degree in law. Once he decided to try his vocation as a Dominican, he deliberately chose to enter the Toulouse province, not the province of his home territory, Lyon. This was because the political orientation of the Lyon Dominicans at that time was toward Bourbon restoration legitimist reaction, whereas Toulouse still breathed the (politically) liberal attitudes of his hero

Lacordaire. After ordination and some complementary studies at the University of Vienna in biblical and ancient near eastern languages, he was asked by his superiors to start a school of biblical studies in Jerusalem. He opened the school (the *Ecole Biblique*) in November 1890. It was the first permanent school of modern archaeological and biblical studies in Jerusalem. But the idea was so obviously a good one and the time was so ready, that Lagrange's project was soon followed by the opening of permanent American, British and German schools. Lagrange set the pace. He soon launched a scholarly quarterly, *Revue Biblique* (1892) and planned a complete commentary on the Bible, starting with Genesis. The *Ecole* soon scored a coup by publishing the Madaba map, a mosaic map of ancient Jerusalem, crucial for later excavations. In France another Dominican, Vincent Scheil, published the first edition of Hammurabi's Code, an Assyro-Babylonian law code with important parallels to biblical legislation. The analysis of these parallels would renew the study of the Pentateuch.

In the light of subsequent events it is important to remember that Lagrange enjoyed the support and favor of Pope Leo XIII for the first thirteen years of the *Ecole* (1890–1903). Moreover, the gifted diocesan priest Alfred Loisy was taking an even bolder line in his Paris teaching. Among the Jesuits Albert Condamin collaborated in Lagrange's publication projects, while Franz Hummelauer tried to do the same kind of work in German and Latin. But in the time of trial which would soon come, these would all fall by the wayside. Lagrange alone would remain to keep the flame alive, even if the flame must burn low. The parallel with Lamennais and Lacordaire is rough but real. Loisy was excommunicated. Hummelauer and Condamin were withdrawn from biblical studies by their superiors.

A seminary friend of Lagrange, Pierre Batiffol, asked him to give a series of lectures in Toulouse on the Bible and modern criticism. The lectures were soon published (1903), translated, sold out, reprinted. The book contained one simple idea. In reading the Bible one should pay attention to the different literary genres in the book: besides history, there is also law, praise, prophecy and wisdom. The first ten chapters of Genesis are not plain, ordinary history, but a story of origins. This book made Lagrange suspect in higher church circles. He had lost all chance of further promotion. But because of his known piety, orthodoxy and moderation, because of his lawyerly sense of how institutions evolve slowly, because he was supported in the darkest hour by a saintly superior (Cormier), Lagrange escaped the worst. The anti-modernist witch hunt (1907–1914) came and went. Lagrange survived and kept on working. Five years after he was safely dead, the Holy See recognized the truth of his book of 1903, the role of literary genres (the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1943). The limits to biblical inerrancy were recognized at Vatican II (*Dei Verbum*, no. 11; 1965). Lagrange's spirit had been brought to the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome soon after 1945 by two of his younger Jesuit disciples, Stanislas Lyonnet and Joseph Bonsirven.

Before ending this section, we should mention a representative of systematic theology who helped Lagrange in his struggle for a more adequate theology. Ambroise Gardeil (1859–1931) taught systematic and philosophical theology with the Paris Dominicans. He is best known for a book entitled *Les données révélées de la foi* (the revealed data of faith). The point was that reflective faith, that is, theology, should take its start from the Bible and the earliest Christian witnesses, the church fathers, liturgies and councils. This seems banal, harmless enough, except that he published his book during the witch hunt period (1911), when the official view was that personal thinking about the faith was best avoided altogether. If it should happen, such personal thinking should take its cue from the latest turn of the magisterial party line (not from Scripture or tradition). Gardeil's book somehow escaped censure (it was written in an obscure and difficult style). It too kept the flame alive, the flame of living thinking about the faith, thinking nourished from the primary sources. So Gardeil's book contributed in its way to the great renewal of theology in France that burst forth during the years 1944–1954.⁷

III.

In the mid-twentieth century period, from around 1935 to 1965, the situation in the life of the church becomes more fluid and complex. The two figures who, one could argue, did the most to help the church to face difficult issues in this era were two Parisian Dominicans: Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895–1990) and Yves Congar (1904–1995). The areas where Congar was helpful are easy to list: ecumenism; a theological reevaluation of the role of the laity; a blueprint for the reform of the church through a major ecumenical council. The contributions of Chenu are harder to list accurately: a historical-critical approach to the study of Thomas Aquinas which set Thomas in his historical context; a renewal of the study of the thought of the entire Middle Ages which rediscovered forgotten figures like Anselm of Havelberg, Otto of Freising, Jacques de Vitry; these figures supported Congar's arguments in the areas of his contribution, besides helping to formulate a Christian theology of history; a renewal of pastoral theology which takes more seriously the alienated condition of dechristianized urban workers.

All this involved a multi-faceted program. Chenu and Congar could not and did not tackle it all alone. Nor were they equally successful in every area. What we can say is, they got the ball rolling. Two factors helped in the early days, the late thirties. (1) Most of the anti-modernist hardliners in the Vatican curia had died by 1935. Catholic theology could begin to resume its

⁷ The best biography of Lagrange is by Bernard MONTAGNES, *Le Père Lagrange (1855–1938): L'exégèse catholique dans la crise moderniste*. Paris: Cerf, 1995. This book will soon be published in English (Paulist Press), where further publications will be listed.

forward march. (2) The Jesuits in France after 1926 gradually abandoned the monarchist restoration stance which de Maistre had bequeathed them. They became allies, especially the two patristic scholars Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou. When Congar launched his ecumenical-ecclesiological book series *Unam Sanctam* in 1937, one of the first books in the collection was by de Lubac (*Catholicism*, 1938). The Jesuits soon launched their own theological series, *Théologie* (1944). The spirit of both series was captured by the label *la nouvelle théologie*. Its basic idea was a return to the classic sources of Christian thought, the Bible, the Fathers, the medieval doctors like Thomas Aquinas, to get beyond canned textbook answers, and to address out of the tradition the contemporary issues already mentioned. This idea was called *retour aux sources* or *ressourcement*.

To return to Chenu. In his little book *Une Ecole de Théologie, Le Saulchoir* (1937, placed on the Index 1942), Chenu explicitly states that he wants to do for Thomas Aquinas what Lagrange had tried to do for the Bible, place it in its historical context. This provides an explicit link with the previous stage. But what difference does it make? Why is Thomas important? Thomas Aquinas represents for most mainstream Christian intellectuals the finest example of the ideal synthesis between faith and reason, Christ and culture, science and revelation. Thomas attains a high degree of coherence, though this is neither absolute nor complete. Since at least 1879, wise popes have held Thomas up as a model and a norm for Catholic philosophy and theology. Thomas is a healthy thinker, very balanced. (This makes him unappealing to many moderns who prefer sickness to health as a cultural style.) So how Christians understand Thomas plays an important role in Catholic theology. We can briefly sketch three ways of grasping Thomas in history: (1) the historical Thomas who was sufficiently bold as to merit posthumous condemnation from the bishop of Paris in 1277; (2) the Counter-Reformation Thomas of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) which emphasized his differences from Luther and Calvin and turned Thomas into an authority; (3) the Maurrasian Thomas of French neo-fascism (the Action Française movement founded by Charles Maurras). This movement turned Thomas into a timeless, abstract, purely Latin-Mediterranean metaphysician *against* the German historical philosophers like Schelling, Hegel and Schlegel. The Maurrasians tried to turn Thomas into a sort of Catholic Plotinus. Chenu and the great Jesuit de Lubac broke with this program by (a) recovering the historical, bold Thomas and (b) showing his harmony with the Fathers rather than his differences from them. Congar then tried to free him from his use by Trent, to make him an ecumenical force. At the same time the lay Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain was laying the groundwork for the Christian Democratic parties which emerged in Europe after the defeat of fascism (*Integral Humanism*, 1936). Chenu and Congar were influential in the worker priest movement which tried to reach the unchurched masses. This activity led them to compromise with Communist-led labor unions and it

ended in their (temporary) condemnation and exile in 1954. (Chenu influenced the pastoral letters of Emmanuel Cardinal Suhard, archbishop of Paris.) Depending on one's politics and in the light of the fall of Communism (1989–1991), some of their stands may seem erroneous. But the pastoral problems they tried to address remain as real and urgent as ever. Their social justice concerns were developed by Louis Lebreton, o.p., and led to the social encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and the Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971). Their confrère H.-D. Feret helped them formulate a theology of history, and the convert Louis Bouyer helped with ecumenism and liturgical-biblical renewal. The achievements of Congar merge imperceptibly with those of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) of which he is the main architect, particularly in the areas of ecclesiology, ecumenism, religious liberty, laity and priesthood. We will not go into all of this, except to say that Congar's book *True and False Reform of the Church* (1950) is the blueprint of the Council as convoked by Pope John XXIII. When this future pope was nuncio in Paris, he read Congar's thick book to prepare himself to inform Congar that the book was not allowed to be reprinted or translated into other languages. This reading planted the seed that led him to convoke the Council once he was elected Pope in 1958. Congar's period in the desert had only lasted 1954–1958, much shorter than Lagrange's. He lived to see his ideas prevail. He even died a cardinal.⁸

IV.

Our fourth and final section will be brief and simple. In the period after the Council (1966–2000), Catholics were first busy with the mental digestion, assimilation and application of the Council itself. In many ways this was easily and quickly done, since the council often only officially confirmed what many people had long been thinking and, in some cases, practicing, e.g., religious freedom and tolerance in countries like the Netherlands, England, the United States. Of course many practical mistakes were made, especially by church leaders who had not been properly prepared in the previous eras. Catholics went from a brief period of conciliar euphoria (1966) to postconciliar crisis, catastrophe and lamentation. The noble hopes raised by the

⁸ Chenu's brochure book of 1937, *Une école de théologie: le Saulchoir*, was reprinted with four essays by historians explaining its importance. Paris: Cerf, 1985. See also the article by Robert GUELLEY, «Les antécédents de l'encyclique *Humani Generis* dans les sanctions romaines de 1942: Chenu, Charlier, Draguet», in: *RHE* 81 (1986) 421–497; besides the many books by and about Congar in English, see now Yves CONGAR, *Journal d'un théologien 1946–1956*. Paris: Cerf, 2000; and for the twenties, Philippe CHENAUX, *Entre Maurras et Maritain: Une génération intellectuelle catholique (1920–1930)*. Paris: Cerf, 1999; cf. Eugen WEBER, *Action Française*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962.

Council were often bitterly disappointed. First came the departures of many priests, religious men and women, even bishops. Then came the birth control encyclical (1968) which created a major crisis of church authority. The very foundations of the church seemed to totter. No sooner had old problems been settled than new ones seemed to emerge, e.g., the role of women. Priesthood, marriage and religious life were coming apart. To the rescue came new movements of Christian life, like the charismatic movement.

In the midst of this turmoil a few theologians did not lose their heads or their way, but continued the quiet, steady work of Christian scholarship and reflection. Among these was a Flemish Dominican, trained by the Paris Dominicans, Eduard Schillebeeckx. Active already before the Council, especially in the area of sacramental theology, Schillebeeckx (born 1914), professor at Nijmegen University in the Netherlands became consultant to the Dutch bishops at the Council and thereafter. He was a main contributor to the *New Dutch Catechism* of 1966 and a founding editor of *Concilium*. After the great crisis of 1968–1969, he decided to go back to school. He felt that the church needed to return to the basics, to Jesus Christ as true God and true man, as universal savior and gracious liberator. But this could not now be done simply by repeating the old formulas. He had taught Thomas Aquinas' Christology for decades. What was needed now was to set down and wade through a huge mound of recent historical-critical material on the historical Jesus, the earliest Christologies (especially as traced by Helmut Koester and J.M. Robinson in their work *Trajectories through Early Christianity*)⁹, and the biblical doctrines of sin and evil, justification, sanctification, liberation and salvation by grace. He then synthesized this material in two thick volumes, entitled in English *Jesus and Christ*.¹⁰ They were quickly translated into the major European languages (except French, alas). Among many senses of this major work was the idea that, after the admission of historical-critical methods to the study of the Bible and to Thomas Aquinas, Christological and hence Trinitarian dogmatic theology could also not remain an enchanted garden, forever closed to these methods. The methods must be brought into the inner sanctum.

Schillebeeckx continued to make contributions to the theology of ministry (which earned him a Vatican trial and acquittal), and to ecclesiology, missiology and world religions. Here he was in the company of Hervé Legrand and Claude Geffré. His Christological work has been paralleled by R.E. Brown on the infancy and passion narratives, and by J.P. Meier on the historical Jesus. Whether Schillebeeckx's works will make a lasting contribution to Catholic theology, it is perhaps too soon to tell. The jury is still out.

⁹ Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991.

¹⁰ Benedict T. VIVIANO, *Trinity-Kingdom-Church: Essays in Biblical Theology*. Fribourg: University Press, 2001, pp. 75–87 (NTOA 48).

I here rest my case that in three or four major problem areas arising out of the French revolution, it was a handful of mainly French Dominicans who helped the Church to face the challenges and to develop lasting solutions. If we ask why these men did the job more than others, a brief answer would be that the Dominican Order's motto is *veritas* (truth; cf. John 8:32). At its best this means that the Dominican should pursue the truth for its own sake, as an end in itself, without consideration of the political consequences. This means that the authors in question often seem to speak «out of season» (2 Tim 4:2), inopportunately, naively, foolishly. It means that they get into trouble with the authorities. But «great is the truth, and strongest of all» (1 Esdras 4:41; 3:12). Sometimes, it is the best service of all and the most timely, to speak the truth to and for the church, but to do so in love (Eph 4:15). It is perhaps this set of values and this track record that led Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian diocesan priest who is one of the founders of liberation theology, recently to cast in his lot with the French Dominicans.