

## Book Symposium

### **Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II**

by Tracey Rowland (*London: Routledge, 2003*)

### **Cardinal Cajetan and His Critics**

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#### I

A LARGE NUMBER of Catholic students who are about to commence graduate studies in theology were born sometime after 1976. This means that these men and women enjoy only a brief living acquaintance with the practice of Catholic theology in the postconciliar period. It is difficult to imagine what meaning they have drawn from the experiences of the mid-1990s. The theological waters into which these aspiring students are about to set sail remain uncharted. How will they interpret the variety of outlooks that characterize today's Catholic theologians? At the same time, few of these young scholars will advance much in the study of theology without absorbing the confusions spawned by the diversity of theological emphases that have emerged since the close of the last ecumenical Council of the Church.

There is no easy way out of the predicament that faces today's young theologians. Even if new students of theology follow carefully the conferences and publications that both illustrate and record the state of their chosen discipline, there is no guarantee that they will be able easily to discover where abides the heart of Catholic theology, especially as the discipline is practiced in the English-speaking world. The national professional societies, as Father Matthew Lamb has observed on many occasions, embrace a wide spectrum of positions and outlooks, and these include many dissenting views from what is taught by the Magisterium of the Church's Pastors. Furthermore, the political organization of these learned societies frequently falls into the hands of persons who consider

it a prerogative, perhaps even a duty, of the theologian to challenge or tinker with what is taught by the Roman Magisterium. Annual meetings of these societies and their published proceedings reveal what is being said by theologians who may be Catholic and who may teach in Catholic universities, but these events and their write-ups offer no assurance that what is being expounded uniformly matches the measure of divine truth as the Church safeguards it.

Many consider it a fair generalization to say that the public exercise of theology, at least in the English-speaking world, affords few examples of the discussions that should occupy authentic Catholic theologians. What is an authentic Catholic theologian? One who exercises the discipline of Catholic theology within the horizons established by the Church's authoritative Magisterium. Such a person understands and observes the ecclesial vocation of the theologian, as the Church herself has described it. Would that there were more ecclesial theologians. Because there are not, several paradoxes emerge. The one worth noting for the purposes of this present exercise is that young theologians endowed with keen analytical (and political) abilities may achieve standing in the professional guilds only at the price of retreating from what makes doing Catholic theology worthwhile, namely, the faithful exposition of divine and Catholic truth.

Reading broadly may not always keep the beginner in theology from making this retreat. Those who enjoy influence in the national societies that address philosophical and theological issues, whether within a Catholic, non-denominational, or even inter-religious context, also referee articles for scientific journals and review books for publication by major university presses. The one starting out in the study of Catholic theology finds no easy-to-obtain guide that enables him or her to distinguish even in Catholic publications what is sound and authentic from what is speculative and ersatz. Much like the student of the thirteenth century that Aquinas had in mind when he began his *Summa*, students of the twenty-first century encounter so many and different positions that they are more likely to become confused than illuminated as they undertake the arduous process of absorbing the existing body of theological print.

No one should mistake these present circumstances as providing an ideal time for fresh starts or new beginnings. The scarcity of reliable accounts of the work done by Catholic theologians since the end of the Second Vatican Council means that new students of theology lack something that is essential to their professional development as theologians. They lack a comprehensive awareness of the past, of the authorities (*auctoritates*) who have shaped the past, and of the authoritative resolutions or at least of the clarifications of the difficulties that sometimes emerged

when approved authors have disagreed on how to put together the big picture of Catholic theology. The late Renaissance *De auxiliis* controversy is one such instance; the history of moral theology from the mid-sixteenth century to the start of the Council illustrates another.

There was a time not so long ago when basic information about the past would have been available to every first-year student of theology. In short, there flourished what was called *rationes studiorum*—programs of study developed to supply comprehensive accounts of the discipline. Among other advantages, these programs afforded students immediate and reliable access both to the sources or *fontes* of Catholic theology and to its more or less universally recognized landscape, which, it should be recalled, exhibited its own forms of legitimate diversity.

A well-developed *ratio studiorum* provided students with a great deal of introductory instruction. A typical one, such as governed instruction in Jesuit seminaries, contained the main theses that comprised what was considered required learning—*scientia debita*—for ecclesial theologians. These theses together formed an *elenchus*, ignorance of which was considered a sign of ineptitude. The theses also came with succinct accounts of the historical debates and subsequent magisterial resolutions out of which the conclusions emerged, and included some indication about the weight of theological authority that attached to each thesis. Today in most academic settings, one would be hard-pressed to enforce a *ratio studiorum*. Thus, the question emerges: Where will our new students, our hopes for the future, learn to evaluate critically the evolution of theology after the close of the Second Vatican Council and, especially, what has occurred during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II?

Without a trustworthy account of today's theology to guide them, present-day theological students are imperiled. Some may find themselves drawn to reactionary positions, and take a dim view of what happened in Rome between 1962–1965; the majority, however, will espouse a romantic evolutionary vision that considers the mid-1960s as the bright dawn of a new era. Both groups, however, miss out on something more important than a reliable account of Catholic theology's recent history. Young Catholic theologians, liberal and conservative alike, remain ignorant of both the classical theses that have been developed within the long tradition of Catholic theology, especially since the sixteenth-century, and the principle of unity that related these theses one to another within the theological science. They fail in other words to receive adequate introduction into the *sacra doctrina*, the grace from God that both establishes the truth and constitutes the unity of any Christian theology worthy of the name.

**II**

The book that this symposium considers does offer some help for the perplexed students of theology whose parlous situation I have sketched above. Professor Tracey Rowland, who currently serves as Dean of the Melbourne campus of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, constructs an account of theological and philosophical conversations that occupy a prominent place among Catholic theologians. She concentrates her energies on those theologians who are active in the ecclesiastical institute that the Holy Father himself inaugurated after the 1980 Synod of Bishops, which was devoted to the family. The postsynodal exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, contains the fruits of this Synod's discussions. The international John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family remains the living legacy of the Holy Father's pastoral initiative to provide a permanent source of research and education in what has become the locus for one of the major challenges in our period to Catholic teaching: the family. Pope John Paul II is rightly recognized for many accomplishments, but his defense of the institution foundational to all culture ranks among the most significant of his achievements.

Tracey Rowland surrounds herself with good company. The authors who are featured in her book embrace wholeheartedly the Pope's views on marriage and family, on what it means to be male and female, on how sexual activity should conform to the full reality of the human body, and on other important issues. Of course, the Pope's achievement does not fit neatly into narrowly ethical confines; those who have been inspired by his theological style exhibit competency in many areas of scholarship. His reflections on the Book of Genesis continue to generate wide-ranging theological considerations such as Christology, theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, and also prompt investigation into the "reasonableness" of these revealed teachings.<sup>1</sup> In short, the Pope's teaching on marriage and family is comprehensive. Rowland's book provides a ready resource for students who want to identify many of the theologians who have taken seriously the task of doing Catholic theology during the period that future Church historians may refer to as that of the "New Evangelization." I consider the list of authors—however she may categorize them—that Rowland draws up one of the most useful features of her book. Theological beginners may read with profit each of them.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Fides et Ratio*, no. 43: "Although he made much of the supernatural character of faith, the Angelic Doctor did not overlook the importance of its reasonableness; indeed he was able to plumb the depths and explain the meaning of this reasonableness."

Shortly after the establishment of its Roman campus at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, the John Paul II Institute came in 1988 to the United States. It was first housed in the Dominican House of Studies in the Brookland section of Washington, DC, and later moved to The Catholic University of America, which is located in the same neighborhood of the nation's capitol city. Many of the theologians that the author mentions in the eight chapters that make up her book are or have been associated with the American campus of the John Paul II Institute. The current dean of this session of the Institute is Professor David Schindler, who—to borrow a metaphor from the Holy Father—serves as the lodestar of the American *Communio* school of theology. In many ways, *Culture* is an account of David Schindler's personal research, his project for theology, and his exchanges with colleagues. It also must be said that the book reflects his particular preferences.

The *Communio* school of theology, taken globally, and not as it plays out under the influence of the American edition, is more difficult to define than Thomism. Thomists are those who read Aquinas, and so may be distinguished from those who read and adhere to other major Christian thinkers such as Scotus or St. Bonaventure or Ockham. Partisans of the *Communio* school, on the other hand, study many authors; their return to the sources embraces a wide range of both ancient and recent theologians and philosophers, and even includes consulting social scientists.<sup>2</sup> Rowland identifies many of these figures in her chapters. Suffice it to remark that a common feature of *Communio* school theology is that its adherents subscribe without hesitation to a viewpoint that lately has been set forth by Nicholas M. Healy in his *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life*: “In his commentary on the *Summa theologiae*, Cajetan so separates nature from grace that humanity now has *two* ends, natural and supernatural. . . .”<sup>3</sup> Healy of course repeats an assertion that was set forth with remarkable success in the twentieth century by Jesuit Father Henri de Lubac, later Cardinal of the Roman Church.

It has always struck me as odd that so many good-willed theologians accept the view that a twentieth-century French Jesuit whose intellectual interests were wide-ranging occupied a better position to understand what St. Thomas Aquinas taught about the finalities of the human person than did a sixteenth-century Italian humanist, who had represented Catholic doctrine in person to no less imposing a figure than Martin Luther and

<sup>2</sup> Rowland's publisher, London's Routledge, advertises her book under the headings of “Theology/Philosophy/Sociology.”

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas M. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 13 (emphasis in the original).

whose commentary on the entire *Summa theologiae* appears by order of Pope Leo XIII in the critical edition of Aquinas's *opera omnia* that bears that Pope's name, the still incomplete Leonine edition. But they do. Many sincere people, including Tracey Rowland, accept the proposition that de Lubac laid bare a huge historical mistake about how to construe the relationship between nature and grace, and they seemingly consider his critique of Cardinal Cajetan and the Thomists who follow him a non-gainsayable principle of all future Catholic theology. What Cajetan obscured, de Lubac grasped with clarity. Nicholas Healy illustrates this conviction: "[T]he influence of the two-tier conception of reality became widespread and was understood by many theologians as a reasonable development of Thomas's thought."<sup>4</sup> One could infer from remarks such as these that Tommaso De Vio, Cardinal Cajetan (1469–1534) should be known as the great betrayer of Aquinas instead of his papal approved interpreter. Prima facie, the proposition seems primitive.<sup>5</sup>

Those who want to understand more about this golden apple of twentieth-century theological discord should consult the work of Professor Steven A. Long. His essays on topics such as the obediential potency and other related theological theses repay careful study.<sup>6</sup> Long's articles reveal the way that theologians have attempted to handle the difficult question of describing adequately the differentiation of finalities that the gratuitous bestowal of divine friendship on the members of the human race introduces into Catholic theology. Because of the centrality that this issue

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> I will leave it to others to elaborate on the difficulties that emerge when Catholic theologians engage other theologians on this issue. See for instance, Tracey Rowland's review article on John Milbank's *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* titled "Divine Gifts to the Secular Desert" in *Religion and Theology* 2 (2004): 182–87: This book "will be of particular interest," she writes, "to Catholic scholars in *Communio* study circles who, like Milbank, owe much to de Lubac's reading of the causes of secularization" (187).

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the correct understanding of obediential potency and the natural desire for God in relation to the right understanding of nature and grace, Steven A. Long has undertaken both a project of recovery of the authentic Thomistic tradition and its further articulation. See the following works: "On the Possibility of a Purely Natural End for Man: A Response to Denis Bradley," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 211–37; "Obediential Potency, Human Knowledge, and the Natural Desire for God," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1997): 45–63; and, forthcoming in *Nova et Vetera*, "On the Loss, and the Recovery, of Nature as a Theonomic Principle: Reflections on the Grand Confusion of *La Nouvelle Theologie*." Long has provided an excellent simile for the obediential potency of the human creature to be uplifted with the aid of divine grace, namely a stained-glass window illumined by the sun's rays.

holds in the thought of many of the theologians that Rowland presents to her readers, I think it is important to alert those who will read her book, especially beginners in the discipline, that they should make up their own minds about de Lubac's critique, and not assume that one eminent French Jesuit and 100,000 *Communio* followers can't be wrong. The fact of the matter is that the differentiation of finalities that a Catholic theologian must consider in the human person remains a topic that has been ill served during the period after the Second Vatican Council. Let me conclude this section with a word of advice to beginners: You can embrace *Gaudium et Spes* 22 and still follow Cardinal Cajetan.

### III

It is unfortunate that Rowland's editor chose the title *Culture and the Thomist Tradition. After Vatican II*. In a certain sense, the author herself illustrates the predicament that young students of theology face. They lack a comprehensive knowledge of what the great tradition of Catholic theology includes. I cannot speak for John Duns Scotus, or for St. Bonaventure, or still less for William of Ockham, but I am in a position to comment on the school that develops from St. Thomas Aquinas. *Culture and the Thomist Tradition*, I regret to say, has very little to say about the Thomist tradition. The author refers to Dominicans (including the present reviewer) and to authors who are not reluctant to cite the texts of St. Thomas Aquinas. She does not, however, offer a completely credible account of the Thomist tradition or, again regrettably, give much evidence that she is aware that Thomism continues to flourish in many quarters of the Catholic intellectual world, that is, after Vatican II.

Allow me to mention two noticeable omissions: The first is the absence of any reference to the work of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas. Surely the initiatives of Father Abelardo Lobato, OP, current president of the Academy, and of the international society that he has encouraged (SITA) merit some mention in a book that tries to make sense today out of "the Thomist Tradition." There is another obvious lacuna: Nothing is made of the extensive historical and systematic work of Jean-Pierre Torrell, OP, even though his contributions represent one of the great contemporary centers of Thomist theology and philosophy, the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). I would be able to develop the list of omissions that Rowland commits as she tries to grapple with the complexities of theological discussions at the start of the twenty-first century. I mention these glaring omissions in order to illustrate what I said at the beginning of this essay. It is difficult for young theologians to get a start nowadays.

There is the question of how Rowland treats historical Thomism, Thomism *before* Vatican II. It may be true that the word “culture” does not appear in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (see p. 14), but this standard reference work does include an entry for “Thomisme.” One should never criticize an author for the book that she did not write. My concern, however, is that an aspiring student of theology may come away from reading *Culture* and think that he or she has mastered all there is to know about Thomism. As far as I can determine, Thomism, as the term is deployed in *Culture*, serves mainly as a cipher for those figures in contemporary Catholic intellectual life that the leaders of the American *Communio* school, especially David Schindler, have chosen to engage. Rowland discusses “Whig Thomism” at least thirteen times! Thomism has been reduced to the status of a camp.

Besides her references to the works of Professor MacIntyre, there is very little in the book that helps the searching student discover the potentialities of the real Thomist tradition. The truth of the matter is that Thomism has survived more cultural shifts and has flourished in more diverse settings than is likely to be the case for the high-end European intellectualism that drives many of the authors that Rowland and others suggest possess some special purchase on cultural critiques of modernity. (My mentor, Father Coleman O’Neill, OP, used to wonder about those theologians whose spiritual home is Paris.) Recently a Japanese scholar wrote me to request biographical information about Robert Edward Brennan, OP (whom Rowland dismisses on the first page of her book). Father Brennan wrote a popular neo-scholastic manual on human psychology, which had been translated in the 1960s into Japanese. What sort of study, one may ask, could be more culturally *déclassé*? Not in the Orient. Now this American Thomist, who was a master of the tradition, and his book, will have an entry in a new, twenty-first century Japanese encyclopedia. There are other less incidental indications that Thomism, like metaphysics, will always survive those who offer themselves as its pallbearers. Thomism, defined in a strict sense, continues to inspire the work of Catholic theology.

If my presentation of Thomism is correct, there is reason to believe that Thomism exhibits more resilience to cultural evolutions than many of its critics, including those who wear the same religious habit as Thomas Aquinas, are prepared to recognize.<sup>7</sup> Thomism flourished in the century following the death of Aquinas, although he left no circle of disci-

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<sup>7</sup> See my *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

ples, and then showed itself strong in the mid-fifteenth century when schism and plague affected the cultural landscape. Later, Thomism accompanied missionaries to the Orient, where two Chinese translations of the *Summa* became available in Peking. Thomism was implanted in the new world. Catholic priests, religious, and laity who took up the work of instructing the ignorant transported Thomist manuals and primary texts from Europe to the American continent. Dominicans in the early nineteenth century even imported Aquinas to the backwoods of Kentucky. Everyone acknowledges that Thomism was a dominant force in the Catholic culture of the United States before 1962.

I recognize that the history of theology and the history of Thomism are more complex than I now have the space available to recount. Moreover, it is not my intention to defend the view that the Thomist tradition contains the answer to every difficulty that faces those engaged in the work of evangelization. It is my conviction, however, that the contributions of St. Thomas and of the tradition that grows out of his thought will continue to form part of the Church's cultural outreach. It may also happen that more Catholics will come to see that Cardinal Cajetan enjoyed a deeper penetration into the mystery of divine grace and its transformation of human nature than Professor Rowland and those upon whom she relies imagine.

Thomists of Cajetan's period generally understood the immensely important place that transformation holds in the Christian life. Thus their insistence on nature. Two-tier is not a dirty word for Catholic theologians: "Just as grace builds on nature and brings it to fulfillment, so faith builds upon and perfects reason."<sup>8</sup> If future evangelists announce to a non-Christian culture the greatness of the mystery of Christian transformation, but are unable to speak about what is transformed—scholastics would have referred to a *terminus a quo*—they may not find themselves in a very strong position.

It would be helpful to know what Radical Orthodoxy and the members of the *Communio* "study circles" think about original sin. Not David Schindler's "structures of sin" (see p. 103), but the personal disorder of sin that arises in every human being on account of the sin of nature. Catholic doctrine recognizes that the sin of nature is a privation that infects every person born into whatever culture. The baptismal consecration that removes mankind's ancient curse makes possible a new way of life. We call it Christian life. The effects of original sin remain, however, even in the baptized. Aquinas referred to these as the "penalties

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<sup>8</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, no. 43.

of the present life.” As long as these penalties dominate the psychology of a human person, it matters little whether or not one achieves a successful Christian critique of culture.

Cardinal Cajetan’s treatment of nature and grace respects the anthropological givens that enable preachers of grace to explain how it is that the Eucharistic conversion extends in a transformative and highly personal way to each communicant. Gallup polls now indicate that for the first time on record fewer Catholics than Protestants regularly attend Church on Sunday. Rowland’s narrative makes it plain that the hegemony of Thomism in Catholic studies has waned since 1965. One thing is sure, then: We can’t blame Cardinal Cajetan for the noticeable decline in Sunday Mass observance that has occurred during the same period.

The New Evangelization will proceed with success to the extent that students of theology discover “the enduring originality of the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.”<sup>9</sup> As they do, there is every reason to believe that they will also discover that Pope Leo XIII was on to something when he ordained that Cardinal Cajetan’s commentary on the *Summa* find a permanent place in the modern critical edition of the Angelic Doctor’s works. In short, Cajetan supplies some helpful distinctions. Like his teacher, the Dominican Cardinal “recognized that nature, philosophy’s proper concern, could contribute to the understanding of divine Revelation.”<sup>10</sup> **N V**

### The Retrieval of *Gaudium et Spes*: A Comparison of Rowland and Balthasar

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TRACEY ROWLAND’S new text on the relationship between Thomism and modern culture raises several provocative issues that deserve careful analysis. It is beyond the scope of a single short essay to deal with all of these issues adequately. Accordingly, in what follows I will narrow my focus to a comparison of her analysis and retrieval of *Gaudium et Spes* with that of the late Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. This analysis is justified for several reasons. First, Rowland makes a point of aligning her project with that of the “continental Balthasarians” as she calls them and thereby implies that her work is an organic development of the theological project known as *ressourcement* theology—a project that

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 43–44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 43.