
A FEW CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING NEO-THOMISM

Anton Adămuț*

*University 'Al. I. Cuza', Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Bd. Carol I no. 11,
Iasi 700506, Romania*

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Abstract

No one nowadays can contest the fact that moving closer to the history of medieval philosophy implies much more than a purely historical interest. To emphasize: does medieval philosophy tell us something in general and Saint Thomas in particular? This problem covers several issues: the rebirth of the philosophy of Christian antiquity, especially Augustinianism, the rebirth of Thomism and Scotism. It is obviously that some want a reborn Thomism, while others would settle with a revitalized Augustinianism, other part claims to be from Scotus, and Suarez places aside its own followers. One thing seems to be extremely clear: the French Revolution did not bring any favors to Christianity in general and to the occidental one in particular, and Restoration does not end the religious crisis. The Revolution confuses the traditional ideas and philosophy brings into discussion the very fundamentals of metaphysics and religion. Catholic thinking seems helpless in front of neutralizing the subversive action of these hostile trends. Then, after the Second World War, we witness a crisis in Christianity, temporary, but serious, a crisis which at least questions the traditional values. Thomism is not saved either, since Catholic intellectuals, priests or laics wonder whether the recognition and rebirth of Thomism (in the form of Neo-Thomism) is in fact an exceeded and outdated phenomenon, even of bad taste. The problem becomes: is it happy the selection of Thomas as master thinker? Does his doctrine still answer (manifest as it is, as Neo-Thomism) the present needs of Church? This text tries an answer as it has been formulated by Fernand Van Steenberghe.

Keywords: Thomas, Paleo-Thomism, philosophy, scholasticism, theology

1. Raising the issue: two objections against Thomas of Aquinas and restoration of Thomism

After the Second World War we witness a crisis in Christianity, temporary but serious, crisis that brings for the least into discussion the traditional values. Thomism does not escape and from everywhere, Catholic intellectuals, priests or laymen wonder whether the recognition of Thomism is not an outdated and obsolete phenomenon, even of bad taste. The issue becomes: is Thomas' choice

* E-mail: antonadamut@yahoo.com

as master thinker a happy one? Does his doctrine still answer to the present needs of Church? In this place Steenberghen brings forward two objections [1].

The first objection: there are serious reservations regarding Thomas' choices and his works. Catholics need a solid theology that can be an instrument of dialogue with the modern and contemporary thinking. What is being offered in return? A theologian that is not explicit in his philosophical synthesis and a philosopher who indulges too much freedom in Theology! Thomas' philosophy is diluted in great philosophical treatises, in comments on Aristotle and in some opuscles dedicated to some particular problems. We are thus facing the unpleasant situation of rebuilding his philosophy by using disparate fragments. What is next? Next is to present Thomas' philosophy in the frames of his theology, which is completely artificial. The conclusion is enforced by itself: such a philosophy cannot be an instrument of dialogue with modernity. The Catholics of the XXth century want a present philosophy that can fold on the contemporary currents. What are they being offered? A scholar of the XIIIth century! And this is not all. This scholar, Thomas, is an Aristotelian who keeps in his synthesis most Aristotelian doctrines from *Physics*, including the considerations regarding the celestial bodies. Except that something like this could maybe impress another scholar, but definitely not a XX century man! Not to mention the fact that this follower of Aristotle is fought also by his own contemporaries and followers. In comparison with Augustine, the very respected one, Thomas is almost a heretic. Neo-Augustinianism trims Thomism right at the end of the XIIIth century. Then Thomism and Scotism are overwhelmed by nominalism until the end of Middle Ages. Can we speak, in these conditions, of any authority of Thomas?! What good is coming back to someone who signifies so little? Moreover: it is suggested as guide of Catholicism a Latin writer whose entire work is written not just in a dead language, but also in decadent form of it (medieval and scholar Latin) and who uses a confusing technical vocabulary.

The second objection: Thomas does not manage to make unanimity around him, but right after *aggiornamento* the return to Thomas encounters a more and more radical objector spirit. As a consequence, the supporters of the return to Thomas justify their attitude by resorting to the idea of tradition, of continuity and of fidelity towards the authentic sources of Occidental thinking. The supporters of this type reproach to Renaissance the fact of denying the medieval culture, reproach Descartes the attitude of making *tabula rassa* in relation to the philosophy before him, and this break is presented as a true betrayal of what the philosopher calls *philosophia perennis*, a notion, as a matter of fact, confused in itself. A comeback to Thomas would mean, from this point of view, a renunciation to Pre-Socratics, to the great Greeks, Latins and then Arabs as well. It is a little bit much! Thomas is always in difficulty, especially in the atmosphere created by the Vatican Council II. (In the documents of the Vatican Council II, Thomas is not a privileged. He appears quoted in *Dignitatis Humanae* twice, in *Ad Gentes* twice, in *Presbyterorum ordinis* four times and also four times in *Gaudium et spes*. The preference of the Vatican Council II rather seems Augustine than Thomas.) [2] Traditionalism becomes for Thomas

an enemy: *Recedant vetera, nova sint omnia*. Thomism, in synthesis, does not seem to be exactly the conceptual instrument that the XX century needs.

Here are the two main objections for which Thomas and Thomism cannot occupy the position that Leo the XIIIth prepares to make at the end of the XIXth century by means of *Æterni Patris* (4th of August 1789).

What does Van Steenberghen think? He thinks that a personal study of the Thomistic writings can emphasize the huge depth of the philosopher and theologian from Aquinas. This conviction cancels the difficulty as such of the readings of the texts of the angelic and common doctor.

2. On Thomism's mission

The attitudes mentioned before are partially founded, partially unfair. An evaluation of these two aspects can obtain for us the position from which to define in new terms the mission of Thomism in today's Church.

According to Steenberghen [1, p. 226-240], the Anti-Thomist reaction appears as justified in at least two of the situations: the conviction of Paleo-Thomism in all of his forms, on the one hand, and the conviction of speculative excesses in theology. Let us follow this lead.

Paleo-Thomism is convicted by the Vatican Council II. Paleo-Thomism is a sclerotic Thomism and finds the dumbfounded precisely in the pretext of fidelity towards Thomas by means of the fact that, for the virtue of this pretext, the exigencies of dialogue and of progress are ignored. Here it is how, by means of two examples used by Steenberghen, the Paleo-Thomism makes disservices to Thomism.

The first example: the issue with the imposing of Latin language at *École Saint-Thomas* from Louvain. How is the issue raised? Does the professor who presents Homer or Plato to the students in classical philology speak in ancient Greek to his students? Must one definitely speak in German when explaining to French students Kant? Or is it that the professor has to make a transposition, in the audience's language, of the text he interprets, of the author he presents? Therefore, to claim that Thomas' philosophy and theology cannot be exposed in modern languages is equal to convicting the idea itself of Thomist rebirth and to make from Thomism a veritable museum exhibit. The formula of the dilemma becomes: we either speak the language of our time, or we preach into wilderness. I cannot ask the Christian to know Aramaic in order to understand the Christian parables under the condition of the argument that Jesus used this language!

The second example: it is about a manual used for a long time in the Catholic seminars written by father Joseph Gredt. The manual, written by a theologian interested in physics and biology, was entitled *Elementa philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae* (1899 first edition). In the sixth edition (1932), the part that deals with *Philosophia naturalis specialis* is thus divided: *De caelo et mundo seu de ente mobili motu locali*, *De generatione et corruptione seu de ente mobili motu alterationis* and *De anima seu de ente mobili motu augmentationis*.

Well, maybe the good father author (J. Gredt) did not believe anymore in the celestial, unalterable and incorruptible spheres, but he is not willing either to give up at the Aristotelian classification of the noble beings. For example, in the mentioned edition, the author assigns only one page to the theory of relativity and that only to convict it. He writes 20 lines about it and concludes: *falsitas principii fundametalis huius theoriae patet ex dictis de motu locali in genere*.

Leo the XIIIth was influenced by the fanatic Thomists around him and he himself gets to be intolerant, fortunately not for good. To the general Minister of Franciscans he writes in a tough manner that to move away from the precepts of the angelic doctor is also ‘against our will’ (of the pope) and dangerous. Those who truly want to be philosophers, and the religious ones will want it the entire time, are implicitly forced to establish the principles of their doctrine in Thomas. We are, with these ideas from *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, still far from *Æterni Patris*, but on the right path. In the end, Paleo-Thomism is the expression of the philosophical revelation closed for good at 7th of March 1274, together with Thomas’ death, to use a happy expression of the Eminence De Raeymaeker.

What is the problem with the speculative excesses in Theology? Until Vatican II, this type of excesses prevailed. The Council ends the excessive role given to speculative or scholastic theology. The influence of speculative method in sacred science was, of course, much older. Petrus Damiani vituperates against the abuse of dialectics in the study of the Scripture, Bernard denounces the rationalism that he believes to find in Abelard’s texts, pope Gregory the IXth draws attention on the abuse of philosophy in regards with the same problem, and Roger Bacon, in *Opus minus*, brings again into discussion too much speculation to the detriment of scientific study of Scripture. The idea appears also in *De vitiis contractis in studio theologiae* where one can find seven vices that compromise the study of Theology (one of the vices is precisely philosophy). Van Steenberghe comments: unfortunately, the protest of Bacon has not understood at all and the speculation becomes more and more intemperate [1, p. 230]. Seems to be a catastrophe, it is not exactly so if speculative theology is claimed from its scriptural and patristic grounds. On this ground will it built itself again cautiously and discreetly, in the respect of mystery and, implied, with the recognition of reason’s limits.

The capital mission that Thomism has to fulfill is, according to Steenberghe, a triple one: historical, philosophical and theological. *Historical – vetera novis augere* (recognition of the historical importance of scholasticism), *philosophical* – the philosophical formation is absolutely necessary to any theologian and from this point of view the return to Thomas has never been more urgent than in nowadays, *theological* – the renewal of speculative theology, and no careful observer of the Church’s life will not doubt that this renewal is necessary. A regenerated Thomism goes hand in hand with a resurrected speculative theology (by means of the progresses made in the positive theology and in the Biblical sciences, and we must say that speculative theology will always annoy positive theology!). The conclusion is only one: to frequent Thomas is always profoundly possible. And Steenberghe admits [1, p.

240] that Thomas is the one to whom he owes fervent and discreet fidelity, respect without servilism, as to a master who does not let you get lost.

3. The fourfold conditions of the success of Thomism

‘Back to Thomas’ is not a simple slogan, ‘back to Thomas’ is a reality, it is called ‘neo-Thomism’ and it has managed by virtue of satisfying four successful conditions that can be called: the sense of tradition, the sense of historicity, the sense of progress and the sense of philosophy. Briefly, it is about the following [1, p. 240-256].

First of all, about the idea of tradition. No Thomist who respects himself would avoid the concept of tradition, none of them comes on an empty field, none of them practices the break from past and none of them lacks the idea of continuity. A few things must be said here. Some Thomists see in Thomism a type of timeless doctrine, others see a succession of the type: *Aristoteles genuit Thomam, Thomas genuit Cajetanum, Cajetanus genuit Joannem a Sancto Thoma*. This genealogy of philosophical type, extremist, as it has been seen, is the expression of what they call *philosophia perennis* and which, paradoxically, is materialized in the ‘Thomism’ of this kind in a privileged school and rewarded by a special charisma which also guarantees the philosophical orthodoxy. Those included in the genealogy are a kind of ‘chosen people’, definitive and infallible successors of Aristotle. Thomas does not think this way, as a proof his respect for all the intellectual accumulations that precede him. On the other hand, it is not less true that Thomas belongs to his own century by means of which he must be also judged. He is a man of the Middle Ages, a scholastic, case in which we cannot reproach him, either to him and to others, the fact of not thinking like us, those from today. Thomas practices *benigna interpretatio*, a benevolent interpretation, at least towards Augustine and Anselm. Beyond all these, the lesson Thomas is serving to us is valuable. He wants to know as much as possible and as precise as possible about many things. Not just that he knows many things, which can be within reach for many, but Thomas exercises his critical spirit on what he knows, as well as he knows to appreciate the value of sources. Guillaume de Moerbeke finds him a more faithful version of the Aristotelian texts and Thomas is happy. In *De unitate intellectus* he is extremely delighted to oppose the authentic text of Themistius (received from Guillaume) to the interpretation of the same Themistius suggested by Averroes [3]. Which is Thomas’ standpoint? The one according to which a gift in tradition the letter does not beat spirit. The tradition does not oppose progress, is not exclusive, the tradition, not at all paradoxically, implies progress. This means that Thomas’ option in the favor of Aristotle is not absolute and either exclusive. And Steenberghen tells us that Thomas’ example must be followed. The preference for Thomas does not take out of the game the others, both philosophers and theologians, just as Descartes did it by denying all together scholasticism [1, p. 244] (and here Steenberghen is wrong, at least that’s what I think. Descartes is not so much the first modern, as the last scholastic, the same way as Boethius is

not the last Roman, as the first scholastic. Descartes is, however, a scholastic, even as masked as he used to advance).

Secondly, Steenberghen invokes for the success of Thomism the idea of historicity, the sense of historicity. The idea itself of tradition induces the sense of historicity, so that Thomas' work bears the mark of his time. According to the sense of historicity, any thinker expresses himself necessarily in the language of his time. Therefore, the fact of *expressing* the truth is always something relative and temporarily from language's perspective. The fact to *recognize* the truth does not belong anymore to language. The truth is "neither Hebrew, nor Greek, nor Latin, nor barbarian" (*nec hebrae, nec graeca, nec latina, nec barbara veritas*) [4]. It is always covered by a crust (language) and the main activity of Thomists would be 'removing the crust'. An example is given by Steenberghen [1, p. 246] regarding even his own Thomistic experience: "the more I was studying the problem of God's existence in the successive works of Thomas, the more surprised I was by the contrast between his doctrines on the metaphysical causality, of participation, of creation and the summary character of the evidence on God's existence, especially the famous *quinque viae*". "Father Dominique Dubarle, proves Steenberghen next, (Dominican, of course, professor at Saulchoir, why am I not surprised?!, dean of the Faculty of Philosophy from the Catholic Institute from Paris between 1967-1973 and elder brother of another Dominican and professor of moral theology also at Saulchoir – André-Marie Dubarle – *n.m.*) has proven masterly the radical inadequacy of these ways in comparison with the exigencies of the contemporaneous scientific spirit (one must mention that Dubarle was formed at the school of mathematical logic, of epistemology, and that in collaboration with the physicist Louis Leprince-Ringuet he solved problems of nuclear physics – *n.m.*). However, it would be unfair to think that this inadequacy is just on the side of scientists. There are still Thomists for who the text of the five ways is sacred and they cannot stand any kind of criticism". [1, p. 246] And Steenberghen confesses and states that his reserves of common sense regarding *quinque viae* were not the same also for the team from 'Estudios filosoficos' from Santander that saw in the theologian from Louvain, in Steenberghen, an 'iconoclast' whose critics are completely without fundament. The Paleo-Thomists also puts into corner Steenberghen, especially at the Thomist Congress from 1950. The sense of historicity, in conclusion, tells us that Thomas is the man of his time, as well as it tells us that Thomas does not remain there, as proof being Neo-Thomism.

The third aspect is that of progress. Steenberghen concludes: historicity is the fruit of traditions, as it gives birth to the sense of progress. Again, says Steenberghen, Thomas is our model [1, p. 249]. Thomas' contemporaries were astonished by the novelty of his teaching. Thomas' first biographer, Guillelmo de Tocco, used to note: *Erat enim novos in sua lectione movens articulos, novum modum et clarum determinandi inveniens, et novas adducens in determinationibus rationes [...], nova docere et novis rationibus* [5]. This wants to say that everything seemed new in this teaching: the problems, the method, the solutions, the arguments. Thomas, it is clear, had made a work of reformer,

innovator and creator, and Thomism is the only modernism that made it. Not the same thought the contemporaries. Jean Peckham reproaches Thomas the innovations not only from Theology, and William De La Mare publishes a real war declaration between 1277-1279: *Correctorium fratris Thomae* [1, p. 464-479, 486-493], text whose echo can be found in the conviction from Paris and Oxford. Thomas is however firm, he does not sacrifice truth for routine. What does progress mean here? It means that if the Church, born from revelation and guarded by revelation, is by its nature traditional, the faithfulness towards tradition induces a real routine, an overreacted attachment towards past, case in which the Church itself risks not being able to adjust to the alert rhythm of the evolution of humanity. What could follow? A break between Church and the world, the first one aged in institutions and stiffed forms of teaching, the second one in an unavoidable progress. Thomas notices the danger and what he has done for his century will do Neo-Thomists for their time: to rethink problems, in the light of tradition, without doubt, but also considering the most unexpected situations and the needs. This obligation is double and can be found in *Æterni Patris*: if there is something incorrect in Thomas, it must be mentioned and renounce at that point; the positive aspect takes into consideration the enrichment of tradition and Thomism in the permanent contact with modern thinking. The sense of progress tells us a very simple thing: if we want to be Thomists according to the spirit of Thomas and according to the directives of Leo the XIIIth, we will receive openly everything that spiritually human has purchased after the XIIIth century and till present days and, by virtue of this, a rejuvenated Thomism and as for our century is wanted. If not, we only do our job and we are unfaithful to our own vocation as Thomas would have been unfaithful if he had been satisfied to repeat Augustine, Lombard or Albert [1, p. 252].

Finally, what does it mean the philosophical sense of the success of Thomism? It means taking into consideration the philosophical nature and its role in the Christian culture. Thomas himself is the middle between conservative theologians and those heterodox (progressive) from the Faculty of Arts from Paris. This type of presenting things is not, however, completely exact, as it is incomplete. For example, Siger of Brabant is progressive in relation to Christian and theological tradition but, on the other hand, to philosophize means for him to comment Aristotle. Thomas' program is different. When insisting on Aristotle, Thomas takes into consideration a very clear thing: pagan Aristotelianism represented by the Arab branch would have been on the verge of provoking a real crisis in Christianity if the true Aristotle hadn't been presented in himself. The love for truth will inspire our effort, since we cannot attach ourselves in a servile manner to any master be it also, or especially, Aristotle. As a matter of fact, Thomas, an innovator without doubt, "has done an extraordinary service to Christian thinking by means of using this instrument, through the interpretation in such a favorable sense, from the Christian perspective, of Aristotle [...]. Thomas remains one of the most rigorous and most subtle commentators of Aristotle" [6]. Thomas, for example, prefers Aristotle as philosopher but, in

theology, he follows Augustine. He is not servile for Aristotle and he does not innovate from obligation either. Curious thing, Augustine does not like Aristotle, however, Thomas likes both!

And Steenberghen concludes that an intelligent and efficient reading of Thomas implies a triple initiation: linguistic, historical and doctrinal [1, p. 259-266].

It is already understood, Steenberghen is not the supporter of the type of reading exclusively in the Latin language. It is needed to transform and transfer the scholastic Latin in a language that is alive, it is needed to transpose in the language of audience the spiritual wealth of the ancient ones and which they created by making use of an instrument that is foreign to us today. A text that cannot be translated is a dead text, its reading is useless if it does not say anything. From this perspective it is not necessary for the text to be old in order to consider it dead as well. A lot of new texts are already dead! We must translate and rethink Thomas' texts in the language and according to the needs of our time. The biggest difficulty in Thomas' reading, and of other scholastics, comes from what Léon Becker called the 'dialectical twist' of thinking, an attitude by virtue of which we easily pass from the ontological aspect to the logical one. For the modern spirits, more positivists, this 'twist' is confusing and it risks producing confusing interpretations. For the scholastic, such process did not create any difficulty. The historical initiation tells us that a writer of the XIII century must be read and rethought as much as possible with his mentality and his concerns. Such initiation implies the knowledge of the sources of Thomas' thinking, in this case, of the environment where he lived and developed his activity. Finally, we cannot read a text of a philosopher without a previous knowledge of the technical vocabulary and the system where it moves. This means in Thomas the difference between the contemplative life of philosophers and the contemplative life of saints (*sancti*). About the contemplation of philosophers Thomas speaks in the past (*sic erat affectis in vita contemplative philosophorum*), about the contemplation of saints speaks in the present (*sic habet affectionem vita contemplative sanctorum*). The verb for the contemplation of philosophers is at past tense (*sic erat affectio*), the one of the contemplation of saints is at present (*sic habet affectionem vita*) [7].

4. Conclusions

The bishop Pérouse sets in 1859 the foundations for the Academy Saint Thomas of Aquinas in his diocese. 20 years later appears *Æterni Patris* where, unlike Pius the IXth who was satisfied to condemn modern philosophies and to see in Thomism the efficient remedy against modernisms of any kind, Leo the XIIIth suggests the solution as well: 'back to Thomas'! The encyclical engages the entire Catholic Church and the idea is that of renewing Catholic thinking by returning to Thomas' philosophy and theology, who was seen as post and glory of the Catholic Church. Leo the XIIIth wants by means of this to establish a common vocabulary and principles of basis by virtue of which the Catholics,

especially priests, to handle daily problems. Also with Leo begins the famous Leonian edition. Then, at 4th of August 1879 Leo the XIIIth declares Thomas master of studies in Catholic churches, and Pius Xth, at the 29th of July 1914, asks the Catholic professors of philosophy to teach the principles of Thomism in universities and colleges. In the same year, the Congregation for Seminaries and Institutes of Superior Studies promulgate a list of 24 Thomistic theses considered as *normae directivae tutae*. After the death of Pius Xth, Benedict the XVth reviews the code of canonical right and, recommending Thomas' doctrine, repeals the 24 theses (1917).

For all these reasons, and yet many more, "Thomas has always been suggested by the Church as master of thinking and model of the correct method of making Theology" [8]. That is why Thomas can be defined as 'the apostle of truth', as Paul the VIth called him in the Apostolic Letter *Lumen Ecclesiae*. And together with Fernand Van Steenberghen, we state that Neo-Thomism is nothing else but *le retour à Saint Thomas*. And this means that Thomas, "even when he makes philosophy, he is making theology. On the other hand, he himself is always aware by the field he is operating on and, when his conclusions do not depend on any premises from faith, he feels authorized to engage the dialogue with philosophers and to speak as them" [9].

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