

**THE HUMANISTIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL
TRAINING OF FUTURE PRIESTS:
PUTTING THE COUNCIL'S TEACHING
INTO PRACTICE**

I. What did the Council say?

The Council's explicit teaching is contained in Paras. 13-15 of the Decree and can be schematically set out as follows:

A. HUMANISTIC TRAINING

- (i) the preparation for higher studies usual in each country;
- (ii) the study of Latin and of the Biblical languages.

B. THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

An introductory course to be given on this theme which is to be the focus of the whole of the seminarian's training.

C. PHILOSOPHY

a) *Aims:* These should be:

- (i) to acquire a solid and coherent knowledge of the world and of God;
- (ii) to achieve an understanding of the contemporary mind and a readiness for dialogue with the contemporary world.

b) *Content:* It should take account of:

- (i) the perennially valid legacy of the past
- (ii) other philosophical investigations – especially those most influential in the country concerned;
- (iii) the more recent progress of the sciences.

c) *Manner of Teaching:* It should:

- (i) instill a love for rigorously searching for the truth, a skill in demonstrating it, and a recognition of the limits of human knowledge;
- (ii) show the connexion between philosophy and the problems of life, particularly those which preoccupy the students;
- (iii) show the connexion between philosophical questions and the

- mysteries of salvation considered in theology;
 (iv) in the history of philosophy, bring out the root ideas of each system, preserve what is true in them, and refute the errors.

II. What was said at the Council

From the reports, insofar as philosophy was concerned, the two points of view expressed appeared to conflict as to whether there should be more or less Thomism in the course. But, as Father Congar remarked in his Council diary, the issue should not be seen in terms of more or less, but of *a different use* of St. Thomas: if what is understood by Thomism is an apparatus of abstract questions and prefabricated solutions, then there should not only be less, but nothing of it; if, on the other hand, one understands by it faithfulness to the *type* of philosopher St. Thomas was, then one should be a Thomist completely. The final text of the Council avoids raising the false issue which dogged the debate in the Hall, but it is to the question of 'how to be a Thomist' that section on the content (couched in rather shadowy terms) is an attempt at providing an answer. It is, therefore, worth trying to establish a little more clarity in the matter.

The problem arose because, evidently, many Fathers felt that Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* and Pius XI's *Studiorum Dux* which in their time had stimulated the revival of philosophic studies in the Church had now become shackles on the freedom of intellectual research. This feeling easily gives birth to the temptation of curing the disease by killing the patient.

The unfortunate fact is that the history (700 years long) of Thomism is very largely the history of its misinterpretation – from the condemnations of 1277 and 1284 to the recent schools (or rather shoals) of disciples, more numerous than faithful, whose sins tend to be attributed to their (as they claim) Master.

The image of the 'Thomist philosopher' had grown to be in the eyes of outsiders, that of a man in holy orders, teaching in a seminary (out of a Latin manual) an eclectic mixture of doctrines labelled Thomist, but in fact consisting of a kind of HCF (referred to in Latin as *communis opinio*) of the conflicting views of many Medieval doctors.

Then there was the *Neo-Thomist* philosopher, sometimes a layman teaching at a University (in a modern language, but using a lot of hermetic terms slightly adapted from Latin) an equally eclectic mixture of doctrines, labelled *Neo-scholastic*, but in fact consisting of a desperate attempt at wedding Modern Idealism with Medieval Realism.

Incarnations of both these images were actually present at the Council: flesh and blood specimen of the first type spoke as the self-appointed defenders of St. Thomas in the Conciliar debate, confirming the worst fears of those who did not like their image of the Master; and living embodiments of the second type were equally present at the Council at least in the persons of some lay auditors. These do not like the 'conservative' image either, but neither do they allay the real suspicions of the others with their attempted synthesis of *nova et vetera* which sounds a bit similar to, but is not quite, what the Conciliar Text actually contains.

What we are asked to teach as the *philosophia perennis* is not *Thomism* but philosophy in its continuous historical evolution, in the course of which St. Thomas and his contemporaries hold a particular (and key) position (because, I may add, mainly of his contributions to ontology and philosophical anthropology).

What emerges from the text is that nothing is specifically prescribed about the content of what is to be taught, except that it is to be presented in proper historical perspective and with reference to contemporary interests; emphasis is so displaced on to the method of philosophizing.

St. Thomas saw and set out truths of capital importance and permanent value, which cannot therefore be neglected; but he was not alone, nor did he see all, nor has he said the first and last word. Hence, the conclusion would appear to be that to be a Thomist is to follow a certain *method*. This is not to be that of the scholastic manuals – viz. the presentation of his theses dogmatically as the received truth and of the theses of his opponents as errors to be treated exactly like heresies; but that which Thomas himself practised – viz. the rigorous search for truth, by sifting the views of others and reflecting on one's own with full confidence in the rational man's ability to develop further his understanding of the world, of his place in it, and of their relation to God.

III. Reform of Studies at the University of Malta.

The faculty of Arts is planning a reformation of its structure. The general idea is to group the existing courses, except for English and Economics, into an integrated pattern viz. 'Mediterranean Studies'. The three-year Hons. course will consist of Two Parts: (1) A General History of Mediterranean Civilisation (4 terms); (2) Specialisation in one of five options: (i) Classics (ii) Semitic Studies (iii) Modern Languages

(iv) History (v) Philosophy. Each of these specialisations will consist of a main and a subsidiary subject, viz. (i) Latin - Greek (ii) Maltese - Arabic/Hebrew (iii) Italian - French; (iv) History - Archaeology (v) Philosophy - Comparative Religion. The B.A. General will consist of *Part One*: History of Mediterranean Civilisation and *Part Two*: any two subjects chosen from (1) those listed above, (2) English, (3) Economics. It is hoped that the Philosophy option will fulfill the Council requirements for the Humanistic and Philosophical Training of future priests as set out in the schema above.

A. HUMANISTIC TRAINING: The 'classical world' was traditionally the typical unit of study adopted in the West when it was desired to provide students with an academic education intended to make them familiar with a whole civilisation studied in all its main aspects: literature, history, art, etc. However, with the advent of a 'planetary' civilisation, it is felt to be preferable to present the Graeco-Roman as *one* of the great cultures of humanity, and hence to study it in relation to other cultural traditions.

Around the basin of the Mediterranean, two living cultures exist which can roughly be said to have been produced by the fusion of Graeco-Roman values with Christianity in the North and with Islam in the South. The Graeco-Roman component of both these living cultures has admittedly been metamorphosed in divergent directions by the opposed influences of the two great religions; but it is being increasingly recognised today that both these religions have their roots in a still older semitic past, and that by going back to those primitive roots it is possible to conceive of the development of Mediterranean Civilisation as a coherent historical process which explains the existing cultural diversity.

Moreover, a 'dialogue' is being re-established between these two living cultures - both of which are today in a state of critical self-examination and aspiring towards a more 'open' and more comprehensive cultural synthesis. It is hoped that this will provide an excellent background to philosophical study.

B. THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST: one of the complaints voices at the Council about the present system of studies is that often philosophy and theology tend to be merely juxtaposed, instead of organically correlated. To remedy this, the Council has laid down the institution of the course on 'The Mystery of Christ'. It is hoped that this will provide the backbone

of the proposed course on 'Comparative Religion' as a subsidiary subject for the Hons. degree in Philosophy or as one of the two B.A. (Gen.) subjects. (Thus, a degree with religion as one of the subjects will also be available for laymen).

C. PHILOSOPHY: Christianity is pre-eminently a way of life and action, rather than a doctrine or an ideology; it is a personal and communitarian encounter between mankind and God in Christ. This encounter, however, takes place through *contemplation* as well as action: not only in the sense that God sometimes grants a kind of anticipation of the vision of Himself in mystical experience, or in the sense that the sacramental life of the Christian is an initiation into the Trinitarian life of God Himself, but in the sense of a deeper intellectual understanding of God's revelation through creation or in Christ. It is here that philosophy can render service both in itself as an autonomous discipline, or within Theology in its role of *ancilla Theologiae*. Hence its necessity as part of the training of the seminarist.

Aims: If theology is essentially reflection upon and a deepening of the dialogue between God and man, it requires the study both of (a) God's self-revelation in the world as well as in the Word (Scripture handed down by tradition) both of which centre on Christ and of (b) Mankind's response and the factors which condition it. Within this framework, philosophy is expected to contribute in two ways corresponding to the two aims listed in the Council's decree viz. (1) to show how the World reveals God is its proper task and (2) to study the contemporary mind in order to discover both the roots of the intellectual difficulties in the way of modern man's acceptance of Revelation and the stepping stones which can lead to it in his outlook.

Content: Hence the three elements which the Council lists: (1) the 'philosophia perennis' as defined above – viz. mainly traditional ontology and natural theology; (2) later philosophy especially that which has most contributed to the formation of the intellectual outlook of modern man in the country concerned; and (3) 'the progress of the sciences', by which, I think, we should understand not only the relevance of the natural sciences (physics, biology etc.) to philosophical questions and their important role in the intellectual outlook of our contemporaries, but also the growth of psychology and sociology as empirical sciences of the utmost importance for the understanding of the contemporary mind. Hence it appears that the elements of the course

should be: (1) ontology (2) history of philosophy, especially contemporary thought (3) psychology and sociology studied from the point of view of the understanding of man and his behaviour and as the basis for ethical judgement.

Manner: The points mentioned in the Conciliar Decree are really already implicit in what has been said above. They should be complemented by the general remarks on not having too many lectures, on having more discussion groups, more occasion for personal and group reflection. 'Dialogue' has become a fashionable word, but there is no field in which it is more essential than in philosophy.

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