

Seven hundred years ago this month St Thomas Aquinas died on his way to the Council of Lyons. This Council, besides discussing a new crusade against Islam, was also to impose on the Greek Church a 're-union' on purely Roman terms—it was for this reason that St Thomas had been summoned to attend and bring a copy of the treatise which later editors were to call *Against the Errors of the Greeks*. The settlement did not last long and it is permissible to feel relieved that St Thomas was not too deeply involved in it. The seventh centenary is inevitably a time for looking again at the achievement and relevance of Aquinas and the world is throbbing with International Conferences and Public Lectures, the learned journals are producing their Special Issues and so on. In accordance with our general policy of trying to vary the contents of each issue of *New Blackfriars* we have finally decided against having a special month devoted to St Thomas. Instead we shall spread it out thin by including an article on him in each issue for the next few months, beginning this time with a study of Aquinas and Wittgenstein by Marcus Lefebure, O.P., a previous editor of this journal. Next month Kenelm Foster, O.P., will write on St Thomas and Dante and this will be followed by Yves Congar, O.P., on St Thomas and the spirit of ecumenism.

The resurgence of interest in St Thomas during this year a decade after the Council is a good moment for asking where he now stands in the charts. From the top position he definitely held in the first half of this century he seemed to slide very rapidly down during the period of Vatican II. It is clear that the pop-rating of a record has nothing to do with its intrinsic merit but it is also rumoured that it has only a tenuous connection with its actual popularity, that there are organisations and vested interests which are able to manipulate these things. It is fair to have somewhat the same suspicions about St Thomas's rating. His high place in the charts may have had less to do with the virtues of his writings than with the power of some academic and clerical organisations. What else are we to think of the situation which once prevailed in the Dominican Order when teachers were required to take an *oath* not to depart from his teachings? It was not reading St Thomas himself that mattered; during all that period when he was revered as the highest point in Christian theology we were not even provided with a definitive and reliable text of his actual works. It was by no means the immensely exciting and radical thinking of the saint that accounted for his position; it was the respectability given to what were believed to be 'his' schools of thought, to scholasticism in general and to Thomism in particular. And these were valued first of all as defenses for what was regarded as the only possible orthodoxy. The opposition and condemnation that St Thomas encountered in his own lifetime and later from the contemporary guardians of orthodoxy was not much stressed. In line with the growing centralisation of the

Roman Church's administration there was a serious and explicit attempt to formulate a single theology any departure from which was dangerous if not actually Temerarious.

An academic reputation that had been put to the service of ecclesiastical politicians and the triumphalists of the Roman Curia could not be expected to last; and it collapsed rapidly when the whole project of a monolithic Church was threatened by Vatican 11. Of course the theologians who gave the new direction to the Council, Rahner, Congar, Schillebeeckx and others were all men who had made their own the spirit of St Thomas, who had found in his writings not an official exponent of the Party Line but a real theologian who could pass on to others something of the Spirit of truth that he had received and cherished. It was not they who having first venerated him at second hand then condemned him out of hand. His ecclesiastical reputation had come from men who read him through doctrinaire spectacles, his rejection from people who hardly read him at all.

Now perhaps we shall start reading him. Now that he is no longer to be treated either as a bogey or a commissar we may look to him for an alternative to both the scholasticism of the old conservatives and the frequently shoddy rhetoric of so much post-conciliar writing. And if there is one feature of his writing from which we can especially learn it is his concern simultaneously for the precision and the limitation of language. He is prepared to follow an argument through with the utmost exactitude (not always, of course, he made logical blunders like the rest of us) while at the same time remaining aware that our concepts and our language cannot capture the truth towards which they are groping. He did not, like a rationalist, think we were the prisoners of our grammar and syntax but nor did he think that the way to transcend our limitations was to become sloppy and illogical. He pursued the truth with every human resource that was available to him with a critical clarity and a passion characterised by what he himself called 'a chastity of the mind' but he was fully aware not merely on his death-bed but throughout his life that the best we can offer is but straw. His message for us is not to despair of intelligence but to see to it that the straw we have is the best there is.

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