



BOOK REVIEW

Joseph Carola, S.J. *Engaging the Church Fathers in Nineteenth-Century Catholicism: The Patristic Legacy of the Scuola Romana*

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‘In this somewhat precarious theological situation, I regard it as salutary to move forward by first moving backward, upstream, and listening to the sources.’¹ If John Betz has given us direction, Joseph Carola has taken us upstream. Wading through the long title of *Engaging the Church Fathers in Nineteenth-Century Catholicism: The Patristic Legacy of the Scuola Romana*, we arrive at a powerful confluence: ‘Not only did the Rhine flow into the Tiber, but the Tiber also mixed with the Thames as it flowed past Ostia into the Mediterranean Sea’ (p. 6).

The story of the *Scuola Romana* sits at the heart of nineteenth-century Catholic theology. It is a story of audacious genius in a time of massive cultural upheaval. It is likewise the story of men; some inspiring, others melodramatic, all of whom had a deeply Catholic vision of reality. Carola’s book is a powerful testimony to the life and legacy of seven major thinkers, who comprised what Heribert Schaaf first called the *Römanische Schule* (Italian: *Scuola Romana*) in 1941. Exceptionally comprehensive, the work offers a compelling *promozione* of a ‘much neglected’ theological legacy (p. 24).

Strictly speaking, the *Scuola Romana* consisted of four leading Jesuit theologians at the Roman College: Giovanni Perrone (1794–1876), Carlo Passaglia (1812–1887), Clemens Schrader (1820–1875) and Johann Baptist Franzelin (1816–1886). Perrone, ‘the precursor, if not founder’, was followed by Passaglia, the school’s ‘true genius’ (p. 6). Schrader and Franzelin carried the project forward, ‘systematizing what their professors had pioneered and promoted’ (p. 408).

But as Carola writes, the *Scuola Romana* was in fact ‘not Roman’ (p. 475). Not only were its four ‘charter members’ not from within the Aurelian walls, the School encompasses three others: their Tübingen predecessor Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838), and two of their students – John Henry Newman (1801–1890) and Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1835–1888). Considered together, these seven extraordinary theologians account for the patristic legacy that spanned the nineteenth century. As Carola explains, the ‘chief concern’ of the book is to elaborate ‘their engagement with the Church Fathers’, an employment which allowed them to ‘address contemporary challenges’ (p. 22).

¹J. Betz, ‘Review: P. Griffiths and R. Hütter, *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*’, *Pro Ecclesia* 16 (2007), p. 222.

To understand the twentieth century, we must look to the nineteenth. The theological and doctrinal development of the church's last century can only be understood and interpreted in light of the nineteenth century's renewal. That renewal, Carola demonstrates, was patristic in nature, and centred around the theological vision of the *Scuola Romana*.

But when exactly was the nineteenth century? Eric Hobsbawm argued that it began with the storming of the Bastille in 1789 and ended with the first shots of First World War in 1914. Called the 'long nineteenth century', it was a period of political unrest and cultural transformation at the end of the modern age. Perhaps it centres on the revolutionary year of 1848, which as Carola details, dismantled the theological establishment of Rome and sent Pope Pius IX into exile.

From another perspective, Jürgen Osterhammel suggests a more restricted timeline, dating the 'real nineteenth century' from 1830 to 1880 (p. 18). As Carola surmises, this timeline fits well with the renewal of the Catholic theological tradition, situated largely within the patristic revival of the *Scuola Romana*. If the claim strikes us as exorbitant, we can take it on the authority of Matthias Scheeben: 1830, he wrote, was 'the decisive year for modern Catholic theology's restoration after nearly two centuries of notable decline' (p. 18). As Carola concludes, the theologians of the *Scuola Romana* 'were convinced that a systematic theological crash had occurred', one that began with the Reformation and climaxed with the Enlightenment and French Revolution (p. 469).

This 'real theological nineteenth century' could be described in three generations. First, the earliest members of the *Scuola Romana* published key works in the early 1830s – Möhler's *Symbolik*, Perrone's *Praelectiones Theologicae* and Newman's *The Arians of the Fourth Century*. A second generation, Passaglia and the early Schrader, took up the mantle and led the School into its 'golden age' (p. 303). Lastly, the late Schrader, Franzelin and Scheeben drew this half-century of scholarship to a remarkable close. In many respects, the 'enduring legacy' of the *Scuola Romana* is the *Handbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik* of Matthias Scheeben, published just before his untimely death at the age of 53.

Carola's book is worth a read simply for its history. But this survey, at times repetitive, serves the deeper project of the book: a theological exploration into the many unread (and even unknown) masterpieces of the nineteenth century. Here we discover its true contribution and enduring value. The members of the *Scuola Romana* partook in literally every major doctrinal commission and theological conversation of the nineteenth century. They were major players in some of the most important theological controversies of the time. But they did so as patrologists and positive theologians – a *ressourcement* long before Charles Péguy coined the phrase. They were decidedly not scholastic in method, but never disparaged scholasticism. Because they lived and worked within the 'ongoing tension between neo-scholastic currents', they harmonised their creative retrieval of the fathers with the scientific expositions of their scholastic predecessors (p. 3). As Carola writes of Newman, 'development does not supersede the Fathers, but explains and completes them' (p. 144). Just as it is 'consequently fallacious to pit the Fathers against the Scholastics' (p. 472), it is equally fallacious to pose contemporary Thomism against the twentieth-century movement of *Ressourcement*. Theologians faithful to the church can no longer afford the luxury of a divided theological establishment. From the *Scuola Romana* we can learn anew the way forward – courageously following the tradition upstream, in order to more deeply engage the world of today.

'In the case of John Henry Newman, biography is most definitely theology' (p. 144). Anyone who knows Father Carola knows the same can be said of him. As he wrote of

Möhler, 'perhaps the greatest testament that he left behind was the profound love he had for his students' (p. 41). This book, dedicated to the members of his long-standing patristic seminar, is scholarship grounded in paternity. And its legacy may one day be called a new *Scuola Romana*.

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