

## REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC INTELLECTUALITY

John Caiazza, Ph.D.\*  
Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, Rivier College

**Note:** This essay was originally given as a brief talk, as a contribution to the “Engaging Fridays” colloquia held to discuss “Catholic perspectives on faith, vocation and the intellectual life.” It has been slightly altered for presentation in the *InSight: Rivier Academic Journal*. I wish to acknowledge helpful comments by Rivier College colleagues Brad Stull, Sr. Lucille Thibodeau, Ann Riggs, Herman Tavani, and Paul Lizotte.

My topic is provoked by the last essay in Part II of *As Leaven in the World*, which is by Alex Nava, entitled “Mystics, Prophets and the Status of Religion in Contemporary Intellectual Life.” Now the essay is a fine one as far as it goes, but I frankly doubt whether, as Nava thinks, that post-modernism is more accepting of religious opinion than Enlightenment attitudes, especially as post-modernists such as Derrida are explicitly agnostic. I also think that the secular academy is dead set against religious thinking, especially Christian. However, I was provoked not by Nava’s thesis but by his title, especially the phrase “the status of religion in contemporary intellectual life,” for it brings to my mind an issue I have been concerned about, namely, *the status of the intellect in contemporary religious life*.

As an independent scholar who is a Catholic, I have become aware of the disconcerting presence of a strain of anti-intellectualism in the Catholic Church these days. My response is, I believe, not the usual cavil of an elderly some-time professor about the inability of his current students to grasp material which he is sure in his day was immediately understood by himself and his fellow undergraduates. The evidence is anecdotal but convincing: a series of picture and text cards which gives accounts of various saints. The card which features Thomas Aquinas describes him as a preacher who attracted large crowds without a mention of his influential theological writings or that his essential vocation was that of a university professor. A docu-drama about John of the Cross which portrayed in dramatic detail his trial and imprisonment but without a mention of his writings as the most important of the Church’s mystical theologians, and which remarkably avoided the dramatic irony involved in the fact that he wrote *The Dark Night of the Soul* while imprisoned. A “bible study” in which the participants once they had reviewed an incident or a parable in the Gospels were satisfied with it as a piece of information, a *datum*, but were disinclined to search for spiritual meaning or layers of context. Television programs for a Catholic audience on EWTN which seemingly presume that the viewers have no education beyond the fourth grade.<sup>1</sup> I assume that you can supply your own examples.

What is lost in this of course is the whole history of serious Catholic writing and thinking and devotion to education, from time of the earliest monks in the African desert teaching youngsters how to read, to the establishment of the great European universities in the Middle Ages, to the vast network of Catholic schools and colleges established in the United States (including Rivier). But worse, I get the impression that devotion to learning and abstract thinking in particular is outright scorned these days as unbecoming to the true Christian, and that advanced learning is a diversion from true participation in the Christian life. The anti-intellectual response to my complaint is always at the ready in that true Christian wisdom is given to the poor and uneducated while the learned are lost in the presumptuousness of their

theoretical life (Matt., 11:25), yet this avoids as essential insight of the Christian revelation that God and the faith are ultimately reasonable and that the *Logos*, the very word chosen by St. John to describe the Christ for a universal audience, descends from the being of the revealed God Himself. (John 1:1) <sup>ii</sup>

Now, if my intuition about contemporary anti-intellectualism in the Church is correct, we may next ask what the causes are. There are, I think, three broad reasons for this new type of anti-intellectualism in the Catholic Church. However, in each case, these causes, which are all recent, are benign in themselves and not maliciously intended, and so the negative effects on the intellectual life of the Church are “unintended consequences.”

The first of the three causes is the rise of Evangelical movement within the Church. Now Evangelicalism also affects Protestantism as well, so the overall effect is not confined to Catholics. The Evangelical surge is I believe an extremely good thing, inspired by the Holy Spirit to bring a new sense of participation and sincere action among Christians and to bring them personally closer to holiness, which is to say closer to God. However, the evangelical emphasis on personal experience and its main, not to say sole reliance on biblical teaching, imply that attempts to explain and analyze the Christian faith from theology and philosophy are in effect diversions from the true experience of God and from the Word of God. In this way, evangelicalism has had a strong tendency to subtly and sometimes not so subtly suppress intellectuality in the Church.

Another cause, specifically Catholic, was the post-Vatican II policy of freeing Catholic education from a forced dependence on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. This was a good thing, as I can testify from my own experience when as an undergraduate at a Jesuit university in 1959 and the early ‘60’s when I was treated to an enforced curriculum of neo-Thomist philosophy.<sup>iii</sup> As someone who was seriously interested in philosophy and would go on to pursue a doctorate in the field, I was appalled by the dismissive treatment given to philosophies other than neo-Thomism, especially modern philosophies. However, as inhibiting to new philosophical approaches as neo-Thomism was, it undeniably gave a serious, organized and comprehensive intellectual basis to the understanding of the Catholic faith. Thomism is a comprehensive philosophy including a basic Aristotelian metaphysical and ontological component which is largely missing from contemporary philosophy. The departure from Thomism has thus, I fear, acted to remove the sense of intellectuality from the contemporary context of Catholic experience. Departing from Thomistic philosophy as the primary or sole intellectual basis of the Catholic faith leaves current Catholic thinking unmoored. Catholic thinkers now must search individually for their own basis of understanding of the Catholic faith from within their own academic fields of interest or search for alternative philosophies.<sup>iv</sup> In large part, however, this is for the good, even though it complicates the life of the Catholic intellectual.

The final cause arises, once again, from a good thing, namely lay participation in the activities of the Church formerly reserved for priests and sisters. The problem that arises here is simply that lay people are not trained in the more exact and comprehensive intellectual aspects of the Catholic/Christian faith. As a result, discussion and presentation of doctrinal principles or biblical themes is often limited by the lay person’s own personal experience and whatever education they may have. The result then is vapid and sometimes erroneous presentations of Catholic teaching at such venues as RCIA and CCD. The point is not that lay people who offer their time and talents to the Church are uneducated since in fact many are college graduates and many have advanced degrees, but they are in areas such as education, management and engineering. Inevitably, lay people will use the categories and experiences of these professional fields, not to say their personal lives, to interpret and describe Church doctrines. Thus, lay participation has acted in some real measure to take the edge off of serious intellectual treatment of Christian doctrine and effective discussion of the essentials of the Christian faith.

Is anti-intellectualism then an inevitable aspect of the post-Vatican II Church, or is the opportunity for new styles of intellectuality available in the Church being taken advantage of? Two trends may tell a hopeful story. First, there is the combining of Thomism with the thought of contemporary philosophical schools including Phenomenology as in the writings of Bernard Lonergan S.J., and analytic philosophy in the school of “analytic Thomism” exemplified by GEM Anscombe and Anthony Kenney. Second, there is the work of contemporary scholars who are themselves Catholic but whose work is not “officially” Catholic, e.g., Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre.<sup>v</sup> The position of such Catholic intellectuals is however anomalous in that writing apart from a Thomistic framework, their work is “unmetaphysical” lacking an ontology and a connection to an overall philosophy. On the other hand, their writing has an influence on secular intellectuals that explicitly Thomistic or “Catholic” writing would, not since it is based on contemporary and modern (i.e. post-medieval) thought. Their Catholic identity is apparent in the fact that the writings of Taylor and MacIntyre are humanistic and anti-reductive, emphasizing the reconstruction of ethical and moral traditions.

Despite these positive developments in Catholic philosophy however, the effects of the new anti-intellectualism are still apparent overall. Perhaps there will eventually be a “trickle down” effect so that these new intellectual approaches will provide a newly refined basis for Catholic intellectuality; or perhaps these streams of discourse will dry up because seen as irrelevant in the present emphasis in Christian life on social change within and without the Church. Thus,” the status of the intellect in contemporary religious life” remains an open and troublesome question.

## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> This comment is not intended as a general characterization of EWTN’s programming philosophy, for many of its shows have an intellectual flavor and are intended for an educated audience. However, their main presentations at the family hour from 7:00 to 9:00 PM, and other programs are very apparently aimed at an audience which has a grade school understanding (this excludes EWTN’s children’s programming). Notably, two excellent programs aimed at a college educated audience, Fr. George Rutler’s refined sermons in *Christ in the City* and Fr. Charles O’Connor’s series on the history of the Catholic Church, are on late on Tuesdays evenings, at 11:00 and 11:30 PM respectively.

<sup>ii</sup> The late Pope John-Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* and the present Pope Benedict XVI in his Regensburg address have both affirmed the intimate connection of the Christian faith with reason. John-Paul states, “I would want especially to encourage believers working in the philosophical field to illumine the range of human activity by the exercise of a reason which grows more penetrating and assured because of the support it receives from faith.” *Fides et ratio: On the Relationship between Faith and Reason*. Boston, 1998, Pauline Books, p. 128.

<sup>iii</sup> Neo-Thomism must be distinguished from Thomism, i.e. the philosophy of St. Thomas itself which continues to attract serious interest from Catholic and non-Catholic intellectuals. But this is due to the true merits of St. Thomas’ philosophy and not to demands of ecclesiastical authority. The original declaration about using Thomism as the basis for seminary education and Catholic thought generally was the Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of Leo XIII in 1879. There does not seem to be a declaration as such which removed neo-Thomism as the sole or preferred basis for seminary education and official Church teaching, but this has nonetheless been the effective policy of the Church since Vatican II.

<sup>iv</sup> The leading example of Catholic intellectuals who maneuver without the support of Thomistic philosophy but who benefit as a result is Cardinal John Henry Newman, whose intellectual background was the classical learning of early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Oxford.

<sup>v</sup> Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self*; Cambridge, Harvard U. Press, 1989. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.); Notre Dame, Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

---

\* **Dr. JOHN CAIAZZA** was formerly the Director of Financial Aid at Rivier College, but is now an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy. John is a “cradle Catholic” whose interest in philosophy was stimulated in his early teens when he read G.K. Chesterton’s book on Thomas Aquinas (a gift from a boyhood friend). He received his doctorate in Philosophy of Science from Boston University in 1972, and since has been writing philosophical essays and book reviews while pursuing a career in academic administration. Since his early retirement, he is able to do more writing and has taken up golf.