

SEMINAR ON HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

This year's meeting marked the first time in several years that a Seminar in Historical Theology was held. Its indirect predecessor is the seminar on nineteenth-century theology, which disbanded after its last session in 1984. At that meeting, one option proposed for providing a continuing forum within the Society for discussion of the ways in which the Christian tradition informs and/or challenges contemporary formulations of faith was to hold a seminar on a rotating basis. One year would be devoted to patristic theology, the next to medieval, another to nineteenth-century theology. Although the current seminar in historical theology is not committed to following rigidly the proposal made in 1984, it is conceived broadly so as to allow the topics for discussion to change from year to year in accordance with the interests of the group or with the theme of the annual conventions. This year's seminar divided sessions between the early and the medieval periods.

Robert J. O'Connell, S.J., of Fordham University was the presenter at the first session on "The Human as 'Fallen Soul' in St. Augustine's Theology." His thesis was that Augustine used Plotinian thought to describe human presence in the cosmos as a penal condition into which we had fallen, when our souls sought to possess lower, temporal realities as sources of beatitude proper to themselves. O'Connell explained how Augustine sought to demonstrate that the anthropology of *Genesis* was the same as the Plotinian estimation of the soul's situation. In *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, Augustine interpreted *Genesis* as presenting the pristine human condition as a soul directly illumined by the light of the Word and in a consequent state of delight. This situation changed dramatically when the soul turned away from the divine source of its bliss; the result was the loss of the beatifying vision and the soul's embodiment in a physical body. O'Connell discussed the complex nature of the reciprocal effect of Augustine's scriptural interpretation upon his appropriation of Plotinus and Platonism and the latter's effect upon his reading of the Bible. He pointed out that although Augustine's intention was Christian, his anthropology did not always succeed in being more Christian than Plotinian. O'Connell concluded by tracing the development of Augustine's anthropology and highlighting the variations in his appropriation of Plotinian thought. The ensuing discussion focused upon dating more precisely the stages in Plotinus's influence upon Augustine's theology and drawing comparisons between Augustine's thought and the anthropology and eschatology of Origen.

Dennis M. Ferrara of Washington, D. C. was the presenter at the second session of the seminar, entitled "Objective and Existential Language in the Theology of St. Thomas." In the first part of his presentation, Ferrara argued that the transition from the first to the second part of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* witnesses a transition from the speculative character and objective language of science to the

subjective character and existential language of Augustine. By "existential" Ferrara explained that he meant materially the *Summa's* treatment of the questions pertaining to human action and Christian existence and formally its explication of the human self in terms of the transcendental appetite for the end as good. In the second part of his presentation, Ferrara identified the perduring points of difference between Augustine and Aquinas, and he explained that Aquinas grasped the primacy of the existential over the intellectual only imperfectly and unthematically. Ferrara adduced evidence from the *Summa* to show that both the intellectual and the existential perspectives co-exist in the *Secunda Pars*. He argued, however, that Aquinas became increasingly aware of the primacy of love and that this shift in his thought was a genuine development rather than repudiation of his former intellectualism. In the final part of his presentation, Ferrara used modern psychology to draw an analogy between the development of the human person and the development of Thomas's thought. Just as the human individual can grow by going to school, in which he or she becomes familiar with the pre-personal world and prepares for life in the interpersonal world, so too the transition of Aquinas's academic theology from impersonal cosmocentrism (*Prima Pars*) to the personal world of the properly human (*Secunda Pars*) is an important step in his growth as a Christian thinker. Ferrara suggested, moreover, that this analogy could be extended to Western Christian consciousness in general. Hence, the age of scholasticism could be seen as a necessary, yet penultimate stage in the maturation of Christian consciousness.

The discussion in this session focused on the question of the radicality of the perspectival disjuncture in Aquinas's *Summa* and on Ferrara's call for contemporary theologians to set off the objective language of their systems dialectically and ironically against the language of their own experience and praxis as witnessing Christians.

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