

SEMINAR ON HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

RERUM NOVARUM CENTENARY CELEBRATION

The continuing seminar in historical theology commemorated the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* by reflecting on the social theories of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Jean Bethke Elshtain, from the Political Science Department of Vanderbilt University, was to speak on "Augustine's Politics For Our Time." However, she was unable to attend. Her attention to the importance of Christian traditions and in particular the work of Augustine for political science today was acknowledged. Jean Porter, from The University of Notre Dame, spoke on "The Common Good and the Virtue of Justice in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*."

Porter began her reflections by arguing that Thomas's metaphysical theory of goodness provides the framework for his reflections on justice and the common good. She reviewed his argument: All creatures move toward the good according to their nature; humans through the rational apprehension of what constitutes the truly human good. The human person must cultivate a habitual orientation to perceive, respond, and act in accordance with the true human good. Intellect, will, and passions each have their corresponding virtues in this moral endeavor.

Her attention then turned to justice as the virtue of the will. Not to be viewed as a separate faculty that battles with the passions and intellect, the will is a "comprehensive spring of human action," the source of moral integration in a virtuous life. Justice accordingly orients the will towards the individual's own proper good and toward the common good. It regulates all human interaction; equality, construed in a variety of analogous ways, is its norm.

Porter suggested that Thomas's treatment of justice entails a certain problematic. He often suggests that the common good subordinates the good of the individual without remainder (*ST I, 60, 5*). Yet his overarching treatment of the virtues does not support this, because justice must cohere with the other virtues, which are directed to the good of the individual. Temperance and fortitude are completed by justice. Justice is perfected and completed by charity. Consequently, "Aquinas needs to show that the common good stands in an integral relationship to the good of the individual such that the common good perfects, rather than supercedes" the good of the individual.

Thus the individual's good can be subordinated to the common good in one sense, yet in another sense it is essential to the common good that the individual good be protected in certain ways. This argument is supported by Thomas's preservation of a certain equality (e.g., equality of immunity from certain kinds of harm and equality of immunity from certain kinds of coercion) and in his affirmation of the legitimate claim of the individual on the basic goods of life. Although Thomas

does not delineate a detailed theory of social justice, he does provide an important principle for it: "The common good takes precedence over individual goods in a certain sense, because the individual good depends on the common good. But this is only so, insofar as the common good has as one of its constitutive components the maintenance of individual goods."

Porter closed her remarks by suggesting that *Rerum Novarum* does not adopt Thomas' moral system, but it does commend Thomas' claim that "human law, and by implication economic forces, are not ultimate—what is ultimate is God's law." This rehabilitates Thomas's conviction that theology and philosophy can criticize society. More specifically, like Thomas, *Rerum Novarum* argues that "the earth and its goods are for the sake of all." Two significant differences were noted: the primacy of property and class analysis cannot be attributed to Thomas.

The discussion moved in three directions. The first concerned the relationship of the common good and the goods of the individual in Thomas' work. While Thomas articulates the importance of the notion of the common good for an adequate understanding of justice and the moral life in general, there is in his writings no development of a complex notion of the common good, which many look for today. Moreover, there is ultimately a plurality of individual goods in Thomas' moral theory that must be considered, both intrapersonal and interpersonal, rather than one kind affirmed to the exclusion of the other.

Some pursued Porter's suggestion that Thomas recognized the possibility of the "breakdown of institutions" in the midst of the relative institutional stability of his time. Porter cited *ST* II-II, Q. 66. as evidence. The question was raised whether it was not (simply) the breakdown of institutions that was conceivable to Thomas, but (also) the failure of institutions or the corruption of institutions.

Finally, Porter suggested that the treatment of private property in *Rerum Novarum* seems closer to the position espoused by John Locke than by Thomas Aquinas. No one argued that the encyclical gave a faithful reading of Thomas on this point. One discussant noted that Leo XIII's position on private property was indebted to the nineteenth century scholastic theologian, Taparelli d'Azeglio. Another defended Locke's position as more ethically nuanced than the caricature of his position offered by some of his disciples, interpreters, and critics.

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