

AQUINAS—INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Thomas Aquinas, Common Doctor: Whether and How
Convener: Holly Taylor Coolman, Providence College
Michon Matthiesen, Providence College
Moderator: Anna Bonta Moreland, Villanova University
Presenters: Nicholas Lombardo, O.P., Catholic University of America
James Keenan, S.J., Boston College
Bruce Marshall, Southern Methodist University

This session was centered on a question that arose in our question-and-answer session last year, so it provided a strong sense of continuity in this group's ongoing work. Each presenter was asked to give a short position paper addressing the central question of whether contemporary theologians can still understand Aquinas as the "common doctor"—and what that might mean. Each spoke for ten to twenty minutes, leaving plenty of time for all those present to enter into discussion of the question.

The first speaker was Nicholas Lombardo, O.P., who addressed the question from a recent pedagogical experience: he had traveled to Asia to discuss Aquinas with students who were struggling to understand his work. Fr. Lombardo noted that there were real challenges to be met: there was not only vocabulary, but also basic concepts that might have been more familiar to readers in the west but were foreign to his students. He noted, though, that, as they began to master the framework within which Aquinas worked, these students, so far removed from Aquinas's original context, still found his work insightful and valuable.

The second presenter, Jim Keenan, S.J., took a more systematic approach, arguing for a number of specific ways in which Aquinas does serve as common doctor. Especially important, he said, was the way in which Thomism has provided a common vocabulary that has prevented Catholic theology from simply splintering into discrete and unrelated schools of thought. Fr. Keenan also emphasized the way in which, among those who have studied Aquinas closely, there has often been an unexpected level of collegiality. (He noted, for example, the recent publication of *The Ethics of Aquinas* [Georgetown, 2002], edited by Stephen J. Pope, an anthology to which Aquinas scholars of widely differing theological persuasions nevertheless contributed in a coherent way.)

The third presenter, Bruce Marshall, first summarized briefly the history of modern Thomism (since *Aeterni Patris*) and then argued in particular for one way in which Aquinas serves a common doctor; he offers a model of Catholic theology that can continue to inform us, even where we come to conclusions differing from Aquinas's own.

The question-and-answer period was characterized by thoughtful engagement, in which those present pressed especially two issues: Aquinas's authority and Aquinas's uniqueness. There was significant agreement on the claim that Aquinas's claims, as such, have no particular authority at all, although it was also noted that they have, at certain points, become integral to magisterial teaching. Those present, however, noted numerous ways in which the work of Aquinas continues to have certain strengths, especially comprehensiveness and coherence, possessed by no other single theologian in the same way. Reflecting on Fr. Keenan's claim that the study of St.

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Thomas seems to produce a relatively high level of collegiality, even among those of differing theological tendencies, it was agreed that this same phenomenon seemed to appear in this very session.

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