

A Conversation

With Père Chenu

translated by **Joseph P. Philibert, O.P.**,
from **Informations Catholiques Internationales**,
No. 233; 1 February 1965.

Père Marie-Dominique Chenu celebrated his seventieth birthday and his fiftieth anniversary as a Dominican religious this year. Along with an international reputation as an historian of theology, Chenu must certainly be mentioned when the names of the pioneers of our present theological renewal are counted off. His gift was, and is, a theological reflection which meets the modern world at the level of its actual problems.

His great work of historical background for Thomistic theology, *Understanding Saint Thomas*, has just been published in English. Editions du Cerf in Paris is now publishing his great two volume work, *La Parole de Dieu*, the second volume of which, *L'Evangile dans le temps*, was released on the first of February.

When people ask your friends about you, Father, they say something like this: "Père Chenu is first of all a priest who never seems bothered by anyone, who seems to have set aside his day just for you; whoever you are, you're important to him. . ." Is this the portrait of a theologian who needs time and quiet for the constant occupation of preparing books, articles and lectures?

I wish my friends were right about me. . . But anyway, it's true that that's my ideal. If I seem happy, no matter what I may be doing, to receive all my visitors, to meet all kinds of people, this isn't so meritorious; it's not only to fulfill my priestly duty, it's also because as a theologian I need them! People are my obsession. Upon entering, they carry a breath of fresh air into my cell. They carry with them the living world, the living Church. I need them to know life: what is going on, what is evolving: the vitality swelling up through the Church and through the world. For a theologian, dia-



logue is indispensable because these men reverberate, at the level of daily experience, the dynamic reality of their time. I am enriched by this kind of dialogue.

Did you always feel this way, even as a young priest, when you were more concerned with growing yourself than with giving to others?

Well, in those days, it was necessary to work strenuously to have any results. Then, I had a studious solitude. It was only later, when I had more command of my work, that I could get around and meet people. But perhaps because we were in exile from the Saulchoir, near Tournai in Belgium, our priory was more open, always welcoming people, desirous of making friends; the guest house was never empty. And even as a young religious I felt that openness to others, communion with my whole self with the affairs of the world, was essential to the life of a Dominican, an ideal which comes from the beginning of the Order.

Discovering my vocation after high school, I chose a mendicant order. I would have become a Franciscan, for their evangelical spirit, their closeness to the people (we Dominicans are frequently "aristocrats"), the joy of St. Francis had impressed me. Even today, if I am speaking to Franciscans, I feel I'm barefoot with them. But I chose the Order of St. Dominic. And I've never forgotten what these two mendicant orders owe their foundation to: to the evangelical somersault of a Church which rescued itself from the comfortable situation it enjoyed in a feudal society.

During this period, the feudal structures collapsed—everything's tied up with life. Urbanization, the organization of communes, the creation of markets occurred (to the great anger of feudal lords and certain bishops, when the merchants seized the economic power). The primitive state of industry had seen its day: it was discovered that the forces of nature could be converted into energy. All this didn't come about without trouble and upheaval.

The mendicant orders were born in this context and they are naturally at ease in such a context. So we even find the Dominican Friars, because they had the learning which the people lacked, drafting the constitutions of the new communes. This is what was done at Bergamo by the Friar we venerate under the name of Blessed Guala.

I've never studied the history of the Church alone, isolated, but always in the light of the history of civilizations. As an historian, I only understand a text of St. Thomas really when it is immersed in his own period, in the situations of his contemporaries, to which he was so sensitive and for which he had such great respect. If I, as a theologian, meet an economist, a scientist, or a technician, I don't expostulate to him about his field; I listen with respect to his conclusions and I find my theology confronted with what he said. I don't have to contradict his results in the name of what I think; they are right in their own order, provided that they are not imprisoned there and that they don't abuse their science by reaching a conclusion which their science cannot permit them to draw.

But haven't you ever had a nostalgia for a quiet workroom where you could have pursued your work methodically, volume after volume, far from the noise and bustle of the world?

And also far from the Church crying out in the milieu of the world? Impossible! Before all else, to be a theologian really means not to be cut off from the daily, concrete life of the Church. What good is a theologian under glass who avoids outside "contamination"? Set problems and an outdated, erudite jargon, a series of abstract principles which you apply methodically and which you try to make fit concrete situations by adjusting them for better or for worse. . . ? I fully understand that for some that's what theology is. Sure, the truth is transcendent, it is revealed to us by God. But I find my theology in the living Church with its hierarchy and its people, in the Church as it lives today in a real world, as it is the way men are busy making it to be.

At the age of seventy, you continue lecturing, priests' conferences, evening study groups. . . At this point, wouldn't you rather write your thoughts in a book?

I don't deny that now and then I haven't been able to avoid scattering my efforts. I might have had more time to pursue works of real importance. For example, I would have liked to write a book on the theology of matter. But I've made a choice and I don't regret it. Doubtless, the same thing is true in your profession as a journalist. Each episode is distracting, but one ends with an astonishingly global view.

Finding myself with curates, priest-workers, lay apostles, parishoners, bishops, even unbelievers, I have always considered these encounters (to which some theologians would have shown only an aristocratic benevolence) as a test of the truth of our labor, and a guarantee of its evangelical source. And in my life as a whole, I feel I have done the work I was destined for. I have exercised the ministry of the Word of God. Especially in these last years, when I was sick and unable to study or to write for protracted periods. Think of that for a moment. My eyes were so weak that I couldn't even read my St. Thomas!

You say it as though this has been one of your worst trials?

It's true. The work of St. Thomas has been my constant sustenance. He is better equipped than others to understand the modern world and his vision of man is astonishingly realistic.

Often I've said to young priests who seem to have no use for him, "You have such esteem for me, do you? You can be positive that without St. Thomas I wouldn't be what I am today." I want my communion with the divine life in Christ to be rooted firmly in rational foundations. But there are so many people who abuse his work by considering it a system which is finished, terminated, locked up once for all! They degrade his genius. His manner of knowing human and Christian reality is what I would like to have in the world and in the Church today.

I express there one loyalty which has been life-long. It happened by chance. After the war, my studies in Rome ended in 1920. I returned to the Saulchoir at the moment when Père Mandonnet and Père Lemonnyer set to work. They were a team who were engaged in an historical study and analysis of the work of St. Thomas. The doctrinal understanding of the text had to come from a reconstruction of its genesis. The return to the sources, there as elsewhere, offered enrichment and freshness.

The team furnished their collaborators with the *Bulletin Thomiste*; I became secretary for the publication of *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*. It was then that I got to know Etienne Gilson, who remains my very dear friend. You see, my attachment to St. Thomas didn't start yesterday and it hasn't been a fleeting thing.

Then, in 1932, I found myself the regent of a corps of teachers enlarged through the addition of young men. Spiritual filiation is an amazing thing, and it is a joy to think back to those days. There was, for example, the beginning of the *Unam Sanctam* series which has since become an important collection. And who inaugurated it? Père Congar, with the volume, *Chrétiens désunis: Principes d'un oecuménisme catholique* (1937). We would not have imagined then the span of the enterprise, in fact of the renewal of the *whole* of the theology of the Church, in which Congar has been one of the greatest craftsmen. Père Feret, lecturing on the theological history of the Church, deepened our insight into the Word of God working in the human intelligence, both individual and collective. At the same time the group called *Istina*, directed by Père Dumont, began; they started just in time to make a contribution in the first steps of the ecumenical movement.

But you were considered a medievalist until you wrote on the Young Christian Workers. Then you began a weekly column in Sept.; later you became chaplain of the teachers' Equippes; you were called the "theologian of the priest-workers". . . Didn't you feel torn between two different worlds, with jobs like that taking you from your theology?

Not at all. You'd have one think that there were two Chenu's. The one, an old medievalist, not without a reputation, but preoccupied with reading ancient manuscripts, full of erudition, attached to the old centuries of Christianity, maintaining a medieval tradition even in the present century. Then, there is the other Chenu: young, dapper, frivolous, in a scramble with the contemporary world, responsive to all appeals, prompt to get involved in the most delicate problems of the world and of the Church, and for that reason controversial, suspect in certain sectors.

No. That's not the story. There's only one Chenu. My life is thoroughly unified; I don't have to worry about living in little pieces.

Through this paradoxical unity of two personalities or two concerns, the unity of theology becomes clear. If there is only one Chenu, it's because he's received the grace of a theology whose first law is to be *one*. The Word of God is *in* the world, there where

the Spirit continues and realizes *today*, within the individual and collective theological understanding of man, the regimen of the incarnation of Christ. I've told you this: the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ in history, with its institutions and its charisms, this Church in action is the *locus* of theology. This is because first of all it is the place of Tradition: the vital and communal development of Holy Scripture.

It was during this same period of about fifty years when I published my most important works as a medievalist that I launched out on my missionary movement. (A Roman prelate who only knew of me through a brochure which reproduced one of my talks referred to me as "that young theologian." I found that very entertaining; I was then sixty years old!)

When I saw the dawn of the biblical renewal and of the liturgical movement in which I had participated somewhat, when (by a surprising stroke of luck and the grace of God) I met Père Augros—organizer of the *Mission de France* which took place under Cardinal Suhard—and Père Godin, founder of the *Mission de Paris*, when I found myself in collaboration with the priest-workers whose vocation developed out of this missionary obsession (and not, as some have said, out of partisanship in the economic struggle), I wasn't really surprised. What my historical and theological methodology, my Dominican vocation, my idea of the Church in the world had given me a glimpse of, I now saw being realized spontaneously. There were evident ambiguities and false steps. But we were in profound agreement about what needed to be done.

I was in the midst of this effervescence only as a witness, but in the strongest sense of that word. These priests, these laymen, these workers not only wanted a theologian, they demanded a theologian who would partake of their inspiration and their commitment. I don't dare ask myself if I responded faithfully to this grace and this friendship.

Even in the worst days of 1953-1954, I shared with them the sadness, the darkness, the heartbreak.

You were removed from your teaching post in 1942; this time you were told to leave Paris. . .

The Master General had asked certain Dominicans, of whom I was one, to give an example of obedience and self-effacement

for the sake of the Order. I left for the priory at Rouen. I don't pretend that at the moment that had not been disagreeable for me, that there had not been agitation on the surface of my heart. But it wasn't a profound shock. Obedience was not difficult for me; besides it was done as an act of faith. I've always preserved my confidence. It was easier for me than for those committed to certain new forms of apostolate. The guarantee of my faith was my communion with the Church, which is in ferment in every epoch. I received lots of letters then, and I answered them all assuring everyone of my confidence in the future. I said, "Remember the blow to the Jesuit missions in China." I knew that we were witnessing a somersault, that the ferment was at its work.

At the moment of departure, the last friend I met was a worker who was overwhelmed with discouragement. I was able to encourage him, and like a good lad, he held on.

But I must say that even this period remains a tender memory of Dominican brotherliness. At Rouen, just as at Paris, even those Fathers who weren't entirely in agreement with my views showed me a graciousness and an affection which I can never forget.

Père Chenu, which of your books are your favorites?

My little *Saint Thomas* (in the collection *Maîtres spirituels* published by du Seuil) and the book which is just now coming out from Editions du Cerf: *L'Evangile dans le temps*.

What would you prefer that we preserved of your teachings if we could only preserve a fragment?

I have been concerned most with the demands of the Incarnation. If Christianity is the reality of God incarnate in matter, the divinization of man implies that it must reach even to the level of matter. But I am not sacrilizing each level of material being. I respect the levels of understanding of reality, the "formal objects", as we say in our language of theology.

Humanization is already a capacity for divinization. What we call the movement of history is really a disposition for divinization.

Also, I have preached a great deal that the Church must incessantly strive to recover its primitive vitality. But this is not archaism; history can't be turned back. It is continually necessary for the Church to return to the Gospel, to remain the leaven in the world.