

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ENCYCLICAL *HUMANI GENERIS*

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POPE PIUS XII published the Encyclical, *Humani generis*, on the 12th of August, 1950. Since then it has been commented on and explained as very few encyclicals have been in the past. Here in America many commentaries have come to light. Two, one by Fr. Francis Connell, C.S.S.R., and the other by Fr. Joseph Fenton, appeared simultaneously in the same issue of the *American Ecclesiastical Review*.¹ Robert Barrat made observations on the document in the *Commonweal*.² Fr. D. L. Greenstock wrote a pertinent article in the *Thomist*,³ and a lengthy study was made by Fr. Cyril Vollert, S.J., in THEOLOGICAL STUDIES.⁴ Even the Protestant review, the *Christian Century*, carried a commentary by the former Dominican and present Presbyterian, Georges Barrois.⁵ The European journals were even more generous with the attention paid to the papal pronouncement, and the number of articles is too great to permit even a summary catalogue here.⁶ In fact, the interest aroused by the Encyclical in theological circles is extraordinary.

The amount of comment published is not out of proportion to the significance of the document. It took cognizance of a situation that was important not only for theology but also for other disciplines in which Catholic intellectuals engage. Before the Encyclical can be properly understood, it is necessary to understand the situation that it contemplates. To make such an understanding possible, this study

¹ Francis J. Connell, C.S.S.R., "Theological Content of *Humani Generis*," *American Ecclesiastical Review*, CXXIII (1950), 321-30; Joseph Clifford Fenton, "The Lesson of the *Humani Generis*," *Ibid.*, 359-78. Cf., in the same review, Joseph Clifford Fenton, "The *Humani Generis* and its Predecessors," CXXIII (1950), 452-58.

² Robert Barrat, "Reaction to the Encyclical," *Commonweal*, LII (1950), 628-30.

³ David L. Greenstock, "Thomism and the New Theology," *Thomist*, XIII (1950), 567-96.

⁴ Cyril Vollert, S.J., "*Humani Generis* and the Limits of Theology," THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, XII (1951), 3-23.

⁵ Georges Barrois, "An Overlooked Encyclical," *Christian Century*, LXVIII (1951) 78-80.

⁶ In a future article we shall give a catalogue of the articles that have appeared along with a synthesis of their thought.

wishes to discuss the ground from which sprang the theology criticised by the papal communication. In order to do this, a triple task must be essayed: first, a consideration of the possible dynamisms that can influence Catholic theologians; second, against such a general background, a rapid gaze at the highlights of the record of theological contributions made by some modern Catholics in vital contact with French existentialism; third, an indication of the effects of French existentialism on Catholic theology by reason of inner logic, in the hypothesis of a meeting of theology with such a philosophy, and pre-scinding from any concrete historical development of such an encounter. In the light of such reflections, it should be possible to understand better the doctrine contained in *Humani generis*.

I

The theologian is, like any other man, conditioned by his time, and he cannot escape its influence. Of all thought disciplines, Catholic theology by reason of its necessary attachment to tradition is the most conservative. The times will only influence it unconsciously, because there will be a conscious resistance to innovations. When innovation presents itself patently, there will always be a strong opposition, not because the theologian is not of his time, but because he is very sensitive to the possible change in the data of his discipline, which data must always remain intact and free from all deformation. In this concern, the theologian is no different from the thinkers in other fields, who have no objection to new hypotheses and theories, but demand that the data, which never admit criticism and can only command acceptance, be not transformed nor mutilated. In theology the prime data are necessarily fused with some contingent formulation so that it is not an easy thing to separate the ephemeral from the abiding core. When dissection is made, there is always the danger that the theological knife cut off something of the nucleus which must never be touched. This situation makes any paring off of the temporal a delicate task, because there will be a temporal area closely attached to the heart of the thing, and as soon as it is touched, there will be theologians who cry in pain and alarm because they think that the very heart is being touched. In such a moment controversy arises and it can be bitter.

Now the whole operation is far too important beyond the confines of theology to allow the theologians to fight it out until some kind of consent be achieved, for the theologian deals with the faith of the Christian and the faithful follow the lights and the formulas of the theologians. Consequently, the official teaching organs of the Church, which give the original data to the theologian and in consequence infallibly know what are true data and what are not, must come into a theological debate, though theology is not per se a function of the magisterium. If the work of the theologian has no repercussion on the faith of the Church, the magisterium does not interfere, and it allows the theologian all the freedom that he can desire. The Church is chiefly interested in communicating the revelation of Christ and in safeguarding it. The intellectual drive whereby faith in a human thinker seeks for intelligence, *fides quaerens intellectum*, is not suppressed nor hampered, but the magisterium will not allow theologians to teach that such and such is the message of Christ, when it is not. If the erring theologians are her own children, the Church with every right corrects and, if necessary, chastises them. If the theologians are not her children, the Church admonishes her own and points out the errors in the non-Catholic theologians' doctrine.

In theology, because of the structure of human beings, there will always be certain tendencies at work. There will be the trend on the part of some to make of revelation one element to be fitted into a philosophic scheme conceived and construed independently of faith. The Gnostics of old exhibited this tendency. Where it has free play the revelation is swamped by so many extraneous elements that it will no longer be seen, and it will be deformed by the dreadful weight of speculations quite alien to it. The result will be that theology becomes a mere philosophy, strange and bizarre because it tries to handle elements for which philosophy is not equipped.

There is another form of theologizing superficially similar to the preceding but substantially quite different. It plays an important role in theologians like Origen. In such theology revelation is not overloaded with things that relegate it to an inferior and subsidiary position. The revelation is itself taken as the source of a framework of all thought, providing a setting for universal truth. In consequence, the original revelation, never denied, always revered, is considered as a

basic complex idea, which can be analysed so that in the light of the analysis it can be blown up to become the scheme of philosophical enquiry itself. Now such a concept of revelation is certainly not illegitimate, but there is here an inclination to see in revelation only philosophic, i.e., general, truth. The definitely historical elements in revelation, which are individual and concrete, as well as the legal formulas which are concerned with practice and not theory, are not left out of the revelational data, but they are interpreted as allegorical expressions of general abstract vision. The simple, straightforward understanding of propositional revelation as given is spontaneously rejected as puerile, and such interpretation is not considered as relevant. Instead of such a literal understanding of the revelatory propositions, it is supposed that they are really symbols of hidden truth rather than narrations of events or formulas for concrete behavior.

There is a third tendency which can be found in theological history. It is the mystic's contempt for intellectual categorization. The Victorine school of Paris, and the attitude of Thomas à Kempis, who would rather feel compunction than define it, exemplify this propensity very well. Men of this type love to work with revelation, but its theoretical content does not concern them greatly. They wish to use it as a stimulus for meditation, not in search of intellectual harmony but of experimental and existentialist achievement of truth through personal encounter.

The extreme opposite to the above type of theology is the thinking current among the theologians of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These men, of whom William of Ockham is the outstanding example, made positive contributions to theology, but rather in spite of their method than because of it. In their methodology they were logicians, interested almost exclusively in the logical connection of concepts derived from revelation, with very little preoccupation for the original content of the concepts. This methodology produced a schematic theology that passed over substance in its eager search for logical form.

The Protestant Reformers used a fifth kind of theology, although it was not their invention, for we find it in the Antiochian theologians of the fifth century, whose great lights were Theodore of Mopsuestia and, to a lesser degree, St. John Chrysostom. This form of theologizing

takes a critical approach to the data of revelation, which is identified with Scripture. A sober positivism energized by commonly accepted principles of reasoning then erects a scheme. Theologians of this tendency do not soar to mystical heights nor penetrate to metaphysical depths. They take as little as possible from philosophy, and what they do take would be accepted with no reluctance by the educated men of their time. It seems to be a sensible theology, and that is all that it is, for there is no profundity reached, and its fruit is moral endeavor rather than spiritual insight.

I submit that these five tendencies are always at work in the efforts of theologians. A given age, by reason of the problems that it faces, is more propitious to one tendency than another. No tendency is altogether vicious; each has its virtue, excepting possibly the extreme gnosticizing inclination. Like all classifications, this one is schematic and abstract. It will not be possible to squeeze every theologian into one of the groups. He may seem to belong to two groups simultaneously and even show characteristics of a third group. In fact, the best theologian would be he who could successfully blend all the virtues in all five tendencies, while successfully avoiding the defects in each.

II

With these generalities as a background, we must now consider the concrete scene of the Encyclical we are discussing. To understand the event of 1950 we must go back to 1900. At that moment the thought-currents of the intellectual world in general had a twofold component: Hegelianism was the philosophic climate of the day and positivism was working triumphantly in historical and physical science, which had to be spelled with a capital S. Catholic theology was quite free from any Hegelian influences; for Catholics, even the majority of German Catholics, were quite ignorant of the spirit and doctrine of Hegel. On the other hand, since theology from the days of the seventeenth century had turned positive rather than speculative, there was an Antiochian spirit in Catholic theological schools, but with a difference. The old Antiochians were constructing a new theology whose final expression was hardly satisfactory, while the new Antiochians had no desire to build a new theology. They wished only to reconstruct the received theology by means of an historical approach to the data

and rational principles of synthesis. As a matter of fact, many, though by no means all, were so interested in rational synthesis that their product looked somewhat like the logicism of the fifteenth century. Their object was to justify the accepted formulas syllogistically, and with this achieved, they felt that their task was done. The result was that Catholic theology was a strange thing in the general atmosphere of Hegelianism and positivism; for it did not speak the language of the times.

Baron Friedrich von Hügel, a German Englishman of tremendous energy and deeply interested in his Catholic religion, gathered around him thinkers who were dissatisfied with the theology of their day. They were scintillating figures, even if not necessarily great minds. There was the English convert, Fr. George Tyrrell, S.J., who was writing in the English journals. From France came the ex-Jesuit Henri Bremond and Abbé Alfred Loisy. These were to be the stormy petrels of the movement of dissatisfaction. Tyrrell and Loisy left the Church but the other two remained. This quartet had taken on the leadership of revolt, but they were never elected by the discontented, who did not like the von Hügel group. Among such malcontents we find M. Maurice Blondel and the Oratorian, P. Lucien Laberthonnière, who had no intention of accepting the outré positions of the self-appointed spokesmen.

Now what was Modernism, as the theology of the von Hügel group was called? It had two elements, one positive and one negative. The negative element we have already indicated; it was a dissatisfaction with a theology occupied with erecting a static skeleton of Christian dogma whose members were rigidly connected, one with the other, by logical terms functioning exclusively with the forces of Aristotelian dialectic. The Modernists believed that this was the only theology around, and they had the impression that current theology was merely an exercise in syllogistic reasoning. This negative basis of the new theology was not of itself a gateway to error, but it was irritating to the theologians whose serious work was so cavalierly despised. The danger lay in the positive principles of methodology adopted by the Modernists. They were children of their time, and positivistic historical method made a great impression on their minds. By it, the supernatural simply disappeared. They could, therefore, find no justification

of Catholic claims in the historical method, which they servilely accepted. However, Hegelianism gave them a way out. Behind history there was an immanent reality, God, and by inward contemplation the individual could find this undefinable God in himself. In this way Catholic dogmas could be justified; for they were symbols of a richer reality than history could discover, since they could be understood with an immediacy that was entailed in religious experience. Modernism was a sad attempt to join Antiochian positivism with Victorine mysticism.

The Church's magisterium through its Roman organs condemned the new theology. Two pontifical documents were issued: *Pascendi* (September 8, 1907) and *Lamentabili* (July 3, 1907). The latter was issued by the Holy Office and was a catalogue of Modernistic theses, which were all condemned. *Pascendi* was the Encyclical of Pius X in which Modernism was constructed. No Modernist had made such a construction; for no one man held all the Modernist doctrines. The construction, however, was accurate, as Loisy recognised and admitted.

The effect of the condemnation of Modernism was highly salutary and purifying. The Modernists were destroying Catholic faith, and they had to be stopped. The papal pronouncements achieved this fully, first of all, because there were not many Modernists in the Catholic world, and secondly, they had no attraction for the general Catholic public. Yet the very success of the Roman condemnation brought with it something not wholly desirable. The discontent that many theologians felt with the state of their discipline could not now be voiced because it exposed them to the danger of being considered Modernists. On the other hand, the entrenched method of treating dogma with superficially positive approaches and of rationalistically coordinating the data with logically constructed terms now claimed magisterial canonization and it seemed that nothing could dislodge it.

However, the legitimate dissatisfaction did not vanish just because it could not be voiced. In fact, it grew because the spokesmen of theology were interpreting all Roman orientations in function of the fear of Modernism. The question of human evolution was simultaneous with Modernism, and the Biblical Commission dealt with it in a decree of June 30, 1909. The document, read today with calm serenity, is very sober and not at all repressive. The word, evolution, is not once mentioned, and the phrasing of the decree really left the question quite

open. However, the general sensitivity of theologians at the time made them interpret the doctrine with rigidity and no one dared to see in it a permission to entertain an evolutionary hypothesis in the interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis.

By 1914 the whole world was interested in things other than theology. The First World War swept over Europe and when it ended it had swept away much. Among other things, it dethroned Hegelianism, and the post-war years dumped nineteenth-century positivism and historicism into the scrapheap. A Danish theologian of the nineteenth century, Soren Kierkegaard, was rediscovered by the Protestants, and Albert Einstein and Max Planck gave physical science a new background. Thinkers had to reflect seriously to find out what science was, especially after Werner Heisenberg in the 20's denied the universal applicability of the principle of determinism.

Protestant theology dropped the historical approaches of Adolf von Harnack, and Karl Barth went back to the Scriptures as he found them. He derived therefrom a living personal revelation. In Catholic circles P. Pierre Rousselot, S.J., a victim of the war, was being discussed. His great contribution, *The Intellectualism of St. Thomas*, first published in 1908 but republished in 1924 after the author's death, indicated one solution to the problem of rationalism in Scholastic theology. Rousselot brought out that in St. Thomas the problem had already been overcome. As he saw it, for St. Thomas the intellectual assent in judgment was a dynamic grasp of the real, and not a mere ordering of concepts in a pattern. The notion of dynamism, introduced earlier by Maurice Blondel, made its reappearance, and was not considered as something revolutionary; for the early twentieth century produced excellent historical studies of St. Thomas and Thomism which revealed that such thought, at least in germ, could be found in the Angelic Doctor. The notion of the dynamic pleased those who were unhappy with the static constructions of then current theology. Men with no revolutionary tendencies helped to pave the way. For example, P. Antonin Gilbert Sertillanges, O.P., produced scholarly and solid works which in spirit were not hostile to attempts at theological renovation.

Then came P. Joseph Maréchal, S.J., who made an original study of Thomistic epistemology, contrasting it with the work of Kant. The whole work was based on the idea of dynamism, i.e., the tension in

thought toward reality by reason of its teleological drive, independently of conceptual structure, which Maréchal considered subjective.⁷

The concept of dynamism allowed for much latitude; for after all it was never too clear just what it did mean. In the 30's, under the general spell of self-examination, theology began to reflect on itself in order to see just what it was and with what it was working. Two questions were in the forefront: what is the science of faith, and what is faith? This latter question involved the correlative question: what is revelation to which faith is attached, especially in the magisterial communication of it?

Three names of an earlier period must be mentioned as antecedents to this movement. The first we have already mentioned, P. Pierre Rousselot, S.J., who published studies concerning conversion and the psychology of faith. It was his theory that without an illumination attached to the grace of faith it was impossible to see the naturally certain grounds for making the act of faith. This was close to the conclusions of the Modernists, but the argumentation was entirely different. Rousselot did not say that the historical events supposed in Christian revelation could not be verified by the historical method, but on theological grounds he would not admit that the natural could achieve the supernatural even by backstairs methods.

The second name is that of P. Ambroise Gardeil, O.P., whose work was done in the early part of the century but was being reexamined in the early 30's. He was directly interested in the nature of the theological enterprise, and proposed a dynamic Thomism as the true theological method.

The third man who helped to develop the present situation was the Spanish Dominican, Francisco Marín-Sola. He insisted that St. Thomas taught, and he himself was certainly teaching, that in communicating revelation the Church was not restricted to the logical analysis of preexisting propositions, but could extend received dogmas in the light of truth achieved empirically or metaphysically, even though such truth was not formally contained in the primitive propositions.⁸

The first and third men were attacked strongly. Rousselot's theses

⁷ Joseph Maréchal, S.J., *Le Point de départ de la métaphysique. Cahier V. Le Thomisme devant la philosophie critique* (2d ed.; Bruxelles & Paris: Edition Universelle, 1949).

⁸ For Gardeil and Marín-Sola cf. A. Gardeil, O.P., *Le Donné révélé et la théologie* (2nd ed.; Juvisy: Editions du Cerf, 1932); F. Marín-Sola, O.P., *L'Evolution homogène du dogme catholique* (2d ed.; Fribourg: Imprimerie de l'Oeuvre de Saint Paul, 1924).

were proscribed by the General of the Jesuits, who forbade that they be taught in the Jesuit houses of studies. P. Garrigou-Lagrange, the famous Dominican theologian, opposed both Rousselot and Marin-Sola. He was aided in his opposition by many theologians of lesser renown.

“Vitalism” in theology became widespread in the 30’s. This was due in part to the interest in the 20’s in the notion of the Mystical Body as a description of the Church. In consequence, on every side the Church was portrayed as the vital theandric unity of all Catholics in and with Christ, the divine Redeemer and Lord. The presentation of the Church exclusively as a monarchic society with a juridical framework was no longer so popular, though no one denied it. The juridical conception of the Church simply took a second place in favor of an organic consideration. By the end of the 30’s there were clear manifestations of a militancy on the part of some of the enthusiastic supporters of an expansion of vitalism to all fields of theology. One of the first of these manifestations was the Frenchman, P. Yves de Montcheuil, S.J., who died during the Second World War. Less militant but just as important was P. Louis Charlier, O.P., whose most conspicuous contribution was the book, *Essai sur le problème théologique*, published in 1938 but put in 1942 on the Index of Forbidden Books.

The war stopped theorizing, but it influenced the French theologians, many of whom through the resistance movement were thrown into contact with non-Catholics. This encounter convinced them that the only way non-Catholics could be attracted to the Church was by presenting her in terms of the vital and the existential. In line with such conviction, the war’s close brought to the limelight a trio of Jesuits, P. Henri de Lubac, P. Jean Daniélou, and P. Henri Bouillard. P. Daniélou was teaching in the *Institut Catholique* of Paris; P. de Lubac in the *Facultés Catholiques* of Lyons and also at the Jesuit theologate of Fourvière, where P. Bouillard was his colleague. The Jesuits were paralleled by a Dominican trio: P. Marie Dominique Chenu, former director of studies at Le Saulchoir, the house of studies of the Dominicans of the Paris Province, P. Yves Congar, and the Saulchoir scripturist, P. André Marie Dubarle. Fourvière and Le Saulchoir took on special meaning; for there was evidently ferment there. One splendid product of the ferment was the ecclesiological series, *Unam Sanctam*,

manifesting the energy of PP. Congar and de Lubac. However, the product that caused most discussion was the work of P. de Lubac, *Le Surnaturel*, and this book and its author somehow became the concrete symbols of the movement. P. Michel Labourdette, O.P., editor of the *Revue Thomiste*, was very critical of the new ideas, but Mgr. Bruno de Solages, rector of the *Institut Catholique* of Toulouse, defended those who championed them.

The theologians in the German-speaking lands were in no condition to take active part in the French discussions, but in Germany itself something related was appearing—the *Una Sancta* movement, which wished to unite all Christians in some sort of fellowship; the eminent German theologian, Karl Adam, wrote in favor of the movement.⁹ However, it was not the theologians who made German Catholicism vocal, but laymen. A conspicuous example was Eugen Kogon, the editor of the splendid *Frankfurter Hefte*, a journal born after the war. Because he is not a theologian and because he is realistically committed to all the events in Germany, we find in him an innocent disdain for the preoccupations of the older theologians.

Belgium showed some sympathy with the French innovations, but did not give them an uncritical support. In England, the *Downside Review*, with a typical English sense of aloofness, developed some of the thoughts of the “new” theologians and gave the new approach a hearing in its pages, without committing itself to its stands.

In Spain there was a critical study of the new thing, and though the general tendency was definitely adverse to it, yet there was no passionate hostility to the phenomenon. In Italy the movement was watched and attacked vigorously by two Frenchmen, P. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange and P. Charles Boyer, S.J., and the renown of these two theologians gave added weight to their opposition.

In the Americas there was no general awareness of what was going on in Europe, though Fr. Philip J. Donnelly, S.J., published articles in THEOLOGICAL STUDIES analyzing theories of P. de Lubac, which he found wanting.¹⁰ However, in 1949 it was evident even in the theo-

⁹ Karl Adam, *Una sancta in katholischer Sicht* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1948).

¹⁰ Philip J. Donnelly, S.J., “On the Development of Dogma and the Supernatural,” THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, VIII (1947), 471–91; “Discussions on the Supernatural Order,” *Ibid.*, IX (1948), 213–49; “A Recent Critique of P. de Lubac’s *Surnaturel*,” *Ibid.*, IX (1948), 554–60; “The Gratuity of the Beatific Vision and the Possibility of a Natural Destiny,” *Ibid.*, XI (1950), 374–404.

logical circles on this side of the Atlantic that there was a powerful stirring going on in France and Belgium. In the March issue of *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* in 1950, Fr. Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., gave a brilliant resumé of the positions of the new voices on the meaning of the symbolical sense of the Scriptures,¹¹ and on the eve of the publication of the Encyclical *Humani generis*, John J. Galvin, S.S., the present president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, at the 1950 meeting of the Society exposed the theories of the new theologians and of their opponents on the matter of the development of doctrine.¹²

Rome had not been sleeping. The Holy Father in his audiences with the General Chapter of the Dominican Order in 1946 and with the delegates to the General Congregation of the Jesuits in the same year urged both groups to be wary of innovations in theology which were antagonistic to the constant tradition of the Church.¹³ Early in 1950 there were grapevine communications from all over Europe announcing that action was being taken in Rome against the new movement and that some kind of a syllabus would be published. As a matter of fact, no syllabus has yet been published and what we have is the Encyclical, *Humani generis*.

The Encyclical mentions no names and condemns no individual. Nor did any ecclesiastical censure fall on anyone after the document was published; there was no need of this, because the leaders of the movement belonged to two religious orders, the Society of Jesus and the Order of Friars Preachers. The superiors of these two groups could take any necessary or convenient steps by domestic arrangement without necessitating any pontifical action. Actually some outstanding figures in the movement lost their professorial chairs by the simple device of sending the men to other posts. However, no one was "silenced," nor was any individual book officially condemned by name. That is the external situation which was the context of the Encyclical, but in describing it superficially we have not indicated its inner life, which was the real concern of the papal pronouncement. It is hard to say just what the *nouvelle théologie* is, or rather, was. P. de

¹¹ Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., "On Early Christian Exegesis," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, XI (1950), 78-116.

¹² John J. Galvin, S.S., "A Critical Survey of Modern Conceptions of Doctrinal Development," *Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Meeting* (The Catholic Theological Society of America, 1950), pp. 45-63.

¹³ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, XXXVIII (1946), 385-89; 381-85.

Lubac, who is certainly one of the best-known names connected with the phenomenon, hated the word "new theology," and he insisted that he and his friends were not rejecting an "old" theology, to substitute for it a "new" one.

Like many historical things, the "new theology" was a casually gradual realization of an idea, but the idea was never grasped clearly or totally by any one man, nor did any one man proceed step by step in order to achieve the whole. The idea itself was not a simple thing, but rather a constellation of disparate elements; and different representatives of the "new theology" simply grasped at factors in the constellation without worrying about the totality. Not one of the men associated with the movement ever formulated the constellation, and no two would have committed themselves to such a formulation even if it had been made. What united the theologians was a mood rather than a theory. And the mood was not rebellious to the magisterium of the Church; for the men were utterly devoted to Catholicism. The movement was strictly speaking domestic; there was no tendency toward founding some theory at variance with Catholic tradition or Catholic life. The men involved were ardent Catholics, zealous and eager for the Catholic cause. It would not be too rash to say that not one of the better known spokesmen really held basically a heterodox doctrine in spite of the startling approach or expression manifested in their writings; and, as time went on, they so modified their language as to free their assertions of unorthodox meaning. The situation was probably quite different in younger addicts to the movement who did not possess the learning and intelligence of the leaders.

There was a common interest in what is called kerygmatic theology, the theology that must be taught to non-theologians and must therefore begin with the mood and convictions actually obtaining in the milieu. The scene was the France of the 30's and 40's, when French thought was in confusion, and when the famed French rationalism was being attacked by the French as irrelevant and harmful. It was the time of French existentialism, and the "new" theologians experienced existentialism as a fact, though they were cold to it as a theory. They knew that existentialism was a deep reaction to a kind of thinking which they found prominent in Catholic theology, and which for two reasons they wished to drop. First, they themselves were the sons of

their time, and the prevailing discontent with the tactic of solving problems by reducing the terms of the problems to logical constructions worked in them no less than in the non-Catholics. Second, if theology was necessarily and exclusively a matter of rationalistic formulation, there would be no way to establish contact with the new generation which heartily despised such an approach.

In the "new" theologians, existentialism and Catholic theology met. It would be fruitless to make a detailed historical investigation concerning the bearing of the historical wave of existentialism on the "new theology." The theologians themselves could not tell us just how it influenced them at every step. It would be better to see what effects existentialism must have by inner logic, even though such effects were never intended, never consciously admitted, never clearly present in the writer's thought. P. de Lubac, when dealing with nineteenth-century thought, saw this very well, and his words can be legitimately used about the movement with which his name is associated: ". . . all systems, as shaped and held together by their underlying inspiration, have their own internal logic; and not to see this quite clearly from the outset is to run the risk of going dangerously astray."¹⁴

III

The question is whether we can give a simple definition of existentialism. It would be unjust to demand that it be done here when others have consistently failed. A definition will not contain this thing because it oozes out of any container; it is so liquid. It might not be too misleading a simplification to state that it is a doctrine that takes a bold stand in metaphysics by declaring that the real is only that which exists, and the human existent is a striving to transcend himself in anguish without the possibility of help from any absolute, whether that be God or an order of reality which can be called the ideal or the essential. The striving is blind and is the core of existence. Thinking is an instance of this striving; it is not the illumination of reality but merely another blind manifestation of it. From thought, then, all we can expect is that it show up existence, but it cannot show existence any goal. In spite of the word, "transcendence," the doctrine is a

¹⁴ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, trans. by Edith M. Riley (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), p. vi.

shut-in theory isolating the subject absolutely; and it is in consequence a rare form of the philosophy of immanence. The subject knows himself, and knows himself to be utterly contingent, which in existentialist terminology is called freedom. Everything beyond the subject is known only in its "I" relevance, never in itself.

Such a doctrine is in total opposition to any form of rationalism, be that Thomistic, Cartesian, or Hegelian. In these systems, thought achieves the real in itself because thought is reflective rather than projective. The extreme forms of rationalism will always be an a priori dialecticism, where an attempt is made to confine reality in propositions whose concepts are self-contained and final. To the existentialist this is unreal and horrifying. He does not believe in any reality that is not *vécue*, lived, and a lived reality cannot be any more final than the striving contingent who lives.

Now the existentialism of the twentieth century will not be a simple return to a Heraclitean *panta rhei*. It knows that there is such a thing as science, and especially historical science. However, it insists that history must be ever read anew in the light of existence. A final historical scheme is as senseless as anything final. It, too, is subject to the law of the *vécu*. Metaphysics, as the rationalist conceives it, is impossible. The most it can do is offer an analysis of human existence as something experienced but never as something to be understood by a table of categories supposed to be independent of, anterior to, and normative for, living experience.

There is a corollary to these ideas which changes the nature of human communication. A narrator does not so much tell us what is or was, but what he has experienced in terms of a striving toward transcendence. In consequence, you do not understand him by examining his words in a dictionary, but rather by trying to relive what he lived. His words are not symbols of things but symbols of experience. The living subject is the existent, and only the existent is real. No bars, please, and no essays at fencing in.

Above all, existentialism is voluntaristic. It is not even soberly intellectualistic—an epistemology which does not claim to reach reality in neatly tied parcels, but does insist that thought gives me the objective real on any level it wishes to work on. Existentialism identifies being with striving and the blind will to transcendence explains all.

Existentialism, as exposed here, cannot be reconciled with Catholicism. This is clear to a philosopher like Heidegger who worked out something like a consistent existentialist philosophy; and it is also clear to a man like Jean Paul Sartre, who is a rhetorician and not a philosopher at all (a fact which explains Heidegger's vigorous repudiation of Sartre's existentialism). A Catholic in consequence will not be a thorough existentialist, because that is just impossible. However, Catholics living in an atmosphere where existentialism is the prevailing wind, may try to move along with it as far as a Catholic context will permit. They will try to adopt existentialist postures with the hope of transcending existentialist theory. If this is done consciously or unconsciously, strange things will take place.

To avoid all misunderstanding at the outset, it would be prudent to see how such a philosophy might influence theological thinking. It seems most reasonable to think that many men who might be labeled as followers of the *nouvelle théologie* had little contact with the writings of the existentialist philosophers. It would not be amazing to find that some had never read anything of Heidegger, Jaspers, or Sartre. Yet they would still be influenced by existentialism as a spirit, even though they were singularly free of Existentialism, the academic philosophy. In a determined place in a determined time, a common mood is produced by the impact of common problems which cannot be solved by the kind of thinking obtaining up to that time. The inadequacy of the old categories will be recognized, or at least supposed, by all kinds of thinkers in the community. The general air and the general discontent will work in different fields but in accord with a vague pattern spontaneously followed by all thinkers in the area. It would be grotesque to say that one writer was borrowing from the other; they are both simply manifesting a *Zeitgeist*. It will be easiest to express the metaphysics, methodology, and epistemology of the moment by some contemporaneous philosophic synthesis which will be given a name by current historians of philosophy. This philosophic tag can be accepted by the general historian as a key to the thinking of the epoch, though the concrete philosophy as crystallized in an academic system will not have too much bearing on the work of those who are not engaged in philosophy. The academic thing, the concrete philosophic scheme, and other kinds of thinking do not flow one from the other. There is no

vertical dependence. There is only horizontal relationship, because both products of thought are born of the same mood, which mood is named after the philosophy that it produced. Consequently, if we find a key to the understanding of the "new theology" in existentialism, let it not be supposed that a sweeping simplification has been made whereby one would seem to assert that someone like Sartre is the father of the "new theology." At best he would be a barely recognized distant cousin. He like others was thinking according to a line which can be called existentialist, though non-Sartreans would properly resent being called existentialists, even though they were inevitably enmeshed in existentialist preoccupations of thought.

A Catholic with existentialist preoccupations will find the consideration of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, a living, human thing, very congenial. On the contrary, a legalistic consideration of the Church as an abstractly fixed juridical institution will be annoying. It looks too much like "fencing in." The presentation of the act of faith at the close of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth was an attempt to make the act of faith simultaneously a rational assent imperated by logic, and a graced, free assent. This obviously paints a very confusing picture. A theologian in an existentialist climate will try boldly to drop out the rationalistic element in the act, thus freeing the problem of its most embarrassing factor. To meet the demands of Catholic dogma, which insists that a certain knowledge of God on the natural plane as well as a humanly certain recognition of the historical fact of divine revelation must precede the act of faith, different solutions will be proposed. The most radical is the solution formerly suggested by Rousselot, namely, that the grace of faith, free and contingent, has a double function; one looks backward, so that the sufficiency of the evidence for God's appearance in history is guaranteed, and the other looks forward, so that the act of faith can be placed. A consequence of such a doctrine is that it is admitted that the historical arguments proposed as rational proof for the fact of revelation are valid objectively, but the admission is modified by the assertion that no human subject would be convinced by them alone. His intelligence must be elevated by free grace, and with a higher kind of intellectual assent he will then see the divine event toward which the arguments point.

The result of such a doctrine will be a coldness toward the apologetic developed by the theologians of the last century. In its place a new apologetic will be constructed so that the Church will be presented as admirably adapted to meet the anxiety which is the overwhelming envelope of human life. There will be no polemic; there will be no controversy; there will be no attempt at logical debate. Apologetics will be understood realistically as a preparation of the future convert for grace through acts of humble confession of misery and confidence in salvation. He is led to a longing for Catholicism rather than to a conviction that Catholic faith is a rationally valid and necessary act. Holiness and a deep God-seeking will be considered as surer roads to conversion than historical research or philosophical disputation.

For the understanding of faith itself a new approach will be taken. The attempt to cram so vital an experience as revelation into verbal formulas will be deprecated. The verbal expression of revelation, the proposition, holds a fuller truth than is conveyed by words, and this fuller truth will be achieved by vital intuitions tangled up with the existentialist striving for transcendence. A Catholic theologian, no matter what be the influence of the existentialist climate on him, will never go as far as Karl Barth, who rejects the notion of propositional revelation; but, if existentialism has some kind of hold on him, he will insist that the proposition does not give adequate expression to revelation. There will be an inclination to consider the proposition and the concepts as symbolic representations of a great truth which must be *vécue* rather than reduced to logical categories. In Scripture, therefore, the divine message is given through the mystical sense more than in any other way. This persuasion will provoke an enthusiastic return to the Fathers of the Church in order to understand their development of the doctrine of mystical or symbolic interpretation of the Scriptures.

Now this is by no means the tactic of the Modernists of fifty years ago. A Catholic theologian will not deny that there is narrational truth in the propositions of the Sacred Books, but he can consider this as less important than the divine non-historical truth that is being presented by an event understood as symbol. A theologian so inclined would not expect positive exactitude in the narration of a prophet; for he is only interested in the event as symbolic. The prophet, of course, did narrate; this the Catholic theologian will admit against the

Modernists who opined that the sacred writers, consciously or unconsciously, only invented. Existentialist thinking, however, would be prone to make of narration a secondary concern, not to be scrutinized for detail. The first three chapters of Genesis, therefore, offer no difficulty to the believer who accepts the current doctrine of the evolution of man. The sacred writer was only communicating the symbolic or mystical aspects of the origin of man. His narration is not so much concerned with the details of the historical event but rather with the existentialist meaning of creation. In like manner, if Scripture mentions angels, this does not mean that there are beings of an order of being higher than man, but only that God's action on man breaks through from a higher order, and this breaking through is symbolically presented under the guise of an angel.

An existentialist theologian—and let it be said once and for all that any Catholic would bridle at being called such a name—would have the same difficulty with the Church's dogmas that he has with the affirmations of Scripture. If the Scriptures give the impression of being too narrative, the Church's dogmas give the impression of too much philosophic rationalism. However, just as Scripture is not primarily concerned with narration, so the Church is not primarily concerned with philosophizing. She communicates divine revelation and she must communicate it with the clarity necessary for it to be rightly understood. Hence she uses philosophical terminology and the philosophical framework of the time to express herself. This does not mean that she subscribes to such a philosophy nor that she teaches it. In fact, in order to realize her function of communicating revelation effectively, it will be constantly necessary to reformulate the perennial dogmas. Such reformulation is not only licit but necessary; for otherwise the people of a given age that rejects the philosophy of the past will not be able to understand the revelation. The task of reformulation falls to the theologians primarily, nor must they wait for the official magisterium to do so.

Yet reformulation is a dangerous task, because we must be sure that our new formula actually carries with it the truth expressed in the old. Hence the theologian must always go back into the theology of other times, especially into the rich and varied theologies of the Fathers, in order to see how the same truth is expressed from different philosophical points of view. By comparing formulas the theologian

will find out what is mere temporal terminology and what is the true and full content of dogma. With this task done, he will express the truth equivalently in the philosophical scheme congenial to his time. In this way the Church's teaching is always contemporaneous and vital. This, of course, means that present formulas are to be understood by the past, whereas current theologians understand the past by the present.

In such an attitude great stress is laid on certain changing aspects of the reality of the Church, and on the temporal modalities in her manner of speaking, her manner of praying, her manner of dealing with individual members, and with the world. Such an attitude does not imply that there is any substantial change. The Church always teaches the same, but this identity permits and demands the use of passing modes arising from the exigencies of history. The substance of the Church's being does not vary; for it is preserved and evolved by the living dynamism of the Holy Spirit. This substance, however, is known only in as far as under free grace it is *vécue*.

Another postulate inherent in this attitude is the denial that the Church has a philosophy which she has made her own. From an existentialist outlook, she can have none and she makes none, but rather uses any philosophy at hand in order to communicate her divine message. There is no necessity to adhere to Scholasticism which has been the philosophical vehicle in use for some time, but not always. In fact, it is most desirable to drop the Scholastic framework because it is outmoded and in the present it is only an obstacle to the acceptance and understanding of divine revelation. Many Scholastic formulas must be dropped, for they are tinged with views and suppositions rejected by thinking men today.

However, in the light of existentialist thinking dogma and Scripture would not be the important things in Catholicism. The actual religious strivings of the Catholics and the behavior resulting therefrom constitute the real Catholic Church of any moment. This is existential Catholicism. It is, of course, supernatural; but that term must not be understood as if there were two discontinuous levels of reality. All human life is supernatural in the sense that God always breaks into it, just as He did spectacularly in the Incarnation, which is only the high point of this breaking through. In some sense it is impossible for man to be without this constant visitation of God, who alone can be

man's satisfaction, to be achieved in the final act of transcendence wherein man will enter into the closest union with God, the union which will end isolation and loneliness, the union that is called the beatific vision.

One of the most winsome corollaries of such a doctrine is the exhilarating conclusion that the individual Catholic as well as the Church as a whole is living constantly in a God-permeated existence. This does not mean a vague, pantheistic divine pervasion but life in Christ, God incarnate. An existentialist theology will be Christocentric, for Christ's life was a human life. It will also underline the inadequacy of naturalistic assuagings of anxiety and it will emphasize the supernatural vision, impulse, and guidance in Catholic life.

But this very divinization of Catholic life whereby the individual intimately shares the divine reality and free action of God residing in the Church carries with it a dangerous possibility. The Catholic can become so inward in his belief and piety, can so assimilate the teachings of the magisterium and the directions of the regimen, that he really nullifies both, because he understands them not as they were meant but in terms of his own inner life. Catholic inwardness can easily separate the Catholic from the Church's external authority, doctrinal and jurisdictional. Theologians carried away by such a vision, especially if they be more distinguished by uncritical enthusiasm than by humble docility, will simply ignore all directives from authority which are not compatible with their persuasions. They will have two motives: first, they will implicitly recognize that the people actually in authority do not share their views. This recognition will engender the spontaneous rationalization that the authorities are ignorant though legitimate bearers of the keys of the Kingdom. They can still be accepted by the simple device of interpreting their edicts in the light of an existentialist theology. Second, they will reflect that all authority in human society is necessarily conservative, reluctant to change. This inevitable shortcoming of authority will have to be patiently born by the Catholic but it will not really perturb him. The divinely guided authorities will eventually come around to his point of view, which he has gained though inner resonance with the Spirit who directs all Catholic life.

Such a theory, obviously never expressed in so many words, makes the position of those in authority somewhat uncomfortable; for their authority is revered and never denied, but their instructions will not

be obeyed. In the eternal question, how can external authority and inner light be reconciled, an existentialist movement tends to subject authority to the inner light, which is just as pernicious as to cancel out inner light in favor of authority. Neither of these two positions is a reconciliation but rather the suppression of one of the factors that must enter into the reconciliation.

If existentialism will primarily affect a man's vision of Catholic life and a theologian's methodology, it will none the less affect in the second place the content of Catholic teaching. One instance will be the existentialist-minded theologian's attitude to the problem of God and human freedom. God's foreknowledge of free future acts is a doctrine quite repugnant to existentialist principles, because existentialism is an exaggerated affirmation of the absolute contingency of things and events. This contingency is ambiguously called freedom; for freedom can actually exist simultaneously with necessity, as St. Augustine frequently pointed out. If, however, utter contingency is made the heart of freedom, it follows that free acts are totally contingent and free from all necessity. There cannot, therefore, be a determining *vis a tergo* behind free acts and free events. They cannot be the reflections of an eternal necessary plan; for they cannot be reflected before they exist. If a theologian thus conceives human liberty, he must deny that God has a foreknowledge of man's free future acts. The existentialist argument is so simple. The being of a free act arises out of undetermined contingency, and before it is, it has no being at all. Hence it simply cannot be known before its existence.

If such argumentation be accepted, it will lead to consequences that no Catholic can admit. If being is limited to physical existence, then there can be no all-wise creation. St. Thomas put it clearly when he said that creation, since it was an intelligent action of God, necessarily supposes that God had a preview of a plan in whose similitude this world is made.¹⁵ Likewise, an existentialist conception of liberty cancels out the Catholic dogma of predestination which teaches that God determines those who are to be saved.

IV

There can be no doubt that when existentialism meets Catholic doctrine there will be a "new" theology. This will not escape the vision

¹⁵ *Summa Theologica*, I, q.15, a.1.

of those involved in the encounter. However, if they be zealous apostles of Catholicism, their zeal may make them willing to risk the dangers of an existentialist reconstruction in order to reach more effectively the human beings engulfed in an existentialist environment. They will justify their risk on the principle that the apostolate demands an irenic approach to the neighbor. The philosophic wall that Catholics erect around themselves only keeps non-Catholics out of the Church. Let it, therefore, come down. Let us speak the language of our time. Catholicism is urgently apostolic, and the apostle must speak before the altar of the unknown God on the pagan heights of the Areopagus. We must go in though the neighbor's door, if we wish him to come out our own.

Such a justification for running the risk of putting new wine in old bottles is not altogether unreasonable. On the other hand, it is not altogether valid. Yet it is better than the action of others who proceed without having their eyes open. In all philosophies there are positions which deal with problems faced by other philosophies. The doctrines of the different philosophies may be superficially similar. In existentialism there are affirmations which are also made in perennial Christian philosophy, but the total structures and the dynamisms are divergent. Yet by reason of certain common insistences in two philosophies, it is possible that the circumambient pressure of a popular philosophy will induce the thinker to find it in his own, and quite different, philosophy. This man in good faith will propose as genuine propositions of an accepted philosophy theses that are unwittingly derived from an alien vision. Such a man will think that he is being true to his own system even when he is proposing doctrines quite at variance with it. He is unwittingly destroying in an attempted process of reconstruction.

All these factors enter into the background of the Encyclical, *Humani generis*. Without taking them into account, the document will not be properly understood. As a final observation it will not be irrelevant to remind all that the example of the pontifical pronouncement is worth following. No individuals are to be attacked. No one is to be accused of having taught what by inner dynamism would have been the final and logical upshot of so much thinking in the movement. The men engaged in it were and are sterling Catholics. The best proof of it is that not one has left the Church and not one has relinquished his Catholic mission of working on in theology, the science of the real as illuminated by faith.