

MATTHIAS JOSEPH SCHEEBEN AND THE REVIVAL OF THEOLOGY

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TWENTY years ago the statement was made that Scheeben possessed an international reputation in Catholic circles equalled by no other speculative theologian who has written in the German language.¹ That assertion, unchallenged when uttered, is truer today than in 1926.

Undoubtedly, the commemorative celebrations which in 1935 marked the hundredth anniversary of Scheeben's birth gave a strong impetus to a renewed study and awareness of the distinguished theologian. Scholars of note vied with one another in extolling his merits and in focusing attention upon his contributions to the present flourishing condition of the sacred sciences. Martin Grabmann affirms outright that Scheeben is the greatest dogmatic theologian of the nineteenth century.² He relates that as a student and later as a young professor of theology he made constant use of St. Thomas and Scheeben, and adds: "In my lectures on dogmatic theology Scheeben has remained my favorite among modern theologians."³ Karl Feckes agrees that Scheeben is one of the most illustrious theologians of the present era, and observes that the title, "the greatest Mariologist of our time," has frequently been conferred on him. Feckes also points out that among Scheeben's achievements is his rediscovery of the Greek Fathers.⁴

Such testimonies of esteem are not confined to the anniversary essays. Granderath, who spiritedly opposed some of Scheeben's

¹ K. Eschweiler, *Die zwei Wege der neueren Theologie* (Augsburg: Benno Filser, 1926), p. 25.

² M. Grabmann, "Matthias Joseph Scheebens Auffassung vom Wesen und Wert der theologischen Wissenschaft," in *Matthias Joseph Scheeben, der Erneuerer katholischer Glaubenswissenschaft* (Beiträge von Karl Feckes, Martin Grabmann, Franz Xaver Münch, Wilhelm Pingsmann, Michael Schmaus; Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1935), p. 58. This work will be cited throughout the present article simply as *Erneuerer*.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴ K. Feckes, "Die Stellung der Gottesmutter Maria in der Theologie Matthias Joseph Scheebens," *Erneuerer*, p. 112.

ideas, acknowledged his competent scholarship and outstanding services to theology.⁵ Likewise during Scheeben's lifetime, Dupont referred to him as a theologian of prodigious learning, of sure and profound judgment, of eminently speculative gifts.⁶ A standard history of theology emphasized his extraordinary profundity, originality, and wide erudition.⁷ In a review of the third edition of Scheeben's *Die Mysterien des Christentums*, the Belgian scholar, R. M. Martin, wrote that the author was deeply versed in patristic as well as Scholastic theology, and that he was a thinker of the first order, with an exceptional genius for speculation. He continues:

During his scientific activity over a period of thirty years Scheeben was the champion of the supernatural in Germany, the indefatigable defender of traditional doctrines against the rationalistic interpretations of Günther and his school, and played an important part in the resurgence of Scholastic studies in his native land. His books, *Natur und Gnade*, *Die Mysterien des Christentums*, and the *Handbuch der Dogmatik* constitute a theological monument *aere perennius*.⁸

Hurter describes Scheeben as a tireless worker endowed with marvelous talent and says that he can rightly be regarded as a pillar and an unflagging apologist of the Church.⁹ In the judgment of Eschweiler, "the most precious flower of the spring of Neo-Scholasticism grew out of the Rhineland. It is as though the Catholic soul of the Rhineland wished at one stroke to form and express speculatively in Scheeben what it had actually been living for a thousand years."¹⁰ A similar view of Scheeben is put forward by Brosch: "Like a brilliantly-hued spring blossom he grows above all the great theologians of his century. The ascent from the icy regions of rationalism, begun with Möhler, is at length reached with Scheeben."¹¹

Appreciations of Scheeben show no signs of abating as we draw

⁵ T. Granderath, "Zur Controverse über den Formalgrund der Gotteskindschaft," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, VII (1883), 491.

⁶ A. Dupont, "La théologie catholique en Allemagne," *Revue des sciences ecclésiastiques*, XXXVII (1878), 67.

⁷ J. Bellamy, *La théologie catholique au XIX^e siècle* (2d ed.; Paris: Beauchesne, 1904), p. 169.

⁸ R. M. Martin, *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, VI (1912), 830.

⁹ *Nomenclator Literarius*, V, 1511, 1513.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹¹ H. J. Brosch, "Das Werden des jungen M. J. Scheeben," *Stimmen der Zeit*, CXXIII (1932), 395.

closer to our own day. He is described as the most richly gifted historical and speculative theologian of Neo-Scholasticism,¹² as the best theologian of modern times, and as a pioneer of the liturgical movement.¹³ An American editor states that Scheeben is "the foremost theologian of the nineteenth century, whose writings did more than those of any one else to prepare the dogmatic foundations for the liturgical movement. Within the last score of years there has been a remarkable growth of what only can be called a Scheeben cult."¹⁴ Finally, Grabmann repeats and, as it were, brings up to date the evaluation he had expressed on at least three previous occasions: Scheeben is the greatest dogmatic theologian of the nineteenth century "and indeed of recent times."¹⁵

Such are a few of the judgments concerning the theological excellence of Scheeben. They could readily be multiplied. They represent the considered opinions of scholars of many nations. In an address to the students of the German College in Rome, Pius XI did not hesitate to recommend Scheeben, that "man of genius," as a worthy model for all students of theology. "He was a model of theology, and a model of spirited defense of the Church, the Holy See, and the Pope. Above all, he was a model of saintly Christian life."¹⁶

The theological works of Scheeben house many a treasure whose very existence is scarcely suspected outside of his own country. The purpose of this article is to call attention to the man and his achievement, in the hope that American theologians may be induced to draw more fully upon his supernatural knowledge and wisdom, to their own profit and that of their students and readers.

THE SITUATION

Throughout Europe, but especially in Germany, Catholic theology had reached its nadir at the end of the eighteenth, and the beginning

¹² Brosch, "Scheeben," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, IX, 225. This volume appeared in 1937.

¹³ A. Kerkvoorde, "Le mystère d'iniquité d'après Scheeben," *La vie spirituelle*, LVI (1938), 145.

¹⁴ G. Diekmann, *Orate Fratres*, XVII (1942-1943), 13, note 1.

¹⁵ M. Grabmann, "Theological Synthesis," in W. Meyer and others, *The Pastoral Care of Souls* (St. Louis: Herder, 1944), p. 97.

¹⁶ Reported in *L'Osservatore Romano* (Mar. 11-12, 1935).

of the nineteenth century. Under Kant, the philosopher of Protestantism, the despair of human nature inaugurated by Luther grew into a despair of human reason. Hoping to save religion by rescuing it from the clutches of science and philosophy, Kant succeeded in laying the intellectual foundation for opposition to all dogma. Despair of nature was matched by the despair of supernature which is the essence of rationalism.

The intellectual leadership of Germany had passed to the Protestant stronghold in the North. Catholicism did not escape its influence. Rationalism, idealism, sentimental moralism, and Protestant theology penetrated deeply into Catholic thought.

Catholic theology was ill prepared to meet the grim onslaughts of the Enlightenment. Scholastic philosophy, formerly so serviceable as the basis of theological speculation, lacked the lusty vigor it had possessed during the Middle Ages. It had too little contact with the new physical sciences and the modern philosophies they fostered. It had grown sick by endeavoring to assimilate indigestible blocks of the philosophies of Descartes, Leibnitz, and Wolff. Further, theology did not draw sufficiently upon the patristic sources which were being made increasingly available. Added to all this, the gloomy conviction was current that Scholastic methods were outworn and powerless to halt the infiltration of rationalism and secularism.

Those who still cherished the ancient Scholastic theology had little interest in the new intellectual pursuits which attracted the men of their time. They were indifferent or bewildered when challenged by the new sciences. They refused to give up their love for the interplay of ideas that had slight connection with life and reality.

Eventually the break with medieval theology was almost complete. The great works of the Golden Age were no longer read. The true nature of Scholasticism was known to few. The distinction between what was perennially valuable in Scholasticism and the trivialities or aberrations of eighteenth-century Scholastics was obscured.

Deprived of the vitality inherent in Scholasticism, theology tended to become a purely positive science, content with an exposition of the scriptural and patristic foundations of dogma. But many thinkers of philosophical temperament refused to renounce speculative culti-

vation of theology and endeavored to press German philosophy, first that of Leibnitz, Wolff, and Kant, later that of the idealists, into the service of revealed truth. After attempts that reached deep into the nineteenth century, they were forced with bitter disappointment to the conclusion that the philosophies of the Enlightenment were powerless to promote an understanding of the supernatural, which must ever remain the heart and life of Catholic truth, and hence were without value for dogmatic theology. Indeed, a theology built up with the aid of such philosophies had inevitably to lead to a corruption of the deposit of revelation.

In point of fact, a number of Catholic theologians went so far as to question the supernatural character of revealed dogmas. They were prepared to acknowledge the supernatural origins of revelation and the inspiration of the Scriptures. But they saw nothing in the body of revelation that was not ultimately comprehensible by reason and philosophy.

Particularly the mysteries of Christianity, the most precious jewels of God's revelation, were looked upon askance as insults to human dignity. Was there not something dishonorable in these pretended mysteries, which could not bear investigation and had to lurk in hiding, safe from the critical acumen of human reason? The only way to save theology from becoming a vaguely religious moralism and preserve it as a science would be to strip it of its aura of mystery.

Hence, those theologians who could not be satisfied with a simple positive exposition proposed to cultivate a speculative theology in line with the fashionable philosophies of the age. Since the bridges leading back to Scholasticism had been destroyed, Catholic theologians, sincere in their desire for a Catholic restoration, sifted German philosophy for elements that might prove usable for a speculative elaboration and synthesis of Catholic teaching. Many discerned in the system of Schelling an approach to the Catholic view of the world. Others hoped that with the sentimental philosophy of Jacobi and the dialectic of Hegel they could do what Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas had done with Aristotle. Their brave attempt was fore-ordained to failure. The philosophies of the Enlightenment were unreal, hence unnatural, hence incapable of being subordinated to

the supernatural. The abortive endeavors of Hermes and Günther are but more striking instances illustrating the impossibility of basing a revival of theology on nineteenth century thought.

Faced with such disasters, theologians at length perceived that they would have to abandon all plans to utilize the new German philosophies. Their misgivings were confirmed by repeated ecclesiastical pronouncements which demanded a study of the past. They decided to turn back to medieval Scholasticism, to the ages in which the faith and theology had flourished so gloriously. Thus was inaugurated the fruitful rediscovery of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Under Adam Möhler, Joseph Kuhn, and Heinrich Klee, the great men of the Tübingen school, theology was liberated from Schelling's influence, and foundations were laid upon which their successors could reconstruct theology. After many gropings, heartbreaking failures, and partial triumphs, Neo-Scholasticism was firmly established in Germany by Joseph Kleutgen, who in his *Theologie der Vorzeit* restored the idea and value of the supernatural to the consciousness of his country's theologians and thus prepared the way for the lifework of his greatest disciple.

While in Germany the competence of reason in the supernatural domain was exaggerated, efforts undertaken in France and Italy to revive the theological sciences veered toward the opposite extreme of traditionalism and ontologism. These tendencies, however, were soon stifled by the resurgent Scholasticism, which insisted on reasoned motives and foundations of faith, and roundly rejected attempts to confound the logical and ontological orders. In Spain, continuity with Scholasticism had never been completely severed. In Italy, particularly in Rome, the Dominicans had remained loyal to the great Thomistic traditions of their Order. In the Eternal City, too, Scholastic thought was strongly fostered by the reestablished Society of Jesus, especially by Liberatore and Taparelli.

Up and down Europe Catholic scholars were reaching back to the philosophical and theological resources of Scholasticism. Encouraged by papal exhortations and by ecclesiastical condemnations of the errors of the times, Neo-Scholasticism labored with mounting success to rescue Catholic theology.

At the time theologians were still cautiously feeling their way and

occasionally stumbling along alien paths in search of their ancient heritage, Matthias Joseph Scheeben, who would utterly drive out of theology the last dreary remnants of rationalism, was pursuing the hidden life of a student at the German College in Rome. His life and writings fall within the youth of the awakening giant that was Neo-Scholasticism.

LIFE AND WORKS

If adventure consists in swift movement from place to place, in a succession of escapes, pursuits, cavortings with death, and physical struggles, the history of Matthias Joseph Scheeben was prosaic enough. To outward appearance his life was like that of thousands of other ecclesiastics. He attended school in his native province; he studied philosophy and theology and was ordained a priest in Rome; he returned to Germany, and taught and wrote theology for the rest of his days.

But if the real life of man as such is the life of the spirit and the mind, his career was packed with activity, thrill, and triumph. Those who think of the word "dull" in connection with the experiences of a first-rate intellect wholly absorbed in congenial study and authorship, are incapable of appreciating excitement that is truly human. Of his highest adventures nothing shall be recounted here; but there is abundant evidence that he was a mystic.

Scheeben was born March 1, 1835, in Meckenheim near Bonn. He made his elementary studies in Münsterfeld and his secondary studies in Cologne. On the basis of his excellent scholastic record he was sent to Rome in 1852, at the age of seventeen. For the next seven years he attended lectures in philosophy and theology at the Gregorian University, as a resident in the German College.¹⁷

In Rome at that time a great intellectual renaissance was in the

¹⁷ The following are the principal sources for the biography of Scheeben: J. Hertgens, *Professor Dr. M. J. Scheeben* (Paderborn, 1892); "Zur Erinnerung an Scheeben," *Der Katholik*, (1888, II), pp. 112-32; Hurter, *op. cit.*, V, 1511-14; H. J. Brosch, "Das Werden des jungen M. J. Scheeben," *Stimmen der Zeit*, CXXIII (1932), 395-407; M. Grabmann, "Scheeben's theologisches Lebenswerk," Introduction to *Natur und Gnade* (2d ed.; München, 1935), pp. 1-29; M. Grabmann, *Geschichte der katholischen Theologie* (Freiburg i. B., 1933), pp. 231, 341; K. Eschweiler, *op. cit.* In 1939, J. Höfer announced that he was writing a full-length biography of Scheeben, but I have been unable to learn any further details of this project.

making. Taparelli and Liberatore, then teaching at the Gregorian, were the champions of Italian Neo-Scholasticism. Other influential professors were Secchi, Tongiorgi, Perrone, and Ballerini. Above all, mention must be made of Kleutgen, then living in the Eternal City; the first two volumes of his *Theologie der Vorzeit* accompanied young Scheeben at his initiation into the sacred sciences.

Passaglia and Schrader were Scheeben's regular professors during the first two years of his theological course; the rest of his studies were mainly under the direction of Cerciá and Franzelin. The latter must have had a special influence on Scheeben; he lived at the German College as its prefect of studies and presided at the weekly disputations conducted there. With his wealth of patristic erudition, he undoubtedly had a large share in cultivating Scheeben's love for the Fathers.

The scientific bent of the German College was decidedly in the direction of tradition. The library possessed good editions of the Fathers and all the great authors of medieval Scholasticism. Also the works of later Scholastics were on the shelves. During his term as librarian, Scheeben had excellent opportunities to become acquainted with the new books issued by the prominent theologians of the restoration in Germany. With his native largeness of mind, he early learned to amalgamate his reverence for the past with keen awareness of the contributions of contemporary scholars.

The young theologian was singularly fortunate in his teachers, who were among the militant pioneers of the Neo-Scholastic movement. From his professors he received a sound introduction to the true genius of Christianity. To the incentives received in class, he added his own penchant for independent speculation and did much private reading and investigation. If the past was to be revived, he felt, then let it be not only the past of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but the past of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries; the past not only of the West, but of the great Fathers of the East, the past of those early centuries when Christian life and thought were not yet confined to neat, man-made channels of abstract formulae, but flowed in their original freshness.

For him, however, the thoughts of the ancients were never the end,

but were the guideposts to the living reality of the faith. He summoned forth the great spirits of the past not only to associate with them on terms of intimacy or merely out of curiosity to learn what they had said. He wished to make their knowledge his own, so that by adding their vision to his he might be enabled to see farther, and by building upon the foundations they had laid he might erect a loftier edifice.

Under the stimulation of such minds, the living and the dead (who were even more vividly present to his spirit than his own contemporaries), the leading idea of his life—the idea of the supernatural order—began to dominate the young student, and his ambition crystallized: to make the drab naturalistic world glow again in the light and beauty of grace, to bring back to the consciousness of men the glorious destiny of our conformation to God.

Scheeben was ordained on December 18, 1858, in Rome, by Cardinal Patrizi. "The following summer he returned to Germany, armed with the doctorate in both philosophy and theology. For a year he acted as rector of the conventual church of the Salvatorian Sisters in Münster-eifel and also taught religion in the school the nuns conducted for young women. In 1860, he was appointed professor of theology at the archiepiscopal seminary of Cologne. The uninterrupted career of scholarship which he now began, at the age of twenty-five, is all the more surprising in view of his teaching duties: his weekly schedule included five classes in dogmatic theology, and four in moral.

His first publication, brought out in 1860, *Marienblüten aus dem Garten der heiligen Väter und christlichen Dichter*, was the fruit of his devotion to our Lady. In this same year he published an article in *Der Katholik* which presaged his entire theological productivity: "Die Lehre von dem Uebernatürlichen in ihrer Bedeutung für christliche Wissenschaft und christliches Leben."

The following year, appeared *Natur und Gnade*, the first of his major books, which he wrote at the age of twenty-six. He describes the supernatural as a participation in God's nature: the supernatural implies a state of being, life, and knowledge, resembling that of God. This volume, which is highly original in concept and method, immediately ranked Scheeben among the leaders of speculative theology.

To supply a patristic foundation for this work, Scheeben published, in 1862, a new edition of *Quid est homo*, by Antonius Casinius, S.J.,¹⁸ to which he added an introduction and notes. In his desire to spread a knowledge of the supernatural, he wrote *Die Herrlichkeiten der göttlichen Gnade* that same year. This is a free adaptation and elaboration of *Aprecio y estima de la divina gracia*, by Eusebius Nieremberg, a Spanish Jesuit descended from German ancestors. Scheeben completely reworked the doctrine and added so much of his own, especially the dogmatic groundwork, that the book is rightly regarded as his. The work is popular in scope and became enormously successful. By 1933 it had reached fifteen editions. An English translation, *The Glories of Divine Grace*, appeared during Scheeben's lifetime and has gone through several reprintings.

A series of articles that had been running in *Der Katholik* during 1861 and 1862 served as the skeleton of what was to become Scheeben's most famous book, *Die Mysterien des Christentums*, first published in 1865.

This volume, a monument both to Scheeben's theological intuition and to his incredible labor, presents a conception of Christian truth as a whole that alone would admit the author to the company of the world's foremost theologians. In a measure of success achieved, perhaps, by no other theological work, it penetrates into the interrelations, the laws, the organism, and the consequences of the great mysteries of Christianity. With consummate skill the author displays in a masterly synthesis the richness and variety of the Christian revelations as a unified system of truths flowing from the mystery of the Trinity. The book is a striking proof that a high degree of initiative and of speculative power can be developed on the basis of tradition and within the framework of ecclesiastical teaching. "That in the great mysteries and dogmas of Christianity dwell value and power for life, anyone whose soul has been warmed by a study of this incomparable book can bear joyful witness."¹⁹ To do justice to the work, the reader must master it as a whole rather than trace out and

¹⁸ Not St. Peter Canisius, as is erroneously stated in *DTC*, XIV, 1271.

¹⁹ M. Grabmann, Introduction to *Natur und Gnade* (2d ed.; München, 1935), p. 12. The editor of *Orate Fratres* stated in a personal letter to me: "The *Mysterien* have brought dogma to life for me more than any other book I've ever read."

follow Scheeben's personal theories in disputed questions; even the author's personal views have meaning only in their function as parts of the whole. There is no other book quite like this in the vast history of Christian literature. Its unique character has been signaled by discerning critics since its first appearance. J. B. Heinrich, in a review of the first edition, points out that the work undertakes "to unfold in all their height and depth, length and breadth, the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in the dogmas, to illustrate them with a great variety of analogies, and to draw from them all the conclusions within the reach of our minds."²⁰ A. M. Weiss, O.P., called the *Mysterien* "the most original, profound, and brilliant work which recent theology has produced."²¹ According to Rademacher, the book is one of the most noteworthy achievements of Scheeben's genius and of modern speculative theology in general. It is Scheeben's special merit, he contends, to have displayed the inner coherence of the mysteries, and to have investigated and illuminated them to their uttermost depths, "often, it could seem, to the extreme limit of keenness of vision possible to the human mind. Many of its sections, particularly those dealing with the Trinity, will for a long time to come represent the frontiers beyond which the power of theological thought will not be able to penetrate."²²

In reviewing the third edition, Martin calls the volume "une oeuvre magistrale," "un modèle de hautes études théologiques spéculatives," "vaste et puissante synthèse des mystères du christianisme."²³ Grabmann refers to it as "a heroic monument of speculative theology" which "is no mere copy of the medieval summas and syntheses, but a masterpiece of independent creative genius."²⁴ Years later he stated that the book is an admirable work of dogmatic synthesis, and that it is justly reckoned among the most notable contributions to the theological literature of all ages.²⁵ "This immortal, monumental

²⁰ *Der Katholik* (1866, II), p. 367 f.

²¹ A. M. Weiss, *Benjamin Herder* (Freiburg, 1879), p. 97 f.; quoted with approval by Grabmann in *Erneuerer*, p. 60.

²² A. Rademacher, Foreword to *Mysterien*, (3d ed.; Freiburg i. B.: Herder, 1912), p. xvi.

²³ *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, VI (1912), 830 f.

²⁴ Introduction to *Natur und Gnade*, p. 11.

²⁵ M. Grabmann, "Theological Synthesis," *op. cit.*, p. 97.

masterpiece"²⁶ "is of extraordinary value to the universal Church. In this book flow together a most ample erudition in the sacred sciences and a spirit aflame with high vision. The clarity of the School, supreme piety, and a characteristic energy of thought and perception concur in the work, and make it scarcely surpassable."²⁷ In Brosch's opinion the *Mysterien*, Scheeben's "most original book," realizes all the beauty, depth, and boldness of the consuming idea of his youth. Scheeben "sees ancient truths in a new light. It appears as though the spirit of the Greek and Latin Fathers lives anew in him, and as though changeless Scholasticism had won a new form."²⁸

In addition to his theological treatises, Scheeben took delight in tracing out the operations of grace in the lives of the saints. A series of short ascetical and hagiographical studies appeared in 1867 in his *Die Heiligkeit der Kirche im 19. Jahrhundert*, and several articles in *Der Katholik* are the product of his pious meditations amid the grind of his scholarly researches. Around this time he wrote several introductions to biographies of saintly persons.

He was also active, throughout his teaching career, in an editorial capacity. At the beginning of his sojourn in Cologne, he was appointed director of the *Katholischer Volksfreund*, a magazine devoted to the edification of the faithful. In his zeal to promote the sanctification of his fellow-priests he founded the periodical, *Kölner Pastoralblatt*, and edited it up to his death. His concern for the spiritual well-being of the faithful is further illustrated by his new edition of the popular *Goffine Handpostille*.

In the controversies incited by the decrees of the Vatican Council, he defended the teaching of the Church in a large number of articles and brochures. At this time he accepted the editorship of yet another periodical, *Das ökumenische Konzil von 1869*, of which two volumes of some 600 pages were issued annually. After four volumes it was continued under the title, *Periodische Blätter zur wissenschaftlichen Besprechung der religiösen Fragen der Gegenwart*. Scheeben himself

²⁶ M. Schmaus, "Die Stellung M. J. Scheebens in der Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts," *Erneuerer*, p. 38.

²⁷ F. König, "De Matth. Jos. Scheeben," in *Matthias Joseph Scheeben 1835-1935* (Romae: Collegium Germanicum Hungaricum, 1935), p. 17.

²⁸ Brosch, "Das Werden des jungen M. J. Scheeben," *Stimmen der Zeit*, CXXIII (1932), 404.

wrote practically all of the first four volumes and a large part of the remaining ten. In the titanic struggle between Catholicism and Liberalism occasioned by the Syllabus of Pius IX and the Vatican Council, Scheeben's periodical writings were marked by a theological profundity that has not been matched subsequently in Catholic scholarship.²⁹

Incredible as it may seem, in the midst of this feverish activity Scheeben was contemplating yet another project which was to take form in the greatest of his works. For many years there had been ripening in his mind the plan of gathering together the results of his theological investigations and reflections in a vast synthesis. The incentive for actually beginning the work was supplied when Benjamin Herder, an intimate friend of Scheeben's, suggested that he write the volumes on dogmatic theology for the Herder "Theologische Bibliothek." The first tome of Scheeben's *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, the most profound and valuable treatise on dogmatic theology in the German language,³⁰ was published in 1873. The second followed in 1878, and the third, issued in two parts, in 1882 and 1887. The three volumes, embracing over 3000 pages of small type, take in the whole theological tradition of Christianity.

Scholars of the time appreciated the excellence and grand scale of the work, and with the passage of the years this esteem has steadily mounted. In a study on Catholic theology in Germany, Dupont judged that Scheeben's *Dogmatik* corresponded admirably to the exigencies of the present age and to the exacting standards of strict science. He found the work carefully planned and well executed, and emphasized the fact that the author never lost sight of the practical needs of modern life.³¹ In a review of later volumes the same critic refers to Scheeben's achievement as a landmark in the history of theology.³²

In Grabmann's opinion, Scheeben's genius reaches its high point in the *Dogmatik*, in which a rare mastery of the whole of theological tradition and an energy of thought undeterred by any hardship lead to the very heights and depths of the mysteries of faith.³³ No other

²⁹ Eschweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 306, note 10.

³⁰ Grabmann, Introduction to *Natur und Gnade*, p. 14.

³¹ Dupont, *art. cit.*, pp. 65-67.

³² *Revue catholique*, LIV (1883), 795.

³³ Grabmann, *Geschichte der katholischen Theologie*, p. 231.

theologian can be pointed to, he holds, who in such painstaking fashion has worked through the Fathers, medieval Scholasticism, and post-Tridentine theology, and has gained such an independent control over this immense material. Scheeben's history of theology, embodied in the first volume, with its wealth of detail and sharp delineations of persons and trends, is a further demonstration of his amazing comprehension of the whole of theology.³⁴ In fact, thinks Grabmann, this history of theology may well be designated as the best of its genre.³⁵

More than a generation ago Hurter pronounced the *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik* a work of genius and, in some of its sections, a classic.³⁶ Schmaus places it at the summit of dogmatic theology in the nineteenth century.³⁷ Brosch goes further; in spite of a terminology that is occasionally defective and a style that is not infrequently obscure, the work is, he says, the classical theological summa of Neo-Scholasticism.³⁸

Concurrently with this, the great work of his life, Scheeben continued to write for periodicals and encyclopedias. He published over twenty articles in *Der literarische Handweiser*, and contributed regularly to *Der Katholik*. He wrote several pieces for the *Staatslexikon der Görresgesellschaft*, and had some thirty articles in the second edition of the Wetzer and Welte *Kirchenlexikon*.

Scheeben died July 21, 1888, at the age of fifty-three, in Cologne. Rightly is his name associated with St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus, who in the Middle Ages had shed such splendor over that ancient city.

AIMS AND METHOD

In Scheeben's mind the sacred sciences have two main objectives: first, to explore and expound the eternal, changeless truths of revelation in accordance with the directives of the teaching Church; secondly, to come to grips with current tendencies which endeavor to undermine or obscure religion and morality. The shifting circumstances of the times constitute an ever-new challenge to the sacred

³⁴ Grabmann, Introduction to *Natur und Gnade*, p. 17.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁶ H. Hurter, *op. cit.* V, 1513.

³⁷ Schmaus, *Erneuerer*, p. 38.

³⁸ *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, IX, 227.

sciences, both as to the objects which are treated and as to the way of treating them.

Given the conditions of his age, he thought that the time had come for opening up new avenues in the organization and explanation of theology. He had no love for the new merely for the sake of novelty. Still less did he cherish any ambition to draw attention to himself. His sole motive was his desire to be of service to the Church.

What he had in mind was a combination of diverse methods. He aimed at following the ideals of Scholasticism in the precision of its propositions, in the sharp definition of its terms, and in the clear formulation of its arguments. But because this method tends to excessive separation and division, he also employed a more modern and, as he called it, a freer exposition, bringing Scholastic theses together into an organic whole in which continuity and progression would be stressed. This union of Scholastic form with his own freer, organic development characterizes his method and considerably enhances the value of his theological exposition.

In a way equalled by no other Neo-Scholastic, Scheeben goes to the basic sources of theology. The starting point of his thought is invariably the word of God. He perceived clearly that the solemn definitions of the Church were pronounced against the errors of various periods, and of their very nature do not lay before the faithful the constructive teaching of revelation. He envisaged theology as a comprehensive insight into the inspired books and the matchless writings of the Fathers, rather than as a brandishing of Denzinger in disputing, arguing, and fulminating censures. He labored for a penetrating understanding of the sources of faith and of the truths derived from those sources. Once such understanding had been made possible, his whole concern was to relate it to man's daily life.

Every page of his major works, especially his *Dogmatik*, gives evidence of his deeply meditated knowledge of Scripture. A theology which has the sacred writings for its point of departure and its constant norm of reference cannot wander far down paths remote from life but takes up the questions actually posed by life. It safeguards right order, for it places Christ Himself, God's own Word, the goal of all history, and the answer to all searchings, in the center of our supernatural consciousness. Scheeben's unremitting study of the New Testament kept his theology close to this ideal.

Scheeben's acquaintance with the Fathers astonishes all who read him. His works breathe the very spirit of the Fathers. His characteristic way of speaking about God and divine things is deepened and invigorated by his knowledge of them. A man such as he, no mere pedantic compiler or retriever, but a true author, could never rest content with quoting or copying them. He was a creator, as they had been; which is one reason why he invites comparison with the Fathers rather than with the Scholastics.

When Scheeben was ready to inaugurate his theological productivity, the conflict against rationalism was approaching its term. Neo-Scholasticism was firmly entrenched. He was in the fortunate position of having studied under some of the men responsible for the new movement. Gladly yielding himself to their influence, he naturally took his place at the side of those who recognized St. Thomas as the supreme leader to be followed. But he desired to know St. Thomas through St. Thomas himself, not in simplified form or in distorted versions. His purpose in mastering the Angelic Doctor's thought was to discover his principles and key ideas, so that he might utilize them for an acquisition of a scientific knowledge of revealed truth and for a solution of modern problems. To comprehend St. Thomas better, as well as to complement him where necessary, the young scholar devoted careful study to the contemporaries and the immediate predecessors of Aquinas.

Already in his *Mysterien* Scheeben reveals a comprehensive knowledge of the whole of medieval Scholasticism. In this he was unlike most of his forerunners in the Neo-Scholastic movement, who knew and valued Scholasticism chiefly, if not exclusively, in the system of St. Thomas. During his studies, as later throughout his writings, he attended to the great common doctrines rather than to the differences between the schools. More particularly, he sought to stress the harmony rather than the disagreements between the Doctor Angelicus and the Doctor Seraphicus. His primary objective was to exploit the common property of the Schoolmen, the great Scholastic synthesis. His vivid appreciation of the sublimity of the Christian mysteries urged him on in his venture to bring these mysteries closer to men's minds, and confirmed him in his resolve to assemble these

truths and their remotest implications, so far as he could apprehend them, in a higher synthesis.

His great intimacy with the literature of post-Tridentine theology appears above all in his *Dogmatik* but is evident also in the *Mysterien*. He had a special predilection for Petavius and Thomassinus. His esteem for Suarez and Gregory of Valencia was very high, and some of his theories are outgrowths of theirs. His use of the theologians of his own century was extensive; but even when he disagreed with them or was appalled by the questionable orthodoxy of some of them, he scrupulously avoided all trace of harsh polemic.

Scheeben's study of theological thought in its historical perspective is explained by his desire to see the truth whole, so that he might display it whole. "I am aware of no theologian of modern times," states Grabmann, himself a specialist in the history of theology, "who possesses so extensive a knowledge of the whole of theological tradition as Scheeben."³⁹ His organic presentation is discernible even in his earliest writings; it imparts to the *Mysterien* the most conspicuous property of that book; it is the dominant note of the *Dogmatik*. He never tires of drawing attention to the close bond which joins individual truths to their revealed principles, and illuminates the revealed truths themselves by one another. No student of Scheeben can fail to apprehend the connection between the parts of theology and the coherence of the whole system.

In his love for the comprehensive view and his ambition to bring all theological truth together in a higher synthesis, he refused to give his allegiance to either of the two main directions theology was then taking at the Gregorian University. Passaglia and Schrader strongly favored the positive method. The other tendency, promoted by Kleutgen and the disciples of Taparelli, was in the direction of the more speculative method of St. Thomas as interpreted by the older Jesuit school. Scheeben felt that he could associate himself wholeheartedly with neither of these currents. He esteemed Passaglia as the finest theologian among his professors and thought highly of Kleutgen as a philosopher. But he perceived the drawbacks of any extremist stand and persevered in his intention to fuse the best

³⁹ Grabmann, *Erneuerer*, p. 101.

features of both positions. It is largely this breadth of view which accounts for his power and raises him to the rank of the world's great theologians.⁴⁰

After exhaustive researches into sources and lengthy study of historical developments, Scheeben finally takes up his proper rôle as a speculative theologian. Where the labors of most theologians end, his main task begins. His purpose in plodding through the whole of tradition is to catch, if possible, a glimpse of light not seen before, so as to understand the exact meaning or apprehend the ultimate implication of a revealed truth. The goal he set himself was progress toward an understanding of the faith.

To render intelligible to other minds the fitful rays of light he had discerned, he employed the precise terms and the rigid reasoning so dear to Scholastic method. But he departed from that method in the richness of his illustrations and analogies, which were sometimes drawn out and applied in minute detail.

Few theologians have used analogy in such variety and abundance, and to such striking effect, as Scheeben. He was convinced that apt analogies, purified and elevated, would lead to a clearer perception of supernatural verities. Since the supernatural perfects the natural, he reasoned, it must have many points of resemblance with nature, if one could only discover them. In laboring to express adequately what he had glimpsed, he recognized that abstract terms were deficient; illustration and image would aid his own mind to penetrate more deeply into basic truth, and help him to formulate his thought more concretely. The flashes of intuition resulting from this procedure enabled him, in the judgment of some admiring critics, to reach the uttermost limits of vision possible for the human intellect in the sacred sciences.

An examination of Scheeben's method reveals his independence as a thinker. Among modern theologians he is outstanding both for un-deviating loyalty to tradition and for original freshness of conception, gifts not often joined in one man. He cannot be explained in terms of a school, or even classified in any school. Undoubtedly he was strongly influenced by his excellent teachers, especially Franzelin, who must

⁴⁰ Cf. A. Eröss, "Scheebens Gnadenlehre in ihrer ersten Fassung," in *Matthias Joseph Scheeben 1835-1935*, p. 73 f.

have impressed him with his wealth of patristic knowledge. To account for Scheeben's individuality we must recognize his remarkable native gift for speculation, which was developed by the studies he began early in life and prosecuted with vigor and enthusiasm until his death. His genius was enkindled, and thereafter kept aflame, by the best works of the great theologians of all centuries. Grabmann applies to him what Cajetan said of St. Thomas: "Quos [doctores sacros] quia summe veneratus est auctor, ideo intellectum omnium quodammodo sortitus est" (*In Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 148, a.4).⁴¹ He sought to appropriate to himself the boundless wealth of theological thought heaped up in previous ages, and then to put forth a gigantic synthesis marked with his personal stamp. He tried to bring together in the focus of his own mind the beams of light emanating from the most brilliant theologians of the patristic, medieval, and modern eras. In carrying out his vast program he was no mere collector or editor of the theses of earlier scholars. His original energy of thought impelled him to think out for himself, and present in new form, the heritage of Catholic theology. And since he thought as a modern man, his theology has a special attraction and value for men of our time.

Fortunately for present-day theology, Scheeben's scrupulous reverence for the teaching Church confined his exuberant originality safe within the channels of orthodoxy. His sound Scholastic formation kept him, in his occasionally daring flights of speculation, from falling into dangerous conceits alien to the dogma he was discussing. Indeed, his knowledge of tradition enabled him to guide back into the current of modern theology several doctrines that had been dammed up since the days of the Greek Fathers.

TRAITS OF SCHEEBEN'S THEOLOGY

Scheeben, as has been observed, had an unusually wide acquaintance with the theological literature of all schools and epochs. In his evaluation of the work of other theologians, he was utterly free from prejudice and eagerly adopted what he judged to be good, irrespective of where he found it. His independence and originality of outlook in handling the vast material reaching from the period of the Fathers to

⁴¹ *Erneuener*, p. 105.

his own day constitute a conspicuous trait of his theology. His works abound in new insights into the profundities of the mysteries, the penetration and clarification of which he held to be the privileged task of the sacred sciences. There is scarcely a treatise of dogmatic theology that he has not enriched by the uncovering of new relationships between mysteries. In all the questions he investigated, he made a personal study of the sources, thoroughly mastered the data of revelation, and imposed his own form on the doctrine. "Scheeben is an extraordinarily original and creative spirit."⁴²

The very freedom of form in which he wrought is an indication of his independence. He refused to limit himself to the method of any one school of thought. Nor, in envisaging the scope of a whole book, would he restrict himself to the length convenient for a manual. This accounts for the great size of the *Dogmatik*.

He himself was aware of his originality. In the foreword to the *Mysterien* he remarks: "Here and there I may have been somewhat bold in striking out in new directions. But I have been careful to acquaint both myself and the reader with the relation of the new route to the old." His outstanding speculative gift is rigorously controlled by his childlike and unquestioning attachment to the official *magisterium*. His point of departure is never some newly devised theory of his own, but is invariably a revealed doctrine; and he checks his course by reference to the pronouncements of the Church or, in the absence of such decisions, to the fixed stars of ancient tradition.⁴³

Another characteristic feature of Scheeben's theology is his vivid grasp of man's true life. He had little interest in the ideas which occupied the Tübingen school. His undertaking was to uncover again the glorious life that is the right of all Catholics. His objective was not to conduct men to the temple of Catholic faith by a chain of lengthy deductions, and there bid them marvel at the façade; he wished to lead them inside and enable them to live the life that is possible there alone.

With this concern for life is connected a further characteristic of

⁴² F. Münch, "Zur Einführung," *Erneuerer*, p. 10.

⁴³ I. Jailer, *Literarischer Handweiser*, XVIII (1879), 237; quoted by Grabmann, Introduction to *Natur und Gnade*, p. 18.

Scheeben's theology: it is not only an intellectual activity but embraces Christian life as a whole. Hence he did not wish his theology to remain a wisdom shackled to the professor's chair but hoped that it would become the common property of wider audiences. He held that theology was for all men. He knew well that "children and the ordinary faithful grasp the most sublime mysteries more clearly and accurately, and often more easily, than proud philosophers."⁴⁴ The theology he has in mind here is more than simple faith; it may be non-scientific, but it is a genuine theological knowledge, built on faith and to be acquired with the aid of the infused virtue of faith.⁴⁵

Scheeben's books are all conspicuous for their inner unity and consistency. His perception of the internal bonds linking the truths of faith and his correlation of metaphysics, theology, and mysticism are pronounced traits of his thought, as in the case of the great theologians of the past, including Augustine and Aquinas. God and His plans for our salvation are themes recurring in every treatise; only the point of view varies. This makes for considerable repetition and a constant restatement of relationships, which may prove confusing for a time. But the end result is a clarity of perception and a comprehensive grasp which no other procedure could bring about.

The supernatural is the great motif of all of Scheeben's works from the first to the last. He judged the correct description of the revealed mysteries so necessary for his times that he consecrated all his theological writings to the end of showing their force and importance for the sacred sciences, and of emphasizing their value for the daily life of man. Perhaps his greatest contribution to Neo-Scholasticism is his service in bringing the supernatural, in its full purity and beauty, back to the center of theological thought. His doctrine, as well as his method, represents an uncompromising opposition to the lingering influence that rationalism and the Enlightenment had had upon Catholic theology. Theology had no meaning for him apart from the revelation of Jesus Christ; and so he is neither philosopher nor apologist but a theologian in the truest sense. He sought to attract men to the faith, not by proofs based on historical or apologetic considerations, but by opening up and displaying its inner treasures. Whatever success he has had in this venture is owing to his penetrating in-

⁴⁴ *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, I, 411.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

sight and vivid presentation of the supernatural; and this is the real reason why his theology appeals so powerfully to modern man, sick to death with naturalism.

KEY IDEAS

Dominant in Scheeben's thought were two revealed truths: the truth of the essence of God as it is in itself, in the Trinity of divine Persons; and the truth of the consummated union of rational creatures with God in the beatific vision.

The Blessed Trinity stands at the head of all his theological discussions. It is the beginning and the middle and the end of the whole economy of salvation. "As the divine nature regarded in its unity is the supreme object and the crowning point of philosophy, so the divine Trinity is the highest, and at the same time the most characteristic object, the center, and the very heart of theology."⁴⁶ All the other supernatural truths revolve around this center, the three divine Persons who in Their love reach down to man and raise him up to Their sphere. The supernatural communication of the divine nature is effected in three stages: by the substantial and total communication of the divine nature to the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, by the hypostatic union in the Incarnation, and by the participation of rational creatures in the divine nature in grace and glory.

In Scheeben's view, the essence of Christianity is primarily, not a *doing*, but a *being*. To be a Christian does not mean, in the first instance, to conform one's way of thinking to God's way of thinking, or to mold one's personality according to the precepts of the New Law. Christianity implies the replenishing and pervading of our spirit with the Holy Spirit, and in the engendering of the divine life in our persons. This new state of being produced by God Scheeben calls divine filiation. The child of God is the only true man. When the child of God is born, that is, when man receives the new, divine state of being, nothing human or natural is lost. On the contrary, in divine sonship all that is truly human and natural is preserved, transfigured, and divinized. Scheeben could not discern enough reality in the word supernatural; and so, in audacious terminology for which he had authoritative precedent in the Greek Fathers, he speaks throughout

⁴⁶ *Die Mysterien des Christentums* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1941), p. 110.

his writings of the deification or divinization of man, without the modifiers, "as it were" or "so to speak," which later editors introduced into the *Mysterien*. The Trinitarian processes, by which the Father begets the Son, and with the Son communicates the divine nature to the Holy Spirit, are extended to man and reproduced in him. The divine light in which the Son of God is born, and the divine love of which the Holy Spirit is the bond, are poured into man, enabling him to take part in the divine acts of cognition and love of God. This divinization of man is brought about by sanctifying grace but is perfected by the substantial indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human soul.

Scheeben is convinced that the mystery of the Trinity has been revealed, not mainly for the reason often given—that we may acquire merit by subjecting our minds to God's authority in accepting a truth beyond human comprehension—but that we may receive correct information concerning our supernatural state of being. The Father was moved by His joy in His eternal Son to generate children of grace, so that He might extend to them the love He bears for His only Son. This *Gotteskindschaft* is the heart of Scheeben's doctrine and is the leading idea and fruitful principle of so much that is characteristic of his theology.

The generation of the child of grace is accomplished, not by way of natural becoming, but out of freely bestowed love; hence, its exemplar is also the procession of the Holy Spirit, the Person of love. A particularly close bond unites the child of God and the Holy Spirit. In his doctrine on this point Scheeben calls attention to a difference of view between the Greek Fathers and Latin theologians. The latter envisage the sojourn of God in man as a relation of friendship, as a living and working together. The Greeks think of God's indwelling in man as a substantial fellowship with God, a fellowship which is the basis of community of life. Scheeben calls the Greek view organic and physical, as opposed to the dynamic and moral conception of the Latins. In consequence of the substantial relationship between God and man, the union between them excels in intimacy even the tie that joins parents and children together in the natural sphere.

Man is raised to this divinized state of being by membership in Christ. If men are embodied in Christ, the divine dignity, holiness,

and glory of the Son of God must in some fashion pertain to all His members, and the Father extends to all the love He bears for His only-begotten Son. Further, the divine dignity conferred on man by His membership in Christ gives him a title to a glorification in soul and body corresponding to this dignity. Undoubtedly, God could have adopted us as His children without the Incarnation, as He did in the case of Adam and Eve. But without the Incarnation our divine sonship would be less perfect and would lack a basis on the side of nature. It is in Christ that God and man come into closest contact.

Scheeben's doctrine of the Mystical Body clarifies his view of the purpose of the Incarnation. The meaning and end of the Incarnation are not, he held, exhausted by the notion of the restoration of the supernatural order overthrown by sin. The ultimate reason for the Incarnation in God's plan is the introduction of the eternal divine processions and productions into creation. The Incarnation is the supreme and most complete communication of God to the creature and the most magnificent revelation of God's perfections. In virtue of the Incarnation we men become the Father's own sons, because we become members of the Father's own Son; and the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Son, becomes the Spirit of the members of the Son.

The human nature of Christ is the conductor of the divine life, and this life is imparted to all who become members of Christ through faith and the sacraments. The community of members as formed into one body by union with Christ is called the Church. Scheeben warns against a purely organizational notion of the Church, as it had been described by most theologians since the controversies occasioned by the Reformation. The Church must not be viewed in a way that regards externals excessively, on the analogy of other societies observed among men; nor does its difference from them consist only in the fact that it is a religious society founded by the God-man. The Church is much more than this: it is closest fellowship with the God-man, it is the body of all those who are joined to Christ and in Him are united with each other. The perfect expression and the consummation of this union is accomplished in the mystery of the Eucharist. God's purpose in entrusting to the Church such abundant authority to educate and guide was that it might inaugurate, assure, guard, and foster the fellowship of being and life with Christ.

Scheeben is far from belittling the dynamic force of Christianity. Supernatural activity necessarily follows supernatural being, as natural activity follows natural being. Personal religious and moral life of a high order is indispensable for the member of Christ. Such life will be truly Christian only in so far as it flows from fellowship of being with God and fellowship of life with Christ. The supreme flowering of this fellowship is the beatific vision. During our earthly life we are not directly conscious that our activity proceeds from a supernatural principle. Therefore, we should frequently reflect on this truth in order to intensify the Christian character of our activity. In particular, Scheeben urges, preachers should often insist on the fact that Christian behavior must be rooted in Christian being.

Our fellowship of being with God manifests itself further in our life of faith. In Scheeben's view, the nature of faith is best comprehended if it is regarded as the preparation and inception of the beatific vision. In the beatific vision we are enlightened with the knowledge proper to God; in faith we are granted an imperfect anticipation of this knowledge. Thus faith is a fellowship of knowledge with God. In our pilgrim state we can never, of course, rise above faith. But the light of faith is a grace whereby God's own knowledge is communicated to us, a grace whereby God makes His own truth in some fashion conceivable and understandable, as, in an essentially more perfect way, the light of glory manifests the very essence of God.

To Scheeben, faith is not the end-product of a series of demonstrations. Of course, it must be founded on reason. The believer must be aware of the fact that God communicates His truth. But this awareness does not enter into the act of faith itself. It prepares the way for the act of faith, and retires when it has performed this office.

ACHIEVEMENT

The main task of theology in our time, as Scheeben envisaged it, is insistence upon the supernatural character of Christianity in the domains of knowledge and life. Knowledge, obviously, is a part of life. Life, then, as distinguished from knowledge, signifies practical life, the application of values to performance, whereas science discovers values and proposes them to the mind for application. The realization, or making real, of theology is the practice of Christian perfection.

Undoubtedly, the end of revelation is not the satisfaction of man's intellectual curiosity. Revelation is directed chiefly to the right living of the full Christian life. But right living is impossible without right knowing. Scheeben would have agreed with Chesterton: " 'I'm afraid I'm a practical man,' said the doctor with gruff humor, 'and I don't bother much about religion and philosophy.' 'You'll never be a practical man till you do,' said Father Brown." Contemplation is at once the wellspring and the crown of Christian activity; indeed, it is the highest activity of which human nature is capable even here on earth.

Theology cannot rest content with a merely practical mode of speech; its primary function cannot consist in wrapping up revealed truths in handy packages or condensing them into easily digested capsules. The purpose of theology is to apprehend and exhibit the truths of revelation in a way that will not only meet this or that personal need in this or that situation, but will keep the deposit of faith in its objective reality present to every age and thus guard religious practice from all distortion. In this sense, theology is necessary for the salvation of men.

Therefore, it is false to state that if Scheeben's theology is useful for practical life, this is in spite of his speculation. Rather, it generates life in the intelligent student and richly fructifies his living precisely because of the enormous intellectual labor Scheeben put into it.

His exposition of the nature and eminence of theology is an independent mastery and elaboration of the profound thoughts of the medieval doctors, whose teachings he combines in a higher synthesis. This is one of his great achievements. Even today, after so much writing on the subject, his treatise on the nature of theology is unquestionably the best in the German language⁴⁷ and one of the best in any language. "I have occupied myself much with St. Thomas' concept of sacred doctrine, particularly as related to the rest of Scholasticism," writes Grabmann; "but nowhere have I found an appreciation and discussion of the Thomistic teaching so profound and so fired with genius as in Scheeben."⁴⁸

Each science has its own proper domain of truth to investigate.

⁴⁷ J. Höfer, *Die Theologie M. J. Scheebens in neuer Ausgabe* (Freiburg i. B.: Herder, 1941), p. 9.

⁴⁸ Grabmann, *Erneuerer*, p. 61.

Scheeben held that theology is the science of the mysteries of Christianity. Therefore he places a discussion of the mysteries at the head of his theological treatises. His subsequent labor is wholly devoted to the endeavor of bringing the mysteries into relation with one another, of emphasizing and illuminating them with one another, and of gathering them into a system which will reflect the full splendor of Christianity. He searched tirelessly into the obscure depths of the life pulsating in the mysteries and tried to teach others the vision granted to him. This is among his greatest services to humanity. He makes us realize the magnitude and munificence of the divine plan for us and thereby arouses in us a greater love of God.

Scholasticism had achieved an accurate analysis and a clear systematizing of the faith. But this very triumph of Scholasticism was not without danger. Excessive analysis could lead to excessive concentration on details, to the neglect of larger views; systems might close prematurely and thus slight important lines of tradition which did not happen to square with the organizing principle of the system. Against such dangers Scheeben's independence and incredible erudition inoculated him. He was at home with the Councils, Scripture, the Fathers, the Scholastics—in a word, with the whole Christian tradition. He had no reason *a priori* for excluding any item of truth, but brought all truths together and co-ordinated them in a vast synthesis.

A universal and composite view of Christian reality such as that presented by Scheeben is the object of the studies of the theologian, as well as of the quest of the Catholic layman. Contemporary theology is rich in manuals constructed in accordance with the guiding ideas of definite schools of thought and possesses immense encyclopedias and dictionaries, the theological *summas* of our age. Compared with such works, excellent as they are, Scheeben's remarkable achievement in synthesis is utterly unique. To students of theology dissatisfied with the presentation of Christian truth in precise theses and formulas, the theological synthesis set forth by Scheeben, "the metaphysician of the faith and the Church,"⁴⁹ will prove a welcome antidote to the aridity of the analytic method.

The career of Scheeben coincided with the conflict against rational-

⁴⁹ Höfer, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

ism and liberalism. He did not, however, conceive that his part in the campaign was to be primarily polemical. He preferred to undertake a positive task—the formidable task of reconstructing the supernatural edifice of Christianity.

The supernatural, of course, is so essential to Catholic life that it could never be wholly overlooked. Still, we can speak of a resurgence of the supernatural in the last century. During the preceding centuries attention had been largely restricted to the controversies with Protestantism and Jansenism. It was only after the conquest of these errors and their culmination in the sterility of rationalism that theologians could again devote their energies to a fuller study of the supernatural.

A revival of theology as the science of the supernatural could not be achieved by demonstrating the fact of the supernatural order, but had to bring out its value, beauty, and vitality. It had to span the gap between theory and action, between the apprehension of supernatural truth and its realization in supernatural living.

Against the prevailing disregard of the supernatural, Scheeben tried to show that the mysteries of Christianity abound, not only in obscurity, but in light. These mysteries, he insisted, constitute the richest treasure of our spiritual life; dogma is not alien to life, but is the source and inspiration of the fullest life of which man is capable—supernatural life with Christ and in Christ.

He brought back to the consciousness of his contemporaries the undistorted ideals proposed by Christianity. He taught Catholics to appreciate their heritage. He again unveiled the image of the true man, who is the deified man, a child of the heavenly Father, and a member of the Incarnate Son.

He never wearied of pointing out that Christian life is a participation in the divine life. This is a most important message to the modern world. In the name of life, attacks have been launched against religion for decades. Christianity has been pilloried as a storehouse of dead concepts, as a system of life-killing logic. Scheeben's works demonstrated the utter stupidity of such a caricature. The life of the Catholic is life in God. The faith is not a concatenation of ideas hostile to life, or a sum of repressive moral prescriptions. All the labored speculations of the great theologians are only attempts to

bring the living reality of the faith home to our consciousness; all the precepts of the moral code are but aids to the preservation, enhancement, and perfecting of supernatural life.

Scheeben's vivid presentation of the doctrine of the Mystical Body has made him one of the inspirers of the modern liturgical movement. Theology as conceived by him has ties of intimate relationship with the liturgy: theology is the science of the mysteries of Christianity; and the liturgy is the celebration of these mysteries. The liturgy has been called the sacrament of Christian life; for it signifies and reproduces the great mystery of supernatural life. In this fruitful movement Scheeben is an influential pioneer; indeed, as is being realized with increasing clarity, the movement is to a considerable extent founded on his theology.⁵⁰

INFLUENCE

It is only in recent decades that Scheeben has met with the widespread appreciation he merits. For many years after his death he belonged to that large group of great authors who are admired more than they are read. Of all his books, none but the *Herrlichkeiten der göttlichen Gnade* went through several editions during his lifetime; the *Mysterien* reached its third edition only two years before the first World War; and the comparatively small edition of the *Dogmatik* did not have to be reprinted until several years ago. After the war the situation changed, owing largely to the enthusiasm of Dr. Martin Grabmann, who tirelessly called attention to Scheeben in lectures and articles. A steadily increasing band of readers kept spreading the good news, until today vast numbers peruse Scheeben. From their midst, too, there gradually grew up a literature which sought to exploit and popularize his theology. Through such writings, still wider circles, particularly among the laity, were made aware of him. Evidence of this is the great number of inquiries received during the years immediately preceding World War II by booksellers in Germany and the publishing firms of Herder and Matthias-Grüne-wald concerning the prospect of new editions of the *Mysterien* and the *Dogmatik*. Largely as a result of these many requests, made mostly by young theologians and layfolk, a new edition of Scheeben's

⁵⁰ Cf. A. Kerkvoorde, *art. cit.*, p. 147.

collected works, of which several volumes were issued in 1941, was undertaken.⁵¹ The letters addressed to the Herder Book Company of Freiburg indicate that young people are not content with an apologetic approach to Catholic doctrine but seek a deeper understanding of Christian truth itself. They hope to find in Scheeben the real essence of Christianity and the fullness of truth which distinguishes Christian from pagan culture. They are looking for insights and incentives which will help them take up the daring venture of leading truly Catholic lives.⁵²

Scheeben had no ambition to found a "school." In any case he could hardly have done so. His teaching at the seminary was limited to the functions of a *repetitor*. At Cologne, as in most of the dioceses of Germany, candidates for the priesthood did not enter the seminary until they had finished their theological studies in a faculty of theology at one of the German universities; the single year they spent in the seminary was devoted chiefly to preparation for ordination.⁵³ Moreover, Scheeben was scarcely an ideal professor. "Very few minds were attuned to his; his pupils were overawed by the steady flow of

⁵¹ A striking indication of the growth of interest in Scheeben is the appearance of his works in new editions and translations. Grabmann issued a careful edition of *Natur und Gnade* in 1922 (reprinted 1935). The *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik* was reprinted in 1933. Just as the war broke out, a new edition of Scheeben's collected works, to be published in eight volumes by Herder of Freiburg, and edited by such scholars as J. Höfer, M. Grabmann, A. Landgraf, K. Feckes, and others, was announced. The collection includes *Natur und Gnade*, *Die Herrlichkeiten der göttlichen Gnade*, *Die Mysterien des Christentums*, and the *Dogmatik*; Volume VIII is to contain a selection of Scheeben's best articles and shorter works. Three volumes of the series were published in 1941; the rest were to follow shortly. Especially important is the new edition of the *Mysterien*, the only work of Scheeben which embraces the whole sweep of theology, for it makes available for the first time the text Scheeben himself had prepared for a second edition of the book; death, however, prevented him from issuing it. Later editions did not make use of Scheeben's extensive notes which embodied important alterations and additions. The new edition of the *Mysterien* represents the last scientific work of Scheeben that we possess.

An Italian version of the *Mysterien*, by E. Tommasi, appeared in 1908. The *Dogmatik* was translated into French by Bélet during Scheeben's own lifetime. Forthcoming French translations of the *Herrlichkeiten* and the *Mysterien* were announced in 1939; cf. *La vie spirituelle*, LIX (1939), p. [65], note 1, and p. [89], note 60. Wilhelm and Scannel's *A Manual of Catholic Theology*, based on the *Dogmatik*, retains scarcely anything characteristic of Scheeben. An American translation of *Die Mysterien des Christentums*, from the 1941 edition, to be published by the B. Herder Book Company of St. Louis, is in press at the time of present writing.

⁵² Cf. J. Höfer, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-14.

⁵³ G. Fritz, *DTC*, XIV, 1272.

his long, abstruse sentences which brought scanty light to their intellects."⁵⁴ Hence the influence he wielded was almost exclusively through his writings.

Although several of Scheeben's views—for example, his notion of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, his doctrine on the formal cause of man's divine adoption—failed to win favor with the majority of theologians, his influence has been constantly mounting. Not only dogmatic theology, but asceticism and the liturgy, have drawn extensively on his writings and endeavored to cultivate his ideas. A few instances out of many will illustrate this.

L. Janssens, O.S.B., one of the most competent among recent theologians, cites Scheeben frequently in his *Summa Theologica*. Grabmann's important *Geschichte der katholischen Theologie* closely follows Scheeben's account of the progress of theological thought. Two works by Karl Feckes, *Das Mysterium der heiligen Kirche* and *Die bräutliche Gottesmutter*, proceed of set purpose to develop Scheeben's ideas on the Church and on our Lady. The well-known book of Julius Tyciak, *Gottesgeheimnisse der Gnade* (translated into English under the title: *Life in Christ*), was the first of a projected series of similar volumes designed to apply Scheeben's theology to Catholic life. Friedrich Jürgensmeier's *Der mystische Leib Christi*, generally considered the outstanding work on the Mystical Body as the basic principle of asceticism, draws heavily on Scheeben. Many of the volumes propagating the *Theologie der Verkündigung* are deeply indebted to Scheeben. Translations of most of the works mentioned, as well as articles appearing from time to time in *Orate Fratres*, have drawn the attention of American readers to Scheeben.

The *Dogmatik* was translated into French soon after its publication in German and made Scheeben's theological thought accessible in countries of Latin culture. A series of articles in *La Vie Spirituelle* continued to keep Scheeben's ideas before the minds of French Catholics.

While the influence of Scheeben is furthered by monographs which investigate his thoughts and advance his views, his lifework will not be fully successful if we are content to do no more than gather leaves from his books and merely rethink his thoughts. Scheeben went to

⁵⁴ J. Wilhelm, "Scheeben," *CE*, XIII, 525.

the sources of theology; and this explains why his doctrine, despite the difficulties of his language, is so vibrant with life. Today, fortunately, the researches of theologians are prosecuted in the spirit of Scheeben. Not the least part of his influence is the example he gave of a painstaking, thorough study of the great Fathers of the Orient. Indeed, a well-qualified scholar attests that it is only since the days of Scheeben that full attention is again being paid to St. Cyril of Alexandria, as in general to the Greek Fathers.⁵⁵

DEMANDS ON READERS

Scheeben did not write for Catholics content with elementary catechism or for theological romanticists and dreamers. Apart from the *Herrlichkeiten*, his works were not designed for popular audiences. With regard to the *Mysterien*, which treats of almost the whole of dogma in its higher and more difficult aspects, Scheeben hoped for readers, not only among professional theologians, but among all persons who experience a yearning for a deeper penetration into the august mysteries of the faith. In the foreword to the first edition he stated:

“I cherish the firm conviction that speculative theology is of supreme importance for a true and high formation of mind and heart, and that under the guidance of the great doctors of the Church well-paved roads must be built reaching to the very summits of divine truth, roads which can be traveled without excessive fatigue not only by a few privileged spirits, but by anyone who combines serious courage and energy with a sufficiently sound education.”

Certainly the book requires more than a rapid reading; it must be studied and reread and meditated.

The *Dogmatik*, it is scarcely necessary to point out, was not written for the tyro. But theologians who desire to penetrate to the bottom of the problems in which theology abounds will never consult it without profit. Scheeben had no use for theological works that slighted metaphysics and speculation on the pretext of excessive subtlety and impracticality. He was acutely aware that metaphysics cannot be avoided in treating of truths which by their very nature pertain to the most exalted of all metaphysics—the metaphysics of the mysterious and the supernatural. But he also contended that these very truths

⁵⁵ E. Weigl, *Die Heilslehre des hl. Cyrill von Alexandrien* (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1905), p. vii.

are eminently practical; not in the sense that they are always immediately applicable to the minutiae of daily moral conduct, but in the sense that they elevate the soul, flood the mind with light, and open up the beauties of Christian dogma.

Two obstacles stand in the way of spreading Scheeben's works: the sublimity of his speculation and the obscurity of his style. These difficulties are real. Scheeben lacks the form and the power of expression that characterize classical authors; in particular, the awkwardness of his sentence structure is a constant source of annoyance. But the criticisms so often leveled at Scheeben should not be urged unduly. It is easy to be simple and clear if we ignore the complexities of a problem or are unaware of the objections it raises. The difficulty which all students experience in reading Scheeben arises primarily from the loftiness of the subjects he treats and the profundity with which he discusses them. Since the mysteries of faith are inherently obscure, the human language in which they are expressed must also be obscure. Nor may we overlook the fact that the obscurity tends to dissipate the more one delves into Scheeben's intellectual world. As one admirer has pointed out—and acquaintance with Scheeben confirms his assertion—the student who is not afraid to climb will soon find how easily he can breathe in the rarefied atmosphere of Scheeben's thought.⁵⁶

One explanation for the lack in Scheeben's writings of the desired finish is his nervous haste to get his thoughts down on paper and to publish immediately. He was aware of this defect, as a remark of his shows: "It is time to give my pen a rest." But he did not lay it down, for the reason he gave in a letter written in 1867: he felt impelled to go on publishing faster than he wished, for the prosaic but cogent motive of earning money for the support of his aging parents.⁵⁷

If literary greatness is measured by clarity of style and skill in sentence composition, Scheeben was not a great writer. But as a thinker who rouses wonderment by the new vistas of beauty and truth he opens up, he was one of the world's supreme authors.

⁵⁶ F. Münch, *Erneuerer*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Brosch, "Das Werden des jungen M. J. Scheeben," *Stimmen der Zeit*, CXXIII (1932), 405.

SCHEEBEN'S MODERNITY

Many observers have pointed out that a renewal in theology is taking place in our day. The theologian who steps up before the public and proposes the teachings of the Christian faith can count on attentive hearers. Theological writings have a wider circle of readers, perhaps, than ever before. Books explaining the liturgy are extensively read. The movement for theology among the laity was well along in Europe until interrupted by the war, and indeed has persisted in spite of the war. Even the not easily read *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas is eagerly purchased and studied. The lectures of the Reverend Walter Farrell, O.P., on the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas, as embodied in the four volumes of his *Companion to the Summa*, have sold widely. At Marquette University during the scholastic year 1944-1945 a group of students requested a strictly theological course on the Incarnation and Redemption; the request was granted, with happy results. The movement among teaching sisterhoods for summer courses in theology, taught by professional theologians, has been growing from year to year. At St. Mary's College, Holy Cross, Indiana, a School of Sacred Theology, offering a full course for nuns and laywomen in theology, has been functioning with considerable success. The Bulletin issued by this institution in March of 1945 states:

Sisters and laywomen teaching religion in colleges or engaged in explaining the faith in lectures and writing are performing a task requiring the same type and degree of scientific preparation which the Catholic Church in her wisdom and age-long experience prescribes for her priests. Without this preparation, the efforts of teachers and apologists are apt to be amateurish and inadequate. Hence there is a widespread desire among the cultured laity for a deeper and more rigorous training in religion than that afforded by the popular manuals.

A Catholic publisher, who is in an excellent position to know, has affirmed: "Some mighty instinct is driving the laity to the study of dogma."⁸⁸ Such are but a few of the indications of modern man's engrossing interest in theology, even in America.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ F. J. Sheed, *Sidelights on the Catholic Revival* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1940), p. 79.

⁸⁹ On the increasing concern felt by Catholic educators for theology in higher education, as well as on recent literature and a clear statement of objectives, see J. C. Murray, "Towards a Theology for the Layman," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, V (1944), 43-75, 340-376.

This swing in theology is not uncaused. It has its groundbreakers and forerunners. To them belongs, as one of the most influential, Matthias Joseph Scheeben. Indeed, Scheeben has become pre-eminently the theologian of the period following World War I, the era of the liturgical resurgence.⁶⁰ The liturgical movement can still draw rich gain in dogmatic depth and solidity from Scheeben and thereby win greater sympathy for its objectives and acquire many friends.

Inseparably bound up with the liturgical movement is the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. Here, above all, Scheeben was a pioneer. No theologian, perhaps, equals him in vivid appreciation of this stupendous reality. In his conception and presentation of this truth he was generations ahead of his time. The beautiful doctrine as developed by him might have remained long unknown were it not for the liturgical movement in Germany, which in its search for a dogmatic clarification of Christian life, joyfully exploited the rich vein of thought discovered in the great theologian of Cologne.

We are still, unquestionably, on the threshold of educating the laity for the difficult apostolate that lies ahead of them. We should deceive ourselves if we did not seek, as a preliminary condition of that objective, to lay the foundation upon which a sound comprehension of revealed truth can be erected. We should be building upon sand if we were to overlook the necessity of a deepened knowledge of theology. The scope and methods of our undertaking are not yet fully clear; one thing is sure: the task will not be easy.

Scheeben's works, above all his *Mysteries of Christianity*, can be of great value in our strivings to reach the goal. The question whether this book may occupy front rank in the formation of future leaders in the lay apostolate depends on the depth and breadth of theological and philosophical competency we envisage for the coming generation of Catholics. The answer to this question may well be taken as a gauge of the earnestness with which we are willing to devote ourselves to the patient, systematic, sound education of modern youth.⁶¹ Certain it is, that if the spirit from which the *Mysterien* sprang, and which pervades every page of the work, can be communicated to our lay apostles, we need have no misgivings for the future of the Church.

⁶⁰ Feckes, *Erneuerer*, p. 118.

⁶¹ Cf. Münch, *Erneuerer*, p. 14.

Despite the present cult of Scheeben, no one will contend that he has gained the sway over the Catholic mind that he can and ought to have. Though in the grave for almost sixty years, he speaks, not as one dead, but as one alive and modern; and he has much to say to us. It is possible to maintain—and something of the sort has actually been maintained⁶²—that Catholics could render an invaluable service to the Church and to themselves if they would make the *Herrlichkeiten der göttlichen Gnade* and the *Mysterien des Christentums* their inseparable companions, and would allow these incomparable books to energize their lives.

⁶² Schmaus, *Erneuerer*, p. 54.