

# Natural Law

Thoughts about Father Victor Brezik, C.S.B., as Philosopher

by Father Jack Gallagher, C.S.B.

*Father Brezik (1913-2009), a Texan by birth, prepared for the priesthood at Saint Basil's Seminary in Toronto where he was ordained in 1940. He taught philosophy at Saint Michael's College when the prestigious Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies was helping re-establish the privileged place of the theology and philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Catholic thought. On his return to Houston in 1954, he founded the Center for Thomistic Studies, which continues to flourish the present day.*

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ON THE DAY THAT FATHER BREZIK DIED I happened to be reading an account of a recent exchange between a prominent spokesman for the Catholic Church and a well-known atheist. Their topic was whether believers and unbelievers can agree on certain principles which would allow them to support common laws and policies and perhaps even to work together towards the common good of a society. In the course of his presentation the Catholic spokesman cited the natural-law theories of Hugo Grotius and Samuel Puffendorf, two influential seventeenth-century Protestant thinkers, as examples of efforts to find in human reason a basis on which citizens of divergent religions might agree. He went on to say that modern evolutionary ways of thinking have undermined these natural-law theories.

I thought that this Catholic intellectual might then go on and explain that the views of Grotius and Puffendorf, heavily influenced by late mediaeval nominalism, do not represent the Catholic tradition of natural law. Not only evolutionary thinking but also certain findings of modern psychology and anthropology cast serious doubt on the positions of Grotius and Puffendorf. But to refute Grotius and Puffendorf is not to refute all natural-law approaches to law and morality. The Catholic spokesman,

however, did not proceed along these lines. Rather, under the impression that he had disposed of natural law he moved on to examine other approaches to the problem. The two discussants ended by agreeing that believers and unbelievers must continue to talk to each other because somewhere in the depths of their experience there *must* be common ground. I must confess however that by the end of the discussion that common ground remained as murky for me as it was at the beginning.

It dawned on me that, if a Catholic could achieve eminence as a thinker but not know enough about natural-law theory to carry on a meaningful exchange on the subject with an atheist interlocutor, then we are at the end of an era. For a happy eighty or ninety years, beginning a few years after Pope Leo XIII published the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* in 1879, it was not so. During those decades nearly all thinkers who would have been considered spokespersons for the Catholic Church knew the thought of Thomas Aquinas quite well, or would at least have recognized that they were not qualified to discuss issues of ethics with an eminent atheist if they were ignorant of what Aquinas thought about the matter. That, and a smattering of knowledge of the history of philosophy, would have allowed them engage in an informed and probably educative exchange with the atheist on the question of natural law.

Father Brezik's enthusiasm for metaphysics, and for the thought of Thomas Aquinas generally, arose from sheer satisfaction with the insight, the logical consistency, the common sense combined with acute analysis that he found there. But that enthusiasm arose also from his recognition that for much of the twentieth century Thomas Aquinas supplied the intellectual tools that enabled the Catholic Church to grapple intelligently with the modern world. Pope Leo XIII founded modern Catholic social teaching on the basis of Thomistic principles. That social teaching challenged in turn unbridled *laissez-faire* liberalism, communism and fascism. Over the many decades it incorporated new insights while showing a surprising continuity of principle, avoiding extremes, throwing light on a succession issues: the rights of labour, third-world development, peace and war, nuclear weapons, the environment, etc. It was the thought of Thomas Aquinas that presided over a flowering of Catholic philosophy and theology leading up to the Second Vatican Council. A Thomistic framework allowed Catholic theology to integrate developments in biblical and patristic studies along with ideas from other disciplines while generally steering clear of the dead ends and intellectual traps that afflicted other intellectual movements. Aquinas it was who equipped several generations of Catholic thinkers not simply to take every contemporary theory or argument at face value but to delve beneath

the surface, to expose their suppositions and to frame the questions in such a way as to incorporate a fuller vision of reality.

It may be that Aquinas is not the only thinker who could have supplied the intellectual sinew to allow the Church to cope effectively with the contemporary world. Perhaps a vigorous revival of Augustinianism or of the thought of Bonaventure would have served equally well. What is clear is that in fact it was Aquinas who supplied what was needed. It is his thought that has the track record, that can be judged by its ability to stand up under decades of debate and criticism by unsympathetic antagonists. There were great theologians, notably John Henry Cardinal Newman, on the scene before the Thomist revival. I dare to suggest however, that though they contributed immensely to Catholic life, they lacked the philosophical tools to deal effectively with secular thinkers and issues. Maybe the Church needs a new genius. Father Brezik would not have denied that possibility, but he was quite sure that such a thinker has not yet come on the scene, and in the meantime we should go with the genius we know. Father Brezik was skeptical of ideas with a short shelf life and of an eclecticism that is never quite clear about what is at the centre and what lies on the periphery.

So Father Brezik's fervent promotion of the thought of Thomas Aquinas was not concerned only with enriching the Catholic education of the students at the University of St. Thomas, devoted as he was to that purpose. As befits a real philosopher, his field of vision was the Church and the world. ❧