

Medalist's Address: The Importance of Philosophy and of This Association

by Jean T. Oesterle

First—in behalf of John and myself—I wish to express my sincere thanks for the honor bestowed on the both of us by this Association.

When I first heard of it from Mark Griesbach after last year's Executive Council meeting, I was stunned. What could they be thinking of! Although John and I had taught and written in the field of philosophy—John far more than I—we were quite undistinguished. Nor had we ever thought of our work for the Association as something out of the ordinary. Anyone appointed to the task would try to carry it out in the spirit and tradition of the Association and think the doing of it its own reward. So to me—and I'm sure it would have seemed so to John—this is a great honor—and I thank you for it.

In pondering about this address, I first thought of talking about St. Thomas' *Disputed Question On Evil*, which John and I translated and is now being finished up for the press. Something of this sort seemed to me fitting on such an occasion. When I mentioned this to Professor McInerny, he immediately said "No—it would be like parading around with a billboard over your shoulders." As I thought it over, he was right of course.

Then I thought I might talk about the trials of a translator. But thinking of the arguments I had had with Father Gilby on that subject—and that billboard—I discarded it.

So this will not be a learned or intellectual talk. After the four excellent papers we have heard I would be too embarrassed to attempt such a thing. Instead I am going to talk about the importance of philosophy and of this Association to John and myself, which I hope will be of some interest to you.

John and I were converts to the Church back in the late 1930's. We came into the Church through philosophy—and I owe it to John—as I owe so many other things to him—that I became interested in philosophy.

I—together with a group of girls from an office I was working in—had gone out to take up horseback riding and I met John as I came back from my first of many sallies atop a horse. He was working his way through the last two years of his undergraduate work at the University of Detroit by teaching horseback riding at his sister's stables—then on the outskirts of Detroit. Some time later and after a number of discussions on philosophical subjects, John suggested I take a night-school course in philosophy at the

University. The only scheduled night-school course in philosophy that Fall was one in psychology and the upshot of that course was overwhelming. It finished with the proof for the immortality of the soul and my first thought at the conclusion of the proof—and it literally was like being hit over the head—was, ‘and its got to be saved’!

At one time, thinking over this happening, I thought perhaps it traced back to my Protestant background, which I had long ago turned away from because of its emotionalism and lack of reason. But—like Augustine’s change of mind—I realized it was too forceful to have been other than a grace.

What brought me to the crucial point—this was over a year later—was attending a Mass. The priest who had taught the course in psychology—I should interject here, that by this time we had become good friends, asked if I would mind if he said a Mass for my mother, as well as his own mother since the next day was Mother’s Day. Father had never talked of religion or the Church to us, but we had been speaking of my mother’s death at the early age of 43, so the request seemed quite natural to me. Although I did not know what Mass was—or was all about—I thought it would be rude not to attend. It turned out to be a children’s Mass. The church was full of children and there was no place to sit, so I knelt on the kneeling rail at the back of the last pew—the first time I had ever knelt before God—though I did not know God was there. As I knelt watching those innocent children praying so attentively I was overcome by the realization that they were inside of something that I was not, and as suddenly as the realization of it, I ardently desired to be inside of it. Though I have used the word ‘ardently’ this was not an emotional experience, but an immediate movement of the will, which was irresistible. Directly after Mass, I went over to the priests’ residence and told Father I wanted to be a Catholic.

Later, I reflected on how contingent yet providential this all was. I think of St. Augustine’s account of hearing the voice of a child chanting, “Take up and read,” and he took up and read . . . “and all his doubts vanished.”

Of course there was an immense difference. Augustine’s conversion involved a long intellectual struggle, and a moral one—“and all his doubts vanished”—his writings bear witness to that. After I came into the Church, it was not easy *to become* a Catholic. Changing the direction of one’s life, one’s attitudes, one’s habits of thought and practice was not so easy a matter. Here the emotions can be unruly masters and it was only by hanging on to the truths I knew by God’s grace that I could weather the temptations—and at times in desperation, to the thought expressed by St. Peter—“where else would I go.”

I have told you my ‘story’, not John’s, because it is a very personal experience. John’s story I know only in an extrinsic way. And I should add here

that during the period before coming into the Church, John and I had been reading with Father parts of the *Summa*. Reason accompanied the whole process. It was reason and grace that brought us to the Church.

I would like now to go back to pay tribute—a tribute long overdue—to the many persons who so influenced John's and my life and to whom we owe so much, and first of all to the priest who taught, instructed and baptized us, separately I should add. John and I were baptized a month and a half apart and went our separate ways for several years but were always in touch with one another. Indeed our paths often crossed. John was just finishing his PhD at Laval, when I went there for graduate work.

The priest was Father Belleperche, whom some of you may remember. He was a very human priest who loved people and brought many into the Church and many back to the Church. And he loved philosophy! On the least provocation he would engage whomever he met in philosophical discussion. He introduced us to Mortimer Adler, with whom we became personal friends. Father had become interested in Mortimer through his writings and immediately began engineering lectures for Mortimer in Detroit. I say 'engineering' because Father had the amazing ability of persuading people he knew to sponsor talks on philosophy. It was through Mortimer that John went on to the University of Chicago to study under Carnap, which eventually led to his PhD thesis at Laval on "The Meaning of Meaning." And it was through Mortimer that I went to Manhattanville. Mortimer had given many talks at Manhattanville and knew the President, Mother Dammann, very well, so he had only to ask and I was given a scholarship, for which I am grateful to this day. At that time Manhattanville was considered the best girls' Catholic college in the country. In proof of it, we never read a secondary source in philosophy, only the texts of the great philosophers themselves.

And it was Father Belleperche who introduced us to Charles DeKoninck. The story behind this is that Charles, who had entered the Dominican Order in Belgium, had had to leave the Dominicans because of an ear disease that disrupted his physical sense of balance, and was back in his hometown, working in a menial position in the library at the University of Detroit. Father in his usual friendly way, engaging Charles in a discussion of some philosophical point, discovered how learned he was in philosophy, for Charles during the year he was in the hospital in Belgium, hoping for a cure and return to the Dominicans, studied under the tutelage of a Dominican, well-known for his profound grasp of St. Thomas, Father Matthies. His method of teaching was to ask Charles, when they took up a question in the *Summa* or elsewhere in St. Thomas' writings, "Why does St. Thomas take up this question here, and why before the next question?" It was owing to this inculcation of a

sense of order, that if one asked Charles where St. Thomas had said something on this or that point, he could give you every reference and every context in which St. Thomas had said it.

By the time we met him at Laval—this was after his studies at Louvain and his second year at Laval—Charles had studied in this fashion everything St. Thomas had written and all the commentaries at least twice, besides all of the Aristotelian corpus. And we studied the texts in like fashion at Laval, both the philosophical and theological works, with all the other contexts brought into play—the methodological, the physical, the metaphysical, whatever else would illumine the points at issue. Let me give you an instance of this, a much later instance that I recall vividly. Charles taught graduate courses in philosophy at Notre Dame every Fall semester for five years—and lived with us—and in one of the last courses he taught there he spent the whole semester in this fashion on the phrase ‘abstraction from matter’ in St. Thomas’ Prologue to Aristotle’s *Physics*, setting forth what Aristotle had in mind as St. Thomas understood it, together with all the contexts that would explicate that phrase. This included the modern contexts as well, for Charles knew all the latest work in linguistic analysis, science, philosophy of science and mathematics. In fact most of his published works, and many of his public lectures, were on those matters in which the moderns ‘touched’, i.e., had a bearing on those of the ancients, especially Aristotle. It was an invaluable way to study philosophy.

So far I have talked only of those who influenced us most, but have not mentioned the background of all this—the ‘ferment’ going on inside and outside of the Church at that time. Many of the older members of course will remember it and I wish I could convey it to the younger ones. There were the great names, Maritain, Gilson, Pegis, soon Father Owens, and in another area altogether, someone like Thomas Merton. There was all the turbulence at the University of Chicago with—as it was said—a Jewish philosopher teaching Catholic philosophy at a Methodist university. But there were many others, lesser known perhaps but contributors to the ‘ferment’ nonetheless. I think of someone like Carol Jackson, who published a magazine for the ordinary intelligent layperson on philosophical, theological and spiritual matters, called *Integrity*, and many, many others who through their books and articles were contributors to it. It was a ‘ferment’ turned to and focused on the traditional philosophy and theology of the Church, which brought many into the Church and engendered a respect for its teaching among those interested in substantive discussions of philosophical matters.

And last but certainly not least, it was Father Belleperche who introduced us to this Association which, as you can imagine, he dearly loved. It gave him the opportunity to talk philosophy with people of like mind to his heart’s content.

John's first work for the Association—as I recall it—was at the meeting in St. Paul in 1950. He was local chairman in charge of arrangements for that year's meeting. My memory of it is not of the philosophical subject of the meeting nor of the papers, but of Father Hart, the long-time secretary of the Association. Father Hart was delighted with the St. Paul meeting because for the first time the Association had made—instead of—lost money on the banquet. In making the arrangements, John had persuaded James J. Hill's granddaughter, who had become a good friend of ours through taking a night-school course of John's—in logic of all things—to sell tickets for the meetings and banquet to all her friends. We had a crowded house that night—and profit for the Association. John had been a student of Father Belleperche's in more fields than philosophy.

John was also chairman for the arrangements of the meeting at Notre Dame in 1961, and served as chairman of the Committee on International Congresses for 9 years, as President of the Association in 1966, and as editor of *The New Scholasticism* for 12 years.

My connection with *The New Scholasticism* began shortly after we came to Notre Dame in 1954, when Vincent Smith asked me to read articles and copy-edit the journal. How did I happen to acquire that ability? Through John. After teaching philosophy part-time at St. Catherine's College in St. Paul for two years, two Dominicans came to teach full-time in the philosophy department. In my idleness, I had begun to translate the *Peri Hermeneias*. Back when John and I had first read the *Summa* with Father Belleperche, I had become imbued not only with a love of philosophy but with a desire to read St. Thomas and Aristotle in the original, and to that end had majored in the classics at Manhattanville as well as philosophy, and here was my first opportunity to put my mind to it. Then a letter came from the alumnae personnel office at Manhattanville about a job-opening as editor at the *Catholic Digest*. I read it, passed it on to John, saying "Throw it away, I'm not interested." John persuaded me to go for an interview, in which I argued for an hour against my being hired and ended up hired. There I learned to edit, and also learned the processes involved in getting out a journal. I have been doing it ever since, except for the few years Vincent Smith was at St. John's before he resigned as editor in 1965 and John became editor.

What I have been pointing towards in this perhaps over-long personal saga is the safeguards and importance to the faith of, first of all, grace, or better, the disposition for grace, and of philosophy and theology. To put it in another way, the importance of faithfulness to the teaching and practices of the Church, and of a true and increasing knowledge of philosophy and theology, in a less formal way of course for some than for others. In a proportionate way, I think this is important for everyone in the Church and I

see it as most important in relation to the present restlessness and crises in the Church on practical and theoretical matters—another sort of ‘ferment’—in the opposite direction.

My reasoning on this is personal but it seems to me it applies in a wider context. You will have noticed perhaps a progression in this saga. I at least am very aware of philosophy leading me to the faith. It is not incidental that the Church sees the proofs for the existence of God and of the immortality of the soul as propaedeutic to the faith and theology. And I am very aware of the faith leading me, nay pushing me to understand the faith graciously given to me by God which should, in turn, lead to a deeper spiritual life. These were all woven together in John’s and my life—a sort of seamless garment that made us one in what we were and did. You will perhaps say this is unusual but I think it should not be. I have always been a bit annoyed by people saying, ‘but you are a convert, that is the difference.’ It is really the other way around. I have always envied those who have had the faith and the graces for growing in it from their childhood. To me—and to John—those who have, always were far above us—an example to us of what we should be but were not yet.

Finally, I would like to speak of the importance of this Association in all of this. To me and to John, this Association, with its roots in the faith and in reality, its openness to the truth in other philosophical positions, its sense of tradition and of history, yet at the same time of the importance of understanding and addressing the present problems in practical and theoretical matters, and certainly not least, the lasting friendships it begets, has always been a fruitful source of inspiration for our lives and the work we were called upon to do. This surely is the case for all of us. And at this time and in the present ‘ferment’ in which we find ourselves, there is plenty of work to be done—in all the areas of philosophy, and especially in its task and privilege of defending theology and the truths of the faith. Though it is not my part to do this, I would like to wish all of you well and encourage you in your work in philosophy.

Let me close with one final remark. It is my sincere conviction that it is to this Association this medal should be given, for fostering all of us and our work in the field of Catholic philosophy.

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