

Elders, Leo SVD. *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors: The Philosophers and Church Fathers in His Works*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018. pp. 381. ISBN: 978-0-8132-3027-6.

One of the most prominent modern men once said, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” That man, was no other than Isaac Newton. If that were true of the famous physicist, it must also be true to one of the greatest philosophers and theologians that the Catholic Church had produced in the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas. This book, written by Leo J. Elders, SVD, brings us back in time to trace the philosophical thoughts over centuries of treatises before Aquinas. He also shows us that even among the wisest of the saints and the saintliest of the wise, a potential mind would only be in actuality if there are great predecessors that paved the way for the development of thought, revolutionizing the Christian doctrines and the whole world. This book is a product of years of research and it has come about because of Elders’ curiosity of how each of the philosophers and theologians whom Aquinas cited had influenced him given the massive production of books and articles that circulated around the globe. As readers leaf through the pages, they must understand that the great personalities were aids to Aquinas without compromising the Catholic teaching and tradition, and rejected whatever was not helpful in explaining or defining them.

Elders approaches his discussion with a chronological roster with regard to the time frame of Aquinas’s predecessors. He also categorized the books and concepts that Aquinas found notable either to be critically commented on or to be “christianized.” Among the predecessors we can revisit are Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Seneca and Cicero, the Gnostics and the Neoplatonists. Among the Church Fathers, there are Augustine, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Great, John Damascene and Anselm of Canterbury. The Commentaries on Two Treatises of Boethius, the Platonism of Pseudo-Dionysius, and the Metaphysics of the *Liber de causis* also form part of this work. Finally, who would forget the Islamic tradition of Avicenna and Averröes and the Jewish philosophies of Avicbron and Maimonides which helped make Thomism suitable for all Abrahamic religions?

The author introduces Plato as the first protagonist not only of Thomism but also of the Christian world. From here, he claims the evidence that the Christians and the Greek Fathers were not Aristotelians but instead Platonists. Saints Basil and Augustine, to name a few, advocated for the release of the soul from the body which imprisons it. One of the most famous doctrines that Aquinas found useful from Platonism was that “according to Plato there are two substances separated from matter: God, the Father of the world, and his Intellect or Spirit, in whom all the Ideas or essences of things are present.” The notion of the soul as an intrinsic self-motion (*sui motio ab intrinseco*) was also Plato’s original. Plato taught that the sensitive souls and the souls of irrational animals are immortal; however, Aquinas found this impossible. For Aquinas, Plato must be greatly admired for his idea of the good and of God, which

is the universal cause of being. While a grain of truth may be found in Platonism, Aquinas was also critical of Platonists because they show much interest in the ideal more than the material world. They were more concerned with the categories of our intellect than the sensible things from which certainty can be derived.

Respectively, that must have been the very reason why Aquinas leaned more on Aristotle's concepts because the human senses which are common to all (without discriminating against the disabled) draw more certain knowledge which in turn can be universal. Although Aristotelianism is commendable, we cannot discount the fact that Arians used Aristotelian logic in a totally unjustified way to attack the doctrine of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ. As a result, fewer Christians paid high regard to Aristotle. Even after a centuries-long of the definition of doctrines, we would be able to understand why in the time of Aquinas, his contemporaries found him liberal in his ideas. From Aristotelianism, Aquinas made his own brand of the doctrine of categories of being (i.e. substance and accidents) and came up with rules for scientific reasoning and proofs of the Prior Analytics. Although while patronizing Aristotle, Aquinas was careful, especially when the time came that he needed to distance himself from Aristotle's belief in the eternity of the world because this would imply that Aquinas would also express that divinity does not only belong to God, who is the First Cause, but also to other beings. Nonetheless, Aquinas's familiarity with the works of the Stagirite and whom he refers to in his *Summa Theologiae* as "the Philosopher" shows that Aristotle's teachings are close to the truth of the Christian doctrine, including the sacraments. It is no wonder that even during the last years of Aquinas's life, commentaries on Aristotle, such as the *Commentary on De Anima*, the *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, the *Exposition of the Ten Books of the Nicomachean Ethics*, *The Sentencia libri Politicorum*, and many others still flooded his study room.

As we move further, we will be able to discover more about the transition from Greek thought to Roman thought. Stoicism, indeed, came from Greece but it was embraced and popularized by Romans. It could have been surprising to any reader of Aquinas to discover that he also read about the believers of mere fatalism. This finds an opportunity for any learner to be more investigative of Aquinas's claims through the stoics, for example. Venturing on the Romans, we would be able to see how Aquinas tamed the dangerous minds of Seneca and Cicero. It is unfair for these dead Romans not to be able to defend their positions, but Aquinas did otherwise. Highlighted in this section is Cicero, who also used Aristotle's concepts. With the spread of influence of the Roman philosophy containing alarming teachings, Aquinas combatted Cicero with the same amount of knowledge that he had of the Stagirite. One case would be Cicero's claim that all sins are equal. Since all sins are privations of the good, it is but proper to put them on equal footing. Aquinas rejects this by stating that Cicero is mistaken by the Aristotelian doctrine of the possibility that the wise man may have moderate passions. Aquinas also opposes Cicero's superficiality that free will is useless because God foresees all things and is certain of the outcome of whatever happens. While stoicism may not be in line with the Christian faith, we should also find its

doctrine of the logos – the universal cosmic reason and law – salvific and which also brought Justin Martyr, a convert, closer to Christianity.

As a theologian, Aquinas has always relied on those whom he called “*sancti doctores*,” who are more commonly known today as the “Fathers of the Church.” It was quite amazing how Aquinas was able to synthesize his responses by citing the pastoral character of these great figures and the scholastic theology of his time. Among the Fathers, Augustine was cited the most. Aquinas looked up to him as an authority who was a pastor not only of his own flock in Hippo but of the universal Church. Notable of Augustine’s notion was human cognition wherein knowledge passes first through the senses, and with the help of divine illumination, a thing is known. “God is the father of this spiritual light which enlightens our minds.” While we can say that Aquinas must have acquired the same concept, Aquinas was not content with the answer. Instead, he made sure that the senses were involved in *ideogenesis*, which will aid the intellect to pursue the truth which culminates in God. It was also through Augustine that Aquinas was able to develop answers about the distinction between creatures and their act of being. The doctrine of participation is also an idea developed by Aquinas wherein all that God has made has likeness with Him. Above all, the immutability of the divine being remains central, and that in the simplicity of God, there is no distinction between his essence and his properties. Next in line is Saint Jerome, whose citation in Aquinas’s works are difficult to find. He was mostly mentioned whenever Aquinas cites the psalms. While considering Jerome as an authority concerning evangelical poverty, monastic life and chastity, and a true companion in understanding the Sacred Scriptures, there were also statements that Aquinas corrected especially in the commentaries. Jerome has been cited in *Contra impugnantes* and the twenty-third chapter of *De perfectione vitae spiritualis*. Among this generation of the Fathers of the Church, one of the most outstanding preachers was also greatly admired by Aquinas and that is no other than “the golden mouth,” John Chrysostom. It was a blessing for Aquinas to have access to the Latin translations of the homilies of Chrysostom in the Gospels. Thus, it is undeniable that his name appears in the *Catena aurea* (on the four Evangelists) and the *Expositio super Matthaicum* and *Expositio super Joannem*, and the *Summa Theologiae*. Just like the Greeks, Aquinas found Chrysostom as an exemplary scholar of the Sacred Scriptures. It was as if no other views need to be accepted because of the profundity of the explanations that Chrysostom exercised. While Elders tries to stitch the connection of the thoughts of the Fathers of the Church, it is obvious that he does not want to swerve away from the time frame that he is establishing. As a result, Boethius comes into the picture and this name appears several times in the works of Aquinas especially in *De Trinitate* and *De Hebdomadibus*. It was through his influence that Aquinas developed the theory of abstraction and the definitions of man’s free choice, of the concept of eternity and of beatitude. Above all, who would ever forget the definition of person to which we still adhere up to this day in the Christian tradition? – “an individual substance of rational nature.”

Continuing the study of Aquinas on the Patristic tradition, massive in his writings is the presence of Gregory the Great. According to Professor Enzo Portalupi, who examined the presence of Gregory, it is undeniable that he appears in *Quaestiones disputate de veritate* and *Quaestiones disputate de malo*. Aquinas considers Gregory an excellent specialist in moral theology. His genius in solving difficult theological questions is indubitable. He is often put side by side with Ambrose, who, on the other hand, is exquisite in giving the allegorical interpretation. As a scholar who adheres to this great figure, Aquinas used the *Liber moralium*, which is a forty-two-chapter commentary on the book of Job and adapted its meditative approach in consoling the clergy, the monks, and the laity towards the perfection of their Christian life. It was also from Gregory that Aquinas learned to emphasize the contemplative life, which he finds more delightful compared with the active life. One might even think that this could have been the beginning of Aquinas's influence on the Dominican motto articulating it as "*contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere*" ("to contemplate and to hand down what has been contemplated"). As we go along, it is also important to remember how Aquinas's metaphysics became so vivid, including the hierarchies of beings. Concerning that, he is indebted to a person whose name is more familiar to us as "Pseudo-Dionysius." It is evident that when Aquinas could not explain the doctrines using Aristotle's concepts, he would recourse to those who followed Plato. Although Aquinas did not write a commentary on the *De Coelesti Hierarchia*, he found this treatise useful in establishing the order which reigns among the angels and their hierarchy. Two other Fathers were cited by Aquinas: Anselm of Canterbury and John Damascene. Anselm was mainly quoted in the *Summa Theologiae Ia Ilae* in the difficulties put forward at the beginning of the articles. It was from him that Aquinas had taken the definition of justice as the rectitude of the will. Nevertheless, Aquinas tried to clarify whether justice depends only on the will. Thus, to understand the words of Anselm, Aquinas did not simply affirm the claim but rather pointed out that justice "is indeed the rectitude of the will, but the order of things we have to observe depends on God, who has placed things in a certain order" and that rectitude "depends on that which constitute it, namely, the rule of reason."

As we have said earlier, Aquinas was not confined to a purely Christian tradition, nor was he coined as a philosopher-theologian who "baptized" his pagan predecessors to Christianity. He found in our Muslim and Jewish brethren points of convergence that could strengthen his metaphysical views, and points of divergence which he opted to contradict.

Among the Islamic philosophers, Avicenna was his frequent reference. For what reasons could it be? In the medieval world, Avicenna was known for helping other philosophers understand Aristotle better. He even provided a general framework for the organization of philosophical studies such as metaphysics which he urged to be studied after mathematics and philosophy of nature. It was from Avicenna that Aquinas was able to exercise his knowledge on the purely metaphysical notions thus completing his work entitled *De ente et essentia*. Avicenna believed in a form

of creation-emanation retaining the causality of God which is necessary and eternal emanation, and that the world has existed forever. Aquinas opposes these theories by presenting several arguments to show that God creates beings through a decision of his will and not by process of natural necessity. As the First Cause, God himself gives being to all existing things. Another thing that Aquinas rejects is that Avicenna excludes from God the knowledge of individual things. As a rebuttal, Aquinas claims that the universal is not the singular, and whatever is real is made by God, who knows it in his causality. Again, whatever it is that Aquinas found beneficial for the Catholic Church's doctrines was used to agree with Avicenna and if it is not, Aquinas dissociates himself. Another Moslem philosopher by the name of Averroes was much affirmed by Aquinas in claiming that all forms are in act in the First Mover; they are in his intellect. Averroes was also quoted on the assertion that all the forms which are in potency in the first matter, are present in the First Mover. God is the most perfect since the perfections of all things are present in him." This is revolutionary in a sense when considering that Islamic theologians only saw the negative value in the attributes of God in their attempt to remove from him any composition. Notable among those that Aquinas acquired from the thought of Averroes is the declaration that the divine substance is the measure of all substances.

Forming part of the Arabic philosophical tradition are two Jewish philosophers, namely Avicbron (or Ibn Gabirol) and Moses Maimonides. Towards the end of 1271, which is also the release of his treatise *De substantiis separatis*, Aquinas devoted several chapters to the analysis of Avicbron's outlook. Among these are two ideas like the genus and the species of things which Avicbron considered real constituents of the individual being, and "being in potency" has in all beings the same sense thus, there is no difference between potency of primary matter and other forms of potentiality. While adhering to some ideas, Aquinas also has criticisms towards the method that Avicbron follows, which starts from what is lowest in the world to the beings on higher levels; this should instead be the other way around. By this, Avicbron mistakenly imitates the error of the first philosophers, who thought that all things were just forms of single primitive matter. Aquinas also refutes the theory of Avicbron, who regards matter as one and the same for all things but is distinct according to the different things in which it exists. Having Maimonides in the record, we can observe that there is a great contrast between the Old Testament and the New Testament, even in terms of ceremonial laws. There are citations in which Aquinas tries to point out the strengths and weaknesses of Maimonides' arguments when it comes to animal sacrifices offered for slaughter and for the expiation of Israel's sins. In the case of sexual morality, while Maimonides defends the case of Judah, who had intercourse with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, for example, he claims that it took place before the proclamation of the Law, thus becoming tolerable. On the part of Aquinas, however, he looks at it from the perspective of natural law wherein he borrows Maimonides' arguments about the regulations which forbid marriage between relatives but abbreviates them. There were also instances that Aquinas cites Maimonides in his *Summa Theologiae* and comments

on his work entitled *A Guide for the Perplexed*. From here, prophecies which included creation, the nature of angels and the destruction of the universe were also explained.

One of the strongest features of this book by Elders is his efforts in presenting with utmost accuracy the ideas of the predecessors of Aquinas. He uses the strongest arguments that Aquinas examined either to agree or disagree with. Laudable in this work are the categorized references that scholars can make use of as a map in tracing the thoughts of the philosophers and theologians. Truly, Aquinas is presented here as an exemplar of what a Catholic intellectual must be. That, in uniting the knowledge from various sources, every grain of truth must shed light and nothing must be hidden in order to gain wisdom, thus making it more possible to dialogue with our contemporaries. Thus, Elders also adopts the true manner of being a Thomist, wherein he acknowledges the works of other academicians who are experts in their respective fields. This is proof that Aquinas is relevant up to this day. Overall, this book is unique in such a way that no other books about Thomism had been presented in a systematic yet engaging manner, involving almost the whole library of Aquinas's thoughts. The work seems painstaking, and it was no joke for Elders to say that it took years for him to accomplish. From here, we see the importance of studying Thomism. Voluminous as it is, it is but a piece of straw among the bunches of straws that Aquinas considered during his mystical experience. In pursuit of truth, readers of this book might also want to exclaim, "*non nisi te, Domine.*"

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Lomague, Mervin. *Pasĕn ěd Agĕw: The Formative Years of Sison, Pangasinan*. Quezon City: Philippine Dominican Center of Institutional Studies, 2021. pp. 242. ISBN: 9789719309963.

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Pasĕn ěd Agĕw: The Formative Years of Sison, Pangasinan is the first published book of Lomague, but it shows how to write a good book on history and heritage. The well-researched book comprises eleven chapters. Furthermore, it covers the history of the town of Sison, Pangasinan, from its beginning as a barrio called Bolaoen of their mother town San Fabian de Angiuo, to its development during the Spanish colonial times and its independence as a pueblo called Álava up to the present history of the town renamed as Sison. The chapters were arranged in such a way that the reader is as if journeying in time. The chapters lead us to different challenges and struggles in the development of this rural town.