

Thomas F.O'Meara and Paul Philibert

Scanning the signs of the times: French Dominicans in the 20th century

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Reviewed by Dr Brian Lewis

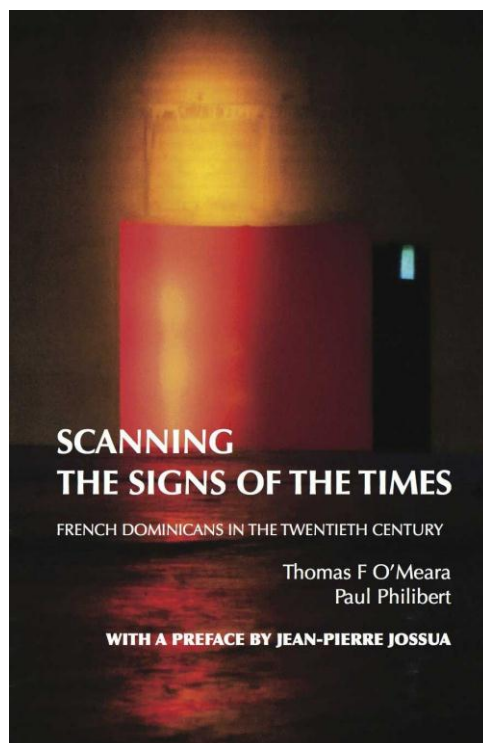
For those concerned about the Church in today's world this is an inspiring and challenging book, authored by two American Dominican theologians. It tells the story of the re-awakening of the Catholic Church in France in the first half of the 20th century through the medium of seven French Dominican theologians, who were among the intellectual leaders of their time and whose work profoundly influenced Ecumenical Council Vatican II.

In a France that had repudiated religion in favour of a rampant secularism, in a Church that had become paternalistic, authoritarian, defensive and withdrawn from the world, and also disillusioned with a theology that was static, unbiblical, un-ecumenical, and legalistic, these seven remarkable men became champions of a new 'apostolic creativity', emerging from a prophetic reading of the signs of the times (see the Second Vatican Council's "The Church in the World Today"). They sought to find ways out of 'the iron cage of ecclesiastical decrepitude'. They saw that the Spirit was alive and at work, not just in the Church but in the world around them, and they responded with a theology that was truly pastoral, vibrant and outreaching.

The introduction to the book, setting the seven in the context of their times, and the conclusion, summarising their contributions to theology and to the Church and looking to the future, were written jointly by the authors. In treating each of the seven individually, Thomas O'Meara wrote the first, third, fifth and seventh chapters. Paul Philibert wrote chapters two, four and six. In addition, there is a preface, contributed by eminent contemporary Dominican theologian, Jean-Pierre Jossua, which gives an interesting account of 'the great adventure', the story of the French Dominicans from 1930 to 1970, stressing first the formation of the intellectual life, evidenced by two new theological and philosophical journals, the founding in Jerusalem of the *École Biblique* by Père Lagrange, and the establishment of the *studium*, which became Le Saulchoir in Belgium when all religious orders were expelled from France in 1904 and later on near Paris. And secondly, the focus on the real world, especially in the light of the negative attitude of Rome towards any innovation.

The seven theologians discussed in the book were immersed in their training in this spirit of engagement with the contemporary world. They realised the value of the modern sciences and integrated them into their theology; they saw history not as 'a museum of the past' but as a vital source for learning how to approach the burning issues people face today; and above all they drew from the Bible and biblical scholarship. From the Bible they gained their insight into the central place of community for understanding the nature of the Church. Hence arose their focus on the theme of *the people of God* in their work.

However, although these men had basically the same religious and intellectual formation, they applied this into quite diverse projects and directions. The sketches that form the bulk of the book show this well. The first sketched, A-G Sertillanges, preceded the rest by a generation. His sermons, discussions of art and morality, and his treatment of Aquinas and science, had a profound impact on the thinking of his contemporaries and those who followed him.



The gifted M-D Chenu left his mark on Le Saulchoir and showed that theology cannot remain a static body of doctrine but must be ever open to living questions. As a prophet and theologian, Yves Congar built a theology that 'sees the church as a living organism', persuasively uniting the Scriptures and the pastoral life.

As an economist and moral theologian, L-J Lebreton developed and implemented the theme of social justice in society. P-A Liégé re-vitalised the field of catechetics and adult formation of the faithful. Jacques Loew, one of the first worker-priests, focused on the development of the spiritual life among workers, in families and in factories. The theology of the arts was the chosen field of M-A Couturier. 'What the priest-workers articulated in the factories, what the theologians wrote in their books on the interplay of nature and grace in the individual, what the liturgists and musicians led in assemblies of the baptised, Couturier pursued in art'.

As always with new ideas, conservatives find them dangerous and unacceptable. The Roman Curia was suspicious of these innovators. They were hounded and sometimes condemned and even banished. Their influence upon and, for some, their presence as consultants at Vatican II was a conclusive vindication of their thought and life work. What they said, wrote and did is still relevant today and we have much to learn from their ideas, their approach and their courage in facing the challenges of the Church in our day.