

Daily Meditation 01-19-23

MLK, Jr. and M. D. Chenu Oppose Dualism—and Pay a Price

Good morning.

Today we continue our meditations on the like thinking between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Marie-Dominique Chenu, French Dominican, with whom it was my privilege to study in Paris, 1968, which was in fact the last class he ever taught. He retired from his teaching after that class.

And I commend Dr. King for his perspicacity, his insight, that a lot of what was behind the reluctance churches in his day to share the struggle with him, the struggle of civil rights, was, in his words,

...completely other-worldly religion, which makes a strange, un-biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

This is a battle that Père Chenu took on in a big way, and his struggles as a theologian, and an historian with the dogmatists in Rome, some of whom were Dominicans also at the Angelicum, the Dominican seminary there. And this is a battle that he waged all his life.

And of course, they held all the power in the institution at that time. They put his book on the Index in 1942. And they banished him from living in Paris, for example, from writing, publishing. It didn't deter him from thinking or studying, and he spent years writing, but not publishing. And he plumbed the depths, really, of Thomas Aquinas' teachings and the history of Christian theology.

And I quote him as saying that,

...for Augustine, history was an embarrassment. People are not meant to be at home in the world, much less in changing the world.

And, of course, it is implicit in that last sentence that we're here not just to be in the world, but to change it. But for Augustine and Neo-Platonists, the world is not a beautiful place that is deserving of change. So Chenu says,

While St. Thomas had nothing of the historian about him, and while he emphasizes history only when interpreting scriptures, still, his conception of being in the world furnishes a sociological basis for acknowledging time and history as a place for the holy, no less than the profane.

So this is part of the creation spirituality of Thomas Aquinas, and of Père Chenu: that history is not something to be disdained; that it is something to be improved, and to be engaged in. And it holds a lot of beauty in itself and a lot of truth, a lot of the sacred, as we develop our science, and therefore our consciousness, about the story of how we got here 13.8 billion years ago; our capacity for being excited about history, the history of the universe, and history of how we got here as humans. All this excitement, I think stirs us to be actors in history.

But Chenu ran up against this buzzsaw, this wall in Rome, about how dogmatic formulas express a truth that is absolute and unchanging.

Now, there's no hint of Darwin in that statement; it came from Rome in the 1940s. That's for sure. And no humility about what the Buddhists call the impermanence of all things. And Chenu fought this mentality of absolutism, as I point out, and of course, he was called relativistic, and history was called relativistic.

And this is Cardinal Ratzinger in our time, saying his war is against, "a dictatorship of relativism." It's just amazing to me that the same objections made in 1942 and before the Second Vatican Council are reiterated in the 1980s and 90s and 2000s by Cardinal Ratzinger operating as Inquisitor General, and then as Pope.

So some people in that organization of the Roman Catholic Church did not grow a lot between 1942 and 2010 or so. It's pretty pitiful.

But Chenu fought the good fight, and he deserves to be respected. And some of his best ideas made their way into the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. And one thing I admire about him is he was not bitter for the way he was treated. He had a good sense of humor and was able to laugh at the Vatican when I had him in class in 1968. He had enough understanding of history to know that we can move beyond history and make our own.

Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow.