

FABRO, CORNELIO,

*La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo San Tommaso d'Aquino.*

Segni, Editrice del Verbo Incarnato, 2005, 427 pp., € 35.00

Those interested in Thomistic studies will be delighted to know that with the work being reviewed the first concrete step in a plan to publish the *Opere complete* of the great Italian student of the Angelic Doctor, Cornelio Fabro, has come to fruition. The present volume is listed as number three in the series, but it is the first actually published. It was written originally as the doctoral dissertation of its author, presented to the Faculty of Theology of the Angelicum in 1937. I was able to find the record of

the presentation of this thesis in the archives of this university. Its two readers were Mannes Matthijs and Henri Dominique Simonin. Not surprisingly it received a note of *maxima cum laude*. The text under review was subsequently published and went to a third edition. It is the text of this third edition that is in our hands today. It contains, incidentally a full indication, by the editor of the present volume, of the variations between its first, second, and third editions.

Fabro begins his thesis with a doctrinal orientation of the problem of participation, considering it as involved with a composition that is both notional and real. By this he refers, in the first instance, to the participation involved when, for instance something specific is said of something generic (or when something singular is said of something specific) or, in the second instance, when a substance stands as a subject to an accident (or when prime matter stands as a subject to a substantial form). Between the genus and the species of a things there is no real distinction. Between an a substantial subject and its accidents there is a real distinction. The participations mentioned in both examples, however, are both instances of predicamental participation. These are to be carefully distinguished from transcendental participation. This latter refers to the way in which an act of being, an *actus essendi*, is present in created things. In this latter there is always a real composition of essence and the act of existing. It is important to note that in this work Fabro limits himself to a consideration only of "static" participation, be it predicamental or transcendental. He does not *ex professo* develop a study of the "dynamic" participation involved in efficient causality. I take it that this is, at least in part, reserved for consideration in a second and considerably later masterwork, his *Participation et causalité selon S. S. Thomas d'Aquin* (1961), although the question of causality figures in a number of not unimportant intervening works as well.

In the early work under review Fabro having delimited the type of participation which he wishes to study, then proceeds to a consideration of the founts of St. Thomas's doctrine of this type of participation. On this matter he distinguishes between the primary founts constituted by Plato and Aristotle, and the secondary Neoplatonic founts crystalized in the Neoplatonic Christians - St. Augustine, Pseudo-Denis, and Boethius. In two of three appendices to his consideration of the secondary founts of St. Thomas's doctrine on participation he takes up this topic as it figures in the *Liber de causis* and in Avicenna.

With admirable order Fabro moves on to consider participation in the doctrine of St. Thomas first as it involves predicamental predication and then as it involves transcendental predication. This doctrinal section begins with a brief consideration of the realism of St. Thomas's thought. The study, after the central doctrinal section, then applies the Thomistic doctrine of participation to supernatural realities, in particular as it figures in the notions of grace and glory in the spiritual lives of Christians and as it figures in Christ himself. In a conclusion Fabro argues for the originality of

St. Thomas's doctrine of participation inasmuch as it constitutes a synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian elements.

If Fabro is admirably direct and ordered in the overall presentation of his thought in this work, it is no less true that he is always willing to deviate from his main line of thought to take up whenever the occasion presents itself, usually in fascinating footnotes, all sorts of side issues. For instance, in speaking of the importance of St. Thomas in the thought of the Church, at the beginning of his book, Fabro in a militant footnote indicates his disagreement with Cardinal Ehrle, who already wished to distinguish between the permanently valid general configuration of the thought of St. Thomas and the specific aspects of the Angelic Doctor's thought set forth in the Twenty Four Theses, this latter aspect remaining, at least temporarily, beyond any definitive judgments. Fabro does not share Ehrle's stance.

At the point of development reached in Fabro's thought which is represented by this early work he has not yet judged that the so called classical tradition of interpretation of the thought of St. Thomas was seriously flawed. He asks the relevant questions, but in this early work he indicates that he is not ready to make an informed response. What Fabro is willing to say here, however, is that St. Thomas is basically Aristotelian in his philosophical thought. He introduces Platonic elements in his thought, of which the notion of participation is the most important. Moreover, Fabro attempts to show that St. Thomas became far less hostile to many of the particular doctrines of Plato as his own thought progressed. Nonetheless, it is clear to Fabro that the Angelic Doctor was basically Aristotelian.

If St. Thomas was basically Aristotelian, he was not by any means merely an Aristotelian. In fact by introducing the notion of participation, understood in his own way, into his philosophical doctrine St. Thomas shaped a higher synthesis of thought, a synthesis of thought which is not only original but profoundly important. The Thomistic synthesis of participation is based upon the Angelic Doctor's understanding of the primacy of the *actus essendi* and the fact that in God alone is this *actus essendi* not really distinct from the divine essence whereas in all creatures the *actus essendi* is really distinct from the essence. This doctrine is not reducible to the Aristotelian doctrine of the relation between act and potency in creatures. The distinction between the *actus essendi* and essence in creatures, as it stands in St. Thomas, is parallel to and embodies the distinction of act and potency as it stands in Aristotle, but because of the *esse intensiva* (a phrase, be it noted and as Fabro well knows, not found in St. Thomas but introduced in the text of Fabro) brought to light by St. Thomas the doctrine of the Angelic Doctor on the *actus essendi* and essence and the manner in which the creature participates in the former transcends in a crucial way what is indicated by the Aristotelian notion of act and potency.

In the conclusion of the work at hand Fabro attempts to show how it is that St. Thomas's doctrine of participation transcends the Aristotelian doctrine of act and

potency and of the Philosopher's doctrine causality. No doubt, participation involves causality, but it is not to be reduced to the notion of causality. In particular it is not to be reduced to the notion of efficient causality, and this even if efficient causality is expanded to make room for external formal causality. Participation means something more. "The term 'to participate' has the property of expressing at once the essential dependence of the participating on the participated and at the same time the absolute metaphysical excess (*l'eccidenza*) of the participated relative to the participating. The 'to participate' comes thus to express, in a manner to which no other philosophical term can pretend, the relation which finite being (*ente*) has to infinite being (*essere*), the creature to the Creator. (p. 344) Fabro's point is clear enough in regard to the transcendental participation of a creaturely *actus essendi* in the infinite *actus essendi* of God. Is the same "excess" of richness indicated by the notion of participation as clearly evident when one is only on the level of predicamental participation, particularly when one thinks of the participation of the species in the genus or of the individual in the species? Is it, moreover, as clearly evident, if at all, when one considers the participation of a limited being in its dependence in being not on God but on other limited but efficiently causal beings? Perhaps these questions are beyond the limited scope of Fabro in the work at hand. Nonetheless both Fabro and St. Thomas himself appear to understand the virtuality of the notion of participation, that is the "metaphysical excess" of the participating over the participated, in this way. I find myself challenged to know why.

I have ended this brief notice on the republication of Fabro's dissertation on participation with a question. This I mean to be indicative of how philosophically stimulating this great work is. I have read it through once, and reread it in many parts as well, in preparing my review. I will not be able to be done with it now that my review is finished. We have in the book at hand a fount to which one is bound to return again and again in the work not merely of writing a few words of a review but in the work of philosophical understanding itself.

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