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Karim Schelkens

Thomas Aquinas or John Henry Newman? The Intellectual Itinerary of Johannes Willebrands

In the eyes of contemporary Church historians, Johannes Willebrands (1909–2006) is a well-known figure. Instead of choosing to investigate already well known elements of his oeuvre, which has consisted largely of promoting ecumenical dialogue, this article aims to analyse his much lesser known early years. Therefore, our topic will be this: born in 1909, educated throughout the 1920s in the Minor Seminary of the Dutch Redemptorist province and subsequently at Warmond, the Major Seminary of the diocese of Haarlem, Willebrands was trained – as were so many priestly candidates of his generation – in the general framework of Neo-Scholasticism. This was even reinforced at the moment when he enrolled in the doctoral study program of Thomist philosophy at the University of St. Thomas in Rome, also known as the Angelicum. At first glance, Willebrands's philosophical and theological curriculum reveals nothing in particular, however, what remains important is the fact that it was his generation that would increasingly abandon its neo-Thomist roots for other paradigms of thought. The same is true for this trainee in philosophy, who, along the lines of his educational trajectory discovered the writings of John Henry Newman. The effect of this discovery would prove to be pertinent, and would last until his later career as a pioneer of Christian unity¹. Of particular interest at this juncture was the fact that his study of Newman's epistemology brought about a profound shift, enabling him to adopt a critical stance towards the neo-Thomist study program of his youth. The aim of this study is to carefully retrace the steps of this philosophical itinerary, and to examine how abandoning the neo-Thomist apparatus arose. While not a *pars pro toto*, Willebrands's particular story may help to illustrate the development and struggle of many intellectually

¹ A brief glance at the inventory of Willebrands's personal archives immediately illustrates the importance of Newman in his life and work. See Declerck, Leo, *Inventaire des archives personnelles du Cardinal J. Willebrands, secrétaire et président du Secrétariat pour l'Unité des Chrétiens*, Leuven 2013 (henceforth 'Archives Willebrands'). We may also refer to the bibliography of Cardinal Willebrands, compiled by ter Steeg, Maria, "Bibliography Johannes Cardinal Willebrands," in: Adelbert Denaux/Peter De Mey (ed.), *The ecumenical Legacy of Johannes Cardinal Willebrands*, Leuven 2013, 331–367. Also, see Merrigan, Terrence, "The Enduring Influence of Newman on Willebrands' Ecumenical Views," in: idem., 31–47.

skilled young Catholics of his generation, who found themselves caught between the modernist crisis and the renewals of Vatican II. Before retracing Willebrands's journey, we will begin by sketching out a broad thematic horizon to clarify how the tensions between Newmanian and Thomist thinking developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I A Suspicious Reference Point

The so-called 'modernist crisis' is unavoidable as a *cantus firmus* to the tale told in this contribution: it is clear the conflict between the neo-Thomist paradigm and other alternatives that emerged in the Interbellum has its roots with the crisis of modernism that shook the Catholic intellectual elite in the first decades of the twentieth century. Although the link between the Victorian theologian John Henry Newman and the event of the Second Vatican Council may seem remote, this is all but the case. Newman's oeuvre is consistently said to have had a profound impact on the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).² Naturally, this claim ought to be received with some skepticism on the part of the historian. At the very least, one should acknowledge that any influence of Newman on Vatican II would have necessarily been an indirect or mediated influence. Here the generations of Catholics that lived and worked between the nineteenth century and the conciliar era must have played a decisive role. Strikingly, a wide array of Catholic intellectuals molded by the discourse of neo-Thomism had rediscovered and received Newman in their own age and for their own purposes. Here, one may think of important theologians such as Romano Guardini, Yves Congar, and Louis Bouyer.³ Only through this lense can an understanding of Newman's impact on the council be studied. Yet this contribution will not go that far. We will limit ourselves strictly to the reception of Newman in the first half of the twentieth century, and the way in which this reception clashed with the prevailing models of Catholic thought. It should not surprise us then, that from very early on, Newman was considered a 'dangerous' influence on Catholic trainees in theology and philosophy.

The origins of this suspicion can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Already in the 1840s, a first French translation of the

² Lash, Nicholas, "Newman and Vatican II," in *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011): 243–246.

³ Cf. Nichols, Aidan, *From Newman to Congar. The Idea of Doctrinal Development from the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council*, Edinburgh 1990.

*Essay on Development*⁴ was published in Paris, marking a decisive step toward the continental reception of Newman. Throughout the next decades this reception would face serious obstacles within Roman Catholic intellectual milieu's, because of the dynamic approach of divine revelation and truth developed by Newman,⁵ and certainly because he seemed a stranger to the continental Catholic philosophy so marked by the spread of the neo-Thomism of the Roman School. The latter would become very influential and was promoted by a Catholic hierarchy seeking to install a uniform brand of Catholicism. When in the first decades of the twentieth century the modernist crisis tended to challenge neo-Thomism through an emphasis on the importance of historical and empirical sciences, Newman's epistemology was quickly associated with so-called 'modernist' tendencies.

There is no doubt that several so-called modernist theologians in the first decades of the twentieth century saw Newman as a source of inspiration in their striving toward a Catholicism that ought to take historical contingency seriously.⁶ Frequently influenced by Paul-Thureau Danguin's study of Newman⁷ authors such as Alfred Loisy discovered a type of theological discourse that appeared to escape the deductive and a-historical methodologies so key to neo-Thomist manuals in the early twentieth century. Gradually, Newman became an alternative to neo-Thomism. Or, seen from a different angle, Newman was also regarded as a threat to neo-Thomist philosophy and theology. His reputation did not improve when prolific authors such as Alfred Loisy (e.g. in his notorious book *L'Évangile et l'Église*) started making explicit references to Newman's writings to warrant their rejection of the lack of historical consciousness in Catholic theology.⁸ Loisy was not alone. Other prominent voices such as George Tyrrell,

4 Newman, John Henry, *Histoire du développement de la doctrine chrétienne ou motifs de retour à l'église catholique*, transl. Jules Gondon, Paris 1848. Gondon's French translation received ample praise from the side of the famous liberal catholic Parisian archbishop Darboy. See Darboy, Georges, "M. Newman," in: *Le Correspondant* 29 (10 Jan. 1852): 385–407.

5 Cf. Meszaros, Andrew, "A Theology of History and Doctrinal Development according to J.H. Newman and Y. Congar," Dissertation, Leuven 2014.

6 Daly, Gabriel, "Newman, Divine Revelation, and the Catholic Modernists," in: Terrence Merrihan/Ian Ker (ed.), *Newman and the Word*, Leuven 2000, 49–68.

7 Thureau-Danguin, Paul, *La renaissance catholique en Angleterre au XIXe siècle*, Paris 1903. The Oratorian friar Louis Bouyer, who played a considerable role in Willebrands' turn toward Newmanian thinking, has described Thureau-Danguin's study as one of "the best pieces of religious history which have appeared in the last fifty years." See Bouyer, Louis, "Newman's Influence in France," in: *The Dublin Review* 217 (1945): 182–188.

8 Cf. Lash, Nicholas, *Newman on Development. The Search of Explanation in History*, London 1975, 147; Lash, Nicholas, "Newman and A. Firmin," in: Arthur Hilary Jenkins (ed.), *John*

Henri Brémond and Édouard Le Roy,⁹ drew on Newman as a source of inspiration.¹⁰ A recent study on Newman by Andrew Meszaros puts it as follows:

On the theological level, the modernists see in Newman a figure seriously attempting to confront the problems posed to Christian faith by historical criticism. Both the Anglican and Catholic apologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century generally subscribed to a kind of *semper eadem* conception of revelation. Newman's *Essay on Development* was the beginning, in Catholic intellectual circles, of an effort to confront the inadequacy of this conception of revelation and doctrine.¹¹

This inadequacy touched upon the core of neo-Thomism itself. While many defenders of the Thomist tradition fostered an *a priori* suspicion of Newman's doctrines, the flipside of the coin was that those Catholic intellectuals on the lookout for renewal often turned into staunch defenders of Newman. Some names have already been mentioned for the French speaking territories, but the same was true for the Low Countries. Eminent Catholic intellectuals of the pre-Vatican II era, such as Willem Hendrik van de Pol, Paul Sobry, Adrian J. Boekraad,¹² Jan Hendrik Walgrave, Johannes Hermanus Gunning en Cornelia de Vogel have all been deeply influenced by their reading of the Victorian age theologian. It is precisely here that the story of Willebrands fits in. In what follows we will first briefly retrace Willebrands's earliest educational curriculum to pinpoint the origins of his discovery of Newman. Then, we will focus on the way in which Willebrands's own intellectual itinerary gradually moves away from the Neo-Scholastic framework he fostered in his formative years, under the influence of Newman.

Henry Newman and Modernism, Sigmaringendorf 1990, 56–73. Burke, Ronald, "Was Loisy Newman's Disciple?" in: Mary Jo Weaver (ed.), *Newman and the Modernists*, Lanham MD 1985.

⁹ Tyrrell went as far as calling Newman, at least on the level of method, 'the father of the Modernists'. See Loome, Thomas Michael, *Liberal Catholicism, Reform Catholicism, Modernism*, Mainz 1979. See Le Roy, Édouard, *Dogme et critique*, Paris 1907, 285. Also, see Léonce de Grandmaison's study from this period, entitled "John Henry Newman considérée comme maître," in: *Études* 109 (1906): 721–750. For an historical approach, see Talar, Charles, "Newman in France during the Modernist Period. Pierre Batiffol and Marcel Hébert," in: *Newman Studies Journal* 2/1 (2005): 45–57.

¹⁰ Poulat, Émile, *Histoire, dogme, et critique dans la crise moderniste*, Tournai 1962, and more recently Jodock, Darrell e.a. (ed.), *Catholicism contending with Modernity. Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, Cambridge 2000.

¹¹ Meszaros, "A Theology of History and Doctrinal Development," 5.

¹² An outstanding introduction is found in Boekraad, Adrian J., *Kerngedachten van John Henry Newman*, Roermond 1966. It is worthwhile to read his review of Newman's epistemology, and the interpretation of it given by Przywara, Erich, "Aristotelische Erkenntnislehre bei Whately und Newman," in: *Philosophical Studies* 11 (1961–1962): 174–178.

II Carefully Selected Sermons Repeated

The story of Willebrands discovering the writings of John Henry Newman is frequently connected to the book published by Nico Greitemann, one of Willebrands's professors at the Major Seminary of Warmond. In his later memoirs, Greitemann proudly claimed to be the first to have triggered Willebrands into reading Newman.¹³ This is not entirely correct. The earliest seeds were sown before his time at Warmond, and can be traced back to the mid-1920s, when Willebrands attended the Minor Seminary of the Redemptorist Congregation, located in the small Limburg village of Vaals. After listening to a popular retreat preached by two Redemptorists, the twelve-year-old Willebrands decided to follow their path, and with permission of his parents he left his West Frisian home town of Bovenkarspel to be educated for six years in Roermond and Vaals.

The Redemptorist Minor Seminary in the 1920s stood fully in the tradition of late nineteenth century Catholic education, and inherited the spirit of Ultramontanism. While students were immersed in traditional Neo-Scholastic principles without being explicitly aware of it, the staff members were all too conscious of this option, seeing as they had all been obliged to sign the anti-modernist oath. This was not a remote issue, since the modernist crisis had also struck the Netherlands. This occurred in the form of an integrist campaign led by the editor of *De Maasbode*, Maria Anthonius Thompson, who had charged several theologians of holding modernist sympathies and of betraying the neo-Thomist philosophy promoted by the hierarchy.¹⁴ So, Willebrands and his peers were raised with the awareness that the two major sources of religious inspiration were Thomas Aquinas and Alphonse of Liguori.

Proper to their particular vocation, the Redemptorists placed a strong emphasis on the literary and rhetorical formation of future preachers. Concretely, minor seminarians were trained in preaching by learning to recite classic sermons by heart. Notwithstanding the fact that the younger generation of teachers started mocking the 'old ways' – they ironically explained their own congregation's abbreviation (C.Ss.R.) as 'carefully selected sermons repeated' –, students such as Willebrands were still molded in the classic way, and learned a collection of sermons by heart. The same principle was applied in the English course

¹³ Greitemann, Nico, *Op zoek naar de tweede onschuld*, Baarn 1981, 76

¹⁴ For a broad study of modernism in the Low Countries see: Kenis, Leo/Van der Wal, Ernestine (ed.), *Religious Modernism in the Low Countries*, Leuven 2013. Also, see Frijhoff, Willem/Spies, Marijke, *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective. 1900, the Age of Bourgeois Culture*, Basingstoke 2004, 384.

thought by Father Willem Reiring. It was there that Willebrands first encountered Newman, through the study of his complex and rich sermon entitled *The Second Spring*.¹⁵ This first encounter made a lasting impression on Willebrands, who was touched, not by the theological or epistemological bearing of Newman's words, but rather by the rhetorical quality and style of these words. In 1927 Willebrands completed his curriculum as a Minor Seminarian, and momentarily entered the Redemptorist novitiate. The stay was only brief, however, as he decided to leave the religious congregation after seven months. After a short period of doubt, he then entered the Major Seminary of Warmond to pursue his ecclesial path in the ranks of the secular clergy.¹⁶

III Newman versus Aquinas

It was at Warmond that an entirely different engagement with the Newman's oeuvre would emerge. In a much more explicit manner than in Vaals, neo-Thomist philosophy was taught here in the line of cardinal Mercier's *Manual of Modern Scholastic Philosophy*. Seminarians were continually introduced to the teachings of the Angelic Doctor and in the philosophy of Aristotle.¹⁷ In this environment, Willebrands proved to be an excellent student, who soon wrote several essays on the centrality of Aristotelian philosophy for the veracity of Catholic thought. He quickly made the jargon of Neo-Scholasticism his own, and could be caught writing phrases such as these:

Aristotle has launched the proposition which is fundamental to his entire philosophical framework, and which has remained the firm basis for the philosophy of Saint Thomas, i.e. the new, profound and uniquely satisfying solution of all philosophical problems: there exists a being in potentiality and a being in actuality, and both contain the full reality of being, be it in analogical sense.¹⁸

15 On Reiring and the educational training at the Redemptorist's Collegium Josephinum, see the materials in the Erfgoedcentrum Nederlands Kloosterleven, Archief redemptoristen, 5083: Codex chronicorum Vaals.

16 The details behind Willebrands leaving the novitiate are explained in Schelkens, Karim, "De l'inventaire à la vie. Quelques réflexions préparatoires à une biographie du Cardinal Willebrands," in: Declerck, *Inventaire des archives personnelles du Cardinal J. Willebrands*, 17–20.

17 Willebrands recalls this much later, in 1945, when he writes an obituary for the Warmond philosopher Theodoor Beysen, whom he credits for having developed neo-Thomism in The Netherlands in the line of Mercier. See Willebrands, Johannes, "In herinnering Mgr. Beysens, Warmonds blijvende roem," in: *De Tijd* (26 November 1945): 1.

18 Willebrands, Johannes, De Aristotelis, quam posuit de actu et potential doctrina. Hujus theoriae origo ejusque historica evolutio. Archives Willebrands, Dossier 18.4: De.

While in itself the citation above contains nothing out of the ordinary, it does illustrate the way in which seminarians like Willebrands were trained in defending the adequacy of the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm of thought as the only solution for all philosophical problems. On several occasions in his seminary years, Willebrands wrote small contributions in the seminarian's periodical *Cassiciacum*, each of them stressing the importance of Aristotle as the main source of inspiration for Catholic philosophy.¹⁹ So, one might ask: how does Newman fit this picture? The answer is indicated by mentioning *Cassiciacum*, for this student periodical also functioned as the official voice of the so-called Saint-Paul's Academy,²⁰ a student association which united the most intellectually skilled seminarians for sessions including lectures and debate. In the early 1930s, Willebrands emerged as a central figure in this circle.²¹ He would leave a mark on the group's gatherings, among others by pointing the attention of his fellow seminarians to the 'desire for unity in the English State Church.' He deliberately steered the Academy away from tendencies toward an all too 'sociological' approach of Catholic identity, and strove toward a more 'theologically oriented' approach. In August 1932, his retreat notes reveal how Willebrands sought to focus on 'a life of study and of devoting the joy and satisfaction of study to God. I should not only study sociology, but rather Scholasticism, so as not to lose contact with theological insight and with Christian philosophy.' In these same years, Willebrands developed a fascination for Anglicanism, which he saw as a *middle ground* between Calvinism and Roman Catholicism.

Most relevant for our purposes here is the valedictory speech he delivered at the very end of his curriculum. Only a week after receiving his priestly ordination, on June 3 1934, in front of the members of St. Paul's Academy he spoke about John Henry Newman. This lecture marked the start of his intellectual path for the coming years, since he was about to start his doctoral studies in philosophy, at the Angelicum in Rome. Willebrands's goodbye speech at Warmond can safely be regarded as programmatic for the direction he wished to take in his doctoral dissertation. Without any hesitation, the future philosopher opened with sharp criticism of the recent Newman-biography authored by James Lewis May – which had appeared in a Dutch translation for a few years:²² "these

19 Willebrands, Johannes, "De godskennis bij Aristoteles," in: *Cassiciacum* 5/2 (1930–1931): 44–50; Willebrands, Johannes, "Het godsdeed bij Aristoteles," in *Cassiciacum* 5/6 (1930–1931): 166–173.

20 de Haan, Peter, "Wetenschap en praktische vorming in de Warmondse studentenvereniging Paulus en het studententijdschrift Cassiciacum," in: *Trajecta* 9 (2000): 191–205.

21 See Noord Hollands Archief (NHA): Archives Major Seminary of Warmond 437.251.

22 May, John Lewis, *John Henry Newman*, Voorhout 1931.

types of biographies,” Willebrands said “have no other aim than to install in their readers an impression of Newman’s influence on persons who are open to beauty, be it in literature, in nature or in man’s existence.” However, the aesthetic quality of Newman’s discourse that had so struck Willebrands earlier on in Vaals no longer seemed relevant. A true comprehension of Newman, he argued, can only be reached by studying the epistemological writings, those which “Newman himself has called: the best things I have written: his Oxford University Sermons and his *Grammar of Assent*. These works contain his epistemology, and without due study of these writings the figure of Newman tends to appear as a much bigger mystery than it already is.”

At this juncture, it is clear that Willebrands was aware of the dubious reception of Newman in the world of continental Catholic philosophy. This did not prevent Willebrands from painfully misreading Newman. Where Willebrands entertained his audience by having Newman say that the “University Sermons [is] the best theological book I have published,” he was wrong. The original source he used contained exactly the opposite idea, since Newman actually judged his Oxford Sermons to be his “least theological book.”²³ More pertinent than this mistake, then, is the fact that Willebrands took on a very particular approach, since he was reading Newman through the interpretive lens of Johannes Vincentius De Groot.²⁴

De Groot, who died in 1922, was a Dominican friar who had served as one of the major promoters of neo-Thomism in the Netherlands around the turn of the century. As of 1894 he had occupied the chair of Thomist philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. In 1910, at the height of the modernist crisis, De Groot had compiled a series of his courses and articles and published them under the title *Denkers van onzen tijd*. The book contained a lengthy contribution on John Henry Newman’s notion of the certainty of faith. The 1918 reprint of this book now served as the cornerstone for Willebrands’s speech,²⁵ which amounted to an undisguised attempt at incorporating Newman’s epistemology within the categories of Aristotelian-Thomist philosophy. This did not go without some intellectual tensions, and Willebrands proved quite aware of that, when he said that “authors such as Dr. De Groot O.P. tend to want to confess with Oxford: *Credo in Neoman-*

²³ See the edition by Mozley, Anne (ed.), *Letters and Correspondence of John Henry Newman During his Life in the English Church*, vol. 2, London 1891, 407.

²⁴ On De Groot, see Monteiro, Marit, *Gods predikers. Dominicanen in Nederland*, Hilversum 2008, 158–160.

²⁵ Willebrands focused on the section, entitled *John Henry Newman over de gronden van godsdienstige zekerheid*, in Johannes Vincentius De Groot’s, *Denkers van onzen tijd*, Bursum 1918 (first edition: Amsterdam, 1910), 207–296.

num; apparently.” The comment that followed is remarkable: “they find it impossible to ponder the idea that Newman may have completely failed in his epistemological efforts.” This very idea provided the starting point for Willebrands’s further years of study, where the focus would remain on this single question: can one reconcile Newman’s idiomatic approach to (religious) truth with the demands of the neo-Thomist paradigm? In his Warmond speech he simply proposed the problem, without attempting to solve it. In his own words, it sounded like this:

We will see how Newman was in fact a convinced individualist. The individual always supersedes the universal; the individual is the only reality. Newman was convinced that it was his personal mission to save England’s Anglican Church. His entire life, he fought against liberalism and agnosticism, in order to safeguard religious dogma. It was this struggle which led him to develop his doctrine of religious certainty and the paths toward certainty. According to Newman any man can reach certainty, and once obtained it is never lost. Certainty, however, is not reached through logical reasoning, since Newman denies the power of the concepts of logic and the necessity of the laws of logic. Concrete and individual reality is only known through a personal act of comprehension, which is carried out instinctively. This doctrine is at odds with the doctrine of Saint Thomas Aquinas and amounts to sheer nominalism.²⁶

The word was out: Nominalism. Apart from the fact that Willebrands did not quite do justice to Newman’s actual thoughts, it is undeniable that the young priest all but identified with the Victorian Age cardinal. In fact, Willebrands moved to Rome with a clear intention to set up a neo-Thomist refutation of Newman’s philosophical writings. This is precisely why, when presented with the choice to go study either at the Gregorian University or at the Angelicum, Willebrands opted for the latter.²⁷ Newman, to him, posed both a threat and an intellectual challenge, and he made it all the more clear when presenting the members of Saint Paul’s Academy with three theses as the basis for public debate: first came the obvious statement that “the figure of Newman needs to be judged on the basis of his epistemology.” Next followed the idea that “Newman’s thesis on certainty leads to agnosticism;” and finally Willebrands stated that “Newman’s doctrine on the nature and development of human knowledge is a nominalist doctrine.” One can hardly find a clearer way to reject Newman.

²⁶ NHA, Warmond Seminary papers, 437.300: Paulus-Academie.

²⁷ Willebrands, Johannes, Notes personnelles, Archives Willebrands, Dossier 324.5.

IV Moving Beyond Neo-Thomist Apologetics

While at Warmond, Willebrands had become a fervent reader of the writings of Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange. More than to Mercier's open Thomism, he clung to the Roman neo-Thomist schools and devoured the Dominican philosopher's *magnum opus* on the knowledge of God.²⁸ Once in Rome, the doctoral candidate marveled at the possibility of taking courses with this renowned master. The results were satisfying. In the spring of 1935, Willebrands took the exam with Garrigou-Lagrange on '*De valore rationis apud Aristotelem*' and obtained the maximum score (20/20). This was all the more important to the philosophy student, since the course provided him with ammunition for the dissertation he started preparing in Rome.²⁹

After having enrolled at the Angelicum on November 26, 1934, Willebrands was lodged at the Dutch Pontifical College in Rome (Via Salvator Rosa), led by rector Msgr. Bernard Eras. One of the first steps he took as a Roman student in philosophy was to seek out a promoter for his dissertation. Upon the suggestion of Eras he contacted the Dutch Dominican Vincent Kuiper, who readily agreed to guide Willebrands. This choice of promoter illustrates the intentions he had: Kuiper was a professor in neo-Thomist philosophy at the Angelicum and in these years was director of the program in philosophy of the Dominicans in Rome. Along with Kuipers's agreement to guide a dissertation on Newman's epistemology, however, came a condition: he demanded that Willebrands's dissertation would demonstrate a clear awareness that he was "studying at a Thomist university, and that therefore his dissertation would have to pay sufficient attention to Saint Thomas, both on the levels of quality and quantity."³⁰ Willebrands had no objections whatsoever.

At this moment in history, Willebrands was not the only Catholic scholar to ask questions regarding the (in)compatibility of Newmanian and Thomist paradigms of thought. His dissertation project was clearly embedded in an atmosphere of the Interbellum, during which Catholic theologians such as Erich Przy-

²⁸ Garrigou-Lagrange, Réginald, *Dieu. Son existence et sa nature*, Paris 1914; Willebrands' retreat notes from this era also testify to the fact that he had read Garrigou-Lagrange's book *Perfection chrétienne et contemplation selon S. Thomas d'Aquin et S. Jean de la Croix*, Saint-Maximin 1923.

²⁹ Willebrands, Johannes, Libellus studiorum. Archives Willebrands Dossier 1.

³⁰ Willebrands, Johannes, Interview with cardinal Willebrands by Fr. Gerbert Goossens, Archives Willebrands Dossier 379.1.

wara undertook similar projects.³¹ Still, the stakes were different: Przywara's theological focus was pointed toward the problem of the analogy of being, and sought to open the debate with Barthian theology. Opposing the alleged positivism of revelation that occurred in Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* (divine revelation as radically contrasted – *senkrecht vom oben* – to human experience),³² Przywara outlined the Catholic position in line with authorities such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas and John Henry Newman. Willebrands was struck by Przywara's portrayal of Newman as an example of balanced Catholic reasoning. Through the readership of such voices, the Dutch doctoral student gradually distanced himself from De Groot's approach. He started to wonder whether Newman might not after all be reconcilable with sound Catholic doctrine. In the same years, Willebrands also began to read Henri Brémond and the Lutheran theologian Louis Bouyer – who would later convert to Catholicism –, authors who were clearly sympathetic to Newman as an alternative to the neo-Thomist paradigm.

Willebrands's Roman years gave him ample time for a more profound re-reading of Newman's oeuvre – which he consulted mostly in the library of Beda College –, and in particular of the *Grammar of Assent*, which would become the principal source for Willebrands dissertation. This close reading had an unexpected effect on the scholar. Had he initially thought to come up with a neo-Thomist refutation of Newman's ideas, instead he developed an increasing fascination for the way in which Newman combined the British empirical tradition with ample attention to patristic and platonic thought.³³ The result was that Willebrands found himself in an intellectual impasse, since on the one hand he acknowledged the failure of attempts (such as those by De Groot and Przywara) at a framing of Newman's epistemology in the categories of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, on the other hand he was forced to recognize the fact that Newman's Platonism kept him “far removed from Aristotelianism.”³⁴ This minor re-

31 Gladen, Karl, *Die Erkenntnisphilosophie J.H. Kardinal Newmans im Lichte der thomistische Erkenntnislehre beurteilt*, Paderborn 1934. Also see Przywara, Erich, *Einführung in Newmans Wesen und Werken*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1922; Przywara, Erich, *Religionsbegründung: Max Scheler – J.H. Newman*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1923.

32 Barth, Karl, *Der Römerbrief, 1919 (Gesamtausgabe)*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Zürich 1985.

33 In Willebrands's opinion, Platonism – quite other than Aristotelic thinking – constituted the major undercurrent of Newman's philosophical enterprise.

34 As will be explained further in this contribution, Willebrands never published his dissertation. It was published with a critical introduction recently, by Schelkens, K./Witte, H.P.J. (ed.), *J.G.M. Willebrands, De denkleer van kardinaal Newman*, Bergambacht 2013. For the reference made here, see page 33.

mark was found in the opening pages of Willebrands's dissertation, and stands to illustrate how Willebrands had started doubting the possibility of his own philosophical project. Before he started writing, he had read Louis Bouyer's landmark study on 'Newman and the Platonism of the English Soul,'³⁵ and Willebrands became convinced that the formal and logical reasoning, which are characteristic of neo-Thomist thought, suffered from its limited capacity to comprehend lived faith. To put things differently: Willebrands adhered to the value of Aristotelian Thomism as a method, but no longer found that the neo-Thomism in which he was raised could do justice to the complex manner in which concrete individuals arrive at religious experiences. Along with this new attention for the category of experience, the typical Newmanian distinction between notional and real comprehension entered the fore.

Willebrands was forced to reposition himself and to clarify his own position in the midst of a plurality of Newman-interpretations. In his dissertation, he would first critically distance himself from Henri Brémont's approach, to the extent that he disagreed with Brémont linking Newman to the 'immanentism' proper to the writings of the French modernists.³⁶ Having rejected the modernist appropriation of Newman, he also went on to criticize Erich Przywara, attacking the German Jesuit for doing the opposite and recuperating Newman for the neo-Thomist agenda. In Willebrands perspective, Przywara had "dismantled the distinction between the notional and the real in Newman's thinking, so as to reach a scholastic interpretation of his writings."³⁷ Both options, the modernist and the scholastic framing of Newman, were judged to be inadequate. The latter critique marked the philosophical and religious conversion Willebrands went through when studying at the Angelicum. Had he planned to use neo-Thomist categories as a means to refute the weaknesses of Newman's doctrines, he found himself in the opposite corner. Henceforth, the *Grammar of Assent* led him to criticize the limits and obstacles he found in a neo-Thomism that had eroded

35 Bouyer, Louis, "Newman et le platonisme de l'âme anglaise," in: *Revue de Philosophie* 6 (1936): 285–305. A recent study of Platonism in Newman, was written by McIntosh, Mark Allen, "Newman and Christian Platonism in Britain," in: *Journal of Religion* 91 (2011): 344–364.

36 Willebrands had consulted Brémont's study on Newman, which was written in 1906 – the high peak of the modernist crisis – but had known a revised edition in 1932: Brémont, Henri, *Newman. Essai de biographie psychologique*, Paris 1932. An interesting evaluation of this study was given by Talar, Charles, "Assenting to Newman. Henri Brémont's *psychologie de la foi*," in: *The Downside Review* 121/425 (2003): 251–270. In order to strengthen the link with the modernist era, it may be interesting to point to another study of Brémont of the same year: Brémont, Henri, "Apologie pour les newmanistes français," in: *Revue pratique d'apologétique* 3 (1907): 655–666.

37 Schelkens/Witte, *J.G.M. Willebrands*, 116.

onto a system of a-historical and abstract reasoning. Although unaware of this, in the same period French Dominicans such as Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique came to similar conclusions, which would mean the start of the so-called '*nouvelle théologie*' movement. This movement, after all, started in 1938, with Congar criticizing neo-Thomism in the style of Garrigou-Lagrange of having become a 'wax mask,' that failed to comprehend the contingency of lived religious experience.³⁸

V A Troublesome Dissertation

Willebrands' philosophical turn was not without consequences, both on the practical and the philosophical level. We will start with the latter. Contrary to the spirit with which he had left the Warmond Major Seminary, he ended up, in the summer of 1937, drafting a dissertation that was as unique in the context of the Angelicum of the 1930s as it was problematic. In the very opening clauses of his study on 'The epistemology of cardinal Newman' he argued that neo-Thomism and Newmanian discourse remain utterly incompatible.³⁹ Formally speaking, this was the very idea he had launched in his valedictory speech for the Saint-Paul Academy in 1934. But he himself had chosen sides in favor of Newman's epistemology, and to the detriment of the Aristotelian-Thomist system. The failure lay not with Newman, rather with Neo-Scholasticism. Against this horizon, the young philosopher carefully meandered between what he thought to be the Scylla and Charybdis of his journey. On the one hand, he tried to steer away from a Newman-reading that would get lost in modern existentialist interpretations, without doing injustice to the concrete experience of everyday religious life – precisely one of the major features of *nouvelle théologie* in the line of Chenu and Congar.⁴⁰ On the flipside, Willebrands tried hard not to sink into

38 Mettepenningen, Jürgen, *New Theology. Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II*, New York 2011, 32.

39 The sharp opposition which Willebrands poses between the thought of Aquinas and Newman does require a *caveat*, for recent scholarly literature tends to offer a more nuanced picture. On the one hand the notion of the development of doctrine is no longer seen as alien to Thomism (which it clearly was for Willebrands), and on the other hand it has been argued that Newman too underwent a good deal of Aristotelian influences. Cf. Kaczor, Christopher, "Thomas Aquinas on the Development of Doctrine," in: *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 283–302.

40 On the *nouvelle théologie* movement and its connectedness with modernism, see the landmark study by Fouilloux, Étienne, *Une église en quête de liberté. La pensée catholique française entre modernisme et Vatican II, 1914–1962*, Paris 1998. Also, on the influence of the Parisian

‘mathematical’ and ‘overly intellectualist’ approaches. Amidst these excesses, he developed his ideas and flirted with the very edges of what was acceptable at the Angelicum.

When rereading Willebrands’ dissertation one is struck by the passages where he dealt with syllogistic reasoning in the line of Aristotle. He entirely orders this type of philosophical argument under the Newmanian categories of ‘notional’ apprehension and notional assent. This was a subtle way of safeguarding what is still worthwhile in neo-Thomism. It nevertheless implied judging that neo-Thomism only remained valid as a formal method on the notional level: with its strict logic of deduction, based on general and universal principles, and its method of condescension toward the concrete, Willebrands judged that neo-Thomism ultimately remained a prisoner of abstraction. It had become insufficient. So, he concluded that “syllogistic reasoning must falter, for it misleadingly presupposes that everything that can be thought, can also be adequately formulated in propositions.”⁴¹ Such criticism touched the very heart of the neo-Thomist paradigm, since it attacked the principle of truth as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, central to the philosophical realism of professors such as Garrigou-Lagrange and Kuiper. True knowledge, Willebrands went on to argue, was not necessarily dependent upon the adequacy of a proposition and the reality it expresses. With such statements, the young philosopher comes strikingly close to philosophical idealism. He was seemingly aware of this, since in his dissertation he delicately remarked that underneath Newman’s Christian Platonism, traces of idealism may be detected.

Ranging the syllogistic method under the category of the notional, for Willebrands implied acknowledging the superiority of Newmanian epistemology, which not only included notional apprehension and assent, but also reserved space for real apprehension and assent. The latter categories were, in Willebrands’ eyes, much more adequate to understand the Catholic faith in its existential, lived dimensions. The verdict sounded: “Newman’s entire idea of human knowledge stands in contrast to the Aristotelian-Thomist point of view.”⁴²

And now for the practical consequences of Willebrands’s turn: the year of 1937 brought the moment in which the Dutch priest was expected to defend his dissertation closer. In the meantime, the philosophical option taken by his

Dominicans of Le Saulchoir and their efforts for the renewal of Thomism before and during Vatican II, see Michael Quisinsky, XXXXX

⁴¹ Schelkens/Witte, *J.G.M. Willebrands*, 90–91.

⁴² Ibid, 101–102. It is worthwhile to observe here that Willebrands does not entirely do justice to Newman, who, in his *Grammar of Assent*, London, 1870, 349vv clearly indicated that the *illative sense* was modeled after the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*.

pupil had caused a breach in the relationship between promotor and doctoral candidate. Willebrands himself had sensed clearly that Kuiper's thought world hardly still matched his own, and so he had proposed to switch promoters. After some considerations, he explained to Alexander Siemer, a less rigid defender of neo-Thomism at the Angelicum, his problem, and Siemer agreed to take over. This shift occurred in 1936 and soon thereafter Willebrands' bishop, the new bishop of the diocese of Haarlem, Mgr. Huibers, urged the candidate to close his study curriculum and return home to fulfil more pastoral duties. Willebrands completed his dissertation in the spring of 1937, yet was utterly surprised at the moment of his defense, that he would be examined not only by Siemer, but also by Vincent Kuiper. The exact events of the oral defense, held on July 6, 1937, are unknown, but in later recollections, Willebrands told the tale as follows:

Siemer was satisfied with the work I had prepared, and so I arrived at the moment of promotion. At that instant, three professors were present to discuss my thesis. During the session I underwent harsh criticisms from the side of Kuiper, to the extent that Msgr. Eras – present at the defense and hoping for a convivial session – became very upset. He was annoyed at the fact that the discussion did not end and the session took much longer than foreseen.

In the end, Willebrands passed with the degree *cum laude*, which was often reserved for the less brilliant students at the time. And more than this: the custom was that dissertations at the Angelicum were published after the defense. But as a result of his lack of loyalty to the neo-Thomist tradition held high at the University, Willebrands was denied this privilege and a note was added to his degree that it can only be published after being reworked and having received a new and positive judgment from the board of examiners. Willebrands never took this step, he returned home to become chaplain of the beguinage of Amsterdam.

VI Epilogue

If anything, the above survey of Willebrands' intellectual journey clarifies that the neo-Thomist framework that had shaped his early education was in a state of decline. Since the modernist crisis, ongoing attempts were made in view of a renewal of the official Catholic intellectual framework. This could take on various directions: from utter rejection of the Thomist framework up to internal renewal from within. Willebrands figured among the many scholarly educated priests of his generation who struggled with this erosion, and sought to find alternatives to a thought system that had often become reduced to an overly math-

ematical and technical approach of reflection upon Catholic truth. In the Interbellum, the need was felt to develop a thought system that was able to connect with the lived experiences of the faithful. For Catholic intellectuals such as Willebrands, Newman's approach included a more intuitive, and more inductive interpretation of the Catholic tradition, which was readily embraced by those who experienced neo-Thomism as stifling. This proved to be of lasting importance. And much more than Thomas Aquinas of Aristotle, Newman would remain a *compagnon de route* for a generation that would shape the conciliar renewal of the 1960s. In the case of Willebrands, the Newmanian heritage would shape his own position further once he was appointed, as of 1940, as a professor of philosophy at the Major Seminary of Warmond. In 1941 he published parts of his dissertation under the form of two articles devoted to Newman's epistemology.⁴³ This marked the fact that seminary education in the Netherlands, already in the 1940s, started moving away from the classic neo-Thomist bulwark it had once been. By means of closing this contribution, we may cite a part of the *oratio inauguralis* of Willebrands, delivered on 21 November 1940, already during the first months of World War II, contained passages that illustrate this evolution more than anything else:

From the perspective of scholasticism, the task of science is to move away. To move from plurality toward unity, from coincidence toward necessity, from particularity to universality. This stands in contrast to an historical approach. History seeks nuance, seeks distinctiveness, seeks particularity and concreteness. In other words, she takes an interest in facts and how then can be comprehended. This tendency is opposed to the scholastic idea of scientific thinking in general. Scholasticism's flaw was its lack of an interest in *Geschichte*, its lack of a *sensus historicus*, of a sense for the importance of concrete developments.⁴⁴

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⁴³ Willebrands, Johannes, "Het christelijk platonisme van kardinaal Newman," in: *Studia Catholica* 17 (1941): 373–388; Willebrands, Johannes, "Kardinaal Newman. De persoonlijke aard van het denken," in: *Studia Catholica* 17 (1941): 425–444.

⁴⁴ Willebrands, Johannes, *Oratio inauguralis. In festo Praesentationis B. V. Mariae*, Archives Willebrands Dossier 2.

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