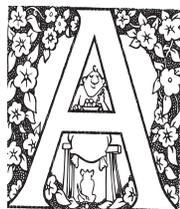


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HOPE IS NOT LOST

Review by James Franklin



AUSTRALIAN READERS of Jude Dougherty's latest collection of essays on the Western intellectual heritage may be

most interested in his account of philosophy in American Catholic universities. The determinedly secular tradition of Australian universities has prevented anything like it here (except in a very small way in the last decade or two). That is a significant loss to our intellectual life, as the contrast with the American case shows.

The United States had by 1875 seventy-four Catholic institutions of higher learning. But none was a university "in the European sense of the term," as Dougherty delicately puts it. Encouraged in part by Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* advocating the study of St Thomas Aquinas, a movement arose to fill the gap.

The Catholic University of America was founded as a postgraduate school. Opening as a Divinity school, it soon expanded to include philosophy, science, the social sciences and other disciplines. To date 406 PhD dissertations have been accepted by the faculty of philosophy, the journal *New Scholasticism* (now *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*) was founded and continues vigorously, and members of the philosophy faculty have included many distinguished

Dougherty, Jude P. (edited by Elizabeth Stone) *Interpretations: Reading the Present in the Light of the Past*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 156.

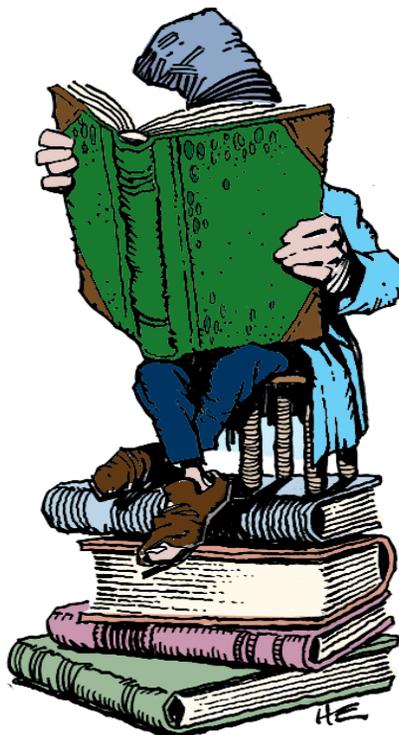
names (to the general public, Fulton Sheen is the best known). Other Catholic universities such as Notre Dame upgraded to full research status.

The *Review of Metaphysics* (of which Dougherty was editor for many years) has published research

of the highest quality. The result has been a vigorous Catholic intellectual life in the United States, with the thought of Aquinas at its core. It is the envy of other countries.

Dougherty does regret some of the directions taken in the last fifty years, especially a fragmentation of philosophy into specialisations often hermetically sealed off from one another, and an attenuation of Thomist and more generally realist influences. Those complaints are justified. Nevertheless when I visited the most recent annual conference of the American Catholic Philosophical Association (San Diego, November 2018), I found a large and impressive body of thinkers, with plenty of the debate still in the Thomist tradition to one degree or another. If only we had an Australian Catholic Philosophical Association to do that here ...

Dougherty sees a pattern of decline much more widely than in philosophy. He edited a collection of essays called *The Impact of Vatican II* in 1966, in which he "questioned the direction the Council seemed to be taking." So he was in on the ground floor with unease about the "Spirit of Vatican II". Fifty years' further experience has only confirmed his initial suspicions. He quotes the liberal Cardinal Daniélou's summary at the time of where the philosophical wind was blowing: "Theological enquiry can no longer restrict itself to Scholasticism, which is immobile



and doesn't take into account the two principles of modern thought: historicity and subjectivity." Just so. It may be that Scholasticism did sometimes neglect matters of historical context and the inner life. But "historicity and subjectivity" immediately became codewords for – or perhaps more accurately, excuses for – the relativism that swept all before it in the Sixties.

Soon enough – or sooner – it was wall-to-wall anti-dogmatism and "tolerance" of any opinions and any "values", for "who are we to say?" As the Australian philosopher David Stove described the products of a modern high school, "Their intellectual temper is (as everyone remarks) the reverse of dogmatic, in fact pleasingly modest. They are quick to acknowledge that their own opinion, on any matter whatsoever, is only their opinion; and they will candidly tell you, too, the reason why it *is* only their opinion. This reason is, that it is *their* opinion." Anything goes; nothing holds together intellectually.

A section of Dougherty's book – a full five chapters – is devoted to the thought of the most academic of recent popes, and scourge of "the dictatorship of relativism", Benedict XVI. One essay, 'The jurisprudence of Benedict XVI', describes his (traditional) view that laws may be made by majority vote in many circumstances, but are constrained by absolute moral principles which the law is not permitted to transgress.

That will remind Australian readers of the High Court's 1992 Mabo decision on native title. The Court, notably the Catholic judges Gerard Brennan and William Deane, held that the doctrine of *terra nullius*, which denied native title to land at the time of white invasion, conflicted with the basic legal-moral principle of the equality of persons and hence was legally invalid. That position scandalised both conservative "black-letter" lawyers committed to the overriding legal power of precedent, and "progressive" activist legal theorists

The Corsican Fire-fly

NAPOLÉON, originally an artilleryman from Corsica, had crowned himself Emperor of France and would-be Ruler of Europe in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, in the presence of Pope Pius VII whom he had brought as a prisoner from Rome, on Sunday December 2, 1804. A few years later, a feast was given in Napoleon's honour by the city of Paris. Above the throne on which the emperor sat were the words, in golden letters: Ego sum qui sum: 'I am Who I am,' the reply given by God to Moses who wanted to know God's name. Madame de Rémusat who attended the feast, noted that nobody took offence at the blasphemy. Eleven years later, Napoleon was defeated and exiled to the island of St Helena in the Atlantic Ocean. He died there on May 5, 1821. He was reconciled with the Catholic Church before his death, and received the last rites from Father Ange Vignali. He was 51 years of age.

– Memoirs de Mme. de Rémusat, ii, 80.

keen to subordinate law to political agendas. The objectivity of basic moral principles has, however, in these issues, and others such as human rights law, become part of the legal fabric. Whether it can survive the decay of belief in the objectivity of ethics remains to be seen.

In another of the chapters, 'Benedict XVI: An intellectual profile', Dougherty returns to the impact of Vatican II. The then 35-year-old Father Ratzinger was a leading and approximately "progressive" theological expert at the Council but, like many (such as John Paul II and Cardinal Pell), had second thoughts on seeing the effects that followed. Dougherty writes:

"To explain what went wrong is no easy matter. Since the end of World War II, the West has experienced a cultural revolution. The ascendancy of liberal-radical theology, marked by an individualistic, rationalistic, and hedonistic orientation, has had its effect not only on the culture but also on the Church. That acknowledged, Ratzinger goes on to say it is time for the Church to find again the courage of nonconformism, a capacity to oppose the trends of contemporary culture."

That is true, but then again contemporary culture has many trends, often incompatible with one

another. In one remarkable passage, Dougherty recalls an earlier thinker who lamented that the gods have departed from the earth, faith and temperance have been abandoned, oaths are no longer reliable, and if the only remaining divinity, Hope, were to depart, civilization would collapse. "The parallels to our present are obvious," Dougherty comments. The thinker he refers to is Theognis of Megara in the sixth century BC. That is a long time ago. If virtue and piety were declining catastrophically as much in Theognis's day as in ours, it follows (from the mathematical theory of functions) that they must have recovered substantially somewhere in between. If that was possible once, it is possible again.

Hope is not lost, because the resources of civilization are still available. Each new generation faces its own choice of what among the smorgasbord of traditions to accept and what to abandon. The Internet, for all its tendencies to vacuity and pointlessness, does make available and easily accessible a range of intellectual resources unimaginable in the past. Young brains are not as damaged by malnutrition, blows to the head, measles and arsenic in the wallpaper as were earlier generations. A proportion of young intellects will grasp the truth.

JAMES FRANKLIN is the author of *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia* and *Catholic Values and Australian Realities*.