



## REVIEW

Etienne Fouilloux, *Yves Congar: A Life 1904–1995*, translated by Patricia Kelly, xiii + 252 pages, ATF Press, Adelaide, 2023, paperback £26.99

Etienne Fouilloux, *Le Saulchoir on Trial (1932–1943)*, translated by Patricia Kelly, 160 pages, ATF Press, Adelaide, 2022, paperback £16.62

Marie-Dominique Chenu, *A School of Theology: Le Saulchoir*, edited and translated by Joseph A. Komonchak and Mary Kate Holman, 160 pages, ATF Press, Adelaide, 2023, paperback £23.99.

In 1960, as a student at Hawkesyard, then the philosophy house of the English Dominicans, my attention was drawn by the librarian to M.-D. Chenu's booklet locked away in the box of books that were on the Index of Prohibited Books. I needed permission to look at the booklet from the student-master, which was immediately granted – the librarian being also student-master (Fr Cornelius Ernst).

Professor Etienne Fouilloux is the principal analyst of the travails of the Paris Dominicans even before Chenu's booklet. Published in 1937, authoritatively condemned in 1942, translated now by Komonchak and Holman, Chenu sets out how Thomas Aquinas would be studied at Le Saulchoir, the Dominican study house which had just become a papally approved college, and of which Chenu had become Rector.

The teaching staff were probably not as united in their version of Thomism as Chenu made out. By far the most influential theologian trained and teaching at Le Saulchoir was Chenu's junior colleague Fr Yves Congar. The books he was to write were to have a great effect on the ecclesiological orientation of the key texts that the bishops endorsed at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Meeting Congar in 1966 led Fouilloux to postgraduate research on the origins of Catholic ecumenism, grounded in Congar's personal archive. This interest culminates in this biography, with splendid photographs on the cover, one of Lieutenant Congar in khaki, and another in the rakish mufti of a junior officer, called up in 1939 as a reservist. Le Saulchoir had just moved from voluntary exile in Belgium during the anti-clerical laws in France under the Combes regime, to its new home in the south east suburbs of Paris. Instead of returning to the elite regiment in which he had done his mandatory military service, Congar found himself second-in-command of a fuel depot, at some distance from the Maginot Line. One of the first duties he took on himself was to conduct the funeral of a squaddy who committed suicide. With the surrender of the Belgian government in May 1940 Congar was among the thousands of French soldiers taken prisoner – in his case held captive until liberated by the British in 1945. As a persistent escapee, his five years included a spell at Colditz. Throughout the years of captivity, he managed a pastoral ministry and even catechetical instruction – of course quite limited.

This biography does not aim at expounding Congar's theology – for that we must consult the volume by Fr Aidan Nichols in the *Outstanding Christian Thinkers* series (1989).

During his captivity, as Congar of course did not know, there were influential theologians in Rome, including fellow Dominicans, some of whom had trained and taught at Le Saulchoir, but as they read his books, they concluded that his preference for positive historical research rather than speculative system-building on supposedly timeless Thomistic metaphysical principles was a departure from the standard form of pre-Conciliar Neo-Thomism as taught in most Dominican study houses at the time. Chenu's historicism looked a collapse into the relativism denounced in the Modernism against which Catholic theologians had been struggling since the late 19th century. In any case, besides the hazards of incorporating historical consciousness into neo-scholastic methodology, most Catholic theologians at the time were not likely to be attracted by books about 'ecumenism', 'true and false reform in the Catholic Church', and 'the theology of the laity' – the titles of Congar's publications, very much on the agenda of the Council as it turned out, not that Congar, or anyone else, expected anything of the kind. By 1954, so unacceptable had the perspective of his theology come to seem to colleagues and ecclesiastical superiors in Rome, meant that he was removed for good from teaching at Le Saulchoir.

Worst of all the sanctions that followed was his assignation by the Master of the Order (Fr Michael Browne) to exile in Cambridge with the English Dominicans. To be fair, Browne probably thought that with a great university library for Congar to access, as well as Anglicans with whom to converse, dismissal from teaching young Dominicans at Le Saulchoir would not prove so intolerable. In the event, the months in the Cambridge house turned out miserably – even if weeping at the gloominess of the English weather (page 143) seems somewhat over sensitive on the part of a man born and raised in the Ardennes!

In the end, Congar's unique contribution to the Church was fittingly acknowledged in 1994 by Pope John Paul II, who had seen him at work on drafts of texts for the Council, now conferring on him the cardinalate in recognition of his contribution. By then, with the advance of the spinal angiomas which afflicted him cruelly for years, Congar was settled in *les Invalides*, the great hospital in Paris for veterans who had served in the military and required full time nursing care. He died in 1995.

Of course, Yves Congar's story extends well beyond that of the French Dominicans. His mentor at Le Saulchoir was Chenu, some twenty years older. Teaching at Le Saulchoir since 1920, Chenu had just come from doing a doctorate on Thomas Aquinas's account of contemplation, at the Angelicum in Rome, supervised by Fr Garrigou-Lagrange, whose invitation to stay on as his assistant he refused. Chenu wanted to get back home to Le Saulchoir as soon as the War was over.

As Professor Komonchak notes (page xlv), the visitor sent by Rome in 1942, with the authority of the Holy Office to curb the incipient Modernism in Chenu's emphasis on historical context, was Fr Thomas Philippe (1905–1993). He had received instructions from the Blessed Virgin Mary through a pious mystic to rescue the French Dominicans from the grip of Chenu's historical reading of Aquinas. Trained at Le Saulchoir (in Belgium) he taught quite happily there until 1936 when he was appointed to teach at the Angelicum. In 1942, since he was already in German-occupied France, he was commissioned to investigate the supposedly crypto-Modernist tendencies of

Le Saulchoir's approach to Aquinas, a task in which he was apparently guided by notes provided by Fr Reginald Garrigou-Lagrance (in Rome and without the appropriate papers to visit Occupied France). Philippe denounced Chenu at a faculty meeting, dismissed him as Regent of Studies and Rector of the Pontifical Faculties, installing himself. This is the same man as was convicted in 1956 of running L'Eau Vive, a community near Le Saulchoir, in which mentally disturbed women were subjected to a form of spiritual direction that included physical sexual abuse (Komonchak, page xlv) – a practice also justifiable, as he apparently believed, by his lunatic Mariology (alas, his crazy ideas influenced Jean Vanier, founder of l'Arche).

According to *Le Saulchoir on Trial* (p. 51) the Dominicans at Oxford were among the study houses that liked Chenu's approach. A version of Chenu's effort to hold together the subjective and objective dimensions of faith appeared in *Blackfriars* July 1938 [487–494]. Moreover, the January 1938 issue [5–15] carries an English version of the lecture on 'the revolutionary intellectualism' of St Albert the Great which Chenu delivered at Oxford on 8th December 1937 (in French!).

Settled back in France in 1938 at Etiolles, Le Saulchoir survived Thomas Philippe. When I got there in 1962, the academic leadership had been in the hands of the Belgian theologian Jerome Hamer, obviously one of Yves Congar's disciples. In 1972, the Pontifical Faculties moved into Paris to St Jacques, with the fine library, and the sprawling buildings at Etiolles were vacated.

As Professor Fouilloux allows the wider context to this squabble over the role of historical consciousness in reading Aquinas includes a certain rivalry between Le Saulchoir/Paris and the Angelicum/Rome, exacerbated by Chenu's caustic mockery of major figure on the Thomist scene. With the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the Spanish civil war, and then World War II, it became increasingly difficult to keep Catholic theology clear of national and international politics. Absurdly, the great Thomist in Rome, Garrigou-Lagrance held that it was a sin for Frenchmen to join Charles de Gaulle – the legitimate government, to which all good Catholics should be obedient, was after all the one seated at Vichy. (It was also ostensibly pro-Catholic, unlike the secularism and anti-clericalism of the Combes regime.)

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