# **CENTER FOR THOMISTIC STUDIES**

Newsletter 1994-1995

The Fifteenth Year

## THANK YOU!

We want to thank those of you who have supported the Center by making us known, by recommending students, or by any other means. We intend to continue to deserve your good opinion in the future.

## UST HOSTS CONFERENCE OF UNIVERSITIES

The University of St. Thomas hosted an international conference of universities from throughout the world that claim Thomas Aquinas as their patron. Schools from Europe, South America, and the Far East as well as Canada and the United States sent representatives.

Father Tom Russman, Director of the Center, delivered a talk on Thomas Aquinas and Education, which prompted those attending to request another conference designed to help them to make more effective use of Thomas' ideas about learning and virtue in their own pedagogy and administrative philosophy.

Dr. Joseph McFadden, President of UST, is exploring the possibility of such a conference, whose site is tentatively set for Manila in 1997.

#### AQUINAS LECTURE BY MICHAEL NOVAK

Fresh from receiving at Westminster Abbey the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, Michael Novak delivered the 1995 Aquinas Lecture on "Liberty in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas." Novak came directly to the point, noting that Aquinas defended the persecution of heretics even by capital punishment. Novak wondered how this position could be reconciled with Aguinas' liberal view that each person is obliged to follow the dictates of his/her own conscience. Novak developed the nuances of the latter position, acknowledging among other things the culpability that can result from neglecting to inform one's conscience appropriately.

Novak described at some length the historical context of Aquinas' position, emphasizing that he would have been familiar with the painful social and political consequences of disputes between secular princes and the popes. Nevertheless, having worked very hard to explain sympathetically the possible historical basis for Thomas' defense of persecution, Novak in the end expressed disappointment that Aquinas' views of conscience did not inform more coherently his position on the persecution of heretics.

In the discussion with Center faculty that followed two major points arose: 1) At Aquinas' time, and indeed for most of recorded history, issues of religion and politics inextricably merge. The notion that civil society requires unity of religious belief to support its own unity was virtually universal. Heresy from whatever perspective raised the possibility of rebellion and war, thus justifying, it was thought, a harsh response to heretics. The idea that the unity of the state does not require religious unity is of comparatively recent origin, based heavily on the "American Experiment," whose apparent success up to now has made religious toleration a virtue in the minds of most of our contemporaries.

2) Thomas believed that being misled with respect to the truth, when the truth in question is a matter of great importance, is a terrible evil. To permanently fall into great error was a greater evil than to lose one's life. Therefore, Aquinas concluded, if one may kill an attacker in order to defend life, one may also kill an attacker (here heretic) in order to defend truth.

Many have tried to counter this argument by appeals to general skepticism, claiming there can be no truth known to us that could

have such great value. Neither Novak nor the other discussants were willing to accept this line of argument.

Rather, it seems Aquinas' concern for truth must be taken very seriously. Truth is indeed as valuable and as important as he claims it is. Having said this, one can nevertheless insist that persecuting heretics (by jailing or killing them) harms the cause of truth more than it helps. The fallibility of the human mind is such that we inevitably do much of our best and most profound learning by making mistakes. The process of advancing knowledge by criticizing mistakes has characterized the entire history of science, philosophy, and theology itself. While this process is painful and even at times harmful (insofar as some may persevere in error), nevertheless for us humans it is a necessary part of the path to deeper insight.

## 1996 AQUINAS LECTURE

William A. Wallace, O.P., will deliver the 1996 Aquinas Lecture entitled "The Modeling of Nature." Father Wallace's visit is particularly welcome given recent and ongoing graduate student research in the philosophy of science.

### PROGRAM REVIEW OF UNDERGRADUATE PHILOSOPHY AT UST

All members of the graduate faculty of the Center also teach in the University of St. Thomas undergraduate Philosophy program. During this past year, it was the turn of the undergraduate philosophy program to undergo a periodic program review. Part of that process was to have an external reviewer evaluate faculty, teaching, institutional resources, and curriculum. The reviewer made the following points: 1) the University Mission Statement expresses high expectations for the role of philosophy in the undergraduate curriculum. It not only attests to the value of philosophical study for its own sake in the tradition of Catholic education, it also insists that philosophy have an integrating function with respect to the rest of the liberal arts curriculum.

Although not a Thomist herself, the reviewer praised the Thomistic orientation of the program, because "it couples an appreciation of classical philosophical sources with an active engagement of contemporary culture, mores, and philosophies." She praised the quality of teaching and the curriculum. She found both design and execution to be well-suited to the "liberating" purpose of the liberal arts.

The strength of the undergraduate philosophy program at the University of St. Thomas is a great asset to its graduate program. Graduate students who come to study at the Center discover kindred spirits in many of the undergraduates. Some graduate students, while writing their doctoral dissertations, also have the opportunity to teach courses in the UST undergraduate program. They are enthusiastic about doing so.

The Center for Thomistic Studies is the Graduate Philosophy Program of the University of St. Thomas. Thomas A. Russman, ofm.cap., Director.