

carpet that the removal of furniture leaves behind. Driving down a country road that has been straightened once or twice, I notice how the curves of the old route occasionally braid in and out of the new one. When I open a book I haven't read in many years, I'm sometimes surprised, even chagrined, by ghosts in the form of my marginal notations, evidence of reactions to the text ("!!??") that must once have been pregnant and powerful but that now elude full apprehension. Often when riffling through old photocopies, I come upon pages in which a person's fingertips or the ball of a hand can be seen along an edge, surely belonging to someone I know.

I worry that ghosts are becoming too common, losing some of their magic, as methods of secondhand preservation proliferate. In 1961 Goya's celebrated portrait of the Duke of Wellington was stolen from the National Gallery in London. The movie *Dr. No*, which appeared a year later, shows James Bond doing a subtle double take when he sees the painting on an easel in Dr. No's undersea lair. Of course, the only reason the picture could be shown is that copies of it existed, by the thousands. Photographs and computers have enhanced the prospects for the survival of almost anything. Broadcasting sends messages into infinity.

Even so, as I was reminded one day recently, the role of serendipity remains. I was walking through a park, absorbed in thought and oblivious of the world, when I heard a faint *click* to my left, followed by nervously polite laughter to my right. I looked up to see that I had strayed at exactly the wrong moment between a prosperous Asian man with a camera and his carefully posed family. At least part of me is now playing the role of *Woman with a Pipe* in an album far away. It's good to know, in case something happens to the original.

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## All the Pope's Men

P U T T I N G   A Q U I N A S  
T O G E T H E R   A G A I N

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JUNE 1979

THE VIA APPIA rolls across the Pontine marshes and hugs the Italian coast between Naples and Rome, but the Via Latina, several miles inland, was always the preferred route of Thomas Aquinas, preacher general at the University of Naples, regent master in theology at the University of Paris, Angelic Doctor, Dominican priest, philosopher, saint.

He was born in 1225 at the castle of Roccasecca, which guards the Via Latina near Aquino. While traveling along the road forty-nine years later, he struck his head against an overhanging branch and suffered the subdural hematoma to which, latter-day physicians surmise, he presently succumbed. The Church mourned the loss of its philosopher, struck down in his prime. Yet when death took Thomas on that March morning in 1274, he was in fact broken, physically and mentally. He had written nothing in three months, and when pressed by Reginald of Piperno, his

scribe and friend, explained darkly that “after what I have seen,” everything he had published “seemed as straw.”

Thomas entered religious life at the age of five, groomed by his parents to become (like his uncle) abbot of the Benedictine abbey at Monte Cassino, a position of considerable power. Thomas shunned the prospect, foiling his parents’ plans by joining the Dominicans, an impoverished, mobile, and studious order of priests founded by Dominic de Guzman in 1216. The rule of the order was strict. Thomas was obliged to walk wherever he went, be it to Rome or Paris, Lyons or Cologne. This may account for his complexion, which contemporaries compared to “ripe wheat.” He was a hulking, gentle, tongue-tied man, nicknamed the “Dumb Ox” by his Dominican brothers. Albert the Great, Thomas’s teacher, was of another opinion. Someday, he predicted, his pupil’s bellowing would “resound throughout the earth.”

Saint Thomas today enjoys exalted status as the Roman Catholic Church’s foremost theologian and philosopher. (His is the only proper name to be found in the Code of Canon Law.) In times of intellectual crisis, the Church has often rested its weight on Thomistic philosophy, as it did during the Counter Reformation and, three centuries later, during the Modernist controversy. In the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas himself took on the doctrinal threat from Greek science and philosophy (lately reintroduced into the West by the Arabs) and in the process systematized Christian theology in Aristotelian fashion. The first of these works was written for “beginners,” the second for “unbelievers,” which perhaps helps to account for the attractiveness of Saint Thomas to thinkers in the centuries since.



There is a congenial stretch of the Via Latina thirteen miles southeast of Rome that Thomas Aquinas knew especially well, where the road slices through catacombs and into the Alban

Hills. The water was good, and nearby were family friends, at Molara Castle. Thomas stopped at the castle one day with Reginald of Piperno, who was dying of tertian fever. The doctors had given up hope. That night, Thomas placed some relics of Saint Agnes on his friend’s chest, and Reginald recovered at once. According to an eyewitness, the household celebrated with “special solemnity and a good dinner.”

The incident accounts for one of a paltry three miracles Thomas is reputed to have performed during his lifetime. (He later cured a woman “afflicted with a flow of blood,” and several days before his death changed some sardines, which he disliked, into herrings.) The “devil’s advocate,” whose official task it was to oppose Thomas’s canonization as a saint, deemed these insufficient signs of sanctity. Pope John XXII disagreed, generously allowing, in 1321, that Thomas had performed as many miracles as he had resolved philosophical questions. Since the *Summa Theologiae* alone contains 512 questions, 2,669 articles, and some 10,000 objections with replies, Thomas’s elevation to sainthood was approved forthwith.

Barring a miracle we don’t know about, Thomas would not have been familiar with the present friars’ house in the village of Grottaferrata, several hundred yards from Molara Castle and the Via Latina. There, at the command of the pope and under the banner of an organization known as the Leonine Commission, Dominican priests are toiling to bring forth, in the original medieval Latin, the first critical edition of Thomas’s three great theological syntheses, nine disputations, twenty-seven commentaries, five polemics, six treatises, five expert opinions, sixteen letters, and seven sermons. The project was begun under Pope Leo XIII, one hundred years ago; another hundred years may see it finished.

The Leonine editors take a special interest in Aquinas because as Dominican priests they are sworn to reverence his person and defend his writings. With their colleagues in Rome, Washington, Louvain, and Ottawa, the scholars at Grottaferrata have spent

every day for thirty years poring over thousands of medieval manuscripts from places such as Erfurt, Parma, Prague, and Zwettl. They have been given, by successive popes, the freedom of the Vatican Library — the rarest of privileges — and have been known to take Aquinas's seven-hundred-year-old handwritten drafts home on the bus — rather like getting leave to borrow a Van Dyck or two from the Hermitage.

Unfortunately, since few of these original drafts, or autographs, have survived, reconstructing a single book as Thomas presumably wrote it can take up to fifteen years. Often the editors are reduced to working from sloppy, error-filled copies or even more corrupt copies of copies, generations removed from the philosopher, the theory being that since everything in the Middle Ages had to be copied by hand from something else, *some* link back to Aquinas must exist *somewhere*. Elaborate family trees of each manuscript are constructed, revised, and discarded. "At times," says Grottaferrata's prior, Father Louis Bataillon, "one feels like Inspector Maigret."

Every friar has a specialty. Father René Gauthier, the librarian, is casually known to his brothers at Grottaferrata as Aristotle. He works from early morning until late at night, and his sharply chiseled features discourage idle conversation. He can tell at a glance whether Aquinas was using the twelfth-century *Anonyma* translation of Aristotle's Greek *Metaphysics* or Michael Scot's thirteenth-century version.

Other Dominicans relish the minutiae of ink, and can judge in seconds whether a manuscript was written with sour gall or Aleppo gall, with green or blue vitriol, with the lees of wine, black amber, sugar, or fish glue. Father Jordan Peters, a Dutch Dominican, is one of those who can discern the difference. "French and Italian inks," he explains one day, "are blacker than English and German, and Spanish is the darkest of all." A handy maxim.

Father Peters works out of a cluttered, parchment-laden office at the University of Saint Thomas Aquinas (or Angelicum) in Rome, a prestigious Dominican school whose alumni include

Pope John Paul II. His feel for a text is subtle and exact. He eyes the format of the page, deftly probes the shapes of the letters, then glances at the method of abbreviation. The verdict: "English, late thirteenth century. When Englishmen put strokes above letters to make abbreviations, the strokes were usually connected with the final flourish of the last letter they had written." He points to the manuscript. "See, like this:



A Frenchman would have lifted his pen."

The twenty-two friars who make up the commission receive no pay for their work: all have taken a vow of perpetual poverty, along with vows of chastity and obedience. The Dominican order provides every priory with a small stipend for each priest, and the money is held in common. "If I want a box of cigars," explains Father Peter Gils, a Leonine editor who works out of Louvain, Belgium, "I go to the *syndicus*, the priest who handles our cash. There is rarely any problem." The friars live a monastic life of prayer, contemplation, and arduous scholarship little different from the life Aquinas lived. They lack only the luxury of living to see their work completed.

It is not as if they have never known, or wanted, another life. Father Bataillon, sixty-five, was trained as a lawyer. He helped manage a Breton fishing port before becoming a Dominican. Father Bertrand Guyot, fifty-nine, who lives with Bataillon at Grottaferrata, was trained originally as a mathematician — "*Mathématiques pures, pures, pures*," he insists. Father Joseph Cos, fifty-seven, came to the job after seventeen years as a missionary teaching Latin and Greek in the Congo. While he was on leave in Belgium, rebel tribesmen slaughtered his companions and colleagues. He volunteered for the commission. Father Hyacinthe Dondaine, eighty-six, a mathematician and friend of the theologian Jacques Maritain, didn't even join the Dominican order until he was thirty-five. And Father William Wallace, sixty, the

current (and first American) president of the Leonine Commission, was originally an engineer; he supervised the aerial mine-laying effort that cut off Japan from Korea and Manchuria during the Second World War.

So far the Leonine editors have published thirty-two elegant, red-and-black, leather-bound folio volumes of the works of Saint Thomas — some fourteen thousand pages in all. In addition to possessing a meticulously reconstructed text, each volume is densely glossed with Latin footnotes. Until recently, the lengthy explanatory prefaces were also written in Latin — in finely wrought Latin, if Father Gauthier's is any indication.

There are about thirty volumes to go. But the commission has been plagued by bad luck from the start. The combination of wars, meddlesome pontiffs, and lack of money is a historic combination for disaster. At times the work of the commission has slowed to a trickle; occasionally it has stopped altogether. Today, the Leonine editors may be facing the greatest crisis yet, as the thirteenth century squares off for a final bout with the twentieth.

Simply put, they are running out of talent, and out of time. Recruits to the Dominican order are down sharply, part of a general trend throughout the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, Latin, once the Church's lingua franca, has been dropped from every seminary in every nation on the globe, a consequence of Vatican II reforms. Yet a knowledge of Latin — specifically, of medieval Latin, medieval handwriting, and medieval abbreviation — is the *sine qua non* of membership on the Leonine Commission. "We would train our successors," Peter Gils says, "if there were anyone to train."

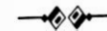
Morale on the commission somehow remains high, with a sense of humor as ironclad a prerequisite as fluency in Latin. Often the latter gives rise to the former. (At the commission's Washington branch, precious manuscripts are stored in a stout safe. The combination: *Verte ad sinistram quater.usque ad sexaginta septem, ad dextram . . .*) But the handwriting is on the wall. Of the twenty-two Leonine editors, fifteen are over fifty-

five years of age, nine are over sixty, and two — Father Hyacinthe Dondaine and his brother, Antoine — are into their eighties. There is no one under forty.

In a report to the master general of the Dominican order in Rome, Father Wallace noted that while most of the remaining volumes of the Leonine edition have been either started or assigned, "there is doubt that the work can be maintained." Father Wallace's report, composed in Latin down to the financial statement of *acceptis et expensis*, is not a happy document.

Sales of Leonine volumes, mostly to university libraries, are steady but slow. Last year the commission sold two sets of Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bringing the total number sold since 1965 to almost one hundred. From the commission's point of view, the *Contra Gentiles* has been a successful volume, but revenues (each book costs \$50) hardly cover the \$1 million the editors have spent in the past fifteen years. Hiring laymen to help with the work is out of the question. (Several laymen — like the medievalist James T. Reilly and the paleographers Carlo Grassi and Bernardo Bazán — donate their time to the commission.)

Father Gils, in Louvain, believes that "fifteen well-trained scholars working every day for fifty years might just be able to finish the job." But in cold, clinical terms, the Leonine Commission may not have fifty years or even thirty, and in twenty years it may not have fifteen men.



I first learned of the Leonine Commission from Father Avery Dulles, a Jesuit theologian. I laughed when he told me that the commission had already spent two of Aquinas's lifetimes trying to edit what the saint had managed to write in twenty-two years. "It was the common view," wrote Bartholomew of Capua, "that [Thomas] had wasted scarcely a moment of his time." What would Bartholomew have thought of the Leonine Commission?

I drove out to Catholic University shortly afterward for lunch with Father William Wallace, who in 1976 succeeded the late

(and by all accounts remarkable) Father Pierre de Contenson as president, or *praeses*, of the commission. Father Wallace is an active, youthful-looking, gray-haired scholar, a specialist in sixteenth-century science and the author of, among other books, *The Scientific Methodology of Theodoric of Freiburg* and *Galileo's Early Notebooks*. He is also an immensely popular teacher, as comfortable with colleagues at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton as he is teaching philosophy of science to a class of one hundred nurses. It is not hard to understand why Charles Sweeney, on the eve of his mission over Nagasaki, sought out Father Wallace for a late-night conversation on the ethics of the atom bomb. (Both men were serving with the 313th Bomb Wing.)

Father Wallace is somehow worldly, urbane, a man of affairs, even when resplendent, with dangling black rosary, in the long white robes of his order. He displays a quiet, energetic confidence that would have taken him to the top in any profession, a characteristic shared with every member of the Leonine Commission.

He lives with eighty other Dominicans at the Dominican House of Studies, a vaguely Flemish Gothic building inflicted on the Catholic University campus earlier this century. When blueprints of the house were sent to Rome for approval, Church authorities promptly wired back: "*Sintnē angeli?*" — "Are they angels?" The architects had apparently left out the bathrooms. Most amenities are available now, including a secular food service that provides the Dominicans with meals. (The shortage of personnel makes an outside service a necessity.)

After noon prayers, the Dominican friars gather for lunch in a long, spare refectory, its windows opening onto a columned cloister.

"What most people want to know," Father Wallace says, "is why the work is taking us so long. That's also what the pope wanted to know. Our first three volumes were published soon after Pope Leo established the commission in 1879. That wasn't fast enough. Leo was a Thomist, one of the leaders of the neo-

Thomist revival of the late nineteenth century. What he really wanted was a *new* edition of the complete works, not a good edition. He wanted it yesterday, for the seminaries. And he wanted the *Summa Theologiae* first. The Leonine editors were under a gun."

When Leo's intentions became clear, the Dominicans severed financial ties with the pope. That left them in semiautonomous penury. Since then, with the exception of some modest crumbs from the pope's table — \$10,000 from Paul VI in 1966, for example — the Dominicans have financed the venture by themselves. Thanks to the order's vow of poverty, the labor is free, but printing costs are high, in part because French linotype operators in Limoges, setting pages in Latin, can't tell when they've made a mistake. There is never enough money. Hence the limp in the commission's gait.

"Then there is the matter of standards," Father Wallace says. "We had to invent our own. Nothing like the Leonine edition has ever been done before. How can you tell what Thomas's text really was? We have only a handful of his handwritten drafts but an embarrassment of corrupt copies, thousands of them, spanning two centuries. How do you grope your way back? And where are all the manuscripts in the first place? Library science and ancient documents do not get along. I was in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid in 1967 when they found Leonardo's 'lost' notebooks. They weren't lost. They were just on the wrong shelf for hundreds of years."

Father William Conlan, a wry, bespectacled Dominican, is sharing our table. He joined the Leonine Commission ten years ago and now spends his time collating: comparing manuscripts, plotting every difference and discrepancy, every changed abbreviation, every jot and tittle of variance, trying to determine the provenance of each, to deduce the father from its spawn. Where was the manuscript transcribed? Was it copied from an original draft by Aquinas? Dictated? Copied from another copy?

The work spins off on tangents. "We have to know how the

publishing industry worked in Paris,” Father Conlan explains. “After all, that was how Saint Thomas’s books got around. We have to know what copies of what books he was using. We’re working here on his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Thomas used three different translations of the book at different times. Maybe four. It’s a nightmare.”

Sorting things out is complicated by the fact that few medieval scribes, scholars, or painters ever signed their work. Of the four score surviving manuscripts of the *Metaphysics*, for example, only one is signed (by John of Frankenstein). The Leonine editors regard scribe John’s signature as a breach of taste. They themselves cherish virtual anonymity. The names of a Leonine volume’s editors are mentioned only once, if at all, in the preface, in six-point type.



From the perspective of today it is hard to gauge the immensity of the Leonine Commission’s task. But consider a worst-case scenario beginning, say, in 1256. Young Thomas is teaching at the University of Paris. He rises before dawn every morning to prepare the lectures he will turn into books. He is living at the Convent of Saint Jacques on the Left Bank, where Latin is so prevalent that despite ten years in Paris, he has never learned French.

It is a crowded university, overrunning the Latin Quarter with its ninety buildings and its great array of Irrefragable and Invincible Doctors. The noise from the narrow street filters in through the windows where Thomas is lecturing on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. In 1256, the university is seething with anti-Dominican sentiment, and the archers of King Louis IX — Saint Louis — stand guard atop the roof of Saint Jacques to quell disturbances.

Has Thomas written out his remarks on Lombard? Probably. If he has, they are scribbled in a fast, sprawling hand that re-

sembles pigeon tracks in sand. (He was never taught calligraphy.) Even in the thirteenth century it was known as the *littera illegibilis*, and Thomas’s closest associates, including trusty Reginald of Piperno, had nearly as much trouble reading it as modern scholars do.

After class, Thomas amends and revises his lecture, then gives it to one of his secretaries to make a fair copy. If the Leonine editors are lucky, Aquinas’s handwritten draft will survive for seven hundred years, enabling them to go right to the Ox’s mouth to establish the restored text.

Usually the editors are not lucky. In the case of the commentary on Lombard, scarcely one fourth exists in autograph. So they must work instead from the secretary’s copy, or from copies of *his* copy. Thomas’s secretaries are diligent men, but after all, they are only men. They strain to read his writing. If the penmanship is especially atrocious, Thomas may fall back on reading his writing aloud. The solution is fraught with its own problems: the secretary misses words continually, his ear plays tricks on him, he misunderstands the meaning of a sentence, he skips a sentence.

When the dictation or copying is over, Thomas examines the transcript. Of course, he is a busy man. He is hard at work on *Being and Essence* and a half-dozen other works. It is Lent and he must prepare for the fortnightly *quodlibetal* (“what-you-will”) discussions, off-the-cuff debates at which he is the target. The atmosphere at the university is tense, and Thomas is a nervous man. Perhaps he doesn’t give the editing the time it deserves. His citations are not quite exact. Even when they are, the text he is using may be faulty.

Assume that Thomas, despite the inevitable errors, approves a version of his lecture to be “published.” A clean copy, or *exemplar*, is made and deposited with the university *stationarii* — “vulgarly called booksellers,” according to one early document. The *exemplar* is divided into *peciae*, loose sections of eight

pages each. The *peciae* are then rented out individually to students for copying. In the days before printing, there was no other way for textbooks to be circulated.

Now the trouble begins.

Let us say that Odo, a young Flemish student, wants to make a copy of Aquinas's commentaries on Lombard. By 1286, nineteen of Thomas's works were available in the university bookstore. The commentaries on Lombard, in 215 *peciae*, rented for ten solidi.

Odo goes to the stationer and rents, for a week, the first *pecia*. Since his family has made a killing in textiles and his father is grudgingly generous, Odo needn't do the transcribing himself. Instead, he engages one of the poorer students to do it for him, a common practice.

The student is from Thuringia or some such place, and his Latin isn't very good. He is also getting paid by the page, and so works as fast as he can. He mistakes how much he can fit onto the parchment. His writing gets smaller and smaller as he nears the bottom of the page, and he begins abbreviating madly, making up contractions if he must. Where he cannot read a word he leaves a blank. By chance he copies out, say, *judex* on line 3, and when he turns back to the manuscript his eye falls on *judex* on line 7, and he accidentally picks up from there. The nib of his quill pen deteriorates, but he'll be damned before he cuts himself a new one. He finishes the work and goes back to Odo for his pittance.

Odo, meanwhile, has gone to the stationer to get a second *pecia* to be copied. The stationer has two copies of the commentaries on Lombard — it is the most widely used book on campus — and instead of giving Odo *pecia 2* of copy A, he gives him *pecia 2* of copy B. The stationer doesn't care. He is bored and surly. Besides, the copies are theoretically identical.

In fact, of course, each is riddled with its own distinctive errors. And so our impoverished undergraduate copies out *pecia*

2 of copy B and then perhaps *pecia 3* of copy A, and so on through the entire work, splicing the two versions together. (This is precisely what happened to the fifty-three *peciae* of Aquinas's commentary on the *Metaphysics*, and the Dominicans at Catholic University have yet to sort it out.)

Twenty years go by. Odo's nephew (or perhaps his "nephew") is now at the university, and because manuscripts are precious things, the two copies of the commentaries on Lombard in the stationer's office are the same ones his uncle used. When young Odo rents it, it has suffered thirty years of wear and tear. Well-meaning know-it-alls have "corrected" the original. From careless handling, whole words and sentences have disappeared. The margins, as in any secondhand text, are filled with little prayers, jokes, drawings, and graffiti.

Odo, like his uncle, hires an indigent student who also makes a slipshod transcription of what is now an even more corrupt text. Most likely he will transfer the offhand marginal quips — "here I stopped," "damn the stationer" — onto his own copy, thinking them part of the text. Or he may be too bleary-eyed to care.

This goes on until the end of the fifteenth century, when the first printed editions of Saint Thomas's writings appear. At this point there exist about forty-five thousand manuscripts of his two dozen major works. They are scattered throughout Europe, for each scholar has returned home — to Valencia, Leipzig, York, wherever — with his "twenty bokes clad in blak or reed," like Chaucer's Oxford clerk. The genealogy is tangled, the quality bad. Still, all can trace their chromosomes directly back to Thomas.

Unfortunately, with the advent of printing, manuscripts become less valuable. Monasteries, now stocked with printed books, throw out their manuscripts or sell them off as scrap. Butchers use parchment to wrap up pork chops. Publishers use it to make bindings. ("Scratch the cover of a sixteenth-century book," Father Peter says, "and you will find a fourteenth-century manuscript.")

Wars, floods, and fires take their toll. Aristocrats hoard great collections, then die; the heirs call in an auctioneer to supervise the diaspora. Some manuscripts simply crumble into dust.

Now it is 1979. Perhaps 10 percent of the original stock of manuscripts has survived, some only as fragments. The task of the Leonine Commission is to reverse the process, to follow the clues back through time, to explore the tributaries in search of the source. Doing this for Aquinas's commentary on the *Metaphysics* has already taken the American section of the commission twelve years.



In the bare, whitewashed editorial offices at Catholic University, Father William Conlan and another Dominican, Father Kenneth Harkins, spend their days hunched over a row of microfilm readers. On the screen: densely scriben manuscripts from the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. Magnifying glasses, red translucent rulers, and a century of accumulated experience suffice to pry loose their secrets.

The few shelves nearby sag with all thirty-two Leonine volumes published to date, along with select reference books: collections of Jerome and Augustine; nineteenth-century monographs on paleography ("Never confuse  $\frac{1}{x} = tenth$  with  $\frac{1}{x} = Christ$ ," one of them warns cryptically); and several copies of Father Antoine Dondaine's masterpiece, *Les secrétaires de St. Thomas*, in which Father Dondaine not only argues that Thomas had a permanent staff of scribes but also identifies each of them by his handwriting — hand E, hand Q, hand A, and so on.

Methodical, silent, and intense, Father Harkins sits engrossed at his microfilm reader, dwarfed by its metal cowl, steadfastly deciphering a crude, gothic hand. (He does not suffer interruptions gladly.) There are seventy-four extant manuscripts of the commentary on the *Metaphysics*, nineteen fragments. (No autograph by Saint Thomas of this work exists.) Each must be checked against the others, line by line. Computers are useless. From

1949 to 1973, the IBM Corporation lent facilities and expertise in the compilation of the thirty-one-volume *Index Thomisticus*, a mammoth tabulation of precisely where and when Aquinas used what terms. (For example, he used the word *vis* and its inflections 2,540 times.) But a computer cannot make judgment

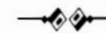
calls, cannot determine whether *malu* is an abbreviation for *malum* or the ink has bled and it is really *modum*. Is it "evil" or "method"? Could make a difference.

From time to time, Father Harkins pauses to consult his copy of Capelli, the indispensable dictionary of Latin abbreviations. The first contractions were introduced in 63 B.C. by Tiro, a slave of Cicero's; the number swelled with the high cost of parchment

in the Middle Ages. Many of them, such as *q̄*, *el̄*, and *h̄z*, verge on the hieroglyphic. The examination of a single manuscript page takes Father Harkins up to a day.

Editing the *Metaphysics* was probably a bad choice as the American section's maiden effort. On three occasions, friar paladins from one of the European sections, themselves hard at work on the *Questions on Evil* and other books, have made the transatlantic crossing to help out. Father Wallace spends much of his time just shuffling the lineup. "It's like being the Yankee manager at midseason," he says.

In his role as manager, Father Wallace has decided to scout out Grottaferrata and Rome, to untangle the commission's complicated staffing and finances. And in his role as embattled president he invites the press along.



There have been five distinct stages in the life of the Leonine Commission. The first, or papal, period began on August 4, 1879, when Pope Leo XIII, Servant of the Servants of God, affixed a red seal to the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. The letter commended to the faithful the study of Aquinas, paving the way



for creation of the Leonine Commission several months later. The Dominicans had been lobbying the pope for a decade, spurred on by envy of the Franciscans, who in 1870 had been awarded their own papally backed commission to produce the complete works of Saint Bonaventure.

The first few Aquinas volumes were painstakingly done, though not up to modern standards. In 1886, Leo ordered the commission to drop everything and begin rapid publication of the *Summa Theologiae*, the most brilliant synthesis of Christian thought ever produced. Instead of demanding meticulous textual analysis, however, the pope instructed the editors simply to “correct” one of the standard printed editions of the work against several manuscripts in the Vatican Library. The Leonine editors were livid — the *Summa* deserved better — but helpless; the first four volumes of the work were rushed into print in six years, an achievement in speed unequalled by scholarship. (The four volumes must be completely redone.) Fed up, the Dominicans decided to go it alone. That was in 1892.

Now began the “classical” period, under three legendary editors, Fathers Peter Paul Mackey, James Lyttleton, and Constant Suermond. They meted out the work neatly. Father Mackey, an eccentric Englishman, dealt solely with Saint Thomas’s handwritten autographs. Father Suermond, a careful, patient Dutchman, did all the collations — that is, established the text in cases where no autograph existed. And Father Lyttleton, an Irishman born in the shadow of Tipperary’s Rock of Cashel, hunted down Thomas’s sources.

It was a prodigious little group. Between 1892 and World War I, they produced eight volumes, including five good volumes of the *Summa Theologiae* and three volumes of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, in many respects Thomas’s most modern work, because it rests primarily on logic, not Scripture, and is addressed to Muslims and Jews, not Christians. The *Contra Gentiles*, expertly edited and glossed, was a sensation in the small Edwardian world of medieval letters.

Unfortunately, Fathers Mackey, Lyttleton, and Suermond didn’t train any successors, which resulted in what Leonine editors call simply the “period of misery.” It lasted roughly from World War I (when work was disrupted entirely) through the end of World War II, and was presided over by Father Clement Suermond, nephew of Constant. Essentially, Suermond II worked alone, making do with reluctant draftees and friars on sabbatical.

He did finish up the *Contra Gentiles*, thanks to octogenarian Father Mackey, who obligingly survived until the work was done. Suermond II then wanted to start work on something else, but now there was no one who could read Saint Thomas’s handwriting. He decided instead to compile an index of all Leonine volumes published to date. For twenty years he did little else. “It was a stupid, stupid thing,” says Father Gils, who recounts Leonine Commission history with a masochistic rancor. (It appears to be his only vice.)

After World War II the Dominicans elected a new master general, Father Emanuel Suarez. (The Dominicans have always had free elections. That and a federal system of monasteries have led to speculation that the thirteenth-century Dominican Constitution may have been used by the Founding Fathers as a model in 1787. Admittedly, more Dominicans than historians support this view.) Suarez summoned a half-dozen young Dominican friars to the Leonine Commission. A year later, at the order’s general chapter, the Dominican Congress, Suarez obtained budget authority for expansion. Two sections were created, one in Canada, the other at the Convent of the Saulchoir, in Etiolles, near Paris.

By the early 1950s, the so-called French period was under way. Fathers Bataillon, Guyot, Gauthier, and Contenson were all at the Saulchoir. Father Hyacinthe Dondaine, “*le petit frère*,” was teaching there. For the first time in its history, the commission was up to fighting strength. Under the leadership first of Father Dondaine, then of Father Contenson, the project flourished. Father Dondaine, a fine scholar, gave the editors a true

sense of method and purpose. Contenson, who took over in 1964, was a crack administrator. The son of a French general, Father Contenson pushed the Leonine Commission to produce eleven volumes in as many years, each volume as close to perfection as human works can be.

With Father Contenson's death, in 1976, the commission embarked on a fifth, as yet untitled period. Epochs do not always end abruptly, however, and in a way the French period lingers on at Grottaferrata, now home to the remarkably cohesive group of Dominicans who first came together at the Saulchoir — Fathers Bataillon, Guyot, Gauthier, and the Dondaines. Grottaferrata is the critical core of the Leonine Commission, if not its official center. It is the font of expertise, the reliquary of experience. As Father Wallace puts it, "It is where all the nuts are gathered in one place."



Father Bertrand Guyot careens with his passengers out of Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport, hunched up, in black beret, over the wheel of an old Renault. He is adept on the horn, quick across the dividing line. Yet he is convivial, swiveling his neck while going around mountain curves. "Ah, oui, oui, oui-i!" he will say with excitement, turning his eyes back to the road just in time to avoid a nun walking up the hill. For a Frenchman, he is not a bad Roman.

Father Louis Bataillon sits beside him, unperturbed. Fathers Guyot and Bataillon have been a team for a quarter of a century, the one short, robust, the technician, the other tall, ascetic, the organizer. At the dawn of the French period, the two of them scoured Europe for manuscripts, microfilming page after page. Was there rumor of a cache in Fritzler? The pair would take off, Father Guyot at the wheel. In eight trips they studied seven thousand manuscripts in four hundred libraries.

We climb into the Alban Hills, a volcanic rim six miles wide, southeast of Rome. Inside the rim are the pocks of smaller peaks

and craters. The friars' house at Grottaferrata, astride a pock, has a clear view down to Rome and the Mediterranean. To the south, the turrets of Castel Gandolfo, the pope's summer palace built over Domitian's villa, can be seen when the wind bends the cypress. To the west, the tower of Saint Niles, the eleventh-century church whose frescoes Stendhal so enjoyed, rises above the olive trees.

Cicero's villa and the ruined town of Tusculum crown hills to the east. (The citizens of Rome destroyed the town stone by stone in A.D. 1191.) Paved and polished, an old Roman road climbs to the summit still, and the earth to either side yields nuggets of marble to the plow.

Around the friars' house is a cluster of medieval farmhouses and a sixteenth-century villa whose giant wine cellars sheltered Resistance forces during the war. (It now houses the three nuns who cook and clean for the friars.) The house is shared by both Dominican and Franciscan priests — an unlikely combination. The two orders have been rivals for 750 years. Both are mendicant orders, both set up shop at the University of Paris in the early thirteenth century, and both soon rose to intellectual prominence. In the thirteenth century, competition for priests was so keen that several popes had to intervene to curb recruiting abuses. In subsequent years, the orders traded charges of heresy; both sides suffered casualties, including Thomas himself, briefly and posthumously, in 1277. Historians of the period remain partisan. As the neo-Thomist philosopher Etienne Gilson has noted, "The list of Thomistic propositions involved [in the 1277 condemnation] is longer or shorter according as it is compiled by a Franciscan or by a Dominican."

Technically, the Grottaferrata priory belongs to the Franciscans, and like the Dominicans, the Franciscans here are scholars. Some are editing the *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, some the writings of Peter Lombard and Alexander of Hales. They fled here in 1966 after the Arno spilled its banks and ravaged Quaracchi, their old priory and press outside Florence. Among

the casualties: the library and hundreds of freshly printed volumes of the works of Saint Bonaventure.

At Grottaferrata, the library is on the ground floor but atop Mount Saint Anthony, 1,230 feet above sea level. "There is no danger of flooding," Father Bataillon points out.

The thirteen Franciscans were joined by seven Dominicans soon after they settled in. This was Father Contenson's idea, and he was diplomat enough to pull it off. (In addition to heading the Leonine Commission, Father Contenson was an aide to Cardinal Willebrands and the Vatican's liaison with the Jewish community.) Grottaferrata today is a thriving monastic settlement, one of the few communal experiments of the 1960s that has survived.

Even aesthetically, Contenson's experiment has worked well. The Franciscans dress in dark brown robes with stiff, pointed cowls, sandals, and white knotted cords around their waists. The Dominicans dress similarly but in wool of purest white, with two long strips of cloth, called the scapular, falling in front and back from the shoulders.

In the refectory, with its rough wooden chairs and tables, the friars stand facing each other before meals. At vespers, they take opposite sides of the small chapel and chant alternate Latin verses. There is a special give-and-take between the two groups, a natural balance. At benediction, for example, Father Contenti, the Franciscan prior, performs the privileged, sacred duty of holding the consecrated host, the body of Christ, aloft before his brothers. But the hymn that is sung, the "Tantum Ergo," was written by a Dominican — Friar Thomas Aquinas. At Grottaferrata, Saint Thomas is outnumbered but never far away.

The friars are usually up before dawn, well before the shrill crowing of farmyard cocks pierces the heavy wooden shutters. Mass is celebrated at sunrise. Then comes breakfast: raw eggs, fresh cheese, cappuccino, homemade bread. The friars eat quickly. Most of them have long been accustomed to having a psalm

read aloud during meals; spoons must be put down with the last "Amen." After breakfast, they adjourn to their rooms to work.

They are called together again at noon, for dinner and Latin prayers. It is a fine medieval meal: fresh lamb, spiced, roasted onions, and cabbage, served up by Father Contenti. (As paterfamilias, he doles out all food and prayer and signals the beginning and end of each meal with a little bell. On Sundays he passes out fresh napkins.) On the table is local mineral water as well as red and white wine, the latter from Frascati, the wine-growing town founded by the villagers who fled Tusculum in 1191. After coffee the priests wander in the gardens or relax with *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican paper.

Following a siesta it is back to work. In the late afternoon there is a period of silence before the haunting ritual of vespers at dusk. (Aquinas, it is said, was once hurrying down a hallway, late for vespers, when a statue of the Virgin Mary in a niche suddenly spoke to him. "You're late," she reprimanded. "Shh," he shot back, "it's the hour of silence.") After vespers, a light supper, and then for some, more work, for others a bit of recreation or quiet prayer.

There is a sense of purpose and contentment at Grottaferrata that I have rarely seen before. At night an unearthly calm settles over the priory; surfeit and worry are strangers here, and an old gatekeeper bars disorder and trivia from the grounds. I ask Father Bataillon if he will be my Virgil the next day.

He laughs. "So you think this is hell?"



The friars' house is built around a cloister where scalloped remnants of Roman columns hold up marble bench seats and red clay flowerpots. Because the complex is built into the summit of Mount Saint Anthony, there are in fact two ground floors. The chapel is on the lower of these, its windows overlooking the cloister on one side, the valley on the other. I serve Father Batail-

lon's morning mass, rain and wind beating against the stained glass, and then, after breakfast, we ascend to the other ground floor in a small caged elevator.

The French Dominican editors are masters of technique, and at Grottaferrata everything is at their disposal. A duplex library, its levels joined by spiral staircases, is stocked with anything a good medievalist could desire. Incunabula, books printed with movable type before 1501, squat side by side with modern paperbacks. In wire cases along the walls, handwritten manuscripts are kept under lock and key.

The heart of the scholarly effort is the *Sala Edizioni*. The room is filled with microfilm cabinets, ten units high, twenty units across, containing microfilms of the manuscripts collected by Fathers Guyot and Bataillon in the early 1950s — some 4,500 in all.

“The most beautiful manuscripts are generally the least useful,” Father Bataillon explains as he pulls out a lavishly illuminated presentation copy. “Here is one done for the Duke of Urbino in the late fifteenth century. Although there were printed books at the time, he didn't believe in them. And here is one made for Pope John XXII, the pope who canonized Saint Thomas. He was old, so there are no abbreviations and the writing is big. Useless for our purposes, of course.”

Everything is arranged according to the monasteries or libraries where they can be found, from A to Z. Fathers Guyot and Bataillon are now helping Father Hugues Shooner, a Canadian associate, compile Volume III (“Montserrat to Zwettl”) of the *Codices Manuscripti Operum Thomae de Aquino*, an extensive catalogue of all the manuscripts in their possession. (Volume I runs from Admont to Fulda, Volume II from Gdansk to Montreal.)

“It is impossible to say where manuscripts will be found,” Father Bataillon says. “We think we have 90 to 95 percent of all extant Aquinas manuscripts, but of course, by definition,

there is no way of telling. We are sure only that we do not have all of them.” Many have been arbitrarily divided into several parts, then disseminated as gifts to, say, Oxford, Vienna, Bologna, and Naples. It takes years to track down the sections.

“All of these microfilms,” Father Bataillon says, pointing to a separate file cabinet, “are of manuscripts listed in libraries as pertaining to one thing but also containing a portion of something else — specifically, a book by Aquinas.” They have been discovered more or less by accident, much as if a browser in an open-air stall in Lagos were to stumble across a lost Fitzgerald short story stitched inside a Penguin edition of *Bleak House*. Manuscripts are always being found. Urban renewal has turned up whole libraries hidden by the French Revolution.

In an adjoining room is Father Guyot's microfilm camera (he has his own darkroom downstairs), a modern photocopying machine, and portable and cabinet-size ultraviolet readers for recovering the texts of soiled, erased, or “corrected” manuscripts. An ornate safe nearby shelters handwritten manuscripts, the commission's guinea pigs. Father Bataillon pulls out a small piece of scribbled parchment, one inch square. His expression is pained. “Here is a piece of Saint Thomas's handwriting,” he says evenly. “Someone in the fourteenth or fifteenth century cut up many of his original manuscripts into little pieces like this as keepsakes for the devout. Typically, most of them are lost.” Only about 10 percent of what Thomas is known to have written in his own hand has come down to us, to the infinite distress of the Leonine Commission.



Reconstructing the presumed original text is never easy. If an autograph of Saint Thomas's exists, and if Father Gils can make sense of it, the job still consumes a decade. Generally there is only a fragment of an autograph or, more likely, none at all. At this point the editors must fall back on collation. The first in-

redient is a working base text that serves, like the vanishing point in drawing, as an arbitrary reference point to bring the various elements into perspective. Usually the editors take a standard printed Latin edition of the work — the Marietti edition, say — and check it against four or five extant manuscripts, merging and purging where warranted.

This base text is then typed at the top of two-by-three-foot pieces of graph paper, one line per sheet. Notations for each surviving manuscript of the work under study run down the left-hand margin. Thus,  $Wr^2$  would be the second manuscript in Wroclaw, Poland, the John of Frankenstein transcription;  $O^5$  would be the fifth manuscript at Oxford.

The editor begins, for example, with  $Wr^2$ , checks it word for word, line by line, against the base text, and records all variations. He finishes several months later and begins on  $O^5$ . Soon he has something that looks like this:

|            |                                 |
|------------|---------------------------------|
| Base Text: | <i>Hic ponit flagellationis</i> |
| $Wr^2$ :   | " " <i>flagellis</i>            |
| $O^5$ :    | " " <i>flagelli</i>             |

Of course, the list may be one hundred or more manuscripts long, and this phrase merely one of tens of thousands.

Collating is relatively unskilled labor, requiring chiefly a sophisticated knowledge of gothic Latin and the boredom threshold of a toll collector. Interpreting the results and arranging manuscripts into the *stemma*, or family tree, requires a much defter hand.

There are always clues — often too many clues, as Inspector Maigret would say. By the time collation has been finished, several thousand variants will have been identified, each manuscript differing from the others by as much as 10 percent. After several years of close analysis, the patterns and relationships will begin to emerge.

Take the case of Aquinas's first book, the commentary on Isaiah. Only a quarter of the work exists in autograph; call it

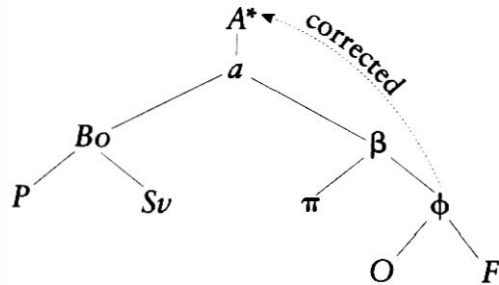
$A^*$ . Beyond  $A^*$ , eighteen manuscripts are extant. Most of them bear a colophon, or inscription at the end, stating that they derive from an original transcription of  $A^*$  made by one Jacobinus of Asti, a secretary to Saint Thomas and the man Father Dondaine identifies as hand A. Naturally, the Jacobinus manuscript itself is lost, but let us hold its place and call it  $a$ .

Some thirteen of the manuscripts have clearly been copied from a single manuscript at the University of Paris stationer's office. (They have *pecia* markings, common pagination, and the folios begin and end with the same words.) The exemplar, labeled  $\pi$ , is also missing, but it can be roughly reconstructed from the consensus of its progeny. Since the progeny contain the Jacobinus colophon,  $\pi$  itself must have borne it. It is thus a child or grandchild of  $a$ .

The five remaining manuscripts, nonuniversity in origin, are from Bologna, Seville, Paris, Oxford, and Florence. Seville ( $Sr$ ) and Paris ( $P$ ) were copied from Bologna — the evidence leaves no doubt — and Bologna ( $Bo$ ) bears the Jacobinus colophon.  $\pi$  and  $Bo$  are therefore collateral descendants of  $a$ .

Oxford ( $O$ ) and Florence ( $F$ ) are unique. Both display the colophon and so are also descendants of  $a$ . However, when compared with the surviving portion of the autograph,  $A^*$ , they are found to contain one hundred correct readings where no other manuscript has them. This means that  $O$  and  $F$ , though based on  $a$ , have been corrected against  $A^*$ . Since there are no correction marks on either manuscript, one surmises that it was actually a common parent,  $\phi$ , now missing, that was corrected against the autograph. (Because much of the autograph is lost, this means that  $O$  and  $F$  can be relied on to fill in some gaps.)

It turns out that  $\phi$  and  $\pi$ , when reconstructed, manifest hundreds of common variants not found in the Bologna branch of the family, sign of yet another shared parent,  $\beta$  — missing, of course.  $\beta$  is the final link with  $a$ . The reconstructed *stemma* thus becomes:



Every work of Aquinas tells a different story. In the *Isaiah*, this *stemma* happens to hold only for the second half of the book. In the *Metaphysics*, conflicting *stemmata* weave like DNA through every page. In the *Contra Errores Graecorum*, the mess begins with Thomas himself, who unwittingly used hundreds of quotations and citations from a forgery.

Once the *stemma* is established it is possible to reject most of the extant manuscripts as too corrupt, too derivative, or too distant, leaving a handful (*Bo*,  $\pi$ , and *F*, for example) that together will be used to correct the base text. The corrected text represents the closest possible approximation to Thomas's original. Restoration is finished.

Not so the work of the Leonine editors. They must still compose a long preface to the work, spelling out their method, carefully weighing all the evidence, recreating step by step the process of their reasoning. In short, the preface, which frequently runs to more than a hundred folio pages, complete with photographic plates, family trees, and fetching monographs on paleography, must justify the entire volume.

Footnotes must also be added, listing all possible alternate readings of the text. Thus, where the editors believe a proper reading to be *Balthasar*, they will nevertheless note that *Bo* reads *baldasar* and *F* reads *balcasall*.

The final and most specialized step is to sniff out Saint Thomas's

probable sources. That job always falls to Father Jordan Peters and Father Albert Kenzeler, a two-man team headquartered in Rome. Father Peters is Dutch, but Father Kenzeler and Father Robvald Gallet, who is editing the *De Potentia*, are Belgian, part of a large Flemish contingent (including Father Cos in Washington and Fathers Gils and Deronne) on the Leonine Commission. Because they have chosen not to work at Grottaferrata, they are lodged at the Angelicum, a three-acre complex of churches, chapels, cloisters, cells, and lush vegetable gardens rising in terraces above the ruins of Trajan's Forum. Bernini's statue of Mary Magdalen touching the Christ hides inside the main church, which is open to the Leonine Commission but not to the public, like much else in Rome.

Most of the Angelicum was built in the sixteenth century. The lower levels, where broken columns pierce the floor, go back further. And no doubt there is older masonry beneath that. Rome is a baffling city. Recently, contractors pouring a foundation found they had greatly underestimated the amount of concrete required. They doubled the amount, but still there wasn't enough. Finally they discovered that the concrete was seeping into an uncharted catacomb.

Both Father Kenzeler and Father Peters are chain smokers, a reflection on their task. "Aquinas's sources are a real problem," Father Kenzeler says, puffing. "He cites Scripture all the time, of course. He cites the Church fathers — Jerome, Augustine, and so on. But he was not in the habit, to put it mildly, of giving chapter and verse. He is more likely to say something like 'As Simplicius says somewhere . . .'"

"Or," Father Peters interrupts, "he will simply say, 'As is noted in divine law.' Does he mean Scripture, or canon law, or the decretals, or what?" One citation from Augustine took two years to find. Sometimes the sources are so protean that not even Aquinas's contemporaries really knew what they were doing. One of Aristotle's books, for example, had survived down to the

Middle Ages only in Latin. Medieval scholars labored for years to translate it back into Greek. Decades later, translators vied to be the first to render it into Latin.

It takes people with a spelunker's sense of direction to tease out the facts. "I have a nose for *les sources*," Father Kenzeler says with a shrug.

Despite a deep respect for the friars at Grottaferrata, the Flemings prefer not to share quarters with the French. The two nations have always had their differences. In 1297, King Philip was obliged to put the Flemish students at Paris under his personal protection. Animosity between French- and Flemish-speaking Belgians is a permanent feature of Belgian life. None of the Flemish editors, of course, admits to any feeling of personal discomfort; yet when out of earshot, each is willing to impute uneasiness to the others. "We are not in Grottaferrata," Father Kenzeler says, "because our resources are here in Rome. Of course, Father Gils is in Louvain because he prefers not to live with the French." Father Gils is equally frank. "Kenzeler and Gallet? I think they are tired of the French, no matter what they tell you. Me? I am simply too old to move."

Such feelings run just deep enough to keep the living arrangements separate. That done, the friars maintain a high level of mutual respect, cooperation, even friendship.

"It's astounding," Father Guyot will say of Father Kenzeler's nose for *les sources*. "I don't know how he does it." And everyone is quick to praise Father Gils. "But of course you must go to Louvain," one will say. Or, "I could explain, but Peter Gils is the real expert." Or simply, "Gils has just finished his preface to the *Questions on Evil*. We need someone to pick it up."



My room in Louvain, at the Paters Dominikanen house, overlooks tiled, gabled homes of the kind depicted in the shop window Christmas displays on Fifth Avenue. Two streets away, the delicate clock tower of the town's great library rises above the

rooftops. The Germans reduced it to rubble during World War I; it was lovingly rebuilt. It was bombed again during World War II; burghers still argue over whether Allied or German planes were responsible. Once more it was rebuilt.

The Dominican house, in the middle of the quaint, lace-curtained red-light district, is the only ostentatiously modern building in town. When the old monastery and grounds fell into decay a decade ago, the fathers decided to sell off most of the property and erect for themselves a vertical, modular structure of a kind the Japanese might admire. From the inside, fortunately, the building cannot be seen, and the roof provides a splendid view of what remains in many respects a medieval city.

Louvain also boasts the largest brewery in Europe (Stella Artois) and is the beer-drinking capital of the greatest beer-drinking nation on the continent. At the Dominican house, which appears to be one of the few monasteries in Belgium that does not market its own beer nationally, large bottles of local brew dominate the tables at mealtime, amid platters piled high with Belgian sausage and boiled potatoes.

The Dominican fathers rely on the tremendous resources of one of the oldest university towns in Europe. (Aquinas dedicated an Aristotelian commentary to the provost of Louvain.) The university is a center for Catholic priests who intend to follow an academic career; those hoping to rise in the Curia, the Vatican bureaucracy, generally study in Rome. In the eyes of the Romans, Louvain is a dangerous place. It is said that Louvain was working toward Vatican II while Rome was working on the Council of Trent.

Father Gils entered the Dominican order in 1930 after a rigorous stint with the Jesuits. His training was in Latin, Greek, and mathematics, and he is an excellent pianist. "I have a very logical mind," he admits. He also had no intention of joining the Leonine Commission. He had his eye more on pastoral work, on preaching. "I did not enter the order to produce texts," he explains. "I always thought the Dominicans were for people.

My superiors always thought they were for texts.” His superiors ordered him to work on the Leonine project, however, and Father Gils took his vow of obedience — “my obedience,” he calls it — seriously.

He took his Leonine work seriously, too. Living at the Saul-choir in the early days of the French period, he was appalled that no one on the commission since Father Mackey’s death in 1935 had been able to read Saint Thomas’s handwriting. “How could such a team of editors publish?” he asks, incredulous. So during vacations and after vespers he began to work on Thomas’s autographs.

“You learn handwriting by reading it,” he explains, “by reading, reading, reading, and making transcriptions yourself, by exploring *la physiologie du geste*, by trying to enter into the handwriting of the man. It is hard. Most of us cannot recognize our own handwriting from a few years back. Father Bataillon cannot read what he wrote yesterday. I spent eight years before I could do it properly. I read all of Aquinas’s autographs, and I copied out the way he made every word. I determined the meaning of his word forms in ambiguous cases by figuring out that in certain other contexts, that form could mean only one thing. I put every word on an index card.”


Father Gils is methodical, capable, opinionated. “Aquinas was a distracted man,” he says. “He would not have been a good man to run the Leonine Commission. He makes so many little mistakes.


“Let me give you an example. In medieval dictionaries, it was customary to divide everything into opposites, good/bad, Christ/Satan, and so on. Aquinas makes little Freudian slips all over the place. He writes things like ‘All bad things come into the world through the sin of Christ.’ He writes *priori* when he means *posteriori*. Sometimes he catches the little mistakes and misses the big ones. Sometimes he ‘corrects’ a mistake and makes it worse. But sometimes he really warms my heart. My favorite is



~~fragilitas~~  
~~sed debilitas, sexus feminei~~

In fact, he never finished writing *debilitas*; he wrote *debili-*, then crossed it out. *Fragilitas* is so much more appropriate for women, don’t you think? *Fragilitas* is like a flower, *debilitas* is like a cripple.”

The trouble with Aquinas is not so much his absent-mindedness as his handwriting. By all accounts it is the most difficult hand of the thirteenth century. “When Samarin taught paleography at the Ecole des Chartes,” a medievalist and old friend wrote to me recently, “he was reputed always to give one page of the Master as part of the final exam. I find the story hard to believe, since few would have passed.”

Gothic handwriting, unlike cursive handwriting, is written as a series of unconnected strokes. Thus, *dei*, the word for “of God,” was written as , five strokes. But Aquinas was a fast thinker; his writing trailed behind his thoughts. So he developed

a kind of shorthand gothic. He wrote *dei* as , where the second stroke of the *d* is also the first stroke of the *e*, and the second stroke of the *e* leads into the stroke of the *i*. Similarly,

Thomas reduced the normal gothic *g* from  to . (The Aquinas *g* has long been a specialty of Gils’s.)

The problem of penmanship, bad enough when dealing only with letters, becomes even more trying when words are involved. “In the *Isaiah*,” Father Gils points out, “there is a place where



Aquinas has written \_\_\_\_\_, and every manuscript that we have — every one — interprets this as *u<sup>s</sup> canit*, which is the abbreviation for *ubi sic canitur*, ‘where thus it is sung.’ In fact, the whole thing should really be read *n<sup>i</sup>pcavit*, the abbreviation for *nisi peccaverit*, ‘unless he should sin.’



“What happened? First of all, everyone mistook the *n* for a *u*, and then the *v* for an *n*, which happens even now. Typically, Thomas also misplaced the superscript *r*, making *verit-* into *-itur*. The *r* should have been over the *v*. But no. For Thomas, the movement from right to left is repugnant. He wouldn’t go back that extra millimeter to put the superscript in the right place.

“Strangely, no one for seven hundred years thought twice about the error, because both readings make sense in context.” He sits back, self-satisfied, and lights up a small cigar. “I was very pleased when I discovered this,” he says.

The extent to which Father Gils has internalized Aquinas is extraordinary. He can write Thomas’s hand as easily as his own. He can look at a manuscript and set the scene seven centuries ago. “Here is a draft by Saint Thomas. A secretary has been reading it over, and is having trouble, not surprisingly. See the check marks in the margin? These are places where the secretary — Dondaine identifies him as hand E, by the way — cannot read the writing, so he marks his place and saves his questions for Thomas. When Thomas explains, the secretary writes out the text in the margin.

“But wait. There is a second set of marks here. The secretary has inserted some entirely new words into the text. He is not just rewriting illegible words. What can this mean but that the secretary is reading back the text to Saint Thomas, and Thomas is making some editorial changes?”

It is late afternoon now, nearly time for the period of silence. I ask Father Gils what he thinks of Saint Thomas as a man, not as an exercise. He puffs slowly on his cigar.

“I love Saint Thomas,” he says. “I know him through his handwriting. He didn’t like writing, and he didn’t like the method of argument he was forced to use — to use quotations from Scripture to make his case. Quotations are not proofs, and he knew it, and you know it, and I know it.

“Aquinas wanted to write another way, the way he wrote in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. This is the work he loved the most.

How do I know? Because he worked on it for eight years. I see the book lying open on his desk all the time. I see him sitting down to it at his leisure, reading it, rereading it, correcting it lovingly over many years. This is not a book of quotations. There are almost none. It is a masterpiece of pure reason.

“But I love Saint Thomas most because he did not take himself seriously. Something extraordinary happened to Thomas. It was on December 6, 1273. It is said that he had a vision during mass. Some call it a nervous breakdown. Perhaps it is simply what happens to every man when he nears fifty. Of course, Thomas was nervous to begin with, nervous and impatient. Just look at his writing! But he had only one obsession: God himself.

“What happened on December 6? I think Thomas realized that nothing he had written had ever — could ever — penetrate the mystery of God. He never worked again. Several of his books end abruptly. And he died three months later. I love Saint Thomas especially because he stopped writing.”

It has started to snow, and a light dusting covers the rooftops. The lighted clock tower of the library strikes 5:00 P.M.

“So when you see Father Wallace,” Father Gils says, “you can tell him I am not a Thomist.” He smiles briefly. “Or put it this way: tell him I am as much a Thomist as Brother Thomas.”



Flying back to the United States, I open up a book of limericks Father Gils has given me. (“Most of them are risqué,” he warned.) Somewhere over the Atlantic I chance upon this:

A crusty old monk was thought odd,  
For he labored at Latin unshod.  
When his friends asked him “Why?”  
He proclaimed with a cry,  
“For the honor and glory of God!”



AUTHOR'S NOTE: I received a long letter from Gus Wallace in April of 1994, bringing me up to date on the work of the Leonine Commission. Though the commission struggles as always with a shortage of money and personnel, publication of new critical editions in Latin of the works of Thomas Aquinas continues. A number of the scholars I wrote about have retired from the commission, Gus Wallace being one of them. (He serves still as a professor emeritus at Catholic University, and he teaches a course in the philosophy of science every semester at the University of Maryland.) A number of other scholars mentioned in "All the Pope's Men" have died and are perhaps now conducting *disputationes* in the company of Aquinas himself. The departed include Fathers Del Pozo, Kenzeler, and Peters, and the two Fathers Dondaine. But Fathers Gils and Deronne, in Louvain, remain active, as do Fathers Bataillon, Gauthier, and Guyot, at Grottaferrata, and as does Father Conlan, in Washington, D.C. Some of the commission's vacancies have been filled by new recruits from the ranks of the Dominican order in the United States and Poland. The director-general of the Leonine Commission is an American, the aptly named John Aquinas Farren, O.P., who was once a student of Gus Wallace's. Three Leonine volumes have been published since my visit (*Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, *Sententia libri de anima*, and *Sententia libri de sensu*), one is now being set into type (*Sententia libri metaphysicorum*), and another will soon go to press (*Quaestiones quodlibetales*). Work has been undertaken on virtually all of the remaining volumes of the projected sixty-five-volume edition.

Gus Wallace concluded his letter to me with these words: "Considering the state of the intellectual life in the Church, and the loss of manpower (and womanpower) in the Order, it is an ongoing miracle that the Leonine Commission does as well as it does. In 1983 I attended a Galileo conference in Cracow, and fortunately was able to address the Dominican students who were studying there. That awakened interest in the commission,

and is the proximate stimulus to our recruitment there. But if the director-general does not keep active and keep 'beating the bushes,' the chances for the future are not very bright."

My own feeling is that the commission will, as it has for more than a century, live up to Virgil's dictum: *Possunt, quia posse videntur*. That is to say, "They can, who think they can."