

Deus Providebit:
Remembering Father Leo Elders, S.V.D.
(August 7, 1926 – October 14, 2019)

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IN THE LAST VERSION of his autobiographical notes, which Father Elders handed to me on September 23, 2019, he praises his parents for shaping him very early on towards a priestly life of service by asking him to hand out pamphlets against alcoholism in the poor suburbs of his home town of Enkhuizen, the Netherlands, where he was born on August 7, 1926, to bring clothes his mother made to a poor family, and to play chess with a frail boy suffering from tuberculosis. The last is something that he would continue to do until his teenage years when the principal warned him: “Leo Elders, you should better practice your Greek vocabulary instead of walking around with a chessboard.”¹

During the Second World War, Leo Elders was finishing high school in a Catholic boarding school in the most southern part of the Netherlands, right on the border with Germany, in the former Rolduc Abbey. His father had given him a devotional card of St. Joseph and asked him to pray daily for his future state of life, which he did. One night he saw how an English bomber was being shot from the sky and the crew jumping out of the airplane. This harrowing event made him think: “If they are willing to sacrifice their lives to liberate us, shouldn’t I be doing something extraor-

¹ During the last years of his life, Father Elders penned down several autobiographical notes. One of these is entitled “My life as a disciple of St. Thomas,” in *Libenter Praeceptorum Laudes Celebrare: Stories and Reflections in Honor of Leo J. Elders, S.V.D., on His Ninetieth Birthday*, ed. Jörgen Vijgen (Haarlem, NL: Kerkrade, 2016), 1–12.

dinary as well?” In the Catholic culture of those days and with a lively missionary spirit among the youth in the school, the thought of becoming a missionary priest almost naturally occurred to him. He asked the moderator of the school’s missionary activities for a list of congregations. When he saw what was written about the Society of the Divine Word (*Societas Verbi Divini*)—founded by the German priest Arnold Janssen (1837–1909) who was canonized by Saint John Paul II in 2003—namely that it was the “most austere and intellectual of all the missionary congregations,” his choice was made. Graduating in June of 1944, he was able to return home to the north of the Netherlands, but then the *hongerwinter* (literally: “hunger winter”), the Dutch famine of 1944–1945 in the north of the country due to the German blockade of food and fuel, prevented him from entering the novitiate.

As with so many of his countrymen, the *hongerwinter* brought out the best of human comradery and ingenuity: making a primitive lamp out an empty jar, some oil, and a razor blade with some cork on it; collecting driftwood for some elderly people, taking a sack of wheat at night in a small boat to a mill to have it ground; hiding with his brother, who had escaped from a German labor camp, in a hole they had made under the wooden floor in the house, pushing a stack of old newspapers over their heads because it was said that bullets would not pass through a thick layer of paper when the Germans fired through the floor. When a member of the resistance movement, who had been active in finding safe places for Jews and others in hiding, had been arrested and it was feared that he might talk under duress, the Elders family had to flee for several weeks to different secret destinations. For their help to the resistance and in particular for hiding a number of Jews in their house, his father and mother were awarded posthumously in 2016 the honorific “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vesham (The World Holocaust Remembrance Center) and the State of Israel. Notwithstanding all this duress, Leo Elders sought to prepare himself for the novitiate. His parish priest gave him Jacques Maritain’s *Les Degrés du Savoir; ou Distinguer pour Unir*, another priest in a nearby village introduced him to philosophy by way of Joseph Gredt’s *Elementa philosophia Aristotelico-Thomisticae*, and in exchange for some potatoes, an Amsterdam professor gave him private lessons in Spanish.

These few anecdotes already are emblematic for the both austere (idleness would never become a part of his dictionary!) and generous life of Father Elders.

Formation Years (1945–1953)

His philosophical and theological education, in Latin of course, were years of intense intellectual and physical labor. He enjoyed Gredt's manual as well as those of Dickamp, Prümmer, and Scheeben. His teacher, Father Grevelhörster, a student of Garrigou-Lagrange, instilled in him the love for Saint Thomas and gave him Garrigou-Lagrange and Del Prado as extra reading assignments because "Elders can easily manage his studies." The reading of Del Prado's three volumes on the "De auxiliis" debate instilled in him "some reservation regarding the Jesuits although later in the Netherlands and the United States I met some excellent Jesuits." The *Cursus theologiae* of John of Saint Thomas was a faithful companion during summer vacations. He took the voluminous books along on the luggage carrier of his bicycle to their vacation destination, to the mild hilarity of his classmates who said that in the mission on the island of Flores, Indonesia, he might even climb up a coconut tree to find a quiet spot for reading John of Saint Thomas. Physical training was an integral part of preparing the missionaries: thirty-mile walks, working on the farm of the study house, swimming during the winter in the pool the students had dug out themselves.

Two visits to the *studium* made an immense impact on the young Leo Elders. The first was by the Austrian linguist and ethnologist Wilhelm Schmidt, S.V.D. (1868–1954), who, when lauded for his impressive intellect, replied: "The secret is not the 'spirit of the times' (*Zeitgeist*) but the 'taming of the time' (*Zeitgeiß*)."² The second visitor was the general superior of the Verbite Fathers, Joseph Grendel (1878–1951), who stressed the importance of manuals and said that "even a bad manual is far better than a random collection of notes." Due to health reasons, his ordination for the Spring of 1951 was postponed. In hindsight, Father Elders considered it as another sign of God's divine providence. It gave him the opportunity to make long trips on his motorcycle to Spain and immerse himself in the language but also to enroll at the university of Utrecht and take classes with Cornelia de Vogel (1905–1986), an international authority in ancient philosophy, who taught him the love and appreciation for the original texts and the world of classical culture. Upon his priestly ordination on February 28, 1953, the appointment to the island of Flores, Indonesia, had to be cancelled due to its struggles for independence from the Netherlands, while his other classmates had already been given assignments. Put on a waiting list, he could continue his studies. "Our Good Lord arranged by way of the postponement of my ordination

² He was making a wordplay on the German *Zeitgeist* ("spirit of the times") to emphasize the importance of managing one's time well in order to achieve results.

that my life was being directed toward a life of science and research.”

Canada (1954–1959)

In September of 1954, he arrived in Granby (Quebec) to teach classical languages in French in a recently founded high school of the Verbite Fathers. After some time, his request to pursue doctoral studies was granted, provided it did not interfere with his full schedule of classes (twenty hours per week) and he would find his own financial resources. A Dutch Canadian who owned a grocery store in Granby offered to drive him to Montreal in exchange for helping him load and unload supplies from the Montreal harbor. He could stay at the Christian Brothers in Montreal where he would celebrate Holy Mass and hear confessions on Thursdays and Fridays in exchange for two Canadian dollars, enough to get through the day and save some money for books. And so began the weekly rhythm of driving Wednesday afternoon after classes to Montreal, taking courses by Fathers Régis, O.P., Lachance, O.P., and others on Thursday when there were no classes in Granby, and returning on Friday to resume his duties in Granby. The most important encounter came when he met Werner Jaeger (1888–1961), who advised him to write his dissertation on book *Iota* of the *Metaphysics*, the contents of which, Jaeger said, he himself had never understood very well. This is how he came to write *Aristotle's Theory of the One: A Study of Book X of the Metaphysics* under the direction of Vianney Décarie (1917–2009) at the Université de Montréal.³

Japan (1959–1971)

Around that time a Boston confrère suggested Father Elders to the generalate of the Verbite Fathers for an assignment in Japan, much to the chagrin of the Canadian provincial. An attempt to assign him to a new seminary in the Congo failed because of struggles for independence from Belgium. And so towards the end of 1959 he arrived in Japan, the country for which he signed up back in 1953. After a year and a half mastering the Japanese language, he was assigned to the seminary and Nanzan University in Nagoya teaching Saint Thomas, in Japanese of course. The Japanese years were particularly fruitful, collaborating with the Thomistic Institute, established by the Canadian Dominicans, writing (among other texts) two monographs on Aristotle and editing a seven-volume work with the texts of Vatican II and commentaries in Japanese.⁴

³ Published as *Aristotle's Theory of the One: A Commentary on Book X of the Metaphysics* (Assen, NL: Van Gorcum, 1961).

⁴ *Aristotle's Cosmology. A commentary on the De Caelo* (Assen, NL: Van Gorcum,

As an illustration of the atmosphere, he often recalled how a critical study of his on Karl Rahner's ideas on mission could only be published with the mitigating subtitle "Remarks on . . ." and in the section "Discussion Notes" of the journal so as not to discredit the towering authority of Karl Rahner.⁵ By the end of the 1960s, the cultural revolution of 1968 and its effects in the Church had arrived to Nagoya. Henri van Straelen (1903–2004), a Dutch confrère in Japan, fearing that Father Elders' extensive workload as full professor, rector of the seminary, and dean of the philosophy department—combined with the continuing difficulties in the Church—would become too much, suggested his name, without Father Elders's knowledge, to the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Franjo Seper.

Rome 1971–1976

The work for the doctrinal section of the CDF from 1971 onwards proved to be somewhat tiresome, having to deal mostly with deviances from the Catholic faith and few concrete results. As a Dutchman, Father Elders became particularly involved in the study of the writings of the Flemish Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–2009), who at the time had come under scrutiny from the CDF. Father Elders responded to his Christology in several articles written under pseudonyms such as G. Van Rossem and G. Visconti. Teaching assignments at the Lateran University and the Angelicum, however, provided a welcome counterweight, as did the many enduring friendships which originated in those Roman years: Fathers Abelardo Lobato, O.P. (1925–2012), and Clemens Vansteenkiste, O.P. (1910–1997), Giuseppe Perini, Monsignor Brunero Gherardini (1925–2017), Philippe Delhay (1912–1990), Carlos Cardona (1930–1993), Father Georges Cottier, O.P. (1922–2016), Lluís Clavell, and in particular Monsignor Antonio Piolanti (1911–2001), the vice-president of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, to which Father Elders would be appointed in 1980.

1966); *Aristotle's Theology: A commentary on book Lambda of the Metaphysics* (Assen, NL: Van Gorcum, 1972).

⁵ See his "Die Taufe der Weltreligionen. Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie Karl Rahners," *Theologie und Glaube* 55 (1965): 124–31. In fact, the editors of the journal prefaced the article with this statement: "The editors publish this article as a discussion piece to a problem which Karl Rahner thankfully has raised in a new way." As a Verbiter priest, he would often return to this theme. For instance, in: "Vers une théologie chrétienne du pluralisme religieux (étude critique du livre de J. Dupuis)," *Sedes sapientiae*, no.71 (1999): 64–100; "Évangélisation et inculturation," *Nova et Vetera* (French) 76 (2001): 31–51; "Karl Rahner und die nichtchristlichen Religionen," *Theologisches* 34 (2004): 201–8.

He also made regular visits to the aging Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (1890–1979), for whom Father Elders put his polyglot talents to use in writing fundraising letters for an orphanage in the Trastevere division of Rome which Cardinal Ottaviani had taken under his wing early in his career. When asked by then Cardinal Taguchi of Osaka to edit a volume on the most debated topics in post-conciliar theology, he was able to include the participation of then Professor Joseph Ratzinger, which was the beginning of a lifelong friendship.⁶ As a result of the many priests of Opus Dei he befriended in Rome, he took part for more than thirty years in their annual theology conference at the University of Navarra in Pamplona. While the theme of these conferences was always on a general topic, he took it upon himself to introduce each time the insights of Saint Thomas on the topic at hand.⁷ During these years a long collaboration with such renowned journals as *Divus Thomas*, *Doctor Communis*, *Divinitas*, and *Revue thomiste* was started, as well as with the International Theological Commission of the Vatican.

The apex of his stay in Rome was undoubtedly the commemoration of the seven-hundredth anniversary of the death of Saint Thomas in 1974. The international conference at the Angelicum in honor of St. Thomas's thought brought, to the surprise of many, even Thomists, an amazing number of enthusiastic scholars and students to Rome. In the Apostolic Letter *Lumen Ecclesiae* of the same year Paul VI insists on returning to the timeless validity of St. Thomas's thought. Against the background of the theological turmoil after Vatican II and the many dissenting voices, and in light of what Paul VI himself in his first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (§26) writes about the Church "being engulfed and shaken by a tidal wave of change" which causes men "to run the risk of becoming confused, bewildered and alarmed" and "to adopt the most outlandish views" similar to the era of modernism, Father Elders saw the unexpected events of 1974 as an affirmation and a clear response from both the magisterium and the Thomistic community.

Rolduc 1976–2016: "The Center of My Absence"

Meanwhile in 1966 in the Netherlands, the bishops and religious supe-

⁶ As cardinal Ratzinger in 2003 and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in 2016 he wrote two prefaces for the two *libri amicorum* I edited.

⁷ Many of these were later collected in two volumes: *Conversaciones teológicas con Santo Tomás de Aquino* (San Rafael, ARG: Ediciones del Verbo Encarnado, San Rafael, Mendoza, 2008) and *Conversaciones filosóficas con Santo Tomás de Aquino* (San Rafael, ARG: Ediciones del Verbo Encarnado, 2009).

riors had decided to close all the seminaries and houses of formation in order to “professionalize” and “modernize” the priestly formation. Hence they sent their “students,” as they were now called, to the “big cities” to newly founded institutes and “student communities” where they could “experience” and “dialogue” with “the world.” The devastating effect of these measures on the spiritual life of seminarians and novices needs no elaboration. But even worse were some of the official policies put in place by some religious congregations. The Jesuits, for example, made it an official policy that in the house of their newly founded student community in Amsterdam it was not allowed to have chapel in the house. Instead, once a week a Jesuit priest would visit the house and “celebrate” Holy Mass at the kitchen table.

Although some bishops were already very soon convinced that the entire arrangement was a disaster, it took a courageous bishop, Johannes Gijzen (1932–2013), appointed bishop of the southern diocese of Roermond, to realize the necessity for a new seminary, which he founded in 1974 in the former Rolduc Abbey. The “urgent request” from the Secretariat of State to “help out” Bishop Gijzen with setting up the philosophical formation program brought Father Elders back to his former high school in the summer of 1976 where he would remain until 2016. The opposition against “this Tridentine seminary,” “this wretched undertaking” as it was called—whereas in fact bishop Gijzen was implementing *Optatam Totius*, Vatican II’s decree on Priestly Formation—was so vehement that the superiors of the religious orders and congregations in the Netherlands issued a veto against participating in this undertaking, prohibiting their members to teach at the new seminary. Father Elders, who was still a member of the Japanese province of the S.V.D., was, at the instigation of the Vatican, transferred to the German province in order to avoid the veto of his Dutch home province. But Father Elders was never someone to let politics interfere with loyalty and personal friendships.

Inspired by the remark of the former superior general Joseph Grendel, he set out to write manuals for all the main philosophical disciplines according to guidelines set out in *Optatam Totius* §15. These manuals set forth Saint Thomas’s position from within the perspective of the history of philosophy before and after Thomas, and they would in subsequent years be translated into English, French, Italian, German, Czech, Polish, and even the Korean and Persian languages.⁸

⁸ For the English translations see: *The Philosophical Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1990); *The Metaphysics of Being of St. Thomas Aquinas in a Historical Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); *The Philosophy of Nature of St. Thomas*

Summers were usually spent in the house of the Verbite Fathers in Boston, from where, between 1984 and 2012, he drove to countless parishes between Philadelphia and the Canadian border for mission appeals, acquiring a vast geographical knowledge of this part of the United States. In fact, I once witnessed at a conference at Ave Maria that colleagues introducing themselves to him were each and every one greeted by Father Elders with a detailed insight into the region they came from, often with details unknown even to them. These visits naturally included meeting his good friends Ralph McInerny (1929–2010) and Jude Dougherty. The second part of the summer often included trips through Central and South America, lecturing in various countries and often culminating in participating in the *Semana Tomista* in Argentina.

Under his instigation the Rolduc seminary in a small town on the border between the Netherlands and Germany became a center for Thomism during the 1980s, when Thomism was still very much the odd one out in philosophy and theology. The international conferences he organized brought such international scholars as Jan Hendrick Walgrave, Geert Verbeke, Servais Pinckaers, Ralph McInerny, William Wallace, Jean-Pierre Torrell, Leo Scheffczyk, John Finnis, G. C. Anawati, Georges Cottier, and many others to the seminary and gave a certain *praesentialitas* to Thomism, much to the amazement of colleagues and students.⁹ In these years he also turned his scholarly attention to Aquinas's biblical exegesis and reading of the Church Fathers and in doing so was instrumental in what is now called "biblical Thomism" or "*ressourcement* Thomism."¹⁰

Once the program of philosophy formation at the Rolduc seminary was

Aquinas: Nature, the Universe, Man (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997); *The Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005; repr. Catholic University of America Press in 2019)

⁹ The proceedings of these five international conferences were published by the Vatican Publishing House in the *Studi Tomistici* series.

¹⁰ Many of these studies are collected in *Sur les traces de saint Thomas d'Aquin: Étude de ses commentaires bibliques, thèmes théologiques* (Paris: Parole et Silence and Presses Universitaires de l'IPC, 2009), 590. In addition there are: "La présence de saint Grégoire le Grand dans les œuvres de saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Nova et Vetera* (French) 86 (2011/2): 155–80; "The Presence of the Church Fathers in Aquinas' Commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John," in *Reading Sacred Scriptures with Thomas Aquinas. Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions and New Perspectives*, ed. Piotr Roszak and Jörgen Vijgen (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 2015), 257–86; "La présence de Saint Ambroise dans les écrits de Thomas d'Aquin," *Nova et Vetera* (French) 94 (2019): 77–102, and "The Presence of the Alexandrian and Cappadocian Fathers of the Church in the Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas," *Espíritu* 58 (2019): 337–63.

underway, he accepted various teaching positions elsewhere, such as the Center for Thomistic Studies in Houston, the Studium Notre-Dame de Vie in southern France, and the Gustav Siewerth Academy in Bavaria. For thirty years he lectured monthly at the Institut de Philosophie Comparée in Paris. In addition he lectured at various universities throughout Europe, and also many monasteries and convents, mainly in France (Sainte-Madeleine du Barroux, Notre-Dame de Fontgombault, Sept-Fons, Saint-Joseph de Clairval, Sainte-Marie de Lagrasse, Fraternité de Saint Vincent Ferrer). As a result he would jokingly refer to the Rolduc seminary as the “center of his absence.”

On the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of his Ordination to the Priesthood in 2003 he was honored by a *Festschrift*, prefaced by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.¹¹ In 2006, he was given the Lifetime Achievement Award by the American Maritain Association. In a letter thanking Ralph McInerny, Father Elders commented on receiving the award with the following phrase, characteristic of his humility and zeal: “I do not think that I really deserved it, but in the coming years it will remind me of what I still should do.” In 2009 he was the recipient of the Order of St. Thomas from the Center for Thomistic Studies at the University of St. Thomas (Houston, TX) for “his superb contribution to the study of St. Thomas Aquinas.”

Teteringen (2016–2019)

At the age of ninety, he resigned his many teaching positions and retired to the provincial house of his religious congregation in Teteringen in the Netherlands, where so many decades ago he received his theological formation. He was honored by another *Festschrift*, again prefaced by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.¹²

Ever since teaching for several years in the early 1980s a graduate course on Aquinas’s commentaries on Aristotle at the Center for Thomistic Studies, Father Elders had envisioned a book-length monograph on all of these commentaries with the goal of evaluating, by way of a close reading of the text, Aquinas’s reception of these foundational texts. His many teaching, lecturing, and writing assignments in subsequent years did not allow him to undertake this task. Now, freed from many of these obligations, he was

¹¹ *Indubitanter ad veritatem: Studies offered to Leo J. Elders, S.V.D., in Honor of the Golden Jubilee of his Ordination to the Priesthood*, ed. Jörgen Vijgen, with preface by His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Budel, NL: Damon, 2003).

¹² *Libenter praeceptorum laudes celebrarem: Stories and Reflections in Honor of Leo J. Elders, S.V.D., on His Ninetieth Birthday*, ed. J. Vijgen (Haarlem, NL: Kerkrade, 2016).

able to devote his time almost entirely to what he regarded as his *magnum opus*. While originally written in English, a French translation already appeared in 2018 and a revised English edition is planned for the future.¹³ In 2018 he also published his *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors: The Philosophers and the Church Fathers in His Works* with The Catholic University of America Press.

Emphasizing the crucial importance of Aristotle for both the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas, Father Elders often compared the transposition of Aristotle brought about by St. Thomas to the systematic rebuilding of a historical monument: the old bricks, slates, and beams are still used, but a more coherent whole is produced; some new windows are added; there is now much more light in the building, which becomes more livable; a new clarity envelops the whole monument.¹⁴

Ever since his encounter with Cornelia de Vogel in the 1940s, herself a Plato scholar, he remained attentive and sensitive to both the (anti-) Platonic elements in Aristotle as well as to the Neoplatonic influences on Saint Thomas. It is therefore not surprising that the last book he finished—on October 1, 2019, I received his last email containing a correction to the Greek in the manuscript of the book—was a commentary on Saint Thomas's commentary on Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus*, the French original of which was published posthumously in late 2019.¹⁵

Since the Spring of 2019 he was working on a commentary on *De substantiis separatis*. Upon the discovery of a terminal illness in the summer of 2019, he continued working saying: "St. Thomas and my Guardian Angel will take care of me." Although he asked the Lord "to give me six more months to finish my book," by early October his strength had diminished to the point that "I can no longer work but I can pray all the more." On October 14, 2019 at 2:15 p.m. he passed away quietly and peacefully.

Father Elders was above all else a missionary priest, summarizing the spirituality of Saint Arnold Janssen as follows: "Devotion to the Holy Trinity, the Divine Word and the Holy Spirit, simplicity of life, readiness to serve others anytime and anywhere, apostolic zeal." Hence, "when people call upon you as a priest you can never refuse to help" because as a priest "one is a mediator between God and the people." "The central task of a

¹³ *Aristote et Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de l'IPC, 2018).

¹⁴ A useful summary of this position can be found in his "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et Aristote," *Revue thomiste* 96 (1988): 357–76.

¹⁵ Leo J. Elders, *Les Noms Divins de Denys le Pseudo-Aréopagite selon Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de l'IPC, 2019).

priest,” therefore, “is to celebrate Holy Mass for the Church and the world.”

God’s predilection and providence caused this missionary priest to become a missionary for Saint Thomas Aquinas and to lead a life which he himself described as “a life devoted to a restless and never interrupted study of St. Thomas and his sources.” He saw this vocation as an act of obedience to the following words of the old constitutions of the Divine Word Missionaries which were engraved in his memory: *Fratres semper occupati inveniantur in studiis philosophicis et theologicis*. His uncompromising fidelity to God’s vocation shaped Father Elders’s much-admired discipline, humility, and generosity.

Nowadays one is often in search of what it means to be a Thomist. Father Elders was unmistakably clear: “The works of St. Thomas are so to speak the house in which my mind was allowed to live, the warmth and the light which held me upright amidst so many opinions, errors and criticisms, that which brought me the truth and the insight which I longed for and they still contain new treasures and inexhaustible insights.”

I have been given the grace and privilege—as so many others—to accompany Father Elders on his tireless efforts to understand and spread the thought of Saint Thomas. Father Elders was a man of God, a man for God whose simplicity, warmth, and humble generosity gave testimony to the truth he espoused with Saint Thomas as Master. Although his road on earth has come to an end—and with it part of my own road as well—St. Thomas’s “inexhaustible insights” remain there to explore.

May Saint Thomas greet him with the same words once spoken by Christ himself: “You have written well of me” (*bene scripsisti de me*) and accompany him towards his eternal reward, the beatitude given us in Jesus Christ whom Father Elders so devotedly served. N.V.