

Eulogy for Fr. Servais Theodore Pinckaers, O.P.

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(Rev 21.1–5a, 6b–7; Mt 5.1–12a)

10 April 2008

The Chapel of the Ursuline Sisters

Fribourg, Switzerland

IF FR. PINCKAERS could speak to us today, the first thing he would say is that funerals are not canonizations. “You are not here,” he would say, “to canonize me, but to pray for me, to pray for me so that I can enter fully into the joy of the kingdom.” Alright, we shall pray for him. His life, however, like every Christian life, was rooted in the great mysteries of salvation: the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the sacramental life. Fr. Pinckaers was fascinated by the Christian vocation to participate in the life and mission of Christ, the vocation to be configured to Christ in the Holy Spirit; because of this, I am persuaded that Fr. Pinckaers would invite us to celebrate this great vocational mystery in his own life: the mystery of Providence and of grace that enabled a humble, timid kid from the village of Wonck in Wallonia to have an influence that transcends national and cultural boundaries. Right now throughout the world—in China, Vietnam, Korea, the United States, Africa, and Australia, as well as in Europe—there are seminarians and religious sisters and brothers in initial formation who are studying the works of Fr. Pinckaers. Moreover, there are theologians, preachers, and religious educators in Alaska, Krakow, Sidney, Hong Kong, Kinshasa, and even Waco, who are preaching and teaching the Beatitudes, the virtues, and the freedom for excellence that flows from living in the Spirit because of the daily labors of this humble Belgian priest. The extent of his influence is perhaps most

clearly revealed in the Catechism. If one reads the moral section of the Catechism one discovers a remarkable convergence of ideas between it and Fr. Pinckaers's magisterial work *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. He would object to the notion that he wrote this section of the Catechism, but we are still free to observe that on the level of structure and quotations, the similarities between the two works are beyond what chance would permit. No one would have expected such a far-reaching influence for a humble boy from Wonck.

Born in Liege in the Fall of 1925, the young Servais Theodore ("Theo" to his family) lost his father on the eve of the Second World War. An only son, he suffered the trials and deprivations of the war by turns with his mother and with his fellow students at the boarding school he attended throughout much of the conflict. In 1945, after the war and after one year in a diocesan seminary, Servais entered the Order of Preachers. He did his studies at the Dominican Studium of the Belgian Province at La Sarte (Huy) not far from Liege. It was there that he received his license in theology under the direction of the future Cardinal Jerome Hamer, with a thesis studying Henri de Lubac's conception of the supernatural (1952). He then undertook doctoral studies at the Angelicum, where he attended the lectures of eminent professors such as Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, Paul Philippe, and Mario Luigi Ciappi.

His dissertation, written under the direction of Fr. Louis-Bertrand Gillon, was entitled "The Virtue of Hope from Peter Lombard to Saint Thomas" (1954). Upon concluding his studies, Fr. Pinckaers returned to the Dominican Studium at La Sarte, where from 1954 to 1965 he taught moral theology and served for a period as the assistant novice master. It was there that Fr. Pinckaers undertook his first efforts to renew our understanding of moral theology, foreshadowing the Vatican Council's call to renewal by several years. The fruits of these labors, which were first published as articles, were subsequently drawn together in his groundbreaking study *Le renouveau de la morale* (Téqui, 1964). The book was described by Marie-Dominique Chenu in his preface as the work of an author "for whom the historical method, in all its richness, is placed at the service of a doctrinally penetrating intellect and applied to the most pressing contemporary questions." Chenu concludes by affirming that "this way of employing the great masters of classical theology is definitely a means and a guarantee of the *Renewal of moral theology*." In fact, it was during these years at La Sarte that the insights that would subsequently shape his thought began to germinate within him: (1) the primacy of the Word of God as a living Word addressed to each generation; (2) the fundamental importance of the Fathers of the Church, especially of Saint Augustine; (3)

and the lasting value of the method and thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Equally important for his intellectual and spiritual formation were the eight years he spent engaged in pastoral ministry at the Dominican Priory in Liege, where he was assigned following the closure of La Sarte Studium in 1965. Then, in 1975, after already having spent a year there as an invited professor (1972–1973), he was appointed to the French language chair in fundamental moral theology at the University of Fribourg, in Switzerland, where he taught for the next 25 years.¹

Emeritus professor since 1997, Servais Pinckaers did not pass these last ten years idly. Indeed, he recently published a new book, *Plaidoyer pour la vertu* (*A Plea for Virtue*), which was one of three to receive an honorable mention as runners up for the *Grand Prix catholique de littérature* for 2007. Even more surprisingly, his publisher recently revealed that before he died Fr. Pinckaers prepared three more texts for publication: one which he had just finished, entitled *Passions et vertu*, and two others based on course notes: a meditation on Augustine's *De Trinitate*, and a study entitled *L'attrait de la parole, sur les chemins de la morale chrétienne*, which promises to be a coda to *The Sources of Christian Ethics*.

The mention of sources, however, raises the question of Fr. Pinckaers's own sources. What was the source of all this productivity?

Behold, I make all things new. . .
I am the Alpha and the Omega,
the beginning and the end.
To the thirsty
I will give a gift from the spring of life-giving water.
The victor will inherit these gifts,
and I shall be his God,
and he will be my son. (Revelation 21:5–7)

In a brief meditation entitled “My Sources,” which he first offered to an informal gathering of undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame, Fr. Pinckaers mentions two things: the Scriptures and the Eucharist. In other words, the living presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the words of Christ in the Scriptures, and both encountered through a life of daily prayer. This was the twin source of his day-to-day productivity and joy.

His was the joy proper to the Beatitudes, a truly strange joy if we listen carefully to the Gospel:

¹ The biographical information in these first three paragraphs has been gleaned from a summary of his life and work prepared by Fr. Pinckaers's longtime friend and colleague Romanus Cessario, O.P.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.
 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.
 Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 for they will be satisfied.
 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
 Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.
 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
 Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
 for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you
 and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me.
 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.

The Beatitudes proclaim the joy of being poor, in tears, hungry, and thirsty, of being persecuted, insulted, and falsely accused: "Rejoice and be glad!" This is a strange and abnormal kind of joy. Fr. Pinckaers often insisted, however, that it is true Christian joy, because it is the fruit of our configuration to Christ. Yet this is precisely the challenge: to be configured to Christ means to follow in his path, which is the way of the cross. Here we arrive at the heart of the matter: joy in the cross. In several places Fr. Pinckaers writes that Christian joy is much deeper than simply pleasure, because this spiritual joy can even exist during suffering; it can even exist in the depths of agony: in the depths: *De profundis*.

To have an inkling of Fr. Pinckaers's state of mind during his final agony, it is enough to look at the book he left open on his desk. It was John Chrysostom's commentary on the Psalms, opened at Psalm 130, the *De profundis*: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice." It's the cry of the afflicted, but as Chrysostom notes, it is also the cry of one who retains his confidence in God, retaining it to such an extent that he proclaims that the Lord will deliver him from his sins. That Fr. Pinckaers also had this confidence is clear from his last writings. In a notebook that he kept in his choir stall, we find a final meditation. Reflecting on the mystery of our adopted filiation in Christ, which he describes as "a reality beyond words, that words only confirm as a mystery," Fr. Pinckaers proclaims, "we are not alone, even in material solitude. Jesus' power to heal us in our crippled state. We are not to fear weakness, sickness, and infirmity: an offering to the Father in confidence. . . . The joy of working for the Lord and for the Church." In his weakness and infirmity, Fr. Pinckaers gives himself to God with confidence and proclaims, in his last act as a writer, his joy in serving the Lord and his Church. Thus, even if we should pray for him (as he would ask us to do),

we can also find in him an example of confidence and joy to imitate in our own lives.

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