

DE LUBAC

A Guide for the Perplexed

David Grumett

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With a foreword by
Avery Cardinal Dulles



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FOREWORD

by Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.

In retrospect the twentieth century will perhaps be seen as one of the great ages of Christian theology. It rivals the fifth, the thirteenth, and the sixteenth centuries for having produced authors of erudition, creativity, and eloquence. Among Protestants, the names of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich stand out, even though critics will variously assess the value of their contributions. On the Catholic side, Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, and Hans Urs von Balthasar are outstanding, and Henri de Lubac surely belongs to this stellar group. Amid difficult circumstances he managed to achieve an extraordinary mastery of the Greek and Latin Fathers, the monastic tradition, and the Baroque period. Though primarily a historical theologian, he played an influential part in many inner-Catholic discussions of his day.

De Lubac never believed that theology could be pursued in isolation from current trends, whether ecclesiastical or secular. During the Second World War he was passionately engaged in the French underground, working against the Vichy government, particularly because of its complicity in the anti-Semitism of the Nazis. Exploring the roots of modern atheism, he brilliantly analysed the rise of secularism, as exemplified by Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Auguste Comte. He also wrote a careful booklength study of the socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

In his personal thought de Lubac was deeply influenced by several immediate predecessors: the French Jesuit Pierre Rousselot, the Belgian Jesuit Joseph Maréchal, and the French layman Maurice Blondel. Under their influence he promoted a personalist philosophy that sought to integrate some of the best insights of Immanuel Kant into a Thomistic framework. He judged that something had gone

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seriously awry with the scholastic tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with Tommaso de Vio Cajetan, Francisco Suárez, and their successors. He sharply criticized the neo-scholastics of his own day, both Jesuit and Dominican, and they in turn judged his work novel and dangerous.

During the 1950s de Lubac and his associates were accused of promoting a new theology (*nouvelle théologie*) – a term that displeased de Lubac, as readers of the present work will learn. Highly placed Roman prelates shared in the suspicion. They understood him as holding that God could have created human beings with a purely natural end. Pope Pius XII was thought to have condemned that view when, in the encyclical *Humani generis* (1950), he referred to some who undermine the special gratuity of the supernatural order. Also suspect were de Lubac's views on the Eucharist. His willingness to speak of the Eucharist as Christ's 'mystical body', reviving the practice of some early medieval theologians, seemed difficult to reconcile with the doctrine of transubstantiation.

The neo-scholastics were not de Lubac's only adversaries. His promotion of the fourfold sense of Scripture was displeasing to many working exegetes, who preferred to limit themselves to the literal meaning of the text – the meaning that had been intended by its human authors. They considered the spiritual exegesis favoured by de Lubac vague, arbitrary, and even obscurantist.

It may have been providential that the papal nuncio to France in the mid-1950s was Giuseppe Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII. While in Paris he seems to have gained a deep respect for Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar, both of whom were under suspicion from Rome at the time. Shortly after announcing the convening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII appointed them both to take part in the preparations. Like Congar, de Lubac served as a *peritus* (theological consultant) for all four sessions of Vatican II.

The Second Vatican Council seems to bear many traces of de Lubac's influence, notably in what it has to say on Christ as the centre of history, Scripture and tradition, the catholicity of the Church, the Church as sacrament, the theology of missions, religious freedom, the Jews, Buddhism, and Marxist atheism. Even if de Lubac did not intervene on all these questions, his writings prior to the Council greatly influenced the assembled Fathers. At the Council de Lubac found a kindred spirit in Karol Wojtyła, with whom he continued to correspond for some years. At one point he even

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expressed the hope that Wojtyla might become pope, as happened in 1978. Pope John Paul II reciprocated his esteem and named him a cardinal in 1983.

After the Council Paul VI appointed him one of the original members of the International Theological Commission, where he developed close working relationships with Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI.

Even after his rehabilitation at Vatican II, de Lubac remained controversial. He severely denounced some of the liberal interpretations of the Council, especially those promoted in the Dutch periodical *Concilium*. He was a founding editor of the international review *Communio*, which in many respects served as a conservative counterweight to *Concilium*. During the decade following the Council, he spoke out against what he regarded as the hypertrophy of national and regional episcopal conferences, and denied that they possessed true doctrinal authority. He was critical of the bishops for allowing their policies to be dictated by a bureaucracy of professionals.

Although sometimes called conservative, de Lubac was not typical of that breed. Throughout his career he championed the causes of theologians who had been judged less than orthodox. He did a great deal to rehabilitate the third-century Alexandrian theologian Origen. Toward the end of his career he wrote a very favourable monograph on the Renaissance Platonist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who had been in some trouble with Roman authorities. About the time of Vatican II he composed several volumes in defence of the orthodoxy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin – a task he undertook at the behest of the superior general of the Society of Jesus, who was worried that the works of Teilhard might be condemned as unorthodox.

Altogether, the theological career of Henri de Lubac was a stormy one, marked by triumphs and defeats, successes and failures. Since his death he has gained a growing number of ardent disciples. Rereading his works today, we will do well to keep in mind that they were not composed in a vacuum. He was not a pure systematician, dispassionately working out the logical consequences of ideas. He was emphatically a man of the Church, deeply involved in the pastoral problems of the day. He was also a man of tradition, seeking to retrieve earlier insights that could be of help for our own time. A master of the apt quotation, he often cited the words of others to express his own thoughts. He did so partly out of modesty, no doubt,

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but also because he believed that good theology stands within the great tradition.

The present book is, to the best of my knowledge, unique at the present time because it surveys the thinking of de Lubac not on one theme or another but on nearly all the major questions he treated. The advantage of this approach is that it shows the comprehensiveness of de Lubac's oeuvre and his consistency. But the informed reader will recognize that he wrote primarily as historical theologian eager to serve the pastoral needs of the Church in his day. He did so with such learning, elegance, and relevance that his words will be treasured for many years to come.

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INTRODUCTION: A THEOLOGICAL LIFE

Henri de Lubac was a Jesuit theologian born on 20 February 1896 who undertook his formation in the aftermath of the First World War. This was a period of intense social and theological ferment for French Jesuits. Along with members of other religious orders, they had been required to fight for their country. Many, including de Lubac, came from conservative provincial families and entered the order aged seventeen. The maelstrom of war expanded irreversibly their intellectual, social and vocational horizons. De Lubac shot and killed in the war and suffered recurring pain in later life from injuries sustained.¹

In 1902 religious teaching communities had been expelled from France, and de Lubac therefore pursued most of his studies abroad. Following a semester at Hales Place, Canterbury, he arrived on the island of Jersey late in the summer of 1920 to begin his three years of philosophy. The Maison Saint-Louis in St Helier, the Jesuit scholasticate where he was based, delivered a traditional syllabus under the conservative leadership of the rector, Gabriel Picard, and the uncompromising Suárezian, Pédro Descoqs.² De Lubac recalls the ‘philosophy courses . . . during which I sometimes scribbled some rather nonconformist notes . . . They were inspired more by Saint Thomas than by my Suarezian master, whose combative teaching was a perpetual invitation to react.’³ Like all Jesuits of his generation, de Lubac thus approached theology via philosophy, which in his case became a *critique* of a particular form of philosophy launched from within philosophy.

After a year working at the Jesuit college at Mongré in the Rhône, de Lubac moved in the late summer of 1924 to Ore Place, overlooking the town of Hastings on the south coast of England, to embark on his four years of theology. The atmosphere was quite different

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from on Jersey. The groundbreaking journal *Recherches de science religieuse*, launched in 1910, had included in its first two years of publication twenty contributions by no fewer than seven Hastings scholars. Significant foundations were laid in Hastings for the developments commonly known as *nouvelle théologie* by figures like Léonce de Grandmaison the Rector, the Pauline scholar Ferdinand Prat, and Joseph Huby. De Lubac was a member of the Sunday meeting 'La Pensée' in which the first sketch of his major study *Surnaturel* was born. The group met under the patronage of Huby, whom de Lubac states 'had warmly encouraged me to verify whether the doctrine of Saint Thomas on this important point was indeed what was claimed by the Thomist school around the sixteenth century, codified in the seventeenth and asserted with greater emphasis than ever in the twentieth'.⁴

These obscure origins above an English seaside town have been little understood. De Lubac is typically identified as the leader of a movement named *nouvelle théologie*, but at no point did there exist a coherent school comparable with, for instance, the Dominican Le Saulchoir, defined by manifesto and personnel.⁵ The ideas which de Lubac and others were addressing possessed, moreover, deep roots back to figures like Pierre Rousselot, a Jesuit killed in battle in the First World War, and the Catholic lay philosopher Maurice Blondel, made famous by his 1893 thesis *L'Action*. Furthermore, de Lubac himself uses the phrase *nouvelle théologie* pejoratively with consistency over a long period of time. When discussing liberal interpretations of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in 1980 he critically asserts: 'This famous "spirit of the Council", which those who invoke it most have nourished with their own ideologies, is so seductive and so powerful that it soon obliges its adorers to accept a whole "new theology"'.⁶ As early as 1946, moreover, he refers critically to the separation of philosophy from theology around the sixteenth century as engendering a 'new theology' founded on the concept of pure nature.⁷

Following the appointment of the former rector Jean-Baptiste Costa de Beauregard as new Provincial in June 1926, the decision was taken to relocate the theologate back to Fourvière in Lyons, where de Lubac completed the remaining two years of his theological formation. The teaching of theology by members of religious orders remained strictly illegal until 1940 but was by this time tolerated by the authorities, partly in recognition of the sacrifice which many of them had made for the nation in the First World War. A

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year later, de Lubac delivered his first lecture in the Theology Faculty as Professor of Fundamental Theology.⁸ Facilities were limited. He recalls:

In September 1929, I arrived on the Lyons peninsula, at the residence on the rue d'Auvergne. It was an old shack that was demolished shortly afterward. In the loft where I was lodged, which was lit by a little skylight, I had not a single book. The Fourvière library was scarcely accessible: it had no room at that time where one could work, and none of the books could be checked out; the library of the Catholic Faculties was miserable: two dusty rooms in an old, shaky main building with a little bit of everything. Fortunately I discovered a treasure in the attic of Saint Joseph's day school, in the beautiful, old-fashioned quarters located over the chapel: a library, particularly of literature, which had long been neglected but which contained several tiers of theology well furnished with old books.⁹

De Lubac did not teach in the Jesuit scholasticate at Fourvière, the hill overlooking the modern city centre from the west, but in the Catholic Theological Faculty on the central Presqu'île peninsula surrounded by the River Saône on the western side and the Rhône on the east. He evokes the convivial atmosphere characteristic of faculty gatherings: 'The basic essentials of these meetings consisted of a good meal, followed by good recreation . . . Then, before breaking up, we quickly reviewed the list of students, and, if necessary, the dean gave a few opinions.'¹⁰ De Lubac had close contact with doctoral students. One of those was Hans Urs von Balthasar, who records the decisive impact of their encounter during the autumn of 1933 on the direction of his studies towards patristic writers like Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor and Origen.¹¹

Lack of resources was by no means the only obstacle confronting de Lubac. The rigid scholasticism against which he had reacted on Jersey was gaining ground, buttressed by approved reading lists, the Index of proscribed works, periodic investigations into doctrinal orthodoxy, and the requirement to submit all theological manuscripts to *réviseurs* for approval prior to publication. He recollects:

A certain Scholastic conservatism, which claimed in all good faith to be tradition itself, was alarmed at any appearance of novelty. A

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kind of so-called ‘Thomist’ dictatorship, which was more a matter of government than intellectuality, strove to stifle any effort toward freer thought. A network made up of several professors and their former students, which was spread throughout the world, distrusted anything that came into existence outside itself.¹²

This scholasticism is what de Lubac primarily means by ‘modern theology’: a form of theology organized around the philosophical concept of ‘pure nature’, which supposes separation between nature and the supernatural such that nature is able to attain only purely natural ends.¹³ Its proponents, prevented by patronage systems from engaging in serious debate about those philosophical suppositions, he describes less confusingly as ‘new Thomists’.¹⁴

Political pressures of a more disturbing kind increased following the German invasion of the southern zone of France in November 1942, even though the government in Vichy had recently legalized the Jesuits’ position. He recalls: ‘The tension was constant. We lived in a fever increased by hunger, by the daily horror of the news, by the next day’s uncertainty. And yet, work was carried on, becoming even more intense.’¹⁵ Indeed it was the war that offered de Lubac the opportunity to work on the text of his major study *Surnaturel*, from which teaching responsibilities had over the preceding decade distracted him. He explains:

In June 1940, leaving in haste with a group of companions for La Louvesc, after having evaded the Germans who were approaching Lyons, I carried along a bag with a parcel of notes in it, among which was the notebook for *Surnaturel*. I spent several days up there putting a little order into it. Soon there was the return from our exodus . . . and I gave no more thought to it. But when, in 1943, being hunted by the Gestapo, I had to flee once more, I again carried along my notebook. Hidden away in Vals, which I could not leave and where I could not engage in any correspondence, I thus had something to occupy my retreat. Taking advantage of the resources offered by the Vals library, the manuscript swelled. When I came back to Lyons soon after the departure of the German army, it was ready to be delivered to the printer.¹⁶

Owing to the postwar paper shortage the printing of the work was limited to just 700 copies, and even those produced used low quality

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paper and binding.¹⁷ The concrete political controversies surrounding the actions of the French Church during this occupation period make careful examination of de Lubac's response to events and assessment of the period especially important. Shortly after his death, for instance, an essay was published in his name criticizing alleged episcopal collaboration. The authorship has since been shown to have been misattributed.¹⁸

While de Lubac continued work in Lyons, his fellow Jesuit Karl Rahner pursued a somewhat different path across the Alps at the University of Innsbruck. Rahner's supernatural existential was founded on a philosophical conception of human life which supposed that there was an aspect of human nature oriented to accept divine grace and on which God could act. De Lubac's concept of the *supernatural* granted insufficient space to philosophy and the distinctive quality of divine action in Rahner's opinion, although de Lubac for his part eirenicly affirms that Rahner's views 'corresponded rather closely to what I myself was thinking, aside from a mixture of Heideggerian vocabulary that did not seem to me necessary or even opportune in a study of scholastic tradition'.¹⁹ One might well argue that Rahner's theology retains within itself a philosophical conception of pure nature, with the centrality of metaphysical questions and those about knowledge limiting the capacity of theology to establish its own prior discourse about human existence.

De Lubac's adult life encompasses the whole of what Eric Hobsbawm has called the 'short' twentieth century, extending from the First World War to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the year in which he died. His theological writing covers most of this period. An introduction to de Lubac thus also provides an overview of a large part of twentieth-century French catholic theology. De Lubac frequently draws insights from historical debates highly pertinent to current theology, and his discussion of topics like faith and reason, the Church, and Buddhism contain profound pastoral insights. His ideas exerted formative influence on both Pope Benedict XVI and Archbishop Rowan Williams.

Surprisingly, this is the first English introduction to de Lubac's theology to be written. Hans Urs von Balthasar's *The Theology of Henri de Lubac* is a translation of his brief 1976 German study which omits several key topics (nature and grace, historical theology, political theology), draws contestable conclusions about others (Buddhism, the Eucharist) and takes no account of de Lubac's late

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work. Two volumes have been produced in the past ten years each dealing with specific aspects of his theology: Paul McPartlan's excellent *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue*, and Susan Wood's *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac*. More recently, interest in de Lubac beyond Catholic circles has been generated by John Milbank's *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural*. The study here presented seeks to provide a balanced, contextual and accessible account to help readers understand these various debates as well as to introduce some new ones.

CHAPTER ONE

GOD AND NATURE

In 1879, Pope Leo XIII promulgated the encyclical *Aeterni patris*. His intention was to exhort Catholic theologians throughout the world to reform their teaching and apologetics in accordance with the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas. The encyclical identified Aquinas's philosophy as specifically 'Christian philosophy', in distinction with that of other major thinkers such as Descartes. Leo wished to reinstate into theology a philosophical method that supported and required belief in Christ as defined by the Church. The encyclical asserted: 'The catholic philosopher will know that he violates at once faith and the laws of reason if he accepts any conclusion which he understands to be opposed to revealed doctrine.' Leo's second justification for commending Aquinas's philosophy was that it synthesized all previous Christian thought. He more than any other theologian had performed the task of 'diligently collecting, and sifting, and storing up, as it were, in one place, for the use and convenience of posterity the rich and fertile harvests of Christian learning scattered abroad in the voluminous works of the holy Fathers'.¹ Official efforts to re-establish not only Aquinas's theology, but a particular interpretation of it, persisted and became increasingly systematic. In 1914, the Sacred Congregation of Studies published the Twenty-Four Theses, propositions summarizing the central tenets of this orthodoxy to be taught in all colleges as fundamental elements of philosophy.

De Lubac wished to challenge the intellectual historiography of *Aeterni patris*. In his view the theologians who preceded Aquinas needed to be read and studied individually and each in their own terms, and their work could not be judged solely on the basis of its conformity with supposed Thomist norms or divergence from