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THE NEW GNOSTICS / 1

Abuse and 'porno-mysticism': the French scandal that explains Rupnik

ECCLESIA 11_03_2023

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Seventy years of abuse against women, including many religious, justified 'mystically'. And a whole network of cover-ups, complicity, and disciples who learned the style. This is the sad story, which is shaking Catholic France, of the Dominican brothers Thomas

and Marie-Dominique Philippe and Jean Vanier. Two publications reconstruct the incredible story of the founder of *L'Arche*, Jean Vanier (+2019), an international non-profit association present in 38 countries for the support of people with severe mental disabilities, his 'spiritual father', Fr Thomas Philippe (+1993) and the founder of the Communauté Saint-Jean, Fr Dominique-Marie Philippe (+2006).

January saw the 900 page publication of *Emprise et abus, enquête sut Thomas Philippe, Jean Vanier et l'Arche (1950-2019)*, the result of work begun in the autumn of 2020 by a Study Commission commissioned by the *Arche* to shed light on the founder and his relationship with Fr Thomas (download here). In February, historian Tangi Cavalin published for the French edition Du Cerf his over 700-page investigation (*L'affaire. Les dominicains face au scandale des frères Philippe*) into the position of the Dominican order in the face of the scandals provoked by Thomas and Marie-Dominique, requested by the superior of the French Dominican province, Fr Nicolas Tixier.

Fr Thomas Philippe, a Dominican from the Saulchoir convent, had founded the international formation centre Eau Vive in 1945, which was the centre of French Catholic culture in those years. The Dominican friar, according to his own testimony, had experienced, seven years earlier, an unspecified 'very obscure grace', a presumed union with the Blessed Virgin Mary, which also involved his 'sexual organs'. From this experience, Fr Thomas developed the intention to allow his future spiritual daughters to relive the same ‘grace’ through him. This 'privilege' later involved several nuns from two contemplative Dominican monasteries (in the one at Bouvines, the superior was Fr Thomas' sister), three Carmelites, and finally the religious community and some members of *l'Eau Vive*.

In September 1950, an intense relationship of spiritual filiation began between Fr Thomas and Jean Vanier. The following year, two women informed the superiors of the Dominican Order that they had had sexual relations with Fr Thomas, a denunciation that immediately opened proceedings at the then Holy Office. Jean Vanier was initiated into what *Emprise* calls 'mystical-spiritual practice' with a spiritual daughter of Fr Thomas, Jacqueline d'Halluin. In 1952, the Holy Office decided to intervene, first imposing on Fr Thomas to no longer have any relationship with members of *l’Eau Vive* and banning him four years later from exercising his priestly ministry, both in public and in private. The reasons that gradually emerged were extremely serious: sexual abuse of adult women, false mysticism to justify it, and a provoked abortion.

The abortion is a very sad but extremely significant page of Thomas Philippe's mad and false mysticism. The aborted child was the fruit of a relationship between

the Dominican and Anne de Rosanbo, a former novice at the Carmelite convent of Nogent-sur-Marne and later a member of *l'Eau Vive*, which she joined in 1947, while pregnant, precisely to prevent her pregnancy from generating scandal. The relationship between the two was known both to the superior and to Fr Thomas' uncle, Fr Pierre-Thomas Dehau. The young nun was urged to have an abortion, and the dead baby was baptised and venerated as a relic until 1952, as a sign of the special mission that Our Lady would entrust to Fr Thomas and the initiates.

The Holy Office decided to strike some of Fr Thomas' illustrious accomplices: his brother, Marie-Dominique, who was banned from hearing confessions, spiritual direction, staying and preaching in women's monasteries for two years; his sister, Mother Cécile Philippe, who was deposed as Prioress of the Monastery; while Fr Dehau was pardoned on the grounds of his age.

However, it is not clear why the Holy Office did not proceed to dismiss the Dominican friar from the clerical state, given the seriousness of the facts committed and the monstrosity of the "mystical" justifications. A mistake that would cost dearly. In the meantime, both Jean Vanier and the other members of l'*Eau Vive* continue their contacts with Fr Thomas, despite the fact that the Holy Office had forbidden any relationship between Fr Thomas and the members of *l'Eau Vive*. Vanier, in particular, relied on Thomas and his brother, Marie-Dominique, for his doctorate in moral philosophy, but nothing transpired of his continuing contacts. The Dominican's influence was, however, quite marked in Vanier's thesis of the possibility of a Christian morality resting on mysticism alone, without any reference to reason and moral virtues.

In a paper of his that was never published, *Les limites de la morale d'Aristote par rapport à la morale de l'Évangile*, Vanier argued even more clearly for "two distinct, specifically different moralities", namely that of the virtues and that of the spiritual man, moved by the Spirit; the common morality and the morality of the mystics. This extremism constitutes the rational justification of Fr Thomas' 'mystical way', to which he himself was initiated, and to which all those persons deemed to be called to something special were initiated. We are facing one of the great Gnostic errors: the pneumatologists, the spiritual, are not bound to the common moral life, but can break it insofar as they go beyond it in their spiritual freedom, thus totally misrepresenting the famous Pauline passage: "But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is *rightly* judged by no one." (1Cor 2, 15). A passage quoted by Vanier himself.

It is a central point to understand why people like the two Dominicans, J. Vanier or, more recently, Fr Rupnik do not feel the slightest guilt and circumvent with a sense of

superiority the measures taken against them by the ecclesiastical authorities.

It is also a mindset that reveals the persuasive approach towards the victims, who are thus deceived on the grounds that they are the elect, an election that must be kept in secret and intimacy, because the others, the non-elect, would not understand. The fourth chapter of the *Rapport* thus sheds an unavoidable light on cases of this kind: we are not dealing with escapades, nor even with forms of madness, but with real theological deviations, which the Church has already encountered and fought against over the centuries. It is for this reason that these new Gnostics cannot simply have their ministry restricted, but must be dismissed from the clerical state, and tried for the crime of heresy.

In a testimony by a former nun at the Holy Office, what clearly emerges is the total alteration of conscience to which Fr Thomas led his victims: "We believed ourselves confirmed in grace. We could no longer sin in the sphere of purity thanks to a special election of the Blessed Virgin who had revealed to us the secret of her life and her intimacy with Our Lord. We live with the Father [Thomas, ed.] and with each other as we will live in the heavenly city: the carnal union of Jesus and Mary will be at the centre of the heavenly city, in the place of the Cross".

The misunderstanding of the scope of the 'mystical path' inaugurated by Fr Thomas, and carried forward by his brother and by Jean Vanier, the evaluation of their acts in terms of a mere moral transgression are at the origin of a major error that has allowed, as we shall see, these delusions, recognised as early as the 1950s, to be perpetuated for another seventy years, reaping victims, diverting people, sowing scandal and bewilderment.

1. To be continued