

Janette Gray, RSM, *M-D Chenu's Christian Anthropology*, launch by Gerald O'Collins, SJ, AC at Mercy Centre, 28 May 2019.

My warm congratulations and thanks to the Mercy Sisters, Kathleen Williams, RSM, Hilary Regan, and all the others involved in publishing this book. It's a doctoral dissertation on Marie-Dominique Chenu presented at the University of Cambridge, for which the late Jan Gray was awarded her PhD. The book is a doctoral thesis, but that doesn't stop it from being very readable. It presents clearly and evaluates fairly, what Chenu taught about the human condition from a Christian point of view.

Years ago, I spotted an ad for a brand of red wine from France: "Some offer you just a drink. Others offer you a chateau." In this book on a very significant French theologian, Jan Gray doesn't offer you just a drink. She offers you a chateau.

Back in 1938, Roman authorities censured Chenu for his book, *Une école de théologie*. Four years later they condemned it as a misguided view of Christian theology and placed it on the index of forbidden books. You may remember how other important theologians of the twentieth century also suffered at the hands of Roman authorities: for instance, Yves Congar, a student of Chenu, Henri de Lubac, a French Jesuit, and Karl Rahner, a German Jesuit. But, as far as I know, none of their books had the distinction of being placed on the index.

With the election of Pope John XXIII and his calling of the Second Vatican Council in January 1959, a sea change took place. To their surprise, Congar, de Lubac, and Rahner were invited to join commissions engaged in preparing the work of Vatican II, which was to begin in October 1962. During the four sessions of the Council which ended in December 1965, Congar, de Lubac, and Rahner also served as official *periti* or advisers. They proved highly

influential; Congar, for instance, had a hand in drafting eight of the sixteen documents of Vatican II. Sadly, Chenu was not invited to join the preparatory commissions, nor was he appointed an official *peritus*.

Nevertheless, right from October 1962 Chenu attended Vatican II and worked unofficially and with success. Home in France, his theological style had been eminently pastoral. He spent himself incessantly, bringing fresh readings of the Christian Gospel to bear on questions coming from young people and masses of industrial workers, often alienated from the Church. He was convinced that human affairs reveal God and the divine intentions at every point in our history. Chenu's understanding of society and humanity was never static; it was a theology of change and newness that read the signs of the times. Chenu's views converged with and helped to shape the Council's agenda and documents, and not just the Constitution of the Church in the Modern World. For instance, he had an impact also on *Optatam Totius*, the 1965 decree on ecclesiastical studies. His impact on Vatican II's decree on ecclesiastical studies more than made up for his book, *Une école de théologie*, being put on the index back in 1942.

Pope John XXIII's opening address to the Council stressed the need to be eminently pastoral. Chenu could feel his own pastoral theology vindicated. At the start of the Council, on his own initiative, Chenu drafted a "Message to the World," which the bishops assembled for the opening session agreed to proclaim. That initiative helped sow the seeds for the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, solemnly approved on the last day of the Council, December 7, 1965.

Many commentators have noted the use Pope John XXIII and then *Gaudium et Spes* made of Chenu's language of the signs of the times. Contemporary events can be signs of God's

presence and purposes. Chenu disliked timeless, universal, abstract categories of thought. He cultivated historical, particular, and concrete approaches. He shared the concern with the joy and hope, grief and anguish of the people of our time that *Gaudium et Spes* invokes in its opening words. He shared also the desire to address and befriend all human beings.

There is much in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that hints at the direct or indirect influence of Chenu. Just as he gave himself to the Christian formation of lay women and men, so the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, has a chapter on the laity and their sharing in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ. The same constitution has another chapter on the universal call to holiness, the call of all people to become truly holy disciples of Christ. Yes, there is much at Vatican II that shows the impact of Chenu's theology and his presence. But, as Jan Gray warns us, the full story of Chenu's theology and its influence at the Council remains to be written.

In fact, in the annals of injustice, the obscurity into which Chenu has fallen amounts to a theological crime.

Jan's research on Chenu has helped remedy this obscurity and provided a very rich book. Thus far I have quoted some of what she tells us about Chenu and the Second Vatican Council. There are many other golden bits in this volume that can seize our attention. Let me mention five.

First, as Chenu insisted, it is in our human experience and history that God meets us. Human experience and human history are the context of God's self-communication. Outside our experience there can be no revelation. To sum up the conviction of Chenu, you might coin a Latin expression and say: *Extra experientiam nulla revelatio* (outside experience no revelation of God).

Second, Chenu wanted the Church to be deeply engaged with the events of human history. He encouraged the Church to serve contemporary needs. In the France of his day, he pushed the Church to engage effectively with the masses of unbelieving workers. When I read what Chenu said about the thousands, even millions, of unchurched people in France, I thought of the disaffected and sometimes hostile people here in Australia. How do we engage with them? How should we as Christian believers serve them?

Third, Jan discusses some golden insights of Chenu about the seven sacraments, and the relationship of the sacraments to human needs. We constantly need the sacraments. The sacraments ensure that Christian life is not defined only in moral terms, even in the moral terms of loving God and loving neighbour. The sacraments stop us from reducing Christianity to a system of ethics. They are seven major ways for the Holy Trinity to communicate the divine life to human beings, and they do so in the key of the present, the past, and the future. No doubt, Chenu was inspired here by the triple shape of what his fellow Dominican St Thomas Aquinas had said about the sacrament of the Eucharist: 'O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his passion is recalled, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.' That antiphon has been set to music by Arkadelt, Palestrina and many other great composers as 'o sacrum convivium'.

Fourth, in Chenu's theology the incarnation of the Son of God was central. The Word became flesh and the whole material world was changed forever. Everything and everyone became sacred. The personal presence of the Word of God has affected the entire material world and united everyone and everything with him. Hence Chenu did not like too much what the Second Vatican Council said about lay people consecrating the world to God. Through the incarnation everything had **already** been consecrated to God.

Fifthly and finally, Jan recalls an image that Chenu used effectively, that of a bridge. Chenu understood his vocation to function as a bridge, a bridge between his theological inheritance and the pastoral needs of his times. Jan herself seems to have liked in a special way that image of a bridge. During her own doctoral studies at the University of Cambridge and visits to Paris, she saw many wonderful bridges: in Cambridge small ones like Magdalene bridge over the river Cam and larger ones like the bridges in Paris over the river Seine.

Here in Australia, Jan herself was for us a wonderful bridge. a bridge between our theological inheritance and the needs of our times. When leading us over that bridge, she didn't offer us just a drink; she offered us a chateau. May we all, in different ways, take up her work and continue to bridge the gap between the faith we have inherited and the crying needs of our contemporary world.

The American writer Saul Bellow describes a character in one of his novels: "history was a nightmare during which he was trying to get some sleep." Marie-Dominique Chenu and Jan Gray, however, show us that history, the history of the world and the history of the Church is not a nightmare. Our history is a place where we should not sleep but where we can all meet God.

Jan and I shared not only the privilege of studying at the University of Cambridge but also many theological interests. In Perth and in Melbourne I occasionally taught with her and for her. When she was book editor of *Pacifica*, I wrote reviews for her. When Jan died, I wrote an obituary of Jan for the *Melbourne Age* (21 January 2017). Early in 2019, I published with Connor Court (Brisbane) *Portraits: Popes, Family, and Friends*. In the section on friends (who included Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini and ten others, I included

a portrait of Jan. With the other nineteen men and women in *Portraits*, she played her part in shaping my life. At the end all I can say is: Thank you so much, Jan, and thank you all who have come this evening to remember and honour her.