TWENTIETH-CENTURY
CATHOLIC THEOLOGY AND
THE TRIUMPH OF MAURICE
BLONDEL

• William L. Portier •

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Christian revelation could pour in.’”

Introduction

The second of November, 2011 will mark the 150th anniversary of
Maurice Blondel’s birth. He was born at Dijon into an old, landed
Burgundian Catholic family. His father and his uncle were both
lawyers. He studied philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure
from 1881 to 1884 and defended his controversial dissertation,
L’Action, at the Sorbonne on 7 June 1893. A year and a half later, on
12 December 1894, Maurice Blondel and Rose Royer were
married. They had three children. Rose Royer Blondel died on 7
March 1919 in the twenty-fifth year of their marriage. After a year
at the University of Lille, Blondel taught philosophy at the University
of Aix en Provence from 1896 to 1927, when blindness forced
him into retirement. From 1931 onward, thanks to the help of his

1This essay is based on the second annual Michael J. Kerlin Lecture given at La
Salle University on 22 March 2010 and dedicated to the memory of my friend

secretary and former student, Nathalie Panis, he continued to write at an extraordinary pace until his death in 1949 at the age of eighty-eight. After his death, Panis retained the care of his archives at Aix en Provence.2

A professional philosopher, Blondel (1861–1949) had a decisive impact on twentieth-century Catholic theology. Often noted, his impact is as often left unexamined. After the briefest sketch of Blondel’s philosophy of action, this essay addresses a more historical question: how did this philosopher, important in his own right, come to have such a deep and abiding impact on twentieth-century Catholic theology?3

1. Blondel’s impact on twentieth-century Catholic theology

Five years after the Second Vatican Council ended in 1965, Canadian theologian Gregory Baum published a book-length attempt to re-vision Catholic theology. He entitled the opening chapter “The Blondelian Shift.”4 Almost two decades later, Hans Urs von Balthasar called Blondel “the greatest Catholic philosopher of modern times.” He credited L’Action (1893) with giving to Catholic thought “a decisive new beginning.”5 Anglican theologian

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3 On Blondel’s philosophical importance, see Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française, Colloque tenu à Lyon, ed. Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet (Lyon: Éditions Parole et Silence, 2007).

4 Baum credits Blondel with initiating in the Catholic Church “a new style of thinking about that transcendent, redemptive mystery in human history which we call God” (Gregory Baum, Man Becoming: God in Secular Experience [New York: Seabury Press, 1970], 1).

5 Hans Urs von Balthasar, Dare We Hope ‘That All Men Be Saved’? With a Short Discourse on Hell (German edition 1986/1987; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 81, 114. The quote from 114 begins chapter 7, entitled “Blondel’s Dilemma.”
John Milbank called Blondel’s philosophy, “reunderstood as theology, . . . perhaps, the boldest exercise in Christian thought of modern times.”

So how did Blondel get into contemporary Catholic theology? The short answer in two parts is, first, that Blondel was a profoundly religious man whose philosophy reflected on his own lived life. It was his intention from first to last that his philosophy be religiously and theologically relevant. He wanted to be a real philosopher but also to deal with religious questions he took to be an inevitable constituent of human existence. “I propose to study action,” he wrote in 1886, “because it seems to me that the Gospel attributes to action alone the power to manifest love and to attain God! Action is the abundance of the heart.”

His last work was called Philosophy and the Christian Spirit, in three volumes. He signed the contract for the third volume the day before he died.

Second, Blondel’s philosophy came to the center of twentieth-century theology through its appropriation by a group of social and intellectual Catholics, both laity and clergy, in the French city of Lyon in the decades after the “double hécatombe” of the Catholic “modernist crisis” (1893–1914) and Great War (1914–1919). Not least among this “Lyon school” was a group of French Jesuits at La Fourvière, the Jesuit theologate in Lyon. Chief among these “jésuites blondelisants” was Henri de Lubac (1896–1991), the pivotal figure in twentieth-century Catholic theology. From Lyon,
Blondel’s influence spread in Jesuit networks throughout Europe. During the period between 1896 and 1913, in response to theological critics of *L’Action*, Blondel engaged intensely with theologians on the question of the supernatural. Along with *L’Action*, it is primarily his work during these years that changed the face of Catholic theology.

This essay traces the Blondelian thread to de Lubac and the Lyon school and then to Vatican II, and, finally, to John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et ratio*. In a preliminary form that would require further development, this essay argues that the figure of Maurice Blondel holds together in a continuous narrative a series of four widely significant events that, for varying reasons, are often treated as isolated episodes in French Catholic history. These events include: 1) the modernist crisis, during which the theological implications of Blondel’s thought began to emerge; 2) the rise of the proto-fascist *L’Action française*, Blondel’s opposition to which, between 1909 and 1913, clarified the political implications of his thought; 3) the debate on “Christian philosophy” (1930–1931), which made clear the extent to which Blondel had problematized the question of the relation between philosophy and theology, and to which debate Pope John Paul II returned in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et ratio*; and 4) the controversy over “*la nouvelle théologie,*” brought to a head by the publication in 1946 of de Lubac’s *Surnaturel*, the fruit of two decades of work developing the theological implications of Blondel’s thought. This essay focuses on de Lubac’s role as the main channel through which Blondel entered twentieth-century Catholic theology. For reasons of space, the essay can only gesture in the direction of the second and third events. It concludes with a treatment of Blondel in *Fides et ratio*.

at 310. The translations throughout are my own. See also Henrici’s major work *Hegel und Blondel, Eine Untersuchung über Form und Sinn der Dialektik in der “Phänomenologie des Geistes” und in der ersten “Action”* (Pullach bei München: Verlag Berchmanskolleg, 1958) and the discussion in Bouillard, *Blondel and Christianity*, 212–13, from which this citation is taken. It was Henrici who suggested to the young Michael Kerlin that he write his Gregorian University dissertation in philosophy on Blondel.
2. Blondel’s thought in the context of the Modernist crisis

In introducing the modernist crisis, it is necessary briefly to describe the nineteenth-century revival of medieval thought known as “neo-scholasticism.” If those accused of Modernism, including Blondel, had one thing in common, it was their distaste for and opposition to neo-scholastic thought as inadequate to contemporary religious needs. Neo-scholasticism has an inevitable political dimension. This helps to explain the intensity of the modernist crisis and the vehemence of Rome’s response.

After 1789, the Catholic Church in Europe locked itself in prolonged combat with anti-clerical liberalism as embodied in modern secular states. Napoleon had jailed two popes at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The revolutionary upheavals of 1848 saw the assassination of Pius IX’s prime minister and, in 1870, when the Franco-Prussian War forced French troops to withdraw their protection from Rome, Italian nationalists stormed the city. Pius IX took refuge in the Vatican.

In a self-conscious act of anti-Modernism, his successor, Pope Leo XIII, with the encyclical Aeterni Patris in 1879, launched a revival of the thought of the thirteenth-century St. Thomas Aquinas. With its massive reassertion of objectivity, Leo’s neo-scholastic revival would counter the turn to the subject in modern philosophy since Descartes, as well as the political upheaval it was thought to have caused. In his contributions to Catholic social thought, especially in Rerum novarum (1891), Pope Leo began to articulate in traditional terms of goods and ends an alternative social and political order. It is instructive to recall that Aeterni Patris and Rerum novarum were written by the same pope as part of the same project. In the Modernist crisis, the intellectual and theological issues

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9 On 21 June 1965, after reading The Mystery of the Supernatural, Étienne Gilson wrote in a long letter to de Lubac, “The tragedy of modernism was that the rotten theology promulgated by its opponents was in large part responsible for its errors. Modernism was wrong, but its repression was undertaken by men who were also wrong, whose pseudo-theology made a modernist reaction inevitable.” He went on to say, “I see redemption only in a Thomist theology as you perceive it, in the company of St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, and the great theologians of the East.” (Henri de Lubac, At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned His Writings, trans. Anne Elizabeth Englund [French edition, 1989; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 124–26, at 126).
are real and important but they are intensified by and difficult to disentangle from the politics of revolution and restoration, and even ralliement, Pope Leo’s attempt at rapprochement with the Third Republic.

A personal example illustrates what I mean by the “massive objectivity” of neo-scholastic thought. Elementary school students at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School in Tenafly, N.J., imbibed it from the *Baltimore Catechism*. Broadly following Chapter 3 of *Dei Filius*, the First Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, the *Catechism*, as I recall it, defined faith as “the theological virtue by which we believe all the truths that God has revealed on the authority of God revealing them who can neither deceive nor be deceived.” Such a conceptual definition presents faith in terms of unmediated objectivity. Even as a child, I recall being troubled by this definition and wondering how I could ever get to the “authority of God” of which my *Catechism* spoke so easily. Even the mediation of the Church, e.g., the instruction of Sr. Julia and Sr. Rose Clare at Mount Carmel, which the *Catechism* presumed, had to be subjectively appropriated.

Inquiry into the historical and subjective appropriation of what the *Catechism* called “the authority of God” was the common project, to the extent that we can speak of one, of Blondel and others who were accused of Modernism. The situation is complicated by the fact that *Modernism* is an outsider term. None of the thinkers conventionally thought of as “Modernists” used this term to describe themselves.

With his 1907 encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis*, Pope Pius X condemned “Modernism” as the “synthesis of all heresies” (paragraph 39). The encyclical associates the “Modernists’” subjective turn with the epistemological and political chaos that made the Church the object of persecution by European secular states. In one

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10 Although he is often grouped with the Modernists, Blondel was, in the words of John Paul II, “one of the first to discern what was at stake in the modernist crisis and the errors that were involved” (“A letter from Pope John Paul II to Bishop Bernard Panafieu,” 19 February 1993, *Communio* 20 [1993]: 722; republished in the current issue). In this context, John Paul II notes that Blondel’s “twofold fidelity to certain demands of modern philosophical thought and to the Magisterium of the Church did not come without its cost in terms of incomprehension and suffering, at a time when the Church found itself confronting the modernist crisis” (ibid.).
of its most compelling passages, speaking of sentiment and action giving rise to “purely subjective truth,” *Pascendi* pronounces such truth as “of no use to the man who wants to know above all things whether outside himself there is a God into whose hand he is one day to fall” (paragraph 39).

Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. (1877–1964), the leading neo-scholastic thinker of the first half of the twentieth century, was such a man. The English title of his major work is simply *Reality* (1946). After the colon comes the subtitle, *A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*. One might read Garrigou-Lagrange and early twentieth-century neo-scholasticism sympathetically as a reassertion of objectivity in the face of the perceived chaos of post-Kantian philosophy and modern politics as represented by the French Revolution, the revolutions of 1848, and the Great War.11

Between 1907 and 1965, *Pascendi* locked Roman neo-scholastics such as Garrigou and those accused of Modernism such as Blondel together in a common history. It is a “history of the attempted elimination of theological modernism, by censorship, sackings and excommunication—and the resurgence of issues that could not be repressed by such methods.”12 Aidan Nichols attributes the “*damnatio memoriae*” suffered by Roman neo-Thomism after 1965 in part to its role as Modernism’s foe and its inevitable association “with the mechanisms of doctrinal control put in place by the encyclical [*Pascendi*].”13 Garrigou is “the model Thomist” of this period. In their common history, Blondel and later de Lubac represented Garrigou’s worst nightmare: a return of the Modernism condemned by Pope Pius X. From 1913 on, Garrigou “would remain in pursuit of Blondel both publicly and privately for the rest of his life.”14


14Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 257. Monsignor Paul Mulla, Blondel’s godson, and
One French historian calls the Modernist crisis “the intellectual matrix of contemporary Catholicism.” 15 At its heart was a focus on the obvious fact that, if there is indeed an objective or revealed truth, it is only historical subjects who receive it. Whether we conceive the conditions of subjective appropriation of truth in terms of experience, interpretation, liberation, lived practice, liturgy, life, or action, inquiry into them is our inheritance, only partially resolved, from the Modernist crisis. And this is where Blondel comes in. He wishes to show an interior connection between the deepest dynamism of human spirits and the supernatual revelation of God.

3. Blondel’s way of immanence

In the first book of the *Confessions*, St. Augustine addresses this rightly famous word to God, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” This Augustinian apologetic of the restless heart had been at the literary center of French religious sensibility at least since the time of Blaise Pascal in the seventeenth century. During the years of the Modernist crisis (1893–1914), the chief representative of this tradition of interiority or way of immanence was Maurice Blondel.

Drawing on St. Augustine and his heirs as well as on post-Kantian philosophy, and appealing to the Church’s traditions of contemplative and mystical prayer, Blondel and others during the Modernist crisis tried to articulate in new ways how God’s truth might become a spiritual possession for human beings. In 1893, at
the age of thirty-two, he published *L’Action*, a revision of his philosophy dissertation.16

4. **Blondel on action**

Blondel’s was not a mere psychological or even moral appeal to experience. Rather he sought a rigorous philosophical account of the basic dynamism of human existence, which he calls “action.” In the 446 pages of *L’Action*, one looks in vain for a simple definition of “action.” *L’Action* is an ambitious phenomenological analysis that seeks to show the rationality inherent in action. The Introduction promises that “the very meaning of the word and the richness of its contents will unfold little by little.”17 “Action” in Blondel’s sense is not any particular act or set of actions but the “activity of the spirit at its source and in the integrality of its unfolding.”18 Action so understood cannot be contained in a closed natural order. Through his analysis, Blondel sought to “open up a position in philosophy through which the light of the Christian revelation could pour in.”19

“Yes or no,” asks Blondel in *L’Action*’s opening sentence, “does human life make sense, and does man have a destiny? I act, but without even knowing what action is, without ever having wished to live . . . .” For Blondel, we are, in a sense, condemned to act and our various actions set us on a path and make us certain kinds of people. Later “existentialists” would make much of this idea that we are condemned to freedom. Not to decide is to decide.

Blondel’s own analysis of the phenomenon of “action” distinguishes the “willing will” (*volonté voulante*) and the “willed will” (*volonté voulue*) or particular willed actions. The “willing will” is Blondel’s philosophical transposition of St. Augustine’s “restless

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19Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 45, 15. In his first three chapters, Blanchette treats Blondel’s defense of his dissertation, the process of writing it, and the treatment of the supernatural in the original 1893 version of *L’Action*.
heart.” According to his analysis, its aspirations are infinite, its capacities limited. “Will I at least,” he asks, “be able to accomplish what I have resolved, whatever it be, as I have resolved it? No. Between what I know, what I will and what I do there is always an inexplicable and disconcerting disproportion. My decisions often go beyond my thoughts, my acts beyond my intentions.” Rather than to nausea or visions of Sisyphus, such thoughts led Blondel to conclude that philosophical analysis reveals that we need God even as it simultaneously reveals that we are incapable of reaching God on our own. Rather than in contemplative terms, Blondel conceives of our receptivity to God in terms of the dynamism of what we make and do. Philosophical analysis, he thinks, leaves us with a fundamental decision for or against God or the “supernatural.” This is a philosophy that occupies secular space, autonomous from faith, but not separate from it, and incomplete if it fails to consider the supernatural. As Michael Kerlin summarized *L’Action* in a posthumously published article, Blondel:

> shows the ways in which we move forward in semi-light by acts of natural faith through wider and wider circles of social involvement to form ourselves and our world. When we make any of these circles a final stopping point, we find ourselves pushed forward by the necessary logic of our situation and our analysis. It is a movement that can logically stop only with the alternative of affirming the possibility of “one thing necessary” beyond all human creations, imaginings, and conceptions.

Before the condemnation of Modernism in 1907, Blondel called this approach to God as the final goal of human life the “method of immanence,” because, rather than by appeal to external forms of “evidence,” such as miracles and prophecy, it proceeds from an analysis of the “interior fact” or what is inside us. In the tradition of Augustine and Pascal, he insisted that God’s revelation

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21See Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 77–78.
22This is the main emphasis of Milbank’s account in *Theology and Social Theory*, 219.
and the possibility of supernatural life correspond to our deepest longings and, indeed, to the very dynamism of "action." They are not imposed from without by any external authority.²⁴

5. Blondel on apologetics

Blondel's philosophy of action had theological consequences. They began to become clear during the modernist crisis. Revived or neo-scholasticism, as promoted by Leo XIII and emphatically reaffirmed by Pius X in 1907, dominated Catholic thought in the 1890s. It was strongly evidentialist, if not rationalist.²⁵ Blondel had intended *L’Action* primarily as an intervention into the secular philosophical discussion he had known at the École. Responding to those who had read *L’Action* psychologically as a form of apologetics, Blondel wrote what has come to be called in English “The Letter on Apologetics” (1896) to show what an adequate contemporary apologetics would have to do.²⁶ The “Letter” begins with a review of six methods of apologetics. The sixth or “old method” he called “Thomism,” as he recalled it from manuals he read as an undergraduate. He cited from *Le Monde* a summary of a recent Catholic

²⁴Supernatural implies the possibility of relations with a power of grace that is not reducible to our own subjectivity, a completing and perfecting gift beyond the capacity of our nature as we know it, hence “supernatural.” Whether Blondel’s strictly philosophical analysis led to the Christ-specific supernatural of Christianity or a more indeterminate notion is much debated. In *Blondel and Christianity*, Bouillard argues for the latter, at 84–102. In the context of the “Letter on Apologetics,” Blanchette insists that Blondel intends “a strictly Catholic idea of the supernatural here.” See Maurice Blondel, 134; on the “method of immanence,” 136–44; and on the sense in which the supernatural is “necessary,” 139. “In no way,” writes Balthasar of Blondel’s attempt to historicize nature, “did he [Blondel] intend thereby to ‘immanentize’ revelation (as if it could be construed, for example, merely by analyzing the internal act of consciousness)” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. [German edition 1951; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992], 341).

²⁵Kerr describes the “revival of Thomistic philosophy” after 1879 as keeping “very much the same canons of rationality as we find in the Enlightenment” (*Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 2).

conference on modern apologetics: “Reason proves the existence of God. It is possible that he has revealed himself. History shows that he has done so, and it also proves the authenticity of the Scriptures and the authority of the Church. Catholicism is thus established on a truly rational basis.”

At this point, Blondel had yet to encounter St. Thomas himself, who was not part of the curriculum at the École. His description of “Thomism” antagonized the Dominican M.-B. Schwalm, who responded to the “Lettre” in the Revue Thomiste for September 1896. At the International Catholic Scientific Congress at Fribourg the following year, Blondel spent five hours with Schwalm trying to explain his philosophical intent and later responded to his criticisms in an article. In 1893 he had asked another Dominican, Reginald Beaudoin, to read L’Action and assure him of its orthodoxy. Beaudoin became Blondel’s ally and confidant and, as Socius or Assistant to the Dominican General at Rome in the years leading up to Pascendi, an important supporter.

Between 1897 and 1901, Blondel began to read Aquinas himself. By 1910–1911, he had introduced Aquinas into the curriculum at Aix and Marseilles. He began to “lecture extensively” on Aquinas the following year and continued for the next six or seven years. By the time he came to write History and Dogma in 1904, he could no longer call the rationalist apologetics he wanted to critique “Thomism.” Responding primarily to Abbé Gayraud, a former Dominican and member of the French National Assembly, Blondel invented a word for this approach. He called it “extrinsicism.” It seems to confront human subjects with a revelation from outside with little connection between what God reveals and the signs that establish it. This is a supernatural revelation built upon or superadded to a relatively autonomous philosophical account that could do almost as well without the superaddition. To Blondel,

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28 On Blondel and the Dominicans Schwalm and Beaudoin, see Blanchette, Maurice Blondel, 173–75.

29 Ibid., 179, 267–72 with discussion of the texts Blondel read and taught.
“extrinsicists” seemed to say, “Here is a stone; I have established that God’s order requires you to take it.”

Blondel’s carefully qualified insistence, from a philosophical point of view, that revelation or the supernatural fulfills our deepest human dynamism flies in the face of this approach. An extrinsicist neo-scholastic approach tended to treat our supernatural destiny in separation from a putative natural end extending even to the next life and to separate nature and grace in a two-tiered system. This made it theoretically possible to keep completely separate such spheres as “religion” and “politics,” the beatitudes and the Ten Commandments, theology and philosophy. The emphasis in the previous sentence should be on completely.

6. Blondel’s critique of L’Action française

In addition to what it implied about theology and philosophy, Blondel’s critique of “extrinsicism” in neo-scholastic apologetics and his corresponding constructive “intrinsicist” position had political consequences. These became evident between 1909 and 1913 in Blondel’s anonymous defense of the “social Catholics” of the “semaines sociales” of Bordeaux in a series of articles he signed “Testis” or “Witness.” Blanchette calls these articles Blondel’s “most significant contribution to the Annales de philosophie chrétienne” between 1905 and 1913. The “semaines sociales” were periodic study weeks devoted to Catholic social thought, especially Rerum novarum. They were organized by Blondel’s friend Henri Lorin, whose public pronouncements often echoed themes from Blondel’s philosophy. Blondel’s thought also inspired the popular social democratic movement, Le Sillon, condemned by Pope Pius X in August 1910. Its founder, Marc Sangnier (1873–1950), and many other leaders, were Blondel’s former students. From Blondel the social Catholics took the idea of Catholics as a leavening presence

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30Blondel, The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma, 276. Continuing his “sacred stone” metaphor, the “sacred deposit of faith” is “an aerolith [a stone from heaven] to be preserved in a glass case safe from a sacrilegious curiosity . . . ” (278). His introductory account of “extrinsicism” is at 226–31.

31Blanchette, Maurice Blondel, 233. He portrays the Testis articles as “an expansion of Blondel’s philosophy into social action,” at 242.
through whom life and love might circulate in a secular environment, renewing French society by spiritual means.

The Third Republic’s anti-clericalism drove significant numbers of French Catholics to ally themselves with the “proto-fascist monarchist movement” L’Action française. Between October 1909 and May 1910, Blondel wrote seven Testis articles in the Annales de philosophie chrétienne. He had purchased this journal in 1905. His friend Lucien Laberthonnière edited it until its condemnation by Pius X in 1913. The driving force behind L’Action française was the charismatically brilliant atheist and positivist Charles Maurras (1868–1952). Blondel critiqued this Catholic-positivist alliance for the restoration of France on the basis of his theology of nature and grace. If the separate and impermeable levels of nature and grace could only be related externally, he argued, then a Catholic-positivist alliance could only lead to authoritarianism and coercion. Its successful end would be the use of violence to impose the faith resulting in a kind of sacralized paganism.

Blondel’s first two Testis articles defended the social Catholics. The third profiled what Blondel called the “monophorist” mentality. Monophorisme, another Blondelian neologism, approached an extrinsicist theology of nature and grace and its practical and political consequences from a new direction. In the wake of Pascendi, and borrowing from the apologetic “method of Providence” of the nineteenth-century Belgian Cardinal Victor Dechamps (1810–1883), Blondel had begun speaking of a “double afferance” of the “supernatural as it enters concretely and historically into the natural order.”32 Dechamps’ interventions at Vatican I were largely responsible for the appeal to the Church and its holiness as a motive for faith in Chapter 3 of Dei Filius. In his method of Providence, Dechamps insisted on both the “interior fact” and the “exterior fact.” This roughly corresponds to Blondel’s notion of a “double afferance” of God’s supernatural gift as coming “from both inside and outside human consciousness.” Monophorisme is then a single “afferance” or bringing forth of God’s gift, one that is purely external.33 According to Blondel, monophorists could not avoid

32Ibid., 255. What attracted Blondel to Dechamps was that his apologetic “did not allow for a separation of the rational motives for credibility and the concrete motives for faith.” On Blondel’s appropriation of Dechamps, see 228.

33Blanchette treats the Testis articles in ibid., chapter 7. His definition of
naturalism “even if they juxtapose it with an exclusively extrinsicist and authoritarian supernaturalism.” 34 The fourth and fifth articles in the series lay out the “perverse fruits” of extrinsicist monophorism in the areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and theology.

The Suarezian Thomist Pedro Descoqs, S.J. (1877–1946), in later years de Lubac’s philosophy professor at Jersey, entered the fray against Blondel. His articles defending a Catholic political alliance with L’Action française also appeared in the columns of Annales de philosophie chrétienne. The sixth and seventh Testis articles are Blondel’s response to Descoqs. After the last Testis in May 1910, Blondel left the field. The condemnation of Le Sillon followed in August. Descoqs continued his defense of the Catholic-positivist alliance against Blondel in subsequent publications. Citing Pascendi, the condemnation of Le Sillon, and the 1910 Oath against Modernism, Descoqs tarred Testis with the Modernist brush. The social Catholics whom Blondel was defending had already been accused of “social Modernism.” 35

In 1910 Blondel collected the seven Testis articles in a little book called La Semaine Sociale de Bordeaux et le Monophorisme. Citing this “outstanding essay,” Hans Urs von Balthasar contrasted “integralist” attempts at an “orthodox” alternative to Modernism with love or caritas as the form of revelation and denounced them as efforts “to shut down the opponent through an unintellectual and unspiritual use of force.” 36 This had been Blondel’s point against what he termed “extrinsicist monophorism.” “One must even say,” Blondel wrote in 1910, “that in so far as monophorism (intégrisme) triumphed, the Catholic apostolate would be sterilized, the religious

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35Blanchette thinks it probable that Descoqs didn’t know that “Testis” was Blondel. He also emphasizes that Blondel never called Descoqs a monophorist. See Maurice Blondel, 256.

36Hans Urs von Balthasar, Love Alone is Credible, trans. D.C. Schindler (German edition, 1963; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 59 and note 4 where Balthasar refers the reader to Blondel’s “outstanding essay,” “La Semaine Sociale de Bordeaux et le Monophorisme” (1910). For his part, Blondel refused to cede the term integralist to Maurras and his Catholic partisans. Instead he called their approach “monophorisme.”
sense perverted, Christian piety falsified . . . .”

Blondel had some measure of belated vindication in December 1926 when Pope Pius XI forbade Catholic participation in L’Action française. Blondel contributed to a special issue of La Nouvelle Journée. Pius XI read it and had his nuncio in France write Blondel a “letter of august thanks for a presentation whose reading caused the Holy Father a vivid

37 “La Semaine Sociale de Bordeaux et le Monophorisme,” 93, as cited and translated by Alexander Dru in his “Introduction” to Blondel, Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma, 27. On this controversy, see 26–31 and Dru’s article “From the Action Française to the Second Vatican Council: Blondel’s La Semaine Sociale de Bordeaux,” Downside Review 81 (1963): 226–45. The present essay relies heavily on Peter J. Bernardi’s definitive study of this controversy, Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, & Action Française: The Clash over the Church’s Role in Society during the Modernist Era (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), “protofascist monarchist movement” at 2. See also Michael Sutton, Nationalism, Positivism and Catholicism: The Politics of Charles Maurras and French Catholics, 1890–1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Writing in 1963 and 1964, and sensing that the heirs of Descoqs and Garrigou were losing control of Catholic intellectual life, Dru came out swinging in L’Action française’s direction. Writing in a Church torn by partisan theological strife, Bernardi’s exposition is much fuller and more complete. He takes admirable pains to be fair to both sides. “In the controversy between Blondel and Descoqs,” he concludes, “neither disputant can claim a total victory. Each had important insights that were corrective of the other’s positions. Indeed each modified his views in the light of criticism,” at 268. Bernardi backs up this conclusion with nearly 300 pages of rigorous scholarship. I applaud both his scholarship and his much needed irenic intent. But his even-handed treatment of this controversy tends to obscure the asymmetry of the respective positions Descoqs and Blondel occupied on the theopolitical landscape of 1910–1914. Blondel and Descoqs wrote in the aftermath of Pascendi (1907) with its concluding mandate for diocesan vigilance committees and censorship; the imposition of the Oath Against Modernism (1910); and the suppression of the social Catholic network of Le Sillon and its journal (1910). Powerful support from prestigious neo-Thomist theologians in Rome and France lent to L’Action française what Dru calls “an aura of hyper-orthodoxy.” See his “Introduction” to Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma, 31 where he lists its supporters. Without denying the real substance of Bernardi’s careful exposition of their intellectual differences, it must be said that raising the specter of “Modernism” in such an overheated environment is more like a threat than a form of intellectual exchange, a threat backed up by the “unintellectual and unspiritual use of force” denounced by Balhusar. Such threats add an ominous layer of meaning to Descoqs’ arguments. Bernardi makes this clear, e.g., at 155–56, but his concluding emphasis remains on the question of “mutual vindication” (see 229–30).
satisfaction.” As cited in Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 324.

In 1936 de Lubac published “Sur la philosophie chrétienne,” an article in which, “without ‘concordism,’” which Blondel opposed, he tried to show that the positions of Maritain, Gilson, and Blondel “did not contradict each other but were responding to three different situations engendering three different problems.” In de Lubac’s reading of Blondel, “philosophy was not yet Christian since it was hollowing out the empty space that Christian revelation was to fill.” Accordingly, Blondel rejected the phrase “Christian philosophy” and spoke instead and “in another sense” of “Catholic philosophy.” De Lubac ended his article “by outlining the idea of a subsequent sense of philosophy, enlightened by Christian faith, after the manner of the reflection of the Fathers and of certain studies by Gabriel Marcel,” more like “Catholic philosophy” in Blondel’s sense.

The 1931 debate has achieved a certain paradigmatic stature in discussions of philosophy and theology. As we shall see below, Pope John Paul II revisited this debate in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et ratio*. In his commentary on the encyclical, Avery Cardinal Dulles reframed the debate of the 1930s in terms of the encyclical’s “three stances” of philosophy (paragraphs 75–77) and located the pope’s own position as closest to de Lubac’s, which he read as a mediation between Blondel and Gilson.


The political-theological battle lines drawn in the controversy between Blondel and Descoqs over the *semaines sociales* helped

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40 de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 24. De Lubac’s article appeared in *Nouvelle revue théologique*, at 18. See Blanchette’s comments on de Lubac and other theological interpreters of Blondel “reintroducing a theological confusion” into Blondel’s philosophy in *Maurice Blondel*, 143.

to define the post-war controversy over *la nouvelle théologie* that flared up in the wake of the appearance of de Lubac’s *Surnaturel* in 1946. Until 1926, when Pope Pius XI forbade Catholic participation in the movement, Garrigou-Lagrange, like Pedro Descoqs, had been a partisan of *L’Action française*.\footnote{On Garrigou’s politics, see Peddicord, *The Sacred Monster of Thomism*, chapter 5 and the “Conclusion” to Nichols, *Reason with Piety*. He notes that Garrigou’s defense of the “indirect temporal power” in his response to Pius XI’s condemnation of *L’Action française* is based “on the relation of all human acts whatsoever to man’s ‘ultimate supernatural end.’” Of de Lubac, Nichols writes that he “maintained at all times an exemplary devotion to the figure, and the texts, of Thomas,” at 127, 129.}

De Lubac had a different political orientation, which helped inspire his efforts in “spiritual resistance” to Nazi anti-Semitism and genocide. David Grumett describes him as “instrumental in founding and subsequently editing” from 1941 the *Cahiers du témoignage chrétien*, an underground journal of the French resistance. Far from a quixotic posture, the *Cahiers*, according to Grumett, became “the principal means of disseminating reliable printed information about the occupation and Nazi genocide elsewhere.” The *Cahiers* encouraged the French in spiritual resistance and gave access to “accurate versions of papal pronouncements” subject to censorship in official newspapers.\footnote{De Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 35.}


De Lubac eluded the Gestapo but they captured and executed his friend and confrere Yves de Montcheuil. “And it is vital to grasp,” writes John Milbank, “that de Lubac’s and de Montcheuil’s political opponents—Catholic Rightists supporting the Vichy
regime and collaborating with the occupying Germans—were also their theological opponents.”

From his post at the Angelicum in Rome, Garrigou monitored twentieth-century Catholic theology. He regarded Blondel as a Modernist and, when he read *Surnaturel* in 1946, the Blondelian strains in de Lubac’s work struck him as unmistakable. He called what was going on at La Fourvière the “new theology.” “La nouvelle théologie, où va-t-elle?” he asked in the title of a 1946 article in *Angelicum*. His answer was that it led straight to Modernism. Given their respective theological and political orientations, Garrigou and de Lubac recapitulated in a post–World War II setting the theological-political controversy between Descoqs and Blondel in the years before the Great War.

The ensuing battles over *la nouvelle théologie* ended in 1950 with Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Humani generis* and the removal of de Lubac from his teaching position at La Fourvière. De Lubac recalled reading the encyclical “toward the end of the afternoon, in a dark, still empty room, in front of an open trunk . . . .” He found it “rather curious” when he read “a phrase bearing on the question of the supernatural” and “intending to recall the true doctrine on this subject.” “It reproduces,” he wrote at the time, “exactly what I said about it two years earlier in an article . . . .”

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As Peter Henrici has noted, after the modernist crisis and *Pascendi*, there was a certain taboo in ecclesiastical circles against pronouncing Blondel’s name. This taboo, as well as our tendency to regard these controversies as isolated episodes instead of chapters in a continuing drama, has to do with what must rightly be called the “repressive apparatus” of *Pascendi* and its aftermath. Nevertheless, this all too brief summary indicates the extent of Blondel’s subterranean influence on Catholic thought between the wars. Because of this taboo, de Lubac’s significant debt to Blondel has come to light only gradually. It is confirmed by de Lubac himself in the memoir published shortly before his death. This summary should also make clear how Canadian philosopher Kenneth Schmitz could claim that, “It is not too much to hold that, along with the work of patristic scholars, his [Blondel’s] thought was a principal current leading up to the Second Vatican Council.” Continuing Schmitz’s metaphor, we might say that Blondel’s current flowed to the Council chiefly through Henri de Lubac.

9. Maurice Blondel and Henri de Lubac

De Lubac spent the academic year 1912–1913 studying law at the Catholic Faculty of the University of Lyon. He joined the
Jesuits in 1913. Anti-clerical policies of the Third Republic made it necessary for him to go to the Isle of Jersey. With 1914 came the Great War and de Lubac, along with many other clergy, was drafted into the French army where he served from 1915 to 1919. In 1916, at Eparges near Verdun, de Lubac was one of the half million wounded in the Battle of Verdun, sustaining a serious head wound, the effects of which continued throughout his life. After the war, he continued his philosophical studies at Jersey (1920–23), where Pedro Descoqs’ modern Thomism held sway. De Lubac recalls scribbling “some rather nonconformist notes” during Descoqs’ classes, notes “inspired more by Saint Thomas than by my Suarezian master, whose combative teaching was a perpetual invitation to react.”

De Lubac began theological studies at Hastings on the south coast of England in 1924. But in 1926 he returned with the Jesuit theologate to Lyon and completed his final two years of theology at La Fourvière. La Fourvière was much more a “traditionally neo-scholastic school” than any sort of Blondelian enclave. But there was also a group of professors whom Henrici calls “relectures jésuites.” Chief among them was Auguste Valensin, Blondel’s friend and disciple, from whom de Lubac learned Aquinas through Blondel and Rousselot. Blondel himself was at this time teaching at Aix en Provence, on the Mediterranean coast near Marseilles, not far from Lyon to the north.

Under the influence of Valensin and others, de Lubac became an integral part of a loose network of lay and clerical intellectuals and activists that Fouilloux calls the “second school of Lyon.” Its leaders had been moved to some degree by the spirit of Leo XIII’s call for ralliement with the Third Republic. Politically, they tried to navigate between the royalist Catholic integralism of the right, as exemplified by Charles Maurras and L’Action française, and the aggressive anti-clericalism of the early twentieth-century Third Republic. Theologically they negotiated the shoals between Roman anti-modernism, suspicious of Blondel, and their desire to...

\[50\] de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 42

pursue, within the bounds of orthodoxy, the kinds of questions raised during the modernist crisis. Lyon industrialist Victor Carlhian, a student of Blondel’s colleague, Lucien Laberthonnière, and a chief force behind *Le Sillon* in Lyon prior to its suppression in 1910, helped to bankroll the group. Fouilloux calls it an “école polycopiante,” whose publications, produced on copiers of the day, circulated in underground fashion, “a samizdat before its time.”

At the theological heart of the Lyon School were Henrici’s “relectures” or “les jésuites blondelisants.” For Henrici, de Lubac is “without a doubt the central figure in this line of Blondelian Jesuits.” In Fouilloux’s image, the “fires” of the Lyon School burned brightest in 1938 with de Lubac’s publication of *Catholicism*, a book begun as lectures given to social Catholics around Lyon. As Henrici emphasizes, de Lubac’s strong connection to Blondel has only gradually and recently come to light. De Lubac entered theology “through the narrow gate of philosophy, specifically the philosophy of Maurice Blondel.” “During my years of philosophy (1920–1923),” wrote de Lubac, “I had read with enthusiasm Maurice Blondel’s *Action, Lettre* (on apologetics) and various other studies . . . . I had heard a lot about him from Father Auguste Valensin. I had visited him for the first time in 1922 . . . .”

De Lubac’s major work on the question of nature and grace, *Surnaturel*, was not published until 1946 when World War II was over. But in the 1920s, Père Joseph Huby encouraged the young de Lubac “to verify historically the theses of Blondel and Rousselot on the supernatural while studying the same problem in St. Thomas.” De Lubac’s memoir describes Fr. Huby’s informal Sunday evening

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53 Ibid., 268. Their publications included, beginning in the 1930s, the unedited works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, including *The Divine Milieu*.

54 Henrici, “La descendence blondélienne,” 310.


57 de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 19. The occasion of his visit to Aix was his chronic earaches.
discussion group at which his investigation of the “supernatural” began.\textsuperscript{58}

On 3 April 1932, de Lubac wrote to Blondel what he describes as “this sort of sketch of what would later become my book \textit{Surnaturel}.” He urged Blondel, “with all the freedom of a disciple,” that in his recent work, the philosopher of Aix had moved too close to the modern hypothesis of “pure nature.” De Lubac recalled to Blondel: “It is in fact the study of your work that made me begin, some eleven years ago, to reflect on these problems, and I believe that I have remained faithful to its inspiration.” He went on to cite Blondel as the inspiration for the watchword that characterizes his approach to nature and grace: “unite in order to distinguish the better.”\textsuperscript{59}

When \textit{Surnaturel} appeared in 1946, de Lubac sent a copy to Blondel, still working on his final incomplete trilogy. Blondel called \textit{Surnaturel} a “fundamental, truly monumental work.” “I find in it a light, a power, a joy for which I cannot thank you enough, without forgetting the gratitude I owe you for the care with which you raise me above disparaging remarks and objections.” The eighty-five-year-old Blondel found himself “strengthened by it to pick up once again my efforts to finish the multiple drafts of Volume III on ‘La Philosophie et l’Esprit chrétien’ . . . .”\textsuperscript{60}

After Blondel’s death in 1949 and the controversy over “\textit{la nouvelle théologie}” (1950) had somewhat subsided, de Lubac, along

\textsuperscript{58}“Plus tard, le P. Huby suggérera à de Lubac de vérifier historiquement les thèses de Blondel et de Rousselot sur le surnaturel, en étudiant le même problème chez St. Thomas” (Henrici, “La descendance blondélienne,” 312). Cf. de Lubac, \textit{At the Service of the Church}, 34–35. Henrici goes on to suggest that de Lubac’s first studies of Baius and Jansenius, published in 1931, were inspired by a 1923 article of Blondel on Jansenism and anti-Jansenism in Pascal. Earlier (at 311, n. 19), Henrici cites Antonio Russo’s dissertation, written under the direction of Walter Kasper, \textit{Henri de Lubac: Teologia e dogma nella storia}. \textit{L’influsso di Blondel} (Rome: Studium, 1990) as thoroughly documenting the influence of Blondel on the young de Lubac.

\textsuperscript{59}de Lubac, \textit{At the Service of the Church}, Appendix 1:7, 183–85, with Blondel’s reply to de Lubac’s “very useful admonitions,” at 185ff. For de Lubac on “unite in order to distinguish the better,” see \textit{The Mystery of the Supernatural}, trans. Rosemary Sheed with an Introduction by David L. Schindler (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 30–31, preceded by a reference to Blondel’s \textit{L’Action} at 29.

\textsuperscript{60}de Lubac, \textit{At the Service of the Church}, 188, citing Blondel to de Lubac, 19 December 1946.
with Henri Bouillard, and other Jesuits, did much to secure Blondel’s legacy, continuing to raise him “above disparaging remarks and objections,” and to get out the documentation related to the modernist crisis.\textsuperscript{61} In 1957, de Lubac published anonymously the first two heavily annotated volumes of the correspondence between Blondel and Auguste Valensin between 1899 and 1912. By 1965, de Lubac could publish the third volume of correspondence from 1912 to 1947 under his own name.\textsuperscript{62} In 1960 René Marlé published a collection of correspondence and other documents related to the modernist crisis under the title \textit{Au Coeur de la crise moderniste}. Henrici credits the “indefatigable Père de Lubac” with preparing this collection. Also in 1965, de Lubac published an annotated edition of the correspondence of Blondel and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and in 1969, the correspondence of Blondel and Johannès Wehrlé, a Parisian parish priest with whom Blondel corresponded during the modernist crisis and thereafter.\textsuperscript{63} After a long discussion of his editorial work on the works of Auguste Valensin, de Lubac wrote that he considered the “posthumous editions” he published of Valensin, Montcheuil, Blondel and Teilhard “to be one of the most useful tasks ever given to me to accomplish.”\textsuperscript{64}

10. Blondel at the Second Vatican Council

In the early days of the modernist crisis, in the 1896 \textit{Letter on Apologetics}, Blondel distinguished two ways of “looking at the history

\textsuperscript{61}Bouillard’s study \textit{Blondel et le Christianisme} appeared in 1961. See note 2 above.

\textsuperscript{62}For the publication data, see Henrici, “La descendance blondéienne,” 307, n. 13. Henrici calls these volumes “a near inexhaustible mine of information.”

\textsuperscript{63}See ibid., 308, n. 14 for the publication data. De Lubac tells the story of these publications in \textit{At the Service of the Church}, 101–03. Modernist scholars Émile Poulat and René Virgoulay have criticized the editing of \textit{Au Coeur de la crise moderniste}. See Marvin O’Connell, \textit{Critics on Trial}, 254, n. 13. De Lubac explains his and Marlé’s respective roles in \textit{At the Service of the Church}, 102–03. He undertook his writing on behalf of Teilhard at the direction of his Provincial who wrote to him in 1961 that “the four Provincials of France, with the approval of the Father General, want one of those who knew him well, who have followed his thought, to bring his testimony to bear about him” (\textit{At the Service of the Church}, 104, citing Fr. Blaise Arminjon to de Lubac, 23 April 1961).

\textsuperscript{64}de Lubac, \textit{At the Service of the Church}, 101.
of philosophical ideas.” Rather than remaining “outside the mainstream,” cut off “from the only sort of life that is fruitful,” Blondel followed another path. Trying:

> to perceive that stirring of parturition with which humanity is always in labor, we set ourselves to profit by this vast effort, to enlighten it, to bring it to fruition, to kindle the smoking flax, to be less ready to suppose that there is nothing of value for ourselves even in those doctrines which seem most opposed to our own, to go to others so that they may come to us—and that is the source of intellectual fruitfulness.\(^{65}\)

Blondel’s impulse “to go to others so that they may come to us” bore fruit at the Second Vatican Council. Bringing to a close his survey of the Blondelian line of descent among French Jesuits, Henrici notes that *L’Action*, a project conceived as an apologetic addressed to “contemporary unbelievers, dilettantes, pessimists, and positivists,” had ironically become “a fountain of youth for Catholic theology and philosophy.”

He summarizes three intimately related Blondelian philosophical themes that led many twentieth-century Catholic thinkers to re-conceive the relationship of philosophy and theology. First, in the area of philosophical anthropology, human beings, as historical, are defined by their supernatural destiny. Second, in the area of knowledge, the dynamism of human knowing is ordered to the vision of God as both necessary and impossible to us. Third, and most audacious, is Blondel’s argument in Part V, Chapter 3 of *L’Action*, that the union of humanity and divinity in Christ is “the measure of all things” (*panchristisme*) and perhaps the only solution to the “Kantian aporia of the evanescence of sense data (*données sensibles*) faced with the intellect’s dynamism toward the intelligible, and a definitive consistency of the sensible world as the basis of all human experience.”\(^{66}\)

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\(^{65}\)Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, 147.

If there is one thing to learn from the Jesuit heirs of Blondel, Henrici concludes, it is “that philosophy and theology belong (tiennent) together more than we are accustomed to think, and that, if there is no theology without philosophy, it is also the case that, without theology, a philosophy of even the slightest depth is impossible.”67 Blondel’s opening of the “closed compartments” (cloisons étanchées) of “separate philosophy” and “separate theology,” Henrici notes, had “repercussions even up to the most authoritative teachings of the Church,” not only in the 1998 encyclical Fides et ratio, but also in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

De Lubac’s influence on the documents of the Council is well-known and often commented upon. But Henrici concludes his article with a quote from Yves Congar that locates de Lubac’s deep influence precisely at the point of the Blondelian reconception of the relation of philosophy and theology. “If we had to characterize the Council’s approach in one word,” Congar wrote in 1966, “we could invoke the ideal of knowledge Maurice Blondel proposed and which he reclaimed in the face of what he so oddly called ‘monophorism,’ that is to say, a things concep­tion of knowledge.” Henrici adds, in apposition to this last phrase, “an extrinsicist system of closed compartments.”68

In view of his notion of “the ebb and flow of theology,” it might not have surprised de Lubac that a Blondel-inspired theology of nature and grace, rather than a once for all achievement, has proven unstable and unfinished. On the one side, undifferentiated appeals to the graced character of our world threaten to evacuate its christological and trinitarian center. Reassertions of philosophical autonomy in appeals to the praeambula fidei in the Summa theologicae of St. Thomas (1, 2, ad 1) and Vatican I’s dogmatic constitution Dei Filius unsettle the christological and trinitarian center of this


theology of nature and grace from another side.69 Clarifying the senses in which we can truly say the world is graced remains a major task of contemporary Catholic theology.


In addition to Vatican II, Henrici also mentioned the encyclical *Fides et ratio* as one of the examples of the repercussions

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of Blondel’s thought reaching to the most authoritative teachings of the Church. Indeed, Henrici sees Blondel’s thought at the center of the encyclical and refers to Maurice Blondel as the encyclical’s “innommé,” the “one who went unnamed.” The encyclical can be seen as the second of three steps taken by Pope John Paul II, which, viewed together, represent the vindication and even the triumph of Maurice Blondel.

The First Step: the 1993 Centenary Letter. Anniversaries of significant events played a formative role in the life of Pope John Paul II. His enthusiasm for the celebration of the Jubilee Year in 2000, with its emphasis on repentance and “purification of memory” should be understood in this context. The late pope was not one to miss an anniversary. On 19 February 1993, John Paul II took the first of his three steps in a letter to the Archbishop of Aix en Provence. The occasion was the centenary of the publication of *L’Action* in 1893. In order to appreciate how remarkable this letter was, one must recall the words of Pope Pius X in *Pascendi* that caused Blondel so much grief in 1907 and thereafter.

We cannot but deplore once more, and grievously, that there are Catholics who, while rejecting *immanence* as a doctrine, employ it as a method of apologetics, and who do this so imprudently that they seem to admit that there is in human nature a true and rigorous necessity with regard to the supernatural order—and not merely a capacity and a suitability for the supernatural, such as has at all times been emphasized by Catholic apologists.

(Paragraph 37)

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Passendi is here rejecting the way of immanence as accepting Kant’s starting point and rejecting his conclusions. The distinction between immanence as a doctrine and as a method was one that Blondel consistently emphasized in defending his work from neoscholastic criticism. Here Pius X cut the ground from beneath him and rendered his name suspect and in need of defense in ecclesiastical circles for the rest of his life. “I have read the encyclical, and I am in a stupor,” he wrote on 17 September 1907. To his close friend, the Jesuit Auguste Valensin, he wrote, “It almost makes one cry out, Happy are those who are dead in the Lord.” By 22 September he had achieved a certain perspective on the encyclical. “We have a double task to accomplish,” he wrote to Johannès Wehrlé, “work of sanctification and edification by our loyalty, if necessary to go as far as heroism; work of illumination and engagement with scholastic minds.”

Nearly a century later, on the 1993 centenary of L’Action, another pope offered a stirring tribute to the memory of Maurice Blondel.

Thus, in calling to mind the work, we intend, above all to honor its author, who, in his thought and life, was able to affect the coexistence of the most rigorous criticism and the most courageous philosophical research with the most authentic Catholicism, even as he drew on the very fountainhead of dogmatic, patristic, and mystical tradition. This twofold fidelity to certain demands of modern philosophical thought and to the Magisterium of the Church did not come without its cost in terms of incomprehension and suffering, at a time when the Church found itself confronting the modernist crisis and the errors that were involved.72


This extraordinary papal recognition of Blondel acknowledges both his fidelity to the Church’s Magisterium and his suffering during the Modernist crisis. Pope John Paul II calls L’Action “the treatise of a philosopher on that which surpasses philosophy.” This description could apply just as easily to the pope’s own 1998 encyclical Fides et ratio. In that encyclical, in the context of rejecting “rationalism” and “dogmatic pragmatism,” John Paul II briefly cites Pascendi (paragraph 71). But cut off from its theological-political context, Pascendi becomes a century-old warning against “rationalism” and “historicism” that John Paul II joins Pius X in rightly rejecting.

The Second Step: The encyclical Fides et ratio, 1998. Fides et ratio carries Pascendi along as a minor tributary into one of the great theological streams that flowed into the Second Vatican Council. This stream runs back, as we have seen, through Henri de Lubac and others, to Maurice Blondel. Pope John Paul II honored de Lubac in 1983 by making him a cardinal. The nineteenth-century reformer, Antonio Rosmini, called by some the Italian Newman, makes an appearance in this encyclical (paragraph 74). In fact, the encyclical
has been read as “an act of reparation in so far as it recommends thinkers condemned or dismissed in the nineteenth-century turn to Neo-Thomism.”73 In 2002 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith formally dispelled the suspicion of heresy that had surrounded Rosmini since 1887. On 18 November 2007, Pope Benedict XVI beatified him.74 In contrast to Rosmini and other former outliers mentioned in the encyclical, Blondel’s name is conspicuously absent from Fides et ratio. And yet his presence in the encyclical is palpable, as in its reference to philosophers who “produced a philosophy which, starting with an analysis of immanence, opened the way to the transcendent” (paragraph 59).

Peter Henrici makes the case that Fides et ratio should be read “precisely as a magisterial sanctioning of Blondel’s concept of philosophy,” while at the same time, “the philosophical biography of the young Blondel . . . could be read as a philosophical justification and grounding of the (existential) task of philosophy advocated by Fides et ratio.” He points out that the encyclical lacks a “philosophical bridge” to mediate between its simultaneous affirmations about the human quest for meaning and its fulfilment in Christ. Henrici sketches four “structural convergences” between L’Action and the encyclical and concludes that L’Action “may, in fact, be read as a complementary philosophical commentary on Fides et ratio.” It exemplifies precisely the kind of philosophical mediation the encyclical needs. Given this analysis, as well as the clear allusions to Blondel he finds in paragraphs 26, 59, and 76, Henrici raises the obvious question: “Why was Blondel’s name not mentioned in the encyclical?” Such an omission could not possibly be accidental. Henrici attributes it to John Paul II’s desire not to “impose any specific philosophy on his reader.” Blondel’s philosophy is the kind of


74The CDF statement on Rosmini appeared in late June 2001 and was reported in L’Osservatore Romano on 1 July 2001. See David McLaurin, “Houdinis in the Holy Office,” Tablet (7 July 2001): 979–80. The CDF stated that, while the forty Rosminian propositions condemned in 1887 remained erroneous, they do not faithfully represent his thought. See Origins 31 (16 August 2001): 201–02.
philosophy the encyclical presupposes, but it is not the only possible one. Given what Henrici calls the “inner relation between Blondel’s thought and the lines of thinking” in the encyclical, as well as the pope’s desire to remain open “to a wide spectrum of Christian philosophies,” John Paul II, Henrici thinks, deliberately avoided mention of Maurice Blondel.  

The Third Step: Address to the international Blondel conference, 2000. As if to confirm Henrici’s reading of the encyclical, Pope John Paul II took a third step. The occasion was an international meeting at Rome’s Gregorian University to relate Blondel explicitly to the themes of Fides et ratio. The meeting’s theme was “Blondel Between L’Action and The Trilogy.” On 18 November 2000, the pope told those assembled at the Gregorian that their meeting had particular relevance to urgent issues he had raised in the encyclical. These issues included the study of philosophy as a preparatio fidei (paragraph 61) and the relationship of theology, as

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75Peter Henrici, S.J., “The One Who Went Unnamed: Maurice Blondel in the Encyclical Fides et ratio,” Communio 26 (Fall 1999): 609–21, trans. D.C. Schindler, quotations at 617–20. In “La descendance blondélienne,” Henrici uses the omission of Blondel’s name from the encyclical to suggest that “even today [the taboo against mentioning the name of Blondel] is not entirely lifted.” See 309. In his chapter-length treatment of Fides et ratio, Aidan Nichols finds clear traces of Blondel. Paragraph 7, e.g., with its emphasis on “a moment of fundamental decision” Nichols reads as “highly reminiscent of Blondel’s story of the way the option for the supernatural takes place in the pages of L’Action.” But on the whole, Nichols reads the encyclical as representing a “synthetic outcome” to the debates about faith and reason and philosophy and theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The pope, he argues, espouses, in chapter 6, Gilson’s understanding of “Christian philosophy” (Nichols, From Hermes to Benedict XVI, chapter 10, on Blondel at 207–08, 212; on Gilson at 216). This reading is at odds with that of Avery Dulles cited in note 41 above. Dulles finds the pope opting in paragraphs 75–76 for de Lubac’s mediation between Gilson and Blondel, a variant on the third philosophical “stance” treated in these paragraphs. Dulles also clarifies the continuities amid the “striking differences” between Vatican I’s dogmatic constitution on faith and reason, Dei Filius, and Fides et ratio. Chapter 2 of Dei Filius teaches that “God can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason” (Deum ... naturali humanae rationis lumine e rebus creatis certo cognosci posse). Dulles again likens the pope’s positions on faith and reason to de Lubac’s, going so far as to speculate, as Henrici did with Blondel, on why de Lubac’s name is not mentioned. See Dulles, “Faith and Reason: From Vatican I to John Paul II,” in The Two Wings of Catholic Thought, 193–208, at 204 for his remarks on Blondel and de Lubac.
the science of faith, with philosophical reason (paragraphs 64–69). His next words recalled his 1993 letter, which he then went on to cite.

At the root of Maurice Blondel’s philosophy, there is a sharp perception of the drama of the separation between faith and reason (cf. paragraphs 45–48) and the intrepid will to overcome this separation as contrary to the nature of things. The philosopher of Aix is thus an eminent representative of Christian philosophy, understood as rational speculation, in vital union with faith (cf. paragraph 76), in a dual fidelity to the demands of intellectual research and to the Magisterium.  

Was this an act of reparation, purification of memory? Perhaps only Maurice Blondel himself could answer that. In any case, history has been kind to the philosopher of Aix. More than a century after Pascendi, one might faithfully read the intervening history of Catholic theology, from the perspective sketched here, as the “triumph of Maurice Blondel.” It is a triumph that came a century out of time and fraught with irony and deep ambivalence. Perhaps Blondel would not have been surprised.

Writing in 1980, Henri de Lubac credited to Blondel the “main impulse” for Latin theology’s “return to a more authentic tradition.” Later he tried to capture the impression Blondel made on him at their first meeting in 1922 by citing an unpublished word portrait of Blondel written in 1935. It is something like the impression Michael Kerlin made on me.

In his presence I understood from the outset what it meant to consider the teaching profession as a kind of priesthood. . . . In Maurice Blondel’s patient voice and sustained eloquence there were at that time inflections of goodness, charity and urbanity, in the broad sense of that word, that I have rarely found in so developed and refined a degree in men of the Church. In the conversation of this so-called great “combatant” of ideas, there was not the least trace of [that] bitterness . . . . I left Maurice

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76 Discours de Jean Paul II aux participants au Colloque International “Blondel entre ‘L’Action’ et La Trilogie,” Saturday, 18 November 2000. The text is found on the Vatican website. The translation is my own.

77 de Lubac, A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace, 37 and the explanation of Blondel’s impact that follows.
Blondel not only enlightened but calmed, and, reading his long works, which are more spoken than written, I found once again that immense patience, at once gentle and persistent, which ended in triumphing over all . . . 78

This, perhaps, was Blondel’s truest triumph.

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78 de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 19, citing a 1935 description of Blondel by Antoine Denat, a professor of literature.