

Benignus of Jesus, F.S.C. (1907-1953)

was a Thomist philosopher and author, as well as a professor at Manhattan College. He was a member of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, and chaired that organization's New York chapter.

Life[1]

Born Joseph Gerrity in 1907, he attended St. Thomas the Apostle and Manhattan Prep schools in New York. He was noted for both his scholastic and sporting achievements. In 1924, Gerrity entered the Christian Brother's novitiate at Pocantico Hills. When he had completed his period of discernment and received the habit of the Institute, he chose the name Benignus after the disciple of St. Patrick. He was sent for further study at Manhattan College (B.A.), Fordham University (M.A.) and The Catholic University of America (Ph.D.).

With the completion of his doctorate, Br. Benignus joined the faculty of Manhattan College in 1936. He would later become sub-director of the Brothers community and chairman of the philosophy department. During this time, he would also write his popular book, Nature, Knowledge, and God (hereafter *NK&G*).

Br. Benignus suffered from severe stomach issues dating back to his novitiate days, and the strain of his academic, scholarly, and religious commitments led to a health breakdown. He applied for a transfer to St. Mary's College of California, hoping the mild climate of the Bay Area would restore his health. It did not. Br. Benignus suffered several heart attacks and, though he recovered, was advised by his doctor that he only had a few years to live. Not wishing to burden the St. Mary's community, he opted to return to the Eastern Province.

After a sabbatical at the Brothers' community in Barrytown, New York, Br. Benignus returned to teaching at Manhattan College in 1952. In January of 1953, however, he suffered a stroke and slipped into a semi-comatose state from which he did not emerge.

Following his death, a "Brother Benignus Medal" was created to recognize academic excellence in the field of philosophy.

Philosophy

Br. Benignus was a proponent of Thomistic Realism. For him, the reliability of sense knowledge[2], and the doctrine of causes—particularly that of human finality—constitute "central" characteristics of Thomistic philosophy.[3]

Aside from St. Thomas Aquinas, he acknowledged his debt to the thought of Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, A. D. Sertillanges, O.P., Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., and George Hayward Joyce, S.J.[4]



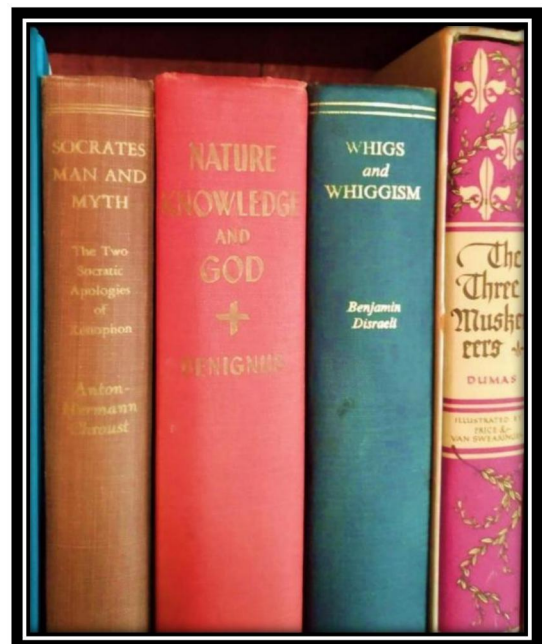
(Photo: window depicting St. John Baptist de la Salle at the former Barrytown community)

Nature, Knowledge and God

The culmination of Br. Benignus' academic career was the release of *NK&G* in 1947. At the time of his death a few years later, his *magnum opus* was in its fourth printing. It became one of the principal textbooks used by generations of philosophy undergraduates. In the book's preface he described the circumstances that led to its creation:

Several years of unavailing search for a textbook of Thomistic philosophy which would present that philosophy as a coherent whole and in a manner suitable for the college student of today led to the writing of the present book. Experience both as a student and a teacher of philosophy taught the author that the study of a series of books departmentalizing philosophy into cosmology, psychology, epistemology, ontology, and so forth, fails to produce any single, integral picture of the universe in which we live. St. Thomas Aquinas certainly had such a picture, and the study of his philosophy should give this picture to the student.[5]

The book is divided into four sections, the first being a discussion of the nature of philosophy and a brief history of philosophy from the Pre-



Socratics through St. Thomas Aquinas. The second part is a discussion of matter, form, existence, human teleology, psychology, and freedom. The third part deals with various theories of knowledge, while the fourth is about God and creation.

Among the book's contemporary admirers is Professor Dennis Bonnette, formerly of Niagara University and currently director of the Aquinas School of Philosophy.[6]

Select Publications

John Dewey's Theory of Ethics (New York: Fordham University, 1933, download or print-on-demand only).[7]

The Relations Between the Theory of Matter and Form and the Theory of Knowledge in the Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1936).[8]

Nature, Knowledge and God (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1947).

"Professor Cunningham and Thomism," *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 58, no. 6, November 1949.

"Review of Evolution and Philosophy, by G. H. Duggan", *The New Scholasticism*, April 1951.

References

1. Most of the information in this section comes from a digital copy of a six-page typed document, *Brother Benignus of Jesus*, obtained with the kind assistance of the Archives & Special Collections Department at Manhattan College. Ref: author unknown, 1953, De La Salle Christian Brothers Archives of the New York District Repository, box 18.
2. *NK&G*, pp.211 & 303.
3. *NK&G*, p. 83.
4. *NK&G*, p.viii.
5. *NK&G*, p.vii.
6. <https://strangenotions.com/index.php?s=benignus>
7. <https://research.library.fordham.edu/dissertations/AAI28404111/>
8. cf. https://www.persee.fr/doc/phlou_0776-555x_1939_num_42_63_3976_t1_0506_0000_2

Further Reading

(Note: These books were either favorably reviewed by Br. Benignus and/or consulted by him in the writing of *NK&G*). Some are still in print, but most are available at Archive.org.

Br. Azarias F.S.C., Aristotle and the Christian Church (London: Keegan Paul, 1888).

Brennan, Robert Edward, Thomistic Psychology (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941).

Bittle, Celestine, O. M. Cap., From Aether to Cosmos (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1941.).

Duggan, George H., S. M., Evolution and Philosophy (Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1949).

Garrigou-Lagrange, Reginald, God—His Existence and His Nature (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1934.)

Gilson, Etienne, The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons LTD, 1924).

Joyce, George Hayward, S. J., Principles of Natural Theology (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1923).

Mason, Frances, ed., The Great Design: Order and Progress in Nature (London: Duckworth, 1934).

Maritain, Jacques, A Preface to Metaphysics (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939).

Maritain, Jacques, The Degrees of Knowledge (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1937.)

Maritain, Jacques, St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942).

Sertillanges, A. D., Foundations of Thomistic Philosophy, (London: Sands & Co., 1931).