

## A Prophet's Cross

Review of

*Silence Speaks:*

*Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, John Courtney Murray and Thomas Merton*

By Robert Nugent

Introduction by Richard Gaillardetz

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Reviewed by **Joseph Quinn Raab**

In *Silence Speaks*, Robert Nugent highlights the trials of four Catholic visionaries, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, John Courtney Murray and Thomas Merton, whose work put them at the center of the critical tension between innovation and preservation that marked the mid-twentieth century Church. Before that tension bore fruit in the harvest fields of the Second Vatican Council, these four innovators bore a peculiar kind of suffering at the hands of those charged to preserve the sacred deposit of the faith. Some of that suffering finds poignant expression in Nugent's little book, where his concise portraits of their trials remind us that in the Church prophets endure pain, humility is required of genius, and, as John Courtney Murray hoped, the cautious "counsels of prudence [eventually] cede to the claims of Truth" (67).

The book begins with a helpful introduction by the theologian Richard Gaillardetz who provides a much needed explication of the historical, ecclesial context that enables the reader to better understand how thinkers who are now seen as genuine contributors to the tradition could once have been seen as its enemies. While Nugent's telling of these stories understandably focuses exclusively on the plight of the censored ones, which indirectly leads to a presentation of the censors in the worst possible light, Gaillardetz's introduction provides a bit of balance and considers the role of the magisterium as necessary and potentially positive. Gaillardetz offers some helpful and insightful suggestions on how we might understand and affirm the "legitimate accountability of the theologian to the ecclesiastical magisterium." Still, however, he laments that "much of the inquisitorial atmosphere in which [these four theologians] lived is still present in the church today" (9-11).

In his epilogue Nugent returns to issues considered by Gaillardetz and adds a thoughtful reflection on the religious vow of obedience as it played a decisive role in the way each of these men responded to his own predicament. He also anticipates the questions that naturally arise in the reader and thoughtfully engages them by way of conclusion. But I found the book most fascinating in its intermediate chapters. Readers of *The Merton Seasonal* are likely familiar with all four of these figures, and Merton enthusiasts won't find new material here; still, Nugent succeeds admirably

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by providing a window into the interior struggles each man had reconciling the experience of being suspected and censured by brothers who had been charged to preserve and protect the very faith each had given their lives to serve.

This is a compassionate book. Reading each chapter I was left wanting more details regarding the specific nature of the theological and doctrinal issues at stake and regarding the reasons for the censoring of these thinkers. How and why, precisely, had the Holy Office or the religious superiors who acted against these men decided that the innovators in question had run afoul? Gradually, however, I began to realize that Nugent shared this yearning and so did the men about whom he wrote. For example, Congar was frustrated that sanctions had been taken against him (as well as his brothers Chenu, Feret, and Boisselet) “without reason – without any other reason than the dissatisfaction of the Holy Office” (44). Other times “certain ambiguities” or “dangerous implications” seemed to be the only reasons given for sanctions and restrictions imposed on their publishing and teaching, and so these men were kept in the dark in such a way that compounded their suffering. Even the great Angelo Roncalli, who would become Pope John XXIII, was dismissive of “this Teilhard fellow . . . why can’t he just be satisfied with the catechism and the social doctrine of the Church, instead of bringing up all these problems?” (24). Of course, though, there is another side to the story and the questions these men were raising did have serious implications for doctrines of Creation, Sin, Human Freedom, Just War theory and so on, and the *concerns* of the magisterium were legitimate, even if some actions taken were hardly just.

Nugent reminds us that the work of these men has received much vindication, and to appreciate their sweeping impact one needs to go beyond the limits of this study. Congar and Murray enjoyed not only rehabilitation – Congar was even named a cardinal – but the doctrinal developments of the Second Vatican Council depend heavily, if not fundamentally, on their work. Congar’s influence is everywhere in the documents, but most obvious in *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* and in *The Decree on Ecumenism*. Murray provides the framework for *The Declaration on Religious Liberty* but his insights echo everywhere, most notably in *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. If the Church is still in the process of catching up to Merton and Teilhard perhaps their influence will be analogously and “officially” recognized in areas like interreligious dialogue and the dialogue with modern science. This happy vindication saves their stories from tragedy, yet their stories remain a haunting reminder that, to paraphrase Merton, “too often we in the church are content to huddle under the dimmed light of insufficient answers to questions we are afraid to ask.”

I commend Robert Nugent for putting together a very compelling, readable, and enlightening little book. It enkindles passion for the faith and inspires inquiry. I recommend this work with warmth, enthusiasm, and even a little lingering sadness.