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BOOK REVIEW

Being before God: Cornelio Fabro, Thomism, and Søren Kierkegaard's Theology. By Joshua Furnal. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2025. Pp. xiv, 383. $80.00.

The life of the mind is a humbling thing. A person can spend a decade in school, slowly develop into a productive scholar and teacher, publish book after book, serve the guild with passion and grace, and seemingly rise to the top of the profession, only to find his work forgotten in the latter stages of his career or upon his death. This neglect is often not the fault of the scholar himself. His research remains sound, his prose lucid. But times change, and intellectual fashions shift. What once seemed cutting-edge is now considered antiquated or, even worse, banal. The ideas of a man who was a much sought-after mentor and speaker in his own day now gather dust in the basement stacks of a university library—an area so seldom explored that the library has installed motion-sensor lights, which flick in a pale, spectral glow whenever a brave soul enters their domain.

This, it would seem, is the fate of most scholars. But books such as Joshua Furnal's *Being before God* prove that all is not lost. Furnal's overarching objective is to shed fresh light on the authorship of Søren Kierkegaard—a figure who has by no means been forgotten since his death in 1855. Yet, Furnal wants to accomplish his goal by retrieving the contributions of Italian scholar Cornelio Fabro (1911–95). Like many of the most accomplished thinkers of his generation, Fabro combined intellectual intensity with multidisciplinary extensity. Born and raised in the province of Udine, which today borders Austria to the north and Slovenia to the east, Fabro was in poor health for much of his childhood and youth. Nevertheless, at the age of eleven, he was sent to Verona for school. Although his education was well-rounded, including a stint at the prestigious Scipione Maffei school, the principal influence on Fabro during this period was the Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata. Founded by Gaspare Bertoni (1777–1853) in November 1816, the Stigmatines are a Catholic religious congregation whose charism centres on the love made visible in the bodily wounds of the crucified Christ, also known as the stigmata. In practice, this emphasis entails a diverse and flexible apostolate, which serves the Church in education, parish work, missions, and spiritual direction. Fabro studied under the Stigmatines at almost every educational level and, in November 1927, entered the congregation's novitiate. During the first half of the 1930s, the locus of his work shifted to Rome, where he read philosophy at what today is known as the Pontifical Lateran University. He would also go on to study theology at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Ordained as a priest in April 1935, Fabro embarked on a first-rate teaching career, holding positions at various pontifical universities, the Catholic University of Milan, the University of Notre Dame (USA), and, for a lengthy stint, the University of Perugia. After retiring from teaching in 1981, Fabro continued to publish extensively. He died in Rome on 4 May 1995.

Such a distinguished career would seem to merit consideration in its own right and, to be sure, Fabro remains well known in Italy for his contributions to Thomism, his willingness to engage modern thought (including atheism), and his dogged efforts to introduce Kierkegaard to italophone audiences. Still, among English-language readers, he hardly enjoys the renown of other figures from his era. Fabro is more of an Erich Przywara than a Hans Urs von Balthasar—a figure whom Catholic theologians have likely heard of (if studied) but who also lies outside the mainstream canon of twentieth-century Catholic theology.

Furnal's book aims to redress this situation, paying special attention to Fabro's work on Kierkegaard—an approach that yields two major contributions. First, it tells Fabro's story in a way that may surprise, but also intrigue, interested audiences. After all, if Fabro were presented as 'just another Thomist', he might vanish amid the cloud of Thomists who appeared in twentieth-century Catholic letters, including French Dominican scholar Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange (1877–1964), German philosopher Josef Pieper (1904–97), and even American novelist Flannery O'Connor (1925–64). Wisely, Furnal sidesteps this potential problem by linking Fabro's Thomism to a modern thinker who, at first glance, would seemingly have nothing to do with Thomism: Søren Kierkegaard. Second, in highlighting Fabro's unique amalgamation of scholastic metaphysics and existentialist anthropology, Furnal successfully expands our understanding of Kierkegaard as well. If the Dane's thinking can be aligned with

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that of the Angelic Doctor, then a number of conclusions follow, not least the fact that Kierkegaard remains best understood against the backdrop of Christianity's time-honoured philosophical themes and theological teachings.

Being before God is divided into seven chapters, along with an introduction and, curiously, two separate concluding sections. At nearly 400 pages (including back matter), it is a lengthy project and, given the subject matter, will have the greatest appeal to specialists. That is not to suggest, however, that its findings are not applicable to the kinds of issues that interest general audiences. After introducing the reader to the book's *dramatis personae*—Kierkegaard and especially Fabro—Furnal moves on to the book's core argument. In chapter 1, Furnal examines Fabro's intellectual context and formation. This section may be too meticulous for some readers, but it does provide fascinating insight into a number of fault lines that ran through twentieth-century Western thinking. Chapter 2 shifts to Fabro's own contributions to philosophy and theology, focusing, first, on Fabro's attempt to show that there is a 'structural link' between Thomas and Kierkegaard. In fact, as Furnal argues, it was this very link that allowed Fabro to elucidate Thomas's participationist metaphysics. This is a complex chapter, and, for many, it will feel like 'inside baseball'. However, it does help Furnal draw a critical conclusion: Kierkegaard's opposition to intellectual abstraction and his recentring of philosophy on the concrete individual facilitated Fabro's own resistance to neo-Scholastic readings of Thomas—an inflection point in twentieth-century Catholic philosophy.

In chapter 3, Furnal continues to build on this line of thinking: it is not just that Kierkegaard influenced Fabro's metaphysics but that he gave him the conceptual tools needed to develop a rich theological anthropology. For Fabro, as for Kierkegaard, the individual human being, created in the image of God and existing 'before God', is always already higher than the universal. But this Kierkegaardian insight, Furnal goes on to explain, sharply breaks from the quasi-Lutheranism of Hegelian philosophy and finds its roots in the thinking of Thomas's Dominican inheritor, the German mystic Johannes Tauler (ca. 1300–61), whom Kierkegaard read with interest. Chapter 4 may have the greatest import for Kierkegaard specialists. According to Furnal, Fabro was at the forefront of an attempt to use Kierkegaard's nonpseudonymous writings to militate against the widely held contention that Kierkegaard was 'an irrational gadfly'. Once one takes account of Kierkegaard's Christian commitments, the coherence of his authorship emerges—a contention that, in recent decades, has been made popular by scholars such as C. Stephen Evans and George Pattison, though Furnal shows that Fabro was making this case far earlier. In chapter 5, Furnal reconstructs Fabro's juxtaposition of Kierkegaard's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* with Aquinas's metaphysics of participation. For Fabro, human freedom is a gift of divine omnipotence that becomes concrete in and through the individual's decision for God. On this reading, as Furnal argues, an account of Christian discipleship centred on devotion and self-gift is an extension of divine creation itself.

The final two chapters of *Being before God* supplement an argument that Furnal previously developed in *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard* (Oxford University Press, 2015)—namely, that Kierkegaard's legacy is ecumenical and, indeed, extends to Catholicism. In chapter 6, Furnal examines Fabro's identification of Catholic ideas and themes in Kierkegaard's Christology, Mariology, and implicit ecclesiology. Yes, Kierkegaard never embraces Catholicism per se, but his emphasis on the imitation of Christ moves him into the orbit of Catholic theology on more than one occasion. In chapter 7, Furnal uses Fabro's scholarship to outline a 'future pathway' for research on Kierkegaard's relationship to Catholic teaching. There are many points of overlap, Furnal observes, though Kierkegaard's lack of a developed understanding of the Church as a visible, sacramental, and hierarchical institution remains a stumbling block. The book's back matter—a conclusion and a postscript—add a pair of summary reflections. For such a lengthy project, this material might have been left out or, at least, integrated into the main body of text. Still, specialists will doubtless find it worthwhile.

So, what has Furnal ultimately accomplished? As a work of scholarship, *Being before God* is excellent. In terms of form, the book is thorough and well-researched. Fabro is the protagonist, as it were, but the text is ordered with an eye to revealing, slowly but surely, Kierkegaard's ongoing relevance for Catholic thinking. It is clear that, as Furnal's account unfolds, he is using Fabro to make this very case. In other words, *Being before God* is not just a *ressourcement* of Fabro; it is meant to contribute to the secondary literature on Kierkegaard as well.

In terms of content, the book can be tough sledding at times. Anglophone readers with little or no familiarity with Fabro (or Kierkegaard, for that matter) will likely find *Being before God* conceptually and linguistically dense. To cite a couple of brief examples, the first page of chapter 3 (p. 55) contains sentences such as 'the ground of the soul emerges beyond the relating relation of the self', and 'Fabro saw the existential appropriation of created freedom in free decision as an ethico-religious demand for the inseparability of metaphysics and soteriology'. It goes without saying, then, that this book is not pitched at, say, undergraduate students or lay readers—a reality that, in a sense, undermines Furnal's attempt to introduce Fabro to an audience generally unacquainted with his thinking.

On the other hand, an author has to start somewhere, and Furnal has undoubtedly served the guild in writing *Being before God*. He has done so, I think, in two overarching ways. First, Fabro's contributions to Kierkegaard studies have been largely forgotten, and Furnal not only reminds scholars to take Fabro's reading of the Dane into account but also provides the tools to do so. Roughly 25 years ago, when I was just starting to study

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Kierkegaard in earnest, I walked into a used-book store in Evanston, Illinois, and stumbled upon a collection of essays edited by Howard A. Johnson (1915–74) and Niels Thulstrup (1924–88). It was entitled *A Kierkegaard Critique* (Harper, 1962). I bought the book and began reading it soon afterwards, including its longest chapter, 'Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic', written by none other than Fabro himself. I remember thinking at the time that Fabro's core argument—that Kierkegaard's concept of faith is not only in line with orthodox Christianity but can even be seen as illustrative of Thomistic teaching on the matter—did not accord with what I had been taught about Kierkegaard. And yet, I also felt that Fabro was onto something—that the Kierkegaard of the upbuilding discourses needed to be brought to bear on the pseudonymous texts, that Kierkegaard's understanding of Christian faith tempered the most radical interpretations of his philosophy. But *Being before God* is more than a mere survey of these issues. Rather, it demonstrates the breadth and depth of Fabro's analysis and, just as importantly, introduces Fabro to a new generation of Kierkegaard scholars.

Furnal contributes to Catholic studies, too. I will illustrate this point by way of a story. Several years ago, I was speaking with a colleague at Villanova, who was asking about my interest in Kierkegaard.

'But you're Catholic, right?', she asked.

'I am', I replied, 'but, you know, there's actually a significant Catholic reception of Kierkegaard: Guardini, de Lubac, Balthasar, even Ratzinger'.

My interlocutor, who was good-natured but also firm, countered by saying that a handful of *ressourcement* thinkers hardly proves that Kierkegaard can be profitably put in conversation with Catholicism.

'To do *that'*, she added, 'you would need to show that Kierkegaard also accords with Thomas Aquinas'.

I told her that I thought that that was possible, and maybe I even mentioned the Fabro chapter in *A Kierkegaard Critique*. But I was not able to marshal a thorough argument on the spot, much less change her mind. Now, I no longer need to. I can just give her a copy of *Being before God*.

Villanova University Christopher B. Barnett

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