

especially the latter part, which are for their information. The Appendices were added to help our sisters, who are in many different countries in the world, to identify the sisters in the book, many of whom they would have known under other names.

However, if anyone wants a copy of the book, they can apply to the Marist Sisters at Haberfield.

Sr Joan McBride sm

BOOK REVIEW

Aquinas Academy 1945-2015 – A Very Personal Australian Story

Author: Julie Thorpe

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Reviewed by Xavier Symons*

The Aquinas Academy of 2016 is very different institution from the Academy established in 1945. In the times of Rev Dr Austin Woodbury (affectionately known as ‘The Doc’), the Sydney Academy offered generalised courses in Thomistic philosophy and theology, and these were taught with the systematic precision characteristic of the late 19th early 20th century manualist tradition. In contrast, the Academy today offers courses on spirituality, mysticism and comparative religion, and has a pedagogical style reflective of Post Vatican II theology – ‘freedom of the spirit in the Spirit’. Prima facie, there are few traces left of the original Academy, save the odd photo of The Doc on the display in the historic Harrington Street classrooms.

Yet there is an amazing and complex history to this unique institution, and what exists today is arguably a reflection of the spirit of enquiry and love of wisdom that Austin Woodbury taught students all those years ago.

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Aquinas Academy

1945-2015

A Very Personal Australian Story

Julie Thorpe



Australian historian Julie Thorpe was commissioned with the difficult task of piecing together a rich tapestry of narratives – stories from former students both lay and religious, senior figures in the Church in Sydney from the 1930s until today, relatives and friends of the Doc, and most importantly, the various faculty members who have taught at the institution since its inception. *The Aquinas Academy 1945-2015 – A very personal Australian Story* is a delightful and engaging history that gives readers a window into the heart and mind of Austin Woodbury, and also those who succeeded him. The book is not a history of ideas or Catholic philosophy; it is, rather, a deeply personal history, and one that will be of great interest to anyone

who has come in contact with the Academy over the years.

Julie Thorpe deftly condenses 70 years of history into very readable 160-page volume. Roughly half of the book deals with the life of Austin Woodbury, and the rapid development of the Academy in the late 1940s to early 1960s. Thorpe pays significant attention to Woodbury's personal history, and in particular early events in his life that left an indelible mark on his character and led him to immerse himself almost completely in his academic pursuits. The second half of the book discusses the transition of the academy from an exclusive focus on scholasticism to a Post-Vatican II focus on pastoral studies and mysticism. The Academy shifted its attention away from Woodbury's Thomism and toward Jungian psychoanalysis and courses in pastoral theology. There were signs of a change in the direction at the academy following the end of Vatican II in 1965, and what were mere auspices soon became an inexorable force when the Doc stepped down as principal of Academy in 1974. Thorpe discusses the how Woodbury's preoccupation with pontifically recognised philosophy degrees was replaced with the desire of subsequent principals to offer 'Christian Growth Programs' for lay men and women.

It would not do Julie's book justice to ignore her very personal and endearing approach to writing history. To my mind this book is just as

much reflective of Julie's uncanny sensitivity to the complexity of life as it is the rich personalities of characters like Austin Woodbury. In a sense Julie represents the lay, female audience for whom the academy today offers so much promise. And all this even in what appears to be – to use a concept from the German sociologist Max Weber – a thoroughly disenchanted world.

Each chapter of the book interweaves historical reflections with interviews with significant figures associated with the academy. Julie clearly worked extremely hard to arrange some of these interviews – just wait till you read about her encounter with unionist and former politician Johnno Johnson! The discussions are recounted in a lively style, and Julie skilfully captures the complex personalities and personal histories of these different significant figures in the history of the academy.

Thorpe is sympathetic to the new direction followed by the Academy in its post-Woodbury era. There are many who would not take so kindly to the Academy's current ethos (indeed, a splinter institute, the Centre for Thomistic Studies, still exists today, staffed by former students of Woodbury who disagree with the liberal approach to theology in the Academy). But while many are critical of the 'progressive' theology taught at the Academy today, there is general agreement – both among so-called liberals and conservatives – about the significant contribution that Woodbury made to Catholic intellectual life in Australia in the 20th century. The sections of the book focused on Woodbury transcend to some extent the ideological divides that polarise Catholic theology and philosophy today. This is one of the book's strengths.