

Blast From the Past: Leo XIII

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 9, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

As mentioned yesterday, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated the bicentennial of Pope Leo XIII's birth last weekend, going to Leo's birthplace in Carpineto Romano.

One of Leo's most seminal accomplishments was to renew Catholic scholarship which, understandably, had not flourished during the reign of his predecessor Pius IX, author of the Index of Forbidden Books. Leo's method was very conservative, in its way. In an 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, Leo called for renewed focus on the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. It was, you will pardon the expression, a distinctly Catholic way of inaugurating renewal. Leo encouraged Catholic scholars to return to the great medieval theologian who was much more adventurous a thinker than some of his followers. After all, Thomas had tried to introduce Aristotle to Christian philosophy, a revolutionary different way of approaching philosophy from what went before. Thomists may have grown timid in the nineteenth century, but Thomas had not been timid.

There were other reasons for the great theological advances of the twentieth century. Next week, we shall celebrate one of the other great reasons, the effects of Cardinal John Henry Newman. But, Leo XIII also played a role in the renewal of Catholic theology that came to fruition in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Closer to home, Leo was responsible for the founding of the Catholic University of America, and his statue adorns the entrance lobby of McMahon Hall on campus. His method was conservative, but its results were astounding.

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