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The point of departure between Thomas Aquinas and Vincent Ferrer



Jaume Mensa, a lecturer in Medieval Philosophy at the UAB, has published an article in the *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* that documents the evolution of Vincent Ferrer's thinking on the possibility of knowing the end times. For a long time Ferrer subscribed to the theses of Thomas Aquinas but, between 1408 and 1412, he breaks radically away from them.

Vincent Ferrer preaching. Miniature of Ms. 345, Bibliothèque municipale de Toulouse, f. 4

Vincent Ferrer (1350–1419) taught himself with the works of Thomas Aquinas (C13), the master par excellence of his Order of Preachers. Ferrer himself wrote works of philosophy that were clearly inspired by Thomism and the influence of Thomas Aquinas can be traced through the various themes he dealt with.

There comes a point, however, where Ferrer breaks with Aquinas over a central topic: the possibility of having knowledge of the end times — those of the coming of the antichrist and the end of the world. Aquinas had written a series of rebuttals of William of Saint-Amour and other authors who upheld the possibility of such knowledge. For Aquinas, the end times could not be known about, either through reasoning or through a revelation. Jesus of Nazareth himself appears to have denied this possibility: "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power." (Acts 1:7).

Ferrer interprets this biblical passage three times. In a sermon on 5 December 1408, he completely agrees with Thomas Aquinas. His main premise is that "the coming of the antichrist cannot be known to the year, month, week, day or hour". In the same sermon he tells how a hermit has assured him that two of his companions had had a revelation that "the antichrist was already born". Ferrer replies with the same words from the Bible (Acts 1:7) used by Aquinas to counter William of Saint-Amour, although, according to the hermit, Jesus's words applied only to those he was addressing (the Apostles), not to those destined to undergo the tribulations brought by the antichrist. Then, in a sermon on 8 July 1411 and a letter dated 27 July 1412, Ferrer adopts the hermit's interpretation as his own. In other words, the premise of the first sermon is only valid "until the birth of the antichrist". Once the antichrist is born — and Brother Vincent also gives credence to the revelation told to him by the hermit — his presence in the world must be announced openly.

The arguments used by Thomas Aquinas to combat the apocalyptic predictions of William of Saint-Amour, and which Ferrer himself had upheld as his own, could now be thrown back at the Valencian saint. In the space of three and a half years his position has shifted 180 degrees.

Jaume Mensa

Philosophy Department, UAB
MINECO, FFI2014-53050-C5-2-P, Arnau DB
Jaume.Mensa@uab.cat

References

J. Mensa, 2017, "**El punt de ruptura entre Tomàs d'Aquino i Vicent Ferrer, o la possibilitat de conèixer els temps finals**", *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 47/1, p. 159-175.

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