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SCIENCES**

**ASCETICISM AND EXEGESIS IN THE WORK OF  
HENRI DE LUBAC**

**SUMMARY**

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**IAȘI**

**December 2014**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this thesis is to highlight the contribution of Henri de Lubac in the development of exegesis, in response to the “modernist” trend, as he often calls it, to streamline the whole process of interpretation of the text, especially the sacred. Henri de Lubac wrote in response to the exclusive trends to technically interpret the Scripture. The twentieth century saw a greater diversification of methods of inquiry and interpretation and so, biblical hermeneutics has been addressed as science, almost exclusively, but not as a spiritual activity. His position can be expressed by the phrases "letter and spirit" or "History and Spirit" as it is called, and one of his books, *Histoire et Esprit*. The assumption was that man is more than reason, and in order to form a conception of the world and human life must address things holistically, both through the filter of his reason, but also by that of his spirit.

### **I. Life and work of Henri de Lubac**

Henri de Lubac was one of the most important catholic thinkers of the twentieth century, a prominent character in the *Ressourcement* and *Nouvelle theologie* movements, which inspired

the change in Catholic Church and which brought the change at Vatican II.<sup>1</sup>

Whoever wants to write a biography of Henri de Lubac need to study his memories. The most important is *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits*<sup>2</sup>, which he published in 1989, just a couple of years before his death. Another biographical sketch is *Mémoire sur mes vingt premières années*, which was published postum in „Bulletin de l'Association Internationale Cardinal Henri de Lubac” in 1998, in which de Lubac wrote the memories regarding his first 20 years of life. One could find the circumstances of his writings, personal data as well as some other events.

In his book, *Chrétienne Résistance et l'Antisemitisme: 1940-1944* Henri de Lubac not just write about the Nazi occupation of France and the persecution of Jews in this period, but besides his memoirs, he includes the analysis of documents and controversial events that have not been widely publicized.<sup>3</sup>

In this thesis I also referred to two other reference works. The first, *Meet Henri de Lubac*, published by Ignatius Press, edited by Joseph Fessio, a Jesuit who had the privilege to meet him on De

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Leihart, „Natural and Supernatural”, Trinity House – Institute for Biblical, Liturgical and Cultural Studies, Birmingham, 30.10.2013, <http://trinityhouseinstitute.com/natural-and-supernatural/>

<sup>2</sup> Translated in English as *At the Service of the Church*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism: Memories from 1940-1944*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1990.

Lubac and the second written by the most famous disciple of his Urs von Balthasar, *Henri de Lubac: Sein organische Lebenswerk*. The two writings are important resources for analyzing the life of this remarkable Christian thinker.

## **II. Supernatural vs natural in the work of Henri de Lubac**

De Lubac's concern was to address the failure of the Church to relate to contemporary culture and express doctrines of Christianity in a way that is relevant to society. His concern was that the Christian worldview is expressed in terms that better reflect the deepest human aspirations. To achieve this, he made an excursion into history to identify the period in which the rupture between natural and supernatural has taken place; this divorce, in his opinion, is the main cause for the lack of relevance of the church in contemporary society. So natural-supernatural reconsideration report is the way to reach his goal.

In this chapter I sketched the steps that de Lubac has taken in order to recover the concept of supernatural.<sup>4</sup> He does this, first, by identifying the causes that led to the loss of a sense of sacredness. In his view, the end of the medieval era was a separation between

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<sup>4</sup> Henri de Lubac is considered by Michaël Figura „the most important theologian of supernatural” (Michaël Figura in Introduction to *Misterul Supranaturalului*, p.III.)

the sacred and the profane, between the spiritual and the natural. Paradoxically, this break comes, first, from the theological realm.

The second step to recovery is to clarify supernatural notions of „supernatural” and „natural”. De Lubac's defense is very technical, clarifying the meaning of the natural and the supernatural in relation to natural, challenging the reader to a reconsideration of the thomist position. De Lubac challenges the modernist interpretation of the concept of "pure nature". It can be said, in the words of Etienne Gilson, that de Lubac recovers Thomas Aquinas.

Henri de Lubac finds an ally not only Thomas, but also in the patristic writings, both from East and West, but also in medieval theology and philosophy. He concurs with bringing the reader's attention to both well known personalities and some more obscure. In this respect, he goes in line with „Ressourcement”, a movement with which he collaborated together with his disciple, Danielou, by returning to the writings of the past, not for the sake of returning to the past, but by observing how theologians and philosophers have succeeded to address critical situations which they had experienced.

By simply reading material of de Lubac on the concept of supernatural one can see a preference for Thomas and Augustine, he argued that the former falls into the same doctrinal lines with the former, only their contexts differing, Thomas Aquinas living and

writing in a time when Christian philosophy was more stable, its vocabulary adapted to the era in which he lived.

Once established that man is called to beatific vision, from Augustine's famous statement: *Fecisti nos ad you, Deus* (You made us for yourself, O Lord) he demonstrates the failure of atheistic humanist conceptions. His thinking is one of the paradoxes, a specific feature of the Christian worldview. Urs von Balthasar said about his master that his position was one of "middle", which means that he was able to maintain a balance in doctrines that were apparent contradictory.

### **III. Henri de Lubac and his defense of Origen's exegesis**

Origen was perceived and classified in different, absolutely stunning ways: philosopher and scholar, mystic, systematic theologian, representative of the esoteric system, interpreter and/or allegorist, a Christian saint (even martyr), true Gnostic, one for which mystical knowledge is a way of salvation, Hellenistic, Platonist, moralist, ascetic, a man of the church and syncretistic eunuch. However, all critics agree that Origen was a unique writer and the wealth of his writings can not fit into just one of the above categories.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Daily, „Origen man of the church and focus on controversy”, *Proceedings of Catholic Theological Society of America* 40, Boston, 1985, p.109.

Henri de Lubac was fascinated by the personality of Origen and for 20 years he analyzed the life and theology of this great man of the church. The examination Origen's exegesis was necessary for the time in which de Lubac lived, since it had defining role in the development of Christian thought.

Analyzing the lives of the two, the Alexandrian theologian and the French cardinal, one can even see a parallel between the approach to Scripture and how some of their works were received by their contemporaries. Although de Lubac did not explicitly mention Origen as his model, one can see the influence of his thought and, especially, the approach to Scripture in the work of the French cardinal.

The studies which Henri de Lubac did on Origen's life and work have resulted in a complex work: *Histoire et Esprit. L'intelligence de l'Ecriture d'apres Origen*. In a time of turmoil he found the necessarily "quiet time" to write the book. As expressed by Lubac, his approach of Origen is a chapter in the spiritual exegesis. Lubac says about this book "I sought not to defend Origen, but rather, to see what he thought and he said really"<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p.10.

Henri de Lubac begins his book by saying that "we do not have enough room to speak about Origen"<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, his voluminous work is an apologetic of both the thinking and even the life of the one that de Lubac considers the promoter of the four senses of Scripture. In this work, de Lubac analyzes the allegorical system which Origen developed, but also the context in which he lived.

Heine believes that Origen "stands as the oak stands in the middle of the plain"<sup>8</sup>. Church for centuries lived in the shadow of this man of the church, being so built and divided by him. Few are those who have not been influenced in their theology or methodology by Origen.<sup>9</sup>

De Lubac aims to get as close to Origen's thought through exegesis "as literal as possible". This involves understanding of the issues faced by Origen, but also of his responses in that historical context: "I want to understand the mind of Origen searching without

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<sup>7</sup> In his work devoted to the analysis of Origen's exegesis, *History and Spirit*, Henri de Lubac begins by showing that if a certain Dom Capelle wrote a scientific article about a certain theme of Ambrosie then „...what voluminous book is needed to analyze with the same minutia many texts what are often misquoted about Origen?“ (p.9)

<sup>8</sup> Ronald E. Heine, „Introduction“, in *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, ed. Ronald E. Heine The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 1982, p.1.

<sup>9</sup> In the arian controversy, a century after Origen's death, both Atanasius and Arius quoted Origen to defend their doctrinal position. Practically, just as Heine showed in the introduction on *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, Origen considered Catholic by some, Protestant by other, but all referred to him to defend their positions.

deciding a priori, which was written by an extended reading through exegesis literal as possible."<sup>10</sup> Vonderholzer believes that de Lubac's purpose in writing this masterpiece, was to encourage supporters of scientific exegesis to engage in a dialogue between exegesis and systematic theology.<sup>11</sup>

In this chapter I will consider de Lubac's apologetic about the life and work of Origen, according to his work *Histoire et Esprit*. To understand de Lubac's plea there I will also address his other works as well as the works of other authors, who study the life and work of Origen. De Lubac's defense of Origen is built on four main areas: his life, the context of his writings, the relationship between exegesis and his philosophical thought. Each of these four items listed above will be considered below as main points of this chapter. De Lubac's argument is solid, well-documented. He did not hesitate, as we shall see, to show the shortcomings of its spiritual interpretation. De Lubac does not aim so much to justify Origen's allegorical interpretation but rather to defend the Alexandrian writer of unfounded accusations, of departing from the Christian faith.

De Lubac finds the element of Christian mystery in the life and work of Origen, aspect which tended to be overlooked in the theological circles, who are more interested in the scientific aspect

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<sup>10</sup> Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p.12.

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Vonderholzer, *Meet Henri de Lubac*, p. 69.

of the hermeneutics. Although de Lubac said he studied Origen without a priori judgment, one cannot help but observe his positive premises, even de Lubac acknowledging that claim to total objectivity is an utopia. Thus, de Lubac will give mitigating circumstances to Origen, sometimes passing over some sensitive issues in the Alexandrian theologian life and work.

However, de Lubac's arguments are sound and causes the reader to study again Origen's work, but this time, detached from the presuppositions that incriminated him and considering the lubacian plausible arguments.

#### **IV. Plurivocity of hermeneutics**

The term "hermeneutics", wrote Moises Silva, "has seen an increasingly popularity in recent decades. As a result, it came to be used in every possible way. Given that so many writers use it, it seems to have become a moving target."<sup>12</sup> The meaning of the word "hermeneutics" is relatively simple, it is the science and art of interpreting ancient texts, especially biblical interpretation method or science and cultural phenomena. Gadamer states that the word "covers very different levels of reflection, as has happened so often

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<sup>12</sup> Moises Silva și Walter C. Kaiser Jr, *Introducere în Hermeneutică*, Ed. Logos, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, p.18.

with words derived from the Greek that have found a way to access our scientific language."<sup>13</sup>

Some authors consider that the origin of the word "hermeneutics" point to Hermes, the divine messenger who would bring to people the messages from Zeus. Interpretation, as practice has its roots in the classical Greek culture. The activity of Ἑρμηνεία<sup>14</sup> (Hermeneia) happens when the interpreter translates into an intelligible language that which was expressed in another or in an unintelligible language. The act of hermeneutics is always a transposition from one world to another, from the world of gods in the world of men. The interpretation depends on the quality of the transmitted message, which brought subjectivity in the interpretation.

Gerald Bruns defines hermeneutics as "the tradition of philosophical thought or reflection that attempts to clarify the

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<sup>13</sup> Hans G. Gadamer, *Adevăr și metodă*, Editura Teora, București, 2001, p.433. Gadamer speaks about this old hermeneutics, which was not as much science, but rather was concerned with the judge or priest. By this, Gadamer shows that the quest for truth is not as much about the method as it is about the understanding of a phenomenon in a given context.

<sup>14</sup> The Greeks considered that one of the gifts given to people, beside that of reason and understanding was the creative gift of ἑρμηνεία, (Xenofon, *Memorabilia Socratis*, IV, 3, 12). Plato considered that the poet did not write from himself, but he was only an interpreter of deity (Platon, *Ion*, 534 b, e). Platon influenced Philon, who considered that the prophets were God's interpreters. Moses, the perfect prophet, was filled with the Spirit of God in order to ἑρμηνεύς τῶν χρησμοφδομημένων (De Decalogo, 175).

concept of *Verstehen*, namely, understanding."<sup>15</sup> As understanding is not a simple thing, the best approach to hermeneutics is through history. Michael Ermath sees no connection between previous forms and contemporary hermeneutics. In his historical approach, he identifies six models of hermeneutics: Biblical exegesis, in which one can identify several methodologies; philological model (it includes historical-critical approach here), literal and grammatical school; understanding the science of language, having as representative on Schleiermacher; fundamentally humanist model, Dilthey being the main representative; phenomenology of being (Dasein) and existential understanding of Heidegger and symbols of Paul Ricoeur model.

Today one can see that the phenomenon goes beyond theological and legal hermeneutics, being at the intersection of several disciplines. First, philosophy makes an important contribution to the understanding of hermeneutics, and then many other disciplines, including literary criticism. One can add sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines that contribute to finding the meaning of a text. Plurivoc character is given and genres of literature; thus various passages have different

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<sup>15</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992, p.1.

interpretations, but also different levels of interpretation of the same text.

In this chapter I have tried to build an overview of the history of the interpretation of the first centuries until the late Middle Ages to highlight differences in interpretation. Outlining the history of hermeneutics is a very large project and would far exceed the limits of this thesis; however, in this chapter, I want to highlight differences in interpretation, the very beginning of the history of hermeneutics. Henri de Lubac's argument for spiritual interpretation comes from this period, walking in the line of Alexandrian school, and of the western school, without, however, totally reject the Antiochian school position.

Another major issue which I will reveal in this chapter is the question of the meaning of a text. Parties involved in the interpretive process play an important role in determining the meaning. One must consider three factors that influence the meaning: the author, text and reader. Author produces the text and the reader studies it. However, which of these three factors has a greater importance in interpretation? Since the author is not present to explain the meaning of the text, can it be said that the text is independent of the author? On the other hand, if the reader sets the method, then what role has the text in discovering meaning of the text? In addition, it is already

generally accepted that subjects bring their prejudices and luggage in the interpretation.

## **V. The exegesis of Henri de Lubac**

Although Henri de Lubac is known more for his writings on grace and ecclesiology, he devoted most pages of his work to exegesis.<sup>16</sup> The two fields should not, however, be taken separately. In fact, Henri de Lubac's exegesis is a response to secularism which included Western European society in the years of 1930-1950. In this approach, together with Henri de Lubac, several philosophers and theologians have also joined, including Jean Daniélou, Yves Congar, Louis Bouyer, Urs von Balthasar and others. They believed that theology was still relevant for the turbulent times in which they lived and that this language can be rediscovered by addressing the history of Christian thought. The values pursued by these authors are as follows: return to the Christian heritage, especially the patristic and medieval a reinterpretation of Thomas Aquinas and dialogue with major philosophies of the period and their representatives, with a keen interest in the Renaissance, modernism, humanism and secularism. This movement would be known as "aggiornamento".

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<sup>16</sup> He dedicated numerous essays to this topic and even his most voluminous work, *Medieval Exegesis* in on the same subject. He wrote these 4 volumes during 20 years.

The four volumes of work *Exégèse médiévale* include more than 1,800 pages and is an overview of the methods of interpretation of early Christianity and early sixteenth century. This work is considered one of the most important and extensive contributions to the history of medieval exegesis, Henri de Lubac citing numerous thinkers, more or less known. For any of its argument, the French cardinal finds support from dozens or hundreds of predecessors in the history of Christian thought. Ricouer Paul writes about this work:

Thanks to the admirable work of de Lubac about the four senses of Scripture - historical, allegorical, moral, anagogic – the mutual side of interpretation of Scripture and existence can be known. Beyond the mere interpretation of the Old Covenant and typological correlation between the two testaments, hermeneutics followed coincidence between understanding medieval belief in "lectio divina" and understanding of reality as a whole, containing these four components: divine and human, historical and physical. So hermeneutical task is to expand understanding of text on the doctrine, the practice of meditation on the mysteries.<sup>17</sup>

In this section I detailed the contents of the four senses of Scripture interpretation, a topic for which de Lubac allocates most pages of his masterpiece. The order is not random, although some authors consider that it is not so important. Motivation for historical,

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Ricouer, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1980, p.52.

allegorical, and anagogic tropologică is quite simple, Henri de Lubac claiming that sense it determines the other.

In *Exégèse médiévale* the author shows that biblical exegesis was not a separate discipline of theology but rather exegesis is theology. His conclusion was that the best method of interpreting Scripture was allegorical or spiritual method. For de Lubac this was the method of the church fathers and it was supposed to be "the best current method." His plea for allegorical interpretation comes from his conception of the relationship between natural and supernatural, in that the first concept is included in the second. Thus, in his study of medieval exegesis, de Lubac shows that allegory is not something that is added to the literal meaning, but something that emerges from literal as the literal fulfillment and telos.

Exegesis should be concerned with the "real life" and that spiritual interpretation will help the church to have a continuing involvement in society, in the problems it faces. Therefore, exegesis is not just an exercise or an abstract thing, but a continuing involvement in everyday life. De Lubac proposed that the patristic and medieval exegesis model to show how they were relevant in their interpretation of the society in which they lived. Robert L. Wilken, in the introduction to the English translation of this work of de Lubac says:

De Lubac has harsh words for those who believe that the Church Fathers and medieval exegesis is dying or obsolete, or silly or childish. He is no less sharp in his words against those who believed that exegetical writings of the past must be investigated only for historical reasons.<sup>18</sup>

I also developed on the content of each sense of interpretation. I tried to capture the defining features of each approach. Henri de Lubac gives many examples of interpretation, in every sense of the hand and chooses his words carefully. In addition, he gives examples from the history of early Christian thought for each element mentioned in the four senses. It is impressive the ease with which he manages to cross hundreds of years to support his position through other Christian thinkers. So both *Histoire et Esprit*, but especially *Medieval Exégèse* provide a rich bibliography and it is likely that some of the works mentioned are known today only through the work of French Jesuit. Reference lists hinder the reading of these two works, but the reader who has the patience will be enriched by them. Then, after a brief introduction to the concept of sense of Scripture, I will do a summary for each meanings: historical, allegorical, moral and anagogic.

## **VI. Asceticism in the works of Henri de Lubac**

Henri de Lubac's purpose in all his work was to restore the element of mystery for the Christian community. This is the theme

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, „Foreword” in *Medieval Exegesis*, p. XII.

in which he has invested his entire life. Mystery influenced Christian perspective on the relationship between man and God, and his hermeneutics. Interpretation sought to integrate Christian world and life view in the context of the time in which he lived where humanist philosophies promised freedom by denying the divine reality. The Lubacian exegesis is a plea for spiritual interpretation, for that kind of exegesis that produces transformation in the life of the interpreter, through the knowledge of God.

In the previous chapters, I have sought to highlight the presuppositional framework of de Lubac's hermeneutics, the reader being able to identify the centrality of spirituality in French cardinal concept. Since it places great emphasis on the subjective side of interpretation, the subject of asceticism requires treating this component in a separate chapter. It is therefore appropriate to systematize the ascetic aspect of interpretation. In all his treatises on the subject, de Lubac concludes with a plea for the allegorical sense.

In its volumes on medieval exegesis, Henri de Lubac presents this interpretation in a wonderful, surprising transition from monastic to the scholastic understanding, transformation and meditation oratory and debate in question, replacing the spiritual with the intellectual, the sacredness of the secular transition from monastic schools attached to cathedrals."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Robert E. Nelly, *op.cit.* p.450

Asceticism, it can be said, is the favorite topic of Henri de Lubac, since he is an ecclesiastical writer. His argument, as it could be observed so far is that man is not only intellect, but is also spirit, created in the "imago Dei". Man is fulfilled as long as it relates to the transcendent. It deals especially knowing deity book *Sur le chemins de Dieu*. This volume continues the idea started in books *Catholicism* (1938) and *Surnaturel* (1946), which starts from the Augustinian conception of man that finds its fulfillment in God alone, which influenced the design and medieval period, at least until the end of the twelfth century. In the introduction that makes the above-mentioned book by De Lubac, David Schindler believes that "we can say that the book develops, almost as in a mirror, what Thomas said the fact that in any act of thinking and the will, the man thinks God implicitly, through thought and will."<sup>20</sup> He says this about the French thinker, as can be seen from him so Augustine's thought, but also that of Thomas, Christian personalities they specifically studied in college. Borrowing the language of the two Christian thinkers, Henri de Lubac believes that the "restless heart" or that desire "ordinary" as is absolutely breath of the soul and precedes all human thought or action. He believed that reason systematize the information has already man of God and that have

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<sup>20</sup> David L. Schindler, *Preface*, in Henri de Lubac, *Discovery of God*, p.ix.

been implemented in the human mind by him before the reflection to occur.

This message is the address to the twentieth century man, who was deeply influenced by rationalist trends and for whom the assumption of objectivity of Descartes is a truism. De Lubac shows, however, that atheists cannot give an explanation for rational process that uses it, trying to deny the existence of God. If God does not exist, then it would undermine the very human ability to reason.

Ascetic component is what gives meaning to both life and work of French thinker, his life was the embodiment of its principles. Structuring this feature of lubacian exegesis is difficult, as it leaves its mark on his whole thinking. The difficulty comes from the fact that asceticism may be harder comprised in some structures. Therefore, the first part of this chapter I showed the semantics and images used by de Lubac in the development of this topic. The work of French author abounds in spirituality and as a result, it is often mentioned inner side of the interpreter.

Then I underlined Lubac's conception on development of the inner universe. His entire work is punctuated by elements of the ascetics, in an attempt to sensitize readers that, in the end, what matters most is the relationship with the divinity. The first issue that I will address is de Lubac's belief that man naturally after transcendent longing after God. Interpretation must take place

within the framework influenced by personal faith. The interpreter works in a well-defined presuppositional framework in which man finds its fulfillment in God alone.

Thirdly, the author speaks of a *metanoia*, that is a change of mind. De Lubac believed that man, in his natural state, cannot understand the divine things. But when a person experiences *metanoia* his eyes are open to see the things of God. In his work, the concept is both a moment, the interpreter grows in his capacity to understand a text or a phenomenon. In this chapter I will deal with both aspects. Henri de Lubac shows that interpretation is a life-long concern. As it relates to divinity, man will learn how long he lives. In addition, the prospect of eternity cause man to correctly align his values and makes him hope that a day will come when his body will experience *metanoia*.

## **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, Henri de Lubac was one of the most important Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, through the impact he had with his life, but especially through his writings. His influence on Catholic thought, and even in whole Christendom, is generally recognized both by Catholics and Protestants, the latter even wrote several publications and books about his life and about specific topics. However, he is not well known, some authors considering that in future many would write about him. Henri de Lubac is neither

known very well in our country. So far, only three books have been translated, but through articles and conferences that I attended I hope that his work will be known better; this is much more as our society needs a Christianity which shows an organic connection between faith and practice.

Henri de Lubac is known by two major elements. First, it should be mentioned his Thomistic reinterpretation of the concept of "pure nature", aspect that influenced his entire work. The second major area of his writings, which earned him recognition from several authors in the field of hermeneutics, is the spiritual exegesis. These two elements are identified with the personality of the French Henri de Lubac being a reference author in studies about: Thomas Aquinas, the supernatural with the natural ratio, medieval exegesis and the four senses of Scripture and design theistic worldview compared to atheist humanism. De Lubac's approach to these areas is ontological, his life is a criterion for validating the themes mentioned above.