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BILLOT, LOUIS

Theologian; b. Sierck (Moselle, France), Jan. 12, 1846; d. Galloro (near Rome), Dec. 18, 1931. He studied at Metz and Bordeaux and at the major seminary in Blois, where he was ordained in 1869. In the same year, he entered the Society of Jesus. He then preached in Paris (1875–78) and at Laval (1878–79). He began to teach dogmatic theology first at the Catholic University of Angers (1879–82), then at the Jesuit scholasticate on the Isle of Jersey (1882–85), and finally at the Gregorian (1885–1910), with a brief stay in Paris (1886). Leo XIII, most eager to promote a return to Thomistic doctrine, had him called to Rome. In 1910 he was named consultor to the Holy Office, and in 1911 he was created a cardinal by Pius X. Because of his sympathies for the movement Action Française, which was condemned by Pius XI in 1927, he was persuaded to renounce his cardinalial dignity. His obedience was irreproachable, and he prevailed upon the members of the movement to sacrifice their ideas and conform to the orders of the pope. He then left for the novitiate of the Jesuit Roman province at Galloro and remained there until his death.

His works consist chiefly in theological treatises: *De Verbo Incarnato* (Rome 1892); *De Ecclesiae sacramentis* (2 v. Rome 1894–95); *Disquisitio de natura et ratione peccati personalis* (Rome 1894); *De peccato originali* (Rome 1912); *De Deo uno et trino* (Rome 1895); *De Ecclesia Christi* (2 v. Rome 1898–1910); *De virtutibus infusis* (Rome 1901); *Quaestiones de novissimis* (Rome 1902); *De Inspiratione Sacrae Scripturae* (Rome 1903); *De Sacra Traditione* (Rome 1904); *De gratia Christi* (Rome 1912). Added to these are several articles in the review *Gregorianum*, and two series of 10 articles each: “La Parousie,” *Etudes* 54–56 (1917–19), edited in one volume (Paris 1920); and “La Providence de Dieu et le nombre infini d’hommes en dehors de la voie normale du salut,” *Etudes* 56–60 (1919–23).

Following the directives of Leo XIII, Billot gave primary importance in his teachings to the fundamental theses of St. Thomas’s metaphysics, especially the analogy of being, the distinction between act and potency, and the real distinction between essence and existence. He

viewed the last distinction as one of greatest importance: *essentia* and *esse* are really distinct in creatures, and one and the same in God. Here is what the whole of metaphysics hinges upon, the very root of the assertion that nothing univocal can be ascribed to God and creatures. Billot used this distinction in the treatise on the Incarnation to explain the distinction between person and nature; having recourse to and renewing Capreolus’s opinion, he defined the person of Christ as *Esse Verbi*.

His treatise on the Trinity is of special merit because of his subtle analysis of the concept of relation; it exemplifies a theological treatise, the rational explanations of which are systematically constructed with admirable logic upon a metaphysical notion. In his treatise on the infused virtues, he stressed the rational basis of the judgment of credibility. In the treatise on the Eucharist, he insisted on the notion of conversion as characterizing transubstantiation. He also developed a theory of the Mass according to which the sacrifice is to be understood as essentially a mystical immolation.

His thesis on the salvation of infidels was somewhat less acceptable. He held that a very great number of adults remain children from a moral point of view and, therefore, upon death go to Limbo. This was a solution that was generally rejected by theologians.

Among the doctrines or movements that he fought against especially were Modernism and Liberalism. He denounced Modernism with vigor, and in the encyclical *PASCENDI* his ideas, his formulas, and even excerpts from his works can be recognized. In Liberalism he saw a heresy that had issued from the ideas of the French Revolution and that was founded on an atheistic philosophy; he strove to refute the error that claims that individual liberty is man’s supreme good. He did not conceal his hostility toward democratic ideas, and he vividly criticized the *Sillon* movement (see SANGNIER, MARC). Billot is justly praised for possessing a remarkable ability to speculate dogmatically and for his concern in giving a vigorous philosophical structure to theology. On the other hand, it must be admitted that he showed almost no interest at all in positive theology, and that at times he even mistrusted it.

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