The Theological Papers of Canon John Francis McHugh

Recently the theological papers of Canon John Francis McHugh have been deposited in the Archives of the Diocese of Shrewsbury.

John Francis McHugh was born in Stalybridge on August 3rd 1927. He left for the junior seminary at Ushaw in September 1939. Having completed his schooling there in 1946, he was sent to the English College, Rome, where McHugh completed his training for priesthood, and was ordained priest in St John Lateran by Archbishop (later Cardinal) Luigi Traglia on July 6th 1952. In Rome he was awarded the degree of Licentiate in Philosophy (De questione an S. Thomas Aquinas libertatem arbitrii humani cum natura omniperfecta conciliaverit, 1949), and Doctor of Divinity for a theses on The Exaltation of Christ in the Arian Controversy (1954) under the supervision of P. Galtier S.J. (SHRDA/J McH/2). He continued his studies as élève titulaire at the École Biblique in Jerusalem (1955-1956). On his return to Rome he received the degree of Licentiate of Sacred Scripture.

After finishing his studies, McHugh spent a brief spell of eight months as curate in Shrewsbury Cathedral during 1957, before taking up a post on the staff at the seminary at Ushaw that autumn. Here he lectured in Scripture, and in other areas, from 1957 to 1976. These courses (typescripts deposited in Ushaw College Archives) offer a useful illustration of the move away from the theology of the manuals that occurred at the time. In 1976 he was appointed to a lectureship in the theology department in the University of Durham, becoming senior lecturer in 1978. From 1980 to 1982 he was dean of the Department of Theology.

John McHugh’s hope was to contribute to the creation of an educated clergy and laity whose scholarship could respond to the needs of the times. His first two books, translations of Roland De Vaux’s Ancient Israel in 1961 and Xavier Léon-Dufour’s The Gospels and the Jesus of History in 1968 (SHRDA/J McH/4), were important attempts to make the fruits of European scholarship accessible to the English reader. His own book, The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament, published in 1975, combined his deep love for Scripture and his concern for ecumenical relations with his devotion to Our Blessed Lady: he wished to contribute to
ecumenical relations by revealing how the recent developments in Catholic Marian theology could be reconciled to Scriptural understanding. This study provoked an important disagreement between McHugh and Raymond Brown about the relationship between history, exegesis and dogma (SHRDA/J McH/6-8). He was a long time member of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, contributing much to its discussions. He also attended and contributed to the Marian Congress in Sydney, 1976.

Much of McHugh’s work was done behind the scenes. In 1967 McHugh was invited by Archbishop Dwyer to act as a consultor to newly created Episcopal Theology and Doctrine Commission (Dwyer, Butler, Fox), and he accompanied the Archbishop as peritus to a meeting in Rome called to discuss the relationship between National Theological Commissions and the International Theological Commission (1969) (SHRDA/J McH/9-12). After the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, he contributed a detailed analysis of the doctrinal authority of the encyclical in a series of three articles in *The Clergy Review* (Aug – Oct 1969) (SHRDA/J McH/13-14). In 1969 Denis Nineham invited him to join a regional study group for the Faith & Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to work on a report on The Authority of and Bible and Eternal Life (1969-1970) (SHRDA/J McH/15). In 1972, he was proposed by Bishop Wheeler for membership of Hebrew panel commissioned to produce a new translation of the psalms for liturgical use in the Church of England (SHRDA/J McH/24-29). It is a mark of the respect in which he was held in the Church at large that he was called to be a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission from 1984 to 1990, and, on completing his term of office, received a warm letter of thanks from the then Cardinal Ratzinger. (SHRDA/J McH/34-35).

McHugh’s involvement in liturgical translation led to a wide involvement with the liturgy. While at Ushaw he translated Vespers and Compline for use in the college, sending proposals on the new English breviary to Bishop Cunningham of Hexham and Newcastle, and corresponding with Bishop Wheeler of Leeds on this, and other matters. He contributed sample translations of several collects to the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), but was severely critical of their work. He submitted translations of Eucharistic Prayers II and
III, as well translations of prayers for the first ten weeks of the year, as his entry for the Ronald Know Prize of 1996. His open letter, *On Englishing the Liturgy*, addressed to Bishop Gray (1983), his own ordinary and chairman of the English and Welsh Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, provoked considerable interest at the time and much correspondence. This was published first in *Liturgy*, vol. 8, ns. 1 & 2, pp. 17-39, 61-88) and then, privately, as a separate pamphlet; it includes McHugh’s fine English version of the *Exultet*. (SHRDA/J McH/16-23) *

McHugh was appointed Honorary Canon of the Diocese in 1981 and Diocesan Censor of Books in 1988. After retiring from Durham University in 1988, after a brief spell at Our Lady’s Edgeley, Stockport, he spent four and a half years as parish priest in Alderley Edge (1989-1993), before retiring to devote himself to writing, first, in 1993, to Langley Park in Durham, and then, to the Convent of Mercy, Alnwick, Northumberland. Here he settled down to continue a long planned and major commentary on St John’s Gospel at the invitation of the editorial board of the International Critical Commentary. John McHugh died very suddenly in Alnwick on February 3rd 2006, aged 78. His commentary on the first four chapters of John’s gospel was published by T & T Clark three year later SHRDA/J McH/44-45).

Peter Phillips,
Shrewsbury Diocesan Archivist


**Appendix: The Papers of John McHugh**

SHRDA/J McH/1 Sermons and Retreat Talks

SHRDA/J McH/2 Ph L Dissertation (*De questione an S. Thomas Aquinas libertatem arbitrii humani cum natura omniperfecta conciliaverit*, 1949);
DD thesis (*The Exaltation of Christ in the Arian Controversy* 1954);

SHRDA/J McH/3 The Virtue of Faith.


SHRDA/J McH/5 The Biblical Institute in Rome (important letter from Ernest Vogt on schema *de fontibus revelationis* and Holy Office interference at Council) and teaching at Ushaw (1962)

SHRDA/J McH/6-8 Reviews and Correspondence about *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, including correspondence with Raymond Brown and Harald Reisenfeld (Uppsala) about history, dogma and exegesis; file relating to the French translation (3 files).

SHRDA/J McH/9-12 Papers, Correspondence and Minutes relating to Theology and Doctrine Commission of Bishops’ Conference and meeting with SCDF (4 files).

SHRDA/J McH/13-14 Papers and Correspondence relating to *Humanae Vitae* (1968ff), including correspondence with Butler, Dwyer and Beck. (2 files).


SHRDA/J McH/16-23 Liturgical Translation, ICEL, and related Correspondence: pre-1960 work and publications of the Vernacular Society of Great Britain (C R A Cunliffe); Compline & Other Psalms 1971-2 (translation); Varia Liturgica 1965-1971; ICEL Psalter 1978-9, 1983-5; *On Englishing the Liturgy* (1983), with responses; *Exsultet* (translation); Knox Prize Submission 1996; printed comments on ICEL’s work; papers by Ephrem Lash, and others, on translation; correspondence with ICEL and others.

SHRDA/J McH/30 ARCIC 1 (Feb-May 1992) & ARCIC 2 (the latter mainly printed material)

SHRDA/J McH/31 Papers on (In)dissolubility of Marriage.


SHRDA/J McH/33 The Situation of Catholics in England (English and German) Vallendar 1983


SHRDA/J McH/36 Ordination of Women in Anglican Communion (1990): Marginal Notes, Correspondence, and Newspaper cuttings.

SHRDA/J McH/37-38 Catechism of the Universal Church (provisional text with additional documents and observations (1990). (2 files)

SHRDA/J McH/39 ‘Neo-Triumphalism’: reflections on a petition to beatify Challoner


SHRDA/J McH/41 Lectures and Lecture Outlines: Jesus God & Man; Mary; Prayer; Church, etc; unfinished pieces and pieces in need of revision
John McHugh: Published Works


‘“Behold the Lamb of God”’, Adoremus, vol. 39, April 1957, pp. 36-43.


‘His Holiness Paul VI’, Shrewsbury Diocesan Yearbook, 1964, pp. 11-19


God Speaks to Us, CTS, no date.


‘Present and Future in the Life of the Community (1 Cor. 4.6-13 in the context of 1 Cor 4. 6-21)’, from Paolo a una Chiesa Divisa (1 Cor 1-4), Rome, 1980.


The Earliest Known Invocation of the Mother of God, Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1981.


(also printed privately with an appendix ‘The Exultet’)


‘Why this Marian Year?’, Priests and People, May 1988, pp. 121-124.

‘Mary’s Fiat as the Commencement of the New Covenant’, Marianum, Rome 1988, pp. 133-137.


‘In Him was Life’, in J. D. G. Dunn, Jews and Christians: The parting of the ways AD 70-135, J.C.B Mohr (Paul Seibeck) Tübingen, pp. 123-158.

Review ‘Praying Together: A revision of “Prayers we have in Common” (ICET 1975), in Priests and People, May 1990, pp. 204-205.


No Date


Review The Resurrection, New York, (Francis Xavier Durrwell), Catholic Biblical Quarterly, ****

Review Concordance to the Distinctive Greek Text of Codex Bezae, Grand Rapids, 1961, Catholic Biblical Quarterly, ****