

in memoriam

Fernand Bossier

On January 13th, 2006, Fernand Bossier, editor of the Latin series of *Corpus Christianorum*, died in Louvain at the age of 72. After struggling bravely for many years with polyarthrititis, in the end he succumbed to cancer.

In 1997 Fernand Bossier succeeded Dom Eligius Dekkers (1915-1998), who had founded *Corpus Christianorum* in 1949 and served as its editor for nearly half a century. Bossier became the head of the Academic Board that assumed the task of ensuring the future of the *Series Latina* and the *Continuatio Mediaevalis*.

Fernand Bossier was born in Bruges on October 4th, 1933. Growing up in that city renowned for its art and its place in Flemish history, where church bells mark the rhythm of the days, he early felt a strong inclination towards the humanities. His enthusiasm for history, architecture, geography, music and languages led him to explore the origins of Western culture.

From 1952 to 1962, he studied classical philology and philosophy, first as part of his novitiate in the Society of Jesus at Drongen, near Ghent, then at the Catholic University of Louvain (K.U. Leuven). In Drongen, his studies were supervised by the eminent Hellenist Émile de Strycker who instilled in him the rigorous discipline essential to philological analysis, and impressed upon him the importance of texts as the primary sources of our knowledge of ancient culture. When he arrived in Louvain he turned his attention to classical philosophy, specifically to Plato. Following the advice of Father de Strycker, Bossier laid the groundwork for his first dissertation by reading the entire corpus of Plato's works. This gave him an understanding of language and style that stood him in good stead for all his subsequent work. Bossier's dissertation on the Platonic concept of the soul as the principle of life and of physical movement was supervised by Gerard Verbeke, the professor of classical philosophy who had awakened his talent for *reductio ad essentiam*, both in the interpretation of texts and as an approach to philosophical problems. It was

Professor Verbeke who would then open the way for him to pursue a career in the transmission and editing of texts.

From 1966 to 1978, at the “De Wulf-Mansion Centre for Ancient and Medieval Philosophy” of the Institute of Philosophy in Louvain, Fernand Bossier developed his talents as a researcher. Here the focus of his work shifted from Plato to Aristotle, and from purely philosophical questions to the wider circle of the transmission of Greek works of philosophy and science to the medieval West. In 1975 he completed his doctoral thesis, a fundamental study of Latin translations of the works of Simplicius, a late classical commentator on Aristotle, with a special emphasis on his *In De caelo*. While carrying on his own research, he became an integral part of the *Aristoteles Latinus* project which, under the auspices of the International Union of Academies, is producing critical editions of all the medieval Latin translations of Aristotle. In 1973 when this great scholarly venture was transferred from Oxford to Louvain, Gerard Verbeke became its director. From 1973 to 1978, Fernand Bossier was the editor-in-chief, conducting a vast correspondence with contributors and verifying their work thoroughly, from the manuscript traditions of the texts through to the final minutiae of publication format.

His own research focused on the translations of Aristotle’s scientific works. He had undertaken the monumental job of editing the oldest Greco-Latin translation of the *Physics*. Together with Jozef Brams he patiently analysed the abundant manuscript tradition and unraveled the complex relations between the various recensions. Their edition appeared in print in 1990 as volume VII, 1 of the *Aristoteles Latinus*. In 2000 he published the first part of William of Moerbeke’s translation of the *History of Animals* with Pieter Beullens, and in 2004 the first volume of Moerbeke’s translation of Simplicius’s commentary on Aristotle’s *De caelo* with the collaboration of Christine Vande Veire and Guy Guldentops.

Bossier's analyses of the techniques used by twelfth and thirteenth-century translators as a way of establishing the relative chronology of undated translations and even the attribution of anonymous translations constitute another important contribution to our understanding of how the Latin middle ages acquired the knowledge and wisdom of Greek antiquity.

In 1978 Fernand Bossier succeeded Émile de Strycker as professor of Greek language and literature at the University of Antwerp, and held the position until his retirement in 1999. The careful attention to detail and delight in textual exegesis that Bossier brought to research carried over into his teaching. He felt it the duty of every scholar to pass his knowledge on to the next generation, and he was acutely aware that the culture of the ancient world was becoming ever more distant from our own. He knew that if he was to train a new generation of philologists capable of reading and understanding ancient texts, it would require more than factual knowledge on his part. Fortunately, he was amply endowed with both enthusiasm and humour, two qualities that never fail to catch the attention of the young student. Besides being an inspirational teacher, he was a sure and reliable guide to those who wrote dissertations under his direction—especially when the topic concerned the Dominican translator William of Moerbeke. In all his activities as professor, at Antwerp and at Louvain, he exemplified the adage of Saint Jerome: *nulla ars absque magistro discitur*. “Tradition et traduction”, the title of the collection of essays presented to him in 1999, on the occasion of his 65th birthday, aptly reflects the two main aspects of his teaching and research.

In 1995 Brepols Publishers and Dom Dekkers invited Bossier to accept the responsibility for ensuring the continuation of the Latin series of *Corpus Christianorum*, by establishing a team—the Academic Board—which he would oversee. Some twenty years previously he had materially contributed to the creation of the *Series Graeca* of *Corpus Christianorum*, developing contacts between the

Abbey of Steenbrugge, Maurice Geerard and the University of Louvain. In 1997 he began his first five-year term at the helm of the project. This new phase of his career reopened the other panel of the diptych that contained Bossier's interests in Western culture. He knew that he would have less time for his own research on the transmission of scientific thought, but he felt it was more important to guide a new generation in producing editions of works spanning the entire period from late antiquity—the *Series Latina*—through the middle ages—the *Continuatio Mediaevalis*. He brought to the work all his editing skills, his vast knowledge of the subjects, and his gift for dialogue with other scholars. He was supported in this endeavour both by the Editorial Board and the publishing managers.

What made Bossier so unique as the guiding light of the Latin series of *Corpus Christianorum* was his sense of teamwork. He enjoyed sharing his scholarly knowledge with others, convinced that truth and knowledge belong to everyone: *Quod uerum est, meum est*, or rather *Quod uerum est, omnium est*. He never hesitated to assume the most difficult editorial tasks, nor to engage in detailed discussions with the contributors in order to arrive at a solution that best suited the specific character and tradition of a text, and that would best present the results of its editor's research. No effort was too much for him. Even when he was much afflicted by polyarthritis he would undertake the journey from his home in Holsbeek near Louvain, where he lived with his wife Anny, to the editorial offices in Steenbrugge “in abbatia Sancti Petri”. He was glad that his work for *Corpus Christianorum* gave him the chance to return to the town of his birth, to savour again the linguistic nuances of its speech, and to visit with family.

In 2003, to mark its fiftieth anniversary, *Corpus Christianorum* published *Xenium natalicium*. At the end of the *Series Latina* section, Fernand Bossier made this promise to the contributors to the series: “For our part, we can guarantee that we will devote to their projects all the attention and care they deserve; that we will

not tarry to formulate, to the best of our ability, and to communicate our suggestions and comments with all the respect due to an editor; and we wish to assure all our collaborators that we will continue this dialogue with the firm intention of creating well-organised publications, characterised by excellent presentation and, above all, scientific rigour. May our collaboration on those terms contribute to the future progress of the *Series Latina – ad multos annos.*” (pp. 76-77)

When he wrote these words, despite declining health, he still hoped to complete his second term as editor (2002-2007). The diagnosis of cancer in May 2005 obliged him to modify this hope. To his close relatives and friends he expressed his sentiments through the words of Cardinal John Newman: “I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me.” Even up to the last weeks of his life he continued to advise his collaborators on several editorial projects, and listened to the details of new submissions with interest.

Those who knew him, who admired his intellectual fervor, his steadfastness in all that he undertook, and his exegetical acumen, they remember the twinkle in his eye when he discovered a new interpretation of an old text, and his warm, diplomatic touch in delicate situations. The Academic Board, the Editorial Board, the Publishing Managers and the Direction of Brepols Publishers mourn the loss of Fernand Bossier, a man well worth knowing.