

## THE EARLY PRINTED WORKS OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

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VERY device which facilitates the interchange of ideas necessarily exerts a deep, though often intangible, influence upon every department of human knowledge. The intellectual development of mankind, viewed in this light, falls into three great divisions. Primitive peoples received the accumulated wisdom of their ancestors by word of mouth, and transmitted it in the same manner to their children. But this method was subject to many limitations. The teacher could instruct only a relatively few; and the traditions thus conveyed, received a new coloring from every mind through which they passed. The next great step forward was the invention of writing. "Littera manet." The written word was handed down from generation to generation substantially unchanged; and the circle of its influence was greatly expanded. For thousands of years, no further improvement was made. Then, in the middle of the fifteenth century, the art of printing from moveable type was discovered, and the world entered upon the third stage of its intellectual development.

To the men of the fifteenth century, the art of printing was a never-failing source of wonderment. One contemporary speaks of it as an art "than which there hath never been in the world any art more holy or divine." Another, calls printed books, "heralds of the Gospel, preachers of the truth and of knowledge." We, today, have become so accustomed to the printed book, that we scarcely realize its real significance in our intellectual life. The fact remains, however, that printing has profoundly affected every branch of science, not excepting theology. For example, it has placed at the command of every modern theologian, all the treasures of the past in the field of scripture, of patrology, of history and of allied subjects.

These considerations seem sufficient to justify a study of the early printed editions of St. Thomas, apart from the intrinsic interest of the subject itself. There seems to be little doubt that printing tended to enhance the popularity which the theology and philosophy of St. Thomas had previously enjoyed. Shortly

after many of the writings of the Angelic Doctor had been printed the era of the great Thomistic commentators began, the era of Cajetan, Medina, Bannez, Suarez, Silvius and many others. This Thomistic revival was largely due to the religious controversies of the sixteenth century, but it is highly probable that the art of printing was an important, contributory factor.

However, it is beyond our purpose to enter into such an involved question as the nature and extent of the influence which printing may have exerted on the study of St. Thomas. We shall be content to investigate the early printed editions of his works from the viewpoint of a bibliophile; to learn a little about the presses which produced them, about their date and place of publication, about their appearance, their value, and their present repositories.

The primitive press seems crude and inefficient compared with the huge and intricate mechanism of a modern printing plant. It survived, however, substantially unchanged until the beginning of the last century. John Gutenberg, the inventor of printing, would have had little difficulty in operating the press which Benjamin Franklin used. Old wood cuts show the early press to have consisted of "a stout framework of wood posts, firmly braced against the ceiling, a bedplate of stone as a rest for the form of type which could be exposed to receive ink and then be slid upon ways under the platen or pressing surface. Impression was given by a large screw of wood over this platen, and this screw was moved by a long bar of wood and iron." At first, only half a page could be printed at a time. As the capacity of a press was only about three hundred sheets a day, a printer usually had from four to six presses working on the same book. The average edition of a work varied from between 275 to 400 copies. All books thus printed before 1500, are known today as "incunabula."

Before 1501 there were printing-presses set up in 237 places in Europe. There were twenty-one printers in Nuremberg alone, while over a hundred German printing-presses had been established in Italy before the close of the fifteenth century. The religious orders soon became interested, and in a short time many monasteries and convents possessed their own presses. One of the most famous of these monastic printing establishments was that owned by the Brothers of the Common Life at

Brussels. The Carthusians, Benedictines, Minorites and Augustinians also founded presses in various houses of their orders. The Friars Preachers also took up the new invention. We learn "that between 1476 and 1483, in the Dominican convent of Florence, two brothers, Domenico da Pistoja and Pietro da Pisa were busy producing printed books in great quantity."<sup>1</sup>

So great was the activity of these presses, that nearly twenty thousand, not volumes, but separate editions, appeared during the half-century from 1450 to 1500. Works of St. Thomas alone numbered over two hundred editions.<sup>2</sup> It seems fairly well established, that the very first work of St. Thomas to be printed, was the "Summa de Articulis Fidei et Ecclesiae Sacramentis," which appeared about 1460. This book lacks the name of the printer, but it is generally considered to be the work of the inventor of printing, John Gutenberg. The second work of the Angelic Doctor to find its way into print was the "Secunda Secundae" of the "Summa." This volume was published at Strassburg by John Mentelin about 1466. The following year a new edition was brought out by Schoeffer who had taken over the press of Gutenberg at Mainz. In 1469, Schoeffer compiled the first catalog of printed books, which lists the "Secunda Secundae" along with some other works.

The earliest dated edition of the "Prima Pars" of the "Summa" appears to be that produced by Ulrich Zell at Cologne in 1473. The "Prima-Secundae" made its initial appearance from the press of Schoeffer at Mainz in 1471. The "Secunda-Secundae" had been published five years earlier, as we have already mentioned. The "Tertia Pars" of the "Summa" first appeared in type in 1473. However, some time was to elapse before a single publisher should attempt to bring out a printed copy of the entire Summa. It was an enterprise which called for a rather large investment and involved a considerable risk, but was finally undertaken by Michael Wensler, a printer of Basel. He produced the work complete in four large tomes which are dated 1488.

Besides the "Summa," practically every important work of St. Thomas had found its way into print before the beginning of the sixteenth century, that is, within the first fifty years after the invention of printing. Space will permit of the mention of only a few here. German printers who had established a press at Venice, produced in 1473, the first copy of the "Summa Contra

Gentiles," the date of which cannot be determined with any certainty. The "Catena Aurea," probably the first work of St. Thomas to be published in Rome, was likewise the work of Germans who had set up a shop in the Eternal City. This volume is dated 1470. A collection of the minor treatises of the Angelic Doctor, the "Summa Oposculorum," first appeared in 1480. Another edition of the same work, made at Venice in 1498, is preserved in the library of the Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D. C. Of course, the catalogs of "incunabula" list many editions of the other great Scholastic Doctors, such as Albert the Great and St. Bonaventure.<sup>3</sup> The early editions of the works of Aristotle are also very numerous.

Among the works printed between 1460 and 1500 under the name of the Angelic Doctor are a number of short treatises unknown before they appeared in their printed form. At least, but few of them have come down to us in manuscript, and their titles are not given in the ancient catalogs of the writings of St. Thomas. For this reason, critics have declared them spurious. Père Mandonnet lists sixty-six of these apocryphal or pseudo-Thomistic writings, in his book on the Authentic Writings of St. Thomas.<sup>4</sup> A few of these have been traced to other authors. A very few others have been shown to be genuine, but it is possible that further research may show many more to be genuinely Thomistic. That certain minor treatises of the Saint could have escaped notice for several centuries, is not surprising. It is related in his biographies, that he often composed small works at the monasteries where he stayed in the course of his travels from one university to another, and left them behind as a souvenir of his visit. In the course of time, such works might have been forgotten until the popular demand for the writings of the Angelic Doctor, in the early days of printing, caused them to be sought out and given to the press. Among the most popular of the pseudo-Thomistic writings were the "Commentarium Super Boetium de Consolatione Philosophiae, De Arte Praedicandi," which went through no less than twelve editions, "De Modo Confitendi," and "De Humanitate Christi."

During the fifteenth century, Germany led in the production of the printed works of St. Thomas, with Italy a close second. France, which had been one of the principal scenes of the activity

of the great Doctor, had published only a very few of his writings before 1500, while England seems to have printed none at all during the same period. To be more specific, over twenty-five separate editions of St. Thomas came off the presses of Cologne during the years between 1460 and 1500. Perhaps as many more were produced at Venice, while Rome, Basel, and many German cities also have a goodly number of editions to their credit.

Studying the early output of books as a whole, it is interesting to note how its character varied in the different countries. In Germany, the popular taste inclined towards works of a theological and religious nature. Italy produced many printed volumes of a similar kind, but there, the influence of the Renaissance is seen clearly reflected in the extraordinary demand for editions of the ancient Greek and Roman classics.

However, one searches the catalogs of "incunabula" in vain for mention of an edition of the "Opera Omnia" of St. Thomas. The undertaking was too colossal for the early printers. The art of printing had been practiced for over a century before the collection and publication of the complete works of the Angelic Doctor was begun by command of the great Dominican Pope, St. Pius V. He entrusted the task to two Dominicans, Vinzenz Giustiniani and Thomas Manriquez. The results of their labors were seventeen folio volumes and an index volume which were printed at Rome in 1570-1571. This is the famous "Piana" or "Roman" edition. Including the still incomplete Leonine edition, the "Opera Omnia" has since been reprinted seven times. The second edition appeared at Venice in 1593-94, the third at Antwerp in 1612, the fourth and seventh at Paris, one in 1640, the other in 1852-72; the fifth, that of De Rubeis appeared in 1745-88, the sixth, at Parma in 1852-72. The latest edition, that begun by order of Pope Leo XIII in 1882, is still far from completion.

Let us turn from a general consideration of the early printed works of St. Thomas and examine one of these interesting volumes closely. It may seem rather odd and primitive to us in its binding of parchment or pig-skin stretched over thin wood boards. The first thing we notice upon opening the book is the absence of a title-page. In place of it is the colophon, a short paragraph at the end of the book, which gives the name of the work, its author, its printer, and the date and place of publication.

There is no index, of course, for the pages of the earlier books were not numbered. The text, we see, is printed in two columns with wide margins around three sides of the page. The type is black-letter Gothic, copied from the characters in which the manuscripts of the period were written. It was a great favorite with the pioneer printers because its heavy, bold-faced surface made it easy to cast, easy to ink and gave it better wearing qualities than the Roman type which was introduced later. However, shortly after 1500, the Gothic was everywhere supplanted by the more legible Roman letters, except in Germany where the Gothic has survived in a modified form to our own day.

A modern student would experience some difficulty in reading a fifteenth century copy of the "Summa." He would find at least two or three words in every line abbreviated in a strange and unintelligible fashion. The first printers, however, did not originate this practice; they were simply following the example set by the copyists of manuscripts who had invented an elaborate system of abbreviations to save time in their work. They represented the syllable "con" by "c" reversed; "per" by "p" with a horizontal line drawn through its stem; and they substituted a character resembling the figure "7" for the conjunction "et." These are only a few specimens; anything like a complete list would make a book. In fact, dictionaries of these abbreviations have been compiled, but even with this help, a reader often finds himself puzzled by these cryptic symbols employed in early typography.

A complete set of the "Summa" represented a considerable investment in the days when printing was still a novelty, but even at that, the printed books were far less expensive than those written by hand. A certain bishop wrote to Pope Paul II, in 1468:

Is it not a great glory for your Holiness that volumes which formerly could scarcely be bought for a hundred ducats at present may be had for twenty gold pieces or less, and are no longer full of errors as they used to be? and that books which the reader formerly bought with difficulty for twenty ducats can now be got for four or less?<sup>3</sup>

The writer had found no reference to the price of a volume of the "Summa." However, a Bible could be purchased in Rome at the end of the fifteenth century for ten ducats. We may suppose that a folio volume of the "Summa" brought about the same

price. A ducat of that period was almost the equivalent of our \$2.50 gold piece, so that a complete set of the "Summa," consisting of four volumes worth ten ducats each, would cost in the neighborhood of a hundred dollars. However, Cardinal Gasquet, the English historian, has estimated that the purchasing power of money then was ten times greater than it is now, so that the actual cost of the "Summa" in the fifteenth century, if expressed in present-day values, would be almost a thousand dollars. In recent sales of rare books, some of these same volumes of St. Thomas have sold for sums ranging from \$10 to \$600, depending on the date of publication and the rarity of the work.

Anything like a complete collection of the early printed works of St. Thomas can be seen only in the great European libraries like the British Museum in London or the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. However, a fair number of copies exist in the United States, 229 by actual count. This is the figure furnished by "A Census of Fifteenth Century Books Owned in America," compiled by a committee of the Bibliographical Society of America in 1919. Complete information about every known copy of the "incunabula" of St. Thomas, owned in the United States, is furnished by this valuable report, including a list of their titles and of the libraries where they may be found. Brown University, it might be interesting to note, possesses a copy of Gutenberg's edition of "De Articulis Fidei," the first work of St. Thomas to be printed, while at Yale may be seen a copy of the first complete edition of the "Summa" to appear in type. The Library of Congress, Cornell, Oberlin as well as many other colleges and public libraries also own one or more copies of the "incunabula" editions of the Angelic Doctor.

A fifteenth century copy of the "Summa" may arouse in us only a passing interest if viewed merely as a specimen of the early printers' art. It takes on a new appeal, however, when we think of the associations which cluster around it, for it was contemporary with one of the most stirring epochs in the history of the Church. It may be said, in fact, to have helped to make that history. It trained the great churchmen who opposed Luther's novelties, participated in the deliberations of Trent and furnished the weapons which were used in the counter-reformation. These faded, mouldy old volumes we have been discussing

claim our interest and our veneration as Catholics, both for their service in the past and for their importance in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Casartelli, L. D., "Sketches in History, New York, 1906. P. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Michelitsch, Prof. A., "Thomasschriften," Graz, 1913. Pp. 200-232.

<sup>3</sup> Hain, Ludwig, "Reportorium bibliographicum ad annum MD." Stuttg., 1826-38. Vol. 1. Peddie, R. A., "Conspectus incunabulorum," London, 1910-14. Vol. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Mandonnet, O. P., Pierre, "Des Ecrits Authentiques de S. Thomas D'Aquin," pp. 108-110.

<sup>5</sup> Casartelli, Op. Cit. P. 93.

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## *To a Virgin of Israel*

*By BRO. CELESTINE ROONEY, O. P.*

To a Virgin of Israel,  
Kneeling in sweet, contemplative prayer,  
An Angel of God comes, stealing thru  
The mists of the morning air;  
Comes with a message from Heaven,  
That softly falls on the ears  
Of the Spotless, Immaculate Lily,  
Humility's flower—who hears  
That she is to mother the Saviour  
Expected since Adam's fall,  
That she, of all creatures the purest,  
Shall bear the Redeemer of all.