

ST. THOMAS AND PROGRESS

BRO. CYRIL DORE, O. P.



HERE is in the philosophy of St. Thomas a very sound theory of progress. It is a theory of both individual and social progress. The principles of St. Thomas here admit of wide application as it is not alone a question of the progress of science but of civilization and the realm of social action. St. Thomas was convinced of the human mind's power for truth and in a number of passages, especially in his commentaries on Aristotle, he has expressed some very noteworthy thoughts on the development and progress of science and of civilization. In his *Opusculum* "In Boethium de Trinitate," in which he fully developed his teaching on science and method, St. Thomas has deeply grasped and presented the intrinsic connection between philosophy and the other profane sciences; and it is quite in keeping with his thought to hold that the advance of the special sciences exerts an influence also on the development and rounding out of philosophic thought, without detriment to the eternally valid principles and basic convictions of the "*philosophia perennis*."¹

The principles of Thomistic philosophy can be regarded as the postulates of the particular sciences with greater reason than can those of modern idealistic and positivistic philosophy which either explains away the specific significance of the individual sciences, or, conversely, allows itself to be absorbed by them. In the philosophy of St. Thomas we have a system that is based on the conviction of a Perfect God, the Supreme Ruler of the Universe and the Last End of all creation. In so far as man ordains his actions to, and conforms his life with, the immutable laws of God, in so far as man strives day by day to overcome his lower nature and to advance toward his ultimate perfection, union with God, and in so far as he approximates his Last End, man may be said to be making progress. Because God is distinct from the world and perfect, it does not follow that there is no room for perfection in the universe.² This progress towards perfection is in us and not in God. If progress were

¹ J. S. Zyburá, *Present Day Thinkers and the New Scholasticism* (St. Louis, 1926), p. 156.

² F. J. Sheen, *God and Intelligence* (New York, 1925), p. 267.

applied to God it would defeat its own purpose because God is perfect and He cannot be moving from perfection to perfection. The universe and the souls in it can only progress on the condition that they have a Cause and an Ultimate of progress. Without the first they never would have begun to progress; without the second, they never would try to progress. In other words, God as the Cause and the Ultimate End, the Alpha and Omega of all things, is the one forceful condition of all true progress.

In all created things it is observed that two things concur for the perfection of an inferior nature; the first is proper to its own motion; the other is proper to a motion of a nature which is superior to it.³ The added perfection of the mineral world is found in its use for the plant. The added perfection of the plant is found in its purpose for the animal; while the animal is subordinated to the perfection of man. Man is the natural perfection of creation and all things that are inferior to him exist on account of him. "*Bonitas rei non solum in esse suo consistit, sed in omnibus aliis quae ad suam perfectionem requiruntur.*"⁴

In God's plan of the universe there are three great orders. The first is the order of nature which receives its perfection from the motion of a higher intellectual nature. In the case of man, this is the gift of supernatural participation in the Divine Goodness. The second is the order of grace. Although nature does not absolutely need grace, yet once it receives that participation in the Divine Nature, which is grace, it exceeds its own limitations. The order of grace has its ultimate perfection in the order of glory, which is the beatific vision of God. In this last order, man finds the goal of his aspirations and his perfect happiness. Here is a philosophy of progressive movement that gives intelligibility and intelligence to progress. It is a philosophy of perfectibility for in it we see the tendency of all things toward their final end which is God.

It is interesting to observe how St. Thomas succeeded in reconciling the constant and the variable in his theory of progress, and in what degree it admits of the possibility of change for the better. First of all, essences are immutable and by them the natural species are fixed. They are imitations of the essence of God, and the degree of imitability does not change. From this it follows that what constitutes man, his *quiddity* as it was termed, is everywhere the same. One is either a man or not a man. In like manner the first principles

³ *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 2, a. 3.

⁴ *Contra Gentes*, III, cap. 30.

of reason—the judgments which express the fundamental relations of all being, the prerequisites of whatever reality may come into actual existence,—are stable and permanent. Their necessity and their universality are absolute. St. Thomas referred to these principles as “*per se notae*,” i. e., knowable of themselves; for by merely understanding the subject and the predicate one can grasp the absolute necessity of all the relation which unites them, independently of all experience. The first principles of mathematics, in a lesser degree, express the same invariable relations. These relations are constant and admit of no progressive development.

Nor is it otherwise when we consider the principles of the moral and social order. That good must be done and wrong avoided, that the state is for the good of the individuals, are principles which are necessary and fixed. However, the necessity of these moral and social principles is different from that of the principles of reason. These moral principles imply a condition; namely, the existence of humanity in its actual state—the fact of creation. Hence, such principles are not knowable by a mere analysis and comparison of their subject and predicate, “*per se notae*”; they manifestly rest on observation and on experience. These principles also are constant and are termed “*per aliud notae*.”

On the other hand, St. Thomas took into consideration the problem of change. In his doctrine of potency and act, St. Thomas gives us a solution of this problem. He took it from Aristotle and gave it a breadth and extension unknown to the Greek philosopher. Act or actuality may be described as any present sum-total of perfection. Potency or potentiality is the aptitude to achieve that perfection. Potentiality is imperfection and non-being; but it is not mere nothing because non-being considered in an already existing subject is endowed with the germ of future actualization. The coupling of actuality and potentiality penetrates the inmost depths of reality and explains all the great conceptions of scholastic metaphysics. Especially does it explain the doctrine of matter and form; and it is the philosophical foundation of an explanation of progress.

An answer to the problem of human progress is found in the psychology of St. Thomas. For, as St. Thomas observes, human nature is the same in all men and whatever is essential to it is stable and uniform. The faculties, however, differ in power and in flexibility.⁵ The intelligence and the will are energetic in a greater or less degree; they are susceptible of being perfected and this perfec-

⁵ *De Anima*, III, 4.

tion is itself unlimited. The repetition of activities engenders permanent dispositions, which intensify effort. So it is evident that there is room in this theory for progress in science. St. Thomas applies this to the geocentric hypothesis of which he sees the possible supplanting.⁶

In the domain of morals and social justice, the place accorded change is much more pertinent and widespread. The concern here is not with the increase of judgments on morals in the individual and society. It is a case of real transformation and adaptation. The underlying reason is found in human liberty. This involves the pre-eminence of the intellect, for reason has to weigh the value of the circumstances that envelop a concrete and practical application of the moral law. The more numerous these circumstances become, the greater is the elasticity of the law. The matter is well and clearly put by St. Thomas, as follows: "As to the proper conclusions of the practical reason, neither is the truth or rectitude the same for all, nor, where it is same, is it equally known by all. Thus it is right and true for all to act according to reason: and from this principle it follows as a proper conclusion, that goods entrusted to another should be restored to their owner. Now this is true for the majority of cases: but it may happen in a particular case that it would be injurious, and therefore unreasonable, to restore goods held in trust; for instance if they are claimed for the purpose of fighting against one's country. And this principle will be found to fail the more, according as we descend further into détail, e. g., if one were to say that goods held in trust should be restored with such and such a guarantee, or in such and such a way; because the greater the number of conditions added, the greater the number of ways in which the principle may fail, so that it be not right to restore or not to restore."⁷ However, it is well to remember that in spite of all else, the fundamental inclination towards good abides in the depths of human conscience. It can be darkened, but it cannot be completely extinguished. Even in the worst of men, human nature remains good and retains the indelible imprint of the eternal law. No matter how low man may fall, he is capable of regeneration and advancement. No matter how perfect he may consider himself, there is always room for improvement. Hence, progress in the interpretation of moral laws is consonant with social changes.

As for social truths and social laws, these are even more sub-

⁶ *De Coelo*, II, 17.

⁷ *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 94, a. 4.

ject to the conditions of time, occupation and person, than the laws of the moral individual. Hence, because of the variability of social conditions, progress in human legislation is possible. In the following passage, St. Thomas shows that law as well as science is capable of progress: "Thus there may be two causes for the just change of human law: one on the part of reason; the other on the part of man whose acts are regulated by law. The cause on the part of reason is that it seems natural to human reason to advance gradually from the imperfect to the perfect. Hence, in speculative sciences, we see that the teaching of the early philosophers was imperfect, and that it was afterwards perfected by those who succeeded them. So also in practical matters: for those who first endeavored to discover something useful for the human community, not being able by themselves to take everything into consideration, set up certain institutions which were deficient in many ways; and these were changed by subsequent lawgivers who made institutions that might prove less deficient in respect to the commonweal. On the part of man whose acts are regulated by law, the law can be changed on account of the changed condition of man, to whom different things are expedient according to the difference of his condition."⁸

Thus the Thomistic theory opens the way for progress in human legislation. And since legislation is an attribute of sovereignty, it opens the way likewise for progress in the government of states. But St. Thomas adds this counsel of wisdom: human law should not be changed except for very good reasons, because every change in law weakens the majesty of legislative power.

On the basis of the principles found in St. Thomas, it is, therefore, compulsory to expect and to work for progress in social life. For whatever the government may be, it must always look towards betterment, "*ut sit de promotione sollicitus.*" It must put at the disposal of individuals the means of perfecting their personality in all phases of social action. It must assure all that concerns the development of the physical powers of man, as well as of the intelligence and of the moral will. It must also better the conditions of production and of work. A like mission belongs to the social authority, whatever form this authority may assume. Hence, with the wise and definite distinction of St. Thomas ever in mind, one must determine in varying circumstances just what form of government is most propitious to the realization of its social mission.

⁸ *ibid.* q. 97, a. 1.

Like the individual and the state, human civilization in its entirety is capable of progress. This is because of the fact that civilization is the result of human activities which are always perfectible. Education, religion, heredity, the influence of authority can all act on the development of the artistic faculties, of scientific achievement and of custom.⁹

Human progress carried out to its logical conclusion not only includes the temporal welfare of man but also the perfection of the soul. The way is prepared for transcendental action of a still higher order that extends to a term that is absolutely final. For the ultimate perfection to which anything can attain is this, that it be united with its principle. Hence, God is most certainly the beginning and the ultimate objective of all human progress. These principles are found throughout the writings of St. Thomas and they were used by him to solve the problem of progress.

In the philosophy of St. Thomas we find an ideal and objective worthy of man's highest aspirations and compatible with his noblest progressive achievements. In it the present life is not the be-all and end-all of human existence; on the contrary, the present life is looked upon as a journey towards God, man's Last End and Perfect Happiness, and so lived that he may constantly prepare for life with God. The goods of this life are to be used in a rational way, not as containing perfect happiness in themselves, but as means to man's Ultimate End, God, the One Supreme Object towards which all true progress tends. For, final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing other than the vision of the Divine Essence. It is the happiness of the highest of man's faculties and completely satisfies our noblest desires. Progress, considered under the principle of finality and interpreted by the Aristotelian distinction of potentiality and actuality, completes any theory of social philosophy. Therefore, we maintain that St. Thomas deserves a hearing in modern social science and that human society, baptized in the golden wisdom of Aquinas, will more closely approximate the City of God.

⁹ Maurice DeWulf, *Philosophy and Civilization* (Princeton, 1924), pp. 97-101.