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THE CHARACTER OF ST. THOMAS REVEALED IN HIS WRITINGS

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SINCE his death in 1274 scholars have honored the Angelic Scholastic, but perhaps many have failed to realize the vast range of his writings. The works of St. Thomas touch upon and contribute to practically every field of thought. The theological, philosophical, apologetical, moral, social, political and canonical spheres have felt the beneficent influence of his gigantic mind. Not only extensive in range, but enormous in mass are the writings of this preëminent thinker of the Middle Ages. The Old Roman edition of the *Opera Omnia* contains eighteen volumes, the Parma edition, twenty-five, and the Vives, thirty-five volumes. These editions, however, as well as other compilations of the same nature, contain many works of doubtful authenticity. The various lists of the authentic writings of St. Thomas differ widely, extending from the thirty-two reported by William of Tocco to the ninety named by Vallolid, an eminent Spanish Dominican of the fifteenth century.

The divergence in the catalogues may be attributed to at least two factors, the mode of life followed by the Saint, and the literary condition of his time. As to Thomas, it will be recalled that he traveled extensively. From the year 1252 when he set out with Blessed Albert for Cologne, until 1274 when God called him to contemplate in beatific vision what he had so sublimely taught upon earth, Aquinas was a frequent traveler upon the highways of Europe. During these years we find him at Cologne, Paris, Rome, with the Papal Courts of Urban and Clement at Viterbo, Fondi, Orvieto and Perugia. Few indeed were the cities he did not visit. Even London

was honored by his presence, and when death came, it found him, a traveler, on the road which leads from Naples to Lyons. Now Thomas wrote whenever and wherever he stopped. It is said that he frequently penned a treatise in payment for his board. Moreover, it is certain that the Saint carried on an extensive correspondence. Hence, we can readily see that his writings were spread over a vast territory and the gradual finding of the manuscripts accounts for the difference in the number of works reported as authentic.

The second factor which occasioned the variations in the lists of St. Thomas' authentic writings, was the literary condition of the thirteenth century. Anonymous manuscripts were not uncommon. Religious, especially, perhaps out of humility, often omitted to append their names to their writings. Frequently the books were not given a title and were known by the opening or closing words of the manuscript, a custom which still obtains in papal encyclicals. Plagiarism was frequently practiced and the copyists were not above attributing to themselves the exemplars from which they worked. St. Thomas was a popular lecturer and there was a demand for his writings, a fact which would attract the ambitious literary pirates of his day. Finally, many spurious works attributed to Aquinas are due to the authors having published them as being "According to the mind of St. Thomas." As time passed the *secundum mentem* was omitted and the works accepted as the personal writings of Thomas. The opusculum *De Pulchro* may be cited as an example of this.

The correct determination of the Angelical's authentic works is important not only because a complete list of his literary production is desirable, but also because in some of the writings of doubtful authenticity there is a development of doctrine not found in certain of the authentic works. Moreover the disputed treatises are being used and their contents proposed as the thought of Saint Thomas.

But even though only the absolutely authentic works of Aquinas be accepted, yet does he justly merit the high praise bestowed upon him for his vast legacy to the generations of thinkers who followed him. Few indeed are the problems of our own enlightened century which are not at least in principle solved by Thomas Aquinas. As a prominent Thomist remarked a short time ago, "the answer to your difficulty may be hidden away in some obscure 'responsio ad tertium,' but search for it and your efforts will be rewarded." During the later years of his all too brief life, he was practically a slave to the demands of all. The universities clamored for his services, popes and kings insisted upon his presence at their courts, his own Order needed him.

His literary output is consequently all the more remarkable, although the number of works he left incomplete bears mute testimony that even his many-faceted mind was not equal to the task.

When we behold the vast literary edifice reared by the Angelic Doctor the thought which naturally arises in our minds, is, what sort of a man was this master thinker of the Middle Ages. We are told that he was the most scholarly of saints and the most saintly of scholars. The testimony of those who knew him bears witness to the assertion. But we need not have recourse to the dead pages of history to know Thomas, for we may find him still living in the writings he has given us. Though he lived centuries ago, the spirit of Aquinas animates every page he has written and to his works must we go if we would truly know him. Father Lacordaire has written of Thomas: "Shall I attempt to describe this man and his work? As well might I attempt to give a perfect idea of the pyramids by telling their height and breadth. If you wish to know the pyramids be not content with listening to a description; cross the seas; go to the land where so many conquerors have left their footprints; go into the sandy deserts, and there behold standing before you something solemn, something grand, something calm, immutable and profoundly simple—the pyramids!"

If you go to the literary pyramid of Aquinas you will find there many admirable qualities of the man, and not the least of these characteristics is that which has gained for him the title "Doctor Veritatis," Doctor of Truth. Every religious institute has a certain spirit, peculiar to itself, which gives it a determined place in the Church and which differentiates it from all other religious families. The spirit of the Dominican Order finds expression in its motto, "Veritas," Truth! To quote Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange in *La Spiritualité Dominicaine*: "Truth immutable, infinitely superior to the fluctuations of human opinion . . . the divine Truth of the Faith which the Friars preacher have defended at the peril of their lives against the onslaught of heresy . . . absolute veracity, hatred of untruth in all its forms."¹ If love of truth be a Dominican characteristic, certainly Thomas was a Dominican of Dominicans. His heritage was his inspiration and love of truth is written large across the pages of the *Opera Omnia*.

In his three apologetical works, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the *De Rationibus Fidei* and the *Contra Errores Graecorum*, his devotion to truth is quite naturally particularly evident. He tells us it is his

¹ p. 51.

intention to "manifest the truth which the Catholic faith professes," to show how, from the writings of the Greek Fathers "the truth of Catholic Faith may be taught and defended." In these works as in many others, for example, the opuscula *De Articulis Fidei et Sacramentis Ecclesiae*, *Expositio super Symbolum Apostolorum* and *Catena Aurea*, St. Thomas is not content with a mere exposition of his own doctrine but whenever the occasion presents itself, makes a positive attack upon contrary heretical opinions.

Unlike many of our Cartesian minded contemporaries, Aquinas tells us that "it is necessary for the philosopher to heed the opinions and doubts of different authors in the formation of a more definitive judgment."² Yet he warns us in his Commentary on Aristotle's *De Coelo et Mundo*: "The study of philosophy is not to find out what men have thought but to discover what is the truth."³ And again in the Commentary *In XII Metaph.*: "In accepting or rejecting opinions, a man must not be influenced by love or hatred of him who proffers the opinions but only by the certainty of the truth."⁴

These texts suggest and interpret the relation which existed between the Christian Scholastic and his Pagan Master. The Angelic Doctor counsels us to be "grateful to all who have helped us to secure so great a good as the knowledge of truth."⁵ That he himself was grateful to Aristotle, history bears abundant witness. He among others was bitterly attacked for his adherence to the Stagyrte, whose doctrines, garbed in the dress of error by the Jewish and Oriental commentators, were contrary in many instances to the truths of faith. But Thomas discerned the true doctrine through the maze of textual corruption and risked much to defend this truth and the man who had given it to him. He was indeed, grateful, but on the other hand, he did not forget that "an appeal to any merely human authority is the feeblest of all arguments."⁶ And he tells us explicitly in the tract *De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averroistas*, where he disputes with the European Averroists concerning the meaning of Aristotle's words, that after all it is not what the Philosopher taught, that we must seek but rather what the truth of the matter is. In other words, if Thomas is the "Christian Aristotle" it is because and only because he was convinced that the Stagyrte taught the truth, and being assured of this, followed his teachings. Thus, in the Commentary *In*

² *Comm. In III Metaph.* lect. I.

³ Bk. 1, cap. xxii.

⁴ Lect. 9.

⁵ *Comm. In II Metaph.* lect. I.

⁶ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. I, a. 8 ad 2.

I De Anima, he writes: "We must give ear to the opinions of the ancients no matter who it is that made the statements. There is a twofold benefit in this. We thereby acquire for our own use whatever was correctly said by them and we avoid that in which they erred."⁷ Apropos of this, we should note Aquinas' discrimination in the Greek text he used when commenting on the works of Aristotle. The texts used by his predecessors and contemporaries were not direct translations but had come through the long line of Greek to Persian, to Syrian, to Arabic, to Hebrew, to Latin translations. The result was an admixture of truth, error, interpolation and private opinion. Such a vitiated text did not satisfy the Doctor of Truth and he engaged his religious confrère, William of Moerbeke to make a direct translation from the original Greek, not indeed, merely to discover what Aristotle had taught but to learn the truth of things.

What has been said of Aristotle, also applies to St. Thomas' attitude towards the Fathers. The Angelic Doctor knew them well and his works are generously interspersed with quotations from their writings. In the *Summa Theologica* alone he cites fifty-two Fathers and Doctors of the Church. Yet, Thomas was ever the Doctor of Truth and did not hesitate to depart from the Fathers when he thought them to be in error. And in matters of faith he counsels us "to abide by the authority of the Church rather than by that of an Augustine or a Jerome or of any doctor whatever."⁸ It should be noted however that even when differing from the Fathers he never fails to manifest towards them that reverence which is their due.

Hence we see that the motto of his Order was not for Thomas an empty, meaningless title. Love of truth motivated his every action. Whether he preached or taught, wrote or studied it was always in the interest of truth—either to acquire it, or having acquired it, to impart it to others. The intellectual or social status of those who solicited his aid, mattered not at all. He wrote for popes, kings and masters, but he did not hesitate to solve the difficulties of a common soldier also, as is seen in his monograph *De Occultis Operationibus Naturae*. In the introduction to his Commentary on *Perihermeneias* he states that he is writing the work as a reward for the interest his correspondent had manifested in the pursuit of knowledge, and this, he adds, despite "the many cares of my occupations." Likewise in *De Sortibus* he very frankly informs his correspondent that he has interrupted his vacation to answer the difficulties proposed. In the

⁷ Lect. 2.

⁸ *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 10 a. 12 c.

Quodlibetales many of the questions given to Thomas for solution are in themselves trivial, almost absurd.⁹ Yet, for him they represented the desire of someone for truth, and for the Doctor of Truth that was sufficient.

Another indication of Aquinas' love of truth is found in what we might term his literary honesty. In his *De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averroistas*, although he is most anxious to prove that the Averroistic commentators have distorted the truth in Aristotle, he is honest enough to say that he has not seen the particular document under discussion in his own language and consequently advances his decision as a merely probable opinion. As Dr. Kennedy observes, Thomas "does not hesitate at times to say plainly: this is something about which we know nothing, differing in this from many of his time and of our times who foolishly imagine it is unphilosophical to say: I don't know."¹⁰ Dr. Grabmann writes in the same strain: "Everywhere Thomas walks the narrow path of truth. . . . Everywhere he separates real from apparent knowledge, the certain from the probable, definite conclusions from hypotheses."¹¹

Still another manifestation of honesty is seen in Aquinas' retraction of former statements. It is refreshing to find admission of error by one who, in intellectual genius, towered so mightily over his associates. "Time is, so to say, a discoverer and kind cooperator."¹² Thus, for example, the doctrine which he taught on the causality of the sacraments in the Commentary *In IV Libros Sent.*, is changed in the more mature work of the *Summa Theologica*. The same is true of his doctrine on venial sin in relation to the reception of the Holy Eucharist.

One who possesses literary honesty does not avoid the difficulties which might weaken the position he is endeavoring to defend. Thomas not only did not avoid difficulties, he sought them. Witness the *Summa Theologica*, the *Catena Aurea*, the *Expositio super Symbolum Apostolorum* and so many other works where he proposes objections actually advanced or which might be leveled against the thesis he is defending or the doctrine he is explaining. He not only answers the difficulties but uses the very objections to clarify the matter he is discussing. His attitude is brought out very well in the last chapter of *De Perfectione Vitae Spiritualis*: "It will be most pleasing to me if someone will answer what I have said. For, there

⁹ Cavanagh, O. P., *Life of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London) p. 205.

¹⁰ *Specimen Pages from the Summa*, p. 14.

¹¹ *Thomas Aquinas, His Personality and Thought*, p. 35.

¹² *Comm. In I Eth.*, lect. 2.

is no more satisfactory way of teaching truth and of refuting error, than by discussion.”

In reading of the disputes in which St. Thomas was involved we marvel at the patience and charity he manifested even in the face of the arrogant and aggressive manner so frequently assumed by his opponents. His own attitude is summed up in his Commentary *In I Cor.*: “Speech which is lacking in charity is fittingly compared to the sound given out by a lifeless thing such as brass or a cymbal. The sound which these things give forth is clear but lifeless. So too, the speech of a man who lacks charity has no life in it, however clever it may be, for it in no way helps us to merit eternal life.”¹³ But there was one thing which did move the Angelic Doctor to speak sharply against his opponents and that was, deceit, conscious error, falsehood of any kind. Truth was for him something sacred and he would not tolerate what he apprehended to be willful error. Perhaps he recalled the words of One Who from the Cross had begged forgiveness for those who knew not what they did, but Who also had branded the consciously deceitful Pharisees as hypocrites. Thus Thomas terminates his *Contra Retrahentes a Religionis Ingressu* with these words: “If any man desire to contradict my words, let him not do so by chattering before boys, but let him write and publish his writings; so that intelligent persons may judge what is true, and may be able to confute what is false by the authority of truth.” And again in the Prologue of the tract *Contra Impugnantes Dei Cultum* we find expressions such as the following: “For it is not enough for the servants of Satan to nourish themselves with their own malice, or to injure those at hand, but they must needs strive to defame their enemies, and spread their blasphemies against them over the whole globe.”

It is interesting to note that St. Thomas, in his earlier works, refers to Averroës as the “Commentator” of Aristotle. In his later years when he had learned the mind of the Stagyrite he recognized the errors of Averroës and the Commentator becomes the “Corruptor.” At times he judges the Arabian’s argumentation as “frivolous,” “unintelligible,” “ridiculous,” and his interpretations as “inadequate,” “against the intention of Aristotle,” “against truth.” Thomas was jealous of truth.

The Christian Averroists, led by Siger of Brabant, seem to have been particularly obnoxious to Aquinas who deemed their misinterpretation of the Aristotelian text inexcusable if not absolutely mali-

¹³ XII, I.

cious. To them he addresses the following words in the tract *De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averroistas* which we have already quoted: "This is our refutation of the error. It is not based on the documents of faith, but on the reasons and pronouncements of the philosophers themselves. If anyone, who boastfully prides himself on his supposed wisdom, desires to say anything against our exposition, let him not do it in some corner nor before boys who are entirely without judgment in such different matters. Let him rather write against this our tract, if he has the requisite courage. He will then find not only myself, the least of them all, but many others, cultivators of truth, who will step up against his error, and attack his lack of knowledge." He expresses this same thought in his Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians: "It is to be observed that true doctrine always takes its stand in public, while falsehood is always seeking nooks and corners."¹⁴

Such then is Thomas, Doctor of Truth. We have followed the counsel of Lacordaire; we have gone ourselves to view the pyramids of Aquinas. True, our visit has been brief but it has been lengthy enough to give us some idea of those writings which three times evoked the divine approbation of Truth Immutable, the Light of the World—"Well hast thou written of Me Thomas." We have also learned something of Thomas the man, too frequently submerged beneath the pages of his *Opera Omnia*, which to those who know not the author who penned it, readily becomes but a formidable mass of dead pages, an interesting relic of a long forgotten age.

¹⁴ V, 20.