

FAITH AND REASON IN THE THEOLOGY OF ST. THOMAS

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THEOLOGY, as the name itself implies, is the science of God. It is a systematic body of doctrine embracing everything that human reason can know of God, either from the data furnished by the visible world, or from truths made known to us immediately by God Himself.

There are two kinds of Theology, natural and supernatural. The first draws its conclusions by the sole light of reason from naturally known principles, and is called Theodicy, which is the highest point of philosophical metaphysics. The second starts out from revealed principles and arrives at its conclusions by reason elevated and directed by the higher and surer light of divine faith. Supernatural Theology is Theology properly so called; Natural Theology is but a mere philosophical treatise

Man has been elevated by God to a supernatural end, which is the blessed possession of God for all eternity in the contemplation of His divine essence. The role of the science of Supernatural Theology is to lead man to a knowledge of this end, and to show him the means whereby he can attain it. Under the first consideration we place Dogmatic Theology, which consists in the sole consideration of God; under the second, which considers God as our supernatural end and points out the way to reach Him, we have Moral Theology. They are not two distinct sciences. The difference between them is in the point of view from which we consider the one object, namely God, as knowable from revelation, either as He is in Himself or as attainable by us.

In its *Dogmatic Constitution on Catholic Faith* the Vatican Council says: "The Catholic Church has ever held and does hold that there is a twofold order of knowledge, distinct both in principle and in object; in principle, because in the one it is natural reason, and in the other by divine faith: in object, because, besides those things to which natural reason can attain, there are

proposed to our belief mysteries hidden in God, which unless divinely revealed cannot be known.”¹

That the world can tell us much about God is a teaching of our faith. The Creator has written down clearly in the book of the material universe much about Himself and His invisible perfections, and has given to man an intellect by which he can read what is recorded there. And so easy is it for us to arrive at the knowledge of some of these truths, for example, that there is a God, and His principal attributes, that St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans does not hesitate to condemn as inexcusable the Gentiles who ignored them. “For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made: His eternal power also and divinity: so that they are inexcusable.”

But human reason alone cannot tell us everything about God; it can go just as far as creatures can lead it and no farther. It can reach the door of the inner sanctuary of divine life, but alone can never penetrate there; of the intimate nature of God and the decrees of His divine wisdom it can tell us nothing. And here where reason ends, faith begins and leads us higher to the knowledge of things known to God alone and made known to us by revelation; all of which we accept by faith, and hold as certain on the authority of Him who can neither be deceived Himself nor deceive us.

Between the conclusions of this twofold source of our knowledge, reason and faith, there can never be a contradiction, for the same God who gave us the light of reason, has also given us the light of faith. The truths of faith are above reason; they can never be contrary to it. Time and again in his works, St. Thomas insists upon this all important truth. This was especially necessary in his time, for Averroism was then taught openly in the schools of Paris, and one of its tenets was “What is true in theology can be false in philosophy and vice versa.” In the eighth article of the very first question of the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas says: “Since faith rests upon the infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is clear that the arguments brought forth against faith cannot be demonstrated, but are difficulties that can be answered.” Again in the seventh chapter of the first book of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, where he shows that the truth of reason cannot

¹ Concilium Vaticanum. *Constitutio Dogmatica de Fide Catholica*, c. iv.

be in opposition to the truth of Christian faith, we read: "Although the truth of Christian faith surpasses the ability of reason, nevertheless those things that are naturally instilled in human reason cannot be opposed to this truth. For it is clear that those things which are implanted in reason by nature, are most true, so much so that it is impossible to think them false. Nor is it lawful to deem false what is held by faith, since it is so evidently confirmed by God. Seeing then that the false alone is opposed to the true, it is impossible for the truth of faith to be contrary to those principles which reason naturally knows." St. Thomas is here speaking only of first rational principles which cannot be opposed to faith; it is evident that what is true of the principles must also be true of the conclusions logically deduced from them. St. Thomas not only pointed out the impossibility of there ever being a conflict between the truths of faith and those of natural reason, but his whole life work was to harmonize the two, to bind together human knowledge and divine knowledge in the very closest bonds, and to leave us a synthesis of the two which represents the supreme effort of reason in its quest of divine truth. The work begun by the Fathers, carried on by the early Scholastics and reached its apogee in the Angelic Doctor, of whom Leo XIII writes in the "Aeterni Patris": "Now far above all other Scholastic Doctors towers Thomas Aquinas, their master and prince. His intellect was docile and subtle; his memory was ready and tenacious; his life was most holy; and he loved the truth alone. He wrote in such a way that in him not one of the following perfections is wanting: A full selection of subjects; a beautiful arrangement of their divisions; the best way of treating them; certainty of principles; strength of argument; perspicuity and propriety in language; and the power of explaining deep mysteries."

St. Thomas was admirably equipped to give the world its masterpiece of theological science. Everything in his life from his earliest years was oriented in view of this end by Divine Providence. As a mere child at Monte Cassino there was one thought ever uppermost in his mind—What is God? And to answer this question as clearly as it can be answered upon this earth, St. Thomas consecrated his entire life and brilliant talents. Rightly is he called the Angelic Doctor, not only because of the purity of his life and wonderful intellectual acumen which likened him to the angelic spirits of whom he wrote as no other could: but even more so because his entire life was a continual

pursuit of divine knowledge and a constant contemplation of divine truth. Everything that could tell him of God he interrogated, and his keen penetrating intellect was quick to grasp the kernel of truth even in the midst of error.

Scripture and Tradition, were for the Angelic Doctor an open book, which he had studied, meditated upon and thoroughly assimilated. He knew the Scriptures practically by heart and there is scarcely an article in his immortal *Summa Theologica* which does not contain some quotation from the sacred books. He expounded in the schools the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. John. He wrote commentaries upon these gospels and upon the Epistles of St. Paul, also on the Books of Job, Canticle of Canticles, and upon the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremias. His *Catena Aurea* is a concrete proof of his deep grasp of the meaning of Scripture in the light of the Fathers.

Joined to his profound knowledge of the Sacred Writings, was a ready acquaintance with all the doctrine handed down by Tradition in its various organs of transmission. In the *Summa Theologica* alone he quotes from nineteen Councils, from forty-one Popes, and from fifty-two Fathers and learned Doctors of the Church. For the Fathers, the heroic witnesses of the faith and early practice of the Church, he always had the deepest reverence. His favorite Father was St. Augustine, upon whose rule he based his Dominican life, and whose authority he so venerated that even when he disagrees with his teaching, he rather distinguishes the sense than denies the authority. In the words of Cardinal Cajetan: "So great was his veneration for the ancient and sacred doctors that he may be said to have gained a perfect understanding of them all." And the "Aeterni Patris" adds: "Thomas gathered together their doctrines like the scattered limbs of a body, and moulded them into a whole. He arranged them in so wonderful an order, and increased them with such additions, that rightly and deservedly he is reckoned a singular safeguard and glory of the Catholic Church."

The philosophical training of St. Thomas fitted him in an eminent degree for the work of placing all the powers of reason at the service of the Christian faith. He was thoroughly familiar with the Greek philosophers and especially with Aristotle, whom he calls the Philosopher. His was not a slavish attitude towards the great Stagirite, with whom he disagreed on more than one point; he sought only truth and took it wherever he could find it, regardless of who was its author. He adopted the philosophy

of Aristotle, not because of the authority of Aristotle, but because of the truth of his teaching. More than once St. Thomas points out that human authority is the weakest of all arguments in philosophy; here a man's authority is of no more value than the weight of the reasons he advances. St. Thomas wrote many opuscula on different branches of philosophy, but his masterpieces are his Commentaries on Aristotle. Due to misinterpretation and the mixture of Oriental coloring, the Arabian commentators had in many cases entirely changed the sense of the Stagirite. St. Thomas brought out clearly the true meaning of Aristotle and freed him from the erroneous. It has been said that "between Aristotle seen in Aristotle, and Aristotle seen in St. Thomas, there is the same difference as between a city seen by the light of a candle and under the full noon day sun." There is an old proverb, "Sine Aquinate, silet Aristoteles," Without Aquinas, Aristotle is dumb."

The Angelic Doctor had a profound knowledge of the truths of faith contained in Scripture and in Tradition. No less profound was his grasp of philosophy and the truths to which unaided reason can attain by its own powers. He was then well prepared not only to point out clearly the relations between faith and reason, just what reason can do, and what it cannot do in the things of faith, but also to give us that marvelous synthesis of the two which he bequeathed to the Church as a lasting monument to his genius. In the eighth article of the first question of the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas asks: "Does sacred doctrine proceed by way of argument?" He answers, "As other sciences do not argue in proof of their principles, but argue from their principles to demonstrate other truths in these sciences: so this doctrine does not argue in proof of its principles, which are articles of faith, but from them it goes on to prove something else; as the Apostle from the resurrection of Christ argues in proof of a general resurrection. But just as metaphysics, which is the queen of natural sciences, defends its principles so also does Sacred doctrine. If any revealed truth is admitted, we argue from it to prove others. If no revealed truth is admitted, all we can do is answer the objections of the opponent, for truth cannot contradict truth."

In the second question in his commentary on *Boetius De Trinitate* which contains four articles which every theologian would do well to study and ponder, St. Thomas tells us that there is a threefold use of reason with regard to the truths of faith.

First of all reason can prove by apodictical demonstration, the preambles of faith, that is the truths that our faith necessarily supposes to make it reasonable, as the existence of God, etc. Secondly it can illustrate the mysteries of faith by analogy with the things of this life. And finally it can answer whatever objections are brought against them.

St. Thomas has left us two classic examples of the use of this threefold method, the harmonious union of faith and reason, in his two immortal Summas, the *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. This last is sometimes erroneously called the *Summa Philosophica*. In fact it is just as much a theological work as the *Summa Theologica*. It is the use of reason in the defence of faith according to the threefold method laid down by St. Thomas. In these two masterpieces of theology, compared by Lacordaire to the pyramids in grandeur and stateliness, whose every page breathes forth the deep piety and great faith of St. Thomas, we are carried from the creature to the Creator and are enabled to span the great chasm between time and eternity. In both he begins with an inquiry into the preambles of faith. Having established the existence of a self-subsisting being he demonstrates that this being must be all perfect, all true, all knowing, the beginning and end of all things. In both Summas he illustrates his truths by analogy with the things of this world. Arguments of convenience have their place in almost every article, and in the most sublime mystery of the Trinity, his use of analogy is of paramount importance. Aristotle had long ago remarked that "the slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge of lesser things." Moreover St. Thomas defends the doctrines of faith. The proof of this is had when we consider that in the *Summa Theologica* alone, he answered more than ten thousand objections.

According to St. Thomas, Theology is a true science, and like every other science it does not prove its principles, but from them deduces other truths. As the highest and most noble of all sciences, it must defend its own principles, and this it does either by arguing from one point of faith admitted to the truth of another, or by the solution of objections. Finally, theology proves the preambles that make our faith reasonable, and illustrates the mysteries that are above the grasp of reason by showing the wonderful harmony that exists between them and the truths of the natural order. Such was the theology of St.

Thomas that won for him the glorious title of DOCTOR ANGELICUS ET DOCTOR COMMUNIS ECCLESIAE. Well has he merited this remarkable encomium bestowed upon him by Leo XIII in the "Aeterni Patris": "Carefully distinguishing reason from faith, as is right, and yet joining them together in a harmony of friendship, he so guarded the rights of each, and so watched over the dignity of each, that as far as man is concerned, reason can now hardly rise higher than she rose, borne up in the flight of Thomas; and faith can hardly gain more helps and greater helps from reason than those which Thomas gave her."

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TO ONE WHO LIED

CHRISTOPHER POWELL, O.P.

Death, you told me, would come like a thief in the night,
 Snatching me roughly away from all I held dear
 And leaving me alone and in darkness.
 I am not lonely here.
 It is brighter, far, than the glitter of sun on sword-blades.
 You must pardon me if I laugh at your tearful compassion,
 For this is a land to be gay in—
 Death's but a gate.
 You told me death is strong—and you lied!
 It is less than drop of rain,
 More fragile than cob-web.