

ST. THOMAS, PATRON OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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ONE of the first acts of Pope Leo XIII after ascending the the Fisherman's Throne in 1878 was to bring the world of Catholic thought back to the feet of the master of Catholic thought, St. Thomas Aquinas. The memorable encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, published on the 4th of August, 1879, restored the golden wisdom of the Angelic Doctor to its deservedly rightful place among Christian schools and scholars "for the safety and glory of the Catholic faith, for the good of society, and for the increase of all the sciences." But not content with the lavish encomium heaped upon St. Thomas and his writings in this encyclical, Leo XIII, in a Brief issued exactly one year later on the feast of St. Dominic, declared him the patron of all Catholic universities, colleges, and schools, and "desired that he should be venerated and honored as such by all."¹

This signal distinction was a fitting and natural compliment to the magnificent work inaugurated by the *Aeterni Patris*. It not only honored St. Thomas as the Catholic world had long petitioned, but brought him more attractively to the attention of Catholic students as the proper model on which to pattern their life's character and conduct.

The passing of fifty years gives us an occasion to recount some of the superb qualities of St. Thomas which made him the Sovereign Pontiff's choice as patron of Catholic schools. It is also an opportunity to see just how closely we have taken this patron to heart, as Pope Leo desired, and made him our own. Perhaps it is even more pertinent today, since the Holy Father Pius XI recently stressed the ideals of Christian education, that we "go to Thomas" the student and teacher for that unmatched combination of holiness of life and soundness of doctrine under which he is proposed to us as patron and leader. For, as Leo XIII said: "The Angelic Doctor is as exalted in virtue and holiness as in erudition. He may be compared to the angelic

¹Brief, *Cum hoc sit*. . . . August 4, 1880.

spirits no less on account of his innocence than on account of his endowments."²

If the Pope who canonized St. Thomas also canonized his writings by calling them "the works of God," it was because the boy Thomas began life with the question "What is God?" and devoted a life-time ordaining all knowledge to God as "the highest peak of our knowledge in this life."³ His inquiring mind penetrated every phase of thought searching for truth. He was as much at home among the pagan and Jewish philosophers and the Fathers of the Church, as he was among the scholastics of his own time. He took truth where he found it, for it was the heritage of man in general and not of any particular race or creed. But he took nothing as a fact until he had asked the why and the wherefore. "In his serene confidence that all must end in good, he moves the most startling and perilous questions, as if it were the most indifferent, the very Being of God. God must be revealed by syllogistic process."⁴ His clear and precise reasoning found an answer for every doubt, or else he was quick to admit that he did not know.

"The world has calumniated St. Thomas," say the English translators of the *Summa*, "as if he spent his time in asking 'Why?'; whereas he said 'Because' as often as he said 'Why?' and indeed he never said the first without the second. He raised no question without answering it. . . . The 'Because' is the luminous word which shines upon his breast." This inquisitive trait, elevated by supernatural motives, for mere curiosity had no place in his life, might be called the fundamental characteristic of Thomas the student and thinker. It permeated his whole life until the day he put his pen aside and could write no more after tasting the supernal delights which made all that he had written seem to him as so much chaff. This method of inquiry and reasoning was not peculiar to Aquinas alone, for it was the mark of a scholastic, but he developed it, perfected it, and joined it harmoniously to faith, guarding the rights of each, so that Leo XIII aptly remarked, "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 and greater helps from reason than those which Thomas gave her."⁵

² *Ibid.*

³ *Contra Gentes*, lib. 3, c. 49.

⁴ Henry H. Milman, D.D., *History of Latin Christianity*, 3rd ed. Vol. IX, p. 132.

⁵ *Aeterni Patris.*

His keen desire to know God better whetted every moral virtue to a supersensitive degree. He never did anything half-heartedly. There is little wonder then that every Pope who has ever mentioned the name of Thomas Aquinas has referred to his virtuous life in the most glowing and superlative terms. Recently Pope Pius held him up again as a patron of Catholic youth when he said: "It behooves our young men especially to look to St. Thomas and to strive to imitate sedulously the great and beautiful virtues that shine forth in him. Before all, they should learn humility, which is the foundation of the spiritual life, and chastity. Let them learn from a man of sovereign doctrine to hold in horror all puffed-up pride of mind, and to unite with their studies humble prayers for a full outpouring of the divine light."⁶

It is impossible to read the life of the Saint without being deeply impressed with his resplendent quality of humility. On it he built his conduct and his character, his purity, charity, patience and self-discipline. He took to himself the advice he gave to others, that "if you would raise on high the edifice of holiness, take humility for your foundation." Early in life he renounced all claim to noble titles and his share in the estates of the House of Aquino and chose to lose himself in the Order of St. Dominic. But even here his remarkable talents could not go unnoticed, and time and again he refused absolutely to take any position in the Order and steadfastly declined higher dignities offered by Pope Clement IV. At the end of his life he thanked God that he could die as a simple religious. It was only at the formal command of his superiors that Thomas went on for the Doctorate, arguing that his knowledge was insufficient, his experience limited, and above all that he was totally unprepared to take the step. Later in life he confided to his companion, Father Reginald of Piperno: "Thanks be to God, my knowledge, my title of Doctor, my scholastic work, have never occasioned a single moment of vain glory to dethrone the virtue of humility in my heart."

Thomas understood the virtue of true humility as no other man, and he was not slow to distinguish it from false humility, as when a man, for instance, not understanding his own worth, compares himself to senseless beasts and becomes like them. Christ, he says, chiefly proposed humility to us that we might despise outward exaltation or the ambition to become great in

⁶ Encyclical, *Studiorum Ducem*, June 29, 1923.

earthly things, in order that we might aim better at heavenly and spiritual things.⁷ His tract on humility shows us better than anything else the solidity of the doctrine on which he built his own temple of holiness. "His humility was no foolish, mawkish, sentimental effeminacy," wrote Archbishop Vaughan, "not the result of a weak constitution or of a softening brain; no hollow pretence or unreality—but the issue of a deep supernatural vision into self, and of the working of an exalted mind upon the lofty theory of human obligations."⁸

The other great virtue which the Holy Father selected from the life of St. Thomas and presented for the edification of youth, is chastity. "Humility then and cleanness of heart," he said, "with unflagging zeal for prayer made the soul of Thomas docile and ready to yield to the promptings and illuminations of the Holy Ghost."⁹ No one knew better than Thomas that divine mysteries and divine truths can be probed only by a clean, pure life, for as a clean eye enables us to see clearly, so is the divine vision promised to the clean of heart.¹⁰ From the day when angels girded him with the cord of chastity, the tranquility of his angelic mind was never disturbed by even a ripple of indecency. He was not blind, however, to the evils of his day. The flaunted vices of Naples, and the unblushing lives of the students at the University of Paris, helped to fasten his attention more securely on God and the things that lead to God. And so he could write with truth from his own experience that "purity is necessary in order that the mind be applied to God, since the human mind is soiled by contact with baser things."¹¹

The pure mind and heart of Thomas was the secret of his extraordinary power of concentration, the root of his genius. Because of it he had a connected view of the old and new, past and present, far and near, a perfectly clear apprehension of an indefinite number of facts, mutually related and correlated, and a keen sense of detecting error no matter how subtly it was mixed with truth.¹² The master-mind of Thomas was due in no small measure to his early schooling in the virtues, his delight in study,

⁷ *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 161, a. 5, ad 4um.

⁸ Very Rev. Roger B. Vaughan, O.S.B., *The Life and Labours of St. Thomas of Aquin*, (London, 1872), vol. II, p. 86.

⁹ *Studiorum Duce*m.

¹⁰ *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae q. 69, a. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.* q. 81, a. 8.

¹² cf. Newman's definition of a master-mind in *The Ideal of a University*, (London, 1888), 8th ed. Discourse VI, p. 134; also p. 69.

his memory training, in fine, to his own natural abilities. But he was quick to acknowledge with St. Paul, "By the grace of God I am what I am."¹³ There was no intellectual pride in the make-up of Thomas Aquinas. And if the clients of St. Thomas learn nothing other than this from their patron, they have gained much.

Thomas was instant in prayer. We have the testimony of his closest friends that he never took up his pen, he never sat down to study, he never lectured or preached, until he had spent some time in silent prayer. Whenever he encountered difficulties he prayed all the more earnestly before the Blessed Sacrament and his doubts vanished in the divine illumination he received. His devotion to the Blessed Virgin is reflected in the way he tried out a new pen by writing *Ave, Ave Maria* in the margins of his parchment manuscripts.¹⁴

St. Thomas crowded so much thought and labor into one day that it staggers the imagination to try to grasp the magnitude of his brilliant accomplishments in the short space of thirty years. And yet he was never too busy to give freely and cheerfully of his vast knowledge whether Pope or emperor, scholar or student asked for it. St. Thomas' method of study is best revealed by his letter to a Dominican novice who asked him how to study. "Pass from the easy to the difficult; be slow to speak and equally slow to give assent to the speaker; keep your conscience clear; do not neglect prayer; be amiable towards everybody, but keep your own mind; above all things avoid running about from one school to another; let it be your delight to sit at the professor's feet; be more concerned to hoard in memory the good things said than to regard the person speaking; strive to understand what you read, clearing your mind of all doubts as you go along; eagerly seek to place whatever knowledge you can get hold of in the depository of your mind, find out what you can do, study your limitations, and do not aim higher than your capacity permits."¹⁵

It was Thomas the student who made Thomas the teacher. In this capacity he is the master and the prince of scholastics; he is the *Doctor Angelicus*; and to his already imposing litany of

¹³ I Cor. XV, 10.

¹⁴ cf. Peter Paul Mackey, O.P. "The Autograph of St. Thomas" in *Thomas Aquinas*, Cambridge papers, (London, 1924), p. 42.

¹⁵ Summary of the letter as given by Bro. Azarias, *Essays Educational*, (Chicago, 1896) pp. 89, 90.

titles, Pope Pius XI unhesitatingly added *Doctor Communis* and *Doctor Eucharisticus*.¹⁶ He is the teacher of the Universal Church and as such he ranks close to the Sacred Writings and the decrees of the Supreme Pontiffs. Learned philosophers and theologians go to Thomas to seek counsel and reasons and answers, while little children receive capsules of his angelic wisdom from their catechisms.

St. Thomas himself summed up the three fundamental characteristics of the preacher or teacher in this way: "The first is stability, that he may not wander from the truth; the second, clearness, that he may not teach obscurely; the third, utility, that he may seek not his own but God's glory."¹⁷ Truth was his high ideal, and faith his guiding star. "Since faith rests upon infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is clear that the arguments brought against faith cannot be strict demonstrations; but difficulties that can be answered."¹⁸ Canon Barry¹⁹ is convinced that no one has drawn the stable character of St. Thomas better than Dean Milman in the following words: "He is perfectly passionless; he has no polemic indignation, nothing of the churchman's jealousy and suspicion; he has no fear of the result of any investigation; he hates nothing, hardly heresy, he loves nothing, unless, perhaps, naked abstract truth."

The second quality of a teacher is clearness. Thomas was nothing if not methodical and orderly. This is abundantly plain from his *Summa Theologica*. "The more a person studies the *Summa*," observes Dr. Grabmann, "and the more he examines its detail, the more does he admire the architectonic structure of the whole and the better does he recognize the structural laws running through the entire work."²⁰ In the *Prologue* St. Thomas says that he is not only going to teach the learned, but also instruct beginners in such a way that they will not be hindered in their studies by innumerable useless questions and arguments, illogical treatment, rough sequence and frequent repetition which causes disgust and confusion. He plans to avoid these and other faults common to writers, and will endeavor "with God's help" to teach "sacred science as briefly and clearly as the matter al-

¹⁶ *Studiosorum Ducem*.

¹⁷ *Comment. in Matt. C*, v.

¹⁸ *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 1, a. 8.

¹⁹ William Barry, D.D., *Roma Sacra*, (London, 1927), p. 153, 154.

²⁰ Dr. Martin Grabmann, *Thomas Aquinas, His Personality and Thought*, transl. by Virgil Michel, O.S.B., (New York, 1928), p. 40.

lows." This he did by using unmistakable language, precise and lucid, in explaining the most difficult questions. It pained him to be obscure. "There was something in him unknown before; his argument, his exposition, was new in power, in interest, in lucidity."²¹ He made truth more lovable because he made it intelligible.

The utility of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas has been attested by the supreme authority of the Church for over six hundred years. He certainly had divine approval when he heard the words from the Crucified Christ: "Thou hast written well of me, Thomas." "It is our purpose," he wrote at the beginning of the *Contra Gentes*, "to declare, as far as in us lies, the truth which the Catholic faith professes, while weeding out contrary errors; for, in the words of Hilary, 'I acknowledge that I owe my chief occupation in life to God, so that every word and every thought of mine may speak of Him'." The glory of God, and not of self, was the uppermost thought in his mind. He was one of the most impersonal of the scholastics, for he cared nothing for the applause of men. And that, after all, is a claim to immortality.

Now, it was the wish and the desire of Pope Leo XIII that all Catholic teachers and all Catholic schools "give largely and abundantly to youths engaged in study, the pure streams of wisdom which flow from the Angelic Doctor as from a perennial and copious spring."²² And when the same Sovereign Pontiff declared him Patron of all Catholic schools, he gave the students of those schools a heavenly protector. But to claim St. Thomas as their patron and leader, they must strive to "understand clearly what he taught, and faithfully imitate what he accomplished,"²³ by praying with him "to ardently desire, prudently search for, truthfully acknowledge and perfectly fulfill all things for the honor and glory of God's Holy Name."

²¹ Henry Osborn Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind*, (London, 1925), 4th ed. Vol. II, p. 467.

²² *Aeterni Patris*.

²³ In the prayer to St. Thomas, March 7.