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# DOMINICANA

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Vol. XIX

DECEMBER, 1934

No. 4

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## SAINT THOMAS ON THE INCARNATION

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WITH each recurrence of the feast of Christmas, the attention of Catholics all over the world is again fixed upon the most fundamental mystery of their faith, the mystery of God made man. On this day, in churches of every country of the earth, devout Catholics of every walk of life gather around the crib to adore their infant Savior. All, even the least educated, believe that the Christ-Child who was born nineteen centuries ago and Whose birth the Church commemorates anew each year is at the same time both God and man. All profess belief in the formula: "Jesus Christ is true God and true Man," and, indeed, this is all that our faith demands of us. Those, however, who desire a greater knowledge of the things of God should study more deeply the explanation of the ideas contained in this dogmatic formula that they may acquire for themselves what the Vatican Council calls "a most fruitful understanding of the mystery." It is the purpose of this article to point out the place which the mystery of the Incarnation occupies in the science of God, theology, and to indicate briefly some of the important doctrinal truths which are contained in it.

### I

To rightly ascertain the place of the Incarnation in theology, we can best go to the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas, the textbook par excellence of theology—a work noted no less for the orderliness of its arrangement than for the clarity of its

doctrine. The whole of theology as contained in this invaluable work falls into three main divisions. The first book treats of God, the Creator and Sovereign Lord of all things; the second part, of the motion of man towards God, his last end; the third part of Jesus Christ, made man in order to lead man to God. In the first book, on God, there is a treatise on the divine essence and attributes, simplicity, infinity, immutability, eternity, etc., another on the Blessed Trinity and a third on Creation. The second part of the *Summa*, on the motion of the rational creature towards God, because of the matter treated, is divided into two books, called the *Prima Secundae* and the *Secunda Secundae*. The *Prima Secundae* treats of the general means by which man advances towards God or turns away from Him—human acts, virtue, vice, law and grace, while *Secunda Secundae* contains an exposition of the particular virtues and vices. We come now to the third section which treats of Jesus Christ, the way by which man is led to God. Saint Thomas indicates the structure of this part in a brief prologue:

“Forasmuch as our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, *in order to save His people from their sins*,<sup>1</sup> as the angel announced, showed unto us in His own Person the way of truth, whereby we may attain to the bliss of eternal life by rising again, it is necessary, in order to complete the work of theology, that after considering the last end of human life, and the virtues and vices, there should follow the consideration of the Savior of all, and of the benefits bestowed by Him on the human race. Concerning this we must consider (1) the Savior Himself; (2) the Sacraments by which we attain to our salvation and (3) the end of immortal life to which we attain by the resurrection.”<sup>2</sup> The treatise on Our Savior is divided into two main sections and it is the first of these which deals with the Incarnation, the second being devoted to the things which the Incarnate God suffered and accomplished.

To sum up in a word the entire division of theology, we might say that the first part treats of God, the second of man and the third of Christ, the way from man to God. Christ expressly tells us: “I am the way.”<sup>3</sup> By becoming man, He truly showed Himself to be the Way to the Father: (1) in His rôle as teacher pointing out the means to salvation; (2) by His in-

<sup>1</sup> Matt. i, 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theol.* III.

<sup>3</sup> *John* xiv, 6.

tercession as our Advocate with the Father; (3) on Calvary when as our Great High Priest He offered the sacrifice of Himself for our sins. It is through the Incarnation then that the infinite chasm between God and man is spanned.

## II

The doctrine on the Incarnation as treated by Saint Thomas falls into three parts. The first is an introductory question elucidating the fittingness, necessity and purpose of this mystery. The second deals with the manner in which the union of the Incarnate Word with human nature was effected and the third points out the consequences of this union. We shall consider the doctrines contained in each part in order.

The mystery of the Incarnation is certainly in harmony with what we know of God. It is, indeed, most befitting to Him to manifest externally the vast riches of His invisible perfections. He has directed all creation to this end. "The heavens show forth the glory of God and the firmament declareth the work of His hands."<sup>4</sup> Now, in the Incarnation this showing forth of the attributes of God is accomplished in a most striking manner. The Divine Goodness and Mercy are manifested, for God did not despise the weakness of man but rather stooped down to help him. "He hath not dealt with us according to our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities."<sup>5</sup> The Divine Justice is manifested, since although God wished man to be liberated from the tyranny of Satan, whose slave sin had made him, He decreed, nevertheless, that this should be accomplished only by man and in such a manner that the full vigor of justice should be maintained. The Divine Wisdom is shown in the devising of this marvelous plan whereby God could show His infinite Mercy to man and His Justice at the same time receive full satisfaction. Finally the Divine Charity is shown forth. "By this hath the charity of God appeared towards us, because God has sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live by Him."<sup>6</sup>

Although the Incarnation was not necessary in the sense that without it God could not have effected the restoration of our fallen nature, still, it is necessary in the sense that it was

<sup>4</sup> *Ps.* xviii, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ps.* cii, 10.

<sup>6</sup> *I John* iv, 9.

the most useful means to attain this end as well as the means best adapted to procure our good. First of all, our faith is strengthened since by becoming man, God Himself speaks to us. Secondly our hope is confirmed, for as Saint Augustine says: "Nothing was so necessary for raising our hope as to show how deeply God loved us, and what could afford us greater proof of this than that the Son of God should become a partner with us of human nature?"<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, our charity is greatly increased by this great manifestation of the Charity of God. Who, indeed, can contemplate this spectacle of infinite love without being inflamed with a greater love of God and of His creatures? "If we have been slow to love, at least let us hasten to love in return."<sup>8</sup> The Incarnation served also to provide man in the Person of Christ, a teacher who would instruct him in his duties towards God and a model according to which he might regulate his life. "Man who might be seen was not to be followed; but God was to be followed, Who could not be seen. And therefore God was made man, that He Who might be seen by man, and Whom man might follow, might be shown to man."<sup>9</sup>

### III

The inquiry into the manner of the union of the Divine Word shows a well-considered arrangement. This union with human nature is first treated from the standpoint of the union itself which is shown to be a hypostatic union, i.e., the Humanity of Christ was so united to His Divinity that both belonged to one person. The Catholic doctrine, as Saint Thomas points out, stands midway between two outstanding heresies: on the one hand, that of Nestorius who held that there are in Christ two distinct persons, united only by an indwelling or unity of intention and, on the other, that of Eutyches who held that but one nature resulted from the union of the two natures in Christ. Holy Church, "rejecting the impiety of both these treasons," affirms that two distinct natures subsist in the one person of Christ.

Although the Incarnation could have taken place in any of the three Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity, it was more fitting that it take place in the Person of the Son rather than in that of the Father or the Holy Ghost. Since the creation of

<sup>7</sup> Saint Augustine, 13 *de Trinitate*, cap. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Augustine, *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, cap. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Augustine, 22 *de Tempore*.

human nature had been accomplished by the power of the Father through the Word, so it was proper that the re-creation of fallen nature should take place through the Word, that the regeneration of man might correspond to the first generation. Moreover, it is suitable that like things be associated together. Now, all creatures were made after the likeness of the Word of God, the exemplary idea in creation. Hence, it was fitting that the Son should assume human nature rather than one of the other persons.

The final consideration under this head regards the quality of the human nature assumed by Christ. The Most Sacred Body of our Lord is a true and real body composed of flesh, blood, bones and of all the integral parts which make up our bodies. Likewise, His Soul is truly a human soul with the same faculties as ours. The two form together a true human nature. Certain perfections and imperfections result from the assumption of the human nature by the Son of God. The perfections are Christ's three-fold grace, His knowledge and the power of His human soul. The first of these graces is the grace of union which is the hypostatic union of His human nature with the Divine Person. The second is the habitual grace by which the soul of Christ is sanctified above all others, while the third is the grace which He has as Head of the Church, whereby He is the source of grace to others. The knowledge of Christ is also three-fold. He had while on earth the knowledge of the blessed in heaven, a special infused knowledge and the knowledge He acquired through life. The defects in Christ's human nature were the miseries and infirmities, such as hunger, thirst, mental and physical pain, and death, which He underwent as an atonement for our sins. These imperfections, we must remember, Christ freely took upon Himself that He might manifest His great love for us as well as leave us an example of heroic virtue.

#### IV

The consequences of the Incarnation fall under three heads. We have first those which pertain to Christ Himself; His unity of being, His two wills, two natures and two operations. His human actions, because the Person operating is a divine Person, have an infinite value and dignity. We next have those consequences of the Incarnation which regard Christ in relation to the Father: His subjection to the Father, His service of the Father by prayer and by the office of His priesthood, and

His predestination by the Father. Finally the consequences of the Incarnation for us are the wonderful adorableness of Jesus Christ and His office of Mediator. The worship which we must pay to Christ is that of "latria"—the worship proper to God alone. As Mediator, Christ stands between God and man, communicating to man both precepts and gifts and offering to God satisfaction and prayers. Considering Christ in His rôle of Mediator we can readily see that the Incarnation is the fundamental doctrine of the Church's teaching concerning Christ. Because He is Man, He can offer sacrifice. Because He is God, He can offer a sacrifice of infinite value in the sight of the Divine Majesty. The consideration of Mediatorship, then, is a fitting close to Saint Thomas' treatment of the Incarnation. Dr. Grabmann commenting on this part of the *Summa*, says:

"The entire treatise of the *Tertia* on the Incarnation is a masterpiece of positive combined with speculative theology. Saint Thomas has at his disposal an extensive knowledge of patristic literature including the Greek Fathers, and of doctrinal decisions and development; and he shows his full metaphysical skill in the way in which he fathoms and fashions the most knotty problems. There is also a mystical afflatus unobtrusively diffused over this picture of Christ's Person and work, drawn by Saint Thomas in the evening of his life."<sup>10</sup>

In showing the place which the Incarnation occupies in theology, we have seen how vital is its rôle in the whole purpose of man's existence. It is impossible in a mere enumeration of doctrinal truths to show forth their real beauty or to bring out the vast riches of meaning contained in them. The fuller realization and true appreciation of these truths must come only after a careful and prayerful consideration of each separate doctrine, and thus, as love of anything is consequent upon the knowledge of it, so will a more complete understanding of the richness of this mystery of the Incarnation beget a stronger and deeper love for the God-man.

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<sup>10</sup> *Introduction to the Theological Summa of St. Thomas*, p. 209.

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