

A MEDIEVAL LITURGIST

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THOUGH he was in many ways far in advance of his age, St. Thomas Aquinas was, like all great men, a true child of his own period. He is indeed at one and the same time the symbol of his century as well as one of its most brilliant products. Sharing to the full the social, intellectual and cultural heritage of a world made one by the bonds of a common Christian tradition, he was in every sense a true medieval, who took for himself what was best and most enduring in the greatest of centuries and labored to pass it on to future generations.

Not the least of the glories of that age of faith was the universal devotion of Christendom to the liturgy. Knowledge and love of the Church's official prayer was not confined to the monasteries. There were laymen who recited the canonical Hours daily like priests and monks. It was not unusual that liturgical prayer in common be included as part of the daily horarium even in royal households. The monasteries that followed the advancing borders of Christianity had made the whole of Europe familiar with the Church's solemn functions, even aside from the essentials, the Mass and the Sacraments. Ploughmen and shepherds marked their days by the regular sound of bells that called the monks to prayer; seasons were marked by the festivals of the Saints as precisely for men of that day as they are by the calendar for men of this.

The recent liturgical revival is helping the modern world to rid itself of a notion which brands public worship as mere formalism, a sort of Christianized Pharisaism, divorced from the true spirit of Christ's teachings. But the faithful of the so-called Dark Ages saw not the slightest inconsistency in a religion which adored God "in spirit and in truth," expressing its love and worship in a fitting external manner. They saw nothing absurd in a public, visible society like the Church rendering public, visible and social honor to the God Who had made man in such a way that he is best able to attain knowledge and appreciation of invisible realities through the instrumentality of visible material things. Here St. Thomas was in fullest agreement with the mind of his age as well as with the mind of Christ and His Church. For him as for all his fellow Christians the liturgy was an

inseparable part of life, more or less intimately bound up with every hour, from birth (or perhaps it would be better to say, rebirth, at the Baptismal font) to the grave. It was not looked upon as a special department of life, an assignment imposed by divine command to which a certain minimum of weekly attention was due.

St. Thomas began his liturgical education at an early age. For many centuries before his entrance into the world the monks had been the educators of Europe and at the age of five Thomas was committed to their care in the ancient Abbey of Monte Cassino. These monastery schools taught their pupils more than the medieval equivalent of our three R's. Monks were monks because they placed "first things first" in their own lives; they were the best of educators because they tried to place "first things first" in the lives of others. The students as well as the monks had their regular hours of prayer. An horarium that revolved around the daily recitation of the Benedictine choral Office made his schooldays a liturgically-centered life. His heart and mind were thus nourished from these earliest years on what a saintly Pontiff of later years, Pius X, was to term "the primary and indispensable source of the Christian spirit." While learned masters were dinning complexities of grammar and logic into his eager young ears, the voice of the Holy Ghost speaking in the liturgy's daily lesson did not go unheeded.

Further studies took St. Thomas to Naples after he had spent about five years at Monte Cassino. Here at the age of seventeen he revealed how attentive he had been to the voice of his Divine Master by becoming a Dominican friar. This venture met with determined opposition from his family, but his steadfastness won out even against a Papal promise that he should become Abbot of Monte Cassino. His preference for the new Order was undoubtedly due to the fact that as a Dominican he would have ample opportunity to indulge his love of study as well as his love of prayer. Moreover, to the full liturgical life that was part of St. Dominic's plan would be added the joy of active apostolic work for souls.

It was as a scholastic theologian that the saintly friar was to become one of his century's immortals. Under the tutelage of St. Albert the Great and other masters, his knowledge of the Scriptures, the writings of the Fathers and the ancient philosophers broadened and deepened, all contributing to his grasp of theological doctrine. His biographers record many details which reveal that his life of liturgical prayer also was in a great measure responsible for his mastery of the queen of sciences. By his own admission, much, if not most of his learning was acquired through prayer and that prayer was pre-

dominantly liturgical. Moreover, the liturgy itself is in the truest sense theology, not the systematic theology of the schools but theology employed to glorify God and sanctify souls. To use a very apt phrase, liturgy is nothing more than "dogma on its knees." The scientific theology of the Schoolmen and the theology of liturgical prayer are merely different forms of the same truth. "Liturgy is essentially the Christian faith prayed," is the way Pope Pius XI expressed it.

It may not be more than mere coincidence that the revival of interest in the liturgy dates its beginnings about the time that Scholasticism began its modern resurgence. But whether or not the two renaissances are closely connected as cause and effect as well as in time, it is none the less true that scholastic theology and the liturgy are so inextricably linked that the study of the former necessarily leads to an understanding appreciation of the latter. Some further explanation of the nature of scholastic theology will make this connection more evident.

Scholastic theology is a scientific exposition of Catholic doctrine which shows the order and interrelation of all the truths of faith, defends these truths with arguments that are strictly rational and reveals the harmony that exists between the certitudes of both natural and supernatural orders. The term "scholastic" distinguishes it from the sources upon which it depends, the Sacred Scriptures and Tradition, both of which are included under the title of positive theology. Drawing upon these sources of revelation for his knowledge of divine truth, the scholastic theologian arranges this body of doctrine into scientific form. Tradition supplies him with knowledge of all revealed teachings which are not contained in the Scriptures. In the writings of the Fathers and in the definitions and other documents of the Popes and the Councils, the traditional doctrines of the Church are to be found.

The liturgy too, bearing the stamp of Papal approval and of centuries of constant use in the Church, is a witness to those truths which the Scriptures do not expressly contain. The connection then between the liturgy and scholastic theology is more than accidental. The theologian who would set out to systematize Catholic truth could not neglect the teachings of either Scriptural or Traditional theology without leaving serious gaps in his work, and the liturgy is a very important source of that traditional doctrine.

In the theology of the liturgy, which is the ordinary exercise of the teaching power of the Church, the theologian has an authoritative and official expression of the Church's voice. The Missal and Bre-

viary, the Pontifical and other approved liturgical books are as full of doctrinal import as Holy Writ and the writings of St. Augustine and St. Jerome. The growth and development of the liturgy has, in the history of the Church, always accompanied the corresponding development in her defined dogmatic teaching. In a very true sense the liturgy, as the living witness of dogma, is "the theology of the people."

The liturgy has even been titled "the *principal* instrument of tradition" by some theologians. While St. Thomas does not seem to have shared that view, he fully recognized its dogmatic value and put his profound knowledge of the liturgy to excellent use in his writings. In the *Summa Theologica*, his greatest work, he reveals a grasp of the liturgy indicating that he knew it as well as he knew the Bible, which he had by heart. In this connection it is worth remarking that of all the books in the Scriptures, the Psalms are, aside from the New Testament, his favorite Biblical authorities. Undoubtedly this is due as much to the fact that they were part of his daily, hourly prayer in the Divine Office as to the fact that the Psalms are in themselves, like the Epistles of St. Paul, a quasi sum of theology.

In the *Summa* he sometimes makes use of prayers proper to the liturgy to answer questions he proposes. When, for instance, he inquires about the number of those predestined to eternal life, rather than trespass on grounds closed to every creature, he decides that it is better to say, in the words of a Missal prayer, that "to God alone is known the number for whom is reserved eternal happiness."¹ Further on in the same part of the *Summa*, asking "whether the Angels are in place," instead of using as an authoritative, affirmative answer any of numberless Scriptural texts, he quotes from the prayer that ends the liturgical day at Compline of the Divine Office: "Let Thy holy angels who dwell *herein* keep us in peace."² The Collect for the Mass of the tenth Sunday after Pentecost supplies the answer for his question, "Whether the justification of the ungodly is God's greatest (*maximum*) work"; for the Church's prayer on that day begins: "O God, Who dost show forth Thine All-mightiness most (*maxime*) by pardoning and having mercy."³

At other times St. Thomas urges the words of some prayer as a tentative objection to the thesis he desires to prove, solving the prob-

¹ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q. 23, a. 7. cf. Secret prayer for the living and the dead, in Missal.

² *Op. cit.*, Ia, Q. 52, a. 1, *sed contra*.

³ *Op. cit.*, Ia IIae, Q. 113, a. 9, *sed contra*. cf. Ia, Q. 25, a. 3, ad 3.

lem by explaining the proper sense of the liturgical phrases.⁴ Such arguments are not given as frequently as are Scriptural and Patristic quotations, but his use of them shows that he considers them to be of great weight. In the third part of the *Summa* where he treats of the Sacraments, and elsewhere when he considers the nature of prayer, liturgical references are more abundant.

There are numerous other examples of his penetrating knowledge of the liturgy to be found in the *Summa*. His exposition of the ceremonial law of the Old Testament and its relation to the rites of the New throws more light on the depth of his liturgical learning. The tract on the Eucharist is completed by a careful examination of the minutest details of the Sacrifice of the Mass. In treating of the kinds of prayer, he shows that the Collects of the Church's liturgy generally include all the four types mentioned by St. Paul, "supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings," the Collect for Trinity Sunday serving as an illustration of his point.⁵

The liturgy contributes its share also to his earlier works. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and other shorter theological writings, he draws occasionally from the Hymns, Responses and Antiphons of the Divine Office as well as from the Prayers of the Missal. In his sermons, too, he sometimes made use of the Church's prayers. Even in the well-known prayer he composed for thanksgiving after Communion we find the liturgical touch. At times he includes a liturgical phrase in the text of his writing in such a way as to be indistinguishable from his own words, and editors do not deem it worth while to indicate these implicit quotations. Indeed the conciseness and brevity of his style, the depth of meaning compressed in curt sentences, which centuries of theologians since have vainly endeavored to reproduce, can be found matched nowhere but in the simplicity of the Scriptures and the liturgy. It is not strange then that the words of the liturgy can enter his work without being noticed or standing out as purple patches.

His reverence for the words of the liturgy was even greater than the profound respect he paid to the ideas of the Fathers, whose opinions he would accept and justify, and whose definitions he would adopt, even when he had something of his own to offer that was really better. In that classic liturgical composition to which all his varied talents contributed, the Office and Mass of Corpus Christi, he includes as opening lines for two of his immortal hymns, *Pange lin-*

⁴ e.g., *op. cit.*, IIIa, Q. 2, a. 2, ad 3; IIIa, Q. 79, a. 3, ad 1; IIIa, Q. 83, a. 2, ad 5.

⁵ *Tim.* ii. 1, *op. cit.*, IIa IIae, Q. 83, a. 17.

gua gloriosi and *Verbum supernum prodiens*, the first lines of two ancient hymns found in the Divine Office. It was certainly not lack of originality that prompted this borrowing from tradition.

In the Office and Mass of Corpus Christi, St. Thomas put his theological lore to practical liturgical use. It was at the request of Pope Urban IV, at whose court he was living in 1264, that he composed this work, which has remained for more than six hundred years the unapproachable model of liturgical prayer. In relation to the liturgies of other feasts it stands as preeminent as the *Summa* to all other theologies, each in its own order a model to be imitated, never rivalled. The Collect of the Mass, according to one eminent authority, "is written . . . with a harmony and a theological depth which alone would sufficiently reveal the liturgical sense of St. Thomas." Of the Office of Matins, the same author says; "Its equal is not to be found in the entire Breviary."⁸ For this feast the Master of Theology turned a sober dogmatic tract into sublime liturgical poetry. In the *Lauda Sion*, the Sequence of the Mass, some scholars see outlined the very order and arrangement as well as a poetic epitome of the Eucharistic doctrine contained in the *Summa* to be penned several years afterwards. Set against a Scriptural background like polished diamonds in a golden monstrance, his other hymns, too, reveal that even as a poet he was the theologian par excellence. Immediately after he had completed the work, Pontifical approval was bestowed upon it. Though the feast of Corpus Christi, the most important which originated in that period, did not become universally popular till the following century, the fact remains that St. Thomas the liturgist received Papal approbation of his labors long before his other theological work, were sealed with the official recognition they now enjoy.

It is one of the highest advantages of liturgical prayer that it places Catholics in direct daily contact with the mind of Christ and His Church. Uniting this prayer to the study of theology, St. Thomas was brought so close to the mind of Christ that his doctrine has become identified with the teaching of the Church. Unique as a theologian and unique as a liturgist, he is honored by the Church in the liturgy for his feast with a unique tribute, one paid to no other Doctor. For besides commending the example of his life to our imitation, she also prays: "Grant us clearly to understand the things which he taught," implying by these words that she makes his teaching peculiarly her own. "The many recent encyclicals and papal documents

⁸Cabrol, Rt. Rev. Fernand, O.S.B., *The Year's Liturgy*, (New York, 1938), Vol. I, p. 260.

concerning the teaching of Thomistic theology and philosophy," says Cardinal Schuster, "throw their inspired light on this magnificent Collect. The Church, therefore, holds the Angelic Doctor to be the most authoritative and official exponent of her teaching and of her theological knowledge, so that all opinions and doctrines which lead minds away from her, are from long experience at once judged by her according to the degree in which they depart from the principles of St. Thomas."⁷

⁷ Schuster, Ildefonso, *The Sacramentary*, trans. from the Italian by Arthur Levelis-Marke, M.A., (New York, 1929), Vol. IV, p. 39.