

A SENSIBLE MAN NAMED THOMAS

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COMMON sense may be described as intellectual tact. It is the Emily Post of action and thought. The man with common sense, the prudent man, is "one who has an accurate sense of what is to be done."¹ But just as some mistake absent-mindedness for concentration, so others confuse concentration with absence of mind or lack of common sense. The common sense of St. Thomas stands out whether he treats of man's relations with man or man's relations with God. He himself was prudent, "vir prudentissimus," says the liturgy, and in expressing himself he does not lay aside that prudence. Obviously the common sense of a lifetime cannot be adequately unfolded in a paper brief as this. We hope to see only in a very general way the common sense of Aquinas in his treatment of the science of all things (philosophy), of man's relation with man (the social sciences), and of man's relation with God (sanctity).

"The common belief that the faculty of abstraction is opposed to common sense, is a gross error. It may be true of those whose outlook is not wide enough to envisage both, but a genius is bound to realize the metaphysical foundation of morals, and the necessary and eternal principles that govern our contingent acts."² What Sertillanges says here for Thomas the moral theologian holds as well for Thomas the philosopher. Thomism is common sense given a third dimension. The young man in the world can be an excellent Thomist and yet, without philosophical scruple, woo his "dream girl," for he is secure in the knowledge that he is not courting a phantom of his imagination. In other words, he knows he is not making love to what is merely a good idea. This is not true of all philosophies, for today we are beset with philosophies which necessitate their followers adopting unnatural attitudes. That many are sincere in their error, is very probable, but sometimes one feels hard-

¹ *Summa Theologica* IIa IIae, Q. 49. Quoted in Pope, Hugh, O.P., *Layman's New Testament* (London, 1934), p. 249.

² Sertillanges, A.D., O.P., *Saint Thomas and His Works*, trans. G. Anstruther, O.P. (London, 1932), p. 84.

pressed not to think that others are philosophical "fifth-columnists" destroying the very fundamentals of the reason they profess to use. Philosophy may be a *pousse-café*, a fluid in free-flowing permeation, but that should be no pretext for some to make it an intellectual "Mickey Finn." Where the idealist disowns his senses as mere useless appendages, and the materialist stifles the breath of true intellectual life, the Thomist makes explicit what was implicit in common sense. "Strictly speaking we learn only what we have somehow possessed all along, without being conscious of it."³

Aquinas made distinctions, and some subtle ones too, but to distinguish is not to depart from common sense. To know the window from the door is to avoid a fall of serious consequence. St. Thomas did not shrink from reasoning in anything reasonable. "The basis for Saint Thomas' confidence in the powers of reason lies precisely in this, that he recognizes (1) the validity of the faculties of knowledge, whether of sense or intellect; (2) that all certitude of knowledge arises from the absolute value of certain incontrovertible principles of reasoning with which man is endowed by his Creator; (3) that all natural things are immutable so long as they retain their nature; finally, (4) that man's desire and capability for natural truth is fulfilled primarily through contact with the material external world of whose reality his senses and intellect assure him. In a sense, these are hypotheses, or rather reducible to a single hypothesis; namely, that of the validity of natural sense and thought processes as commonly accepted by the majority of mankind. But it is not wholly gratuitous, as are the hypotheses of Plato, or even Augustine; it is at least supported by the common sense of common experience of mankind, and if this is thrown overboard, there remains no certain criterion of truth for anyone."⁴ As Father Carpenter has so ably shown, Aquinas begins with what man knows and not with what he doesn't know, which is not only the very sensible thing to do, but also the only way to start.

From no matter what angle we peruse the philosophy of the Angelic Doctor, we see his common sense radiate in striking rays and ways. In commentating on Aristotle—what practical

³ Sertillanges, A.D., O.P., *Foundations of Thomistic Philosophy*, trans. G. Anstruther, O.P. (London, 1931), p. 7.

⁴ Carpenter, H., O.P., "Baptism of Aristotle," *Dublin Review*, Vol. 190, 1932, p. 171.

common sense to disregard inaccurate texts and seek for a precise translation! And how sensible it was for him, though he himself knew Greek, to avail himself of the services of possibly the best translator in Europe, William of Moerbeke, a fellow Dominican! Even his reason for choosing Aristotle impresses by its prudence. "Aristotle does not seek truth in the same way as other philosophers. He begins with sensible, observable things, and proceeds to things separated from matter. . . . They, on the other hand, set out to apply intelligible and abstract things to things of sense."⁵ As to his very method—"The Scholastic style and method approached perfection in the work of Saint Thomas. His language, despite the difficult subject matter, is precise and lucid. It has a certain elegance but is never emotional, although at times it gains a "certain fervor, from the clarity and import of the statement which it so lucidly conveys." Anyone who has attempted to translate his writings readily appreciates his "condensed precision of thought and pregnant felicity of diction."⁶ Philosophy is sufficiently difficult without any unneeded obscurity, and the student is grateful to the Thomas who prudently wrote with a search-light instead of a blackout. Aquinas knew that a teacher to be a teacher should teach, which seems obvious, but unfortunately present-day philosophers are not all quite so Aquinian. For example, in speaking of A. N. Whitehead, C. E. M. Joad, a by-no-means unsympathetic commentator, feels forced to say, ". . . . Professor Whitehead's mode of writing is exceedingly obscure. Nor is it always clear that this obscurity is due to the nature of the subject matter. . . . Indeed, so obscure is his writing, that few contemporary philosophers have any assurance that they have fully grasped its import."⁷ Is this obscurity common sense, and the Thomistic clarity, inane?

Besides philosophy, Aquinas was among other things a "theologian, historian, statesman, author, poet, political economist; and he need not apologize, in any of these fields of endeavor, to the authors of the most modern and sane opinions in these sciences, who are doing their best either with or without his assistance."⁸ This statement is verified in unexpected ways.

⁵ *III Metaphysics*, lect. 1. Quoted in Sertillanges' *Saint Thomas*, p. 77.

⁶ Mayer, Mary H., M.A., *The Philosophy of Teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Milwaukee, 1929), p. 97.

⁷ Joad, C. E. M., *Guide to Philosophy* (New York, 1936), p. 559.

⁸ Smith, Ignatius, O.P., "Thomas Aquinas, Saint and Scholar," *Catholic World*, July, 1923, p. 458.

In social relationships the question of private property plays no unimportant part, and the arguments still used for private property are directly tracible to the great Dominican. J. H. Fichter, S.J., goes so far as to write: "They (Aquinas and Von Kettler) offered an intelligent argument—to me it seems the only strong argument for private ownership—and that is, that the ownership of property is necessary for the individual."⁹ And in that relationship which is the breaking off of relationship—war, St. Thomas displayed true common sense in making stringent the conditions for a just conflict between peoples. How highly esteemed is his reasoning in this matter is apparent from the predominant use of his arguments in Catholic circles today. In fact, the calm figure of Aquinas, the man whom so many would dismiss impatiently from practical affairs, bobs up constantly and sometimes unexpectedly with advice that even the most hard-headed Yankee would admire for solidity. In one of the most recent textbooks on sociology, for example, the soundness of the celebrated Dominican's views on recreation is recognized.¹⁰ But this discovery of common sense in Aquinas is not something recent like your last hair-cut. It was recognized in the saint's own life-time. "Louis IX, the saintly King of France, frequently called Thomas into conferences on the affairs of state, in fact, he made him one of his privy councilors"; then too, "Very frequently he was chosen to take part in the deliberations of the authorities of his Order."¹¹ Pierre Dubois, one of Philip the Fair's advisors, called St. Thomas "ille prudentissimus Frater Thomas." The world might be inclined to accept an opinion of the not overly scrupulous Pierre Dubois on such a point, for Dubois was full of worldly practicality.

But of all the social fields there are few in which controversy wags its bitter tongue so widely and wildly as in education. Yet, it seems safe to say that this field, far from being ahead of St. Thomas, hasn't caught up to him yet. In the cacophony of educational theories today, there are few, outside of the Church, who have any clear absolute, to which education should be directed. The result is that educators are in the same position as the absent-minded professor whose railway ticket the agent forgot to mark—they don't know where they're go-

⁹ Fichter, J. H., S.J., *Roots of Change*, (New York, 1939), p. 167. Cf. p. 71.

¹⁰ Ross, E. J., *Fundamental Sociology* (Milwaukee, 1939), p. 306. (This chapter was written by Sr. Anne Burns, O.S.B.).

¹¹ Smith, Ignatius, O.P., *op. cit.*, p. 453.

ing. Dance partners have to agree on dance steps or some one will get stepped on. The tragedy of educational confusion is that the children and youth are the ones stepped on. Now Aquinas had common sense and realized that the end of education is the same as the end of all other things—God. If he had realized only that and nothing more, he would still be far ahead of most contemporary educationalists, but St. Thomas recognized and advocated principles so fundamental and far-reaching that they can with profit be studied today.

Years ago, many seemed to consider education as something to beat into a recalcitrant's head. It may be that this was unconsciously Platonic, for the Platonist should logically consider an examination as the measure of innate knowledge recalled. The Thomistic concept, following the Aristotelian, is not such. Aquinas taught that the pupil must have the potentiality, the ability to learn, and that the teacher is to be as a guide to truth. In the Thomistic notion, the importance of self-activity is stressed, for education is not poured into the brain like soothing syrup down a waiting throat. Present-day educators, while crying for the necessity of self-activity or as they term it "self-expression," neglect to recall the other part, that activity means effort and every effort is not without its trials. Progressivists in education have in some cases gone too far. While it may be a laudable aim to sugar-coat the bitter pill in order that the child will take it, nevertheless, it is distorting the means to forget to put the pill in the midst of the saccharine covering. Thoughtful Catholics view "painless education" with the pained conviction that it is producing a race of reeds shaking in the wind.

The principles of Aquinas in the educational field are aimed at producing the whole man and not a creature of whims and fancies or a one-sided specialist whose intellect is totally engrossed in the strata of the earth or the winding of the intestines. The so-called "Dark Ages" would pity this enlightened age of blackouts, for the "Dark Ages" hadn't lost the only Light which really counts. "The Ages of Faith" could also use their reason, and reason was not neglected in education. ". . . Whatever the medieval university did not do, it certainly fostered thinking, and . . . whatever the medieval student could not do, he certainly could think."¹² In presenting his wise man, Saint Thomas describes an harmonious union of philosopher, scientist,

¹² Mayer, M. H., *op. cit.*, p. 102.

artist, and saint. The last named is so seldom included today that Father Garrigou-Lagrange could well be appalled at the number of intellectual giants who are spiritual dwarfs.¹³ Still it is precisely at sanctity that true education should ultimately aim.

In living a life of sanctity, the Angelic Doctor clearly exhibited that his map to heaven was not criss-crossed by the silly detours of worldly attractions. To the fervent Catholic, to be a saint is not to play the starry-eyed dreamer; rather it is to use Christian common sense. It is the answer to why we're here. We are wrong to judge the saint unpractical and to "think and speak of the saints and of great men as if they were like wax figures or automata, or men who lived and moved in a dream-land, forgetting that in reality they were warm-hearted, practical men."¹⁴

By seeking admission to the Order of Preachers, Aquinas actually applied his common sense. The Friars of St. Dominic had the rule, the means, and the end which would bring the genius of the Angelic Doctor to its full fruition. As the great Dominican preacher, Monsabré, has pointed out, "Thomas wished to put his admirable intellectual gifts under the protection of a religious rule which would assure him, for all his life, the four indispensable conditions for knowledge." It was in the Dominicans that he found these conditions of time, liberty, solitude and conscientious intellectual labor so essential to true science. "The new Order of Friar Preachers, vowed to poverty, to recollection, to penance, and to study, offered him that advantage. He went there to seek the perfection of his virtue, to be sure to obtain the perfecting of his intellectual gifts."¹⁵ As a follower of St. Dominic he was pledged to study, and no one has ever denied that he kept that pledge. Was his study without purpose? Was he like those contemporaries of Abelard of whom Gilson writes, "Some of them learn in order to know; others in order that it may be known that they know; and others again in order to sell their knowledge. To learn in order to know is scandalous curiosity—*turpis curiositas*—mere self-indulgence of a mind that makes the play of its own activity

¹³ Garrigou-Lagrange, R., O.P., *Christian Perfection and Contemplation* (St. Louis, 1937), p. 191.

¹⁴ Kennedy, D. J., O.P., *St. Thomas Aquinas and Medieval Philosophy*, (New York, 1919), p. 51.

¹⁵ Monsabré, T. R. P., O.P., "Panégyrique de S. Thomas, mars, 1895, *L'Année Dominicaine*, Cf. p. 114-117.

its end. To learn for the sake of a reputation for learning is vanity. To learn in order to traffic in learning is cupidity, and, what is worse, simony, since it is to traffic in spiritual things—*turpis quaestus, simonia*. The only proper thing to do is to make our choice between the sciences with a view to salvation, that is to say so that we may acquire charity, just as one chooses one's food with an eye to health. Every science so chosen, so acquired, is "prudence," all the rest is "curiosity."¹⁶ Saint Thomas avoided all three of these errors and "thought in order to serve others, and his thought is colored by this solicitude."¹⁷ In doing this he was just being a Dominican down to his last rosary bead.

Perhaps the saddest commentary on this world is that so few will recognize this common sense of striving for sanctity. We live in a world so enamoured of the created that it has forgotten the Creator. The world may laugh at its saints, but some day it will cry, "These are they whom we had some time in derision, and for a parable of reproach. We fools esteemed their life madness, and their end without honor. Behold how they are numbered among the children of God . . . (while) we wearied ourselves in the way of iniquity and destruction, and have walked through hard ways. . . . What hath pride profited us? or what advantage hath the boasting of riches brought us? All these things are passed away like a shadow."¹⁸ But while the world moans, the ridiculed Thomas will be looking upon the Almighty; for Thomas had followed Dominic in the footsteps of Christ, and Christ's path was God's path, for Christ was God, and God is all and in all and without Him there is nothing. Thomas, the philosopher of common sense, had used his common sense to distinguish the Light from the Shadow, and the Light was his reward.

¹⁶ Gilson, E., *Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* (New York, 1940), p. 64.

¹⁷ Sertillanges, *St. Thomas and His Works*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ *Wisd.* 5: 3-9.