

THOMISM IN THE LEONINE ENCYCLICALS

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WHEN Cardinal Pecci ascended the Papal Throne in 1878 as Leo XIII, he looked down from his lofty eminence upon the world that had been committed to his care. His heart bled as he observed the noble struggle of the Church in contrast to selfishness and individualism, glorying in their momentary triumph over justice and charity, leading most of the world into a sterile land of "freedom" and "progress." Philosopher that he was, Leo traced the genealogy of these two vices. Greed and injustice were the offspring of selfishness. Greed on the one hand begot an uncontrollable desire for money and the concentration of wealth, which had fathered poverty of the many and wealth for the few. Injustice on the other hand was nurtured by a sanctionless law and a theory that might is right. That other monster, individualism, because it had deified self, utterly abandoned God and love of God and bred disunion in the family, in the state, and in the social order.

What was the source of all this disorder? The Pontiff had learned from a familiarity with the teaching of St. Thomas that all human actions are good or bad, productive of order or disorder, according as men had and followed true or false knowledge. To Leo XIII, then, the root of disorder was in the minds of men: false philosophies tending ultimately to naturalism and atheism had entirely laid waste any thought of the supernatural, while false teachings on revelation had produced a multiplicity of sects, only to end in absolute rejection of true religion, of God's law and authority, the real bond of union in the family, among states, and within the social order.

How was order to be regained? Again from St. Thomas, Leo knew that the source of order was found only in a conformity with the divine plan. Moreover, the Angelic Doctor had taught him that the end of philosophy should be to induce the order of the whole universe into the minds of men. The solution was now evident. The world of disorder would have to be converted by a philosophy of order, an orderly philosophy that would lead to a knowledge of the supernatural, a philosophy of the divine origin of duties and rights, a philosophy that would establish the unity and truth of God. This last was necessary, if one true religion was to be restored.

Where was such a philosophy to be found? Leo had known it even before he was elected to the Chair of Peter, for as Bishop of Perugia, he had begun to revive the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas in his diocese. Now as the Universal Pastor of souls, he recommended to the world the doctrine of St. Thomas, for "he heated the world with the ardor of his virtues and filled it with the splendor of his teaching. Philosophy has no part which he did not touch finely at once and thoroughly; on the laws of reasoning, on God and incorporeal substances, on man and other sensible things, on human actions and their principles, he reasoned in such a manner that in him there is wanting neither a full array of questions, nor an apt disposal of the various parts, nor the best method of proceeding, nor soundness of principle or strength of argument, nor clearness and elegance of style, nor a facility for explaining what is abstruse."¹

Nothing remained but to apply Thomism in a vast plan designed to convert the modern mind to truth and to faith; accordingly, Pope Leo, observing that universal harmony must begin within the family and spread into the state and economy, issued encyclicals embodying principles for the readjustment of each: *Arcanum Divinae* for the family, *Immortale Dei* for states, and *Rerum Novarum* for economy.

In the family the source of disorder was traceable to what modern expediency had done to marriage. The laws of many lands approved divorce; some rulers would not allow marriage to fall under the jurisdiction of the Church; the vogue of civil marriages denied the use of sacred rites, thus separating the union of man and wife from its essentially religious character. All this resulted in the breaking up of homes, in the shirking of responsibilities, and in a flood of disorder within the state. The *Arcanum Divinae* outlined a set of guiding principles manifesting the sanctity, indissolubility, and sacramental character of marriage, describing the virtues which would ensure stability in the unions and suggesting the benefits which well-regulated families bring to the state.

Pope Leo was convinced that much of the error in his day was due not only to civil states founded on theories other than those approved by the doctrines of Christ, but also to the attempt to subordinate the Church to the state. With this in mind, he published the encyclical *Immortale Dei*, in which he discussed the Christian Constitution of States. With St. Thomas as his guide, he expounds on man's natural instinct to dwell in society and shows that every civilized community must have a ruling authority with God as its

¹ *Aeterni Patris.*

author, so that whoever holds the reins of government derives his right from God through the citizens, who center it in him to be administered for the well-being of the citizens, who must be granted liberty to practice the Christian virtues. Among the various societies in the world, the Church established by the Son of God, because of its supernatural and spiritual aim, because of its divine charter, cannot be inferior to any civil power or in any manner dependent on it. "The civil powers have for their object the well-being of the mortal life; the other the everlasting joys of heaven."² Each in its own sphere is supreme, but because both have rights over the same subjects, conflicts have arisen. In such cases the rulers of states must come to an understanding with the head of the higher society. These are the principles of order; anything else would be contrary to reason and opposed to the nature of man and to divine law.

Probably the most prolific source of world disorder was to be found in economy. Here were abuses without number. The working man was, as Leo testified, under a yoke little better than slavery. The employee was defenseless and isolated, ever ready for revolt; the employer was fattening on greed and selfishness. Reports were rampant that the Church was the tool of money-interests for retaining the present abuses against the worker. The solution to such conditions was not in Socialism with its overthrow of religion and fomenting of class warfare. Only St. Thomas, advocating the Church's teaching, could remove the wild boar from the vineyard. *Rerum Novarum* explained that the working man was deserving of justice, had rights to the earth, to private property, to a job and a living wage. The dignity of human labor, viewed as an image of Creation and as cooperation in God's art, was emphasized. No law could prevent laborers from entering associations for safeguarding their rights. The only hope for recovery lay in following these norms, while sheer folly would dictate adhering to the present abuses in a hope that having led men into the wilderness they would also lead men out into daylight.

These were the natural means proposed by St. Thomas for healing the cancers of error. Disorder in the mind is cured by truth and faith. So far Pope Leo appealed only to human reason in his attempt to cure, but after the *Rerum Novarum*, he probed deeper and deeper. "Not in bread alone doth man live, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God."

In an attempt to renew all things in Christ by restoring religion, Pope Leo published encyclical after encyclical, setting forth the na-

² *Immortale Dei*.

ture of true religion and the character of the Church of Christ. Such a gigantic task was left to be furthered by his successors. None of them failed in the early days of his reign to offer St. Thomas to the world, for each of them knew that each succeeding generation was in more and more danger of becoming drunk with pagan practices and of forsaking religion, unless strongly fortified with a reasonable exposition of their beliefs.

Especially to priests and ecclesiastical students was St. Thomas recommended, but not to them alone. Part of the work of the Lay Apostolate was to consist in this, that it should spread abroad not only Catholic religion but also Catholic philosophy in filling the minds of men with truth. "If we love the truth in the souls of men, if we realize the thirst in the anguish of the world, if we are ready to sacrifice everything to slake that thirst; if we love truth in the Church, if we understand the significance of Benedict XV's words, adopted by Pope Pius XI—"The Church has declared the doctrine of St. Thomas to be her own peculiar doctrine"—then we shall not be greatly deterred by scholastic difficulties; rather we may hope to participate in the light shed by St. Thomas, really to understand the things he taught, and to be of use to the best of our ability, poor though it be, in that universal task of restoration in truth entrusted to him by the Master of History."³ The truth of St. Thomas, the weapon used by Pope Leo XIII, is entrusted to us. Its effectiveness depends on how well we use it.

³ Maritain, Jacques, *The Angelic Doctor* (New York, 1931), p. 148.