

ST. THOMAS, EDUCATOR

BERTRAND MAHONEY, O.P.



WE KNOW Thomas as the saint who, after Dominic, is the Preacher's ideal; as the prince of theologians; as the patron of scholars. He has been called the Apostle of the Modern Age. We shall attempt to show him as the Apostle of Education. Not, God forbid, of that education known as "progressive," but rather as the champion of the *pedagogia perennis*, as he is of the *philosophia perennis*. Jacques Maritain has sounded the call for a return of the part of the modern pedagogues to the principles of Thomas Aquinas:

"St. Thomas . . . is the only thinker who has formulated a perfectly correct idea of human nature, which is the central factor in education. His is the only theory which draws a clear distinction between the natural and supernatural orders, while pointing out their essential accord. . . . It is the only theory that establishes the primacy of the intellect in the order of substance and speculative knowledge."¹

It is our intention to show that Thomas has phrased not only the general principles, but immediately applicable ones of education and the manner of teaching. A teacher for twenty-three years, it is only to be expected that in his work we may find some mention of teaching method.

Just what is education? The definitions of modern thinkers are vague and rather verbose, strongly tinged with naturalism. Man is self-sufficient, and pragmatism is the only criterion of truth and morality. Pius XI has phrased the Christian concept of education briefly as "the fulfillment of capacities."² Accepting this definition, we may distinguish three types of capacities, three ends of education: physical, intellectual and moral, of which the last two are the principal concern of the teacher.

In the light of this distinction of ends, we may next ask how is education to be referred to the body of human knowledge; how is it to be fitted to the frame of science? Is it, as many modern writers on the subject think, an autonomous science? Sciences are specified by their formal objects. With its twofold end, education

¹ Introd. to de Hoèvre's *Philosophy of Education*, quoted by Fitzpatrick in *Reading in the Philosophy of Education*.

² Encyclical on *Christian Education*.

has a twofold object. It must, therefore, borrow its principles from higher sciences, from psychology, and ethics or moral theology. In our discussion of Thomas as an educator, we shall limit ourselves to the intellectual aspects of his principles.

The Thomistic philosophy of man sees him related to God as to his first cause and ultimate end. In the order of nature he is a rational animal, a creature possessed of an intellect capable of knowing essences abstractly and, in consequence, possessed as well of a spiritual, appetitive faculty. Man's knowledge begins with sensation. In virtue of the abstractive power of his intellect, he is capable of drawing from his sensitively-acquired knowledge essential ideas.

With this hasty glance at the background of knowledge, we come to the immediate problem. As the pupil is the subject of education, it will be well to see what St. Thomas teaches as to his place in the scheme. It is first established that the pupil is capable of knowledge, indeed that in his knowledge of first principles are contained the seeds of all future learning: "There exist in us certain potentialities of knowledge; namely the first concepts of the intellect which are immediately known . . . as axioms . . . or beings. . . . From these universal principles all principles follow as from germinal capacities."³ By reason of this knowledge of first principles the pupil knows potentially particular truths and principles which he is to acquire through instruction. The potency the student possesses is not merely passive but active. That is to say, his intellectual apprehension of essences, his faculty of discursive reasoning, will lead from the more universal to the particular, from first principles to conclusions, when it is stimulated by the instruction of the teacher.

How then is this potency to acquiring knowledge to be made actual? How is this ability to know to be brought to full fruit of knowledge? It is the rôle of the teacher to help the intellectual power of the pupil to attain to the conclusions. This is done as the teacher speaks, presenting symbols, words of intelligible content to the pupil: "The teacher proposes to another by means of symbols the discursive process which he himself goes through by natural reason, and thus the natural reason of the pupil come to cognition of the unknown through the aid of what is proposed to him."⁴

We see here the burden of the disciple for Thomas. Knowledge is not poured into him as water into a glass. There is no room in

³QQ. Disp. *De Veritate*, Q. XI, a. 1. in corp. This and the subsequent English translations from *De Veritate* are taken from *The Philosophy of Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Mayer (Milwaukee, 1929).

⁴*De. Ver. loc. cit.*

Thomas' pedagogy for the lecture as described by a cynical educator today: "That process whereby the teacher's notes become the student's notes without passing through the mind of either." The teacher may strike the match, he cannot make the light in the mind of the disciple. No—the student's is an active, not a passive potency to knowledge. In the last analysis he must use his God-given wit if he is to know.⁵

It seems then that a teacher is not necessary at all. The principal cause of knowledge is the intellectual light of the pupil; therefore, a teacher is superfluous. St. Thomas points out that a man can come to the knowledge of things unknown through the natural light of his intellect. We find however, two kinds of agents in nature: those which cause the whole of their effects and those which cause only part. The potency to know in man is an agent of the second sort. Education or teaching, strictly so called, implies a perfect knowledge in the master as in a mover, an obvious impossibility in the process of self-acquired knowledge.⁶

Education, then, is bi-lateral. As no man may be his own instructor a teacher is necessary. First and foremost the teacher must be in complete command of his subject. Since he is a true cause, (though an extrinsic one) of knowledge in the pupil, he moves the pupil from potency to actual knowledge.⁷ It is a familiar postulate that one thing may effect another only in so far as it is itself in act. The teacher's task is to guide the mind of the student from the first principle intuitively known, the "germinal ideas," to the full fruit of knowledge and to apply those principles to the body of observed facts. This guidance may not be arbitrary, may not content itself with overwhelming the student with a mass of erudition and opinion, but must proceed as the nature of the human intellect itself requires: "The process of reason in one who arrives at the cognition of an unknown, i.e., in the process of learning apart from the teacher, is the application of general, self-evident principles to definite matters, and proceeding from them to others . . . the teacher proposes to another the discursive process which he himself goes through by natural reason."⁸

So much for the general problem of the teacher. St. Thomas indicates as well the particular method that must be followed in instruction. The student must know something. This statement is

⁵ *Summa Theol.* I, q. 117, a. 1 ad 3; *De Ver.* XI, 1, ad 17.

⁶ *De Ver.* XI, a. 2. in corp.

⁷ *Summa Theol.* I, q. 117, a. 1.

⁸ *De Ver.* Q. XI, a. 1.

not quite as inane as it seems at first sight. He must be in possession of a fact known from internal consciousness or sense experience and with some principle immediately known. Time and again St. Thomas repeats that first principles are the seeds of knowledge, those principles that form a litany familiar to every Scholastic: Contradiction, Identity, Sufficient Reason, Causality. The truth of this requirement is obvious. If learning be likened to a journey, it is obvious that the traveller must know his whereabouts before starting. "All learning," says St. Thomas more succinctly, "comes from pre-existing knowledge."⁹

From this starting point the teacher leads the pupil from principle to conclusion, from potential to actual knowledge. His lectures, if they are to be of any use to the pupil, must be of intelligible content, words from which the students may draw their essential ideas. Learning comes, not from words, but from the discursive reasoning expressed through words.¹⁰ This process of reasoning from the known to the unknown, the *ordo disciplinae* as Thomas calls it in the prologue of his *Summa*, is the cause of knowledge.

This process on the part of the teacher may take two forms: First, he may propose to the student helps which his intellect can use, such as less universal propositions or sensible examples; second, he may show him the order from principle to conclusion in cases where the student has not the power to make the intellectual step himself.¹¹

To sum up briefly the basic principles of the teaching process: Teaching demands both a pupil and a master; a pupil, for it is his intellect which acquires the knowledge; a teacher, for the pupil is only in potency to know and may be led to knowledge most surely by one in possession of it. The teacher's task is to lead the pupil from first principles to their particular conclusions through a correct reasoning process and the use of sensible images.

No better application of these principles may be found than in the work of St. Thomas himself. From the turn of a leaf or the fall of a stone he leads his disciples to the existence of God; with flawless logic and with frequent use of examples, he scales the heights and plumbs the depths of being. The modern teacher can do no better than follow the example Thomas has set in word and work. His language is not the language of today; his symbols (as he might phrase it) are of the thirteenth century, but their intelligible content is timeless, their truth unshakable.

⁹ *De Ver. Q.* XI, a. 1, ad 3.

¹¹ *Summa Theol.* I, Q. 117, ad 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* ad 4.