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ST. THOMAS—THE CATHEDRAL OF THOUGHT

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IN THEIR manifest helplessness men have forced words to their limit in an attempt to express the boundlessness of St. Thomas. Many, realizing the great proportions of the object they sought to describe, have confined their writing to only a small feature of this colossus. Some have chosen his incomparable genius. Another group might scratch the surface in telling about his unfinished work. All, however, are certain about one thing, when they have written their last word about Thomas—they were not equal to their task.

Numerous metaphors and figures have been employed by biographers and commentators to give a sensible image to their readers. Some regard his work as a beautiful water-fall, whose limpid waters are ever rushing on. The diamond is another familiar representation used—the diamond which displays a new facet each time it becomes the object of deeper study. Not a few have conceived of Thomas' mind as a cyclopedia, but have found this bookish figure rather lame, because his prodigious memory was not his main forte. His memory was supported by mind.

Perhaps, the most comprehensive depiction of St. Thomas and his works is rendered in an analogy drawn between them and a Gothic cathedral. As a humble pilgrim viewing an edifice which lies before him for the first time, one must stop for orientation to unfamiliar surroundings.

Genius is distinguished from the ordinary by its height and depth. It was essentially in this that the Gothic architecture differed from the ordinariness of the severe lines of the Romanesque. The towering steeples appear to the amateur to be unsupported. But, upon close inspection, both styles are seen to stem from the same origin.

One of the chief differences between the two types is the dizzy height of the Gothic as compared with the rude symmetry of the Romanesque, with its uniform anchorage to the earth. The "New Art" of the thirteenth century was a definite change from tradition, and it met with the opposition any new school must expect from the masters of the old. The new school to last should not fail to make good use of the best of the old.

The huge blocks which supported the twin towers of the Cathedral of St. Thomas' thought rested on doctrine taken from St. Augustine and from Aristotle. For that which was built above this foundation, St. Thomas allowed himself to wander far from the locale of his beginnings. The territory, into which he progressed, embraced all that existed, or might exist or might never exist.

As a work of art it stands alone, like the Cathedrals of Rheims or Amiens, as though it had no progenitors. Then, although, like Rheims, its style was never meant to be appreciated by the cynic and is seen with jaundiced eye by those in the school of belles-lettres, yet, it reveals itself as a work of extraordinary genius—a system as admirably assembled as any cathedral and as final an accomplishment, seldom found in either science or art. The architecture of St. Thomas, like any other great art, is at first best studied alone. Otherwise, the pilgrim would never get beyond the entrance to the nave.

It would seem that all truth should begin at the same place, and, following the design of truth, reach the same pinnacle. St. Thomas, who saw the foundations laid by St. Bernard and St. Victor, the mystics, knew that he could never suffer his structure to rest on such weak foundations. For this reason, St. Thomas began by sweeping the foundations free of all possible structural defect.

Beginning with the fact that there is motion in the world, he established the existence of God. This fact is proved objectively. Around this foundation are set four other arguments, which, as the '*quinque viae*,' are fashioned into an impregnable keystone. That which rises above this foundation, becomes more complex as it grows skyward, due principally to the incapacity of our intellects to know the Infinite. Then, as the building shaped itself, came the "tour de force," the vaultings of the great nave. St. Thomas made the arches into great vaultings which represent, on one side of the arch, God's descent to man, and, on the other side, man's ascent to God. These arches persist from the very back up past the nave. They extend only to be consummated in something beyond the very confines of the Church itself.

High above the graceful rose window, he placed the Trinity. Its

place of prominence is accentuated by the multiplicity of things that are built beneath it. Remembering the attacks made upon this mystery, he set it down as simply as he could. The Father knows Himself and that knowledge of Himself which exactly corresponds to Himself is the Son, "The figure of His Substance." Seeing Himself, God must love Himself, since He is infinitely lovely, and His love, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is the Holy Ghost. Power and Wisdom and Love in God are therefore inseparable.

The Cathedral, then, is built. The extremities of the edifice are superb. Nothing before it was so lofty, nothing so huge. Through the beautiful stain glass were shadowed vestigia of the Almighty Himself—vestigia never before depicted so completely by man. Here was closeness to perfection. Yet, even in its seeming completeness, it was incomplete for St. Thomas.

For Thomas, his whole Cathedral of thought must be permeated with God, and he had shown its utter dependence in this respect by having its very fundamentals rest upon the creation. St. Thomas knew that all who have been saved have belonged to the soul of the Church, if not to the body; all men enter the portals of salvation through the choice of one of three massive doors: water, blood or desire. But those who are saved by water must also be preserved by Bread. St. Thomas, we are told, proceeded with delicate cautiousness in his marvelous treatise on the Blessed Sacrament. He realized the tremendous task he has taken upon himself and his utter helplessness. One day, almost in despair, he placed the rough draft of his tract concerning the Eucharist on the altar, while he prayed to God for light. Tradition reveals that Our Lord appeared to St. Thomas, and told him, "Well has thou written about My Sacrament, Thomas." Now he had put the very Godhead into the Church for the people to adore.

The life of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is a Life of Operation, and this operation is nothing else but the whole work of redemption, the beginning and the end of which is Love's perfect worship of God. The Eucharist was the Heart of the Church. From the tabernacle, although the Heart was unseen, it was the center of Life and Love. For Thomas this treatise on the Eucharist was his Cenacle. Nothing in the world could escape the influence of the Eucharist. To this center each soul either approaches or moves away. As a top when spinning at its fastest, seems to be stationary, and all its colors blended into one whole, so too a soul, approaching towards God, by reason of His nearness, speeds ever faster towards Him and actually becomes one with Him, when He comes to the soul under the veils of the sacrament. It was beneath these appearances of Bread and Wine

that St. Thomas with sublime reverence studied. He strained with all his heart and mind to learn more about this Mystery. Well did he know the true significance of his own maxim, "It is better to know a little about the Highest Thing than much about inferiors." In comparison to the "Super-essential Hiddenness" Itself he has left us almost nothing, but, in proportion to other theologians, St. Thomas drew his most perfect blueprint when treating of the Holy Eucharist.

The intricate framework of St. Thomas structure gave evidence of a remarkable intellect. Yet, he was to add a stroke that would be a conclusive sign of the splendour of his genius and sainthood. He was to make the mute walls resound with melody, and he was to give a voice to the creatures who knelt before the Eucharist as if their tongues were tied. How could a poor peasant find words worthy of the Mystical Christ!

St. Thomas took from the heavens songs that might well have been chanted by the angels. Christ had given to the poorest of the poor His very Body and Blood. St. Thomas, who understood this awful Mystery better, perhaps, than any human being, composed paens of praise and love to be sung by the whole church.

In his poetry, Thomas has an outlet for his emotions—something he did not allow himself to do in building the shell of his Church. In the order and construction of his hymns, St. Thomas is naturally the theologian, while being the poet. Devotion, as he fully realized, must be the overflow of contemplated revealed truth. Therefore, in all his poetry, after an invocation of thanksgiving, he pours forth his heart in adoration. His poetry unwinds the sacred mysteries in lines of supreme love and reverence. At times, deep tones strike our ears with the evenness of the Chant of the Church sung by a Cathedral Choir, which reminds one of the pounding surf striving to express itself on the beach. And the mighty pauses of his songs are like the silent sighs of an adoring heart.

Aquinas summed up his life-long devotion for this ineffable Sacrament, when, upon receiving the Viaticum, he said, "I receive Thee, the price of my soul's redemption; for Thy love I have studied, watched and laboured." The actual material for his poetry was taken from Holy Scripture. His own pen, with undeniable accuracy, wrote a whole Mass without spilling a single blot of error. Ever since the thirteenth century, the *Lauda Sion* has echoed through every Cathedral Church and Monastery of the world. One of his hymns has become part of the ritual for Benediction.

Thomas, by his works, not only drew plans for a grand Cathedral, but from his love and devotion for the Eucharist, he gave to the

world a symphony on the Blessed Sacrament. Like a true architect, he controlled his project from its beginning until he finally dropped his pen. No theologian has ever been acclaimed with more universal approval than was St. Thomas. Yet, it was from the Crucifix, from which he had drawn the copy for his immortal edifice, that he received the reward for his labours.

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