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## THE CONDEMNATION OF ST. THOMAS

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WHEN a great man dies, it is not long before "the eagles gather" to do their work of destruction. What they failed to do during that man's lifetime, they sometimes succeed in accomplishing after his death. St. Thomas was not exempt from these posthumous attacks. By a strange coincidence, three years to the very day after his death, some of his teachings were condemned as heresies.

The facts of the condemnation are familiar. Stephen Tempier, Archbishop of Paris, was responsible for issuing a condemnation of 219 teachings of philosophy then current in Paris. Among these were some fundamental theses of St. Thomas. Archbishop Tempier denounced these as "manifest errors, or rather, as vain and false insanities"<sup>1</sup> and the penalty of excommunication was imposed on anyone defending, teaching, or even listening to these teachings. Eleven days later, the Dominican Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Kilwardby, caused the Masters of Oxford to condemn these and other Thomistic doctrines, not as heretical, but as dangerous.

In the glorious record of St. Albert's life, perhaps there is no episode more colorful than his magnificent defense of his former student. A man ambitious for his own fame might have remained silent and bowed to the decision of the authorities in Paris with a pretense of humility. St. Albert, on the contrary, made a long journey through the winter's cold in order to present the cause of his beloved Thomas. Indeed, if it were not for this defense, Thomism as we know it today might well have perished, for though St. Albert was unsuccessful at Paris, the weight of his words helped suppress any anti-Thomistic movement within the Order of Preachers.

<sup>1</sup> P. Feret: *La Faculte de Theologie de Paris*, Vol. II, p. 135.

The condemnation, while it apparently affected only a few of the many teachings of St. Thomas, was a direct attempt to destroy his entire system. Stemming from the previous condemnation in 1270 of Siger of Brabant and the Averrhoists, it was fostered by the adherents to the older Plato-Augustinian Scholasticism as well as by those who had personal motives of antagonism to St. Thomas. It was a direct attempt to encompass the ruin of Thomism by confounding it with the pernicious philosophy of the Averrhoist Aristotelians. There were three factions involved: the seculars of the University under the leadership of Stephen Tempier, the Franciscans under John Peckham and the Dominicans under Robert Kilwardby. The seculars were proponents of the older Scholasticism and, in addition, still smarted under the defeat that they had received at the hands of St. Thomas in the question of the Mendicant Orders. The Dominicans were of the pre-Thomist school and, according to John Peckham, had disputed bitterly with St. Thomas. Robert Kilwardby, in particular, had led Dominican opposition to St. Thomas at Oxford. The Franciscans were eager to see the light of Thomas dimmed in favor of their own luminaries, St. Bonaventure and Alexander of Hales. Their leader, John Peckham, in addition, held personal resentment to St. Thomas because of the humiliation he had received in a disputation with Thomas in Paris.

All of these factions, opposed though they might be in other matters, were fused in their common distrust and hatred of Aristotelian thought and of St. Thomas. They were eager to seize upon any opportunity that was offered for the accomplishing of the ruin of the one and the downfall of the other. This opportunity came when Pope John XXI ordered the Archbishop of Paris to begin an investigation of the Averrhoist errors being taught in Paris. The mandate did not include in its scope the teachings of others, but neither this nor the fact that St. Thomas had been the cardinal opponent of Siger of Brabant, the leader of the Latin Averrhoists, made any difference. It sufficed that Thomas and the Averrhoists agreed on certain doctrines, namely the unity of form and the principle of individuation of corporeal substances. By condemning these and thus pairing Thomas and Siger of Brabant, St. Thomas and Thomism would be discredited.

The Averrhoist branch of the followers of Aristotle relied for their interpretation of Aristotle solely on the commentaries of Averrhoes. He alone, they held, understood Aristotle and his was the infallible doctrine to be followed. That it led to manifest heresy did not disturb his followers even though they professed to be of good faith.

They reconciled their heretical doctrines to faith by teaching that what might be true in the order of faith might at the same time be false in the order of reason and vice-versa. In other words, the principle of contradiction was not valid. Thus, while proclaiming themselves good Catholics, they espoused doctrines embracing the denial of the infinity of God, and also the denial of creation, human personality, personal immortality and responsibility.

It was to condemn these that the Pope had given his mandate to Tempier. Seven years before, when the Averrhoists had been condemned, St. Thomas had prevented the inclusion of his doctrines by defending himself in the Third Quodlibetic disputation. But St. Thomas was now no longer to be reckoned with and so the condemnation was issued that was to end the influence of the Friar Thomas of Aquin. Included in this condemnation were Thomas' doctrines of the unity of the world, the individuation of material and spiritual substances, and the theory of the localization of spiritual substances and their relation with the physical world. At the same time, by pre-arranged plan Archbishop Kilwardby of Canterbury had the Masters of Oxford condemn as dangerous the Thomistic theories of the passivity of matter, of generation, of the unity of the soul in man, and of the introduction of new forms in the human body after death.

We have seen that the main purpose of the two-fold condemnation was to end the influence of the Thomistic School by stigmatizing it as Averrhoistic. Let us suppose that the condemnation had not been revoked and yet had failed of this purpose. What would have been the ultimate effect of the condemnation of these doctrines? In other words, how fundamental are they to Thomistic Philosophy and Theology?

The main doctrine aimed at by the opponents of St. Thomas was his doctrine on the unity of forms. Let us see, then, some of the effects of the denial of Thomas' doctrine of unity and the postulating of the opposed doctrine of plurality of forms. The first effect of the denial of this doctrine is the denial of the principles of identity and contradiction. To teach that matter may be informed by more than one form is to teach that that which is already determined may be determined, that that which already is may come to be, that, in brief, being is not being. Secondly, it destroys the basis of unity and therefore of entity itself. St. Thomas in this regard says, "To make an end of the matter, the aforesaid position," (i.e. that there are a plurality of forms), "destroys the first principles of philosophy, by removing unity from individuals, and, consequently, both true entity and the diversity of things. For if another act supervenes to something

which exists in act, the whole will not be a unity *per se*, but only *per accidens* for the reason that two acts or forms are in themselves diverse, and agree only in the subject. To be one, however, through the unity of the subject is to be one *per accidens*.<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, it destroys the doctrine of potency and act. It destroys the *ratio* of act, in that act instead of being that which determines matter may be received into an already-determined substance; it destroys the *ratio* of potency, in that it makes of potency either absolute nothing or something already determined. To destroy thus the doctrine of potency and act is to destroy "the unshakable foundations of all Metaphysics," as Hugon describes it, and to destroy the Thomistic doctrines in Theology of Grace, of the Humanity of Christ, etc.

We see, then, that the purpose of the condemnation was first to discredit and sully the memory of Thomas by implication with Averroism. If that failed, however, the undermining of the foundations could be relied upon to cause the entire edifice of Thomistic philosophy and Theology to tumble into ruins.

That either event failed of realization is to be credited almost entirely to St. Albert. Warned by his disciple, Giles of Lessines, of the impending condemnation, Albert hastened to the defense of his former pupil, Thomas. To defend Thomas, Albert aroused the divided and laggard Dominican Order to a true appreciation of the worth of Thomas and to a united stand in his defense. A direct result of this rallying cry of Albert was the writing of many tracts of defense by Thomas' brother Dominicans. A more important result, however, was the action taken by the General Chapter of the Order held at Montpellier in 1278 which made Thomism the official doctrine of the Order. With such opposition, the condemnation of Thomas could not hold. It was revoked in Paris, after direct intervention by the Church, by Bishop Stephen of Borrete on Feb. 19, 1325. At Oxford, while never officially revoked, the failure of succeeding Bishops to renew the condemnation had the force of a revocation. By 1314, according to Nicholas of Trivet, it was permissible to hold the doctrine of unity of form.

Albert, in this defense, showed many of his traits of greatness, but above all charity and humility. It required a great love to bring a weary old man the long distance from Cologne to Paris. It required great humility for that old man, who was admittedly the most learned man then living, to efface himself for his former pupil. It required great humility to defend Thomas' doctrine of unity of form and by so doing to condemn his own teaching. But above all, it re-

<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas: *De Substantiis Separatis*, C. 6, *Opera Omnia*.

quired great humility deliberately to relegate himself to that position in which for so many centuries the world held him—Albert the Great, who, they said, was great only because he was the discoverer and teacher of Thomas. That he could do so was because he was truly great—Albert the Great Bishop, Albert the Great Philosopher, but above all, Albert the Great Saint.

## REFERENCES

1. L'abbe P. Feret: *La Faculte de Theologie de Paris*, Vol. II, p. 135.
2. St. Thomas Aquinas: *de Substantiis Separatis*, Cap. 6.  
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