

PROMISE IN A PROLOGUE

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FAMOUS professor at a leading university of the world was about to write a new book. He was sitting at his manuscript-strewn desk, pen in hand, wrapt in thought, or more probably, prayer. He began to write slowly and with evident deliberation. After the first paragraph he paused and put down his pen as if unwilling or afraid to proceed. He clasped his massive hands together, bowed his large head and seemed to be debating with himself. He must have conquered his unwillingness and fear, for shortly he reached for his pen and rapidly wrote down the second and third paragraphs. This done, he again set down his pen, picked up the first page of his manuscript and read what he had written:

“Because the Master of Catholic Truth ought not only to teach the proficient, but also instruct beginners (according to the Apostle: ‘As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink not meat’—I Cor. III, 1 and 2), we propose to treat of whatever belongs to the Christian Religion in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners.

We have considered that students of this science have not seldom been hampered by what they have found written by other authors partly on account of useless questions, articles and arguments; partly, also, because those things that are needful for them to know are not taught according to the order of the subject matter, but according as the plan of the book might require, or the occasion of the argument offer; partly, too, because frequent repetition brought weariness and confusion to the minds of the readers.

Endeavoring to avoid these and other like faults we shall try by God’s help to set forth whatever is included in the Sacred Science as briefly and clearly as the matter itself may allow.”¹

When he finished reading it, he whispered to himself: “With God’s help . . . only with God’s help.” He had made a promise and had written it down; he was now begging God to help him keep it faithfully.

Who was this famous professor? What was he writing? And

¹ Prologue, *Summa Theologica*, translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

why was he hesitant and fearful? The university professor was Saint Thomas Aquinas, and the book he was writing was the *Summa Theologica*. He had just written the *Prologue*.

The *Prologue* to the *Summa* is a remarkable document and one of the choice pages of Thomistic writing. Its simplicity, brevity and compactness make it a masterpiece within a masterpiece. It is one of the shortest prologues Saint Thomas ever wrote: three short paragraphs, slightly over one hundred and fifty words. Its brevity becomes more strikingly apparent when compared with the introduction of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which is composed of no less than nine chapters. The simplicity of this miniature masterpiece is deceptive. Some readers pass over it lightly, because at first glance there seems to be little of value in it. They forget that the simplicity of genius is deserving of close scrutiny. In its sheer simplicity this prologue outlines the duties of a Catholic teacher, exposes the chaotic conditions of the universities of Europe and embodies a gigantic promise. Indeed this prologue, simple and brief as it is, provides much food for thought.

Especially noteworthy is the promise contained in these paragraphs, a promise no other man of the thirteenth century could sanely make or faithfully keep. Saint Thomas wrote: "... we propose to treat of whatever belongs to the Christian Religion in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners." And again: "... we shall try by God's help to set forth whatever is included in the Sacred Science as briefly and clearly as the matter itself may allow."

In other words, Saint Thomas set himself to write a *complete* manual of Sacred Doctrine. Everyone will concede that this is no slight task. Add to this the author's promise that certain qualities would shine forth in his work, namely, *brevity* and *clarity*. He knew well that brevity often runs the risk of lapsing into obscurity, yet he dared to attempt this hazardous project. Finally, the author was going to address himself to beginners, for whose immature minds he was intending to compress and set forth the loftiest teachings of the Church. Was not all this a superhuman task? If Saint Thomas were not the Angelic Doctor, he would certainly have failed in his attempt. His *Summa* would have helped to swell further the rising tide of chaos as it would have made the medieval student's study table sag beneath its ponderous weight.

It must not be imagined that there were no obstacles to the fulfillment of this pledge. The great hindrance to its perfect realization was the confusion reigning at the universities, a confusion caused by what might be popularly termed "the textbook situation."

This "textbook situation" was the greatest obstacle in the path of learning for the medieval student, especially the beginner. In that age the students had a hard time of it as they attended lectures, scribbled notes, were duly present at the fortnightly sessions of "Disputed Questions" and the twice yearly solutions of "Miscellaneous Questions." They had to supplement their courses with diligent reading of the Fathers and careful study of the commentaries of the *Books of Sentences*, which, incidentally, was the closest thing to a standard text of theology in existence at the time. All this scurrying and scraping of odd bits of theological information could and too often did produce only one result: the complete befuddlement of the beginner of theology. He spent so much time in wading through useless reading to reach the important matter that when he finally arrived at what he was seeking, he was too tired to continue. More frequently, the beginner's professor would do so much skipping around in the wide expanses of theological speculation, that the young student found himself now proceeding in circles, now jumping over gaps in his knowledge in his pitiful attempts to keep up with his professor.

Such was the chaos which confronted the Angelic Doctor; such was the situation he had pledged himself to right. He had to put the whole body of Sacred Science in order; he had to avoid the faults of his learned predecessors; he had to keep the beginner always in mind. This was why he hesitated before he wrote the words that bound him; this was why he feared to make the promise he was not sure he could faithfully keep.

Once the promise was made, however, Saint Thomas set himself to work with indefatigable energy and concentration. He arranged the matter of his work so that it followed a sure guide of faith, the Apostles' Creed, while at the same time he inserted an unbreakable skeletal framework drawn from sound philosophy. He succinctly indicated this when he wrote: "Since the principal object of Sacred Doctrine is to give knowledge of God, not only as He is in Himself, but also as he is the beginning of all things and the end of them all, especially of rational beings, we shall treat first of God; secondly of the tendency of the rational creature to God, and thirdly of Christ who as man is the way by which we tend to God."²

The Angelic Doctor took the utmost care not to fall into the faults of his predecessors. He was not going to give space to a single useless question, article, or even argument. In his commentaries on

² *Summa*, I, 1 (introd.)

the *Books of Sentences* by Peter Lombard, written very early in his teaching career, Saint Thomas was tireless in proposing objections, often setting down as many as ten, and lavish in giving arguments to support his thesis. All that detail was not needed for his purposes now, so it was ruthlessly omitted. Two or three objections sufficed to set the thesis into its proper setting, a single authority was enough for the *Sed Contra*, one strong argument from reason was frequently sufficient for the body of the article.

Lastly, keeping in mind the fact that he was writing for beginners, he simplified the arrangement of articles, took care not to coin new words, carefully explained the terms he used, and chose to refer the student to what had already been written, rather than repeat himself.

All these things Saint Thomas was doing with the finesse of genius when suddenly on one December day he was granted a view of the brilliance of Divine Truth itself. This vision of things unutterable made Saint Thomas a different man. It seemed to have driven his sincerely made promise from his mind. In spite of the urgings of his close friends and colleagues to continue his writing, the Angelic Doctor could not rid himself of the thought that what he had written was mere straw in comparison to what he had seen. The immeasurable distance between the Truth that was revealed to him and his own attempts to reproduce it paralyzed his fingers; they would not move, they would not write another word.

During the four months which followed, Saint Thomas must have tried to rouse himself to finish his work. He was not a man to leave a task unfinished, a promise unfulfilled. As the weeks dragged on and he saw that he could not continue, he resigned himself to God's will. When he died in March of the following year, his book, the *Summa*, was unfinished; however, whether Saint Thomas realized it or not, his promise was fulfilled. He did not pledge himself to finish the book; that was in God's hands. But the promise he made, he carried out to the letter, as every student of the *Summa* will testify. The miracle of the *Summa Theologica* remains through the centuries as a monument to the man who kept his word.