

FALLING APPLES, SAINT THOMAS AND CHARITY

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PRING may not be the proper season for writing about falling apples, but it is always an appropriate time to write about Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose Feast Day is exactly two weeks before the first day of Spring. Instead of apples, falling baseballs might be used in the title, or even falling bombs. In either case Saint Thomas' teaching on Charity would not have suffered. Baseballs would not have appealed to so many people, falling bombs might have made the reader turn the page in horror, so falling apples were selected as the means of introducing an interesting lesson from Saint Thomas on Charity about which it is always in season to write or speak, and by which it is always necessary to live. To set the stage for this scene depicting a flash of Saint Thomas' greatness, it will be necessary to ask a few questions. First, have you ever noticed an apple falling? Second, have you ever noticed that a falling apple gains in speed as it approaches the ground? It is important to answer this question truthfully, that is, have you yourself ever noticed this fact? Perhaps not. Last, have you ever stopped to think why this happens? Perhaps not. Yet, this common, well known fact of the accelerated motion of falling bodies contains within itself a tremendous secret, which, once discovered, becomes a key to the workings of both Nature and Grace.

A falling apple's downward motion is an invitation beckoning the one who sees it to approach and explore the mysterious realms of the causes of things. The history of the study of the falling apple takes the student back to ancient Greece, when Wise Men, or Philosophers, stopped in wonderment at this phenomenon of nature and swamped themselves with questions as they pondered the fundamental reason for this fact. These men forced themselves to answer, and in answering they made great progress in the knowledge of nature. Falling apples were not too insignificant to attract the attention and hold the minds of these great men.

Men were studying this problem two thousand years after the fall of Greece. Sir Isaac Newton, as the story goes, was awakened rudely, in fact, too rudely, one day as he slumbered at the foot of an apple tree, when a wind-blown apple struck him on the head. Doubtless, the pain of the bump on his head prevented scientific wonder

from arising in his mind at that time; however, after the pain subsided, he did begin to wonder and inquire. The results of his laborious inquiries led to the formulation of the theory of universal attraction which bears his name. We must then give credit to the early Greeks for having first noticed this phenomenon and intelligently naming its cause. To Sir Isaac Newton and the English physicist Atwood must be given credit for determining experimentally the rate at which falling bodies increase in speed. But far greater honors must be given to one who has not yet been mentioned in the foregoing sketch of the history of the problem. Saint Thomas Aquinas, foremost Wise Man, or Theologian, of the Middle Ages, and surely of all ages, gave many hours of his time to the study of the problem. He explained its causes more clearly than the Greeks did, and found in it not only a secret of Nature, but also, a secret of Grace. For Saint Thomas the movement of a falling apple was a signpost pointing the way to successful living, to progressive and heroic loving, to a perfect union with God through Charity.

It matters little whether Saint Thomas himself discovered this fact, or read about it in the books on natural science he studied at the University of Naples (1236-1243). What does matter is the fact that, struck with wonder, he began to ask the question: "Why does it fall faster?" After some study the Angelic Doctor discovered the law which governed the movement of falling bodies. He stated it thus: Heavy bodies move more swiftly as their descent is greater.¹ This answer might have satisfied a careless student. It did not satisfy the Angelic Doctor. He could see something more fundamental in the problem, but could not as yet put his finger on the full answer. More thought brought more light, and he found what he sought—the principle underlying the motion of falling bodies. It may be stated as follows: Every natural local movement becomes more rapid as it gets closer to its end. The next step the Angelic Doctor had to make, was to test the universality of his principle. He asked the question: "Does this principle apply to all of Nature's movements?" To answer this question it was necessary for him to observe the various kinds of natural motions, such as growth, or alteration, and even natural motions of the soul as fear, joy, hate. His observations resulted in a forceful conclusion:² Every natural motion is more intense or rapid at its end.

An apple cast upwards diminishes in speed, because its motion is not natural, but violent; but, in its downward natural course it will

¹ S. Thom. Aq. Comm. in I de Coelo, c. viii; lect. 17.

² *Summa Theologica*, I, II Q. 35, a. 6.

gain in speed with every second it is moving. In motions from quantity to quantity, which are called growth, one can notice the much faster rate of growth just before the plant, for example, has reached its full stature. This accelerated increase in growth immediately before its natural term is reached can be noticed also in children, who seem to grow up into adolescence almost over night. In those motions from quality to quality, or in alterations of any sort, the principle of the Angelic Doctor holds true. For example, it is amply justified in the act of boiling an egg, that is, in the heating of the water, where the natural motion of heat, continually increasing, increases more rapidly as it nears the boiling point. Spiritual motions, such as joy or fear or hate, become more intense as they near their term, the object to which they tend, which they hate, or fear.

By now the problem is amply clarified: we have the reason for the greater motion, we have the law which governs the speed of falling objects, we have a universal principle, a key to all of Nature's motions. Yes, for a philosopher, the problem is solved. But Saint Thomas was not a mere philosopher; he was a theologian, who thought of God continually, whose task it was to order all things to God. He could not leave this principle bent earthwards. No! He must aim it Godwards.

Saint Thomas saw the connection immediately. Was not man's most necessary duty to return to God from Whom he came? Did not this duty impose on man the necessity of tending toward God? Is there any reason why the principle should not be applied to this motion towards man's supernatural end, once God has freely given to man the first impulse? The only obstacle would be the utter difference between the order of nature and the order of grace, but a glance at this obstacle showed Saint Thomas that it was not a hindrance at all, for grace does not destroy nature but rather perfects it. On this declaration, that grace perfects nature, the Angelic Doctor set his principle drawn from things he observed in nature. If the principle that every natural motion is more rapid or intense at its end, functions in natural, human things, it will also function in supernatural, divine things in a more perfect manner.

How does human love begin? How does it progress? Father Farrell explains: "Not infrequently a chance breeze blows back the curtains from the windows of our soul, a passerby is given an unexpected glimpse of the depths of that soul, and friendship begins. Perhaps the immediate occasion is no more than a smile, a kind word, an understanding glance."³ The progress of this friendship or love

³ Farrell, W., O.P., *A Companion to the Summa*, III, p. 93.

depends on more than a fleeting glimpse ; progress in love depends on deeper knowledge. One must be constantly near the one beloved to know him or her better, and as the knowledge grows, love reaches forth more ardently. That is why an occasional meeting is enough for friendship although soon, more frequent meetings are necessary to satisfy the love which seeks union with its beloved.

Does divine Love or Charity proceed in the same way? If it does, we have really reached the end of the lesson. To quote Father Farrell once more:⁴ "In somewhat the same way the favors of God or the high hopes He offers us, push back for an instant the veils that hide His face ; we get an unexpected view of the depths of the riches of God." God's riches make man stretch his arms to Him Who alone can give them. Thus does divine love begin, with God's gift. Through God's continual giving love progresses. These gifts, secret, powerful, active gifts serve to bend man Godwards, drawing him into closer and closer union with Him. At first there is much reliance on human things in the march to God, but with time, with greater knowledge and love, man's reliance is placed in God alone, his only concern is complete union with Him. As man marches closer to God, he can realize more and more clearly that God is attracting him more powerfully with each succeeding step. If we consider what takes place in man's progress in love, in charity, we shall see the striking parallel between falling apples and loving hearts. The nearer the apple approaches its term, the ground, the faster is its motion ; the closer the heart of man gets to its term, God, the more intense will its love and activity be. Apples and hearts differ in this, though, that apples cannot resist the power of the earth which attracts them, while man can resist God's attractive power.

We have reached the end of the lesson from Saint Thomas Aquinas on falling apples and charity. Not only have we found the answer to the problem of the falling apple, but we have learned a principle, which is a key to the motions of both nature and grace. There remains but one thing more, a thing which demands some courage. That one thing is this: Make the experiment with God's gift of charity ; dare to live close to God, received in Holy Communion ; see for ourselves whether closeness to Him will make the motion of our love for Him more rapid and more intense.

⁴ *Ibid.*