

## THE CLASSIC COMMENTATOR—THOMAS DE VIO CAJETANUS, O. P.

---

Italy, the land wherein St. Dominic bequeathed to his children his last will and testament, was destined to give to his Order not only the author of the "Summa Theologica," St. Thomas Aquinas, but also the classic commentator of that immortal work, Thomas de Vio Cajetanus. This other Thomas, as he has been called, was born at Gaeta in 1469 or 1470. Writers tell us that his parents were in good circumstances and lived in the love and fear of God. Their illustrious son was baptized Giacomo, the Italian for James. From his earliest years he showed signs of that sanctity and learning which so characterized his whole life. When yet a mere youth he turned aside from that path of worldly fame which lay before him and entered the Dominican convent of his native city. Here he was clothed in the habit of the Order he had chosen and took the name of Thomas, in honor of Saint Thomas Aquinas. His parents objected to the step he had taken, and to avoid interference on their part his superiors sent him to Naples. Here he studied philosophy afterwards going to Bologna for theology. His rapid progress in studies made him become known throughout all Italy. Since he had come from Gaeta, which in Latin is "Cajeta," he was universally called Cajetanus, or Cajetan—the man from Cajeta.

At the age of twenty-one he was a professor in Padua. A few years later, in 1494, an event took place in that city which was to cause the name "Cajetan" to resound throughout all Europe. The General Chapter of his Order was assembled in the city, and during it a public disputation was held. Cajetan was the defendant, and among the many who objected against his theses was the well-known Pico della Mirandola.

Pico, wishing to test our young Dominican, proposed arguments and difficulties which seemed to be insuperable, but Cajetan, after having repeated all these with accuracy, showed in his answers such solidity of doctrine, such profundity of genius, such subtilty of mind and such a universality of knowledge that he won the admiration of his formidable adversary and the applause of the whole assembly. At the close of the disputation he was carried in triumph, first to the Duke of Ferrara and then

to the Master General of his Order. The former covered him with honors and distinctions; the latter, at the request of all, especially of Pico della Mirandola, gave him the Doctor's cap. What a sight that must have been! All eyes centered on that little Friar, who was, as writers say, "small in stature but gigantic in intellect." Nature had not been generous to him in regard to his height, but had given instead a combination of moral and intellectual gifts that are rarely found united in the same person.

Sought for by all the universities of Italy, Cajetan taught successively at Padua, Brescia, Mantua and Milan. During the first years of his professorship he wrote his commentaries on St. Thomas' work "De Ente et Essentia." He ends them with these words: "Adolescentiam enim adhuc ago"—"I am yet a youth."

About the beginning of the year 1501 he was called to Rome as Procurator General of his Order, and in addition to this and other duties he taught at the Sapienza. As he had not only the dialectical skill of a St. Thomas but also the governing power of a St. Bonaventure, upon the death of the Master General, John Clérée, in 1507, Cajetan was appointed by Pope Julius II as Vicar General until the General Chapter should meet and elect a new head. The meeting took place the following year and the choice fell on him.

Seeing the evils that then existed in the Order, Cajetan set to work at once to apply the remedy. In his letters he lays stress on two things, religious discipline and the study of the Sacred Sciences. These letters are worthy of the heart and mind from which they sprang, for by them he seeks to carry his brethren back to the primitive vigor of the Order, which was its glory in the thirteenth century. He did not neglect the foreign missions, and during his Generalship the first band of Dominicans left Spain for the recently discovered lands in the New World. Four centuries have passed since that memorable time, and today the Order is so spread over the earth that when some of Dominic's children are chanting the "Jam lucis orto sidere" in the Old World, others are but intoning the "Laudate" in the New.

---

<sup>1</sup>The "Laudate" is said shortly after midnight; the "Jam lucis orto sidere" about six in the morning. As there are about five or six hours difference of time between the Mainland of Europe and certain places in the United States the "Laudate" and the "Jam lucis orto sidere" as being chanted at the same time, though in different localities.

In 1511 the Pseudo Council of Pisa began. Cajetan, knowing that it would disturb the peace of the Church, sent thither three Dominican theologians of well-known reputation, who by their doctrine and skillful arguments defended the rights of the Pope and compelled the schismatics to leave the city. In the meantime he was busy at Rome giving to the world his work, "De Comparatione Autoritatis Papae et Concilii"—a book which has been called both excellent and divine. It was partly at his advice that the Pope convoked a real Œcumenical Council, the Fifth Lateran, at Rome, April 19, 1512. It treated of reforms within the Church. Cajetan was present in behalf of the Religious Orders, having been chosen by them for this purpose.

Pope Julius II died in 1513, but the Council was continued by his successor, Pope Leo X. This Pope was as quick as his predecessor to recognize the abilities of Cajetan, and in recognition of the labors of our Dominican in behalf of Mother Church, gave him the purple of a cardinal. Nominated as Archbishop of Palermo, he refused on account of opposition on the part of the Sicilian Senate. However, at the request of Charles V, he accepted the bishopric of his native city, Gaeta.

Chosen as a Legate to bring back Luther to the bosom of the Church, he gave his whole heart and soul to this difficult task. Although unsuccessful in his mission, Cajetan nevertheless won universal admiration for the spirit of firmness, prudence and moderation which he exercised towards this rebellious child of the Church.

But in the midst of all these duties Cajetan found time not only to write the works we have quoted but very many others besides. Various and numerous as these may be, none perhaps have been more esteemed than his Commentaries on St. Thomas' "Summa." He wrote them between 1507 and 1522, and were quickly recognized as classic, in scholastic literature. The important relation that exists between Cajetan and the Angelic Doctor was emphasized by Leo XIII when by his Pontifical Letter of October 15, 1879, he ordered the former's Commentaries to be incorporated with the text in the "Summa" in the Leonine Edition of the complete works of St. Thomas.

If we ask how Cajetan was able to accomplish so much, the answer is, "Because he wrote and studied much." He made it a rule never to let a day pass without devoting some time to reading or writing—a practice that he observed faithfully until the

day of his death. It is said that he knew the whole "Summa" by heart.<sup>2</sup> "Let others rejoice in their prerogatives," he once wrote, "but the works of our Order is at an end unless Sacred Doctrine be our commendation." There is scarcely a Dominican who is not familiar with his saying:<sup>3</sup> "I can scarcely excuse from grievous sin a brother Dominican who does not devote at least four hours a day to study." This saying, though it may seem a little hard, reveals nevertheless the attention which our Order gave at that time and has continued to give to study.

During the last years of his life Cajetan undertook his great work—Commentaries on the Sacred Books. It was his object, he declared, in a dedicatory letter to Clement VII published in his edition of the Gospels, to ascertain the true, literal sense of the Scriptures, and he did not hesitate to adopt new renderings, provided they did not conflict with the Sacred Writings and the teachings of the Church. This position, much criticised in his time, is now quite in line with the common method of Catholic exegetics; and the name of Cajetan is held in respect by scriptural students of today.

When in 1534 this great man, who had been a light of the Church and a glory to his Order, passed out of this life, his remains were laid to rest in a humble tomb in the vestibule of the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva. In accordance with a beautiful custom that exists in our Order, its Master Generals are always remembered in the prayers of every community. In each year, on the ninth day of September, as we are gathered together for prayer, a brother announces that this day is the anniversary of the death of the Venerable Father Thomas de Veo Cajetanus, thirty-eighth Master General of the Order. Then the cantor intones the "De Profundis," which is taken up by all present. Thus they pray God for him in whose life they see a restoring of all things in Saint Dominic, in whose letters they find the highest ideals of a Dominican vocation.

—Albert Muller, O. P.

---

<sup>2</sup> Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica, Tomus IXus, pagina 94.

<sup>3</sup> Echard-Scriptores Ordinis Praedicatorum, Tomus 2us, pagina 16.