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ST. THOMAS AND THE BLESSED SACRAMENT*

The monuments which the giants of history have bequeathed to mankind are manifold. Indeed, in every branch of human endeavor we are indebted to our predecessors in great measure for our present state of progress and development; and in consequence we naturally desire to understand something of the life and accomplishments of these men. While accepting their gifts with gratitude, we wish to learn the motives which influenced them and to determine the source whence they derived their light and strength. Not infrequently, however, we are surprised and disappointed when we penetrate beneath the surface; for, on raising the veil which overhangs the inner sanctuary, we discover a mind not enriched as we had hoped by lofty sentiments and moved by generous impulses, but rather depraved by sordid aims and selfish purposes. We find ourselves in the presence of genius, but of genius whose brilliancy has been dimmed by pride, conceit, or turpitude. Such is the genius of an Aberlard, of a Photius, of a Voltaire, of a Napoleon, and of a Balzac. We are amazed at their rare accomplishments, but we are not attracted or edified by their moral qualities. And thus it is that biographies are too frequently but poor commentaries on the works of master-minds.

This is not true in the case of the saints. On the contrary, the more familiar we become with the lives of these men and women, the more convinced do we become of how imperfectly even their greatest achievements reflect their state of soul. Enlightened by Christian faith and informed by Christian charity, these men and women rose above the littleness and pettiness of human ambition, pierce the clouds which darken the ordinary visage, and, soaring aloft in the regions of empyrean blue, live in

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a world of thought and action for communication with which human language, however subtle, is but a faulty medium. As the poet-priest of the south expresses it, they see thoughts too pure for the touch of a word. It is the consciousness of this fact which makes a St. Paul seem to suffer a veritable torture in his endeavor to invest his words with a power and a force for which they are entirely inadequate; which makes a St. Augustine acknowledge that even his most learned dissertations are but mere babbling; which makes a St. Thomas Aquinas, after writing the greater part of his "Summa Theologica," exclaim to Blessed Reginald that anything which he had ever said or written seemed like mere trash in comparison with what he had seen and heard. An acquaintance with such men, then, for from being disappointing, is elevating and ennobling. And, however much we may admire their external works, we shall derive much more profit and inspiration from a consideration and an understanding of the motives which actuated them and of the principles which directed and sustained them.

Sanctity in its various forms arises from and is dependent upon love of God; and no saint has ever been crowned with the aureole of holiness without first having been enlivened by divine charity. But different saints have chosen different paths to attain this goal. Some, like a St. Antony or a St. John of the Cross, have found it in solitude, in following the thorny way of the mortified Redeemer; others, like a St. Vincent, a St. Hyacinth or a St. Francis Xavier, have found it principally in ministering to Christ in His suffering members; while others, like a St. Juliana, a Blessed Margaret Mary and a St. Thomas of Aquin, have, prostrate at the door of the tabernacle, found it in the Blessed Sacrament. Yes, if we were asked to determine that which more than anything else is responsible for the conception and the successful prosecution of one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of the inspired writings, we would say that it was St. Thomas' love and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

Of course there is always the danger of a disciple falling in love with his master, and, in consequence, attributing to him reasons and motives foreign to his mind. And this danger is enhanced when the master not only attracts us by his intellectual attainments but also wins us by his spirit of piety. In the present instance, however, this danger is obviated, since the words of the master himself furnish the evidence upon which we found

our conclusion. It was on his deathbed that he made that sublime profession of faith in the Real Presence, and at the same time made known the source whence he had derived the light and strength necessary to enable him to do so much for God and the Church. Before receiving Holy Viaticum, he pronounced these words: "I receive Thee, the price of my soul's redemption, for love of whom I have studied, I have watched, and I have labored. Thee have I preached, Thee have I taught. Against Thee have I never uttered a word." His devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was, then, the motive power, the internal principle, which awakened, stimulated and coordinated his energies; which enabled him amidst the dangers of his early life and the trials of his later university career to preserve his clearness of vision, his singleness of purpose and his peace of soul; and which finally explains the important position which the Blessed Eucharist occupies in two of his principal works—the "Summa Theologica" and the Office of Corpus Christi.

Most of us are too familiar with the outline of the "Summa Theologica" to make a repetition of it necessary. We shall therefore refer to it only in a summary way, endeavoring to show the position which the treatise on the Eucharist occupies in the general scheme. There are three main thoughts in the "Summa Theologica": the first of these considers God as He is in Himself, the second, God inasmuch as He is the beginning of all things; and the third, inasmuch as He is the end of all things, especially of man.

After studying the tracts dealing with God as He is in Himself and inasmuch as He is the beginning of all things, we form ideas not only of His power and majesty but also of His transcendence and of the great distance separating us from Him. And yet, inasmuch as He is our last end, we desire to know and to be united to Him. How this chasm between the infinite and the finite has been bridged over, how God has made possible the fulfilment of our desires and aspirations for the eternal, is the question which the Angelic Doctor answers in the "Tertia Pars." And his answer may be expressed in a single word: Christ, who by His Incarnation, Life, Passion and Death, remotely, and by the institution and administration of the sacraments, proximately, has made possible a union between us and our God which surpassed our greatest expectations. This entire section is, then, the "nexus" between two previous sections. And since a proper

reception of the Holy Eucharist is the easiest and most perfect way for us to effect this union, the tract on this sacrament assumed in the mind of the Angelic Doctor an exceptional importance, and consequently occupies a commanding position in his general scheme. If the "Summa Theologica" is likened to a Gothic cathedral whose various parts are centered about and subordinated to the tabernacle, it seems that the treatise on the Holy Eucharist is the centre, the Holy of Holies, towards which the other tracts are ordained, and without which they would lose much of their attractiveness and meaning. It is, as it were, the soul, the vivifying principle, which gives strength and beauty to the whole.

Christ exercised His most tender charity toward mankind in the institution of the Blessed Sacrament—having loved His own who were in the world He loved them to the end—and His disciple, St. Thomas, has unquestionably surpassed all his previous efforts in the exposition and explanation of the doctrine of this sacrament. In fact, it was after writing some of the articles in this treatise that he had a divine visitation in which Christ Himself approved the truth of his doctrine. And the ready acceptance with which his views met shortly after their appearance, their gradual adoption by otherwise contradictory schools of thought and their now well-nigh universal incorporation in books of philosophy and theology, afforded additional testimony, if such were needed, for their soundness and accuracy.

We do not intend to insinuate that the Angelic Doctor has added anything decidedly new to the theology of the Eucharist. Here, as elsewhere, he aims at a systematic and thorough explanation of Catholic doctrine as found in Scripture and tradition. But he has, as it were, taken the threads which lay scattered throughout the inspired text and the writings of the Fathers, and has woven them into a beautiful tapestry whose central figure, embossed in resplendent gold, is an ostensorium containing a Sacred Host, on one side of which are reproduced the types of the Old Dispensation, foreshadowing the Clean Oblation, on the other the Prophets, whose countenances are radiant with the joy arising from the possession of Him whose advent they had foretold and for which they had long sighed; immediately above the Sacred Host has been wrought a replica of the Last Supper, during which Christ fed His disciples for the first time with the Bread of Angels, and in the distance we can see the Glorified

Christ ascending into heaven to make ready the mansions which are reserved for the Eucharistic worshipers. Truly the Doctor has given a treatise which is no less beautiful than it is instructive. In it the metaphysician will discover speculations which will call for the exercise of his most ingenious and subtle faculties, the apologist will find in it the solution to whatever objections may be brought against the Real Presence, while the theologian, whether for his own benefit or for the benefit of others, learns from it the easiest and most perfect means of sanctification.

At first reading we may think the Aristotelian method too cold and rigid for the exposition of a subject which so readily lends itself to warmth and fervor. But upon closer examination we recognize that it is not without its advantages; for it makes possible an economy of words, a clearness of distinctions and a force of expression which no other method would permit. True it is that it does not afford an opportunity for the display of affection which a less impersonal style admits; but it enunciates with lucidity and exactness the principles by which we are to distinguish true affection from false sentimentalism and a reasonable faith from an unhealthy mysticism. To illustrate, in his article, "*Utrum liceat quotidie suscipere hoc sacramentum, in responsione ad tertium,*" he summarizes in a few well-chosen sentences the sentiments which we should entertain toward the reception of the Eucharist: "The reverence due to the sacrament is an admixture of fear and love. From love arises the desire of receiving; from fear arises a certain humility which suggests that we remain away lest we receive unworthily. But love and hope are to be preferred to fear. Hence, when Peter said: 'Depart from me, O Lord, because I am a sinful man,' Jesus answered: 'Fear not.'" The recipient, then, should steer a middle course between excessive timidity and rash presumption; he should experience a conflict between love and fear in which love is the victor. It was by insisting too much on reverential fear that the Jansenists incurred the displeasure of the Church; it was by neglecting it altogether that certain sectaries came to hold that even the presence of mortal sins was no obstacle to the worthy and fruitful reception of the Eucharist. It was by following the rule here enunciated by St. Thomas that the present discipline which regard to frequent Communion was inaugurated.

An impelling love and a restraining fear are the two thoughts which recur again and again in those questions which consider the Eucharist in its relation of the individual soul. An understanding of the motive which prompted its institution and a knowledge of its wonderful effects stimulate our affection and urge us to seek union with Him whom it contains; but a consciousness of our misery and sinfulness makes us hesitate at hastening into the presence of Him who is without sin, St. Thomas has already told us that the reason of the Incarnation was a desire on th part of God to communicate His goodness to the human race; and since the Eucharist is but a continuation of the Incarnation, the motive of its institution can be nothing else than this same divine goodness wishing to communicate itself to men. Christ knew our weaknesses and frailties; and in consequence in the institution and administration of this sacrament He accommodated Himself to our lowly condition rather than expected or demanded of us conditions impossible of fulfilment. "Sacramenta sunt propter homines" is, therefore, the principle which the Doctor applies in the solution the various questions which arise with regard to the reception and administration of the Eucharist. But, ever and anon, a word or phrase is introduced warning us against a certain carelessness or irreverence which might result from a too-liberal interpretation of this principle.

It seems that only a mind which had been lifted up to the contemplation of things divine and had seem almost with the clearness of vision the beauties and excellencies of this sacrament, that only a will which had felt itself strengthened and consoled by a proper reception of the Holy Eucharist, that only a heart which had itself experienced the conflicting emotions of a delicately strung soul in the presence of its Supreme Benefactor—could have exposed with such simplicity and precision the doctrine of the Eucharist as here set forth. In fact, the devout reader unconsciously feels himself raised to a higher and nobler plane of thought; and perhaps equally unconsciously, but no less truly, entertains the secret desire that he may share in the Angelic Doctor's understanding of the great things which have been accomplished in our midst. The student who sees in these articles merely a set of scholastic distinctions or an application of philosophical principles has certainly missed the spirit of the

author. He should read between the lines and endeavor to discover the heart and soul of the man, which were so ardently attached to the truths thus impersonally expressed. Any study of this beautiful treatise which does not end in a prayer, in a desire to know and to love with the knowledge and the love of St. Thomas this the greatest of God's great gifts, the memorial of his wonderful works, may not be fruitless, but it has certainly not attained to all that the writer intended. The study of this tract is no ordinary study; it is rather a meditation which should not only illuminate the mind but should also foster a spirit of piety and devotion. It should not only reproduce in those who pursue it properly thoughts and ideas akin to those of St. Thomas, but should engender dispositions and sentiments similar to those which he entertained. And only when we have exercised ourselves in this reverential and prayerful study do we begin to understand the position which this tract occupies in the general scheme of the "Summa"; only then do we begin to understand the singular graces which must have been showered upon St. Thomas in order to render him capable of writing as he has upon this subject; only then do we begin to understand why it was that shortly after its appearance St. Thomas abandoned his intention of completing his "Summa." He had been lifted up to the mountain of God; and he was to remain there the rest of his earthly career.

If we observe a certain lack of feeling and emotion in St. Thomas' tract on the Eucharist, we are delighted by the presence of it in his poetry. At first glance, it may appear singular that a poet of such unquestioned ability should have made the Blessed Sacrament the exclusive theme of his inspiring verse. And yet when we consider the dominating, all-absorbing interest which the Eucharist exerted on the mind and heart of the Angelic Doctor we should not be greatly surprised. Where one's treasure is there also is one's heart. And since St. Thomas had in his tenderest years discovered in the Blessed Eucharist the "pearl of great price" and had never ceased to cherish and defend it, his sentiments and affections naturally became more and more centred upon and unified by it. His eye was single—and the sole object of his desires was a knowledge and possession of Him who lives under the Eucharistic species. See him before the crucifix and listen to the colloquy between him and his Redeemer

—"What reward wilt thou have?" "None other than Thyself, O Lord!"—and you will no longer be surprised at the fact that when afforded an opportunity of expressing in the music of poetry and songs which arise with such sweet cadences from a heart attuned to the celestial harmony whose only hymn is "Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!" he devoted his energies to a single theme.

Christ Himself commended his dissertation on the Eucharist, and the Spouse of Christ, by incorporating his Office of Corpus Christi in her liturgy, has given to it the seal of her approval. What his "Summa Theologica" is in the field of theology, his Office of Corpus Christi is in the liturgy of the Church. The hymns "Sacris Solemnis," "Pange Lingua," "Verbum Supernum," and "Lauda Sion" constitute a galaxy whose brilliancy is unexcelled in the realms of sacred poetry. Joy, love, exultation, thanksgiving, hope and desire pulsate throughout them; and one knows not which to admire the more, their simplicity or their sublimity. Like the "Benedictus" and the "Magnificat," these poems can be understood by the unlettered, but their profundity cannot be fathomed by even the most learned. Poets have despaired of imitating them; translators have found themselves unable to reproduce them, and the musicians have hopelessly striven to interpret them. Doctrine is never sacrificed to imagery; truth suffers nought for the benefit of rhythm. Indeed, the "Lauda Sion" is but an epitome in verse of the theology of this sacrament; the "Pange Lingua" and the "Verbum Supernum" are resumes of the life of Christ, terminating in the institution of the Eucharist; while the "Sacris Solemnis" is concerned almost exclusively with the Last Supper.

In these hymns there are expressed but two dominant thoughts: an intense belief in the Real Presence and an earnest desire to share in its benefits. There are but two points of view taken by the sacred writer: the world in which we live and the home for which we are destined. To illustrate, let us consider the "O Salutaris." In the first two verses we are transported to heaven with the Risen Saviour, we see the portals of paradise open at His approach, and we contemplate for a moment the glories of our celestial home:

O Salutaris Hostia,
Quae coeli pandis ostium

In the last two verses we descend to the world of strife and discord, we feel ourselves surrounded by hostile agencies threatening our salvation, and we cry out for strength and assistance:

Bella premunt hostilia
Da robur fer auxilium.

Again in that oft-quoted stanza of the "Sacris Solemniis," beginning with the words "Panis Angelicus"; in the first two verses we ascend to the abode of the angelic choirs, we hear them singing their paeans of praise and thanksgiving and see them ravished with the joy of the Beatific Vision. We are then brought back to the world of signs and symbols and we see the figures of the Old Dispensation foreshadowing the Clean Oblation:

Panis angelicus fit panis hominum
Dat panis coelicus figuris terminum.

Then in the two following verses we are asked to consider that the same God who inebriates the souls of the angels, whose advent into the world had been announced by such remarkable manifestations, has become the food which is to nourish the souls of us destitute, servile and abject mortals:

O res mirabilis! manducat Dominum
Pauper servus et humilis.

In fact, so simply and yet so eloquently does the Sacred Doctor write of the Beatific Vision that one might readily imagine that he had already penetrated the veil and had caught a glimpse of the Glorified Christ. We may say of him what has been said of a less eminent sacred poet: "So beautifully does he sing that it seems as though in him heaven and earth came nigh and he heard the waves of time as they pulsed on the shores of eternity." He passes from the human to the divine with the ease and facility of a bird winging its flight from the sombre valley to the sun-kissed hills; and he seems to be in surroundings more congenial and natural when contemplating the divine than when restricted and oppressed by the limitations of the human. His life, one of his biographers tells us, was a continual progress towards the Beatific Vision, and to all appearances he had advanced a considerable distance along that path when he composed the Office of Corpus Christi.

We said that the proper study of St. Thomas' tract on the Eucharist should end in a prayer, in a desire of knowing and

loving Christ under the sacramental species with the knowledge and love of St. Thomas; and we find those very prayers admirably formulated in his sacred poems. St. Thomas the theologian tells us why we should worship the Blessed Sacrament; St. Thomas the poet shows how we should do so. As a theologian he speaks about Christ; as a poet he speaks to Him. When we wish to know what can be safely held about this sacrament, or when we wish to learn how false views may be answered, Holy Mother Church tells us to consult the "Summa Theologica." But when during Benediction we wish to mingle our prayers with the sweet-smelling incense, to join our homage to that of God's most beautiful creatures diffusing their odor throughout the sanctuary, and to enkindle in our hearts the fire of divine love like unto the flames of the burning tapers, she places upon our lips the words of St. Thomas' devotional "O Salutaris" and of his majestic "Tantum Ergo."

And that same Mother Church, by this day commemorating St. Thomas' advent among the elect, has given us infallible assurance that the Christ of whom he wrote so profoundly and so reverently in his "Summa Theologica" and to whom he prayed so fervently in his sacred poems has now become his eternal possession. And it is to be hoped that we who are endeavoring to understand and to appreciate the things of eternity as he understood and appreciated them, who are praying the same prayers that he prayed, may one day see, as did he, the veil of our Eucharistic Saviour gradually fade away and the figure of the Glorified Christ become more and more distinct, until we see Him with the clearness of vision, in which vision we shall discover our everlasting beatitude.

—Cornelius McCarthy, O. P.