

THE JOYFUL BELLOW

RICHARD HEATH, O.P.



WHEN ST. ALBERT quietly told his students that the huge friar they called the Dumb Ox would bellow so loud that the whole world would hear him, the Master was referring to the philosophical and theological tracts which St. Thomas would soon write, and not to his poetry. Yet, in a more literal way, it is this that the whole world hears. When thousands of Holy Name men gather in a municipal stadium and lift their voices in the hymn the Church has decreed to be sung at every Benediction, they are quite literally bellowing the poetry of St. Thomas Aquinas, for he wrote the *Tantum Ergo*.

Thomas wrote scientifically on innumerable subjects; he saved his poetry for one special Subject. Under obedience to the Pope, he composed the Mass and Office for Corpus Christi, in which are found his Eucharistic hymns; and by that act of obedience he revealed to those who marvelled at his intellect, that he also had a heart. He uncovered the core, that central fire that warmed all of his works, his profound, yet lyrical, love for the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Dominicans today cling to this tradition. They realize that their Thomism is not complete if it lacks this same love for Our Lord in the Eucharist. They know they are not bellowing everything St. Thomas said if they do not frequently sing his hymns. Once a month they leave their books and their discussions, they put from their minds the ponderous expositions of their masters, and go to chapel to sit at the feet of another Master, and to learn from His Exposition. They light candles and carry Him through the cloisters, singing all the while the hymns Thomas wrote about the goodness, the love, the beauty, and the truth of Him whom they carry. Once a month they bellow Thomistic doctrine.

Again, once a year they set aside eight days, usually at the beginning of June, for a more solemn manifestation of their love for the Eucharist. The Octave of Corpus Christi, coming, as it does, in the late Spring, gives Dominicans, nay, the whole Church, a wonderful opportunity to bring Our Lord out of His tabernacle, into the streets and fields of the world He made. More magnificent processions are

formed, many more candles lighted, and voices of all ranges, from boy sopranos to basso profundos, join in with the bluebirds and robins to praise their Lord. Outdoor Benedictions are given while all kneel on the pavement or the grass to adore. The entire octave makes manifest the love and the joy of Christians at having such a Sacrament.

Panem de coelo praestitisti eis, sings out the celebrant. "Thou hast given to them Bread from heaven." The congregation, once more in words chosen by the Dumb Sicilian Ox seven centuries ago, sing their response: *Omne delectamentum in se habentem*. "Having in Itself every delight." There in the fields, or in the streets of the city, the bellow of the Dumb Ox is heard, the bellow of joy, of thanksgiving, of love. The faithful may not know as much about the Eucharist as did Thomas; they may not be able to understand the distinctions of quantity, of concomitant presence; but they do know that the Sacrament they see before them, the large white Host held aloft, is Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and that It is a very joyful Sacrament. When they bow in adoration, they can say with the same intensity as did the Angelic Doctor, *Adoro te devote*. "I adore thee devoutly."

COMMON SENSE SUBLIME

St. Thomas, after he had finished his theological tract on the Eucharist, brought it to the Crucifix. There he begged Our Lord to show him the errors that were in it. Our Lord's answer is history. "Well hast thou written of Me, Thomas; what reward wouldst thou have?" Thomas was only being logical when he said, "Nothing but Thyself, Lord." If a man held that there was only one thing worth possessing in this life, and then were asked to choose among all things that which he prized most, and did not choose that object, he would not be logical. He would be lacking in common sense. The answer, "Nothing but Thyself," is perhaps the greatest example of common sense in all Thomistic literature. It is logic, psychology, metaphysics, and theology carried out to the perfect conclusion. It is St. Thomas applying his vast science to his heart.

The same may be said for his Eucharistic hymns. It has been said that "the hymns of the Angelic Doctor are remarkable for their smoothness and clearness, and for their logical conciseness and dogmatic precision."¹ Thomas did not place an abyss between his science and his poetry. His heart does not have reasons of its own, as Pascal might say. It rather rejoiced in the reasons given to it by his intellect.

¹ Cit. in Aquinas Byrnes, O.P. *The Hymns of the Dominican Missal and Breviary*. Herder. St. Louis. 1943, p. 166.

St. Augustine describes happiness as a rejoicing in the truth, and we might use the same to describe St. Thomas' hymns. They rejoice in the Truth; they are logical, dogmatic and joyful; theology, as it were, put to song. So that when St. Thomas had finished his manuscript and had presented it for approval, not now to Christ Himself, but to His Vicar on earth, he, by accepting the hymns, and by decreeing that at least one of them must be sung at every Benediction all over the world, echoed the response of Our Lord: "Well hast thou *sung of Him, Thomas.*"

The faithful at Benediction do not sing all of St. Thomas' hymns, yet the two stanzas of the *Verbum Supernum* beginning *O Salutaris*, and the two of the *Pange Lingua*, beginning *Tantum Ergo*, are sufficient to reveal St. Thomas as a zealous and joyful poet.

In the *Verbum Supernum*, the hymn of Lauds for Corpus Christi, St. Thomas tells in remarkably compact form the story of Our Lord's life. Proceeding from the Father, He comes to earth to accomplish His work. In the evening of His life he confers upon His disciples the gift of Himself. Then He died for us. Keeping all of this in mind, St. Thomas changes from the narrative third person into a direct appeal to Our Lord for help.

*O salutaris hostia,
Quae coeli pandis ostium:
Bella premunt hostilia
Da robur, fer auxilium.*

For those of us whose Latinity is usually far behind our devotion, Fr. Byrnes supplies a literal translation. "O saving Victim, that openest the gate of heaven: hostile attacks beset us; give us strength, give us aid."² If, with a little study, we caught hold of the grammar and vocabulary of this stanza, it could easily become for us a prayer for peace, so necessary in these days. *Bella* immediately brings to mind "war," and although St. Thomas means it more here as the assaults of the world, flesh, and devil, still we can accommodate it to mean the assaults of a military power which does seem to have something diabolical about it.

The hymn concludes with a doxology, that is, an expression of praise for the whole Trinity. St. Thomas remembers that we are pilgrims and strangers in this world, and that with the help of the Trinity we shall be brought to our true native land.

² *Ibid.* p. 178.

*Unitrinoque Domino
Sit sempiterna gloria:
Qui vitam sine termino
Nobis donet in patria.*

"Eternal glory be to the one and three Lord, who givest us life without end in our native land."³

Thus, the thought of the two stanzas, while it does not reveal adequately the theological content of St. Thomas' hymns, does show the devotion and piety of the Angelic Doctor. In them we beg for help from the saving Victim, and we praise the Trinity from whom we hope to gain admittance into our native land.

"SING, O TONGUE"

In the *Pange Lingua*, the hymn for Vespers, St. Thomas proceeds in much the same way as in the *Verbum Supernum*, except here he is more concerned with praise. The opening words reveal this: "Sing, O Tongue." The four stanzas which precede the *Tantum Ergo* establish the fact that Our Lord was true man, and that He gave Himself to His disciples at the Last Supper. Then St. Thomas, a true logician, comes to his conclusion. He reveals his heritage and his method of procedure with the word *Ergo*, "therefore." That word shows that Thomas did not separate his science and poetry, but rather incorporated the two. *Ergo* appears usually in the conclusion of a valid syllogism. So, Thomas, seeing that all the things he had said about Our Lord were true, can validly conclude:

*Tantum ergo Sacramentum
Veneremur cernui.*

"Let us therefore, prostrate, adore so great a Sacrament." Holy Mother Church, realizing that the faithful do not need proof for the greatness of this Sacrament, has wisely chosen only the last two stanzas to be sung at every Benediction.

In the remaining four lines of this first stanza, St. Thomas offers two thoughts, both of which occur many times in his Eucharistic hymns. For him the Eucharist is the greatest example of the fact that Our Lord came not to destroy, but to fulfill the Law. Throughout the Old Testament there are many instances of sacrifice, and even of symbolic sacraments; but all are types of this last and best Sacrament. The old is fulfilled by the new; the shadow by the Substance.

³ *Ibid.* p. 179.

Thomas closes this verse with a note on the function of Faith. It is a gift which makes up for our defective sense knowledge, for while we see, and taste what appears to be a white piece of bread, we know It is not that at all.

*Et antiquum documentum
Novo cedat ritui:
Praestet fides supplementum
Sensuum defectui.*

“. . . and let the Old Law give way to the new rite; let faith supplement the defect of the senses.”⁴

In his final stanza, his doxology, St. Thomas praises the Trinity with dogmatic sureness, and with great restraint. He shows his great love for his Subject yet holds the expression of this love to the truth given him from theology, and to the form given him from the poetry. From all eternity the Father generates the Son, the Son is generated by the Father, and the Holy Ghost proceeds from both. Yet, even though there may be an order of procession in the Trinity, there is no inequality. All are equal; all receive equal praise.

*Genitori, Genitoque,
Laus et jubilatio,
Salus, honor, virtus quoque
Sit et benedictio:
Procedenti ab utroque
Compar sit laudatio.*

“To the Father (as Generator) and to the Son (as Generated) be praise, glory, salvation, honor, power, and also benediction; and to Him proceeding from them both be equal praise.”⁵

DIVINITY IN ECHO

Father Byrnes notes a text from the Apocalypse from which St. Thomas constructed this stanza, revealing at once the scriptural bend of the great Doctor, and his humility. Thomas said once in the Summa that the greatest arguments which can be given to prove a theological proposition is the argument from the authority of Scripture, for that amounts to quoting the Holy Ghost. He, even in his poetry, practiced

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 168.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 170.

what he preached. When he came to write the doxology of this, perhaps his best poem, he did not rely on himself. Rather he remembered that marvelous passage from the Apocalypse of St. John which so well described a scene which Thomas now knows, and which we, who have been in attendance at some great Benediction, have some suspicion of.

"After this I saw a great multitude which no man could number, of all nations, and tribes, and peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne, and in sight of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands:

"And they cried with a loud voice: Salvation to Our God, who sittest upon the throne, and to the Lamb.

"And all the angels stood round about the throne, and the ancients, and the four living creatures; and they fell down before the throne upon their faces, and adored God,

"Saying: Amen. Benediction. Benediction, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, honour, and power, and strength to our God forever and ever. Amen."⁶

Every word that St. Thomas could possibly fit into the rhythm scheme of his poem he took from this text. Perhaps this is why the bellow of the Dumb Ox is heard in all corners of the earth, for it is not so much his bellow as it is an echo. Thomas, in his philosophy, echoed the truth in things; in his theology echoed the Truth in God; and in his poetry echoed the Truth and Goodness and Beauty which the blessed in heaven see in the Most Holy Trinity.

In this light, then, we can extend the prophecy of St. Albert. Since St. Thomas did nothing more than borrow his text for this poem from St. John and the Holy Ghost, may we not say that his bellow will not only be heard throughout the world, but that it will also resound through the heavens forever and ever?

"Benediction, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, honour, and power, and strength to our God forever and ever. Amen."

⁶ Apoc. vii, 9-12.