

DOMINICANA

Vol. XXXIV

JUNE, 1949

No. 2

THE LAW AT THEIR LIPS

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NCE, LONG AGO, in a dim corner of the abbey church at Monte Cassino, a young and perhaps chubby boy watched with intense interest the ceremony going on at the high altar.

Two or three monks were prostrate on the sanctuary floor; a figure clad in ancient garments was seated before them. Other monks, standing in the choir stalls, were singing out of great books, their swelling voices filling the vast nave. *Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison.* The boy wondered. He listened to the litany, watched the prostrate figures, and wondered. All his life he had wondered; had asked himself questions about everything he had ever seen, and about many things he had never seen; had sought the meaning of all things; and had resolved one day to write down his questions and his answers.

St. Thomas had always proceeded that way. Once when one of the monks at the abbey had caught him looking off into space with a strange fire in his eyes, and had said, "What are you thinking of, boy?" Thomas slowly came back from the distant place he had been, and answered quietly, "I was wondering what God is." Now he was wondering what ordination was, what the Priesthood was, what Holy Orders were.

About thirty years later this chubby boy, now a huge friar, with a huge intellect, and a still larger heart, dipped a pen into some ink, and after testing it on the paper with the words *Ave gratia*, wrote: "Should there be Orders in the Church?" It was his first question in solving the problems that made him wonder long ago. And his answer to that question reveals that the boyish wonder never left him.

WHY HOLY ORDERS

Order is a certain arrangement among things whereby the lower

depends on the higher. Such an order Thomas saw in the world, and it was a thing of beauty to him. So God, Who caused this beauty of order in the whole universe, desired to have the same beauty in His Church; the beauty of order, the beauty of Orders. Through them His grace would come; through them all in His Church would become more perfect. The laity would be able to receive the grace of Christ by means of His priests; His priests would be directed through the bishops; and all would receive infallible guidance through the Pope. If there existed order in the world of nature, then surely there should exist order in that which leads men from nature to glory, the Catholic Church.¹ Thus Our Lord, by instituting the Sacrament of Holy Orders, established in the realm of grace what had already existed in nature. He put order into His Church that through this order all men might be brought to Him. The very purpose of Orders is social; this sacrament was established for the benefit of others.

Perhaps St. Thomas hearkened back to the words of the bishop on that day when he first saw the ordination ceremony. Holy Mother Church puts these words into the mouth of the bishop, which he sings in the Preface of the Ordination Mass:

It is truly right and just, fitting and profitable that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to Thee, Holy Lord, Father Almighty, everlasting God, the fountain of all honors, and the bestower of every dignity; by Whom all things make progress, by Whom all things are strengthened, in accord with Whose wise plan Thy rational creatures are gradually drawn to a higher excellence.

Through Sacred Orders God fashions the instrument whereby the faithful are drawn by Him to a higher excellence, and are ultimately brought to the highest excellence possible to any rational creature, the eternal enjoyment of His vision in heaven.

It is this element of order in the Church and the necessary dependence which it implies that allows St. Thomas to make what at first seems a strong statement, namely, that Holy Orders has greater reason for being a sacrament than any other.² By way of explanation he goes back to his school days and applies a principle learned then to this question. The principle, *propter quod unumquodque tale, et illud magis* (the cause whereby a thing is such, is still more so) has fruitful application here. By the Sacrament of Holy Orders a man becomes a dispenser of the other sacraments. Standing as it were be-

¹ *Summa Theologica*, Suppl. q. XXXIV, a. 1.

² loc. cit. q. XXXIV, a. 3, sed contra: "ordo habet magis rationem quod sit sacramentum quam alia."

tween God and man, he channels sacramental graces to those on whom God has mercy. In this sense Holy Orders may be said to be the cause of the other sacraments, and therefore has more of the character of a sacrament than the others.

BETWEEN GOD AND MAN

The priest stands between God and man, a lofty pinnacle indeed! He is "ordained for men in the things that pertain to God" (Hebr. V, 1). The sublimity of this position would certainly fill with awe any soul, who appreciated the meaning of God, as St. Thomas did. Infinitely perfect, God is the Creator of heaven and earth. He made man out of the slime of the earth; then by ordination He gives man an undeserved dignity, a breath-taking power. No wonder that even in his mature years the massive Dumb Ox could write that the priest, as being between God and man, is called an angel.³ He is the angel of the Lord of hosts (Mal. II, 7). There is something here that suggests the wonder and admiration, the reverence and desire that the boy Thomas had toward the priesthood.

Perhaps we have reason enough now to understand why priests are considered both by the Catholic and by the unbeliever to be in a key position. The Catholic knows that the priest mediates between God and man; he appreciates, if only implicitly, the rôle of the Sacrament of Holy Orders in the Church. Though the priest himself may have personal defects, his office as one who bestows divine things on the people and who "offers up gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Hebr. V, 1), is certainly appreciated by the pure of heart. Because they know that as God's official representative he can give the law with more authority than anyone on earth, "they shall seek the law at his mouth" (Mal. II, 7).

Conversely we see also why the priest is the first to feel the sword of the violent. In the eyes of those who persecute the Church the priest is the key man. Get rid of him, because he is the cause of the others; tumble him from his high position and all else will tumble. Our Divine Lord was the first to win the hearts of the poor; but it is significant that directly after He instituted the Sacrament of Holy Orders He was put to death. Satan's wrath knew no limit when on the same night Christ gave us both the Eucharist and the Priesthood. It was too much.

Our Lord knew the treachery and malice that were mounting against Him; when He spoke to His first priests that night, He told

³ *op. cit.* III, q. XXII, a. 1, ad 1um.

them that there would always be treachery and malice mounting and surging and crashing down against His Church and His priests. "If the world hate you, know ye that it hated Me before you. If you had been of the world the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore, the world hateth you" (John, XV, 18-19). When he is ordained, the priest is chosen out of the world to bring Christ to those who, like himself, are in the world but not of it. By his divinely given power the priest is the first to know Christ in the Eucharist. Should he not also be the first to know Christ on the Cross? *Propter quod.* . . . The cause whereby a thing is such is still more so.

SCIENCE AND SANCTITY

Little wonder, then, that St. Thomas, having contemplated the nature of Holy Orders, should begin to wonder about the requirements demanded in a man who would "go in to the altar of God" (Ps. XLII, 4). Here is the boy again, asking himself what kind of a priest God wanted him to be. "Does God want me to be learned? Does He want holiness of life?"

As for learning, there would be a difference in what was demanded of the monks Thomas had known at Monte Cassino, and of his own brethren, the Friars Preachers. The action of a priest is two-fold; the first and principal action is over the true Body of Christ in the Eucharist; the second is over the Mystical Body of Christ, and depends on the first. If a priest perform only the first action, he need not know as much concerning the sacred sciences as that priest who exercises both actions. Monks as such do not have the care of souls, for the people do not seek the law at their lips. Yet they should be sufficiently learned to be able to perform the sacramental action with due reverence. If, on the other hand, the priest has charge over both the Eucharistic Body of Christ, and the Mystical Body, then he does need a solid, though not exhaustive knowledge of the sacred sciences, because the people depend on him for the law and the sacraments. His reverence should extend both to Christ in the Eucharist and Christ in the faithful.⁴ Was Thomas here writing the answer that had come to him at Monte Cassino, and that later brought him, not to the monastery, but into the seething world of heresy and argument? Like his father St. Dominic, he saw a kind of sacrament in preaching, in teaching and in drawing the members of Christ's Mystical Body to a higher perfection. At his Mass he would

⁴ *Summa Theologica* Suppl. q. XXXVI, a. 2, ad 1um.

consecrate and distribute the Eucharistic Body of Christ; later in the pulpit and in the classroom he would break and distribute the word of God, thereby performing an action over the Mystical Body of Christ. That the priest who would perform both these actions should be learned is evident.

Should the priest be holy? The question needs clarification, for Thomas takes care to safeguard the objective efficacy of the sacrament, by simply stating that holiness of life is not essential to the reception of the Sacrament itself, for a wicked man receives the Order, though with sin.⁵ As a matter of precept, however, holiness of life is necessary. Such a conclusion is not a surprise, since from all that has been said about the priesthood, holiness of life in the priest is implied. Because of the order that should exist in the Church, because Holy Orders itself preeminently has the nature of a sacrament, because the priest is set between God and man as mediator, and finally because he has the two-fold action over the Eucharistic Body of Christ and over His Mystical Body—because of all this, the priesthood literally begs for holiness in the priest himself. Pope Pius X sums up the doctrine of the Fathers on this point in these words: "There should be as much difference between the priest and the good layman, as there is between heaven and earth, and therefore the priest's good life should be free not only of the graver defects but even of the least."⁶ St. Thomas uses the authority of St. Jerome in urging this point, choosing words that remind one of the words of Pius X. St. Jerome writes: "All who serve the house of God should take very great care to be examples of speech and conduct to those over whom they are placed, since it is most disastrous to the Church if the laity be better than the clergy."⁷ Why is this so? Is it not precisely because the order that God put in His Church demands abundant holiness in those who are higher? St. Jerome doubtlessly envisioned the dire situation in which, because of a lack of holiness in those in Sacred Orders, the laity, zealous but unordained, would rise up to assume the duties of the priesthood. The order instituted by our Divine Lord would thus become inverted. Those who were meant to be led would attempt, in their bitter zeal, to lead. Their contempt for authority would eventually erupt into heresy. In this sense disaster would be said to come to the Church.

How well aware Holy Mother Church is of these dangers is

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *Haerent animo*, Exhortation to the Catholic Clergy. Aug. 1908.

⁷ *Comment in Ep. ad Tit.* c. II. v. 15.

apparent in every prayer, every admonition, every response of the rite of ordination. She calls on the laity at the beginning to come forth and proclaim any known defects in the deacons to be ordained.

This she does in the most unmistakable language: "If anyone should know anything against them, for God's sake, and in God's Name, let him boldly come forward and speak." She wants her priests to be worthy of that high office which she confers; she beseeches the Holy Ghost to come and strengthen her ministers; she begs the protection of Our Blessed Mother; she summons all the Saints to their aid. How ardently she prays for good priests! And how ardently the deacons themselves ask for help! Prostrate on the sanctuary floor in token of their own utter dependence upon God, they pray and they implore all the faithful to pray for them, that they be worthy to perform their two-fold action, over the Eucharist and over the members of Christ, in a manner that befits men of God. "Holiness becometh Thy house" (Ps. XCII, 5). As the channel of grace the priest strives to rid himself of all imperfections so that the waters from heaven may flow and cascade through him into the souls of the faithful.

Perhaps the young Thomas Aquinas did not realize all of the things implied in the ordination ceremony at Monte Cassino. But we are sure that the desire burning in his heart to know more about the priesthood, to strive to become worthy one day to receive it himself,—we are sure that these desires were fulfilled. Thomas learned so much about the sacrament that we now seek the law at his mouth concerning it. He was so worthy of it that we may now call upon his name on the day of ordination and ask him to pray for his newly ordained brethren.

To these brethren of St. Thomas, the ordinandi of St. Joseph's and St. Albert's Provinces, we extend our fraternal prayers and good wishes. To their families and friends, our congratulations that from among them, God has deigned to choose more priests, that we may seek "The law at their lips."