

NOBLEST TEACHER OF TEACHERS

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WHAT CONSTITUTES a perfect school? Is it the result of good methods or does it consist in good teachers? Pope Pius XI in his encyclical on education told the world over twenty years ago that perfect schools are the result not so much of good methods but rather of good teachers. The Holy Father, the Custodian of Truth, pointed out that good teachers are men and women thoroughly prepared and well grounded in the sciences they have to teach, and who possess the intellectual and moral qualifications required for this important office. Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Patron of Schools, and therefore the patron of teachers as well as students, is without a doubt one of the greatest of human teachers.

Today, we live in a world where the nobility of the profession of teaching has been in many ways derided. The causes of this contamination are quite evident, since materially-minded men no longer realize the true end of education. They deliberately cast aside the fact that man must not only be prepared for the labors he must do on this earth, but he must also be prepared to attain the sublime end for which he was created. Modern materialistic educators, besides perverting the end of man in education, have made a far more fundamental error, an error which shows their system of education to be no system at all. What is this error? They have denied the existence of a spiritual soul in man. Deny the existence of a soul in man and all you can educate is a cold, lifeless corpse. And who can educate a corpse? The subject of the Christian system of education is the whole and entire man, with all his faculties, both natural and supernatural, which reason and revelation have shown him to be. The effects of these false materialistic systems of education are all about us but, like everything else that is commonplace to us, we fail to recognize them.

However, despite the adulterating influence of the world, and especially of pragmatic philosophies that have blinded themselves to the proper value of things, the profession of teaching is still a most noble one, for two reasons. First, because every teacher should inoculate his students with the serum of truth and, because, secondly, by such an inoculation he should direct his students in some way

to the font of truth, God Himself.

History shows us not only that Saint Thomas did precisely this in his own day, but also that, through the volumes of thought the Angelic Doctor has left to posterity, he has been influencing mankind in this regard for 700 years.

It was Pope John XXII who canonized Saint Thomas on July 18, 1323. After he had sung the Mass in honor of the new saint, it was only proper that the Holy Father should further enlighten the audience concerning the greatness of this most recent light of the Church. It was during this eloquent eulogy that Pope John XXII exclaimed: "His doctrine was not other than miraculous. He has enlightened the Church more than all other Doctors, and more profit can be gained in a single year by the study of his works, than by devoting a lifetime to that of other theologians. He has wrought as many miracles as he has written articles." Since the enunciation of these words on that memorable day in Church history, more than eighty Popes have emulated one another in commending the sanctity and learning of the Angel of the Schools. Pope after Pope down through the long corridor of centuries has exhorted Catholic educators to restore the golden wisdom of Saint Thomas, to disseminate it far and wide not only for the defence of the Catholic Faith and for the good of society, but for the benefit of all sciences as well. Pope Leo XIII in his Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* eloquently points out the advantages to be derived from a practical reform of philosophy by returning to the reknowned teachings of the Angelic Doctor: "In virtue of our supreme authority, for the glory of Almighty God, and the honor of the Angelic Doctor . . . we declare Saint Thomas Aquinas, Patron of all Universities, Academies, Colleges, and Catholic Schools: and we desire that he should be venerated as such by all."

Saint Thomas was not only one of the greatest of human teachers but he gave to posterity the conditions by which every teacher may become great. These qualifications are: stability, that one may never deviate from the truth; clarity, that one may not teach with obscurity; utility, that one may seek God's honor and glory and not his own. These three requisites are the *sine qua non* qualifications for anyone who ascends the professorial chair. The conditions which the Angelic Doctor enunciated in theory were also manifested in his own humble life.

The first qualification is stability, that one may never deviate from the truth. Saint Thomas as a youth joined an army of men, the Dominican Order, especially dedicated not only to the defense of truth but also to its dissemination. During his short life, he dwelt in

the fortresses of truth belonging to this army of Dominican Friars, where only fighters for the cause of truth can live. Like every Dominican, Saint Thomas was a fighter, for this was the name given to them by Pope Honorius III, who, when he confirmed the great Order of Saint Dominic, called them: "Champions of the faith and true lights of the world." To this Order of men and especially to Saint Thomas himself because of his ardent love for truth, theological studies, as well as the social sciences and fine arts, are very deeply indebted. Saint Thomas, following in the footsteps of his spiritual father, Saint Dominic, and all Dominicans down through the ages have been efficient instruments in preserving the wisdom of the ages and in bringing it to the defence of truth. The Angelic Doctor will always be remembered in human history for the great organization of philosophy that he made, thereby rendering it the handmaid of Theology and therefore establishing the knowledge of Revelation as queen of the sciences. For the prodigious intellectual achievements of the Angelic Doctor, the world will always be his debtor.

Let us look at that world today which should be his debtor and see how it has perverted this notion of stability. The result of this perversion is instability. Men have adulterated the profession of teaching with this fallacious characteristic of instability because they have compromised the notion of truth. They have contaminated truth because they have cast aside the classical notion of reason, so that they might have their false notion of reason become the bride of the materialistic spirit of the 20th century. They are ignorant of the fact that once reason marries such a spirit, inevitably she becomes a widow in the next age. We do not deny that the classical notion of reason should consider such a wedlock. The spirit of the age is the complexus of desires, problems and conflicts that arise from the constant contingent interaction of the historical, psychological, ethical and moral factors of a given age. The classical notion of reason should wed the temper of the times, so that it may solve the conflicts and direct the developments of such an age. However, these modern pragmatists pervert this union whereby reason-unchanging weds a changeable spirit, by demanding that the spirit of the times instead of reason, give the principles for the solution of the problems of the age. With the principles of reason destroyed, nothing is stable, and as a result no problems are solved. False notions that are born from such perverted conceptions are: "Sin is all right as long as you don't hurt anyone." "Liberty means you can do as you please." "Morality is something purely subjective." "Religion is how you feel about things."

These men have made the "match" for reason because they have divorced it from faith. When the senses are divorced from reason due to intoxication, the result is instability. Take away faith from reason and we have the same result—intellectual instability.

The second qualification which Saint Thomas considered as essential in the life of a teacher is clarity, so that one may not teach with obscurity. Now this essential quality is manifested throughout all the works of the Angelic Doctor. The guiding principle of Saint Thomas when he wrote, lectured, and preached, was to start with what was more known in the minds of his audience and to proceed to what was less known. In the very prologue of his greatest work, his *Summa Theologica*, he realizes the confusion created by other writers on this matter and immediately sets out to inform the students he is about to instruct that he will avoid such confusion as well as the repetition of useless articles. Saint Thomas knew that the teacher played an important rôle in education, but he also recognized that this was nevertheless an instrumental rôle. Instruments, however, have a proper effect proportionate to them and when any of the perfections due to this instrument are lacking, then the effect of the instrument necessarily must suffer. A sharp razor blade will give a man a good clean shave, but should he try to shave with a dull blade, the results are usually disastrous. Imperfect instruments lacking some due perfection can never produce the same effects as perfect instruments. What the Angelic Doctor promised to the student in the prologue to the *Summa* he definitely accomplished in the opus itself. This is clearly manifested from the outline of the whole *Summa*, a gem of intellectual acumen.

This necessary qualification of clarity, which is essential in the profession of teaching, is entirely lacking in the modern materialistic form of presentation. Instead of clarity, we have obscurity, and this is by no means an unintentional obscurity but a deliberate one. This confusion of the moderns is obtained by a simple device; they deny the validity of any argument which the scientific method of controlled experiment cannot prove. Their own fundamental proposition—that only the scientific method gives truth—cannot itself be proved by the scientific method. This is entirely a philosophic question, one to be considered in the light of the principles not of practical but of speculative thought. These ravaging wolves in professorial garb under the guise of this device presuppose their own philosophical principles, without shouldering the burden of proving them. Attack their principles and they cloud the issue with vague generalizations and equivocal arguments.

The third and last characteristic Saint Thomas demanded that every teacher should possess is utility, so that one might seek the honor and glory of God. That this characteristic had a great influence upon his life is evident in every biography of the Angelic Doctor. We know that when Our Divine Lord appeared to him, after he had completed his beautiful treatise on the Eucharist and said to him: "Thou hast written well of Me, Thomas, what wouldst thou claim as a reward?" Thomas cried out in response: "None but Thee, O Lord!"

This apparition took place on the Feast of Saint Nicolas and it marked the climax in the life of Saint Thomas. Shortly after this date he told his fellow Dominican, Reginald: "All that I have written appears to me as so much straw, after the things that I have witnessed and that have been revealed to me." This is only natural, for Saint Paul, too, was unable to clothe in the garment of words the magnificence of the Godhead.

How this qualification is lacking in the system of education of many modern educators! For utility they have substituted vanity. These men are interested only in material and personal success, and their procedure is to adopt any thing that will aid their cause. They say their doctrine is opposed to all forms of supernaturalism, not because it rules out *a priori* what may or may not exist, but rather because no evidence has been found to warrant belief in such entities. They deny the existence of God because the scientific method cannot prove it. How often do they think of the incapability of the scientific method to prove the existence of God? The science of matter of itself can never prove that a Supreme Being exists. Yet these men do prove the existence of God in a fundamental way with the discovery of every new scientific law, and if they were not so blinded by the mask of prejudice, they would not fail to see it. When science discovers a new law of nature it is a further confirmation of the Law-maker, and not, as they would maintain, a denial of His existence. Can a law exist without a Law-maker? Science can only discover these laws; it cannot create them. The law of gravitation existed long before science discovered it, and although the physical sciences can never prove the existence of God, they can and do prepare the metaphysician to take these facts and argue to their cause.

Since these men reject God, they prepare the stage for their own divinization. No longer are they interested in the honor and glory of God, but rather only in that of self. It is quite evident that while such men and women are allowed to disseminate these fallacious ideas, the educational system of America and Europe is in a precarious position.

However, we must always remember with Saint Gregory of Nazianzen that the teaching, direction and the formation of youth is the art of arts and the science of sciences. Saint Thomas, in his rôle as the Patron of Schools, should be considered the exemplar and model in this great work. Today the world needs good teachers to prepare our youth to take their places in the world of tomorrow. Teachers, lovers of truth, if you look to your Patron and Model, Saint Thomas Aquinas, both in his life and in his works you will find the aid for this tremendous task. Chesterton once said: "Each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most." Good teachers, we no longer live in a rationalistic age, for Rationalism is dead. Irrationalism is now slowly conquering the earth. The Angelic Doctor is the saint who most contradicts this intellectual blight. Good teachers, follow him in his life, follow him in his works. Follow him and the enemy will be ours!

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