

OUR THOMISTIC HERITAGE

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ARCH 7, 1274. Thomas Aquinas was dead and the lovers of truth throughout all Christendom wept. No longer would his impressive figure command the attention and respect of the students, both beginners and proficients, whom he taught at the Universities of Paris and Naples. No more would his sonorous voice be heard propounding and defending truths about the God he loved so tenderly. Those eyes "that looked more like placid pools than darting daggers"¹ would peruse and interpret Aristotle no more. The greatest champion of truth the world has ever known had passed on to his eternal reward. The sentiments of all who knew and loved him were best expressed by his teacher, Albert the Great, who, upon hearing of the death of his former pupil, remarked with deep emotion, "The light of the world has gone out." And indeed it had.

Had he left his Dominican brethren completely? Was there nothing left of him but the memories that have been the only legacy of some of the greats of history? Not at all. For the Angelic Doctor, as posterity was to call him, had left behind book after book of his writings. Treatises, physical and metaphysical, social and political works, prayers and pious meditations, commentaries on Aristotle, Peter Lombard and others whom he numbered among his great predecessors, monographs on Sacred Scripture, and last but by no means least, his theological tracts of which the *Summa Theologica* is the crowning point, all came with equal facility from his pen. All his works reflect the character of the man that was Thomas. From his cold scientific productions such as *The Unicity of the Intellect* to the warmth and majesty of the *Lauda Sion* or the *Adoro Te*, we see portrayed the soul of the intellectual and spiritual giant from Rocca Sicca.

The scope and depth of Aquinas' writings cannot but stagger our minds. The keen intellect of this son of Dominic was first conspicuously brought to the people's eyes in the year 1257. Thomas had been sent to the University of Paris by his superiors to study for his Masterate and eventually assume a professorship there. The University

¹ *St. Thomas Aquinas*, R. M. Coffey, O.P. Vol. III of Benziger *Summa*, p. 3066.

had fallen away from the pristine scholarship of its founders and had on its faculty Averroist philosophers who worshipped Aristotle and self-styled Augustinian theologians who feared the mind. Against these men and their fatal doctrines, the mendicant orders, Franciscans and Dominicans, presented a united front. By so doing they quite naturally incurred the anger and displeasure of the secular professors. The tension that had long been fomenting against the mendicants broke with fury in 1255 when William of St. Amour, the leader of the secular party, released his scurrilous denouncement of the Friars in a work called *De Periculis Novissimis*. Ironically enough, the pamphlet, instead of permanently blackening the Orders and their doctrine, provided them the means to vindicate themselves completely from all previous charges made against them at the University. Replete with error and heresy, it gave them the opportunity they had long been seeking.

The first refutation of St. Amour came from the pen of a Franciscan, Joachim of Florence, under the title *Introduction to the Eternal Gospel*. Unfortunately, the work of the well-meaning son of St. Francis was more heretical than the doctrine it sought to disprove. It served only to heighten the antagonism against the Friars whose members now became the target for the vandalism of the town rowdies. Their convents were stoned and the Friars themselves were pelted with mud and rocks as they walked through the streets. At length the situation became so acute that the pamphlet together with its refutation was sent to Pope Alexander IV who was then ruling the Church from Anagni. The Holy Father decreed that a trial should be held at which he himself would preside and ordered both sides to draw up their cases. Thomas, Albert, and Bonaventure represented the Friars' cause and completely shattered the secular opposition. St. Amour's book was burned in public, condemned as heretical, and its author was banished from France by the King. Thus did the public of the thirteenth century first come to know Thomas Aquinas as a brilliant expositor and defender of the undying glory of the religious Orders. They were to learn to respect him in the future as a Philosopher and Theologian *par excellence*.

After this brilliant apology for the Friars, Thomas went on to compose such works as the *De Veritate* and his commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate*. To this period also belongs the production of one of his most famous works, the *Summa Contra Gentes*. By Raymond of Pennafort, saint, canonist, and Master of the Order, St. Thomas was commissioned to write a philosophical treatise as an aid to the missionaries who were laboring among the Moslems. In this work St.

Thomas, by making use of reason alone and freely citing Aristotle, reduced to absurdity the Mohammedan teachings. It represents the zenith of his purely philosophical tracts. He reached the height of his perfection in the last few years of his life when he penned the *Summa Theologica*, the most perfect exposition of Catholic Truth ever to come from the hand of man. Written as Thomas himself says for the enlightenment of beginners, it has nevertheless become the supreme masterpiece of Catholic thought of all time.

But now he was gone . . . this man who with fire in his eyes had silenced the heretical Latin Averroists and who, with tears in those eyes, had wept while he sang the moving Lenten antiphon *Media vita*. His work on earth was at an end. "In the midst of the Church the Lord opened his mouth, and filled him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding: he clothed him with a robe of glory."² There was indeed laid up for him a crown of justice.

THE OPPOSITION

Thomas had been dead for only three years when opposition to his thought made itself felt. In 1277, Pope John XXI, to whom complaints had been made about the orthodoxy of the saint's teachings, ordered Stephen Tempier, the Bishop of Paris, to institute an inquiry into the doctrines of Thomas. The latter, who was possessed of a strong bias against the Dominican, was only too happy to comply and on March seventh of the same year, the third anniversary of the death of Aquinas, he published a syllabus of 219 propositions which he condemned as absolutely erroneous and imposed excommunication on whomsoever should hold or teach them. Although the syllabus contained the condemnation of a great many Averroistic doctrines, nevertheless the fundamental Thomistic teachings were all denounced. A few days later, Robert Kilwardby, the Dominican Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of England, also condemned Thomistic philosophy. The severity of this censure was intensified by Kilwardby's successor the Franciscan, John Peckham. As Maritain remarks: "Room had to be found for Duns Scotus and the nominalist debaters who were to darken counsel in the fourteenth century."³ This open repudiation of the basic principles of Thomistic thought was undoubtedly one of the principal reasons why the General Chapter of the Dominicans held at Milan in 1278 ordered a strict adherence to all the works of Thomas.

² *Introit of the Mass of a Doctor.*

³ *The Angelic Doctor*, p. 61.

In 1282, the Franciscan Order assumed officially an antagonistic attitude toward the teachings of the Angelic Doctor and only authorized the study of his *Summa Theologica* subject to a number of precautions. A formal criticism was written by William de la Mare of the Friars Minor. Entitled *Correctorium Fratris Thomae*, it was almost universally accepted by his Franciscan brethren. As DeWulf notes: "Up to then the two Orders had developed peacefully side by side: from henceforth doctrinal conflicts separated them."⁴

The adversaries of Thomism were soon to discover their greatest champion in Duns Scotus. Coming into prominence at the end of the thirteenth century, the Franciscan's teachings were almost diametrically opposed to those of Thomas. His *Metaphysics* from its very beginning is contrary to the traditional Thomistic theses. Starting with the concept of being as univocal, the entire content of his thought could not but do violence to Thomism. His unique theory on the principle of individuation, his teaching on the primacy of the will and the plurality of forms, were taken up by the Franciscan school. But the errors of the *Doctor Subtilis* were not to go unrefuted, although almost two centuries were to elapse before Thomas de Vio, better known as Cardinal Cajetan, was to include in his famous commentary on the *Summa Theologica* a systematic and thorough refutation of the fundamental theses of the Franciscan Doctor.

Ranking second only to Scotus as an opponent of the teachings of the Angel of the Schools, was Franciscan Suarez, a Spanish Jesuit. A professor at Alcalá, Salamanca, and Coimbra, the repercussions of his thought were widespread and continue to this day to influence many Scholastics. The most important point on which the *Doctor Eximius* chooses to differ from the *Doctor Angelicus* is his teaching on potency and act, essence and existence. Suarez denied the real and posited a rational distinction between the two. Other vital doctrines on which he departs from the traditional interpretation are his teachings on substance and accidents, analogy, law, and, of course, physical premotion. "Accordingly, he is not the 'faithful commentator on the Angelic Doctor' which posterity was pleased to call him."⁵ But neither were his mis-interpretations and denials of Aquinas' principles to go unanswered. John Poinset, better known as John of St. Thomas, a Dominican of the seventeenth century, ably refuted them in his philosophical and theological works. Thus down through the ages we can see the neglect of the precious heritage of truth which

⁴ *History of Mediaeval Philosophy*, DeWulf, Vol. II, p. 37.

⁵ DeWulf, *op. cit.* p. 304.

Thomas left to us. Men and schools departed from his teachings thereby giving rise to divisions in Scholasticism. Scholasticism as applied to the tenets of St. Thomas, Scotus and Suarez is certainly an extremely analogical term. These cleavages within Catholic thought have continually threatened its basic unity.

But if the opposition has been great the approbations have been greater. There arose brilliant and perspicacious intellects who took up the torch of truth and worked assiduously to enkindle its flame in the minds of men. They realized the perils of a departure from the teaching of Aquinas and devoted their entire lives to bring others to that same knowledge.

Pope John XXII, who enrolled Thomas in the catalogue of the Saints, wrote: "We believe that Brother Thomas is glorious in heaven, because his life was holy, and his doctrine cannot be but a miracle."⁶ The same Pontiff declared that, "He alone enlightened the Church more than all the other doctors." Nicholas III, Honorius IV, Boniface VIII, and many more of Christ's vicars paid sterling tribute to the Angelic Doctor and his work.⁷ In more recent times the saintly Pius X has expressed the magnificence of the Thomistic heritage when he wrote that if the principles of St. Thomas "are once removed or in any way impaired, it must necessarily follow that students of the sacred sciences will fail ultimately to perceive so much as the meaning of the words in which the dogmas of divine revelation are proposed by the magistracy of the Church."⁸

Maritain has stated concisely the attitude of the Church toward St. Thomas. The great contemporary Thomist writes: "A new era has dawned for St. Thomas. The Church has recourse to him henceforward in her battle against all heresies and errors; his philosophy grows greater in the sky, the Church of Christ makes use of it in her own peculiar life, which is one and universal: the Popes bear it testimonies innumerable, the concordance and reiteration of which in the course of centuries are singularly significant. And now Leo XIII in the Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (4th August, 1879) and Pius X, Benedict XV, and Pius XI, in decrees unceasingly renewed, and clearly without imposing that philosophy as an article of faith (no theological or philosophical system could ever be so imposed), have ordered Catholic teachers to make it the basis of their teaching, and

⁶ *Acta Sanctorum*, vol. I p. 681, n. 81 seq.

⁷ *cfr.* Berthier, O.P., *Sanctus Thomas Aquinas, Doctor Communis Ecclesiae*.

⁸ *Doctoris Angelici*, June, 1914.

implore the world with tragic insistence to return to it for the salvation of mind and civilization."⁹

What further persuasion then do we need to urge us to a more profound study of and adherence to Thomistic teaching? In turning the pages of history we see that some of the greatest Catholic philosophers have been formed by a careful and meditative reading of Aquinas. In recent times we have profited much from the works of scholars of the caliber of Cardinal Zigliara, Garrigou-Lagrange, Hugon, and Maritain. Following the principle that St. Thomas is his own best interpreter, they have sought to present his thought as he himself would have presented it to the twentieth century man.

Let us look back once more to the thirteenth century to the Abbey of Fossa Nuova where Thomas Aquinas lies still in death, received into the bosom of his Eternal Father. The Benedictine monks to whom he had returned to die sorrowfully mourned his passing. They, too, realized that the light of the world had gone out. But they together with all who knew and loved him realized also that his guiding spirit would be manifest in the Church until the end of time. Through their tears they could clearly perceive the bright light of his doctrine illumining the minds and inflaming the hearts of those who would follow him. His own short life had ended but his work would live forever . . . leading souls to Christ and eternal bliss.

⁹ Maritain, *op. cit.* p. 68.

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