



ST. THOMAS — PRINCE OF THEOLOGIANS

THE PRINCE AND THE QUEEN

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THEOLOGIAN is a man on stilts. Within the perimeter of his normal horizon he sees a segment of the earth. But with a loftier view he can see over the walls and hedges, over the rooftops, across valleys and pastures, into the hills. He can see how the rivers run and how the forests form; where the sunlight falls and where the clouds cast shadows. He sees the earth beneath the sky, and against the earth he sees men, the godly and the ungodly. His vision is far and broad and deep, and into his eye comes everything that is. And through it all he sees God, "For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen—his everlasting power and divinity—being understood through the things that are made" (*Rom. 1:20*).

Theologians have a prince—the thirteenth century Dominican, St. Thomas Aquinas, the Universal Teacher, the man with the deepest vision, the theologian with the highest stilts. "He alone enlightened the Church more than all other doctors," declared Pope John XXII in the bull of his canonization. He can see farther and wider than all the others; his horizon seems almost limitless. So sublime and pure is his thought that he seems more like an angel who speaks, this Angelic Doctor. So mighty is his teaching that it stands as a bulwark of the Church: "Take away Thomas and I will destroy the Church," cried a Lutheran reformer; and Leo XIII replied, "An idle hope, to be sure, but not an idle testimony."

HIS VISION OF THE QUEEN

How does the Prince envisage the Queen? What does Aquinas say of our Lady? How did she fare in his teaching? What part did she play in his life? From the towering height of his wisdom, how does the greatest of all theologians see Mary, the Mother of God?

Here is what he sees: Mary, the greatest mere creature ever created by God, so perfect that God in His infinite power could not have created her better. His own words can serve as a synthesis of his teaching: "The Blessed Virgin from the fact that she is the Mother of God has a certain infinite dignity from the

infinite good, which is God. And on this account there cannot be anything better than she; just as there cannot be anything better than God."¹

This is the Prince of Theologians himself writing of the Queen, in a soberly scientific passage of the *Summa*. Could there be a higher tribute from a more noble source? This, as we shall see, is the key which opens St. Thomas' grand vision of our Lady, the central theme, the principle from which he reasons, the foundation upon which he builds: her maximal relation to the Godhead, the fount of all her dignity, perfection, and prerogatives.

HIS APPRECIATION OF THE QUEEN

Before exploring the beauties of St. Thomas' doctrine on the Blessed Virgin, the ground must first be cleared of an untrue impression which prevails with unpleasant insistence. Suspicions and suggestions are frequently discovered of an estrangement between St. Thomas and our Lady, as though the Angel of the Schools were in some way lacking in appreciation of Mary's unique role in the divine economy of salvation. There are insinuations that St. Thomas passed our Lady by, that his theology of the Virgin is defective, short of what is expected from an intellect of such gigantic proportions.

A cursory knowledge of Thomistic Mariology proves this to be a grotesque misconception. Its antecedents are facts which are true enough, and freely admitted, but which are, nonetheless, inconclusive. The weightiest indictment is St. Thomas' "denial" of the Immaculate Conception. In itself, the issue is most complex.² But this much can be said with certainty: the sense in which St. Thomas denied the Immaculate Conception is quite different from the sense in which Pius IX defined it a century ago (as a preservative redemption involving posteriority not of time but of nature). The notion of preservative redemption was not current in thirteenth century theology, and St. Thomas never explicitly considered it. He stood in opposition to theologians who alleged insufficient reasons for a conclusion which history has proven to be true, something which is hardly to their credit. He was anxious that Mary have every prerogative which faith and reason could demonstrate as certain, but he could not abandon his irrefutable principle: "We must not give to the Mother

¹ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 25, a. 6, ad 4.

² See "St. Thomas' Teaching on the Immaculate Conception," by Terence Quinn, O.P., *Dominicana*, December, 1953.

so much honor that it takes anything away from the honor of the Son, who is the Saviour of all men, as Paul the Apostle writes, *I Tim. 4:5*.³ To say that Mary was absolutely without sin would mean that she could not have been redeemed; if she were not redeemed, then Christ could not have been the redeemer of all men, which the Scriptures say He was. That St. Thomas could not foresee the distinction later to be evolved which would preserve both truths—the universality of Christ's redemption and Mary's Immaculate Conception—proves only that he lacked the gift of prophecy; to construe it as bad theology, or worse, as a studied derogation of the honor due our Lady, is as unjust as it is untrue.

Judging by contemporary standards, St. Thomas' Mariology is rather undeveloped, for reasons entirely circumstantial and historical. Not often does he treat professedly of Mary; aside from his sermons, there is but one work which is specifically Mariological, his brief Commentary on the Ave Maria. For the most part, his Marian theology is presented as an adjunct to some greater consideration, as the complement to a more universal doctrine, the part of a whole—most frequently Mary's maternal part in the total reality of the Incarnation. Aquinas' contribution to the theology of our Lady is comparatively meager, from the quantitative standpoint; but, qualitatively, his teaching ranks him as an eminent Mariologist. Examination proves that his works contain, at least in principle, all the great doctrines about the Blessed Virgin which modern theologians have more explicitly developed. St. Thomas, once he became adjusted to the terminology, would be perfectly at home at a present-day Mariological convention. He had knowledge of all the great truths which the moderns teach about Mary, and, what's more, he taught them himself.

St. Thomas is not, perhaps, the greatest of Marian teachers; but he, "the leader and master of them all," is surely the greatest teacher ever to write about Mary. His doctrine can hardly be considered insignificant. His intellect is a certain compendium of all the theologians who preceded him, as Cajetan remarked, "because he had the utmost reverence for the doctors of antiquity, he seems to have inherited in a way the intellect of all," including the greatest of Marian doctors, men like Ephrem, Anselm, Bernard, and, above all, his own master, Albert the Great. His

³ *Quodl. 6, a. 7.*

teaching is theirs, absorbed, epitomized, and enriched with his own peculiar genius. His writing is the culmination of all the Mariology which went before him; it is the avenue to all that comes after.

HIS DOCTRINE ON THE QUEEN

All this can be dismissed as gratuitous assertion unless some attempt is made to indicate that St. Thomas actually knew and taught all the great truths of twentieth century Mariology. The whole of his doctrine about the Virgin Mary is not found in any one place or in any systematized form, nor does he always employ the same terms as those used today. Nevertheless, if his writings are taken in their entirety, and his language is translated into its modern counterpart, all the great Marian truths are there to be found.

In summary form, this can best be demonstrated schematically by adopting the general outline of contemporary Mariological study and showing that the equivalent doctrine is contained in the works of the Angelic Doctor. Mariology can be broadly divided into three great parts as Mary is studied (1) in herself; (2) in relation to men; (3) in relation to God.⁴

(1) MARY HERSELF

To consider Mary in herself is to inquire into her surpassing fullness of grace and personal sanctity. St. Thomas writes: "There was a threefold perfection of grace in the Blessed Virgin. The first (the perfection of disposition) was a kind of disposition by which she was made worthy to be the mother of Christ; and this was the perfection of her sanctification. The second perfection of grace in the Blessed Virgin (the perfection of form) was through the presence of the Son of God Incarnate in her womb. The third (the perfection of the end) is that which she has in glory."⁵ To the first perfection is allied Mary's privilege of the Immaculate Conception; to the second, her perfection of unspotted Virginity; to the third, her Assumption into heaven.

Most of what St. Thomas teaches in regard to our Lady's personal fullness of grace has reference to her dispositive sanctity,

⁴ For a more extensive treatment of this subject, see "The Mariology of St. Thomas," by Urban Mullaney, O.P., *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, September, 1950, upon which this section of the article is largely based.

⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 27, a. 5, ad 2.

by which she was rendered suitable to become the Mother of God. He devotes an entire question of the *Summa* (III, Q. 27) to a beautiful study of Mary's sanctification. The Angelic Doctor teaches that the holy Virgin was farther from sin than any other saint; that she was free from all inclination and temptation to sin; that she was preserved even from the penalty of sin. Not only was Mary protected from the least shadow of sin, but she had besides an ineffable degree of sanctity and gifts of grace beyond our understanding. "It is reasonable to believe that she who bore the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, received greater privileges of grace than all others," for "the nearer a thing is to the principle, the greater the part which it has in the effect of that principle. . . . Now Christ is the principle of grace. . . . But the Blessed Virgin Mary was nearest to Christ in His humanity: because He received His human nature from her."⁶ Mary possessed most certainly an incomparable fulness of sanctifying grace; but she had much more than this. "She was enriched with the virtue of all Saints and all Angels," writes St. Thomas.⁷ She was filled with all the gifts of the Holy Ghost, all the charismatic gifts, all the virtues, the merit of all the saints, and more besides. "So full of grace was the holy Virgin that grace flowed forth into her flesh, that from it she might conceive the Son of God."⁸ Can one go farther in acknowledging with Gabriel that the Blessed Virgin is "full of grace"?

The fact of Mary's unsullied virginity, clearly expressed in the Scriptures, is taught by St. Thomas with consummate skill. One whole question of the *Summa* (III, Q. 28) is given to the miracle of our Lady's virginal bearing of the Christ Child. In four brief articles, he verifies that his is the heritage of all that had ever been known of Mary's virginity, summarizing and recasting the doctrine of the ancient doctors into so perfect a mold that theologians ever after have needed only to cite and adapt it.

Of our Lady's Assumption St. Thomas says but little; but when he speaks it is clear that he is reverently aware of Mary's glorious prerogative of bodily incorruption. In the *Summa* he twice makes explicit mention of the Assumption, but more often he considers it as an element of Mary's enthronement and glory as Queen of Heaven and Earth.

⁶ *Ibid.* q. 27, aa. 1 and 5.

⁷ Sermon for the feast of the Purification. *Sermones Festivae*, n. 23.

⁸ Commentary on the Ave Maria.

(2) MARY IN RELATION TO MEN

The Blessed Virgin's relationship to men consists in her part as a principle in the sanctification of the human race. Her role in the divine drama of sanctification is usually studied under three aspects, according to Mary's three great titles as Mother, Queen, and Mediatrix of men. These are but three modes of expressing one fundamental reality: Mary's co-operation with her Divine Son in the bestowal of grace upon men—as our Mother, she bears men into the life of grace; as our Mediatrix, she obtains grace for us from God; as our Queen, she possesses a certain regal power over all in the kingdom of grace.

The Angelic Doctor is indeed conscious of Mary's cardinal position in the transmission of grace from the hand of God into the souls of men. In a profound passage of his Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, he writes: "Mystically, the Mother of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin, is in spiritual nuptials as councillor; for through her intercession one is joined to Christ by grace."⁹ In his tender prayer to our Lady, he recognizes her motherhood of men, calling her *Mater omnium credentium*, "Mother of all believers." With no less assurance he acknowledges Mary's mediation in the life of grace. In his Commentary on the Ave Maria he bids us "approach this mediatrix with a most loving heart," and he teaches with great discernment that the Annunciation was reasonable "in order to show that there is a certain spiritual wedlock between the Son of God and human nature. Wherefore in the Annunciation the Virgin's consent was besought in lieu of that of the entire human nature."¹⁰ It is but a short step to conclude that, just as the bond of this marital union continues throughout all ages, so too does Mary's office of mediation. In several of his works St. Thomas concedes to Mary the dignity of queenship. He reasons to the fact in a concisely expressive statement in the Commentary on the Ave Maria: "Since she is the Mother of the Lord, therefore she is the Queen." In his beautiful prayer to the Blessed Virgin, he calls her by a host of queenly titles: *Domina angelorum*, *Domina mea dulcissima*, *Regina coeli*.

(3) MARY IN RELATION TO GOD

Last of all, Mariologists ponder Mary's glory in relation to God, a consideration which embraces another Marian trilogy: her

⁹ *In Evang. Joan.*, c. 2, 1. 1, n. 2.

¹⁰ *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 30, a. 1.

motherhood of Christ, her motherhood of the Divine Redeemer, and her motherhood of God.

Our Lady's motherhood of Christ is a scriptural truth which St. Thomas accepted, of course, and taught in many places. In the *Summa* he sets forth his position succinctly: "The Blessed Virgin Mary is in truth and by nature the Mother of Christ."¹¹ To develop this further would be to elaborate the obvious.

Under the study of Mary's motherhood of her Divine Son as Saviour, fall her Compassion and Co-redemption—two doctrines which contemporary Mariologists have insistently emphasized and impressively unfolded. Moderns are quick to charge that St. Thomas neglects altogether this aspect of Marian theology, that his consideration of Mary's function in the work of redemption is far less than adequate. He writes nothing of it in the *Summa*: true enough. But the *Summa* does not contain everything he teaches about our Lady. Aquinas is plainly aware of Mary's position as the new Eve, a truth which includes necessarily and concomitantly her association and co-operation with her Son in the salvation of humankind. He devotes half of his Commentary on the Ave Maria to an elucidation of the contraposition of Mary and Eve, giving evidence of a thorough understanding not only of the general doctrine but of all its implications as well. Of Mary's Compassion, the central element of her co-operative redemption with Christ, St. Thomas writes expressly and with piercing insight. Contemplating Simeon's prophecy of the Virgin's sorrows, he writes, enumerating the dolors contained therein: "The first is the great compassion of the Blessed Virgin."¹² He preaches in another sermon that Mary suffered the death of the cross with Christ. In other places, too, he exposes this phase of Marian theology, especially in his Commentary on St. John's Gospel.

Mary's relation to God reaches its pinnacle in her matchless prerogative of divine maternity. No other mere creature has ever approached so closely to God, and it is precisely through her activity as Mother of God that her unique nearness to divinity came about.

As to the fact of our Lady's motherhood of God there has never been legitimate question since the fifth century when the Council of Ephesus thundered "anathema" upon anyone who

¹¹ *Ibid.*, q. 35, a. 3.

¹² *Sermones Dominicales*, n. 15.

“will not confess that the holy Virgin is the mother of God (for she brought forth according to the flesh the Word of God made flesh).” Since it is a formally defined dogma of faith, St. Thomas, naturally, teaches the fact that Mary is God’s Mother. In this there is nothing distinctive. But the mode of his teaching is remarkably distinctive indeed.

As to his method of exposing the doctrine, like his treatment of Mary’s virginity, the Angelic Doctor’s work here also is a theological masterpiece, a synthesis reflecting all the speculation of the ages preceding him, characterized by his own unique gift of concise and accurate expression. His terminology is ideal, and his presentation so excellent that theologians after him have been content merely to enlarge upon his reasoning.

Even more distinctive is the singular regard in which he holds this greatest of the Blessed Virgin’s privileges, and the use he makes of it to substantiate all the other truths he teaches about Mary. The divine maternity is the crown of Thomistic Mariology. St. Thomas is fully cognizant of the essential nature of our Lady’s divine motherhood as the basis for all else with which God favored her. The rest of his Marian theology is but a superstructure built upon the foundation of the divine maternity. The superabundance of her graces is given only in preparation for her role as Mother of the Incarnate Word, and the subsequent profusion of supernatural favors is bestowed only as a result of her divine motherhood. Virtually in every instance when Aquinas asserts the fact of some dignity of our Lady, the principle underlying his teaching is the divine maternity; always and everywhere the same reason is to be found: “because Mary is the Mother of God.” For St. Thomas, Mary’s quasi-infinite dignity comes from her most intimate relation to God, and she is so closely united to God only because she is the Mother of God. This accounts for the sovereign splendor of his vision of the Virgin: he sees Mary always through her motherhood of God, as through a prism which diffuses an infinite variety of color from the single light-ray of divinity.

St. Thomas’ Mariology, rooted in the one principle of our Lady’s motherhood of God, conforms to the theological ideal of God-like simplicity, and preserves a balance in Marian study by insisting always that God is the source of all that Mary is. This God-centered simplicity of approach to the theology of the Blessed Virgin is a distinctly useful contribution which the Angelic Doctor makes; contemporary Mariologists, who follow dif-

ferent patterns of thought, would do well to consider the advantages and the security which his position offers.

HIS DEVOTION TO THE QUEEN

After examining the outline of St. Thomas' teaching about Mary, the question still remains: what of his personal attachment to her? Was he in any special way devoted to our Lady?

With an appreciation of the scope and grandeur of Aquinas' vision of the Virgin, the question answers itself. Knowledge necessarily precedes love. According to St. Thomas' own teaching, meditation or contemplation causes devotion, but not infallibly. Knowledge in some men is a source of pride and self-confidence, and as such an obstacle, a hindrance to devotion. But knowledge perfectly submitted to God is the most certain principle of devotion, and the greater such knowledge is, the greater will be the devotion.

The fulness and strength of St. Thomas' contemplation of the Blessed Virgin shines clearly through his writings. His knowledge of her was incomprehensibly vast. And his love for her was correspondingly deep. All his learning, all his penetrating meditation about Mary was surely perfectly submitted to God. For him knowledge was no obstacle. He was the greatest of scholars; but even more, he was a saint. Leo XIII has written: "Such a combination of doctrine and piety, of erudition and virtue, of truth and charity, is to be found in an eminent degree in the Angelic Doctor, and it is not without reason that he has been given the sun for a device; for he both brings the light of learning into the minds of men and fires their hearts and wills with virtues." In a man whose incomparable knowledge of Mary was perfectly balanced in relation to God, devotion to the Virgin must needs be moving and powerful.

Even more directly, from his words themselves evidence can be drawn of his intense love of our Lady. For him, Mary is pre-eminently the Mother of God. But she is the Mother of St. Thomas, too, his "only Mother." Addressing her in his affectionate prayer, he calls her most tenderly *tu mater unica*. As a true son, his actions toward his Mother are inspired by piety, comprising the elements of reverence and service. His words are redolent of the highest reverence for the Virgin, mirroring a mind steeped with profound wisdom and fired with ardent admiration. And a pervading sense of service radiates from his writings, betraying a will suffused with love which poured forth

in works of homage and devotion to his Mother. These two essentials of piety are strikingly apparent in the opening of his prayer to Mary—reverence, in the array of gracious titles accorded her, and service, in the total dedication of all he is to her.

Dearest and most blessed Virgin Mary, gracious Mother of God, Daughter of the Sovereign King, Queen of the Angels, Mother of Him Who created all things, I commend to the bosom of thy mercy this day and all the days of my life, my soul, and my body, all my actions, thoughts, wishes, desires, words, and deeds, my whole life and the end thereof, so that through thy prayers all may be ordered according to the will of thy beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus the Prince of Theologians sees the Queen of All the Saints.