



"Well Hast Thou Written of Me, Thomas"

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THE HISTORY OF THE SUMMA THEOLOGICA*

"The brethren of your Order will be the champions of the Faith and the true light of the world." These prophetic words of Honorius III, addressed to St. Dominic in the Bull of Confirmation of the newly founded Order of Preachers, were singularly fulfilled when the provident God bestowed on the infant Order the future Angelic Doctor, Saint Thomas Aquinas. Other occupants of the throne of the Fisherman have likened St. Thomas to the sun. Fitting, then, it was that this Sun should rise in all its splendor in the early morning of the Order of St. Dominic, to light up the long day of its hallowed existence. And just as the great luminary sends forth its beams in varying splendor, so the writings of the Angel of the Schools shine as so many sunbeams, each with its own peculiar brilliance. Of these, the *Summa Theologica* is beyond doubt the brightest, for it is the Angelical's masterpiece.

In studying the history of this great work, the first question that naturally arises is: When did the Saint conceive the idea of writing a *Summa Theologica*? This query cannot be answered with any degree of certitude. His reasons for writing it can be more easily ascertained. The introduction of new studies and new methods into the universities had produced a general chaos at Paris and elsewhere. With the Commentaries of Averroes on Aristotle regarded as the perfection of philosophical learning, with pantheism and rationalism rampant in a Catholic university, with a contempt for the old systems and a hankering after new ones, there could arise nothing but confusion—a confusion that served to perplex even erudite men, not to mention the difficulties it offered to beginners, unable to do aught but follow the systems of their masters. Though St. Thomas witnessed this disordered state of philosophical and theological learning, he did

* Read at the scholastic exercises held in honor of St. Thomas by the students of the House of Studies, Washington, D. C., March 7, 1920.

not suffer much thereby, for he had the advantage of studying under a master who was able to surmount the dangers that lurked everywhere. This was Blessed Albertus Magnus, and he it was that acquainted his illustrious pupil with the sad condition and pointed out to him the needs of the time and the remedy. It is owing to him, then, in a special way, that the immortal *Summa* was written.

For a task of such magnitude the saintly Aquinas was well qualified. At an early age he had manifested wonderful talents and thoughtfulness far beyond his years, and the training he had received at Monte Cassino, at Naples, Paris and Cologne was the best that the century could afford.

Regarding his knowledge of Holy Writ, it can safely be said that he probably knew the whole of it from memory. In all his works he manifests an extraordinary gift of making Scriptural applications, which he draws from every portion of the inspired writings, from Genesis to the Apocalypse.

The Saint's mastery of the traditions of the Church is also evident from his works. An argument gleaned from the "*consuetudines Ecclesiae*," the usage of the Church, was, as he himself affirmed, of greater weight than the authority of any Doctor.

The works of the Fathers of the Church served St. Thomas in the composition of his great work. The ease with which he quotes from them gives proof of the vast knowledge he possessed of Patristic lore. Though his reverence for all the Fathers, both Greek and Latin, was profound, he showed a decided preference for St. Augustine.

The Angelic Doctor also used the works of the philosophers to advantage, especially those of Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and the Christian Boethius. He chose what was best in the works of the pagan philosophers, saying that the Catholic Doctor should take whatever truth the pagan philosophers attained, for they were its unjust possessors.

Besides these qualifications, however, St. Thomas had others which were of a still higher order. It has been aptly said that "Thomas was an angel before he was the Angelic Doctor." Unenthralled by the allurements of the world, his mind could soar aloft to the things of God. He was a man of prayer, and we are told by his confidant, Fr. Reginald of Piperno, that before studying or lecturing, he prayed much, distrusting his great natural gifts. Before his crucifix, or before the tabernacle, he would

seek for the light he needed. His early biographers tell us that he frequently received heavenly visitors who encouraged and enlightened him.

Such, then, were the endowments of nature and grace that fitted the saintly Doctor for the writing of the *Summa Theologica*. After many years of strenuous study and progress in the "science of the saints," St. Thomas began the composition of this great work; the fullest exposition of theological lore ever given to the Church.

The *Summa* is divided into three parts: The First Part treats of God and Creation. In rigid sequel the treatises deal with God's Existence, Unity, Attributes and Trinity. Creation comprises God's creative action, the Hexameron, or work of the six days, the Angels, and, lastly, Man. The Second Part is subdivided into two divisions known as the First of the Second and Second of the Second. The former deals with the End of Man, which is the vision of God; with Morality, Passions, Sin, Theological and Moral Virtues, Gifts of the Spirit, Law and Grace. The latter part goes over the same ground in detail, ending with the states of bishops and religious. The Third Part treats of Redemption through Christ. The chief treatises are the Incarnation, the Life of Christ, thus forming a perfect Christology; the Sacraments as sources of grace applying the fruits of the Redemption. The number of questions in the entire *Summa* is 612, of articles, 3,120.

Eight years were devoted to the composition of the *Summa*, which was begun at Rome, where the First Part and the First of the Second were written in the interval between 1265 and 1269. The Second of the Second, begun in Rome, was finished in Paris in 1271. In 1272 St. Thomas went to Naples, where the Third Part was written, as far as the ninetieth question of the tract on Penance. The rest of this part was supplied from the Angelical's Commentary on the Fourth Book of the Sentences.

Towards the close of the year 1273, the Saint laid aside his pen to resume it no more. When Reginald asked him why he left unfinished this work which he had undertaken for the glory of God and the world's enlightenment, he replied: "I can do no more. Such secrets have been communicated to me that all I have written now appears to be of little value." The fact is that he had, in ecstatic vision, caught a glimpse of that which he was soon to see clearly by the light of glory.

Among the tributes of praise bestowed on the work of the Angelic Doctor, none have been more lavish than those of the Roman Pontiffs. The Bullarium Ordinis Praedicatorum, published from 1729 to 1739, cites thirty-eight Bulls in which eighteen Popes praised and recommended the doctrine of St. Thomas. Pope Leo XIII in his Encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, gives a brief summary of these papal commendations in these words: "Clement VI, Nicholas V, Benedict XIII, and others, testify that the whole Church was enlightened by his admirable teaching. Pius V, acknowledges that heresies are confounded and exposed and scattered by his doctrine, and that by it the whole world is daily freed from pestilent errors. Others, with Clement XII, say that most fruitful blessings have flowed from his writings on the whole Church. They affirm also that the same honor has to be give to him as to the greatest Doctors of the Church, such as Gregory and Ambrose, and Augustine and Jerome. Others did not hesitate to set forth St. Thomas as a standard and teacher to universities and great schools of learning, saying that they might safely follow him. . . . To these judgments of the Pontiffs about Thomas there is added, as a crown, the testimony of Innocent VI: 'His doctrine above all other doctrine, with the one exception of the Holy Scriptures, has such a propriety of words, such a method of explanation, such a truth of opinions, that no one who holds it will ever be found to have strayed from the path of truth; whereas any one who has attacked it has always been suspected as to the truth.'"

In the history of the Church, singular honors were rendered to the doctrine of the Angel of the Schools. At the Council of Florence, the Dominican, John of Montenegro, gathered his overpowering arguments from the works of the Angelical, principally the *Opuscula* and the *Summa*. The Councils of Vienne, Constance and the Vatican profited by the doctrine of the holy Doctor. Regarding the influence of St. Thomas at the great Council of Trent, Leo XIII says: "It was an honor reserved to St. Thomas alone, and shared by none of the other Doctors of the Church, that the Fathers of Trent in their hall of assembly decided to place on the altar, side by side with the Holy Scriptures and the Decrees of the Roman Pontiffs, the *Summa* of St. Thomas, to seek in it counsel, arguments and decisions for their purposes."

Following the teaching of the Popes and the practise of the General Councils, the great universities adopted the teachings of

the saintly Doctor. Paris naturally took the initiative. The learned Cardinal du Perron, in a public speech delivered in 1615, declared that "the *Summa* of St. Thomas had always been looked upon as the oracle of theology, had always been publicly read, and (if it be permitted so to speak) had always been adored in the schools of Paris." Salamanca, Alcalá, Douai, Toulouse, Padua, Bologna, Naples and Coimbra were the centers of learning where Thomas held supreme sway. Such was the reverence manifested towards him in the old University of Louvain that the doctors were required to uncover and bow their heads when they pronounced the name of Thomas.

Recent legislation concerning the teaching of St. Thomas is to be found in the *Aeterni Patris* of Pope Leo XIII. In this Encyclical, he points out the benefits to be derived from "a practical reform of philosophy by restoring the renowned teaching of Thomas Aquinas," and he exhorts the bishops to "restore the golden wisdom of Thomas and to spread it far and wide for the defense and beauty of the Catholic Faith, for the good of society, and for the advantage of all the sciences." Pius X insisted in several letters on the observance of the recommendations of his predecessor concerning the study of the doctrine of the Angelic Doctor. In Canon 1366, of the New Code, we read the following: "Philosophiae rationalis ac theologiae studia et alumnorum in his disciplinis institutionem professores omnino pertractent ad Angelici Doctoris rationem, doctrinam et principia, eaque sancte teneant."

Such then, briefly told, is the history of the *Summa Theologica* of the Prince of theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas, "the most learned among the saints and the most saintly among the learned.

—Bro. Boniface Stratemeier, O. P.