

## SOME INFLUENCES OF ST. THOMAS ON PIETY

---

St. Thomas was confronted with the problem of systematizing theology. His aim was to put the patristic writings in logical order by marshalling the principles of philosophy in defence of Revelation. Before the Angelic Doctor had composed the *Summa Theologica* there was no complete scientific manual of Catholic doctrine. Theology had given rise to two opposing schools of thought. There was one school emphasizing unduly the importance of dialectics, which occasioned the Christian rationalism exemplified in Abelard, and there was another school which disregarded philosophy entirely and held for the adherence to the Bible and the Fathers. This second tendency was represented by the mystic school of Chartres. The former made religion a matter of intellectual gymnastics, and the latter tended ultimately to an extravagant devotionism. The genius of St. Thomas lay in this, that he coordinated the good in both extreme views, producing a theology truly of the mind and heart. Viewed, therefore, in the right perspective the study of St. Thomas tends to develop piety in the sanest direction.

The *Summa Theologica* is then admirably suited to lead the soul Godwards—which is, after all, the end and object of piety. Its subject matter is most sublime and elevating. Excerpts that one may chance upon will give plentiful food for meditation. "Nothing could be more inspiring than St. Thomas' treatises on Christ in His Sacred Person, in His life and sufferings. What he has to say on the sacraments, especially on Penance and the Eucharist, would melt hardened hearts." And certainly a vast portion of that work can be considered devotional, so much so that Father Tom Burke spoke of it as his prayer-book. Ascetic writers imbued with its spirituality have made it the basis of their works. Father Faber states: "St. Thomas may be said to have exhausted the subject of the comparative states of perfection in the last seven questions of the *Secunda Secundae*."

Too often, however, the *Summa Theologica* is viewed merely from an intellectual angle, with the result that its merits as a source of spiritual doctrine are overlooked. That it was written by a human hand is true, but much of its wisdom came directly from the Crucifix and the Blessed Sacrament. It was charged with the mystic intuition of an angel wrapt in contemplation. St. Thomas himself tells us he read Cassian for the purpose of ad-

vancing daily in contemplation. Because his wisdom was gained from Divine Love teaching about Itself, Thomas' work should only tend to draw others to that selfsame love with which at the time of its composition its author was inflamed. St. Thomas, when dying, expressed this by his profession of faith: "I receive Thee, the price of my redemption, for whose love I have watched, studied, labored. Thee have I preached, Thee have I taught." Nor could we suppose Our Lord's praise of the work of St. Thomas to have been pronounced for any reason other than that of recognizing its purpose—to lead souls to God. And undoubtedly such was its purpose. "St. Thomas' works breathe the spirit of God, a tender and enlightened piety built on a solid foundation, namely, the knowledge of God, of Christ and of man." One can, therefore, hardly have gained a thorough idea of the complexion of St. Thomas' mind unless he has been initiated into the practises of piety.

It was only natural that the brethren of the Order to which the dying-St. Thomas left his treasury should in a special manner profit by its wealth of wisdom and piety. It would appear that in the very age of scholastic glory Our Lord, in order to show the harmony between theological teaching and piety, raised up a school of contemplatives, which followed St. Thomas and achieved lasting renown. The leaders of this contemplative school, which flourished in Germany, were chiefly John Eckart, John Tauler, and Henry Suso. Tauler took St. Thomas' treatise on the vision of God's essence as the groundwork of his mystic teaching. Blessed Suso drew constantly on the wisdom of the *Summa*, as nearly every page of his sermons bears witness. His mystical transports were greatly admired by Thomas à Kempis.

The spiritual seed of the *Summa* flowered in the fourteenth century in fervor of another sort. It had produced great mystics. It likewise fostered apostles of the true faith. In the latter years of the German mystic school it was instrumental in raising up one of the mightiest champions of God's word. This defender of the truth was the great St. Vincent Ferrer. He was no cold theologian, but one craving for souls, an apostle who set Europe aglow by his fiery admonitions, one whose heart bled so that he almost died for pity at the humiliating trials of the great Western Schism. Yet St. Vincent did not begin his missionary career until after years of study and teaching of St. Thomas. The great St.

Philip Neri studied St. Thomas for many years, even as a lawyer. These studies he found to be perfectly compatible with piety.

St. Teresa holds a high position among mystics. Hers, the most masculine of feminine intellects, fortified by an utter self-surrender to God made her one of the most famous of virgin saints. We read that her mystical theology rests on a Thomistic basis. This was due to the instruction and guidance of several Dominicans, who were her confessors. She preferred learned men—men whose piety was solid, it is true, yet who were because of their profound learning able to lead her soul safely through all the snares of diabolical subtlety. Speaking of the relation of piety and knowledge she says: "As regards true servants of God, men of solid virtue, learned and sensible, that such should be disturbed at not receiving from God tenderness of devotion gives me sorrow." St. Teresa regarded learning as in itself no obstacle to fervent prayer, as she plainly states in her autobiography: "Persons may profit (by exciting the emotions), especially if they have learning and knowledge, which in my opinion are great stimulants for the exercise of prayer, if accompanied by humility." But learning is not only useful, it is also necessary: "Learning is very necessary, since it instructs us who know so little, and gives us light; and when we become intimate with the truths of Holy Scripture, then we do what we ought; but as for silly and foolish devotions, may Our Lord deliver us from them!" We must not fail to add why St. Teresa sought learned confessors. "I believe," she says, "the devil is exceedingly afraid of learning, provided it be accompanied by humility and other virtues, for he knows he will be discovered and will suffer loss."

It is worthy of note that four of the champions of the counter-Reformation founded their piety and drew their ardor and strength from the teachings of St. Thomas. Besides St. Teresa, who was the greatest of the woman reformers, St. John of the Cross applied some of the *Summa* in almost every page of his mystical works. He did not, therefore, rest on the bleak summits of intellectuality, but descended into the sunny meadows and expressed his deep mystic feelings in some of the most rapturous Spanish poetry. St. Ignatius Loyola had a thorough knowledge of the *Summa*. The fourth great reformer is St. Pius V. For sixteen years a teacher of Thomism, he afterwards gave evidence of his piety by his ecclesiastical reforms at Rome.

If then one studies the *Summa* with devout dispositions, one surely will derive spiritual benefit, as did the saints. But if one studies merely to enrich his intellectual at the expense of his inner life, of course he will derive no devotional benefits. It has been said with reference to the study of St. Thomas that one must remould in a warm heart what came from the warm heart of the Angelic Doctor. One must make the teaching of the *Summa* a personal knowledge; then, undoubtedly, he will not find in it only the coldness of a merely scientific work.

—Bro. Dionysius Mueller, O. P.

