

ST. THOMAS AND THE SACRED PASSION

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"If anyone considers from a pious motive the fitness of the passion and the death of Christ, he will find such a profundity of knowledge that continuously more and greater thoughts come to him."¹



T. THOMAS was not, of course, speaking of himself when he wrote these words in his apologetical work *Concerning the Reasons for the Faith*. But if we do apply them to him personally, we gain an invaluable insight into his spiritual life and, in addition, the striking organic development of his writings on the subject of the sacred passion becomes much more meaningful to us.

The primary "pious motive" underlying St. Thomas' consideration of Christ's sacred passion and death was a desire to penetrate ever more deeply into the abyss of divine love. Although the entire redemptive plan was the work of love, that love reached its breathtaking climax in the sufferings and death endured by the God-Man on Calvary. This lavish outpouring of divine love evoked a corresponding love in the heart of Aquinas which found its expression in a lifelong contemplation of Christ's cross. Since all his writings and preaching on the sacred passion derived from such loving contemplation, love is then both their font and unifying theme.

That the holy Doctor's pious consideration of Christ's passion and death yielded "continuously more and greater thoughts" is abundantly verified in his writings. His first major theological work, written as a Bachelor at the University of Paris was a commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. It presents a substantially faithful reproduction of the accepted scholastic treatment of Christ's passion, although several important original contributions to the corpus of traditional doctrine were made. The third part of his immortal *Summa*, however, represents the culmination and perfection of St. Thomas' teaching on this subject.²

¹ *De Rationibus Fidei*, Chap. vii.

² For a detailed study of this organic growth of St. Thomas' doctrine on the sacred passion, which will not be our concern here, cfr. O'Leary, Joseph M., C.P., *The Development of the Doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Passion and Death of Our Lord*, Chicago, J. S. Paluch Co., Inc., 1952.

The full appreciation of Aquinas' teaching on Christ's passion and death can only be obtained by taking into account the constant process of growth and enrichment this doctrine underwent and the profoundly intimate connection this development had with his own spiritual growth. The remarkable evolution in depth and precision of doctrine achieved by Thomas in the intervening years cannot be explained as merely the outcome of intensive study. The Master of Theology leaned heavily upon persevering prayer and ardent contemplation. We know this from the testimony of the Dominican, William da Tocco, the saint's first biographer.

CHRIST, THE FONT OF WISDOM

William held the office of prior of the Dominican house at Benevento, and was a member of the commission appointed for St. Thomas' canonization process. He had known his illustrious brother personally, during the saint's last years spent at St. Dominic's Priory, Naples. He supplemented his own observations with information given him by Peter of Sectea and Reginald of Priverno. Reginald was made Frater Thomas' special companion shortly after the latter's appointment as a Master of Theology, a post he held until the saint's death. The material William da Tocco collected in his official inquiry for the canonization process he later incorporated into a life of St. Thomas, which has remained ever since a basic biographical source.

William attributed St. Thomas' wisdom more to divine inspiration than to study. He recalls how his saintly brother never undertook writing or study without prayer and the shedding of many tears. This was especially true if he found himself involved in perplexingly difficult problems. Only after he had been divinely enlightened would he continue his work. St. Thomas himself offered the reason for his constant recourse to prayer, when he wrote that if there were a book which contained all wisdom, it would be foolish to seek elsewhere for knowledge. Christ, the Word made flesh, was the holy Doctor's book of perfect wisdom.

Thomas made Christ's sacrifice on Calvary the special object of his meditations throughout his life. Antoine Touron, O.P., 18th century biographer of the saint, aptly points out that the wisdom St. Paul acquired in the third heaven, and the beloved disciple on the breast of the Saviour, St. Thomas learned at the feet of the crucifix. "The wounds of Jesus Christ were the masters whom he consulted in his doubts, and to whom he listened in his diffi-

culties."³ He had the pious practice of daily reciting before an image of the Crucified his own beautiful prayer, "Grant, O Merciful God" to obtain the grace to shun all that was passing, and seek only for what was eternal. Thomas showed his reliance upon Christ Crucified even in the smallest details of his life. William da Tocco reveals how whenever the saint was alarmed, as at a sudden clap of thunder, he would make the sign of the cross and say, "God became man for us. God died for us."⁴

St. Thomas wrote the third part of his *Summa* while living at St. Dominic's, Naples. In the course of composing the questions relating to the mysteries of Christ's passion and resurrection, he would come from his cell to the chapel of St. Nicholas to pray. He chose the time before Matins when no one else would be there, and would then prostrate himself before the image of the Crucified to obtain from the font of wisdom the light and grace he needed. On one occasion, while he was absorbed in prayer, Christ spoke to him from the cross saying, "You have written well of Me, Thomas; what reward do you wish for your labors?" Thomas, who had prayed daily at the foot of the cross, "May I despise, O Lord, all transitory things, and prize only that which is eternal," unhesitatingly replied, "Nothing less than Yourself, O Lord."

IMPERSONAL TRANSPARENCY

As we have seen it was love which was the key opening to his gaze hidden meanings in the divine mysteries of Christ's suffering and death. Whatever St. Thomas wrote on the sacred passion was the outpouring of his own intense love. Love, too, impelled him to share these newly won secrets with others. For a Dominican to hoard his store of truths is a betrayal of his vocation. His love of neighbor finds expression in a total, prodigal scattering of these truths over the fields of the world like so many seeds which carry within themselves the promise of a future harvest. St. Thomas fulfilled this primary Dominican role in a unique way. His keen desire to help his neighbor to find the ultimate Truth spurred him on in all his intellectual pursuits.

Though St. Thomas made all the great truths, about which he wrote so sublimely, the object of his own ardent contemplation, the style he employed to express these truths, effectively

³ Tournon, Antoine, O.P., *La Vie de S. Thomas Paris, 1737*, p. 420 as found in *The Interior Life of St. Thomas Aquinas* by Martin Grabmann, trans. by Nicholas Ashenbrenner, O.P., Milwaukee, 1951, p. 71.

⁴ Tocco, William da, O.P., *Vita S. Thomae Aquinatis*, Chap. 38.

conceals whatever is intimate or personal. This is especially the case in his formal theological works. The inevitable result is that many in reading his treatment of Christ's passion lose sight of the intimate relation which exists between the mystic and theologian. Etienne Gilson has referred to his rigidly formal mode of expression as "impersonal transparency." St. Thomas conceived of himself as Truth's medium, and he would permit nothing personal or merely human to distort or intrude upon his presentation of the divine mysteries. This explains why many whose acquaintance with him was limited to the *Summa* should acclaim him as the theological craftsman par excellence, but remain largely unaware of the ardent soul of the mystic which lay hidden beneath formal theological terms. The devoted research of many of his modern biographers has succeeded in making this all important aspect of the saint's life better known.⁵ They have made clear the perfect unity and harmony which existed between his sanctity and learning. The general absence of the personal in St. Thomas' writings is the effect of his total consecration to the Dominican Order's goal and motto, *Veritas*.

A sympathetic and integral evaluation of Aquinas' doctrine on the sacred passion requires that this "impersonal transparency" of which Gilson speaks be taken into account. Fortunately, however, St. Thomas has composed a number of works treating of Christ's passion in which he could permit himself a freer expression of his personal devotion, and it is precisely here that the hidden fires reveal themselves. This is notably true of his scripture commentaries, particularly those written on the Gospels of Matthew and John, and the Pauline epistles.

SERMONS

But nowhere could St. Thomas find such an unhindered outlet for his fervent devotion to Our Lord's passion as in his sermons, especially those preached in his native Italy. There he would often speak to the people in their *volgare* or Italian tongue, the only language other than Latin which he spoke fluently. It is in these sermons as nowhere else that his own ardent nature breaks through.

As Father Hugh Pope, O.P., once pointed out, the Church's Common Doctor is seldom thought of as a preacher, and yet he did a remarkable amount of preaching both at Paris, and in many

⁵ This is especially true of *The Interior Life of St. Thomas Aquinas* by Dr. Martin Grabmann, *op. cit.*

parts of Italy, despite his busy schedule of teaching and writing. William da Tocco relates how at Naples, toward the close of the preacher's life, great throngs of people crowded about him to listen to his sermons. We are indebted to John di Blasio, a personal friend of the saint, and one of four lay witnesses at the canonization process, for precious details of St. Thomas' mode of preaching. Di Blasio attended a course of Lenten sermons delivered by St. Thomas at Naples shortly before his death, and he recalls that the holy Doctor in the fervor of his devotion preached with his eyes often closed or raised heavenward. The effect of such preaching upon the faithful may well be imagined.

About the time of his promotion to the position of preacher-general in the Dominican Order St. Thomas delivered a famous series of sermons on Christ's passion and death at the Church of St. Mary Major in Rome. He had the people consider the intense sorrow of the Blessed Virgin at her Son's sufferings and, we are told, moved them to tears. On Easter Sunday, however, he emphasized the happiness the Mother experienced in her Son's glorious resurrection, arousing in them a deep spiritual joy. A true preacher, he most effectively communicated to his hearers his own burning devotion to the sacred mysteries of Christ's passion and resurrection.

THE SACRED PASSION A WORK OF LOVE

Thomas the mystic and Thomas the theologian cannot be separated if we hope to appreciate fully his theological productions and this is preeminently true of every line he ever wrote on the sacred passion. One thought throughout is paramount: Christ's suffering and death were essentially a work of love. Love served as the unifying theme for all St. Thomas' writings on this subject. Love was also the font from which he drew his intimate knowledge of the divine plan unfolded at Calvary. He saw the difference between the Old and New Testament as above all the difference between fear and love, and epitomized God's whole redemptive plan as a work of love.⁶ If men could only penetrate to the depths of this divine love, they might then understand all the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption. To appreciate this love ever more fully was his lifelong labor, despite his humble realization that God's grace and love are so great that it was beyond his power to comprehend them.

When he listed in his *Summa* the reasons of convenience for

⁶ *Super Epistolas S. Pauli*, Marietti, Rome, 1953; *Ad Hebr.*, vol. ii, n. 144.

Christ's passion, he placed first the reason that by Christ's total sacrifice man learns how much God loves him.⁷ Nothing in the whole divine plan of Redemption so reveals God's love for men as the death of the Son of God, the Lord of death, upon the cross. St. Thomas beautifully explains the words of St. Paul, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who by the Holy Ghost offered himself unspotted unto God, cleanse our conscience from dead works, to serve the living God?" (*Hebrews*, ix, 14) as meaning that the Holy Ghost caused Christ to shed His blood by the spiration of divine love, love of God and love of neighbor which was infused into Him.⁸

During his second term as a Master of Theology at the University of Paris, the poet and Doctor of the Eucharist was asked whether Christ manifested a greater sign of love by giving His body to us for food than by suffering for us upon the cross. Strong as was his devotion to Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, he did not hesitate in his reply. He cited as the key to his answer the words of Christ Himself as found in St. John's Gospel, "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends." The measure and proof of a man's love, he pointed out, is what he is willing to lose out of love for others. In His passion and death Christ surrendered His most precious possession—His own life. In the Eucharist Christ, in giving, suffers no loss.⁹

VIRTUE THE PROOF OF LOVE

For the Angelic Doctor the suffering Christ is our example as well as our ransom. The proof of the sincerity of our appreciation and love for such a generous Redeemer is a virtuous life patterned after Christ's own life.¹⁰ St. Peter in his first Epistle had urged the disciples of Christ to follow in their leader's footsteps (*I Petr.*, ii, 14) and the apostolic Dominican friar called upon the Christians of his own time to heed St. Peter's counsel. "Whoever

⁷ III, q. 46, a. 3.

⁸ *Super Epistolas S. Pauli, op. cit., Ad Hebr.*, vol. ii, n. 444.

⁹ *Quodlibetum V, Articulus VI, Quaestio III.*

¹⁰ It is clearly impossible to cover all the numerous aspects of St. Thomas' teaching on Christ's passion, even in a very general way. St. Thomas' treatment of virtue as the proof of our love for Christ, with Christ portrayed as the model of virtue is here developed, because the saint makes this a recurring theme in so many of his works. This section is drawn from St. Thomas' *Summa*, New Testament scripture commentaries and various theological opuscula. The commentaries and opuscula, in great part, have never been translated into English.

wishes to live perfectly," wrote the holy Doctor, "let him do only this—despise the things He despised upon the cross, and desire the things He (there) desired."¹¹ St. Thomas drew a striking contrast between the tree of the garden of paradise, and the tree of the cross. From the cross Christ opposed His own virtues to the vices which had first enslaved man to satan, when man ate of the forbidden fruit. No virtue is absent from the cross, but Christ especially emphasised humility and obedience, virtues which would have prevented Adam's downfall.

Through his profound study of the Scriptures and his penetrating knowledge of man's nature the saint laid bare the root causes of sin. He saw in Christ's passion the perfect antidote to man's evil inclinations. Man sins because he prefers material values to spiritual ones, and in his pursuit of earthly delights shrinks from the practice of virtue, when this proves painful or difficult. St. Thomas saw that if we piously contemplate His sufferings, Christ will free us from all attachment to material things. He will help us to endure hardship and even death for virtue's sake. Though God, He chose poverty and lowliness, and willingly underwent humiliations. The labor, thirst, hunger and scourging of body He sustained were intended to emancipate us from our attachment to bodily pleasures. "Every action of Christ is our instruction," to quote a favorite dictum of St. Thomas, but especially in the sacred passion did he find portrayed the perfection of the virtuous life.¹²

Certain of these virtues are singled out by St. Thomas for special attention, because they seemed more important to him from the point of view both of the passion itself, and also in their meaning for us. Some of the most beautiful passages in his commentaries on the passion of Christ are devoted to their delineation. As a Dominican religious vowed to a life of simplicity and obedience, St. Thomas kept his eyes ever fixed in loving admiration upon the humility and obedience of Christ crucified. He perceived that these two virtues cannot be separated one from the other, for "The measure and sign of humility is obedience, since it is characteristic of the proud to follow their own will."¹³ Starting with the basic truth that "Humility makes man capable of God," he saw in pride a wall separating us from our Creator.

¹¹ *In Symbol. Apost.* from *Opuscula Theologica*, Marietti, Rome, 1954, n. 919.

¹² *Super Evangelium S. Joannis, Lectura*, Marietti, Rome, 1952, n. 1555.

¹³ *Super Epistolas S. Pauli, op. cit., Ad Phil.*, vol. ii, n. 65.

Christ gave us a unique example of humility by submitting His will to that of the Father even when this involved a most infamous death upon the cross. St. Thomas, in drawing out the lesson of Christ's perfect obedience to God the Father, says that we should find it easier now to do the will of our superiors, who stand in the place of God. When Christ embraced an ignominious death to please His Father, He robbed man of any excuse for defection, even in the face of the greatest trials. "Whatever your afflictions may be," pleads St. Thomas, "do not play the coward, for you have not yet suffered as Christ has."¹⁴ Returning again to his theme of divine love, he points out that the self-same act of obedience giving glory to the Father was also an act of love freeing man from his bondage to sin. By sin man had fallen into a deep well from which only a solicitous God could deliver him.

"If you seek an example of patience, you will find it in the highest degree upon the cross."¹⁵ St. Thomas ascribes the greatness of Christ's patience to two factors: He uncomplainingly endured unequalled sufferings, and He might have escaped these sufferings had He wished. Thomas tells us that it was especially patience and fortitude which won Pontius Pilate's admiration. Pilate had presided at many trials, as governor of Judea, but there was something unique about Christ. Though a prisoner He betrayed no sign of fear and made no attempt to defend Himself. By remaining silent before Pilate and His executioners, Christ had demonstrated how willingly He was going to His death. From the cross itself He offered a more striking proof still that His sufferings were voluntary rather than imposed. At the last, He cried out with a loud voice and yielded up the ghost. St. Thomas says by way of comment that an ordinary man can scarcely move his tongue at the moment of death, but Christ manifested His divine power by expiring with a great cry, causing the centurion to exclaim, "Truly this was the Son of God." St. Thomas then calls our attention to the fact that Matthew, in recounting the passion, does not write that Christ died, but that "He yielded up the ghost."¹⁶

One of the *Summa's* most moving passages is found in the third part (q. 46, aa. 5-6) where St. Thomas delineates Christ's sufferings and sorrow. Christ was persecuted by all classes of men and betrayed by His dearest friends. He was deprived of all

¹⁴ *Super Epistolas S. Pauli, op. cit., Ad Hebr., vol. ii, n. 670.*

¹⁵ *In Symbol. Apost. from Opuscula Theologica, op. cit., n. 921.*

¹⁶ *Compend. Theol. from Opuscula Theologica, op. cit., Chap. 230, n. 484.*

honor and glory, robbed even of His garments. His soul was overwhelmed with sadness, and weighed down by the sins of men. He suffered in all the senses and members of His sacred body. Complete as St. Thomas' account may seem to us, Cardinal Cajetan, in his commentary on the *Summa*, warns that no one can ever enumerate all of Christ's sufferings. Cajetan says that when we consider what Christ endured in His passion and death we enter a limitless sea which we shall never traverse in this life.

A TOTAL VIEW

No true appraisal of the beauty, profundity and loving devotion of St. Thomas' commentary on Christ's sacred passion and death as found in his works of theology is possible without a consideration of all the places in which the holy Doctor has treated of these mysteries. His theological productions alone, because of the rigid methodology utilized in them, might very well create a false impression of cold precision in the reader's mind. Only by consulting his scripture commentaries, apologetical works, catechetical instruction and sermons, will one find the spirit by which the letter is properly to be judged. Then will Thomas be seen with a clear and undistorted gaze; then will the full meaning of the letter reveal itself to those who study the pertinent passages of his theological masterpieces under such a total view.

His writings on the passion and death of Jesus Christ offer a virtually inexhaustible source both of sermon material for the preacher, and topics of meditation for the devout Christian. Taken in their totality they constitute one of the Church's richest treasures, and an imperishable monument to St. Thomas' sanctity and Christlike wisdom.