



THE CHALLENGE OF THOMISM

WITHIN A YEAR after St. Thomas' death in 1277, his Dominican confreres, in the official legislation of the Order, had already set themselves to the task of defending his doctrine from attack.¹ In the succeeding decades this movement would culminate in a decree establishing St. Thomas as the norm and guide for all studies within the Order. To some, this has seemed the beginning of the end for any vital Thomistic thought.² To others, it is the beginning of a tradition of fidelity to St. Thomas that is the glory of the Dominican Order.³ The doctrinal authority of St. Thomas—thus recognized within his own Order almost from the beginning, and extended to the entire Church by Pope Leo XIII—places a double burden on the shoulders of those who would be Thomists. They must follow St. Thomas to the letter—this is the burden most often emphasized, against those who would minimize the duty of following St. Thomas or whose deference to him would be only verbal. They must follow him in spirit as well—this is the point that will be made in the present article.

Following St. Thomas according to the letter but not the spirit may be called, for the sake of a name, "philosophical and/or theological fundamentalism." Fundamentalism is a term usually found in Scripture studies. It refers to those who, through a misguided reverence, interpret the Bible as having said the last word on everything—scientific and historical, as well as on the manner of man's return to God. However, as the Galileo incident clearly shows, fundamentalism can extend as well to the fields of patristics and philosophy. For Galileo was condemned as one who had opposed the "clear statements" of the Fathers no less than the Scriptures; and a certainty of the truth of Aristotle's physical theories seems clearly to have motivated a number of the parties to the condemnation.⁴

All this brings up the question of the right way to approach the study of St. Thomas.

It is obviously the wrong approach for the beginner simply to open the *Summa Theologiae* to a given page and think that the succinct statements he finds there tell the whole story. The easy expectation of finding an answer in this way often enough gives way to disappointment and a shocked, "Is that all he has to say?" Another approach, little better than this, is that of a writer who would bolster up his arguments, however weak in them-

selves, with one-line quotations from St. Thomas, as often as not out of context. A third approach, not wrong in itself but open to misuse, is that of attempting to piece together a theory by collecting quotes from here, there, and everywhere in St. Thomas. To be correct such an approach must make constant application of St. Thomas' procedure and methodology.

The key to the right approach to St. Thomas is system.⁵ Especially in his later works St. Thomas lives, literally, by the principle: "It is the wise man's part to set things in order."⁶ Wise men differ in the orders they impose, and St. Thomas' is peculiarly his own. Its characteristic feature, as contrasted with that of a great doctor like Augustine, is the methodical, plodding way in which the thought is developed. The truth is broken down into tiny fragments, each treated in a separate article or chapter. In one sense, this is the glory of St. Thomas' method. In another, it is apt to induce the reader to take the part for the whole, to lose the forest among the trees. St. Thomas himself was not, of course, guilty of such over-formalization, of treating each article as though it were a self-contained whole. For not only is his thought divided up into articles, but the articles themselves are masterfully correlated in questions, and questions in tracts, until the whole is coordinated in a vast, interlocking system. There is almost no article, for instance, in the *Summa Theologiae* which can be read intelligently without reference to a host of other articles.

We may take as an example St. Thomas' doctrine on grace. There has been in recent times a renewal of emphasis on the Christological aspects of grace, on the fact that all grace comes to man—whether through the Church, the sacraments, or the Holy Spirit—with the mark of Christ upon it. It would be expected that this important point would receive a corresponding emphasis in St. Thomas. At first sight, such seems not to be the case. This has in fact been reason enough for some to want to jettison St. Thomas, or at least his theological order.⁷

To be fully understood, St. Thomas' tract on grace in the *Prima Secundae* must be seen in its place in the over-all plan of the *Summa*: it is the exterior principle of human acts as means of arriving at eternal happiness along the road that is Christ.⁸ Within the tract St. Thomas considers grace itself, its necessity, nature, and divisions; the cause of grace, and the effects of grace—forty-four articles in six questions, and each point important for the whole picture. Every point is linked in a close-knit unity, and the order within the questions is as remarkable as that between questions. But even this is not yet the whole picture. Tucked away in the middle of the tract⁹ are two references to the *Tertia Pars*, to the tract on Christ the Savior. The

references are to discussions of the manner in which Christ's humanity is an instrument in the distribution of grace.¹⁰ By following up these references it is almost amazing how much new light is thrown on the doctrine of grace. All the grace-causing aspects of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, as well as His causality in and through the Church and the sacraments, are brought clearly into focus, with due theological precision on the respective roles of Christ's divinity and humanity. Seemingly tucked away in answers to objections, these references of St. Thomas are in no sense accidental afterthoughts. A close acquaintance with St. Thomas' mode of procedure and methodological use of objections and answers to objections will reveal that such references are his usual way of giving cross references to other parts of his *Summa Theologiae*. Further acquaintance leaves no doubt that the failure to take these cross references into account, as well as a failure to take into account the over-all plan and order of the *Summa*, results in an incomplete, and to that extent erroneous, interpretation of St. Thomas.

It should now be obvious why it is the wrong approach to St. Thomas simply to open the *Summa Theologiae* and expect to find a complete doctrine in any given article. Yet this presents a problem for the beginner: how is he to know where to look for these cross references? A teacher would help, of course. And the serious student will find the cross references tabulated in the index volume of the Leonine edition of St. Thomas' works.¹¹ For the amateur reader interested only in an occasional reference to St. Thomas, however, the best that can be offered in the way of a suggestion is that he at least bear in mind the interrelation of whole tracts: the connection of the tract on the ultimate end with that on charity, and this in turn with the tract on love in the *Prima Secundae*; the tract on the passions with fortitude and temperance, the virtues which moderate the passions; and so on.

It should also be obvious that one-line quotations mean very little, unless, as is sometimes the case, they constitute a pithy summary of a whole doctrine, in its formal treatment and related considerations. Apart from this "filling-out," such quotes tend to foster a mere verbal fidelity to St. Thomas.

It may, perhaps, be less obvious why a doctrinal synthesis of quotes from widely differing parts of St. Thomas' works should not be the right approach. As noted before, the approach is not in every sense wrong, but it is open to misuse. Here a distinction should be made between types of references; a citation from St. Thomas in a question or article where he is discussing a topic only remotely connected with the matter in the cita-

tion—what I would call an incidental reference pure and simple—differs considerably from a text which is either itself a cross reference or is located in an article to which a cross reference is or should be made. Incidental references in the strict sense are seldom useful as more than explications or applications of a doctrine treated formally in another place. If there is no formal treatment, they may give a hint as to what St. Thomas' thinking on the matter is, but in this case it would be far better to work out a formal treatment for oneself, using the methodological principles of St. Thomas, then compare it with the incidental references for accuracy.

Thus the task of following St. Thomas according to the spirit as well as the letter is not at all easy. It was never meant to be. Nevertheless, St. Thomas is the common doctor of the Church, and Catholics have the duty of following his "method, doctrine, and principles."¹² If enough people in the Church followed him in the fullness of his synthesis, method, and order, utilizing all the vast resources of the interconnected passages in his works, then there would be no need to fear a sterile formalism or verbalism, no need to be wary of "fundamentalism" in the philosophy and theology of the Church.

—Reginald M. Durbin, O.P.

¹ *Acta Capitulum Generalium Ordinis Praedicatorum*, ed. Benedict M. Reichert, O.P. (Rome: Polyglot Press, 1898), I, 199.

² Walter Nigg, *Warriors of God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 267.

³ Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 57.

⁴ Giorgio de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* ("Phoenix Books"; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 121, 39.

⁵ M. Dominique Chenu, O.P., "Introduction to the *Summa* of St. Thomas," trans. and adapted by Robert Edward Brennan, O.P., and Albert Marie Landry, O.P., in *The Thomist Reader, 1958* (Washington: The Thomist Press, 1958), pp. 1-34.

⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982 a 18.

⁷ Chenu, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁸ Cf. *Summa Theol.*, prologues to: I, q. 2; I-II, q. 1; q. 6; q. 109; *Tertia Pars*; for full effect, these prologues should be read together.

⁹ I-II, q. 112, a. 1, ad 1, 2.

¹⁰ III, q. 8, a. 1, ad 1; q. 13, a. 2; q. 19, a. 1; q. 48, a. 6; q. 49, a. 1; q. 56, a. 1, ad 3; q. 62, a. 5; q. 64, a. 1.

¹¹ *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, Doctoris Angelici, Opera Omnia*, Leonine edition (Rome: Leonine Commission, 1948), XVI, 85-107.

¹² *Codex Juris Canonici*, c. 1366, 2.