

SOME THOUGHTS ON ST. THOMAS¹

The world abounds in mediocrities and personalities are, indeed, rare—that is, individuals of intellectual worth and exceptional morality. What is more, they are fewer in the order of action than in that of thought. But what is most rare is to meet men who possess to an eminent degree both the genius of thought and that of action; whose lives are full of works and whose works are full of life.

Saint Thomas of Aquin was one thus privileged, and no one ever took less heed of it than he. In his action, as in his thought, God occupied the first place, and it was about this divine center that he developed his wonderful personality from the most tender age even to his last day.

The personality of a man is determined in the course of his life by the greatness of the aim which he assigns to his activity, and by the strength of will which he employs in realizing it.

At the age when children consider none but themselves, and how they may find pleasure, Saint Thomas was already agitated by the desire of finding an object for his youthful energies, one, indeed, that would surpass his greatest activity. This object he found in God. To know, love and serve Him, became the object of all his endeavors. "What is God?" he asked of the monks at Monte Cassino, where he had been placed by his parents to receive a worthy education. From that moment the purpose of his life was decided; it was to God that he would consecrate himself entirely. Though wealthy and noble, and consequently in a position most favorable for the gaining of worldly honors, he preferred to renounce all and to become lowly.

The Dominican constellation was brilliant at that time in the firmament of the Church. Saint Dominic had organized and developed his work upon a foundation of preaching and teaching according to the wishes of the Sovereign Pontiffs, Innocent III and Honorius III. Since 1216 the Constitutions of the Order have made of study a fundamental obligation. "The Friars Preachers were thus the first Order in the Middle Ages, which made of study the foundation of its Constitutions. On August 17, 1217, Saint Dominic sent forth his first companions, who visited in turn all the great cities of Europe, and especially the two

¹ From the French of M. S. Gillet, O. P.

great university centers, Paris and Bologna. From these cities the ranks of the Order received many recruits both among masters and scholars. A Dominican convent is essentially a school. It was forbidden to establish a convent without a doctor, whose purpose was to teach the religious and also the secular clerics who had free access to the conventual class-rooms. Thus it was that the Roman Church, through the Preachers as a medium, solved the scholastic problem which the third and fourth Lateran Councils were unable to solve.² Scholastic activities in the Order were many and varied, and after having been established in the convents, were soon extended to the universities. The Friars played so important a part in the life of the great schools that a modern historian has called them "the academic clergy."

These details are necessary for a better understanding of the precocious resolution of Saint Thomas to enter the Order of Saint Dominic. We cannot say that he had the foreknowledge of his destiny in life, but his very choice of that Order in which he could so easily develop his wonderful gifts impels us to believe it.

However the case might be, after the young Thomas of Aquin had decided to become a Friar Preacher, neither person nor thing was able to hinder him from his intentions. He encountered obstacles on the part of his family which others of a less tempered character would consider insurmountable. No temptation was spared him, not even that of the flesh, but he easily conquered all. It was, indeed, extraordinary to see a young man of nineteen, already master of his passions, and from sheer force of will able to renounce the tenderness of family ties, the worldly glory of the family name and a brilliant future in the world, leaving all for the cloister, there to lead a life humble and mortified, and to divide his time between study and prayer. Saint Thomas knew well that by becoming a religious and submitting to the many trials of the cloister he was taking the best means to the attainment of his divine end. He would be better able to develop his personality and, with the grace of God, to become a saint.

The early writers of the Order relate the following beautiful anecdote concerning our Saint. One day a lay-brother, on his way to the market, was seeking a religious to accompany him,

² Dictionary of Theology—Theology in the Order of Preachers, Mandonnet.

as the Constitutions prescribe. The first one he met chanced to be Brother Thomas, who already was known far and wide for his intellectual labors. However, he was unknown to the lay-brother, who, in all simplicity asked the great doctor to serve as his socius. Without the least hesitation the saint consented and accompanied the good lay-brother to the market-place.

This anecdote suffices to show us the religious personality of Saint Thomas Aquinas. One sometimes meets with people of the world who say that they envy religious because the latter have but to obey, which is so much easier than to command. Without doubt he who obeys does not assume the responsibilities of him who commands, but this by no means makes obedience any the easier. In the cloister as well as in the world nature demands its rights, and to renounce these for the spiritual benefits of grace, to overcome them in order to fulfill the requirements of an austere rule, and to incline oneself continually to sacrifice personal interests for those of the community—this requires a very solid character and a well-trying will. The anecdote related serves admirably to show how perfectly Saint Thomas understood the moral value of religious obedience. He never stopped to ask himself whether or no it were proper for a celebrated doctor to accompany an ignorant lay-brother to the market-place. The Brother needed his assistance in accomplishing a task which was for the common good, and so he sacrificed himself. It can be said that on this occasion he employed the same force of character in humbling himself for the good of the community as he used on other occasions in exalting himself when the benefit of his Order or that of the Church so required.

It happened, as might have been expected, that the success of the Friars Preachers at the University of Paris, and their weighty influence over masters and students, aroused great jealousy on all sides. Little by little a campaign was formed against them which meant nothing less than their expulsion from the University. Mention is not made here of those evil days for the purpose of showing that the struggle against the regular clergy was not begun in our day. It is rather to set forth the personality of Saint Thomas, who knew just the attitude to take amid these very trying circumstances that would promote the general welfare of his Order and of the Church. At the command of the Pope he wrote a work on the rights of the regulars, and particularly on their right to teach, that was a masterpiece of good

sense and moderation, so clear in its exposition, and so unanswerable in its argument, that its very appearance sufficed to restore peace to the University.

It is true that among all the Friars Preachers—who exercised on those around them a doctrinal influence which provoked reactions on the part of their enemies more or less violent—Saint Thomas certainly numbered at once the most enthusiastic friends and the most obstinate adversaries. Even in his own Order the illustrious doctor met with many contradictions, especially when he began to bring Aristotle's philosophy into the domain of theology. This was done, as was later understood, solely to throw more light upon Christian truth and to give greater strength to the arguments of its defenders. But the opposition which Thomas experienced from the members of the Order was nothing in comparison with that which was raised against him by outsiders. His philosophical and theological assertions caused great confusion among his contemporaries. "Masters whose intellectual formation was completed; minds which believed that philosophy had already been perfected in the past; men among whom fellowship and party spirit was of more power than disinterested research and love of truth—all, in a word, who for one cause or another were unable to assimilate a doctrine which exceeded the average powers of the intellect, all such as these offered resistance, some passively by continuing obstinately on the trail long used; others by involving their concessions in reservations and deceit, others, finally by attempting a direct assault on the Thomistic fortress."³

Never, perhaps, did the personality of Saint Thomas assert itself with so much simplicity, and at the same time with so much grandeur, as during this crafty opposition to his doctrine. His whole being was absorbed in truth and his placid countenance, which has been immortalized by Fra Angelico, was never disturbed by contradiction or injury. Knowing that he was supported by the highest authority in the world, that of the Sovereign Pontiff, and that he was in direct communion with Him who had called Himself "the Truth," Saint Thomas continued his tranquil reasonings upon the works of Aristotle and the compiling of his "Summa Theologica." Those who are acquainted with this work and who have meditated upon it for years are

³ Dictionary of Theology, P. Mandonnet.

impressed with the fact that no one can discover the faintest echo of dispute, the least trace of controversy, or the slightest movement of irritation; but there is the constant prepossession of mind on the part of Saint Thomas never to bring forward his own person, and joined to this is an almost exaggerated anxiety lest any shade of truth in the errors of his adversaries be overlooked.

This fact, besides proving how profound was the knowledge of the Saint, also shows us his incomparable mastery over self. Only a saint can give us such an example of humility and patience. "What is God?" asked the young Thomas from his bench in the Abbey class-room. Later, when in full possession of his genius, he had found a satisfactory answer to that question, nothing could hinder him from communicating it to the world. In the face of opposition and adversity, he stood firm as a rock on the seashore, against which the furious waves have no disturbing power. It was his passionate love of God in the search for truth which endowed the life of Saint Thomas with that unity and that inflexible stability which distinguish great characters alone, and which are found in a supreme degree only among the saints of God.

—Bro. Bernardine Myers, O. P.