

THE AUTHORITY OF ST. THOMAS

The celebrated Lacordaire, during one of his famous panegyrics on St. Thomas, asked these two questions: "What place does theology hold in the world and what place does St. Thomas hold in theology?" His answer to both was—the first place. Certainly that theology occupies the first place in the world no Catholic will deny. Since man's superior and ultimate end is spiritual, that which leads him to it must be considered the supreme science of the world. Theology is the only science by which man can properly attain his final end; all other sciences are subsidiary to this, their queen. Likewise the preeminent position of St. Thomas in theology is commonly admitted. We shall endeavor to demonstrate that there exist sufficient reasons for placing St. Thomas above and before all other theologians, past and present.

Authority has been defined as a moral force determining the intellect and will to assent to the words of another, and may be either general or specific. When a theologian's works are permitted to appear in print and may be used in Catholic Schools, his authority is considered general; if, moreover, the Church commends his doctrine in whole or in part, as the expression of Catholic truth without error, he possesses special authority, or special approbation. That St. Thomas possesses general authority is manifest. Our present thesis will concern special authority, and can be formulated thus: St. Thomas has received the special approbation of the Church and his doctrine has been placed above and in preference to the teachings of all other theologians.

With regard to theological discussions, the Church is the proper guide and judge. As she is the custodian of the Word of God, she is the capable judge of her members' writings. The Angelic Doctor's authority ought to be held as special if the Holy See has commended his teaching above all the other Doctors as the right and safe way to attain truth. That St. Thomas has received such commendation is clearly evident from the fact that from 1257, when the thirty-year-old Master began his great career, down to the present, eighty Popes have heaped, directly or indirectly, encomiums on his doctrines. Space will permit us to give only a few notes of that mighty Papal chorus.

Today the Holy See announces most explicitly her desire that St. Thomas be considered the prince of all theologians. One of our present Holy Father's first official acts as the Vicar of Christ was to confirm and promulgate the decision of the Sacred Congregation of Studies concerning the importance of St. Thomas' doctrine and principles. Benedict, since then, has frequently felicitated those obedient to his prescriptions in this regard, and especially those universities where the text of the Angelic Doctor was introduced.

But the greatest modern encomium which the Church has accorded St. Thomas is his incorporation into the new Code of Canon Law, the last word of the Church regarding external affairs, in which Aquinas is literally canonized as the principal Doctor of the Church. In Canon 1366, p. 2, we read: "Let all professors treat exclusively the studies of rational philosophy and theology, and the formation of students in these sciences, according to the method, doctrine and principles of the Angelic Doctor, and let them hold to them religiously." From among all the Doctors of the Church, she selects one, Aquinas, and by a formal, universal, absolute law obliges seculars and religious (Can. 589) alike to follow him diligently. It does not seem unreasonable to infer from this that St. Thomas is given the pre-eminent position among all Catholic theologians. And as if, perhaps, to give a reason for such a unique privilege, Pope Benedict wrote Feb. 6th, 1919: (P. Pégues) "The eloquent eulogies with which the Apostolic See has favored St. Thomas Aquinas permit no Catholic to doubt but that he was divinely raised that the Church might have a master of doctrine par excellence, whom she could follow at all times." Surely a wonderful tribute to the genius of an humble medieval friar! But if the present Vicar of Christ holds Aquinas in singular esteem and, both personally and through the New Code, proposes his doctrine as the representative teaching of the universal Church, it cannot be said that the Holy Father's words and actions in this regard are wholly unprecedented.

On June 24th, 1914, Pope Pius X received in solemn audience the whole professorial and student body of the Dominican College of the Angelico. On this occasion the late Holy Father eulogized the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas as a book unique in the doctrinal order, which, though confided in a very special manner to the family of St. Dominic, was the book of

God's Church, that book whence can be drawn Catholic doctrine in its truth, purity and integrity.

This eulogy was still the topic of conversation when the next day, Pius gave to the world his *Motu Proprio* "Doctoris Angelicoi" (June 25, 1914). Again and more solemnly His Holiness proclaimed St. Thomas the doctor par excellence, and in a certain sense the unique Doctor of the Church. He said that in him alone could be found essentially all that the others could say, and that it was to be found there complete, corrected, and employed to diffuse, to illuminate, and to protect sacred doctrine—in all, a body of doctrine so marvellous that neither faith nor reason could permit its being neglected.

The new testimony of Pius X was rendered expedient because certain professors had unfittingly interpreted and poorly executed orders already given by him in an earlier document. On Sept. 1, 1910, Pius made this recommendation to Bishops and Religious Orders: "Concerning studies We desire and expressly command that Scholastic Philosophy be established as the foundation-stone of sacred studies. And the thing to be noted here is, that in prescribing Scholastic Philosophy We mean by that philosophy, the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas."

"It appears," adds the Holy Father in his *Motu Proprio*, "that because We said at that time that one must follow the philosophy of St. Thomas 'especially' without saying it is necessary to follow it 'exclusively' that many persuaded themselves that they obeyed Our will, or at least were not contrary to it, if they held that which some of the other doctors had taught in philosophy, even though contrary to the principles of St. Thomas. But in that they have greatly deceived themselves. When we pronounced St. Thomas the Prince of Scholastic Philosophy, it goes without saying that we desired over and above all to mean his principles, upon which, as on its foundation, that philosophy rests."

It was the whole philosophy of St. Thomas that the Holy Father intended and if he emphasized the Angelic Doctor's principles, he had in mind those who failed to interpret his earlier document correctly. He continues: "Those principles which are the chief ones in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas ought not be placed in the category of opinions which can be disputed, but as foundations upon which all natural and divine science is established, and if they neglect them or alter them in

any manner whatsoever, it necessarily follows that the students of the sacred sciences no longer perceive the meaning of the terms by which the dogmas God revealed, are proposed by the magisterium of the Church. For that reason We have hitherto desired that all who are engaged in teaching philosophy and sacred theology be warned that if they deviate even only a step from the metaphysics of St. Thomas, serious detriment will follow." (1. c.)

All comment on the words of the Holy Father would be superfluous. Clearly and precisely, forestalling all attempts at equivocation, he stated his mind on the matter as the mind of the magisterium of the Church. Nevertheless a discussion arose as to what were the chief principles in the philosophy of St. Thomas.

A month later, July 27, 1914, a new document appeared, the official response of the Sacred Congregation of Studies fixing the Thomistic interpretation of twenty-four theses or propositions in philosophy submitted to it by the Masters of divers Institutes. The title of the document was: "Approbation of certain theses contained in the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas and proposed by Masters of philosophy."

The text enunciated in part: "After the Holy Father, Pius X, by his *Motu Proprio*, 'Doctoris Angelici', had prescribed that all the schools of Philosophy hold religiously to the principles and major arguments of the doctrine of St. Thomas, the Masters of divers Institutes proposed for examination by the Sacred Congregation certain theses which they themselves had been accustomed to teach and defend as in full accord with the most important principles of the Holy Doctor; this congregation, having duly examined the theses in question and having submitted them to the Holy Father, by order of His Holiness replies that they manifestly contain the principles and major propositions of the doctrine of the Holy Doctor."

Here was settled once and for all what Pius meant by the chief principles of St. Thomas. The Holy Father has left no possible doubt as to his mind in this regard, and even commanded many universities to introduce within three years the text of the *Summa*, under pain of forfeiting their right to confer degrees. But even these declarations of Pius were not sufficient for some, so, as we noted before, the present Holy Father, Pope

Benedict, was called upon to decide on the same matters. This he did, reiterating all that Pius X had done.

The Vicar of Christ preceding Pius X, Leo XIII, was, we may say, among Thomists a most ardent one, at the same time a Pope noted for his authoritative encyclicals. Surely no more competent judge can be found than this learned admirer and student of the Angelic Doctor. He it was who, in 1879, inaugurated the happy return to Scholastic Philosophy. It was he who, in 1880, at the written solicitations of twenty-eight religious orders and congregations and over one hundred and fifty archbishops and bishops, declared St. Thomas the Universal Patron of all Catholic Schools of higher learning throughout the world.

In his Bull "Aeterni Patris" (Aug. 4, 1879) the learned Pope praises St. Thomas, "who, as Cajetan observes, because he venerated most the ancient Doctors, seems to have inherited the intellect of them all." Thomas is called the bulwark and glory of the Catholic faith, "like the sun he reanimates the world with the bright rays of his virtues and fills it with the splendor of his doctrine." The great Pontiff then adds: "He won this title for himself, that single-handed he victoriously combated the errors of former times, and supplied invincible arms to put to rout those which might in after-times spring up. We exhort you, Venerable Brethren, in all earnestness, to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas and spread it far and wide for the defence and beauty of the Catholic faith, for the good of society and the advantage of all sciences. Let carefully selected teachers endeavor to implant the doctrines of St. Thomas in the minds of the students and clearly set forth his excellence over others."

We shall let the same Pope, in his own inimitable way, give the testimony of the General Councils of the Church.

"The Ecumenical Councils," he says, "where blossoms the flower of all earthly wisdom, have always been careful to hold St. Thomas in singular honor. In the Councils of Lyons, Vienne, Florence and the Vatican, one might almost say that St. Thomas took part and presided over the deliberations of the Fathers, contending against the errors of the Greeks, of heretics and of rationalists, with invincible force and with the happiest results. But the chief and special glory of St. Thomas, one which he has shared with none of the Catholic Doctors, is that the Fathers of Trent made it a part of the order of the Conclave to lay upon

the altar, together with the Code of the Sacred Scriptures and the Decrees of the Pontiffs, the Summa of St. Thomas, whence to draw counsel, reason and inspiration."

Such wonderful testimony to the doctrine of Aquinas, centuries after he wrote it, seems almost to escape natural explanation. However, as we have said, we can mention but a few of the commendations of eighty Popes. Clement VIII (Brief "Sicut Angeli") called the works of St. Thomas, "a wonderful number of books which he wrote in such a short time on almost every branch of discipline, in singular order and clarity, without any error whatsoever." Innocent VI bestowed this admirable compliment on his teaching: "His doctrine above others, the Sacred Scriptures alone excepted, enjoys such an excellence of phraseology, method of statement and truth of proposition, that those who hold to it are never found swerving from the truth, and he who dare assail it will always be suspected of error." On Aug. 3, 1668, Urban V wrote to the University of Toulouse: "It is Our will whereby We command that you follow the teaching of the Blessed Thomas Aquinas as the true and Catholic doctrine." The Pontiffs Benedict XIV (Brief Aug. 21, 1750), Clement XII ("Verbo Dei"), Innocent XII (brief Feb. 6, 1694), Pius V ("Mirabiliter"), Nicholas V (Brief to O. P., 1651), and Clement VII ("In Ordine") all affirm that by the doctrine of St. Thomas the whole Church is illuminated, heresies scattered and Universities most safely directed. Finally, in 1323, at the canonization of the Angelic Doctor, Pope John XXII said: "His doctrine was none other than miraculous. He has enlightened the Church more than all the other Doctors, and more profit can be gained in a single year by the study of his works than by devoting a lifetime to other theologians. He has wrought as many miracles as he has written articles."

Well could Cardinal Billot say on March 11, 1915: "Popes succeed each other, Popes of different nationalities, with tendencies and characteristics the most diverse, yet all from John XXII down to Benedict XV unanimously recommend St. Thomas of Aquin."

From the Papal testimony we have presented, the mind of the Church may be summed up as follows:

First: From all the Doctors, she has selected St. Thomas. She has made his philosophy hers,—his method, doctrine and principles. She has publicly declared what she means by these

principles, and has even commanded by a formal law that all professors of philosophy and theology embrace them.

Secondly: When she made hers the doctrine of St. Thomas, and commanded his principles to be held, she did not intend to pronounce upon the character or degree of truth contained therein. And clearly she does not impose that all the propositions of St. Thomas be adhered to interiorly as "de fide." But even in those parts which do not pertain to the deposit of faith, those which may be in the domain of free opinion, she desires that the teaching of St. Thomas be given as most in harmony with the things of faith.

We have said nothing about the religious orders and universities, the saints and other great intellects, past and present, who have been or still are proud to follow the Angelic Doctor. We have not mentioned that his commentators are numbered at 6,000; that Cardinal Mercier calls the *Summa* of St. Thomas the synthesized and reasoned response of revelation to the problem of human destiny. Nor have we noted that the great Dominican, without doubt, received his most beautiful panegyric from the lips of Our Divine Lord Himself: "Thou hast written well of Me, Thomas."

St. Thomas has received the special approbation of the Church; and she considers him her theologian, universal and at the same time unique; universal, because she desires all her subjects to embrace him; unique, in that he is to be considered her authorized representative in philosophy and theology.

The doctrine of St. Thomas, as so many Popes have said, is not confined to the Dominican Order. His teaching is even broader than the Order itself, for it serves the manifold interests of humanity, far outreaching the necessarily limited scope of a religious order. It is as universal as the Church, for wherever she may be, there stands Aquinas, her personal bodyguard. His principles she unhesitatingly offers today to balance modern scientific and historical investigations, to serve in a practical manner our own social and thinking world. This universality and modernity of the friar's genius can be somewhat appreciated from the recent tribute of Professor O'Rahilly of Cork. Speaking of the *Summa* he says: "That text-book, the *Summa Theologica*, is the world's masterpiece in divinity, unrivalled in clear cogency and conciseness, and has through its array of

commentators exerted a unique influence on the subsequent history of philosophy and theology.

“Apart from their historical influence, there is at the present day a peculiar appropriateness in the ideals of St. Thomas and his followers. Not only do we owe to him the incorporation into European political thought of those Aristotelian terms and concepts which are now regarded as commonplace or axiomatic, but never before in the intervening centuries have there been such widespread symptoms of a return to his chief theories.” (Studies, 1920).

Thus today, almost six and one-half centuries after his death, the secular world unites with the Holy See in proclaiming St. Thomas Aquinas, the Universal Doctor, the “Doctor Communis,” the common guide to the “Way, the Truth and the Life.”

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