

ST. THOMAS AND DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY

Because they were human, the Apostles differed in temperament and character. Peter was impetuous and quick; Paul, fiery and brilliant; John, loving and gentle. More than this, they were entrusted with distinct missions. "Now there are diversities of graces, but the same Spirit; there are diversities of ministries, but the same Lord; and there are diversities of operations, but the same God who worketh in all." (I Cor. xii, 4-6). Hence, we are not surprised that each religious order in the Church has its own distinctive characteristics, since they profess themselves imitators of the Apostolic band. St. Benedict consecrated his sons, in a very special manner, to the recitation of the Divine Office. The children of St. Francis find in the poverty of their Father the secret of his seraphic love. St. Ignatius instituted a militia, which to zeal for God's glory united prudence and versatility. St. Dominic was divinely inspired to form an order of preachers, an organization of men devoted to the diffusion of Divine Truth. Our Lord Himself revealed this fact to St. Catherine of Sienna: "Thy Father, Dominic, desired that his brethren have no other thought than the salvation of souls by the light of knowledge. It is this light which he wished to make the principal object of his Order, to extirpate the errors existing in his day."¹

Truth, then, Divine Truth, contemplated and preached, is the inspired object of the Dominican Order. We know very well how faithful to this duty the original Dominicans were. In 1216, Pope Honorius III approved them as "Champions of the Faith and lights of the world"; Alexander IV, in 1257, recommended them as "men steeped in science, powerful preachers"; and in 1266, Clement IV could call their Order the "Guardian of Truth."

These decades, profoundly penetrated with the spirit of Dominic, produced a friar, who, after Dominic, was to be the official guide, director and model of his Order. Hear Our Lord again: "See the glorious Thomas! What a noble intelligence, wholly applied to the contemplation of My Truth! There he found supernatural and infused knowledge and this grace he obtained more by his prayers than by study."²

¹ Dialogues de Ste. Catherine de Sienna, trans. Hurtaud, p. 158.

² Ibidem.



Statue in Possession of Dominicans at Woodchester, England

What could be clearer? Our Saviour personally proposes St. Thomas as an exemplary guide for the children of Dominic. The writings of the Angelic Doctor offer principles which are helpful in understanding and realizing a Dominican vocation. They may be gathered from the *Summa Theologica*,—his masterpiece—the compendium or synthesis of all Catholic doctrine. They can be viewed but briefly here, for nothing less than volumes could do justice to the wealth of spiritual instruction contained in that gigantic work.

As a very primary and fundamental principle, St. Thomas advocates the fullest development of our natural faculties.³ God has created us for His honor and glory, and our eternal salvation. To help us fulfill this mission, He has endowed us with wonderful natural powers and properties; a soul, with an intellect, will, imagination and memory; a body, with the physical ability to achieve perfectly our earthly destiny.

Each one of these gifts of Almighty God has within itself the capability of being developed to a certain degree of perfection that we call natural. This is our first obligation: to develop all these natural powers. However, it is to be remembered that we do this not of ourselves and for ourselves, but with God and for God alone. He has given us all we have and He alone preserves us in the very existence we enjoy.⁴ The actual realization of this principle we witness in that grand Dominican phalanx, seven centuries long, each soul in it placing his own distinctive mite and talents where they may best serve God's glory. Whether they be theologians, preachers, scripture scholars, scientists, medical doctors, historians, painters, miniaturists, architects, artists, sculptors, engineers, litterateurs, poets, or simple, humble, obscure religious,—all burned with an insatiable desire to return five talents for the one Almighty God may have bestowed on them.

But, St. Thomas reminds us, when we have discovered all that nature in its every perfection can do, we must realize that it is as nothing in comparison with the life of grace, the supernatural life of the soul to which God has raised us. This supernatural order surpasses absolutely the powers and exigencies of every created nature, even the most perfect angel. God could keep on creating angels more and more perfect, yet never by

³ *Summa Theol.* II—II, qq. 47-170.

⁴ *Ibidem*, I—q. 8, aa. 1-4.

their natural powers alone could they attain to the least degree of grace. There is simply no comparison between created nature, actual or possible, and the Divine Nature of which grace is a real and formal participation. By nature God gives us gratuitously to ourselves; by grace He gives Himself gratuitously to us. Thus nature and grace are as distinct from each other as we are from God—infinity. The just soul is actually “a partaker of the Divine Nature,” insofar as it has within itself the radical principle of the supernatural life—the life of God.⁵ St. Thomas tells us, too, that the sanctifying grace of a single soul is of more value than the natural good of the whole world, more than all created or possible angelic natures combined.

We cannot imagine a higher idea of the order of grace than St. Thomas has conceived. Neither can we admit that there is in us naturally the least germ of this supernatural life. It is absolutely and entirely the free gift of God.⁶ But, of course, there is nothing in our nature that makes it impossible for God to raise us to the supernatural order. In fact, the humblest Christian soul can be lifted to a height of supernatural life as lofty as that enjoyed by the most perfect angel. And if a soul die with a degree of grace equal to that of the most perfect angel, she will see God as perfectly as the angel does.

When we consider this doctrine of grace in the light of St. Thomas' examination, can we wonder that he is called the angelic of the Doctors and the Doctor of the angelic? Could an angel have given us a more sublime conception of the nature of grace? Our Faith teaches us that we are destined to this supernatural life. Grace is but a commencement of that life,—the seed of our eternal happiness.⁷ The knowledge of the wonderful heights to which we can climb must necessarily enlarge the sense of our own dignity and the dignity of every human being. We know now why Dominic desired to spend himself for the conversion of pagans; why every true Dominican is enkindled with an ardent desire to increase in grace; why almost thirty thousand sons and daughters of Dominic have died heroically as martyrs rather than lose this supernatural life!

St. Thomas enumerates as effects of grace: the healing of the soul wounded by sin, original or actual; the incentive to

⁵ *Ibidem* I—II q. 110 a. 1-3 and 4; q. 109-114.

⁶ *Ibidem* I—II q. 114 aa. 2 et 5.

⁷ *Ibidem* II—II, q. 24, a. 3 ad 2m.

good desires; the effective operation of these desires; final perseverance and eternal happiness. Grace, he says, unites us to God in charity, supernaturalizes every good action, elevates and perfects us as creatures of an infinitely superior world.⁸

The necessity of grace is such that without it we cannot love God above all things; we cannot fulfill all the precepts of the natural law; we cannot abstain from all mortal sins and we cannot persevere in a good life until death.⁹

This emphasizes our complete dependence on the grace of God. But is man reduced to a mere machine? Not at all. He has a free will and God saves no man who does not desire to be saved. He does command us to pray, to ask for His grace and assistance, to beseech Him to bestow upon us those gifts He has determined to bless us with only when we ask for them.¹⁰ By prayer we recognize God as the sole Author of all good, and we realize that of ourselves we have nothing but sin.¹¹ St. Thomas used to say that since even natural wisdom was the gift of God, man ought not to try or hope to acquire it by dint of study, without humbly asking for it in prayer.

Briefly, there are three guiding principles that may be drawn from the theological Summa of St. Thomas: the development of nature, the infinite superiority of the life of grace, our complete dependence upon God, with the obligation to pray and labor ceaselessly for His honor and our salvation. Perhaps we see now why St. Thomas laid so much stress on prayer, humility and the love of God. His marvellous knowledge he obtained "more by prayer than by study."¹² And because he fully realized the weakness of human nature, its absolute dependence on God even for existence, Thomas knew what real humility was. Nothing could deceive him into thinking that his own or any man's good works were not due to the grace of God, freely given.

We may remark here two characteristic notes that permeate the teachings of St. Thomas and, consequently, are distinctively Dominican. The first is intensity. Everything he did—pray, preach, teach or write,—he did with all the zeal and earnestness that his noble heart could suggest. Zeal, he tells

⁸ *Ibidem* I—II, q. 111, ad. 1 et 3.

⁹ *Ibidem* I—II, q. 109 aa. 3-4-8-10.

¹⁰ *Ibidem* II—II, q. 83 a. 2.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, I, q. 23, a. 5.

¹² *Dialogues*, loc. cit.

us,¹⁸ is nothing other than intense love, and the measure of our love of God is to love Him without measure. Perhaps, too, this is why it may be said of so many Dominicans that "being made perfect in a short time, they completed many years." All had caught from Dominic that intensity of effort which forced even unwilling bodies to spend themselves for God. St. Dominic himself, Jordan of Saxony, Reginald, St. Peter Martyr, St. Thomas, Pope Innocent V, St. Louis Bertrand,—all died comparatively young. St. Catherine of Sienna and St. Rose of Lima did not live thirty-five years, while the little eleven year old heart of Imelda Lambertini burst from the intensity of her love of God.

Again, whatever St. Thomas did, he considered, to use his own expression: "sub ratione Dei," in its relation to God. Always to think or speak of things relating to God was with Thomas a habit formed in early childhood. As a student and a religious he brought God into every action, thereby dispelling all fear that study and labor would dry up the well-springs of love. His heart ever kept pace with his head.

Such is the guide, director and model for all who claim to be children of Dominic, whether in the cloister or in the world. Six hundred and fifty years have rolled by since the Dominican Order officially proposed Thomas as its theologian and guide. And just six hundred years ago the Catholic Church placed him among her canonized saints and proclaimed him a model of sanctity and learning for the whole world. When, on July 18, 1323, Pope John XXII, publishing the Bull of Canonization, eulogized St. Thomas as a man "intensely devoted to the things of God," he placed the crown of immortality on the Dominican spirituality which the Angelic Doctor lived and taught.

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¹⁸ Summa Theol., I—II, q. 28, a. 4.