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Twenty-four Theses of St. Thomas Aquinas

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It was said of old to the Egyptians who were in need of corn: 'Go to Joseph'; so to all who hunger after truth it is said: 'Go to Thomas' for the food of sound doctrine which will sustain the soul unto everlasting life."¹ The second decade of the twentieth century has witnessed St. Thomas Aquinas entrenched in a position which is unique and unparalleled in the history of the Church; by the unfolding of a process which we cannot trace here, he is maintained as her official philosopher and confirmed in the capacity of Grand Master of Higher Ecclesiastical Studies. There is no need for us to demonstrate the unassailable authority of Thomism in the schools, but for the proper orientation of our study it will be necessary to glance at the chief historical factors concerned in its establishment.

In 1907 Pope Pius X, in the face of the spread of Modernism, found it necessary to reiterate the command of his predecessor, Pope Leo XIII, that "scholastic philosophy be made the basis of the sacred sciences."² Both these Pontiffs let it be clearly understood that "the scholastic philosophy prescribed is chiefly that which the Angelic Doctor has bequeathed to us. . . ."³ Unfortunately this unmistakable language was perverted, and in 1914 Pope Pius X was forced to a more precise formulation of this mandate: "Since we have said that the philosophy of Aquinas was chiefly to be followed, and we did not say solely, some thought to comply with our will in taking the philosophy of any of the Scholastic Doctors indiscriminately. . . . But these

¹ Encyclical "Studiorum Ducem," Pius XI.

² Encyclical "Pascendi," 1907.

³ Motu Proprio "Sacrorum Antistitum," 1910.

their mind has greatly deceived. . . . We have already instructed all teachers of philosophy and sacred theology that to deviate a single step from St. Thomas, especially in metaphysical questions, would not be without great detriment. Now we say that those who have perversely interpreted or absolutely despised the principles and chief propositions of St. Thomas' philosophy, those not only do not follow but wander widely from him."⁴

Moreover, this positive command to expound the doctrine of Thomistic philosophy in the schools has been canonized in the New Code: "The study of philosophy and theology, and the teaching of these sciences to their students, must be accurately carried out by professors according to the arguments, doctrines and principles of St. Thomas, which they are inviolately to hold."⁵ There can be no cavilling on this score—Scholastic philosophy means Thomistic philosophy. The Church recognizes no other.

But there yet remained a possible avenue of escape, inasmuch as commentators were not wholly of one mind as to the precise content of Thomistic philosophy; and so, one month after the appearance of the "Doctoris Angelici" a new document was issued to obviate this difficulty. This was the official response of the Sacred Congregation of Studies approving Twenty-four Theses of Aquinas as "clearly containing the principles and major propositions of the Holy Doctor."⁶ In the light of the above mentioned documents, the inference to be drawn from this decision appears obvious; if these words mean anything at all, they seem to imply that it is incumbent on Catholic professors to teach the Twenty-four Theses in the schools. But this conclusion was not evident to all, as later developments have shown.

A further question was proposed to the Holy See as to whether all these Theses truly contain the genuine doctrine of St. Thomas; and if such be the case, ought they to be imposed on Catholic schools to be held therein. Back came the reply from the newly named Congregation of Seminaries and Universities on the Feast of St. Thomas, 1916: "All these twenty-four philosophical theses express the genuine doctrine of St.

⁴ "Doctoris Angelici," 1914.

⁵ Can. 1366, 2.

⁶ S. C. S. July 27, 1914.

Thomas, and are to be proposed as safe directive norms." This decision carried with it the ratification of a new Pope, His Holiness, Benedict XV.

With this the storm clouds of controversy burst. While the ironclad pronouncements of Pope Leo and Pope Pius admitted of no tampering, a possible "joker" was perceived in this latter document; and hence our Abelardian scholastics burnished and edged their weapons of dialectic and girded themselves for a mighty battle of distinctions. For several years the contest has been waged in the arena of philosophical reviews; there has been much parrying and thrusting according to the rules of knightly encounter, with an occasional hint of a spiteful lunge which recalls the days of the decadence. We shall sum up the salient points of this controversy and contrast the more important arguments of the opposing sides that we may judge of their respective merits; but by way of groundwork we must first call attention to a few indisputable details necessary for the full understanding and appreciation of the decrees under fire.

The Holy See in adopting Thomism as her official philosophy, and in determining the fundamental tenets of this system, had a very definite end in view and was not merely indulging a petty whim. As Fr. Mattiussi, S. J., points out: "Divine truths in themselves, and the dogmas of Faith do not depend on philosophy; but their presentation and defense certainly do. In this field the doctrine of St. Thomas holds first place. . . . It has been judged the strongest defense we have against error, the clearest and most profound exposition of divine mysteries attained by the human mind."⁷ So true is this that Cardinal Billot, S. J., has not hesitated to affirm that "if we abandon Thomism it is impossible to find an exposition, both scientific and solid, of the meaning of the formulae in which our beliefs are expressed. And this Thomism, without which this synthesis cannot be arrived at, is the Thomism of the Twenty-four Theses."⁸

Again, it cannot be conceived that the Church in this endeavor to point out to her children the surer and better way to scientific development in a field so intimately bound up with the deposit of revelation, has acted without the guidance of the Holy Ghost. It is true that we have here no question of a definition

⁷"Le XXIV Tesi di S. Tommaso," Rome, 1917.

⁸Speech during Thomistic Week, 1923. cf. "Ami du Clerge," Jan. 31, 1924.

in matters of faith and morals, but rather of a doctrinal decision, a practical direction such as the Holy See is wont to give to philosophical and theological studies. "He who admits that divine Providence rules over the Church, and that he can always follow her direction, inasmuch as she can never prescribe anything detrimental to Faith . . . must also admit that in following her leadership in this matter he will not be led into error; but that in going contrary to her will in this regard he is in danger of shipwreck in Faith."⁹

With these few remarks to guide us we come to the question at issue: Must the Twenty-four Thomistic Theses be taught in Catholic schools? We can determine the clientele of the opposing factions only on broad lines, by noting the affiliations of those who have aired their views in print. The majority of articles in support of the negative side have emanated from the Fathers of the Society of Jesus—a natural consequence of their antipathy for the doctrine of the Real Distinction between the Essence and Existence of creatures, a doctrine inculcated in the third of the Theses. But it would be incorrect to assert without qualification that the Jesuits, as such, reject the obligation of the Theses, for we have eminent exceptions in Cardinal Billot, and Fr. Mattiussi, two of the most distinguished metaphysicians of the Society.

The position of the negative side is stated in unequivocal terms: "No professor of philosophy is bound either to assent to, or to teach all the Twenty-four Theses of St. Thomas."¹⁰ Inasmuch as their stand is more apparently in contradiction to the general trend of the papal decisions, we shall first briefly outline their main objections and then examine the refutations attempted by the affirmative side.

On the part of the Jesuits themselves it is maintained that there can be no obligation for them to teach the doctrine of a real distinction between essence and existence, owing to the fact that Pope Benedict XV gave his approval to a letter of the Jesuit General, Father Martin, which stated that members of the Society are free to follow and teach either side of this question. This occurred in 1915, after the approval of the Twenty-four Theses, but before the appearance of the response of 1916 which

⁹ Mattiussi, S. J., *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Cf. Masterson, S. J., "Irish Eccl. Record," Jan., Sept., 1924; Le Bachelet, S. J., "Dictionnaire de Theologie," article, "Jesuites."

proposed the Theses as "safe directive norms." Even the latter document did not impose upon the Society the obligation to teach all the Theses, for, according to the interpretation of Jesuit writers, Pope Benedict in a second letter refused to make this even a matter of counsel."¹¹

It is stoutly denied that these two letters were a concession to the Society, but rather authentic interpretations of previous documents, of which all of every order and condition may freely avail themselves. More than this—the very wording of the decrees of the Congregation implies that no professor, Jesuit or non-Jesuit, is obliged to teach the Thomistic Theses; for, when asked whether the Theses should be "imposed" the Sacred Congregation declined to say that they should, merely replying that they "are to be 'proposed' as safe directive norms." Therefore, a professor complies with the will of the Holy See by pointing out to his students that these Theses are safe, i. e. probable enough to follow, even if he decline to teach them all, maintaining that their contradictories are likewise safe, if not safer.

It has been the wish of the Sovereign Pontiffs merely that we be faithful disciples of St. Thomas by adhering to those principles and major propositions which he teaches in common with all the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. Beyond this fullest liberty is left to all, as Pope Pius XI intimates in his encyclical, "Studiorum Ducem," ". . . in those matters in which Catholic schools are divided according to the contrary opinions of approved authors, no one is forbidden to follow the view which seems to him more probably true." Hence the Jesuit champions ask: "Are not many of the Twenty-four Theses disputable, and disputed in the schools? Therefore, we are quite free to defend either side of these controverted questions, provided we defend them by reasons equally probable. But let it be carefully understood that even though we do not teach them all, we do not therefore forfeit our right to be thought to be, and actually to be true followers of the Angelic Doctor."¹²

There, in substance, we have the principal objections levelled against the obligation of the Thomistic Theses. It remains for us to weigh their probability by examining the refutations proposed by the opposite side which, besides the two learned Jesuits

¹¹ Masterson, *ibid.* Jan., p. 51.

¹² Masterson, *ibid.* Sept., p. 289.

above mentioned, claims the allegiance of the Dominican Masters, Frs. Thomas Pegues and Sadoc Szabo, and Doctor Denis Fahey, C. S. Sp.¹³

To argue that the Thomism obligatory for all, viz., "the principles and major propositions of the Holy Doctor," is merely that which St. Thomas has in common with all the Doctors of the Church, is not even specious quibbling. If this were the intention of the Popes why did they insist so much on St. Thomas? What did Pope Pius X intend when he stated that by Scholastic Philosophy he meant "solely" the philosophy of Aquinas; that the doctrine of any other saint or doctor was approved "only inasmuch as it is consonant with the principles of St. Thomas, or at least not opposed to them." The papal documents admit of but one interpretation: Professors in Catholic institutions must teach the principles and major propositions of the Angelical, a solemn warning which has been repeated over and over again. The Holy See knows no other classification of these principles and major propositions than that of the Twenty-four Theses; this is the Thomism obligatory for all. It will be well to bear in mind an admonition of Pope Pius X, in the great *Motu Proprio* "Doctoris Angelici": "Professors of Christian philosophy and sacred theology . . . did not receive the faculty of teaching to communicate to their pupils their own opinions, but to impart to them the doctrines most approved by the Church." If, then, a professor be unable to reconcile personal opinions with the prescribed philosophical teaching of the Church, he should resign his office and devote his talents to such pursuits as will not undermine her intentions.

Nor is this conclusion weakened by the fact that the Sacred Congregation substituted the word "propose" for "impose" in its official decree. According to a time-honored usage in the schools, to "impose" a doctrine has always signified to demand intellectual assent in the name of the Holy See; no such obligation is implied in the present matter, for there is no question here of supernatural truths to be held on Faith. To avoid the impression that internal assent was required, the expression "proponantur" was employed; the Twenty-four Theses were to be "proposed"

¹³ "Autour de S. Thomas," Paris, 1918; Szabo, "Die Auktoritat des heiligen T. von Aquin in der Theologie," 1919; Fahey, *Irish Eccl. Rec.*, June, July, 1924.

—not merely explained, but taught—for proposal has always implied the defense of a doctrine which one desires to uphold against attack. Hence, they who confine themselves to the mere setting forth of the terms of the Theses, and then proceed to refute them by a defense of their contradictories, do not fulfil the duty entailed in the word “proponantur.”

Moreover, in commanding that the Theses be proposed “as safe, directive norms” the Holy See meant just that—“safe,” i. e., not merely “harmless,” as the Jesuit Cardinal Ehrle would have it, but safe in the full signification of that term. Certainly she did not guarantee their infallible truth; but she did guarantee to us in solemn fashion that in following these Theses we shall not be led into error. From this some gather that the contradictories of the Theses are “unsafe norms,” leading us not safely to true philosophy but into the danger of error, a view apparently shared by Cardinal Billot, S. J.¹⁴ But in all events this much is beyond dispute—the Church has vouched for the safety of no metaphysical theses other than the Twenty-four of St. Thomas Aquinas. They who deviate therefrom, even only interiorly, do so at their own risk.

Now with regard to the duties of the professors of the Society of Jesus; must they also teach all the Twenty-four Theses in their schools? In the first place we have definite information from Pope Benedict XV that his letters to the Father General did not change the significance of the degrees of the Congregation. In 1919 the Dominican, Father Pegues, asked the Holy Pontiff if he were pleased with the explanation which attempted to prove that these letters “did not modify in any way the force of previous official documents.” The reply of the Holy Father, twice repeated, was, “Yes!”¹⁵

Secondly, this letter by its very nature concerns only the Society, and pertains in no way to any other Order, Congregation, or persons. Indeed, pressure had been brought to bear upon the Pope that it might appear in the “Acta Apostolicae Sedis,” but he set his face against this proceeding when it was pointed out that its contents might be used to oppose or minimize the force of that canon of the Code which imposes the obligation of following St. Thomas.

¹⁴ loc. cit., and “Divus Thomas,” II, p. 142, 143.

¹⁵ cf. “Revue Thomiste,” 1923, no. 23, p. 354.

Finally, this letter cannot be construed as an exemption from the duty of teaching the Twenty-four Theses, for not by so much as a syllable does the Holy Father mention either the Theses or the decrees. What he does say is this: "We consider that you were correct in thinking that they adhere sufficiently to the teaching of the Angelic Doctor who propose 'all the theses taken from the teaching of St. Thomas' (*universae de Thomae doctrina*) as safe directive norms, without imposing the duty of embracing them all."¹⁶ Now, the Twenty-four Theses cannot be understood as "*universae de Thomae doctrina theses*," for they are but a small though fundamental part of the Thomistic synthesis. Not even the extremists among the Thomists hold that it is necessary to follow every thesis which the Angelical taught, since many of them are only probable and looked upon by the Holy Doctor himself as opinions. This interpretation is strengthened by the following paragraph of the letter: "St. Thomas must be considered as a guide in the study of philosophy and theology, but perfect liberty of dispute is left to all 'in those matters which can and which are wont to be disputed.'" This last phrase clearly excludes the Twenty-four Theses, inasmuch as they have been removed from the realm of disputable questions by a positive decree of the Holy See, and established as safe standards in the exposition of Catholic philosophy and theology. In the same sense must we understand the words of the present Pontiff, which we have previously cited, since Pope Pius XI does not refer to the Twenty-four Theses, but on the contrary decrees that the commands of Leo XIII and Pius X be observed inviolate by those who hold positions of authority in the schools of higher studies for the clergy.

Basing their case on the arguments which we have exposed, the champions of the affirmative side of our discussion conclude that professors in Catholic institutions must teach the Twenty-four Theses, although in their private capacity they are not obliged to hold to them. Granting a possible exception for Jesuit professors in the matter of teaching the Real Distinction, by this very fact the validity of the command for the Church as a whole is strengthened; for just as the exemption from the oath of Modernism granted to professors in the German Universities did not weaken the binding force of the decree to put aside Mod-

¹⁶ For text of this letter cf. Irish Eccl. Rec., Sept., 1924, p. 280.

ernism, neither would this concession lessen the universality of the papal mandate regarding the teaching of St. Thomas.¹⁷

This observation brings us to the close of our discussion, for it is not our task to determine who are right, and who are wrong. Until such time as our Holy Mother the Church may see fit to settle the controversy one way or another, we must form our own consciences, guided not by passion or by motives of self-interest, but by a sincere desire of compliance with the will of the Holy See. It would be a great pity if these papal pronouncements, issued with an eye to fostering the Thomistic renaissance, should by reason of the unhealthy spirit of rivalry provoked, be the occasion of a return to the suicidal disorders of former ages. It was the wont of St. Thomas when he had set forth his opinion once or twice, and others refused to accept it, to remain modestly silent. If the Prince of Theologians acted thus, why should not his disciples show the same moderation? They who attempt to foist or force their views upon others show themselves wanting in true humility, and easily wound charity, which, above all, should everywhere and always be observed.

¹⁷ cf. Szabo, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

BIRTHDAY GREETING

By BRO. CELESTINE ROONEY, O. P.

Just a wish that,
Blest with love and gifts,
This one may be the best of all thy natal days;
That through the years to come,
No sorrow dim your eye with tears;
That love of Christ the way with thee abide,
And breezes soft of friendship,
O'er the tide of life full swelling,
Urge thy straining sail, till port is won
Beyond the close-kept veil
Where loved ones meet at even, face to face,
And thou, in Mother-arms hold fast embrace.