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ST. THOMAS THE MORALIST

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IT is safe to say that no ecclesiastical writer has received greater praise than St. Thomas Aquinas. From the thirteenth century to our present day his writings have shone as a ray of light. Even though Scholasticism, which reached its zenith in the Angelical, may have fallen into disrepute, his teachings were the subject of almost universal praise. Pope vied with Pope in showering encomiums upon him, and this praise reached unparalleled heights when Pope Leo XIII recalled Christian students to the study and propagation of his golden wisdom. We do not have to look far to find reasons for the fame of Aquinas; if he had written nothing but the second part of his *Summa Theologica* the justice of his claim would be undeniable.

In that part of his *Summa* is to be found a complete analysis of all the fundamental principles of morality. St. Thomas was a friar, but he was not isolated; he was alive to his times, advisor to rulers and princes, and as an international diplomat he was in vital contact with men of all walks of life. He lived in the thirteenth century and knew human nature as it was then; this has not changed, it is invariable in its fundamentals. In the prologue to his masterpiece, the *Summa Theologica*, the Angelic Doctor explicitly stated that he was writing a compendium of all Catholic doctrine, and that doctrine like the Church itself is unchanging and unchangeable. His *Summa*, then, would be valuable in the twentieth century as well as in the thirteenth. By this we do not mean that Aquinas was a prophet, or that he dealt with our problems in all their details, but we do mean that he was not a visionary, not a mere theorizer. He laid down the basic principles of human conduct that cannot be ignored.

Today morality is considered under various aspects, social, political, theological. In the second part the Angel of the Schools has

given us a wealth of principles on these phases of morality in practical form.

Nowhere in the *Summa* of St. Thomas will you find an *ex professo* treatment of social morality. However, this does not mean that he has not given the principles of social conduct. For him there were not two codes regulating human actions, one personal and the other social. As he viewed man, he considered him a social being, ordained by his very nature to live in society. According to the nature of man, he could not, in the ordinary course of things, realize his ultimate purpose of existence unless he came into contact with his fellow-man, to give and receive assistance and help. As a social being, man is part of society and must live in harmony with his neighbors. As part of society, his conduct must be regulated not merely as it is individual, but also as it bears relation to the other members of the group. To the Angelical, then, personal and social morality were so intimately bound together that they formed one system. Personal morals, since they were to regulate the actions of an individual, a member of society, must coincide with social morals, the morals regulating society of which man is a part. In fine, man was to live in concord with his fellows and his actions were to be regulated accordingly.

In his treatise, "De Justitia," the Angelical gives the basic laws for man's social conduct. To many the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," is fundamental. St. Thomas has not in these words enunciated this rule, but when he says, by justice we are bound to render to each what is his, he states it more fundamentally and profoundly. Here he is speaking of the justice between man and man, the particular virtue fundamental to social life. According to St. Thomas, this virtue is the highest of the moral virtues, since it resides in the will, the rational appetite; and its object, rendering to each what is his, makes the just man well disposed toward another, so that justice is somewhat the good of another person.¹

Many problems that have come up in our time were not specifically known in the time of Aquinas, nevertheless he has given us principles upon which a solution may be based. The question of wages does not receive extended discussion in the *Summa*, but in responding to the question, "Whether the judicial precepts were suitably framed as to the relations of one man with another?"² St. Thomas

¹ 2a 2ae, Q. 58, a. 12.

² 1a 2ae, Q. 105, a. 2, ad 6.

takes occasion to remark, "that they who offer their labor for hire, are men who toil for daily bread; and therefore the Law commanded that they be paid at once, lest they should lack food." And in another place he writes, "Our estimates of things should be based upon their end, . . . and the chief end of labor is maintenance of life."³ This passage would justify us in concluding that, had Aquinas explicitly treated the question of the just wage, he would have said it was the wage that would enable man to satisfy his ordinary wants.

Other questions agitated today are the questions of prices and profiteering. These have received formal treatment in the second part of the *Summa Theologica*⁴ Speaking of the just price, St. Thomas remarks, "the just price is the value of the thing considered in itself and to exact a price exceeding the quantity of the thing's worth, is in itself unjust." Speaking further he says, "If the buyer derives an advantage from securing the object for sale, and at the same time, the seller be not at a loss, through being without it, the latter ought not to raise the price, because the advantage accruing to the buyer is not due to the seller." In these words of the thirteenth century, the Angelical has given us a practical solution, based upon justice, to one of the important problems today. With regard to profiteering, in the same question St. Thomas says, with regard to selling merely for profit, "It is justly deserving of blame since of itself it satisfies a greed for gain, which knows no limit."⁵

The teaching of the Angelic Doctor on private property is well known. He said it was necessary for human life, peace among men, and progress of human kind. With regard to the use of external things, he states, "Man ought not to have external things as his own, but as common, so that he is ready to communicate them to others in their need."⁶ Time does not allow us to explain here what St. Thomas meant by this statement, but he undeniably maintains that the system of private ownership is lawful.

In the same tract in which St. Thomas treats of justice he mentions liberality which he considers a part of justice inasmuch as it is annexed to justice as to its principle. It is man's rightly-balanced attitude in regard to externals, and so as necessity arises he should give to those who are unknown to him as well as to his friends.⁷ The

³ 2a 2ae, Q. 187, a. 3.

⁴ 2a 2ae, Q. 77.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 2a 2ae, Q. 66, a. 2.

⁷ 2a 2ae, Q. 117, a. 5.

bearing of such teaching upon social conduct is easily seen. Since men live in society, giving and receiving assistance in the attaining of the ultimate purpose of existence, liberality should characterize their actions.

In the same way the Angelical insists upon the necessity of friendliness or affability because men must live in concord in word and deed. This virtue also, in his doctrine, is a part of justice as liberality is, causing us to act towards others as is becoming.⁸

How such precepts enter into men's actions Aquinas explains when speaking of the judicial precepts of the Old Law. "The Law commanded that, in some respects, the use of things should belong to all in common. Firstly, as regards the care of them; for it was prescribed (Deut. xxii, 1-4): 'Thou shalt not pass by, if thou seest thy brother's ox or his sheep go astray; but thou shalt bring them back to thy brother.'" Again referring to the fruits of one's possessions he remarks: "Friends, and particularly poor men should be allowed to enter the fields and glean the bunches left behind," but wisely he cautions, "Nevertheless let them not take any away with them."⁹ We have said St. Thomas was no prophet, but at the same time, with his keen insight into human nature, he realized too much assistance would be ruinous, killing personal endeavor; while selfishness, going to the other extreme, would have an equally harmful effect. His naive admonition that it were better not to allow things to be taken away is a practical application of the adage, "*in medio stat virtus*." Liberality and affability, bearing an intimate relation to justice and at the same time raising it from the plane of mere give and take, were together with justice the natural foundation for social morality. But man has a supernatural end, God, the beginning and end of all things, Good itself. He is man's ultimate end, all must tend toward Him. Recognizing this fact, realizing that all are members of one great family of which God is the Father, through love of Him men should love one another, and observe the natural virtues necessary for social life. In such manner the Angel of the Schools has shown that, as liberality and friendliness should raise justice from the plane of mere reciprocity, so charity should supernaturalize these virtues.

In broad outline this is Aquinas' system of social morality. But when we say that man must live in society, immediately there arises

⁸ 2a 2ae Q. 114, a. 2.

⁹ 1a 2ae, Q. 105, a. 2.

the question of the relation between ruler and subject, for government is essentially a part of society. His principles explaining the balance, the equilibrium that should obtain between ruler and ruled, might be called a system of political morality. In this field Aquinas is unexcelled. In his treatise on law, that has received unstinted praise from lawyers and theologians alike, there are many passages that reflect his thoughts and convey his teachings.

Authority, he says, is from God because it is the formal element in society which is of the natural law, and consequently a participation of the eternal law. Nevertheless, even though authority is from God, it is limited. It is instituted to form unity in society, and to direct the members toward attaining the common good. If any exercise of authority oversteps the bounds placed on it by its very nature, it is unjust. The first requisite for any legitimate authority in enacting laws is that the law be stamped with justice, legal justice Aquinas calls it, whereby a ruler keeps within limits. In the relation then, between governor and governed, as between man and man individually, justice is absolutely essential, and the use of authority is legitimately exercised in the enacting of just laws.

St. Thomas says that just laws are those which are ordained to the common good and do not exceed the power of the lawgiver. Another requirement for just laws, he says, is that the burdens imposed by the law upon the people be proportionately equal with a view to the common good. If the law is imposed only for the sake of vain-glory, or because of the ruler's cupidity, if he exceed his power, or if the burdens are imposed unequally on the community, they are unjust and he calls them acts of violence.¹⁰ It is the right of authority to enact laws, and justice, the principal moral virtue, pertains to the essence of law. Another fundamental notion in the teaching of the Angelic Doctor is that a law is truly a law only insofar as it is based on the natural law, for he says, "every human law has just so much of the nature of law, as it is derived from the law of nature."¹¹ Basic principles, these, but St. Thomas goes further; he gives us some definite notions on the extent of human law. Two instances will be sufficient to show the practicality of the master schoolman for us of the twentieth century. The question of public regulation and price fixing is very much to the fore today. Aquinas remarks that "in each place those who govern the state must determine the just measures of

¹⁰ 1a 2ae, Q. 96, a. 4.

¹¹ 1a 2ae, Q. 96, a. 2.

things saleable, with due consideration for the conditions of time and place.¹² But a far more interesting question proposed by the Angelical is, "Whether it belongs to human law to repress all vices." On finding such a question in a writing of the thirteenth century, one cannot help remarking that human nature surely has not changed much, for then as now, there must have been many uplifters who thought legislation a panacea for all ills. In answering the question St. Thomas says that "Laws imposed upon men should be in keeping with their condition. Human law is framed for a number of human beings, the majority of whom are not perfect in virtue. Wherefore human laws do not forbid all vices from which the virtuous abstain, but only the more grievous vices, from which it is possible for the majority to abstain; and chiefly those that are to the hurt of others."¹³ In response to an objection he remarks that, "Human law is to lead men to virtue, not suddenly, but gradually. Wherefore it does not lay upon the multitude of imperfect the burdens of those who are already virtuous, . . . otherwise these imperfect ones . . . would break out into yet greater evils."¹⁴

Rulers, then, have the right to enact laws for the common good, and the corresponding obligation to enact none but just laws. On the part of the members for whom these laws are made, are they subject to the laws, and if so, to what extent are they bound to observe them? Aquinas says that, whoever is subject to a power, is subject to a law framed by that power.¹⁵ However, this subjection to law has a certain restriction. In his answer to the question: "Whether human law binds a man in conscience?" he says, if it is a just law, it has the power of binding in conscience, from the eternal law whence it is derived.¹⁶ If it is unjust, *i. e.*, not for the common good, or if it exceed the power of the lawgiver, or impose burdens unequally upon the community, St. Thomas calls it an act of violence and says such a law does not bind. The only way such enactments might have binding force is because of the scandal that might be given by ignoring them, or the disturbance that might arise from their non-observance. In such cases he says, "For which cause a man should even yield his right."¹⁷

¹² 2a 2ae, Q. 77, a. 2. ad 2am.

¹³ 1a 2ae, Q. 96, a. 2.

¹⁴ Ibid. ad 2am.

¹⁵ 1a 2ae, Q. 96, a. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid. ad 4am.

¹⁷ Ibid.

For Aquinas, then, the basic principle of political morality is justice tempered by prudence, just as in his social morality, regulating men as private individuals, justice supported by liberality and friendship elevated by charity is fundamental.

In treating of the social and political moral teachings of St. Thomas we have purposely confined ourselves to the second part of the *Summa Theologica*. The reason for this is that, above all else he was a theologian, a moral theologian. Indeed we might say he was the first moral theologian, the first to give a scientific arrangement to questions of a moral nature.

Before the time of Aquinas there was no complete treatise on moral theology. St. Augustine in his work, *De Fide et Symbolo* follows faithfully the arrangement of the Apostles' Creed, and consequently in it there is no systematic coordination of moral doctrine. In another work, *De Doctrina Christiana*, in which this great Father of the Church unconsciously laid down the broad lines of mediaeval theology, he uses as the plan of his work "De Rebus" and "De Signis." Under the title "De Rebus" he gives us a compendium of *De Fide et Symbolo*, and under "De Signis" he treats of Sacred Scripture. This same plan was, in general, the same that St. John Damascene, often called the Father of Scholastic Theology, used in his work, *De Fide Orthodoxa*. In that work there is no scientific moral theology. Peter Lombard, who brought in the next great development of theology, uses the same arrangement in his *Sentences*. Under the title "Res" he treats of God, the Trinity, Creation, and the Incarnation. Under "Signa" he treats of the Sacraments and Last Things. In this work which dominated theology in the western Church till the end of the thirteenth century, there is no distinct synthesized moral system. True there are many moral treatises, as the treatment of the Seven Deadly Sins found in the treatise on "Man" under Creation, and the treatises on Faith, Hope and Charity found in "De Incarnatione," but there is no correlation of those things which pertain to moral theology as we know it.

Even Blessed Albert, the master of St. Thomas, in the *Summa Theologica* which he wrote after his commentary on the *Sentences* of the Lombard and even after Aquinas had written his masterpiece, the *Summa Theologica*, has little else than a commentary on the *Sentences*, and, strange as it may seem, in it there is no complete treatise on the science of morals.

Such a plan, "Res et Signa," had been canonized, and none dared to put into theology more than accepted masters had put into it.

Even Aquinas followed it in his commentary on the *Sentences* and he mainly follows it in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*. But when he began his marvellous compendium of all Catholic doctrine, he explicitly rejected this canonized arrangement. In article seven of the very first question he says, "Some have asserted the subject of this science (*sacra doctrina*, or theology) to be something other than God, *i. e.*, things and symbols of all these things, in truth, we treat in this science, but so far as they have reference to God." In the plan of his *Summa*, he did not ignore the order of truths in the Apostle's Creed, treating of God, the Trinity, Creation, the Incarnation, the Sacraments and the Last Things, but into the middle of the work he boldly injected an entire new science explaining man's movements to God, the science of moral theology. For the first time a systematized coordination of Christian ethics was given to the Church. They who did not know the *Summa* were unacquainted with such fundamental treatises as "De Passionibus," "De Habitibus," "De Actibus Humanis." The Lombard gave treatises on Sins, on Faith, Hope, and Charity, as also did Augustine, but neither gave a complete moral system. Raymond of Pennafort, O. P., has been acclaimed the initiator of moral science because of his work *Summa de Poenitentia et de Matrimonio*. But this work is little more than a guide to Church Law.

Many other writers previous to the Angelical left valuable collections of moral wisdom, but St. Thomas created the science of Christian ethics. Before his time the treatises on the Virtues and Vices, the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, the Fruits of the Holy Ghost, were scattered here and there, but it was he who brought to light the mutual and intrinsic relations of these subjects; as well as their relations to the primary virtues of the soul. He made such profound use of psychology, the science of the soul, and the grouping of its faculties, that his treatises are yet unrivaled in precision and depth.

To the Angelical we owe this science complete in its content and in its extent. We said that in treating of the social and political morality of St. Thomas we purposely confined ourselves to the second part. All that has been said of his ethics, political and social, can be found in the second part of the *Summa Theologica*. Man's actions are there treated of not only as they affect the individual himself but also as they bear relation to other private individuals and as they affect society of which man is by his very nature a part.

To Aquinas then we owe the title of Founder of Moral Theology, and the action of the Conciliar Fathers at Trent, placing the

writing of the Angelical, together with the Bible upon the table in the center of the council chamber, is an unprecedented approval.

Melchior Cano, undeniably a great moralist, in his teaching on contrition and attrition and the sufficiency of attrition properly so-called, for absolution, has done nothing more than elucidate and demonstrate the teaching of his brother.

St. Antoninus, in his moral writings, refers frequently to Aquinas as to a recognized authority, and St. Alphonsus Ligouri explicitly states that he does not wish to deviate in any way from the sound doctrine of the Angelic Doctor.

Many who are famed as theologians are famed because of their commentaries on this masterpiece of Aquinas, and no less than one hundred ninety-eight commentaries on the second part alone are still extant. Practically every theologian since St. Thomas gave the world his *Summa Totius Catholicae Doctrinae* has based his teaching upon the Angelical and there is no modern moral theologian who does not quote him.

He outlined a complete, fundamental and basic system of social and political morality, and incorporated it in what may be termed his original contribution to the ecclesiastical sciences, his moral theology, the second part of his *Summa Theologica*. On the strength of this alone would we be justified in adding to the many titles of St. Thomas, the title, *Doctor Totius Scientiae Moralis*.

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