

## ST. THOMAS THE MYSTIC

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YSTICISM and the mystical state are not incompatible with vigorous logical reasoning powers. It is too often taken for granted that great intellectual ability renders the soul frigid and dry. It is the purpose of this paper to show that St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest intellectual giants of all time, was one of the greatest mystics the Church has ever produced. It is our belief that as a mystic he must be grouped with St. Bonaventure, St. Bernard, St. Theresa, St. John of the Cross, and St. Catherine of Sienna, who are universally conceded a high place amongst these chosen friends of God.

The mystical life is essentially a supernatural and spiritual life, lived in intimate and conscious union with God. It is the Christian life in its highest perfection, in which the mystic obtains on earth a foretaste of that union with God which is the reward of the Blessed in Heaven. It is arrived at by the faithful soul, that perfectly co-operates with the promptings of the Holy Ghost, that exercises the virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, and, absorbed in God, lives for Him alone, and by contemplation, adheres to Him and finds in Him its only consolation. To the mystic God sometimes grants special graces such as miracles and visions, which serve as an indication of the high degree of sanctity to which he has attained. This is the case with St. Thomas who habitually carried about with him the air of one who was ever at rest in God.

Throughout his whole life St. Thomas possessed those qualities that were destined to make him the chosen friend of God and the beloved companion of his fellows. He never knew an idle moment, devoting every moment of his time to study, to his writings, and to prayer and contemplation. Happy was he to be with his brethren when charity and the rule of his Order demanded it, but happier still when he was alone with God, seeking those graces that were to enable him to become the model and inspiration of the countless numbers who were to study his works and imitate his virtues through all succeeding ages.

St. Thomas lived in an age when the intellectual and political life of the world was seething with activity. Descended of kings, and connected by ties of kinship with the noblest families of Europe, he could have filled with distinction a high place in the political or ecclesiastical world. But destined from birth to a life in the cloister his thoughts early turned to God and the things of God to Whom he consecrated every thought, word and action of his whole life. We find him at the age of five years within the precincts of the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino. It is recorded that during this early period, he was conspicuous for his gentleness, his piety, and his spirit of recollection and study. From the dawn of reason he never ceased to question the good Benedictines as to the nature of God, a question that was to engage the greater part of his attention throughout his life, and, it is worthy of note, the first which he found the opportunity to discuss in the school presided over by Blessed Albert in Cologne.

While preparing himself for the intellectual combats which he foresaw were to ensue in the arena of the university he stored his mind with scriptural and patristic learning which is found in every part of his works—and which he quoted mostly from memory. He read many spiritual works besides, and that which was the favorite study of Our Holy Father St. Dominic *The Collations of Cassian* was ever kept at hand. The reason why he spent so much of his time in this manner is not far to seek, because he himself tells us that after a little time devoted to the writings of the Saints his mind arose quickly and easily to God. His success in the philosophical as well as the theological world may be measured by the works of genius which he produced. Yet at all times, both when preparing himself for, and while engaged in, their composition he was deeply absorbed in the contemplation of the Fount of Truth and sought light at the foot of the Crucifix, his greatest book, and from Our Lord in the Tabernacle. There it was that, in the dead of night, while his brothers were sleeping, or during the day when he was free from his numerous duties, he brought his many difficulties looking for their solution; there also he sought inspiration for the marvelous works which he was to give to a waiting world. Whenever it was possible he attended choir with his brothers, thus participating, as he said, in the songs of the Angels.

Whether we see him as the councillor of kings and princes, the friend and adviser of Popes and Cardinals; whether he preached from the pulpits of the great centers of intellectual life or from those

of the meanest villages; whether he taught in the universities, legislated for his Order or travelled about from place to place, he never lost sight of the great purpose of his life embodied in the questions he asked as a boy, "What is God?"; "What is Truth?" That his question was answered insofar as it is possible in this life, we know from the words that Our Lord spoke when He addressed him from the Crucifix, "Thou hast written ably of the Sacrament of My Body and hast accurately determined the difficulty proposed to thee, insofar as it can be understood by man upon earth and be defined by human wisdom." That it was fully answered in the next life we know from the words which St. Augustine spoke in a vision granted to Fr. Albert of Brescia, a professor at Cologne, and quoted in the Office of St. Thomas, "*Thomas mihi par est in gloria, virginali praeans munditia.*"

The basic requisites for the attainment of the mystical state are outstanding characteristics of the life of St. Thomas; namely, purity of mind and heart, and humility. Our Lord tells us, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God." Inspired by this teaching St. Thomas at no time evinced the slightest attachment for the things of this world. At Naples he lived as one apart, having no share in the revelry of his fellows. From this quality he drew the strength that was to sustain him during the two years of bitter trial that God permitted him to undergo as a test of his vocation. This it was which brought the Angels of God from Heaven to gird him with the symbol of perpetual chastity. In all things it made him Christ-like, and kept his mind constantly elevated to a level far above that of his associates. The beauties of nature and the delights of learning only served to turn the mind of this holy youth toward the Author of nature and Source of wisdom, thereby strengthening his hold upon the life of grace that he had freely chosen, and moving him to accept his sufferings as the lot of one who had given up all things to follow Christ in perfect charity and love. His cleanness of heart was all his life long a bulwark of safety and a source of supernatural joy, preserving him from placing the slightest impediment in the way of the inspirations of grace, and endowing his mind with that perpetual youthfulness and flexibility that enabled him to wield the weapons of Truth to such good advantage.

All who study the life of the Angelic Doctor are impressed with the air of peace that hovered about him, and the calmness and gentleness that characterized all of his dealings with those with whom he came in contact. He allowed nothing to disturb him or draw his mind

down to the more sordid happenings of every day life. Even when made the subject of ridicule, as happened at Cologne, or when his teaching was publicly contradicted by a disciple, as on at least one occasion in Paris, he retained his characteristic composure; his only reply, when a reply was necessary, to taunt and contradiction alike, being one of gentle remonstrance and instruction. He was possessed of a most charming personality which endeared him to all who knew him, and was feared, and with good reason, only by the insolent enemies of the True Faith.

St. Thomas' life was lived amidst scenes of constant activity and great splendor, yet he never ceased to practice to perfection the virtue of humility. He was content to remain in the schools as a disciple until his mind had thoroughly matured and his learning had become so profound that he could meet the greatest of his contemporaries on their own ground. When commanded by his superiors to prepare for the Doctorate he complied in the spirit of true obedience, yet was disquieted with the prospect of receiving so great an honor. He repaired to the church, as was his wont, and cast himself upon the floor, there to pray that God in His wisdom would be pleased to spare him this distinction. He was granted a vision during which an aged man clad in the habit of his own Order appeared, comforting him, and giving him a text upon which to construct his thesis. He had already begun the composition of his immortal works, and the exactness and completeness which characterized them were such as to astonish, from the very first, the great masters in the intellectual world, and to confound the adversaries of Faith and Truth. Yet his great intellect was only beginning to display its powers. His superiors and those who were entrusted with the care of the Church were familiar with his reputation for learning and sanctity. At the request of St. Raymond of Pennafort, ex-Master General, he wrote the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, to combat the errors of the Moors and Jews in Spain. It was translated into many languages without delay. This was followed by a treatise "Of Substance and Accidents in the Eucharist," written to settle a dispute which had arisen amongst the doctors in Paris. In 1259 he assisted Blessed Albert, Vincent de Beauvais and Peter de Tarantaise, afterwards Pope Innocent V, in the work of drawing up a *Norma Studiorum* at the General Chapter of his Order held that year in Valenciennes. At the instance of Pope Urban IV he wrote, amongst other works, the *Catena Aurea*, a commentary on the four Gospels. And although he rose supreme, far above the best in an intellectually proud age, and was the confidant of the greatest

minds of his time, never does he display the slightest taint of intellectual pride. His humility is closely bound up with every action of his life. Some parts of his great works were composed upon mere scraps of paper which he saw fit to use where others of equal rank would have been satisfied only with the best. Even when ill, he never uttered a complaint when called upon to perform a task entirely unsuited to one of his state and condition, as was the case when at the supposed wish of his superior he humbly accompanied about the city a lay-brother who was making purchases for the convent. He was as humble in receiving a command of his superior as he was ready to obey, never stopping to question as to whether or not the prior had made a mistake.

That St. Thomas was a mystic we have further indication in the special graces granted him by Almighty God to prove his exalted sanctity in this respect. What we know of him in regard to these gifts, has been gathered principally from the testimony of eyewitnesses, because the Saint held himself in restraint in all of his writings, carefully excluding and submerging his own personal experiences as much as was possible. But we know that his very birth was preceded by the prophetic utterances of a holy man of God, and that during his infancy he was miraculously preserved from death when lightning struck the cradle in which he slept, whilst his little sister who lay beside him was instantly killed.

While he attended the University of Naples, he was wont to spend much of the time not demanded by his books and lectures in prayer in the Dominican Church. At these times the prior and other members of the community often noticed that rays of light played round the head of the young Thomas, reminding us of Moses, the great Lawgiver of the Jews, as he descended from Mt. Sinai after having conversed with God. During his life he was favored with many visions, one of which, granted him when he was bidden to prepare for the Doctorate, has already been mentioned. Toward the end of his life his deceased sister appeared to him to beg Masses for her soul, for she was still in Purgatory. At about the same time Blessed Romanus appeared to him, and on this occasion St. Thomas inquired of him as to the nature of his vision of God. "As we have heard, so have we seen, in the city of the Lord of Hosts," replied the Saint, and disappeared. His companion, Fr. Reginald, heard him conversing with St. Peter and St. Paul, who appeared to him to expound the meaning of an obscure portion of one of the prophecies of Isaias.



St. Thomas was often rapt in ecstasy, especially while celebrating Holy Mass. At one time while saying Mass in Naples, he had to be roused from this state by a friar lest the Sacred Mysteries be wholly interrupted. Three times during his life Our Lord was heard to address him from the Crucifix to approve of his doctrine, and on all three occasions he was elevated some distance above the ground where he remained for some length of time. He was almost continually in an ecstatic state during the last few months of his earthly life. He could write no more, even desisting from the completion of his greatest work, the *Summa Theologica*. What he saw, while in this condition, no one can tell. That it was indescribable we know from his words to Fr. Reginald, "All I have written appears to me as so much rubbish, compared with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me." Archbishop Vaughan says of him, "Indeed, he not only dwelt in the Unseen World, but he absolutely conversed with its inhabitants; so that what was hidden from the gaze of ordinary mortals became visible to him,—what we see, was, as it were, withdrawn from him; what is veiled from our senses, was miraculously opened before his eyes."

God was pleased to work many miracles in proof of the sanctity of St. Thomas, some of them, even while he was living. On one occasion it is recorded that a woman who touched the hem of his mantle while he was preaching was cured of a malady that had afflicted her for long. After his death many miracles were worked at his tomb, ninety-six of which were brought forward and proved at the time of his canonization.

St. Thomas died at a comparatively early age, being in his fiftieth year when the closing event of his busy life took place. Had he been spared to the Church until after the completion of the *Summa Theologica* he might have prepared a special treatise on the science of mystical theology. While it is true that in no part of his works does he treat of this science *ex professo*, yet there is no part of them in which its principles and the laws by which it operates may not be found, and this is especially true of the *Summa*. Its very plan suggests the mystical trend of mind of the great Doctor. It begins with the tract on the One God, followed by that on the Trinity. Then follow the tracts on the procession of creatures from God. In the second part we find the return of the rational creature to God, its End, by human acts. Herein are his tracts on human acts, habits, virtues, and grace; together with those things that pertain to the special states, including the tracts on the religious life and on graces freely

given. In the third part is the treatise on the Incarnate God, and on the Sacraments, the means which the creature must employ in his return to God. If there is any part of the *Summa* that pertains to the mystical life more than any other, it may be found in his properly supernatural tracts on the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Holy Eucharist, the New Law, Grace, the Theological Virtues, the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, and the State of Perfection.

From his deathbed in the Benedictine Abbey of Fossa Nuova the Saint dictated a commentary on the mystical Cantic of Canticles, at the earnest request of the monks. Tucco says of this, "It was fitting that the great Doctor, now about to be released from the body, should finish his teaching by the Cantic of Love between Jesus Christ and the faithful soul." The last words of this commentary are those of St. Paul, "Our conversation is in heaven for in every place we are unto God the good odor of Christ."

Other sources of St. Thomas' mystical writings are his commentaries on the Psalms, on the Gospels, on the *Sentences*, and his writings on the Holy Eucharist. These latter are principally his tract on the Holy Eucharist, composed in 1273, and the Office of Corpus Christi composed in 1264, at the command of Pope Urban IV. St. Bonaventure was also appointed to write an office for the same feast, but we are told that upon seeing the *Magnificat* antiphon, "O Sacrum Convivium" with the prayer, "Deus qui nobis," he was so overcome with admiration that he destroyed what he had written, and would write no more. "Dipping his pen as it were into his very heart" says Father Conway, O. P., of St. Thomas, "he wrote as one inspired; where all is beautiful, one is particularly struck with its doctrinal accuracy. . . . The language of theology is didactic, but in the sequence, "Lauda Sion Salvatorem" he sings even while he defines, like some bell-mouthed seraph strayed from heaven." It is before the Mystic Shrine that St. Thomas the Mystic reaches his loftiest heights. He bursts into song as his heart could no longer contain his sentiments, and he must needs bring them forth in such a form that they could be used even by the humblest, in adoration before Our Divine Lord. His last recorded words were a sublime act of faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

If there is need of further testimony to St. Thomas' greatness as a mystic, it may be found in the writings of those who have followed his teaching. Principally among these may be mentioned St. John of the Cross, now a Doctor of the Church, who reigns supreme among the Spanish mystics. Fr. Benedict Zimmerman of his Order

says of him, "It has been recorded that during his studies St. John particularly relished psychology; this is amply borne out by his writings. He was not what one would term a scholar, but he was intimately acquainted with the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas, as almost every page of his works proves . . . The few quotations from patristic works (in his writings) are easily traced to the Breviary or the *Summa*." The same author in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* says, "The key to the whole treatise will be found in the seventh chapter of the second book of the *Ascent*. As has already been stated, the whole work is based upon the view St. Thomas takes of the essence and operations of the senses, and upon his treatise on the virtues."

Of the influence of St. Thomas upon St. Teresa of Jesus, we have the testimony again of Fr. Zimmerman who says that in her mystical writings "The Thomistic substratum may be traced to the influence of her confessors and directors, many of whom belonged to the Dominican Order." These were principally Peter Ibanez, a learned mystic, Dominic Banez, and Melchior Cano, a nephew of the great theologian of the same name.

Father Thomas Vallgornera, a Spanish Dominican of the seventeenth century has drawn up a complete treatise on the mystical life based on the writings of St. Thomas. It is published in two large octavo volumes and is entitled, *Mystica Theologia Divi Thomae Utriusque Theologiae Scholasticae et Mysticae Principis*. In almost every article the reader may find quotations from the *Summa*, especially the second part, and from the writings listed above as containing the mystical doctrine of the Angelic Doctor, with whose very words he substantiates a very great number of his arguments.

In our own day there are a great many recognized mystical writers who draw their inspiration from the works of St. Thomas. Among them may be mentioned Fr. Froget, O. P., in whose book, *The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit*, are to be found a great many references to St. Thomas' works, especially to that part of the tract on the Holy Trinity which treats of the Mission of the Divine Persons. Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange, O. P., a professor in the Collegio Angelico in Rome, is a prolific writer on mystical subjects. Fr. Meynard, O. P., has recently produced two works, *Ascetic Theology* and *Mystical Theology*, both based on the principles that are found in St. Thomas' works. *La Vie Spirituelle*, a Thomistic monthly review, contains many articles by well-known writers setting forth the mystical doctrine of St. Thomas.



The fact that many Popes have set forth the virtues as well as the learning of St. Thomas in their encyclical letters is too well-known to need retelling. It might be well, however, to note the one issued by Pope Pius XI on the occasion of the sixth centenary of the canonization of St. Thomas, *Studiorum Duce*, in which he presents the Saint again to the whole Church as teacher, to religious as a model of religious perfection, and to the faithful to whom he is especially recommended because of his devotion to Mary Immaculate and the Blessed Sacrament; and finally to the young, because of his "humility, which is the foundation of the spiritual life, and chastity."

But enough has been said to call our attention to the fact that St. Thomas was very great as a mystic. That he was enabled to become as a little child in all simplicity in accordance with Our Lord's words, so that he might enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, was due to the purity of heart and mind of this intellectual giant. All his life long he was the embodiment of the motto of his Order, "*Contemplare, et contemplata aliis tradere.*" He died as he lived, in obedience and humility; and it is recorded that one of his greatest consolations in the hour of death was the fact that he had succeeded in doing that which he had undertaken to accomplish; namely, in living all his life as a simple religious.

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