

## ST. THOMAS, THE TEACHER

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T. THOMAS received the doctor's degree in the year 1257 from the highest university faculty of that age, the University of Paris. In preparation for this coveted distinction, as a bachelor of the schools, he had already taught one year at Cologne and four at Paris. After making his professorial debut he remained at his Alma Mater and taught for three successive years. Called to other labors Thomas did not ascend the rostrum as a regular professor until 1266, when he taught at the University of Bologna for a period covering intermittently four years. Thus, of the seventeen years which followed his public recognition as a doctor in sacred theology, until his death in 1274, only seven years were spent in the capacity of a class-room professor in any definite university.

But Thomas never discontinued teaching. His professorial labors only assumed a more cosmopolitan nature. During the other ten years of his life, as a recognized teacher, he communicated truth to, and fashioned the thought of, not only students but the world in which he lived. We find him at one time forming with Blessed Albert a *ratio studiorum* for his entire Order; at another time he is personal adviser to Pope Urban IV; he is a practical member of the Roman Curia travelling from one Italian city to another and at the same time lecturing at the different universities. We next see him in far away London attending the General Chapter of his Order and representing the Roman Province. Returning he lectures at the Universities of Naples and Valenciennes; at the command of the Pope he journeys on different Papal commissions and lectures at the monasteries *en route*. Declining the appointment of Clement IV as Archbishop of Naples, he is besieged by Paris, Bologna, Naples and Rome with requests for his services. Special mention is made of his sermons at Perugia, Pisa, Florence, Viterbo, Civita Vecchia and Anagni. In fact, if you should take a pencil and trace on the map his lecture programme throughout Italy and France and his sojourns in England and Germany, you would weave a veritable web, a net-work to cover southwestern Europe.

During these travels St. Thomas faced urgent and tense situations. History relates the upheavals both social and political of the thirteenth century and tells us that civilization was at the crossroads. Brilliant and clever minds roamed Europe and frequently Thomas was confronted by men of deep scholarship—men who demanded the *ratio cur* and the *ratio propter quid* before they accepted his teaching. Often he was sent to rulers on diplomatic missions, as well as to universities and monasteries, the centers of the highest intellectuality, there to systematize courses of study. During these journeys he would preach continually at the different towns, often at the request of the Pope.

This is a portrait of the teacher who wrote thirty-four folio volumes and who travelled on foot throughout his numerous journeys. If there is any claim that is unjust, and it is noised occasionally, it is the presumption that Thomas was an *a priori* professor,—a professor who solved the secrets of life and its problems in retirement and seclusion. On the contrary Thomas lived with and in the midst of the problems to which he brought a successful issue.

Acknowledging that St. Thomas has the right of being recognized as a teacher in the mediaeval period, it is often asked, what claim has he for recognition in the field of the modern pedagogue? Why connect him with educators of the present day with their elaborate educational theories, methods and systems? It is because Aquinas was not only a great thinker but also a great educator. Who else has written a text book so widely acclaimed, so universally employed and so enduring as the *Summa Theologica*? Moreover, a teacher is known by the attainments of his pupils. Among the disciples of Thomas were a Pope, Cardinals, Bishops and leaders of thought in an age illustrious for intellectuality. Again, no teacher in the galaxy of Catholic theologians has left such a marked impress on the development of the Church's doctrine as the Angelic Aquinas. As to the association of St. Thomas, the pedagogue, with modern principles of teaching, the scope is so comprehensive that,—*l'embaras du choix*—we will not select one but three. We will first consider him the teacher in the class-room, where he lays down principles applicable to all ages; secondly, the teacher in the pulpit, where he discussed contemporary problems; lastly, St. Thomas, the teacher in his letters, where he teaches the private individual.

As a class-room professor St. Thomas did not follow slavishly in the footsteps of the thirteenth century educators. In the preface of his *Summa* he mentions three pedagogical errors of his day, which

he would avoid. He determines first to avoid multiplicity of useless questions, problems and arguments; secondly, confusion resulting from lack of systematic arrangement; and thirdly, he would prevent mental fatigue and depression on the part of the student. "For these reasons," says Rev. Dr. Aloysius J. Muench, "St. Thomas in his *Summa* parted ways with the teachers of his day on pedagogical grounds."<sup>1</sup>

St. Thomas saw in the multiplicity of useless questions discussed from the professor's chair an obstacle to definite knowledge. His primary aim would be to confine himself to a few convincing proofs and to avoid irrelevant and doubtful argumentation. To accomplish this he adopted for the most part the deductive method. Thus, he would rivet the minds of his students on a singular objective and consolidate all endeavor in view of a definite end. In this his first pedagogical principle he has touched a vital nerve in our modern educational system. "Concentration of effort in one branch of learning," is the cry heard from observant educators. Dr. Nicholas M. Butler, president of Columbia University, recently asserted in the *New York Times Magazine*, "The new knowledge (since 1890) is so abundant that only the expert could claim to be an authority in any field. His study is so intense that his field necessarily has to be limited."

After avoiding multiplicity St. Thomas sought to coordinate theological problems before presenting them to the student. He saw that useless repetition and lack of systematic arrangement was a source of confusion and weariness in the class-room. Not that the professors of his day had no order in their lecture did he lay down this rule, but he would lay particular stress on such coordination.

Teachers of today, perhaps, unknowingly have adopted St. Thomas' principle of systematic procedure, but in some cases they have misused it. Many of our present day educational centers have been so carried away in their enthusiasm for systematization and standardization that method rather than content seems the great desideratum.

Lastly, St. Thomas determines to prevent in the class-room mental fatigue and depression. To this end he employed examples, mental pictures and made use of analogy. He would avoid lack of interest by presenting new problems to the students and to awaken interest even had recourse to what were considered in his age "novelties in

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<sup>1</sup> *Characteristics of the Theology of St. Thomas.*

theology." In this way he produced many new proofs for the faith that is in us. Some, who did not see the value of these new arguments, considered them innovations and dangerous deviations from the traditional teaching and according to Bishop Vaughn in his *Life of St. Thomas*, went so far as to draw up one hundred and twenty theses of the Angelic Doctor, which they considered pernicious to faith.

St. Thomas then, to quicken the intellect and to avoid depression in the class-room made use of examples, mental pictures and analogy. Today, we are teaching children to think through sense apperception, that is through the coordination of touch, taste and smell. This latter system is known under the new phrase as "Experimental corroboration of the conjectural idea!" There is not a great difference between the principles of St. Thomas and our modern method.

The whole purpose of pedagogical science is to teach the student "how to think" and on this score some have objected to the manner in which St. Thomas presents a problem in his *Summa*. For Aquinas encourages the student to suspend judgment and to think before answering a question. John Dewey, professor of philosophy at Columbia University, a modern and a representative pedagogue of today, advocates in his book, *How We Think*, this idea of suspended judgment. Like St. Thomas he would have the student clarify ideas and give terms their precise meaning. For the rule of the schoolman was: "Never admit, seldom deny, always distinguish."

It may be objected according to the present standards of pedagogy that to begin the solution of a problem by the negative, as is the rule of Thomas in his *Summa*, is not the best method. This may be true in some cases, for example, if the teacher lacks the knowledge or ability to master the situation. But with St. Thomas this objection cannot stand. For his clear reasoning and concise replies show his complete mastery of the objections to his position.

The purpose of this negative side, which takes the form of objections preceding each article, according to Rt. Rev. Dr. Edward A. Pace of the Catholic University of America, is "to open discussion, to clarify ideas, to give terms their precise meaning, to make language not a flow of rhetoric but a transparent medium of thought." What else is such a method but the prestatement of the popular pedagogical slogans of today, such as, "Open discussion in the class-room," "Think for yourself," "Get the other fellow's opinion." But let us pass from St. Thomas, the class-professor, and consider him briefly as the teacher in the pulpit.

Even a hurried survey of the life of St. Thomas cannot but convince us that he was a great preacher. His biographers, such as Tocco, Grabmann and Bishop Vaughn tell us that he preached wherever he taught. We find him then preaching before Popes, Cardinals, Bishops, at the universities, in the monasteries and before the laity. Closer scrutiny shows that he was a lover of the pulpit for, true to his Dominican calling, he was ever in it. It cannot be denied that Thomas as a professor, systematizer of university studies and as Papal emissary cleared the muddled currents of thought in his age. But it was chiefly as a teacher in the pulpit that he reached the average person and instructed him in the social, religious and practical problems of that day.

What first confronts us as we gaze at Thomas teaching from the pulpit are the exceptional prerogatives which fitted him for such an office. Physically, he was a large man, meek, calm, yet of commanding personality. A straight and accurate thinker, possessing a lively imagination, he must have taught from the pulpit with power and conviction. Tocco, his contemporary biographer, informs us that, "his words were received as coming from the Holy Ghost." Having traced and retraced his steps over southern Europe in the capacity of professor, legate and diplomat, he held his finger on the pulse of that restless period. He knew precisely the needs of men and the best method of presenting God's law to them. Circumstances could shape themselves as they willed, they could never ruffle the serenity of Thomas. Like St. Paul he was never unprepared; never taken unaware.

From this same Tocco we learn that, "Thomas spoke with much animation, and a great variety of manner." Furthermore, "that during a lenten course preached at the request of Pope Urban IV in the Basilica of St. Peter, Rome, he so overpowered the congregation by his vivid portrayal of Christ's Passion, that it was impossible to continue his discourse for some moments. On Easter Sunday such hope and happiness did he instil into the hearts of his listeners, that it was with great difficulty that they were restrained from bursting forth into applause.

It is probable that not one sermon of St. Thomas exists as he delivered it. This may be due to the fact that he never preached from a fully written sermon but from a *schema*. Still, we may glean something of their nature from the hints he gives to preachers amongst his voluminous works, especially in his commentary on St.



Matthew, in his work *Contra Impugnantes Dei Cultum et Religionem*, and in the *Responsio ad Lectorem Bisuntinum de Sex Articulis*.

In his commentary on St. Matthew St. Thomas gives us three principles which characterize a preacher. These rules may be summed up in three words, Stability, Clarity, Utility. In the first he urges all preachers to strive assiduously to familiarize themselves with the mind of the Church. The genius of his intellect saw that in the defense and exposition of Catholic doctrine there was ample scope for deviation from the truth. The second is clarity in expression. Order and definiteness seem to be the key-note of Thomas. His teaching vocation was to dispel error. So in his second rule for the preacher, he cautions them against obscurity of diction. The third is utility. Here he warns against vanity. For he tells us in that same homily that if you seek in the pulpit your own glory rather than the glory of the Father, you are guilty of blaspheming God's Holy Doctrine.

Besides the already mentioned writings of St. Thomas relative to preachers is found a volume of homilies or sermon plans for all the Sundays and Festivals of the liturgical year. These have been translated into most living languages and priests throughout the world acknowledge their merit.

St. Thomas was also a teacher of private individuals through personal script. Responsible authorities such as Pere Mandonnet, O. P., and extant letters, to mention, "*De Regimine Judaeorum*"—a letter written to the Duchess of Brabant; a section of "*De Rege et Regno*"—written to Hugh III, the king of Cyprus; together with many articles listed under the "*Quodlibeta*"; indicate that the correspondence of Thomas was extensive. In fact, evidence indicates that he was considered "the court of last appeal." Popes, kings and the schoolmen were continually seeking his advice.

These letters were not about trivial or insignificant matters. Often they involved serious principles of statecraft. Others were concerned with social and economic life. The monasteries and universities were constantly forwarding him difficulties about observance, rule and scholastic studies. Popes consulted him in matters ecclesiastical as well as political. To all Thomas was a kind and patient teacher.

Among the extant correspondence often attributed to him is found a letter to one of his friends, perhaps a novice, who asked his advice on "How to study." Although its authenticity is questioned, it mirrors the mind of Thomas and we think it will be useful to present it here. "Because thou dost ask me, John, most dear to me

in Christ, how it behoveth thee to study so as to acquire the treasure of science, I give thee this counsel. Seek not to plunge at once into the deep sea of knowledge, but approach it by the rivers which lead to it; for by easier things thou shalt attain to the more difficult. This is my advice and instruction. I charge thee to speak little and to be slow in frequenting places of talk; preserve purity of conscience, desist not from prayer, and love to frequent thy cell, if thou desire to be introduced into the intimacy of the Beloved. Show thyself amiable to all; do not take offence at the deeds of others, but do not become familiar with any; for familiarity often leads to contempt, and is of much hindrance to study. In no manner concern thyself with the words and actions of those in the world. Above all fly useless visits. Omit not to imitate the saints, and to walk in the footsteps of the good; do not fail to keep in memory everything good that thou hearest from whatever source. And whatever thou dost learn or acquire from others understand well. Make thyself certain of what is doubtful, and enrich thy mind and memory, ever seeking to fill up the measure of thy knowledge. Seek not things above thee. Thus wilt thou obtain thy desire, and thus wilt thou produce and bring forth useful branches and fruits in the vineyard of the Lord of Sabaoth, during the term of thy life."

It is fundamental after having mentioned the correspondence of Thomas, that we endeavor to explain its underlying cause. Was it merely because of his genius that men sought his aid in preference to others? Was it because of his royal lineage or was it because of his reputation? No,—the answer seems to be more profound, more Christlike. It was because Thomas was always a disinterested and sympathetic teacher. His weapon in the defence of truth was the force of his argument. His appeal was ever to the reason in the light of the Gospels.

Thus we have considered rapidly the claims of St. Thomas as a teacher in the class-room, in the pulpit and through the medium of personal letters. Undoubtedly, present day educators would gain much from the simplicity of procedure and clarity of thought which characterize Thomas. On the other hand we must not lose sight of his spiritual preparation. Although he possessed insight and depth beyond others, he sometimes faced difficulties which were sufficient to stagger human reason. We are told that Thomas, confronted by such problems, prayed and fasted. This was the method of the teacher, who when asked, "From what book do you take all the beautiful ideas which astonish the world?" answered, pointing to a

crucifix, "This is my only book." In fine, we see in the life and works of Thomas the motto of the Sons of Dominic fulfilled to the letter,—*Contemplata aliis tradere*, "To give to others the fruits of their contemplation."

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*“Adoro Te”*

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O poet of eternal song,  
 O bard who lived for Christ alone,  
 Adown the path of ages long  
 Thy voice resounds in matchless tone.

*Adoro Te*—thy virgin heart,  
 A fountain pure hath overflowed,  
 And saving streams in gentle art  
 On desert souls have been bestowed.

O Thomas saint, O prince of song,  
 Fair blossom of celestial spring,  
 Behold on earth a mighty throng—  
 Thy Gift returning to the King.