

THE "QUAESTIONES QUODLIBETALES" OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

THOMAS AQUINAS JOYCE, O.P.



S in a galaxy of stars, the largest and most luminous attracts the attention of all, so in the writings of any renowned author, the one outstanding work of genius receives the praise of all. For this one production he is accorded a place of prominence high above his fellow men. His other writings, no matter what their relative merit, seem to be neglected in order that his masterpiece be extolled. This is particularly true with regard to St. Thomas Aquinas, that greatest of all writers on theological subjects. His *Summa Theologica* has been held in high esteem in all intellectual circles. It has been praised in every language. And rightly so, for it is a masterpiece, the classical manual of theology, an "incomparable summa" that will endure for all time. Some writers on St. Thomas have been so indulgent to the *Summa* that the other works of the great saint seem to have suffered by the comparison—not only because they do not mention them, but also because when they do they treat them with indifference.

The genius of St. Thomas does not lie solely in the fact that he was the author of the *Summa*. There is something more to him. To really know him, to appreciate the genius that is his, to understand just how far he excells all others, there is need to consider all the volumes of Aquinas.

The number alone of his minor writings is so great as to cause one to marvel at his intense activity. The matter treated, the subjects discussed are so varied as to excite admiration for the extensive knowledge which he possessed. The clearness of expression, the profundity of thought lead but to an acknowledgment of the superiority of the Angelic Mind over the writers of all time.

Among these minor writings, one scarcely mentioned, is the "*Quaestiones Quodlibetales*." As a product of the genius of Aquinas, however, it demands consideration. It is the purpose of this article to describe in a general way the "*Quaestiones Quodlibetales*," to show

what importance is theirs, to endeavor, by awakening an interest in this particular volume, to bring all the minor works of Aquinas to the fore.

The scholastic writings of St. Thomas may be divided into two general classes—those which were the result of his activity in the classroom and those which were composed in the privacy of his cell. In the second group the outstanding work is the *Summa Theologica*—which though not taking its origin in the classroom, was written for the use of students. In the classroom the work of Aquinas was twofold, comprising the *lectio* and the *quaestio*. The lesson or lecture was the explanation of the textbook. As Bachelor in the University of Paris, St. Thomas lectured on the “Sentences” of Peter the Lombard. This commentary was committed to writing, and as a result a theological gem—the *Commentary on the Sentences*—was handed down to posterity. The question was a disputation held under the supervision of the Master. The disputations conducted by St. Thomas as Magister have been preserved in the “*Quaestiones Disputatae*” and the “*Quaestiones Quodlibetales*.”

In the thirteenth century, argumentation was much sought after. In intellectual circles, even the recreation periods often consisted in long disputes with endless objections and fine distinctions. *Visne argumentare* was the catchword of the day. In a more formal way, this practice was introduced into the classroom under two plans, one of which was called the “*Disputatio Ordinaria*.” This was held usually every two weeks during each scholastic year. Weighty problems relating to the class matter were discussed with all the thoroughness and depth of scholastic thought. The dispute consisted in the discussion of a question determined beforehand, and in a determination or settlement of this same question by the master presiding. St. Thomas, during his years as a teacher, was very faithful to this exercise. The results of his labors in this field are to be found in the “*Quaestiones Disputatae*.” During his first period of Magistry at the University of Paris, St. Thomas, while not doing away with the ordinary disputation, introduced a new form of discussion. This was the *Disputatio de Quolibet*. P. Mandonnet names him the *Initiateur*, the *Createur* of the Quodlibetic dispute.²

The quodlibetic dispute may be defined as “a dispute about any-

¹ Grabmann-Zybara: *Introduction to the Theological Summa of St. Thomas*, B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, pp. 10-11.

² *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Theologiques*, Vol. 16 (1927) p. 6.

thing proposed by anyone."³ It took place twice a year, before Christmas and at the end of lent. It comprised two elements, the discussion or debate and the determination by the Master of the matter discussed. The moot question was not determined in advance. The dispute was with regard to any subject. The only restriction was that it be connected in some way with the field of Theology. Thus it allowed of philosophical considerations, as well as topics on Canon Law and the Scriptures. Anyone might propose the subject for disputation—students, Bachelors, Masters, even visitors were given the privilege of presenting their peculiar problems. It was the duty of the Bachelor to reply to the question proposed and to give the arguments in support of his response. Then objections were proposed by anyone present at the exercise. To these the Bachelor associated with the Master conducting the dispute, gave the solution.

The determination was the rearrangement of the matter by the master and his solution of the question. Unlike the ordinary dispute, this determination was given on the same day the discussion occurred. By the very nature of the quodlibetic dispute, little order was manifest. Foolish objections were proposed. Objections were often repeated. The answers of the inexperienced Bachelors were often vague. The precise point of the dispute was not covered. In a word, disorder prevailed. The Master's part was to collect all this material, to sort it out, to retain what was worth while, to put a sequence into the points discussed, to bring order out of chaos. Into this rearrangement he introduced his own solution of the question. Precisely in this lies the value of the Quaestiones Quodlibetales. Without the determination of the Master, they would not be worth considering. When, however, his responses are known there is a clear explanation of the salient points of the dispute. And when the master was such an one as the great St. Thomas Aquinas, the Quaestiones de Quolibet take on a vast signification.

The "Quaestiones Quodlibetales" of St. Thomas are the literary redaction of the quodlibetic disputes held under his supervision. They are twelve in number and represent St. Thomas' years as Magister actually teaching, 1256-1259 and 1269-1272. The first six with the twelfth are assigned to the second period preceding his second sojourn in Paris. The other five were written between 1256 and 1259.⁴ In the twelve quodlibeta there are one hundred and

³ "Disputatio de quolibet a quolibet proposito," P. Glorieux: *La Litterateur Quodlibetique*: Bibliotheque Thomiste, 1925.

⁴ Mandonnet: Introduction; *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*; Paris, 1926 p. vi.

thirty-three questions containing two hundred and sixty articles. The general form of each article is similar to the articles in the *Summa*. The title of the article is in the form of a question. The objections are then given. General arguments in favor of the thesis are used in the *Sed Contra*. The question is determined in detail in the body of the article and more particular arguments are advanced. Finally the objections are answered. It departs from the *Summa*, however, in the general arrangement of the matter. The doctrine on any one point may be found scattered over the entire collection of quodlibeta. They have no systematic order in the strict sense, but a general plan is announced at the head of each Quodlibet. This lack of orderly sequence flows from the very nature of the quodlibetic dispute. Since the questions were asked by anyone, St. Thomas had to take them in the order in which they were presented. The lack of order depends not on St. Thomas' inability to see the connection between related questions, but rather on the minds of the men who proposed the questions. The character of the questions advanced and the motives behind each is as multiple as human nature.

The value of the "Quaestiones de Quolibet" is that they present the answers to many complicated problems. They are an aid to the advanced theologian for the more searching investigation of knotty individual problems from every angle."⁵

This form of disputation was valuable to the student of the thirteenth century. Therein were considered topics which could not be given sufficient attention during the regular classroom period of instruction. An opportunity was presented for the solution of a particular problem which may have been causing great difficulty to some one student. One small point which is deemed not worthy of explanation by the master in his ordinary lecture will prove a real stumbling-block to some individual. In the quodlibetic disputes such points were generally cleared up.

The Quaestiones have an historical value. Current theological questions and controversies were treated in these disputations. Hence they are an index of thirteenth century thought. First of all they show that the medieval student had an interest in his studies. Secondly they manifest the intensity of that interest. For the greater the dispute on any subject, the greater the interest shown. From the Quaestiones Quodlibetales of St. Thomas, it is learned that the matters discussed were principally those pertaining to morals and psychology. There are sixty-six articles on morals. There are also

⁵ Grabmann-Zybura: op. cit. pp. 98-99.

twenty-one articles on the angels and a like number with regard to man. The content of these articles is largely psychological in character. Next in order is the subject of the religious orders. About this topic there are thirty-three questions. From this it is argued that in the time of the early Scholastics there was a predominant interest in moral and psychological problems, and from these quodlibetic writings of Aquinas much light is thrown on the controversy then being waged with regard to the status of the mendicant orders.⁶

The number of quotations contained in the Quodlibeta, which Aquinas recited from memory, shows the wide acquaintance of the saint with previous thought. Their manner of presentation shows the personality of the man. Polemic writings, more than any other kind, manifest the character of their author. Personalities may so easily enter in. Caustic remarks are often employed in order to down an opponent. In the Quodlibetic writings of St. Thomas, however, there are no examples of this fault. That gentleness of manner, that fineness of character, for which St. Thomas has so often and so justly been praised, is also found here in the quodlibetic disputes.

The real importance of the Quaestiones Quodlibetales lies in their relation to the Summa Theologica. They have a twofold connection with this gem of Thomistic literature. The quodlibeta written in the period between 1256 and 1259 may be considered as one of the sources used by the Angelical in the composition of his monumental work. As has been said, there were five quodlibeta written at that time. In composition they antedate the Summa. They contain eighty-four articles on theological doctrine. In seventy-eight of these are treated subjects which have a definite reference to the different parts of the Summa. The doctrine is the same. For example, compare Quod. IX, art. 9 with the first part of the Summa, question the fifty-third. The same topic is discussed, the same doctrine expressed. In the later work, however, there is a clearer and more forceful presentation of the matter.

The rest of the quodlibeta were written after the Summa, or contemporaneously with it. In these are found problems also treated in the Summa. They may be used as a summary of the doctrine contained in the major writing. A comparison between Quod. XII, art. 12 and Prima Pars, Q. 89, art. 5 and 6, will prove this. They may also be employed as an amplification of the doctrine of the Summa, by those who wish to make a more exhaustive study of the question

⁶ Driscoll, O.P.: *The Quaestiones Quodlibetales of St. Thomas Aquinas*: dissertation, Catholic University, Washington (1930) p. 32.

involved. Thus in Ia. Q. 50, art 2, St. Thomas teaches only that there is no matter and form in the angels. He does not state exactly what composition is found in them. In Quod. II, art. 3 and 4, however, he explains that there is a composition of nature and subsistence as well as of essence and existence.

Finally the Quodlibetic writings may be of service as an interpretation of the mind of St. Thomas as manifested in the Summa Theologica. Through them the real thought of Aquinas is seen. By means of them, seeming errors or contradictions are refuted. Thus "In the Summa P. Ia. q. 3, art. 3, St. Thomas says that in those things not composed of matter and form the suppositum does not differ from the nature. On the other hand in Quod. II, art. 4, he says that in the angels who are not composed of matter and form, the suppositum really differs from the nature. Thus from the quodlibet we are able to determine the meaning of the statement in the Summa, for it is evident that in the latter work, Aquinas takes suppositum materially for the singular nature and not formally as adding anything to the nature. In other words, we know that the suppositum is taken in the material sense in the Summa for it is employed in the formal sense in the quodlibet."⁷

Against the quodlibetic writings in general, objections are offered to the effect that many useless questions are discussed therein. This objection is of little importance. A few topics are introduced which to the present day seem futile. They are, however, not many and are in no way derogatory of the entire collection. Furthermore what today seems worthless may have been of very great importance to the men who proposed them. It must also be remembered that the purpose of these disputes was the solution of the problems vexing the individual. That St. Thomas deemed them worthy of an answer should indicate the value which they must have had at that time.

The Quaestiones Quodlibetales of Aquinas are worthy of consideration for the matter which they contain. They have an historical importance. They possess a value in their relation to the Summa. Their worth, if no other cause be advanced, lies in the fact that they came from the pen of the Prince of Theologians. The same genius that wrought the Summa Theologica, was also at work here.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 45.