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DANTE ON THE INCARNATION

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THE *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas presents clearly and distinctly a complete summation of Catholic doctrine. To Dante is due its transmutation into immortal verse, however without loss of doctrinal content. "Were all the libraries in the world destroyed and the Sacred Scriptures with them, the whole system of doctrine and morals might be almost reconstructed out of the *Divina Commedia*".¹ Dante has been called the "Poetic Thomas Aquinas." It is a source of wonder how St. Thomas covered so vast a field of learning in so short a span of life; it is equally wonderful how Dante converted his doctrine into golden poetry. The *Summa* and the *Commedia* almost go hand in hand. The subject matter in numerous places is the same. In one we have a subject treated with the clear, precise, philosophical exactness of the Angelic Doctor, in the other the same subject caught up in poetic fancy and presented in an imaginative form that loses nothing of its depth by being converted into high poetry. The chief dogmas of the Catholic Faith are to be found in Dante. Their expression often is so similar to the treatment given them by Aquinas that one may well imagine that there was but one author for both expositions. The Incarnation, for instance, is a splendid example of how Dante would take a doctrine from Thomas and present it in resplendent poetic form. There is a logical order in the poet's elucidation of the doctrine, although the doctrine itself has to be culled in fragments from diverse parts of the *Commedia*. Introductory to the treatment of the

¹ Franz Hettinger; *Dante's Divina Commedia*.

central dogma of Catholic Theology, Dante considers the place Faith holds in human knowledge.

"Insane is he who hopeth that our reason
Can traverse the illimitable way,
Which the one Substance in three Persons follows!
Mortals, remain contented at the *Quia*;
For if ye had been able to see all,
No need there were for Mary to give birth."²

Dante tells us that the manner of the divine operations cannot be manifested to man by reason; and here Virgil takes the argument to affirm decisively and without solemnity, that human reason should not presume to comprehend and explain the mysteries of the divinity, but should be content to understand that things *are* without seeking to know the Why and the How. Aristotle, Plato and others had advanced far in the knowledge acquired by human reason but into the realms of the supernatural they could not go. Benvenuti says, commenting on this passage; "If it were possible by human reason and acquired knowledge to know the divinity and its relation to creatures, certainly ancient philosophers would have known these things, but we see Plato and Aristotle knowing more than others what was able to be known by the human intellect but who did not know all things purely natural nor many things divine for they did not understand the Incarnation, Creation, and the Resurrection." If man were able to penetrate into the supernatural order and know the essence of supernatural things "no need there were for Mary to give birth." Man without revelation would have been able to see all, and Adam seeing the reason for the Divine prohibition would not have sinned, there would have been no sin. But it was not so, and if man were not to be abandoned it was necessary that someone redeem the human race from the sad transgression of the first sin. Dante had the intellectual humility of the medieval mind. To him reason was limited and he acknowledged the limitations. Because of his great respect for reason and from his honest facing of its conclusions he recognized an order transcending the bounds of the human intellect. This supernatural order is made known to man through revelation and God speaking is sufficient for belief; His authority is enough.

"The flood (I answered) from the spirit of God
Rained down upon the ancient bond and new,—
Here is the reasoning that convinceth me
So feelingly, each argument beside
Seems blunt and forceless, in comparison."³

² Purg. III-34.

³ Par. XXIV-90.

It can be clearly seen in what mind Dante approaches the Incarnation. He through his faith accepts the fact and acknowledges that a mystery is involved which man cannot comprehend. Yet there are many things connected with the mystery on which reason can work: the necessity, the convenience, the end, the manner.

Dante speaking of the sin of Adam tells us that his banishment from the Garden of Eden was not so much by reason of eating the forbidden fruit, but by reason of transgressing the mark assigned him by God. The whole culpable point of Adam's sin was his will to be equal to God.

"Now, son of mine, the tasting of the tree
Not in itself was cause of so great exile,
But solely the o'erstepping of the bounds."⁴

St. Thomas tells us "the first sin of man consisted in coveting some spiritual good above his measure, and this pertains to pride."⁵

The poet having followed the doctrine of St. Thomas concerning the sin of Adam goes on to tell why God became man. The question commonly discussed during the age was, why the Incarnation was the method chosen by God for the redemption of man. Could not God have pardoned man without becoming man? Was any other way possible? Was any other manner more fitting? St. Thomas presents the problem thus: "A thing is said to be necessary in two ways. First, when the end cannot be without it. Secondly, when with it the end is better and more conveniently attained. In the first way it was not necessary that God should become incarnate for the restoration of human nature. For God of His omnipotent power could have restored human nature in many ways. But in the second way it was necessary that God should become incarnate for the restoration of human nature. Now a mere man could not have satisfied for the whole human race, and God was not bound to satisfy; hence it behooved Jesus Christ to be both God and man."⁶ "Satisfaction may be said to be sufficient in two ways. First, in as much as it is condign, being adequate to make good the fault committed, and in this way the satisfaction of a mere man cannot be sufficient for sin, both because the whole of human nature has been corrupted by sin, whereas the goodness of any person or persons could not make up adequately for the harm done to the whole of the nature; and also a sin committed against God has a kind of affinity to the infinity of the

⁴ *ibid.* XXVI-115.

⁵ *Summa*; II II, Q. 163, Art. 1.

⁶ *ibid.* III, Q 1, Art. 2.

Divine majesty, because the greater the person we offend, the more grievous the offence. Hence for condign satisfaction it was necessary that the act of the one satisfying should have an infinite efficiency, as being of God and man. Secondly, man's satisfaction may be termed sufficient, imperfectly, that is, in the acceptation of him who is content with it, although it is not condign, and in this way the satisfaction of a mere man is sufficient. And for as much as everything imperfect presupposes some perfect thing, by which it is sustained, hence it is that the satisfaction of every man has its efficiency from the satisfaction of Christ."⁷

Dante gives us the problem in a clear and vivid picture, following the thought of St. Thomas so closely that many of the commentators point to the passage as an example of the exactness with which the bard reproduces the argument.

"Fix now thine eye deep into the abyss
 Of the eternal counsel, to my speech
 As far as may be fastened steadfastly!
 Man in his limitations had not power
 To satisfy, not having power to sink
 In his humility obeying then,
 Far as he disobeying thought to rise;
 And for this reason man has been from power
 Of satisfying by himself excluded.
 Therefore it God behooved in his own ways
 Man to restore unto his perfect life,
 I say in one, or else in both.
 But since the action of the doer is
 So much more grateful, as it more presents
 The goodness of the heart from which it issues,
 Goodness Divine, that doth imprint the world,
 Has been contented to proceed by each
 And all its ways to lift you up again;
 Nor 'twixt the first day and the first night
 Such high and such magnificent proceeding
 By one or by the other was or shall be;
 For God more bounteous was himself to give
 To make man able to uplift himself,
 Than if he only of himself had pardoned;
 And all the other modes were insufficient
 For justice, were it not the Son of God
 Himself had humbled to become incarnate."⁸

In the first ages of the Church, heresies resolved themselves about the nature of Christ. One after another errors sprang up and the Church was brought solemnly to define the truth. Before many centuries the Catholic dogma was defined namely, that in Christ there

⁷ *ibid.* III, Q. 1, Art. 2 ad 2um.

⁸ Par. VII-94.

are two natures and one Divine Person. Dante confesses his orthodoxy through the mouth of Justinian.

"Or e'er that work engaged me, I did hold
 In Christ one nature only; with such faith
 Contented. But the blessed Agapete,
 Who was chief shepherd, he with warning voice
 To the true faith recalled me."⁹

Dante continues, telling us that the nature assumed by the Word was effected by the Holy Ghost.

"Till to descend it pleased the Word of God
 To where the nature, from its own Maker
 Estranged itself, he joined to him in person
 By the sole act of his eternal love."¹⁰

The poet still follows his master in his theological discussion. Aquinas writes, "The conception of Christ's body was effected by the Trinity, nevertheless, this is attributed to the Holy Ghost for three reasons. First, because this is befitting the cause of the Incarnation, considered on the part of God, for the Holy Ghost is the Love of the Father and the Son. Now, that the Son of God took to Himself flesh from the virgin's womb was due to the exceeding Love of God. . . ."¹¹

Dante wishing to describe the desire to understand the mystery of the Incarnation compares himself to the geometrician striving after that insoluble problem, the squaring of the circle.

"As the geometrician, who endeavors
 To square the circle, and discovers not,
 By taking thought, the principle he wants,
 Even such was I at that new apparition;
 I wished to see how the image to the circle
 Conformed itself, and how it there finds place;
 But my own wings were not enough for this,
 Had it not been that then my mind there smote
 A flash of lightning, wherein came its wish."¹²

He acknowledges the mystery beyond the powers of man and bows before it. Yet he proclaims the belief and hope that in the future life there will come some sort of understanding of the problem. The song that Dante sings is the eternal happiness of man which was made possible by the Incarnation. His whole effort is the quest of peace and though he confesses that he has not found it and

⁹ *ibid.* VI-14.

¹⁰ *ibid.* VII-29.

¹¹ *Summa*; III, Q. XXXII, Art. 1.

¹² Par. XXXIII-133.

doubts whether there be any enduring peace here below, yet he joyfully proclaims that in heaven man will arrive at it. He strongly believed that man was made for happiness and that his desires would be fulfilled in heaven which was opened to man by Christ. So ardently does Dante teach the doctrine of the Incarnation that his *Commedia* has been called a "ladder to God."

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NATALIS CHRISTI

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Nox solemnis, profundus, quietus;
 Subito supra colle remoto
 Chori coelestis cantus auditus;
 Nuntians Natum mundo.

"In excelsis," cum gusto cantemus,
 "Gloria omnis, Deo Supremo;"
 Ante Infantem Jesum oremus
 Vivere nos in coelo.