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ST. THOMAS AND HIS TEACHING ON THE FAMILY

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NY return to the past in order to shed light on present day problems is labelled "unmodern" and "unscientific." Hence there is need of that courage which enables one to withstand such labelling in the earnest quest of true doctrine. Present day teachings are attempting to overthrow *en masse* the Christian principles which have guided peoples for the last twenty centuries. These truths were expressed and explained in a philosophy of life by Thomas Aquinas whose doctrine has always been a safe norm to follow.

But Thomas lived in the thirteenth century. The people of to-day prefer to follow modern teachers and not be disciples of an antiquated thirteenth century Doctor. The progress that has been made in all lines of endeavor leads people to think that the newer a doctrine is, the more worthy is it of credence. But therein lies a fallacy. A. E. Taylor of Edinburgh University states in *Recent Developments in European Thought*: "That what is most modern must be best is a superstition which it is strange to find in a really educated man. Our main concern should be that our beliefs be true; a true philosopher shall care very little whether they happen to be popular with the intellectual proletarians of the moment and as long as he can get back to truth, he shall not mind having to go back a long way after it."

The doctrine of Thomas is truly timely for truth is eternal. It can be applied with just as great efficacy in the twentieth century as it was in the thirteenth. This is particularly true of his social philosophy which is closely aligned with his teachings on the Natural

Law. Francis Sylvestris Ferrera calls Thomas "*homo omnium horarum*"—the man of all time.

We get a glimpse of the timeliness of Aquinas' political philosophy through his teachings on the Family, for according to him, the basis of the State is not the individual but the family. There are two principal places in Thomas' writings wherein he treats of the family. The principal work in his *Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle*, Book I, Lections 1, 2, 3, 4. (Vol. 26, page 89-513 in Vives edition). The second work, *Summa Theologica*, Suppl. Q. 44-69, on marriage, though not expressly written by him contains nevertheless his genuine doctrine gleaned from his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* and his *Contra Gentiles*. In the *Summa Theologica* numerous citations may be given which contain short, accurate summaries of his general doctrine. The great Encyclical Letters of Leo XIII and Pius XI, principally those on Christian marriage and on the Education of Children, have ratified and promulgated Thomas' teachings.

For St. Thomas, individuals comprise and constitute the State. To confer on these individuals a fuller and more perfect life is the duty of the State and is at the same time a means of limiting the power of the State. Certain individual rights belong to man by the natural law and the State may not interfere with these rights. Society is necessary for these individuals for otherwise, being unable to provide for themselves, they would not enjoy the fullest use of nature. But the basis of society is the family—and for Thomas a well-regulated family life is a necessary condition for a prosperous society. The family has for its source and basis marriage; and for its natural object the proper perpetuation of the race. The family comes into being by reason of the consent of the man and woman. Its essence is the bond contracted in holy matrimony; its effect is the offspring together with the common life of all the members. Conjugal society is dictated by the natural law for the race and is the union of men and women for the generation of children.

Thomas stresses the perpetuity of the race and the reciprocal aid of husband and wife in their common life as the end of marriage. In the II-II, Q. 154, a. 2, he indicates two purposes of matrimony: the principal purpose which is the procreation and education of children, and the secondary purpose which is the mutual love and respect of husband and wife. He defines domestic society or the family as a set of relationships—relations between husband and wife, parents

and children. The home is perfect when the relationships are perfect.¹ It is worthy of notice that for Thomas the perfect home is not the one which has the greatest amount of material comfort or prosperity but the one which has perfect relationships existing among all the members.

A sublime thought of Thomas' is contained in his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*² wherein he emphasizes home life as a friendship—a mutual love of one another. The members of the family in their relations endeavor to reproduce in the home the love of Christ for His Church to which St. Paul compares the union of holy matrimony. If these relations are founded on charity, devotion and Christian perfection, St. Francis de Sales exclaims "Good God, how precious will this friendship be in the home!" Its source is God, it tends to God and it will last eternally in God. The members of the family thus love each other in this world as they will eternally in the next. In such a family there is found a strong protection and defense for virtue; doubts and difficulties can be presented to sympathetic counsellors for solution; and in time of sorrow or discouragement there is always someone to offer comfort and encouragement.

In this domestic society the dominant authority belongs to the man. Thomas' reason for this is that whenever nature produces its more perfect work it is always found in the male of the species. St. Paul expresses this same truth when he says: "Let women be subject to their husbands as to the Lord: because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church. Therefore as the Church is subject to Christ, so also let wives be to their husbands in all things." As the wife must render obedience to the husband in all things lawful so must the husband cherish and protect his wife. "Husbands love your wives as Christ also loved the Church and delivered Himself up for it . . . let everyone of you in particular love his wife as himself."³

Thomas, with his keen analysis of human nature, demands that some recompense must come to husband and wife for the difficulties of married life. He places this recompense in three privileges or benefits which they enjoy—the education and care of offspring for the worship of God; mutual trust and confidence; and lastly, the indissolubility and stability which comes to them through the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony. He argues as follows: No one

¹ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 58, a. 7, ad 3.

² *Lib.* III, d. 27, q. 2, a. 2.

³ *Ephes.* v, 22, 23.

knowingly inflicts upon himself an injury unless he receives some recompense or benefit in return. But in Matrimony there are many injuries. Therefore compensations or benefits should be found in Matrimony.

Sensual desires, increased by successive carnal acts, darken the intellect and are a detriment to the use of reason. In compensation for this the Good God has granted the benefit of offspring. St. Paul says: "Woman is saved by the procreation of children."⁴ The parents are then entrusted not merely with their own offspring but with members of Christ's mystical body—children of God and heirs of eternal glory. They should exercise their authority over them with such tact and strength that they avoid easily anything that would spoil the children. With God's protecting hand over them at all times, parents perform the functions of a sacred priesthood within the precincts of the home.

The second disadvantage of married life is the troublesome burden of trying to please all the members of the family and to provide them with the necessities of life. For the mother there is the pain and anguish of child-birth. This injury is compensated by a sacred trust and fidelity which springs up between the husband and wife obliging them to respect the rights of each other in regard to their marital acts and to refrain from illicit relations with others. This fidelity embraces two things—conjugal debt and conjugal trust. This trust is a great boon to matrimony for the more sacred the trust the greater is the happiness in the home. Christ himself demanded fidelity in the home when he said: "You heard what was said to them of old, 'Do not commit adultery,' I however say to you that all who see a woman to lust after her already hath committed adultery in his heart."

The third so-called disadvantage of married life is the bond of perpetual service by which the husband is bound to his wife and the wife to her husband. Quarrels and petty arguments tend to disturb and disquiet them and they seem to tire of one another. This injury is compensated by the great gift of grace they receive in the Sacrament of Matrimony. They represent the saving union of Christ with the Church and are enabled by His grace to love one another as Christ loves the Church.

Thomas stresses the fact that although children are the glory and crown of married life yet they impose certain obligations on the

⁴ *I Tim.*, ii, 15.

parents. From the beginning of conception parents must avoid anything that would harm the child; after birth they must provide good physical, moral and religious education. It is their solemn duty to have the child freed from the bonds of original sin by the purifying waters of Baptism as quickly as possible. They sin gravely if they unreasonably defer the fulfillment of this duty. Abortion is the greatest sin against the corporal and physical welfare of offspring for then not only is corporal life destroyed but even the possibility of Baptism and hence eternal happiness is denied them.

Children must at all times respect, love and obey their parents. St. Thomas says: "After God man is indebted to his parents, and just as it pertains to the virtue of religion to show honor to God so does it belong to the virtue of piety to honor and revere our parents."⁵ He further states that children are bound to give to parents all the temporal and spiritual assistance they need.

Thomas maintains that the family stands midway between the individual person and the State, and that as the individual is the basis of the family so is the family the basis of the State. Although the family is inferior to the State since it cannot grant all the needs of men, yet it is superior in dignity for its rights and privileges antedate those of the State. Without minimizing the rights of the family in regard to education, Thomas holds that the State has also certain rights in education. The State violates natural justice if it oversteps its limits in this regard. Parents may delegate in part to the State their privilege and allow it to educate their children. Moreover, wherever parental duty is not and cannot be discharged, then Thomas places upon the State the obligation of fulfilling the place of the parents.

For Thomas the mission of the State is not so universal that it proscribes domestic society. Its purpose is to fulfill very definite wants and to accomplish very definite things of which individuals are incapable. The State helps individuals to help themselves. It helps them to secure as large a measure of happiness as is possible. This happiness embraces spiritual, moral and external goods, for according to Aquinas true happiness is proportionate to one's mentality and morality and to the obedience with which man obeys their dictates.

The State has three duties with regard to domestic society:

1. To see that the people have a good living.
2. To insure this as a permanent fact.

⁵ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 101, a. 5.

3. To strive to better even satisfactory conditions.

As one of the marks of a good State Thomas includes a plentiful number of children and demands that the State should help the family particularly in external goods so that the children may be reared comfortably. In the II-II, q. 2, a. 6, when writing on charity and almsgiving, he says that above everything else the family must be preserved and that money or goods given to keep a home intact is a far greater act of charity than an alms given to keep an individual alive. The State is also bound to provide decent districts for the building of houses and Thomas is surely modern enough when he insists that the houses be built a suitable distance apart and that streets and boulevards be constructed in order to beautify home-sections.

In the philosophy of Thomas are found the five following characteristics of domestic society:—

1. *Strict Unity*—which is destroyed by polyandry and polygamy. These are contrary to the natural law for they lower the dignity of mankind and preclude the home atmosphere necessary for the child during the years of its gradual development.

2. *Indissolubility*—Thomas is opposed to separation and divorce on philosophical grounds, namely, that they are in opposition to the purpose of the family and the education of children. Animals come into life fully equipped for their struggle to live. But man although having greater potentialities, has feebler and slower development. Hence he needs the union of domestic society to help him to live and to protect himself against attack. Even in the higher species of animal life the male and female, after mating, remain together as long as the care of the young requires the concurrence of both. Nature is not satisfied with relative stability but demands an absolute stability, that is, indissolubility. To enter the state of wedded life on the tacit or expressed condition of the provisional character of matrimony is immoral and contrary to the essential conditions and objects of the family.

3. *Continuous Inviolability*—which consists in faith, love, mutual trust and fidelity among all the members of the family. Birth control kills this trust and sublime fidelity—it roots out love from the lives of the people, destroys physical power and is a sore which eats away the vitals of society.

4. *Equality in regard to essential rights*—the marital debitum, etc.

5. *Moderated Inequality as to the secondary rights*—the supremacy of the father; the duty of children to parents, etc.

In contradistinction to the teachings of the Angelic Doctor we have two modern viewpoints in regard to the family, one of which states that it has disappeared and will never come back; the other, that if it has not as yet disappeared, then perfect happiness cannot be had until it is wiped out. There is a belief prevalent today that the home is a thing of the past. This has been brought about by a certain temporary condition which has led people to seek everything—education, industry, amusement, companionship, friends—outside the home. The home is merely a place in which to eat and sleep.

A more penetrating realization of what Thomas taught would lead people to appreciate more fully the benefits of family life. The rights of husbands and wives would be mutually respected. Children would honor and revere their parents. The relations of the home would take on the character of a sacred friendship—all the members united by love and seeking the salvation of their souls by obedience to the commands of God.