

THE CYCLE OF TRUTH

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I



CENTURIES ago a Roman, wise with the wisdom that comes with age, took up his pen and wrote the words: "*Error immensus est*," Error is great. There is no disputing the point; wherever we look the fields of politics, finance, or more especially, in those of philosophy and religion, we find an overwhelming corroboration of Seneca's adage, *Error is great*. Throughout the ages the apparently unvarying record of History: Truth forever on the scaffold—Wrong forever on the throne, led to the formation of schools of Scepticism, which taught that man is by nature incapable of attaining any truth with certitude.

Why is it that error is so widespread and evident? Dryden's lines put the answer neatly and with emphatic force:

"Errors like straws upon the surface flow;
He who would search for pearls must dive below."

It is much easier to detect error than to find truth. Tabloid papers owe their existence to the fact that man's frailty makes good copy, whereas a mind that is jaded by a typically modern shortness of vision can find little of romance or the unusual in the God-fearing lives led by the average well-behaved and virtuous citizen. Moreover, error lies on the surface; it requires no great genius to recognize it and lament the fact. But Truth lies in the depth, and to search for it is *not every man's business*.

It is the business of Dominicans. The history of the Order from its earliest days is a history of a quest for Truth. The pregnant word *Veritas* is emblazoned on its shield of black and white. Dominicans were called into being to become defenders of the Truth, and their record proves conclusively how well they have performed their gigantic and generally unpopular task. Closely knit to *Veritas* is the motto, *Contemplata aliis tradere*, to give to others the fruits of their

contemplation. It gives us a picture of a Dominican sallying forth from the fortress of Truth, a champion ready to combat Error. The figure is sound, for the end of the Order is an unceasing apostolate for the cause of Eternal Truth; it is not limited to any one country or people, but is like to that of the Apostles, universal in scope and embracing the whole world. When Pope Honorius III (Dec. 22, 1216) named the members of the Order "the future champions of the Faith and true lights of the world," he echoed the words of Christ to His Apostles: "You are the light of the world," and his words constitute a connecting link between the primitive apostolate and the apostolic mission of the Order. How are the Friars to fulfill their glorious task? By preaching the word of God, whose "word is Truth."¹

II

What is Truth? Pilate in framing this question simply voiced man's eternal query. Pilate received no answer from the captive Christ, Who a short while before said in His great sacerdotal prayer, "Thy word is Truth." It is from John, one of His select band of disciples, that we have learned the final answer to this perplexing question. God Himself is Truth. All our knowledge proceeds from Him. He is good; therefore that knowledge is good, for good and truth are convertible.

We distinguish, philosophically speaking, three kinds of Truth, every one of which implies the relation of something extramental to something mental. The first is commonly called "the truth of things" or ontological truth. This is "the truth that lies in the depth." Ontological truth is but the being (nature or essence) of a thing reflected in the mirror which we call *mind*. Were there no mirror, there would never be a reflection; no mind, no truth, but simply being. Let us explain: when we speak of *wine* we have an idea of "an alcoholic liquor produced from the fermentation of the juice of the grape; the fermented juice of the grape is *true* wine; every substance which is not the fermented juice of the grape is not *true* wine; and from this we may conclude that every artificial production is not *truly* wine. A liquid is true wine when it is conformable to the definition by which we express the nature of wine."²

¹ John xvii, 17.

² Mercier, *General Metaphysics*, p. 459.

How then may we express "the truth of things?" The truth of a being is the "conformity of this being actually considered, with its nature as already presupposed to be known."³ "A thing is ontologically true which is conformable to the ideal type by which we express its nature."⁴ But whence comes our knowledge of this "ideal type"? This knowledge is a product of the activity of the intellect. As the eye is made to see, and the ear to hear, the spiritual faculty of the mind which we call the intellect is made to strip away all the individuating notes of a thing that mask its inmost nature or essence. It thus produces the universal concept, the "ideal type" which is the point of reference in our judgments of individual entities. Ultimately ontological truth comes to signify things as they exist in the archetypal mind of God, the *causa exemplaris* of all things.

The second kind of Truth is sometimes called "the truth of thought," and sometimes logical truth. Truth consists in a judgment, such as 'This is true wine.' In making this judgment we have performed an intellectual act in which our presupposed idea (true wine) has become the predicate of a judgment, and the thing judged conformable to it, (this) the subject. The heart of the judgment lies in the linking of predicate to subject. Now if "the mind attributes a nature to a subject which truly, in the ontological sense, belongs to it, its judgment possesses logical truth."⁵ If however it should err in the judgment, it is logically erroneous. In God there is no error; He is truth, and in Him all things are reflected exactly as they are. Man's mind, on the other hand, can be compared to the surface of a pool, so ruffled by passion, prejudice and pride that the reflection of reality in it is often a hideous distortion. "Thy wish, Harry, was father to the thought." All of us are so many Harries, seeing things not as they are, but as we would have them to be. Thomas a'Kempis expresses the same idea: "According as everyone is interiorly, so doth he judge exteriorly."⁶

There is a third kind of truth, namely, moral truth, or the "truth of expression."⁷ The end-all and be-all of human existence is to perfect its nature. In other words, man's primary purpose in life is to know things as they are, and so to govern his life in conformity

³ St. Thomas, *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 4.

⁴ Mercier, *General Metaphysics*, p. 459.

⁵ Mercier, *General Metaphysics*, p. 461.

⁶ *Imitatio Christi*, II, iv, 2.

⁷ *Summa Theol.* II-II q. 109, a. 1, ad 3.

with this knowledge that it will find perfect, unreserved expression in all his thoughts, words and actions.

Truth thus seen in its threefold aspect appears before us in a perfect cycle: from God to things (the truth of things, ontological truth), wherein man sees all things to be what they are precisely because they so exist in the exemplar mind of God; from things to the mind of man (logical truth, the truth of thought), since here he makes a logical judgment of reality as it is ontologically true; and finally from his mind to his actions (moral truth)—a perfect cycle, beginning with God Who is Truth, stretching into the uttermost bounds of reality, finding a place in man's mind, and perfect expression in his actions.

III

From the beginning it was St. Dominic's ideal to establish an Order to help men make this circuit of Truth—to *know things as they are*, as they came from God, and how they should be used. "The purpose of Philosophy is not to know what men thought, but 'what is the Truth of things.'"⁸ How is this exemplified in the Order? In three distinct ways. For the moment let us distinguish the Order into its Scholars, its Saints and its Artists and Poets, and endeavor to perceive how their consuming love for Truth found expression in their lives.

First let us consider the great army of Dominican scholars led by Thomas and Albert. They extended the investigation into the "truth of things" beyond the confines of *self* and embraced *all* reality. In their works we find a truly cosmic point of view. They went below the surface for God's pearls to show them to others in order that they might forget the "straws upon the surface." Teaching and preaching were the media they chose to express the ideal that "Truth is not what each man troweth nor good what each one fancies." In other words they strove with great success to demonstrate that the good and the true are not something merely relative (subjective), but have an *absolute* value. As a noted Dominican summed it up, the Dominican ideal consists in "Fidelity to the Absolute."⁹ The pure intellectualism of the great Thomistic scholars has never been more keenly analyzed. So absolute has been their fidelity to the absolute,

⁸ St. Thomas, *De Coelo*, I, 22.

⁹ Clerissac, *L'Esprit de S. Dominique*, p. 52.

to unshakeable principles, that no single consequence, no one conclusion following from their principles, has been rejected as too harsh and intolerable for human understanding. Emotional preachers they were and admirable teachers, but they never gave the "reasons of the heart" preference over those "of the head." Now this does not mean that their intellectualism has become something cold and proudly self-sufficient. Actually it is Sanctity's constant and inseparable companion, as we shall now see.

Saint Dominic and Saint Catherine of Siena became Saints because they discovered the truth *in their own natures*; they saw things as God saw them, and thus attained to logical truth of themselves. Hence their magnificent virtues of zeal and humility, the first-born children of Truth. "He that knoweth himself, becometh vile to himself."¹⁰ Logical error never took root in the lives of these great Saints, since Error is "for a man to think himself greater than he is, and to value himself less than he deserves."¹¹ This they never did. Perfect self knowledge led Dominic and his children along the road to perfection with giant strides. Nor did they halt at knowledge. Dominic, with his truly superb mind, knowing human nature as it really is—a creation of the good God, realized to the full the nature of man's destiny, the *Summum Bonum*, God. He was not content with this factual knowledge, but perfected it by giving it expression, by educating others, by pointing out to them the true equation, that from God they came and back to Him they must go. Dominic preached; he prayed; he pleaded the cause of Truth with such brilliance that he has been named the *Light of the Church*. It is the way of Saints and of all good people to spend themselves in this manner, for "If our virtues did not go forth of us, 'twere alike as if we had them not."¹²

There are many gates to the Temple of Truth, and one is the "Gate called Beautiful." Beauty, Truth and Goodness are all aspects of Being. As the Order dug its roots deeper into the fertile soil of the Thirteenth century it blossomed forth into such gifted artists and poets as Fra Angelico, Fra Bartolomeo, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Thomas. Convinced that that road to true beauty would lead men back to God—the Eternal Beauty, the Absolute Truth, the Highest Good—these apostles of the True flooded the world with

¹⁰ Thomas a'Kempis, *Imitatio Christi*, I, 2.

¹¹ Goethe, *Maxims*.

¹² Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, I, 1.

their beautiful paintings and works. Back of all their activity lay an all-embracing, cosmic point of view. The provinces of the beautiful and the good "are so intimately connected with one another that it requires a master mind to fix their points of agreement and distinction." The lines of Tennyson give apt expression to this truth:

"Beauty, Good and Knowledge are three sisters,
That doat upon each other, friend to man,
Living together under the same roof,
And never can be sunder'd without tears."

(In Memoriam)¹⁸

The great Dominican Saints and theologians were indeed most capable of distinguishing between Beauty, Good and Knowledge. Truth is essential; Beauty is not. Beauty, while somewhat less than Truth, is nevertheless the Magi-star which draws many artistic, poetical souls to the Truth. So the great Dominicans used Beauty, not as an idol to be worshipped, nor as a goal that marked the end of progress, but rather as an instrument to lead men to God Who is the Eternal Beauty.

IV

The Catholic Church is forever surprising her enemies. At the very moment they announce her inevitable collapse, she rises to new heights of sanctity and power. From some hidden source she draws new and increasing vitality. She grows, yet remains the same. The Dominican Order is a comparatively new organization in the Church. Yet, (and this is a point particularly stressed by our great Catholic writers) it is merely a crystallization of her best elements and aspirations; it is a reclothing, in modern dress, of ideals and virtues that have been latent in the Church from the first moment of her life. The Order bears the stamp of the Church upon its brow; it reflects her features in its unity, its sanctity, its apostolic mission, its insistence upon intellectuality. In its teachings as well as in its mode of life, it reflects the very thoughts and mind of the Church.

It is truly Catholic to look at the world as a perfect order, composed of various and successive grades of Being, which ascend in excellence and perfection towards the highest. Each grade, from the lowliest to the highest form of life, is the expression of a divine perfection, of an eternal truth. Not that a Catholic is a Pantheist who

¹⁸ Callahan, J. L. *A Theory of Esthetic*, p. 68.

looks upon the universe as God, for he draws a deep distinction between God Who is Pure Being and the world, which is in its very aspect a thing created and contingent, and which has no perfection whatsoever beyond that which it has participated from God.

The Dominican Ideal to give expression to the myriad perfections in nature is found in its very framework. The Order of Friars Preachers also has a hierarchy, or succession of grades: lay-brothers, students, contemplative nuns, priests, preachers and teachers, all endeavoring first to grasp and apply the Truth in their own lives, and then to reveal to man the enchanting Beauty and Goodness of the "Cycle of Truth."