

FRIAR JOHN CAPREOLUS, O. P.

THE PRINCE OF THOMISTS

Founded at the high-water-mark of Mediaevalism, the Order of Saint Dominic imbibed that beautiful characteristic of the times, the effacement of personality in the interest of society. "Ama nesciri"¹ (Love to be unknown) may well have been its motto. History records but a few names among the vast galaxy of Friars Preachers who played an important role in the life of their time. Even of these, the details are for the most part scanty and insufficient.

As a man of his age, Friar John Capreolus, the eminent theologian and commentator, shares in the general obscurity of his fellow religious. Had not the splendid "Defense of the Summa Theologica,"² for which he has merited the extraordinary appellation, "Prince of Thomists," emanated from his powerful pen, he, too, would have passed unnoticed through the world and his name would have been unknown today.

With the dearth of historical data it is indeed difficult to form even an angular appreciation of the individuality of Capreolus, whose days on earth were "hid with Christ in God."³ Friar John Capreolus was born in the last quarter of the fourteenth century (about 1380) in the diocese of Rodez, France. The exact date and precise place of his birth are unknown.⁴ History tells us nothing of his parents or family life. However, through the efforts of the late Bishop of Rodez, Monsignor Bourret, much valuable information on Capreolus has been gathered. While on the visitation of the diocese whose glory it is to have given this eminent theologian to the Church and Order of St. Dominic, it was the prelate's happy custom to be ever on the lookout for some detail in the life of Capreolus.⁵

The name Capreolus, in French Capréole, is derived from the ancient patronymic Cabrol, or Cabriolé, which today is still extant in the suburbs of Rodez.⁶ The baptismal name of Capreolus is not known; at any rate, he was called by his religious brethren

¹ Imitation of Christ, Bk. I, c. II.

² Pegues in *Revue Thomiste*, Vol. VII, p. 507, *Du Role de Capreolus dans la Defense de Saint Thomas*.

³ Colossians, 3:3.

⁴ Pegues, *op. cit.*, p. 317, *La Biographie de Jean Capreolus*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Annee Dominicaine*, April 1896, p. 251, *Le V. P. Jean Capreole*.

Friar John. Though Capreolus was a native of Rodez, he was not styled "Ruthenensis" (an inhabitant of Rodez) after the fashion of the day, but "Tholosanus" (a citizen of Toulouse). This, as Echard observes, was because Rodez happened to be within the confines of the Dominican Province of Toulouse, where Capreolus held for several years the office of Regent of Studies.⁷ Bishop Bourret aptly remarks: "It was custom among the friars and litterateurs of the day to adopt as a surname the name of their country, and if the country were insignificant, they took, instead, that of the most important neighboring town."⁸

At an early age Capreolus sought the habit of Saint Dominic at the flourishing Convent of Rodez. Here he studied philosophy and theology, exhibiting such remarkable talent that he was sent to pursue higher theological studies at Paris, then the citadel of Catholic theology. And here as lecturer on the "Sentences of Peter Lombard" he was assigned by the General Chapter of Poitiers, 1407.⁹ Soon he achieved fame by reason of his depth of thought, clarity of expression and faithful exposition of the doctrine of the "Angel of the Schools." In 1411 he obtained his degree at the Sorbonne. It was soon after that he was made Regent of the Studium Generale at Toulouse. Resigning this charge, he returned in 1426 to his peaceful cloister-home of Rodez. Here he diligently labored to complete his aforementioned commentary, the first volume of which he had written in 1409, during his residence at Paris. The years 1426, 1428 and 1433 witnessed the completion of the three remaining volumes. In the preface of a compendium of Capreolus' "Defensiones," Isadore de Isolani relates that the manuscripts of these volumes were rescued from flames by a lay-brother, to the great happiness of the learned, and then quite feeble, commentator.¹⁰

It is generally conceded that this work of the erudite Dominican was called, "Libri Defensionum Theologiae Divi Thomae de Aquino in Libros Sententiarum,"¹¹ although later editions bear slightly differing titles. The commentary treats of the "Four Books of the Sentences" of Peter Lombard, and following their order and arrangement, gives a concise and lucid exposé of

⁷ Quetif and Echard, *Scriptores Ordinis Praedicatorum*, Vol. I, p. 795.

⁸ Pegues, loc cit., p. 318.

⁹ Volz in *Cath. Ency.* v. Capreolus, III, p. 314.

¹⁰ Pegues, loc. cit., p. 333.

¹¹ Mandonnet in *Dictionaire Theol. Catholique*, IV, p. 1694.

Thomistic doctrine. Moreover, it has the distinctive feature of successfully defending the Angelic Doctor's writings against the adverse criticism of such as Aureolus, Scotus, Durandus, John of Ripa, Henry of Ghent, Guido the Carmelite, William of Ockham and others.¹² His intellectual acumen, preciseness of theological thought, and close acquaintance with general dogmatic discussion, have caused Capreolus to be regarded as one of the ablest of Dominican theologians. His commentary achieved fame in its day and placed the author among the leaders in the golden age of scholasticism.¹³

Capreolus lived twelve years after the completion of his commentary. His life was cast in troublous times. He had beheld the seamless robe of the Spouse of Christ rent by the fearful Schism of the West; witnessed the deliverance of France and seen her deliverer, Blessed Joan of Arc, burned at the stake.¹⁴ Humility was the dominant trait of his character. He submitted all his writings with scrupulous fidelity to the Vicar of Christ. Prudence, loyalty and self-control were the virtues that endeared him to his brethren at Rodez.

Throughout his life Capreolus bore a profound love for Saint Thomas Aquinas.¹⁵ His intense veneration for and loyalty to the Angelic Doctor earned for him the encomium, "Soul of Saint Thomas." Indeed, Isadore de Isolani, who esteemed Capreolus as a theologian second only to Saint Thomas Aquinas, was wont to refer to him by that extraordinary appellation.¹⁶ Like Saint Thomas himself, who sought to solve all difficulties by consulting the Book of the Crucifix, so his disciple and defender, Capreolus, knelt at Our Lady's statue seeking the aid of Mary's Son in solving his doubts. The humble theologian, ever a devoted client of the Immaculate Mother of God, daily knelt for a considerable time before her image; this was his favorite resting-place.¹⁷ One of many touching incidents of his career, one that gives an index to his character, is the prayerful manner in which he couches the concluding sentence of his commentary: "And these things which we have written suffice for the question; wherefore blessed be God forever! For it was in order to honor Him and the Christ-

¹² Pegues, loc. cit., p. 327.

¹³ Volz, loc., cit.

¹⁴ Pegues, loc., cit., p. 326.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Pegues, loc., cit., p. 333.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

bearing Mary, to honor Saints Dominic, Peter Martyr and Thomas the Doctor, that this and all preceding questions were entered upon and completed."¹⁸

Capreolus passed to his reward, April 6, 1444, and was interred in the sacristy of the Dominican church at Rodez. Trained in an Order of Theologians, and ranking among the first of them, Capreolus stands to all the world as a glorious expression of Dominican tradition and learning. Faithfully following in the footsteps of Saint Dominic and Saint Thomas he was led by them to Jesus and Mary.

In 1881 Bishop Bourret addressed a pastoral letter to the clergy of his diocese, expressing the desire to see a revised edition of the works of Capreolus.¹⁹ This task was undertaken by two Dominican friars, Fathers Ceslaus Paban and Thomas Pègues. The kindly prelate, who meanwhile had been raised to the sacred purple of the cardinalate, died in 1893.²⁰ However, seven years later, in 1900, the first volume of the revised work was published at Tours.²¹ This new edition bears the title: "Johannis Capreoli Tholosani, Ordinis Praedicatorum, Thomistarum principis, Defensiones Theologiae Divi Thomae Aquinatis de novo editae cura et studio RR. PP. Ceslai Paban et Thomae Pègues."²²

If a "brother helped by a brother is a strong city,"²³ surely he who defends another may be likened unto an impregnable fortress. Such was the role played by Friar John Capreolus in defense of the Angelic Doctor. To him whom we still love to call, "Prince of Thomists" and "Soul of Saint Thomas" may be applied the unctuous words of the Sacred Volume: "And I will raise me up a faithful priest, who shall do according to my heart, and he shall walk all days before My Anointed."²⁴

—Ferrer Kienberger, O. P.

²⁴ I Kings 2:35.

¹⁸ Pègues, loc. cit., p. 334.

¹⁹ Bourret, Adresse pour lui conseiller des oeuvres de Capreole (December 21, 1881), p. 22.

²⁰ Goyau in Cath. Ency., v. Rodez., XIII, p. 108.

²¹ Pègues, op. cit., Capreolus, Thomistarum Princeps a propos de la Nouvelle Edition de ses Oeuvres, p. 68.

²² Volz, loc. cit.

²³ Proverbs 18:19.