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# DOMINICANA

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Vol. XXII

MARCH, 1937

No. 1

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## SAINT THOMAS ON STUDY

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**The Commentary of John Paul Nazarius, O. P.**

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IN HIS great Encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, on the study of Scholastic Philosophy, Pope Leo XIII declared to the world: "Our first and most cherished idea is that youthful students should be furnished with a generous and copious supply of those crystal streams of wisdom that flow in a never-ending and fertilizing stream from the fountain-head of the Angelic Doctor."

A year later, on the Feast of Saint Dominic, August 4, 1880, the same pontiff issued another letter making Saint Thomas the Patron of all Catholic Schools. These are his words: "In virtue of our supreme authority, for the glory of Almighty God and the honor of the Angelic Doctor, for the advancement of learning and the common welfare of human society, we declare the Angelic Doctor, Saint Thomas, Patron of Universities, Academies, Colleges and Catholic Schools, and we declare that he should be considered, venerated and honored as such by all."

Now, we have Patrons in this life, not simply that they may pray for us before the throne of God, but also that we may imitate them in our daily lives. Happily enough, this matter is considerably simplified in the case of Saint Thomas and the student of a Catholic school, for among the works of the Angelic Doctor is a letter which sums up briefly how one must study if

he would amass the treasures of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> A certain Brother John had sought this information from Saint Thomas, and this was his reply :

*You have asked me, John, my dear brother in Christ, how you ought to study to amass the treasures of knowledge. The advice that I would give you on this matter is this: Be not anxious to plunge all at once into the deep sea of wisdom, but advance up the streams that lead thereto. For by simple things you arrive at the abstruse.*

*Hence let this counsel of mine be your rule.*

*I bid you to be slow to speak, slower still in frequenting places of talk. Cherish the purity of your heart. Pray unceasingly. Love to keep to yourself, if you would reach intimacy with God.<sup>2</sup> Be courteous with all. Pay no heed to other folk's affairs. Be not familiar with anyone, because overmuch familiarity breeds contempt and is a fertile source of distraction from study. On no account mix yourself up with the sayings and doings of the outside world. Most of all, avoid all useless visits. Try rather to walk constantly in the footsteps of good and holy men. Never mind from whom a lesson drops, but commit to memory whatever useful advice may be uttered. See that you understand what you read and hear. Never leave a doubt unsolved. Take pains to lay up all you can in the storehouse of memory, as he does who wants to fill a vase. Be not solicitous to know things that are above you.*

*Following these ways, you will your whole life long put forth and bear both branches and fruit in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts. If you take these words to heart, you will attain your desire. God be with you.<sup>3</sup>*

Like so many of Saint Thomas' writings, the terseness, compactness, and fecundity of the content of this letter overwhelm the thoughtful reader. However we are fortunate in having a commentary upon it, the work of a theologian renowned for his learning and holiness. This was John Paul Nazarius, O.P., who also wrote a Commentary on the *Summa Theologica* of Saint

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Grabmann, *Thomas Aquinas—His Personality and Thought*, translation by Virgil Michel, O.S.B. (New York, 1928). p. 26, includes this letter among the "certainly genuine" works of Saint Thomas.

<sup>2</sup> Cellam frequenter diligas, si vis in cellam vinariam introduci.

<sup>3</sup> Here, as in the commentary that is to follow, we have used the text found in *D. Thomae Aquinatis Monita et Preces*. Jam tertio edidit R.P. Fr. Thomas Esser, O.P., Paderbornae, 1890. The translation of the letter is in great part that of Placid Conway, O.P., in *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (London, 1911), p. 35.

Thomas.<sup>4</sup> He composed the smaller work, which Tournon has so aptly called "a treatise on the Spiritual Life,"<sup>5</sup> when he was an old man of seventy-five years, completing it at Bologna on March 25, 1631. It is all the more valuable because it is based largely on the writings of Saint Thomas and the sources he was wont to use. Consequently it may be said to be doubly illustrative of his great mind.

### THE COMMENTARY OF JOHN PAUL NAZARIUS, O.P.

Saint Thomas sums up very briefly in his sixty-eighth *Opusculum* all the principal rules that are necessary for the acquisition of knowledge. He replies to a certain young man, Brother John, who had asked him how to acquire knowledge. We shall attempt, with all possible brevity, to explain each of these rules by the doctrine of this same Saint Thomas for the sake of young religious. God grant that this little work of mine may beget in them the hoped-for effect, and, by the bounty of divine grace, may the toil it involved increase my merit.

### MAXIM THE FIRST

*Be not anxious to plunge all at once into the deep sea of wisdom, but advance up the streams that lead thereto, for by simple things you arrive at the abstruse.*

This is the first maxim. To understand it, one must realize that readiness in grasping a science depends especially on four things.

The first is *order*. Aristotle treats of this in his first book on natural science, making therein two observations: first, that a science must be taught by one who has previously mastered the principles, causes, and elements that go to make it up; second, that we must come to a knowledge of things that are more knowable in themselves through the knowledge of things better known to us. Now, says Aristotle, those things are better known to us which are more confused. These are universal ideas, which are fashioned from the particular ideas that they connote; and, because they contain these particular ideas only in potency, they are said to contain them confusedly and

<sup>4</sup>Cfr. Tournon, O.P., *Historie des Hommes Illustres de l'Orde de Saint Dominique* (Paris, 1749), V, 258ff. Also Quetif, Echard, O.P., *Scriptores Ordinis Praedicatorum* (Paris, 1719) II, 544 ff.

<sup>5</sup>Tournon, O.P., *op. cit.* p. 265.

indistinctly. It is in this manner that the notions of man and brute are contained in the concept of animal.

The second condition upon which readiness in grasping a science depends is *method*, or the gift and art of teaching. This means that all useless questions are omitted, the necessary ones alone being treated. Redundance and verbosity are avoided, as also that excessive brevity which begets obscurity. Horace had that in mind when he wrote: "In my efforts to be brief, I become obscure."<sup>6</sup> In the Prologue to the first part of the *Summa Theologica*, Saint Thomas avers that order and method are essential when instructing beginners. He declares the same thing in this opusculum we are explaining, by means of the example of the stream and the sea, saying: "Be not anxious to plunge all at once into the deep sea of wisdom, but advance up the streams that lead thereto." For these streams are the works that contain the whole teaching on one science in a brief and simple compendium, works that touch all necessary points and omit everything useless and superfluous. Such are the *Logica* of Petrus Hispanus<sup>7</sup> and his expositor Versorius, the *Philosophia* of Chrysostomus Javellus,<sup>8</sup> and in its own particular way the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas, which, as he himself maintains, he composed for beginners in the divine science. I have said "in its own particular way," for, as Cajetan observes, that work is said to be suited for beginners, not because it is simple or shallow or incomplete or merely introductory, but because needless questions are eschewed, and repetition avoided, and because of the very beautiful order found therein. Banez in his exposition of the Prologue enlarges on this same thought.

The third condition is the *use of words* in accordance with their strict meaning. The ancient authors had special words for each idea, whether it was simple or composite; and unless the scholastic doctor diligently adheres to this terminology, his words will give rise to much uncertainty in the understanding of young pupils and beget confusion in their minds.

The fourth condition is a *simple manner of expression*, rather than one that is pompous and puffed up with affected elegance. Saint Thomas touches on this point in his *Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint John*. The exact place does not occur to me now.

<sup>6</sup> *Liber de Arte Poetica*, vv. 25, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. De Wulf, *History of Medieval Philosophy*, translated by Ernest Messenger (New York, 1926), II, 92.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Quetif, Echard, O.P., *op. cit.*, II, 104 ff.

Anyway he there states that a simple manner of expression becomes a teacher. The reason is simple. Words were instituted to express the ideas in the mind, not vice versa; and in proportion as they are less involved and less artistically wrought the more clearly and more precisely do they express the idea in the mind. However we do not mean to imply that all elegance in speech must be cast aside, to be replaced by uncouth barbarisms. But we do wish to banish from schools that excessive artistry and elegance in language, which, due to its lack of precision, obscures the meaning of lectures and by frequent figures of speech fatigues the minds of students. Consult Banez's exposition of Saint Thomas' Prologue to the first part of the *Summa Theologica*.

### MAXIM THE SECOND

*I bid you to be slow to speak, slower still in frequenting places of talk.*

There are many striking corroborations of this maxim in Holy Scripture. In the Book of Proverbs, x, 19, for instance, we read: "In the multitude of words there shall not want sin: but he that refraineth his lips is most wise." So too in the Book of Ecclesiasticus, xx, 5-8: "There is one that holdeth his peace, that is found wise: and there is another that is found hateful, that is bold in speech. There is one that holdeth his speech, because he knoweth not what to say: and there is another that holdeth his peace, knowing the proper time. A wise man will hold his peace till he see opportunity: but a babbler, and a fool, will regard no time. He that useth many words shall hurt his own soul." Likewise in xxxii, 10-13: "Young man, scarcely speak in thy own cause. If thou be asked twice, let thy answer be short. In many things be as if thou wert ignorant, and hear in silence and withal seeking. In the company of great men take not upon thee: and when the ancients are present speak not much." Isaias, xxx, 15: "In silence and in hope shall your strength be." Lamentations, iii, 28: "He shall sit solitary and hold his peace: because he hath taken it upon himself." James i, 19: "And let every man be swift to hear, but slow to speak." Again in i, 26: "And if any man think himself to be religious, not bridling his tongue, but deceiving his own heart, this man's religion is vain." Now the point of this maxim may be gathered from these texts of Sacred Scripture, particularly from the first and the last. All sin indeed, but especially mortal sin, is a great

hindrance to the amassing of knowledge. This is particularly true of divinely revealed truth. As we read in the Book of Wisdom, i, 4: "Wisdom will not enter into a malicious soul, nor dwell in a body subject to sin." Water, which is troubled by the wind or ebbs and flows from some other cause, does not admit clear images. Neither does the soul, which is sullied with the stain of sin or disquieted by unruly affections, grasp divinely revealed truth; or if it does, it does not retain it.

Reason arrives at the same conclusion. For almost all those evils that arise from unwary speech are a drawback both to the acquisition of knowledge and to the retention of that already amassed. As the Holy Doctor says, habits are diminished by cessation from act, not indeed directly, but indirectly. "Hence when man ceases to make use of his intellectual habits, strange fancies, sometimes in opposition to them, arise in his imagination; so that unless those fancies be, as it were, cut off or kept back by frequent use of his intellectual habits, man becomes less fit to judge aright and sometimes is even wholly disposed to the contrary, and thus the intellectual habit is diminished or even wholly destroyed by cessation from act."<sup>9</sup> Now if we supplement these words of the Holy Doctor by observing that unwary speech, especially the kind that is not in keeping with the dignity of a religious or a student, gives rise to such strange fancies, that is, fancies or phantasms opposed to those already stored up or to such as should be funded, it follows immediately that such talk both hinders the amassing of new knowledge and diminishes or wholly destroys such knowledge as we have already made our own. Perhaps this was why Pythagoras used to enjoin a five year period of silence on his disciples.

### MAXIM THE THIRD

*Cherish the purity of your heart.*

The truth of this maxim is confirmed by many forceful passages in Holy Scripture. For instance Psalm cx, 10, says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Wisdom i, 4: "For wisdom will not enter into a malicious soul, nor dwell in a body subject to sin. For the Holy Spirit of discipline will flee from the deceitful and will withdraw himself from thoughts that are without understanding, and he shall not abide when iniquity cometh in." The gist of these words may be gleaned from the

<sup>9</sup> *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 53, a. 3.

Book of Isaias, lvii, 20, which reads: "But the wicked are like the raging sea which cannot rest, and the waves thereof cast up dirt and mire." Also note Psalm cvi, 26-27: "They mount up to the heavens and they go down to the depths: their soul pined away with evils. They were troubled and reeled like a drunken man; and all their wisdom was swallowed up." In the same strain the Apostle Jude in his Epistle likens wicked men to "clouds without water, which are carried about by winds . . . raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own confusion." All these texts portray a soul that is harassed by unruly affections and passions. Together with Plato, Aristotle affirms that the amassing of knowledge is beyond the power of such a person, when, in 7. *Phys.* tex. 20, he remarks: "Peace of soul and quiet make a man prudent and wise." Troubled water never admits clear images. Similarly, a soul ruffled by unruly passions and affections lays hold on scientific concepts only with difficulty. So it is, says Aristotle, and Saint Thomas also, that boys and young men are not very apt at grasping scientific knowledge, nor able to make judgments with the help of the internal senses about the things they hear or about other data that comes to their knowledge. This is likewise the cause with elderly men. The reason is because their bodies are affected by many disturbances and unruly passions, since all nature is constantly changing; and they are unsettled in their sensitive nature, where the passions hold sway.

The Holy Doctor, therefore, teaches (Ia IIae, q. 33, a. 3) that bodily pleasures hinder the use of reason because of the vehement alterations they induce in the body, and because they affect the appetite to a present object. These are the words of Saint Thomas: "Bodily pleasures hinder the use of reason in three ways. First, by distracting the reason, because we attend much to that which pleases us. Now when the attention is firmly fixed on one thing, it is either weakened in respect to other things or it is entirely withdrawn from them; and thus if the bodily pleasure be great, either it entirely hinders the use of reason, by concentrating the mind's attention on itself; or else it hinders it considerably. Secondly, by being contrary to reason. Because some pleasures, especially those that are in excess, are contrary to the order of reason: and in this case the Philosopher says in 6 *Ethic.* cap. 5, that bodily pleasures destroy the estimate of prudence, but not the speculative estimate to which they are not opposed, for instance that the three angles

of a triangle are together equal to two right angles. In the first sense, however, they hinder both estimates. Thirdly, by fettering the reason: insofar as bodily pleasure is followed by a certain alteration in the body, greater even than in the other passions, in proportion as the appetite is more vehemently affected towards a present than towards an absent thing. Now such bodily disturbances hinder the use of reason, as may be seen in the case of drunkards, in whom the use of reason is fettered or hindered."

And again in IIa IIae, q. 15, a. 3, Saint Thomas teaches with Gregory (*Moral.* lib. 31, cap. 17) that dullness of sense in regard to intellectual things arises from gluttony, and blindness of mind from lust. In proof of this he writes: "Perfect intellectual operation consists in an abstraction from sensible phantasms, wherefore the more a man's intellect is freed from those phantasms, the more thoroughly will it be able to consider things intelligible and to get in order all things sensible. Thus Anaxagoras stated that the intellect requires to be *detached* in order to command, and that the agent must have power over matter, in order to be able to move, etc. Now it is evident that pleasure fixes a man's attention on that which he takes pleasure in; wherefore the Philosopher says (10 *Ethic.* cap. 4 & 6) that we all do best that which we take pleasure in doing; while as to other things, we do them either not at all, or in a faint-hearted fashion.

"Now carnal vices, namely gluttony and lust, are concerned with pleasures of touch in matters of food and sex: and these are the most impetuous of all pleasures of the body. For this reason these vices cause man's attention to be very firmly fixed on corporeal things, so that in consequence man's operation in regard to intelligible things is weakened, more however by lust than by gluttony, forasmuch as sexual pleasures are more vehement than those of the table; wherefore lust gives rise to blindness of mind, which excludes almost entirely the knowledge of spiritual things, while dullness of sense arises from gluttony, which makes a man weak in regard to some intelligible things. On the other hand, the contrary virtues, *viz.*, abstinence and chastity, dispose man very much to the perfection of intellectual operation. Hence it is said in the Book of Daniel, i, 17, that 'to these children on account of their abstinence and continency, God gave knowledge and understanding in every book, and wisdom.'" In the response to the first objection Saint



Thomas adds: "Although some who are the slaves of carnal vices are at times capable of subtle considerations about intelligible things on account of the perfection of their natural genius or of some habit superadded thereto; nevertheless on account of the pleasures of the body, it must needs happen that their attention is frequently withdrawn from this subtle contemplation, wherefore the unclean can know some truths, but their uncleanness is a clog on their knowledge." On the other hand, because divine grace renders godlike the soul in which it resides and adorns that soul with charity and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit flowing therefrom, and because in virtue of grace the mind is enlightened unto the contemplation of heavenly things, it follows that, other things being equal, the theologian who is pleasing to God through grace and who is free from the stain of sin is more learned than the one who lacks God's grace. Thus the history and annals of the Church tell us that her outstanding theologians were conspicuous for their very great holiness. Saint Vincent Ferrer in his golden book on the *Spiritual Life*<sup>10</sup> teaches very fully and plainly how a religious may attain perfect purity of heart.

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<sup>10</sup> This treatise, originally in Latin, has not yet been done into English. Cfr. P. Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality in the Middle Ages*, translated by S. P. Jacques (New York, 1924), II, 201.

NOTE: The *Commentary* will be continued in subsequent issues of DOMINICANA.