

SAINT PAUL'S BOASTING AND IRONY

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SAINT PAUL in his second letter to the Corinthians seems to indulge in considerable boasting and in his first letter to these same people, to belittle the learning that must have been his as a member of one of the better families of the energetic university city of Tarsus and as a disciple of the famous rabbi, Gamaliel. Since boasting and belittling or irony can be vices, the excess and defect respectively of the virtue of truthfulness, and since the Church's doctrine of Biblical Inspiration guarantees the truthfulness of these letters, it will be interesting to examine them in the light of the principles of Saint Thomas.

Before proceeding it may be well to grasp clearly what we mean by the virtue of truthfulness. "Truth," teaches Saint Thomas, "can be taken in two ways. First, for that by reason of which a thing is said to be true, and thus truth is not a virtue, but the object or end of a virtue; because, taken in this way, truth is not a habit, which is the genus containing virtue, but a certain equality between the understanding or sign and the thing understood or signified, or again between a thing and its rule. Secondly, truth may stand for that by which a person says what is true, in which sense one is said to be truthful. This truth or truthfulness must needs be a virtue, because to say what is true is a good act: and virtue is that which makes its subject good, and renders his action good.¹

Hence when we say that the doctrine of Biblical Inspiration guarantees the truthfulness of Saint Paul's Epistles, we mean that in his letters Saint Paul expressed himself precisely as he thought and felt; or, as Pope Leo XIII stated in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, that he "willed faithfully to write down" what was in his mind. Though the doctrine of Biblical Inspiration also leaves us assured that Saint Paul "rightly understood and expressed in apt words and with infallible truth" all that is in his letters, we are not concerned here with their logical truth. Truthfulness is rather the external manifestation in word or writing of such truth. As Saint Thomas has it, "truth, as known, belongs to the intellect. But man,

¹ Summa Theol. IIa IIae, q. 109, a. 1.

by his own will, whereby he uses both habits and members, utters external signs in order to manifest the truth, and in this way the manifestation of the truth is an act of the will."²

This good habit or virtue of truthfulness is rooted in the will as a potential part of justice, that is, it is annexed to justice as a secondary virtue to its principal. "A virtue," says Saint Thomas, "is annexed to justice, as a secondary to a principal virtue, through having something in common with justice, while falling short from the perfect virtue thereof. Now the virtue of truth has two things in common with justice. In the first place it is directed to another, since the manifestation, which we have stated to be an act of truth, is directed to another, inasmuch as one person manifests to another the things that concern himself. In the second place justice sets up a certain equality between things, and this the virtue of truth does also, for it equals signs to the things which concern man himself. Nevertheless it falls short of the proper aspect of justice, as to the notion of debt: for this virtue does not regard legal debt, which justice considers, but rather the moral debt, insofar as, out of equity, one man owes another a manifestation of the truth. Therefore truth is a part of justice, being annexed thereto as a secondary virtue to its principal."³

Though truthfulness connotes but a moral debt, it is none the less a very real debt. For, as Saint Thomas observes, "since man is a social animal, one man naturally owes another whatever is necessary for the preservation of human society. Now it would be impossible for men to live together, unless they believed one another, declaring the truth one to another. Hence the virtue of truth does, in a manner, regard something as being due."⁴

To violate this right of man to the truth is to tell a lie. About lies Saint Thomas has this to say: "Lies may be divided with respect to their nature as lies: and this is the proper and essential division of lying. In this way, according to the Philosopher (*Ethic. iv. 7*), lies are of two kinds: namely, the lie which goes beyond the truth, and this belongs to *boasting*, and the lie which stops short of the truth, and this belongs to *irony*. This division is an essential division of lying itself, because lying as such is opposed to truth; and truth is a kind of equality, to which more or less are in essential op-

² *Summa Theol.* IIa IIae, q. 109, a. 3, ad 2um.

³ IIa IIae, q. 109, a. 3.

⁴ IIa IIae, q. 109, a. 3, ad 2um.

position.”⁵ Hence the doctrine of Biblical Inspiration precludes boasting and irony in Saint Paul’s Epistles.

And yet we have said that Saint Paul boasts freely in his second letter to the Corinthians.⁶ Immediately therefore the difficulty arises of squaring this with the doctrine of Biblical Inspiration. The solution of the problem lies in the realization that Saint Thomas uses the word “boast” in a well-defined sense, whereas in our day and tongue, anybody who flaunts a real physical or spiritual perfection or imperfection is generally considered a boaster. There is nothing wrong with such boasting if there be a just cause for it. Saint Thomas refers to this sense of the word “boast” when he writes: “To state that which concerns oneself in so far as it is a statement of what is true, is good generically. Yet this does not suffice for it to be an act of virtue, since it is requisite for that purpose that it should be clothed with the due circumstances; and if these be not observed, the act will be sinful. Accordingly it is sinful to praise oneself without due cause for that which is true; and it is also sinful to publish one’s sin, by praising oneself on that account, or in any way proclaiming it uselessly.”⁷ Hence there was nothing sinful in Saint Paul’s boasting about his Hebrew extraction and training, and about his sufferings as a minister of Christ,⁸ since all this was true; and sufficient reason for its manifestation was present: namely, to counteract the propaganda of the Judaisers among the Corinthians.

However, “boasting (*jactantia*) seems properly to denote the uplifting of self by words; since if a man wishes to throw (*jactare*) a thing far away, he lifts it up high. And to uplift oneself, properly speaking, is to talk of oneself above oneself. This happens in two ways. For sometimes a man speaks of himself, not above what he is in himself, but above that which he is esteemed by men to be; and this the Apostle declines to do when he says (2 Cor. xii, 6): *I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth in me, or anything he heareth of me*. In another way a man uplifts himself in words, by speaking of himself above that which he is in reality. And since we should judge of things as they are in themselves, rather than as others deem them to be, it follows that boasting denotes more properly the uplifting of self above what one is in himself, than the uplifting of self above what others think of one;

⁵ IIa IIae, q. 110, a. 2.

⁶ Cfr. especially X - XII.

⁷ IIa IIae, q. 109, a. 1., ad lum.

⁸ Cfr. II Cor., xi, 20-30.

although in either case it may be called boasting. Hence boasting properly so called is opposed to truth by way of excess."⁹

Now Saint Paul never boasted in his Epistles of any advantage or infirmity that was not really his. In other words there are no lies in his Epistles. However when speaking of the revelations and visions that he had experienced,¹⁰ he did boast momentarily of things that others could not verify in him. Still, because these things were true and since there was due cause for revealing them; namely, to counteract the attack made on his apostolate, we can not see anything vicious in his vaunting them.

But is there any way, apart from the doctrine of Biblical Inspiration, of arriving at the truth of Saint Paul's boasting? An examination of the sources whence boasting takes rise seems to confirm its truth. The vice of boasting proceeds either from pride or the desire of gain or of vain glory.¹¹ Saint Paul certainly was not boasting from pride, which, says Saint Thomas, is "more frequently though not always the inwardly moving and impelling cause"¹² of boasting. Suffice to recall these texts: II Cor., ix, 17: "He that boasteth let him boast in the Lord." II Cor., xi, 30: "If I needs must boast, I will boast of mine infirmity." II Cor., xii, 9: "Most gladly, then, will I rather boast of mine infirmities, that so there may rest upon me the strength of Christ." Neither may we find the source of his boasting in the desire of gain. On the contrary, his preaching the gospel free of charge is one of his boasts.¹³ Finally, we cannot attribute his boasting to vainglory. Time and again in his discourse, he breaks off his sentences to assure us that his boasting is "foolishness," and finally in utter confusion he complains (II Cor., xii, 11): "I am become foolish! It is ye who have compelled me!"

Now we may turn to the vice opposed to truthfulness by defect; namely, irony or belittling oneself. We are not concerned here with irony in the sense of sarcasm or ridicule. Perhaps there is no more biting example of that in Holy Scripture than the passage¹⁴ wherein Saint Paul apologizes to the Corinthians for having shown himself backward and weak as regards bullying and extortion, qualities they seemed to admire in the Judaisers among them. The vice or sin of irony has to do with belittling oneself "by forsaking the truth, for instance, by ascribing to oneself something mean the existence of

⁹ Cfr. II Cor., xii, 1-6.

¹¹ IIa IIae, q. 112, a. 2.

¹² IIa IIae, q. 112, a. 1, ad 2um.

¹³ Cfr. II Cor., xi, 7-15.

¹⁴ Cfr. II Cor., xi, 19-21.

which in oneself one does not perceive; or by denying something great of oneself, which nevertheless one perceives oneself to possess: this pertains to irony and is always a sin."¹⁵

Saint Paul would seem to have been guilty of this last aspect of irony; for we read that when he first came among the Corinthians, he resolved to know nought among them save Jesus Christ and him crucified.¹⁶ The text becomes more difficult when we reflect that Saint Paul frequently gives evidence of his acquaintance with the intellectual grandeur that was Greece, and of his appreciation for it. An instance is his talk at the Areopagus in Athens, where he courted the favor of the Athenians by quoting an ancient Greek poet.

The context, however, shows that there is no real irony involved. Saint Paul does not deny his knowledge of the "wisdom" of the Greeks; but, perhaps with the comparative failure of his "captivating words of wisdom" at Athens still in mind, he simply states that he decided to preach Christ, "the wisdom of God," not after the manner in which philosophers and rhetoricians were accustomed to address their hearers, but in accordance with the characteristic method of evangelical preaching. In other words, he avoided human wisdom and loftiness of speech, not as if to feign ignorance of them, but lest the cross of Christ be deprived of its real power and efficacy.

Throughout the first part of this letter,¹⁷ Saint Paul contrasts human "wisdom" with the "folly" of the Cross, and concludes by saying: "If any man thinketh himself wise among you in this age, let him become a fool that he may become really wise." Here again he seems to countenance irony in its second aforesaid aspect, but only apparently so. As Saint Thomas notes: "There is a twofold wisdom and a twofold folly. For there is a wisdom according to God, which has human or worldly folly annexed to it, according to 1 Cor. iii, 18; *If any man among you seem to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise.* But there is another wisdom that is worldly, which as the same text goes on to say, *is foolishness with God.* Accordingly he that is strengthened by God acknowledges himself to be most foolish in the estimation of men, because, to wit, he despises human things, which human wisdom seeks. Hence the text quoted continues, *and the wisdom of men is not with me,* and farther on, *and I have known the science of the*

¹⁵ *Summa Theol.* IIa IIae, q. 113, a. 1.

¹⁶ Cfr. I Cor., II, 2.

¹⁷ I Cor. I, 17—III, 23.

saints.”¹⁸ Hence Saint Paul's exhortation to strive after “real” wisdom or the “science of the saints” does not entail denial of worldly wisdom, but merely another-worldly indifference or contempt of its value or necessity as regards the things of God.

As is evident, the foregoing is little more than a chaining together of passages from the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas. However, apart from the fact that attempts to paraphrase or summarize the text of Saint Thomas seldom stop at obscuring his thought, it is hoped that the whole will, in some small way at least, serve the added purpose of indicating how eminently fitted the Angelic Doctor's teaching still is to solve any problem of Christian life or teaching that may present itself, if we but seek the guidance of his principles, principles the Church has made her own.

¹⁸ IIa IIae, q. 113, a. 1. ad 1um.