

SAINT THOMAS ON STUDY

The Commentary of John Paul Nazarius, O.P.¹

NOTE: The *Commentary* begun in the March issue herein continues. The final installment will appear in December.

MAXIM THE FOURTH

Pray unceasingly



VERY effective way of acquiring knowledge, especially knowledge of divine things, is to beseech it directly from God, the Fountain-head of all wisdom. This follows from the very nature of prayer and from the divine promise that we shall receive what we ask for. Prayer of its very nature is an act of religion. By it we not only show honor and reverence to God and subject ourselves to Him, professing our need of Him, the Author of all good, but also, as Dionysius (*De divin. nomin. cap. 3*) and Saint Thomas observe, we give over and unite ourselves to God. Saint Thomas in the *IIa IIae*, q. 83, a. 1, ad 2, notes that prayer tends to such union with God in two ways: "First, on the part of the object of our petition, because when we pray we ought principally to ask to be united to God, according to Psalm xxvi, 4: 'One thing I have asked of the Lord, this will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.' Secondly, on the part of the petitioner, who ought to approach the person whom he petitions either locally, as when he petitions a man, or mentally, as when he petitions God. Hence Dionysius says (*ibid.*) that 'when we call upon God in our prayers, we unveil our mind in His presence;' and in the same sense Damascene says that 'prayer is the raising up of the mind to God.'" Cajetan remarks on the passage that this union is a unity of application, whereby the mind applies itself to God by subjecting itself to Him and worshipping Him by acts of love and petition, by meditation and other exercises. For anyone who prays, is, in virtue of this unity, undivided from God in regard to worship and subjection in the same way as a servant is undivided from his master in

¹Translated by Mannes O'Beirne, O.P.

regard to service. Since, therefore, the mind of a person who prays, by the very act of prayer, is raised up to God, joined to Him by a manifold act of religion and moreover detached from bodily and sensible things, it follows that this same act of prayer disposes the mind for receiving knowledge from God, the Fountain-head of all wisdom. Besides, it is fitting that God should grant the requests of a man who is joined to Him so honorably.

The divine promise that anything asked for in prayer will be granted, if it is properly sought after, must also be taken into consideration. In the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, VII, 7-12, our Lord says: "Ask and it shall be given you: seek, and you shall find: knock, and it shall be opened to you. For every one that asketh, receiveth: and he that seeketh, findeth: and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened. Or what man is there among you, of whom if his son shall ask bread, will he reach him a stone? Or if he shall ask him a fish, will he reach him a serpent? If you then being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children: how much more will your Father who is in heaven, give good things to them that ask Him?" The same promise is unfolded at greater length in the Gospel according to Saint Luke, XI, 9-13, and is more briefly put in the Gospel according to Saint John, XIV, 13 where our Lord says: "Whatsoever you shall ask the Father in My name, that will I do;" and in XVI, 23: "Amen, amen I say to you: if you ask the Father anything in My name, He will give it to you. Hitherto you have not asked anything in My name. Ask, and you shall receive; that your joy may be full." In the Epistle of Saint James, I, 5, it is particularly said of wisdom: "But if any of you want wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men abundantly and upbraideth not." Solomon in the Book of Wisdom, VIII, very prayerfully and devoutly beseeches God to grant him the wisdom he needs to rule his people. David too in Psalm CXVIII frequently asks God for understanding and knowledge of the divine law and commandments, saying: "Teach me goodness and discipline and knowledge;" and again: "Give me understanding, and I will search thy law; and I will keep it with my whole heart;" and yet again: "Make Thy face to shine upon Thy servant: and teach me Thy justifications." Often he repeats many like requests. Moreover we read in the history of our Order that the Angelic Doctor, Saint Thomas, never began to lecture or write until he had prayed, and that when he came upon difficult passages in Sacred Scripture, he added fasting to

his prayers. Of his Master, Saint Albert the Great, it is related that he besought knowledge from God through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin.

MAXIM THE FIFTH

Love to keep to your cell, if you would reach intimacy with God.²

Since anyone who wants to acquire knowledge must needs stay in his cell so that he may study, it would seem that the purpose of this maxim is to encourage study and meditation in one's cell and to develop habits of industry. However, unless it is prudently and discreetly understood and adhered to, it will do great harm to a young man's bodily health and spiritual well-being. As Scripture affirms (Eccles. III, 1): "All things have their season." Therefore one should choose a suitable time for study and meditation. The same time cannot be fixed upon for all, for there are many things that must be taken into consideration. For instance, a person's temperament, which can be of so many sorts, must be pondered; also one's bodily strength, which is not equal in all; and time in which food may be so digested that one may read and write and meditate without fearing a probable loss of bodily health. All of which experience will teach. For in view of what has been said of the differences in temperament, in bodily strength and in the quantity and quality of food and drink consumed, no determined amount of time can be set apart for proper digestion. The site, arrangement, structure and quality of one's cell must also be considered: whether it faces the south or the north, for many suffer from the heat, many others from the cold; whether the student's desk is near a window or so arranged that he is exposed to drafts that may enter through fissures, for in the course of time many serious ailments are thus contracted, sometimes by the whole body, sometimes only by that part exposed to the draft. One must also ponder whether or not the place where a cell is situated be too damp, as is often the case with locations in the lower part of a house; too cold in winter or too warm in summer, as the upper stories of a house are wont to be. Failure to consider each and all of these items often-times does much harm to one's health, and not unfrequently, as could be illustrated by many examples, brings one's days to a

² Cellam frequenter diligas, si vis in cellam vinariam introduci. Cfr. Cant., II, 4.

close by an untimely death. But this matter is manifest in itself and does not need proof. Finally one must be careful that one's door and windows are opened each morning, so that the stale, foul-smelling air may be dispelled and fresh air enter, and also that one's cell is frequently and thoroughly cleaned. However, if, because of any one of the aforesaid conditions, one's cell may be unhealthy and a ready remedy is not to hand or a better cell is not available, then it is advisable to study in the community library.

MAXIM THE SIXTH

Be courteous with all

This maxim must not be taken to mean that a religious or even a man of the world must seek the friendship and intimacy of all his colleagues. Apart from the fact that this would be to court distraction from study, such a policy would give not a few occasions of turning aside from the path of religious perfection; for it would involve frequent intercourse with some, who, unmindful of their profession and state of life, are notoriously unruly in their lives. What the Holy Doctor has in mind in this maxim is that the young man who eagerly thirsts for knowledge should so comport himself that his words, deeds, and actions are evidently in keeping with right reason and the rules of prudence, and so may rightfully expect to be loved by all with whom he has to live, no matter what their dignity or state of life. However, the fact that some, who lead different and less virtuous lives, do not love but hate him or even persecute him by scoffs, calumnies, mockery, detraction and contemptible acts, is no hindrance to the aforesaid counsel. For, as likeness in virtues and morals, generally speaking, gives rise to friendship, as the Holy Doctor says in Ia IIae, q. 27, a. 3, so dissimilarity in virtue and the opposition between virtue and vice is a seed-bed of hatred and enmity. Sometimes even the similarity arising from like perfection in some science or art or other form accidentally induces hatred and dissension among persons of similar taste, seeing that one thinks the other will hinder him from gaining his own good, as the Holy Doctor teaches with Aristotle in the place just cited. Whence one should not be amazed if some one who is outstanding for his learning or morals or holiness is hated by many on account of some one or all of the above causes. For as St. Cyril says (lib. 10 in Ioan. cap. 15):

"There is a relationship between kindred spirits just as there is between persons of the same blood. Indeed this former affinity is far more intimate than the relationship of blood. Just as every animal loves his kind, so the virtuous delight in the company of the virtuous and the wicked in that of wicked. Hence, the fervent can scarcely hope to be loved by the perverse; and that is the reason why Christ admonished us not to mourn but rather to rejoice in the face of such opposition."³ Many instances might be culled from the sacred writings of both Testaments and from the ecclesiastical annals and histories that relate the lives of the Saints in confirmation of all this. But to add proof of example to so patent a fact would be like using a lamp to behold the sun.

The point of this maxim is this: From hatred and enmity spring contentious words, quarreling and many other disorders, which either entirely take away or in great part diminish that peace of mind so very necessary in the acquisition of knowledge. Hence in order to attain and preserve peace of mind and thence readily amass knowledge, the young man is entering upon the threshold of the sciences will find it most helpful to be courteous with all as explained above.

MAXIM THE SEVENTH

Pay no heed to other folk's affairs

The reason for this maxim is the same as that which we assigned to the second. For undue prying into other folk's affairs, not in a less but in a far greater degree than was the case with unwary speech, gives rise in the imagination to fancies or phantasms that are strange and sometimes in opposition to those already stored up or to such as should be acquired. Even those who are obliged by duty or charity to concern themselves with other folk's affairs experience for the same reason a beclouding of their habitual knowledge and unwonted difficulty in acquiring new ideas. However, the loss of knowledge occasioned by the activity of these latter is not as serious as that which follows from the curiosity of one, who, for no just cause, entwines himself in other folk's affairs. For the imagination is much more ruffled and disordered and diverted from the light of truth by immoderate acts than by fancies which, however strange, are yet untainted by immoderation.

³ Cfr. Luke, vi, 22, 23 and Matt, v, 10-12.

MAXIM THE EIGHTH

Be not too familiar with anyone, because over-much familiarity breeds contempt, and is a fertile source of distraction from study

The Holy Doctor gives us a twofold reason for this maxim: first, *because over-much familiarity breeds contempt*; second, *because it is a fertile source of distraction from study*.

However, a difficulty arises in regard to the first reason, inasmuch as a religious, who offers himself to God as a holocaust, is not supposed to be disquieted by human contempt, but rather to court it; as in fact Church History assures us was done by many holy Fathers. For instance, Castillius, in the first part of his history, cap. 58, relates that our Father Saint Dominic was always willing to visit Carcassonne and the surrounding hamlets, but scarcely ever and then only for a short time could he bear to stay at Toulouse and its environs. When the brethren asked him the reason for this, he answered that dwelling at Toulouse displeased him because there he was held in great honor and reverence and esteem by all; whereas he gladly spent his days at Carcassonne, because there he was despised and mocked and ill-treated. Therefore, it would seem that one should not avoid familiarity with a person simply because of the contempt flowing therefrom.

In solving this difficulty two points must be noted. The first is that contempt means the same as scorn or disdain. It comes from the word *contemno*, which in turn comes from the verb *temno* which means to spurn. *Temno* is derived from the Greek word *témno* which means to cut into or to cut off, for we are accustomed to cut off and remove things that we spurn. So he who despises someone does not consider him worthy of his company. The second point to be noted is that contempt, whether actual or imminent, belongs to the category of evils that gives us occasion for practicing patience. The virtue of patience is necessary both in things done against us and in things said against us, as the Holy Doctor says in IIa IIae, q. 72, a. 3. The precepts of patience, however, in those things said or done against us refer to the preparedness of mind, as the Holy Doctor says in the same place, following Saint Augustine (*De Sermone Domini in Monte*) who explains the precept of the Lord: "If anyone strike thee on the right cheek, turn to him also the other,"⁴

⁴ The words as quoted by Saint Thomas are a blending of Matt., v, 39 and Luke, vi, 29.

to mean that a man ought to be prepared to do so if necessary, but he is not always bound to do so actually; since not even did our Lord do so, for when he received a blow He said: "Why strikest thou Me?"⁵

In this same sense we must understand and obey the same precept of our Lord in regard to contemptible words or deeds that are said or done against us, or that for some reason may be said or done against us in the future. When, therefore, the Holy Doctor says that over-much familiarity must be avoided because it breeds contempt, he does not mean that we must needs avoid contempt arising from *any cause at all*. Contempt indeed nourishes and strengthens humility and not rarely it is wont to give occasion for great merit, especially to those who with the gift of divine grace are prepared to endure any adversity. But he warns us against such contempt as springs from over-much, that is immoderate, familiarity which we may seek to foist upon some one. Sacred Scripture also warns us against this, saying in the Book of Ecclesiasticus, xli, 15: "Take care of a good name: for this shall continue with thee more than a thousand treasures precious and great." However, no one can acquire a good name except by reason of the good opinion that others have of him, and any frequent immoderate action, such as over-much familiarity, destroys this good opinion in any prudent man's mind. So it is that a person who at first is held in honour becomes in time an object of contempt, because of the bad opinion that is begotten of the realization of the defects that over-much familiarity brings to light.

The second reason that the Holy Doctor uses to prove that over-much familiarity must be avoided by the student desirous of acquiring scientific knowledge is: *because over-much familiarity is a fertile source of distraction from study*. Now as was said above in the explanation of the first maxim, Saint Thomas teaches that a habit is diminished indirectly by cessation from act. Hence when a man ceases to make use of his intellectual habits, fancies that are strange and sometimes in opposition to them arise in his imagination. And because over-much familiarity implies much talk, even of the unwary sort, that gives rise to fancies which are not only strange but also in opposition to such fancies as are useful in the acquisition of knowledge, therefore, all who are eager to lay hold on scientific knowledge should avoid such familiarity.

⁵ John xviii, 23.

MAXIM THE NINTH

On no account mix yourself up with the sayings and doings of the outside world

This maxim is contained in the seventh in much the same way as a species is contained under its genus, adding but a special difference of immoderation. For, unless charity compels it, it is a greater fault in a religious to meddle in such sayings and doings of the outside world as scarcely pertain to him than to concern himself with the words and deeds of his fellow religious. Experience, certain and manifold, proves that evils of different kinds often follow as a consequence of meddling in worldly affairs: the fervor of charity grows cold; devotion becomes less zealous; humility, modesty, and the other ornaments of a religious gradually vanish. Wordly morals and vices, hiddenly and as it were insensibly, take their place and lead the man who is a religious by profession to exterior and worldly pleasures, and finally make him a man of the world, hiding beneath a religious habit. Hence it is that worldliness, in the very same way as was indicated in the first and second maxims, hinders progress in learning and diminishes already acquired habitual knowledge.

MAXIM THE TENTH

Most of all, avoid all useless visits

Useless visits from the convent to the city or from one city to another are sources of distraction to a young religious in proportion as they are more frequent and of longer duration. They make him worldly, put him in contact with worldly ways of thinking and acting, and take him away from study. They hinder progress in learning and obscure such scientific knowledge as has already been acquired; and this not only because one's scientific knowledge is no longer used, but also because useless visits give much occasion for conceiving fancies that are strange and sometimes in opposition to our proper stream of thought. Moreover such visits either imperil or somewhat weaken the moral virtues that put the interior senses and the mind in that holy peace that is so conducive to the acquisition of knowledge. Therefore the Angelic Doctor teaches that useless visits should be avoided, not *absolutely*, but *above all things*.

However, since a religious may make a visit for a good or a bad reason, Holy Scripture sometimes praises visiting as a good

thing, sometimes censures it as bad. For instance, Holy Scripture often commends the journeys that preachers make in order to procure the salvation of souls. The holy Gospels frequently refer to such journeys of our Lord. For instance, in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, ix, 35, we read: "And Jesus went about all the cities and towns, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease," etc., Mark, i, 38: "Let us go into the neighboring towns and cities, that I may preach there also; for to this purpose am I come. And He was preaching in their synagogues and in all Galilee . . .," Mark, vi, 6: "And He went through the villages round about teaching . . .," Luke, viii, 1: "He travelled through the cities and towns preaching and evangelizing the kingdom of God." In the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, xxviii, 19, and in that according to Saint Mark, xvi, 15, one finds our Lord's commandment to the Apostles, which reads: "Go ye into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature." In the Gospel according to Saint Luke, x, 1 ff., the preaching mission of the seventy-two disciples is recounted at length, as also the instruction they received in regard to what they were to preach to the people and to how they were to act in their capacity as preachers. "And after these things," says Saint Luke, "the Lord appointed also other seventy-two: and he sent them two and two before His face into every city and place whither he himself was to come" etc. In the Gospel according to Saint John, xv, 16, we read that our Lord said to the twelve disciples: "I have chosen you . . . that you should go and should bring forth fruit."

On the other hand, Holy Scripture sometimes condemns visiting as something evil. Visiting is a bad thing when the motivating cause is bad. There are three such bad causes, as the Holy Doctor says in his opusculum, *Contra impugnantes religionem*, cap. 10. The first is *fickleness of mind* or *levity of soul*, of which Saint Paul was speaking when he wrote (2 Thess., iii, 11): "For we have heard that there are some among you who walk disorderly." This is especially noticeable in those who journey about aimlessly. Saint Augustine is referring to such a class, in his work *De opere Monachorum* (cap. 28, n. 36), when, in his description of monks who are always aimlessly flitting about, he observes that "they are never going any place, never remaining any place, never standing, never sitting." For the same reason, one reads of the chosen people in the Book of Jeremias, xiv, 10:

"This people . . . have loved to move their feet and have not rested and have not pleased the Lord." That their instability was the result of levity is clear from the words: "Who have loved to move their feet." For, as the Holy Doctor observes in cap. 10 of the above-mentioned work, flitting about aimlessly is attractive to such as are motivated by levity.

The second cause is *the seeking after gain from a love of earthly goods*. It is in regard to this that we must understand these words of our Lord (Mark, vi, 10): "Wheresoever you shall enter into a house, there abide," upon which the Gloss of Ambrose remarks: "It does not become a preacher to pass from house to house and thus violate the sacred laws of hospitality." We must interpret in the same sense the almost identical words in the Gospel according to Saint Luke, x, 7: "And in the same house remain," on which the Gloss comments: "Do not pass from house to house with vagrant readiness, but out of consideration for your host be fixed in your abode." For concupiscence frequently induces wayfarers to wander from one house to another for no good reason, as happens, for instance, when, not satisfied with what they receive in one home, they pass on to another in hope of better fare.

The third cause is *malice* induced by seeking something evil. It is of such that the Epistle of Saint Jude says: "Woe unto them, for they have gone in the way of Cain; and after the error of Baalam they have for reward poured out themselves," for these texts imply the intention of doing harm. What follows in the same epistle: "These are spots in their banquets, feasting together without fear, feeding themselves, clouds without water, which are carried about by winds," indicates that concupiscence is the impelling motive. And finally the words, "trees of the autumn, unfruitful," show that the journey proceeded from levity.