

SAINT THOMAS ON STUDY

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

MAXIM THE ELEVENTH

*Try Rather to Walk Constantly in the Footsteps
of Good and Holy Men*



HIS maxim must be understood to refer primarily to the imitation of all virtuous acts in general, especially insofar as they contribute towards progress in learning. For, as Saint Thomas told us above in the third maxim, all the virtues, both acquired and infused, but especially chastity and abstemiousness, dispose a man to perfect intellectual operation. Secondly, however, this maxim must be understood to refer to the imitation of the method and system of study that good and holy men have employed in the acquisition of knowledge. For instance, Saint Jerome, after raising up his mind to God in prayer, was wont to apply it to the study of Sacred Scripture, while it was yet illumined by the splendour of the divine light and in a certain sense deified. When fatigued by study, he would betake himself to prayer; and, having been refreshed by the strength and sweetness flowing therefrom, he would again turn to study. Our Angelic Doctor imitated him in this and always prepared his mind for study by prayer. Indeed it was by means of this same method and system that the holy Fathers and Doctors of the Greek and Latin Church reached the peak of perfection in the sciences, as the annals and histories of the Catholic Church that narrate their lives, testify.

MAXIM THE TWELFTH

*Never mind from whose lips a lesson falls, but commit to memory
whatever good may be proposed.*

This maxim can be understood in two ways. First, in an absolutely unqualified sense, so as to mean that the young man who is anxious to learn must give no heed at all to the qualities of the person who proposes good teachings. But this sense does not seem to be true

¹ Translated by Mannes O'Beirne, O.P.

nor to have been meant by Saint Thomas. For a beginner has to take many things on faith, and the authority of the master, whose word must be taken, will be greater in proportion as he wins the confidence of his students. It would surely then contribute much to a beginner's progress in knowledge to take note of the character of the person who is lecturing or teaching, to believe that he excels in the subject that he teaches, and to hear and relish his words with a certain admiration as if they were the pronouncements of an oracle. Thus it comes to pass that the teachings of a professor are listened to more attentively, and, being well understood and committed to memory, remain firmly fixed there, and are preserved in it enduringly as if in an impregnable treasure house.

Secondly, this maxim can mean that ordinarily a man's teachings should not be judged or appraised in terms of things accidental to him, so that if he does not happen to be a man of great learning or renown, or if he be young, poor, unattractive or poorly clad, his words are condemned as false or despised as foolish. Rather one should abstract from such accidentals in a person, weigh his words in themselves with an equally balanced judgment; and, if they are found to be good, lay them up in the treasure house of memory. It is in this second sense that the Holy Doctor wants to be understood, when he says: *Never mind from whose lips a lesson falls, but commit to memory whatever good may be proposed.*

MAXIM THE THIRTEENTH

See that you understand what you read and hear.

Compliance with this maxim is of capital importance for any student who wishes to have a true and well-rounded scientific knowledge. As the Philosopher says (in 1 *Poster.*): *All teaching and learning takes its rise in preexisting knowledge.* Now the demonstration that gives rise in the mind to scientific knowledge contains two propositions, namely, a major and a minor, that must be known previously and known better than the conclusion deduced therefrom. Again, all the scientific knowledge in our mind arises from groups of demonstrations that are so interrelated that each one depends upon the preceding as upon a cause and presupposes that the premises of the preceding demonstration are understood and give rise to its conclusion, no less than a material effect presupposes as necessary a cause upon which it depends, and no less than the efficiency of a later cause has its source in the efficiency of a preceding one. Just as each effect in the realm of natural entities has a necessary connection with a pre-

existing cause upon which it depends, so in the realm of intellectual realities the idea contained in the conclusion of a demonstration, being an effect, has a necessary connection with the understanding of the premises, as with a cause. For the same reason one demonstration depends upon another, beginning from the last and going back even to the first through all the intermediate ones. Furthermore just as when, in the case of material things, the first cause is taken away, all the other causes and effects dependent thereon necessarily cease to exist, or when an intermediate cause is taken away, the efficiency and effect of the last cause cease to exist, so in the case of our intellect, scientific knowledge of a conclusion no longer does or can exist, if understanding of the premises is not previously present. This is why it is necessary for a beginner to understand well what he reads in his books or hears from his teacher; otherwise he will have scientific knowledge neither of those nor of other things that will subsequently be deduced therefrom, but only opinion, or faith, based upon the authority of the one whose book he reads or whose lecture he attends. Therefore beginners must be very careful to understand well what they read or hear. Let them question their teachers or fellow students of greater talent about problems that the keenness of their own minds cannot penetrate. Public or private literary conferences are very helpful in overcoming this defect, as also frequent participation in or attendance at disputations, which increase one's store of learning and sharpen one's intelligence.

MAXIM THE FOURTEENTH

Never leave a doubt unsolved.

The proof of this maxim is drawn from the same argument about the order of knowledge by which we showed the truth of the preceding. For just as defective knowledge or understanding of principles or of previous demonstrations precludes scientific *knowledge* of conclusions that are deduced either immediately from the principles or mediately from the previous demonstrations, so doubt either about the truth or the meaning of these same principles or about the conclusions of foregoing demonstrations precludes *certain*, and so scientific knowledge. For it is the part of a philosopher not only to know demonstrations, but also to understand thoroughly why they so conclude. As Aristotle says, *to have scientific knowledge (scire) is to know a thing by its cause, to know that this is its cause and to know that apart from this cause it would not exist*. Commenting on this dictum, Saint Thomas says that a philosopher, in order to have certain knowledge, which is truly and properly scientific

knowledge, and the only perfect knowledge, must know not only the cause, but also its causal relation to and necessity for the effect. Those therefore who are intent upon amassing scientific knowledge must needs be diligent in clearing up the obscurity that comes of doubt and in acquiring as certain and lucid a knowledge of truth as they can. For not only ignorance is opposed to scientific knowledge but also doubt, since this latter lacks the certitude and lucidity that are proper to such knowledge. This being true of doubtful knowledge, it is a simple matter to see to what violence those young men subject their minds, who do not properly correlate the ideas, pertaining to the same or different sciences, that come to them from lectures or reading; but who attempt to understand many of these in the light of ideas, which, though previously acquired, should really, in the natural order of knowledge, come later. For there are many who, due to carelessness on the part of their superiors, attend lectures on tracts of logic or philosophy or theology that some professor chances to be expounding to students more advanced than themselves, with the result that time and again they have attended lectures on the same one or few questions, but have no knowledge at all about others that are equally important. Such students have a thorough grasp on nothing. Rather all their knowledge is confused on account of the obscurity which that disorder begets, or beclouded by the ignorance that follows in the train of badly correlated ideas.

MAXIM THE FIFTEENTH

*Take pains to lay up all you can in the storehouse of memory,
as he does who wants to fill a vase.*

This maxim is no less necessary than the two preceding for anyone who wants to excel in scientific knowledge. For what does it profit a man to spend the flower of his youth in attending lectures, in reading and studying the books of learned men, and in mortifying his body with vigils and hardships, if he commits to memory none of the things he reads or hears, and therefore falls short of the end he so earnestly aspired to?

In order that the necessity and usefulness of this maxim may appear in a clearer light, we shall explain the way in which the things we read or hear can and must be committed to memory, and so later on be remembered and recalled to mind. The Holy Doctor in the *Summa Theologica*, IIa, IIae, q. 49, a. 1, ad 2, in explaining the method of memorizing, says: "Memory is perfected not by nature alone, but also by art and diligence. There are four things by which a man perfects his memory. First, when a man wishes to remember a

thing, he should take some suitable yet somewhat unwonted illustration of it, since the unwonted makes us wonder more, and so makes a greater and stronger impression on the mind; and this explains why we remember what we saw when we were children. Now the reason for the necessity of finding these illustrations or images is that simple and spiritual impressions easily slip from the mind, unless they be tied as it were to some corporeal image, because human knowledge has a greater hold on sensible objects. For this reason memory is assigned to the sensitive part of the soul. Secondly, whatever a man wishes to retain in his memory, he must carefully consider and set in order, so that he may pass easily from one memory to another. Hence the Philosopher says (*De Memoria II*): Sometimes a place brings memories back to us: the reason being that we pass quickly from one to another. Thirdly, we must be anxious and earnest about the things we wish to remember, because the more a thing is impressed on the mind, the less it is liable to slip out of it. Wherefore Tully says (*Ad Heren. de arte rhet. III*) that anxiety preserves the figures of images entire. Fourthly, we should often reflect on the things we wish to remember. Hence the Philosopher says (*De Memoria I*) that reflection preserves memories, because, as he remarks (*ibid.*), custom is a second nature: wherefore when we reflect on a thing frequently, we quickly call it to mind through passing from one thing to another by a kind of natural order." That is all that the Holy Doctor says in the aforesaid text. But in his commentary on the *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, lect. 5, he remarks with the Philosopher that things that are well ordered are easier to memorize, as arithmetic, and the theorems of geometry, of which the last is deduced from the preceding and so on; but those things that are badly ordered, we remember only with difficulty. In a brief conclusion that sums up the lengthy discourse of the Philosopher he writes: "So from all that has been said above, we can gather four hints that will help us to memorize and remember things. First, a man should take pains to put what he wishes to remember into some order; secondly, he should thoroughly and of fixed purpose set his mind on them; thirdly, he should frequently think about them in the order fixed upon; fourthly, he should recall them from the beginning of the order fixed upon." This fourth suggestion, when joined to the four previously quoted from the second volume of the second part of the *Summa Theologica* makes five-fold the number of things that are necessary for a ready memory. To these we may add a sixth hint of the Angelic Doctor, found in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, cap. 12, lect. 4, wherein, explaining the words; "who are

written in the heavens," he says: "Just as that which is written is not easily forgotten, so those whose names are written in the heavens at the last judgment will infallibly be saved." By these words he indicates clearly enough that writing is useful in helping us to memorize. However I understand this suggestion about writing, not simply in the sense that things that are written may be recalled by remembering the fact that they were written, but also because the act of writing, taken in itself, stamps a deeper impression of species on the mind than that which thinking alone impresses on the memory. Hence this suggestion about writing can be reduced to the third suggestion of the four previously quoted from the second volume of the second part of the *Summa Theologica*. Anyone who wants a longer explanation of these suggestions can read Aristotle's little work, *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, together with Saint Thomas' commentary thereon, Cicero's *Rhetorica* and others, who treat at length of the art of memorizing.

MAXIM THE SIXTEENTH

Be not Solicitous to Know Things that are Above You

This maxim is taken from the sacred Book of Ecclesiasticus, III, 22-26, which reads: "Seek not the things that are too high for thee, and search not into things above thy ability: but the things that God hath commanded thee, think on them always, and in many of his works be not curious. For it is not necessary for thee to see with thy eyes those things that are hid. In unnecessary matters be not over curious, and in many of his works thou shalt not be inquisitive. For many things are shown to thee above the understanding of men. And the suspicion of them hath deceived many, and hath detained their minds in vanity."

The things too high for us, that is for our natural intelligence, are not only the hidden mysteries of the Godhead, but all the works of God that pertain to the supernatural order. It is of these that Scripture says: "and in many of his works thou shalt not be inquisitive." However knowledge of these can be sought after or searched into in a twofold way. In one way *by argumentation and reasoning*, a method which God Himself in the above quoted words of Holy Scripture forbids us to use. The innumerable errors of the Gentiles and heretics bear witness to the great harm to which the use of such a method gives rise. From the beginning even to these our times the Bark of Peter has ever been tossed to and fro in this sea of error; yet never has it been overwhelmed by the tempest, but in keeping

with the promise of Christ our Lord,² Providence has preserved it unharmed. It is of these errors that Scripture says: "And the suspicion of them hath deceived many, and hath detained their minds in vanity." This method of inquiry is a violent temptation and a stumbling-block to proud and vain temperaments, and should be eschewed by the faithful and especially by the professor of theology. Would that many moderns might heed this warning!

Another way by which we may inquire into and gain some knowledge of the secrets of God and the supernatural mysteries of his works is *through the medium of divine revelation*. Many steadfast Christian Saints have received revelations from God about some of the sublime mysteries of our Faith in answer to prayer, that were humble, abounding with faith and burning with love. Especially resplendent in this regard is the case of our Holy Doctor Aquinas, who devoted himself to the study of theology only after prayer, and who often confessed that his learning was rather the gift of the divine bounty than the result of laborious study.

When therefore Holy Scripture admonishes us, saying: "Seek not the things that are too high for thee," it means to exclude the first method of inquiry. But when it adds farther on: "For many things are shown to thee above the understanding of men," it means to teach that we are to come to a knowledge of the aforementioned mysteries by faith in God's revelation, as the Holy Doctor says in the *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q.1, a.1. And in IIa IIae, q.161, a.2, ad2, speaking of humility, he says: "It is contrary to humility to aim at greater things through confiding in one's own powers. But to aim at greater things through confidence in God's help is not contrary to humility; especially since the more one subjects oneself to God, the more one is exalted in God's sight. Hence Augustine says (Serm. 351, *De utilit. agenda poenit.*, cap. 1, n. 1): "It is one thing to raise oneself to God, and another to raise oneself up against God. He that abases himself before Him, him He raiseth up; he that raises himself up against Him, him He casteth down." From these words of Saint Thomas one can gather how necessary is this divine rule for all who are seeking after a knowledge of divine truth at once clear and unsullied with the corruption of error.

These few words will suffice for our little commentary. We have written it for the common benefit of all young men who aspire to perfect scientific knowledge, so that, showing them an easy and simple way to attain this sublime end, we may participate in their intellectual growth and flowering and be helped by their prayers to attain, through the mercy of God, the rewards of eternal life.

² Cfr. Matt., XVI, 18.