

THE SCHOOL OF BETHLEHEM

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THE first Christian School was the Stable at Bethlehem. The Christ-child was its Teacher. Wise men from afar and simple shepherds from neighboring plains were its first pupils. Kneeling in humble adoration at the feet of the Infant Saviour, they learned the lesson of eternal life.

In the early ages of the Church, countless souls enrolled in the School of Christ. With the memory of Bethlehem and Calvary still vividly before them, they viewed the problems of life in their proper perspective—in the light of the Crib and in the shadow of the Cross. They *lived* Christ, those first Christians. And living Him, walking with Him in their daily lives, seeking His will in their every action, they attained a sanctity which won the respect and admiration of their non-Christian neighbors. In the first few centuries, Christianity was truly a leaven working constantly midst the scandals of a pagan world.

But the scandal of today is not so much the scandal of pagan contemporaries as the scandal of the Christians. For men are no longer Christlike. In the mad rush of modern life, Christ has ceased to be considered a vital factor. The pleasure of the moment and the material needs of the morrow mark the narrow limits of men's aspirations and desires. In the face of problems in the social, economic and moral orders, the world, Christian and non-Christian alike, has turned its back on Bethlehem. For what can Bethlehem contribute to this modern age? Why look back two thousand years for the answers to the pressing problems of today? We are practical men! We want progress and not history!

Towards the close of the last century the Church, ever a wise and indulgent Mother, met that insistent challenge by declaring St. Thomas Aquinas Patron of Schools.¹ Thomas Aquinas was a practical man, besieged from all quarters for advice and counsel. He was a progressive, a progressive who looked back twelve hundred years to Bethlehem to find the key not only to the problems of his day but to many of those deemed peculiar to our own generation. His very practicality consisted in accepting the historic fact of Bethlehem and making it the center and starting point of a progress that immortalized his work and sanctified his life. For at Bethlehem he found the Truth: about God, and Christ, and Man.

The vast structure of the *Summa Theologica*, man's noblest intellectual edifice, is reared on the solid foundation of this triune truth about God, and Christ, and Man. St. Thomas proposes this three-fold division of truth as the ground plan of his entire treatise: "Because the chief aim of sacred doctrine is to teach the knowledge of God, not only as He is in Himself, but also as He is the beginning of things and their last end, and especially of rational creatures. . . therefore in our endeavor to expound this science, we shall treat: (1) Of God: (2) Of the rational creature's advance toward God: (3) Of Christ, Who as man, is our way to God."² The mature Thomas who speaks from these pages is the same child who, at the age of five, asked: "What is God?"; the same whole-hearted youth who memorized the entire Gospel during his imprisonment in the ancestral castle at Rocca Secca. The simple Gospel narrative remained his lifelong treasure. Can we wonder that his works are animated by a spirit of tender and enlightened piety? "Need it be observed that the whole ethical theory of St. Thomas is based upon that doctrine which he derives from the Gospel and St. Paul? He has erected upon that teaching of the Gospel an infrangible theological synthesis."³

Recent years have witnessed a return to the wisdom of St. Thomas. The mind of man is made for truth and the very shallowness of contemporary thought has forced truth-thirsty souls to the limpid stream of Thomism. The patent inadequacy of the manifold remedies for our social and economic evils has won a belated appreciation for the Leonine Encyclicals, and for the sound Thomistic principles which they embrace. Wearied of "ever learning and never attaining to the knowledge of the truth,"⁴ men have come to acknowl-

¹ Leo XIII, Pope, Brief: *Cum hoc sit*. (Rome, Aug. 4th, 1880).

² *Summa Theol.* Ia, q. 2, Prologue.

³ Maritain, Jacques, *The Angelic Doctor* (New York, 1931), p. 79.

⁴ II Tim. iii, 7.

edge the brilliance of the thirteenth century mind which illuminates so many of our modern problems. The pity of it is that the world has not come to recognize the brilliance of St. Thomas as but the outward sign of those inward fires of burning love which he kindled and fed with the Bread of Life. For St. Thomas Aquinas is not simply an intellect, however glorified and exalted; the Patron of the School of Bethlehem is not merely the star destined to attract the wise men of all ages; he is equally the angel of love, bringing good tidings of great joy to the simple and innocent of heart.

One does not know the real St. Thomas, if he does not appreciate the loving heart that poured forth its sublime praises in the Office for Corpus Christi; he does not really understand St. Thomas, if he fails to grasp the language of love voiced in the heavenly hymns of the Blessed Sacrament: the familiar *Tantum Ergo* and *O Salutaris*. We do a grave injustice to the manliness of this virile saint of God if we neglect the intimate glimpses which we have of his love for his fellow-men. The strong affection of St. Thomas for St. Bonaventure and for the beloved Brother Reginald to whom he bared the innermost secrets of his great soul should not be forgotten. St. Thomas Aquinas was human—and in him was a heart filled with love, as well as a mind steeped in truth.

The Church proposes him as Patron of Schools to lead men back to Bethlehem, *House of Bread*, wherein was born the Bread of Life. She bids men take courage from the saintly life of their fellow human, confident that whether they are led by the light of his learning or the lilt of his love they will find themselves like the Wise Men and Shepherds of old at the feet of the Infant Saviour. For the Christ Child in the Crib is the Divine Teacher in the School of Bethlehem; the sole function of St. Thomas as Patron is to lead men back to that Teacher. May the wisdom of Thomas attract the loftiest intellect, as the star did the Magi afar; may his Eucharistic hymns speak to the humblest of hearts, as the angelic choirs to the Shepherds of old. May the words of St. Thomas "I can write no more. I have seen things which make all my writings like *straw*."—recall the straw in the Manger and the Child, Who was laid thereon. The whole life of St. Thomas Aquinas is an invitation for men to seek in the Crib and in the Eucharist, Him of Whom St. Thomas asked as a reward for his labors: "Only Thyself, Lord." May the Divine Child, on the approaching Feast of His Nativity, grant men the grace to accept that invitation and to enroll in the School of Bethlehem under the Patronage of St. Thomas Aquinas.