

WHEN THOMAS SPOKE OF GOD

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HERE once was a priest who preached such excellent sermons that his congregations were sometimes moved to applaud him. When he reprimanded them for doing this, he did it so magnificently that they would applaud his very rebuke. The priest's name was St. John Chrysostom. Centuries later, on a road approaching Paris, a Dominican Friar expressed his strong admiration for St. John in the rather startling words: "I would rather have St. John Chrysostom's treatise on the Gospel of St. Matthew than be king of the whole of France."¹ The Friar's name was, of course, St. Thomas Aquinas. It is strange how time has treated these two men. Since the close of the fifth century, men have shown their admiration for St. John the preacher by calling him "Chrysostom" or the "Golden Mouth," a title which has entirely superseded his personal name. On the other hand, the fame of St. Thomas the preacher has been so little emphasized that he might just as well have been an anchorite. And yet, the well-known fact is that St. Thomas was a very good Dominican. As such, he would remember that a good Friar Preacher is a preaching friar. He preached with his tongue as well as with his pen, and "truth was young again on the lips of Aquinas."²

But the preacher is remembered by his sermons, and his sermons, to be remembered, have to be recorded in some way. St. Thomas' sermons have come down to us only in outline form like the notes of the great Bossuet. There are a great number of these outlines, enough to fill a good-sized volume. Though they were written for various occasions and places, they show definite characteristics, common to them all in some degree. Father John Folghera, O.P., in his study, "St. Thomas and Preaching," when treating of the sermons of Aquinas, writes: "The first and most striking characteristic of his sermons is that of

¹ Vaughan, R. B., O.S.B., *St. Thomas of Aquin*, (London, 1871) I, p. 119.

² James, Rev. Father, O.S.F.C., quoted in "St. Thomas Aquinas: Seeker After Truth," *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Vol. XXXIV, (1929), 566.

being the word of God. The subject . . . is always a scriptural text, in whole or in part; the division, ordinarily, is also taken from Scripture; the subdivisions are often suggested by some biblical verses containing the idea or the word; finally, the divisions and subdivisions rest solely upon the authority of the sacred books and the holy Fathers. This does not mean that, in his oral preaching, the preacher took no other proofs, did not make an appeal to experience or to common sense; in a word, this does not mean that he did not develop his subject and animate it with all his zeal and imbue it with all his strength; but it does mean to point out, above all, the profound knowledge which St. Thomas had of Holy Scripture, by which he utilized and grouped together biblical verses with abundance and marvelous facility He likewise possessed the art of choosing a text."³

Like the discourses of Our Lord, those of St. Thomas have come down to us in very brief form, and, as in the sermons of Our Lord, so also in those of St. Thomas, there are indications that the speaker belonged to that comparatively rare group of men who not only have something to say but know how to say it. Aquinas wrapped his thought in language bright and transparent as cellophane, and he did it so well that his ideas still seem clear and fresh. Less brilliant minds have expressed themselves in a colorless blast of cold thought, but St. Thomas would even resort to a reverent pun to keep the congregation interested. For his text on the feast of St. Vincent, Martyr, he chose the words of the Apocalypse, *Vincenti dabo edere de ligno vitae* ("To him that overcometh, I will give to eat of the tree of life"). Often, too, he chose a strikingly appropriate text. An example of this is shown on the feast of St. Martin of Tours, who, the legend says, gave half his cloak to Christ appearing as a beggar. For this feast, Aquinas began with the words of the First Book of Esdras: "I rent my mantle and my coat." No wonder Father Sharp in his work, *Our Preaching*, says: "The sermon notes of St. Thomas Aquinas show that the scholastic preacher need not have been without color, feeling and imagination."⁴

These sermon outlines are, however, a poor substitute for the preacher himself. Without the preacher, they remain like a mute Zachary, the silent witness to a power that was. They

³ Folghera, Joannes D., O.P., "Saint Thomas et Le Predication," *Xenia Thomistica*, Vol. II. (1925), 588.

⁴ Sharp, Rev. J. K., *Our Preaching* (Philadelphia, 1936), p. 4.

need to be placed in the vitalizing mold of the human voice. St. Thomas, with his prodigious memory, could clothe the bare sermon structure in words, warm with the wisdom of sanctity and love of the divine. Tall, of heavy build, colorful in the Dominican black and white, he must have been an impressive sight as he preached. When preaching, he would close his eyes and raise his head in such a way as to seem to be peering into Heaven itself. Perhaps, as he did this, he thought of his own words in the *Summa*, wherein he declares that man's head, being his superior part, should be turned toward the superior world.⁵

The gentle calmness that so strongly marked his whole life came out in his preaching. There is an incident indicative of this. On one Palm Sunday, he was preaching to a crowded congregation at St. James in Paris. During his discourse, he was interrupted by an official representing the Senate of the University, who walked into the church, told the preacher to stop, and then read a document drawn up by the secular party against the Friars Preachers. The astonished congregation undoubtedly wondered what the brilliant Dominican would do. When the man had finished, Aquinas calmly began where he left off. The attack was ignored completely.⁶ Here again he showed his consistency in word and deed, for, in his *Commentary on St. John*, he writes to the effect that insult and injury should not decrease preaching but rather increase it.⁷ With him, personal defence could wait until the word of God was preached.

In St. Thomas there was none of that theatricalism which attempts to supplant depth of conviction by width of gestures. Yet he was not wanting in effectiveness. Touron relates that one Lent at St. Peter's Aquinas preached so touchingly of the sufferings of the Cross and the love of Christ that he was interrupted by the passionate crying of the people.⁸ And Frigerio tells us that the Angelic Doctor's Easter Sunday sermon on the Resurrection so filled his listeners with joy that they were scarcely able to contain their feelings.⁹ He preached from the fullness of his heart, and his heart was over-flowing. For one whole Lent at Naples, he preached on the one text: *Ave Maria gratia plena, Dominus tecum*—"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with

⁵ *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 91, a. 3, ad 3.

⁶ Vaughan, *op. cit.*, I, 431.

⁷ *Comm. in Joannem*; Tomus X. (Parmae, 1860), 459.

⁸ Vaughan, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

⁹ Frigerio, Lib. III, Cap. V., n. 3, p. 150; quoted in Vaughan, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

thee,"—the words which so often formed a prayerful gloss on the side of his manuscripts.¹⁰

His popularity as a preacher may be seen from the number of sermons he gave in various parts of Europe. The Abbé Bareille states that he preached so much in Paris, the people must have thought he had no other work.¹¹ He preached also at Cologne and Bonn, and he was a familiar figure in many parts of Italy. Tocco says that he was heard by the people as if his discourse came from God. This popularity shows that the Angelic Doctor was no mediocre preacher, for the people of his time were not inclined to patience in hearing poor speakers or ill-prepared sermons. They felt no great timidity at openly disagreeing with the preachers of that day, if they thought the occasion warranted it. If they found the sermon boring, they were quite liable to sleep or walk out of the church until the preacher had finished.¹²

While one biographer has sketched the rather delightful picture of St. Thomas using rich German to his audiences at Cologne and Bonn, sober historical fact seems to show that St. Thomas was fluent only in Latin and in his native tongue, though he very probably had a good understanding of other languages. Father Walz, O.P., in his life of St. Thomas Aquinas, indicates this, and he quotes one of Aquinas' biographers as saying: "He proposed and expounded useful things for the people in his native tongue alone, which he was unable to change on account of the continual rapture of his mind."¹³ But whatever were his limitations as to language, he strove not especially for eloquence but to bring out his thought, and by so doing, he lives up entirely to what Cardinal Newman was centuries later to call "earnest preaching."

St. Thomas, in his *Commentary on St. Matthew*, gives three rules for the good preacher.¹⁴ The first of these is stability, that the preacher may not deviate from truth. St. Thomas lived up to this rule by being a Dominican in every sense of the word. The second concerned clarity. The fame of the Angelic

¹⁰ Boll., Cap. VIII, n. 70.

¹¹ Bareille, Abbé J., *Histoire de Saint Thomas D'Aquin* (Paris, 1862), p. 159.

¹² Cf. Vaughan, *op. cit.*, I, ch. XVIII, for an interesting account of preaching and preachers in the time of Aquinas.

¹³ Walz, Angelus M., O.P., *Delineatio Vitae S. Thomae De Aquino* (Romae, 1927). Cf. Guidonis, *Vita S. Thomae Aquinatis*, Sect. XXIX.

¹⁴ *Comm. in Matt.*, Tomus X (Parmae, 1860), 56.

Doctor as a teacher is world-wide and immortal. Many probably recall the famous Chestertonian remark to the effect that Aquinas saw, in rotten eggs, only rotten eggs, and not scrambled eggs, poached eggs, or even ham and eggs. He was the philosopher of and with common sense, and suffered from no mental astigmatism. In his third rule, St. Thomas required utility, which meant seeking the praise of God alone. That he did this, is brought out vividly by that well-known event when Christ appeared to the humble friar and asked what he desired. His "Only Thyself, O Lord" has gone down as one of the great answers in history.

This side of St. Thomas should be more emphasized not only by his own brother Dominicans, but by all who love and admire Thomas the wise and holy. St. Thomas deserves to be known as a preacher. There is likelihood that when St. Thomas the preacher is better known, St. Thomas the Dominican will also be. He deserves to be known as a Dominican, and he himself was proud of being one. In his early youth, he fought to belong to that Order whose very Constitutions call preaching one of its chief *raison d'être*. And he was truly a follower of St. Dominic, not only down to his fingertips, those instruments of the miracle of a *Summa*, but also down to the tip of his angelic tongue which so gloriously echoed the Alleluias of the angels.

The following sermon outline will serve a double purpose. It will give the reader a clearer idea of what the sermons of St. Thomas were; and this, delivered on the feast of St. Dominic, will also reveal his love of the Order of Preachers and its holy founder. However, it must be emphasized that this is an outline and nothing more, not the complete sermon as the saintly friar delivered it. Just as one does not mistake the map for the country, so also one should not judge with finality the sermons of St. Thomas merely from the sermon plan. As may be seen from such phrases as "it is obvious that St. Dominic led back from death to life," he undoubtedly developed the outline, for as it stands in the plan, the sentence seems to have been written down as a reminder of a point to be expanded.

On the Feast of St. Dominic

"The sun giving light hath looked upon all things, and full of the glory of the Lord is his work." (*Eccles.*, xlii, 16).

These words can be proposed concerning St. Dominic, and two things should be noted concerning them. First, St. Dominic

is praised as "The sun giving light." Secondly, his work, that is the Order of Preachers, is commended in the phrase: "full of the glory of the Lord is his work."

Concerning the first, it should be noted that St. Dominic is called 'sun' for seven reasons. The sun, taken literally, exercises seven effects on the body, and taken figuratively, it exerts seven effects on the spirit. The physical sun generates, vivifies, nourishes, augments, perfects, cleanses and renovates. Concerning these effects, it is said on authority: "The sun is concerned with the generation of sensible bodies, with the nourishing and augmenting of their life, and with the perfecting, purging and renewing of them."

St. Dominic does these seven things spiritually:

1. He generates by preaching, as the Apostle says: "For in Christ Jesus, by the gospel, I have begotten you." (*Cor.*, iv, 15). It is obvious that St. Dominic has so generated.

2. He vitalizes by leading back to the life of grace, as St. James writes: "He who causeth a sinner to be converted from the error of his way, shall save his soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins." It is obvious that St. Dominic so led back from death to life.

3. He nourishes by maintaining in the state of grace, as in *I Thess.*, ii, 7. ". . . as if a nurse should cherish her children." St. Paul's words can be so aptly applied to St. Dominic as to make it seem that St. Paul had seen the Holy Patriarch, and had witnessed with what benignity he cherished his spiritual children.

4. He increased the stature of his followers by leading them from virtue to virtue, as in *Ephes.* iv., 15: "But doing the truth in charity, we may in all things grow up in him who is the head, even Christ."

5. He perfected by instructing in the standard of perfection: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me." (*Matt.*, xix, 21).

6. He cleansed by strictly correcting the least negligences and admonishing against all superfluities, as in *John*, xv, 2: "And every one that beareth fruit, he will purge it, that it may bring forth more fruit."

7. He renews by leading his followers to the condition of newness, to the second spring, as in *Ephes.* iv, 23:24: "And be

renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, who according to God is created."¹⁵

Almost every word of this might well be applied to St. Dominic's greatest son. And like St. Dominic, Thomas left preachers of ages to come both example and encouragement. He gave them a norm of what sermon material should be. Particularly noticeable is his admirable and striking use of Holy Scripture; even in as brief a plan as the one just given there are eight quotations from books of both Old and New Testaments. But despite its brevity there is nothing lacking of that clearness which he declared to be a necessity in preaching. St. Thomas never had to make his own the poetic plaint of Horace, "I labor to be brief and become obscure."

The ageless thought of Aquinas deserves a better fate than burial in the aging yellow pages of an unused book. His sermons are flexible molds adapted to present-day needs and preachers. Six centuries after the Saint's death, the Benedictine, Vaughan, was able to recommend the sermon notes of St. Thomas to the priests of his day,¹⁶ and one of the most recent authorities on preaching, Father Sharp, has stated that Aquinas' "sermon plans will repay study."¹⁷ The Angelic Doctor likewise showed preachers the need for a deep knowledge of the Bible and the Fathers. He showed them the necessity for being men of prayer, virtue and fruitful meditation. After all, every sermon is in some way reducible to saying: "Blessed be God," and they who can say that best are the blessed of God, who go through the world, as did St. Dominic himself, speaking "only to God or of Him."

¹⁵ Translated from Latin edition of Raulx, A.J.-B., *Sermones et Opuscula Divi Thomae Aquinatis*.

¹⁶ Vaughan, *op. cit.*, I, 447.

¹⁷ Sharp, *op. cit.*, p. 147.