

THE ANGELIC WARFARE

MATTHIAS ROBINSON, O.P.



HE TERRIFIED cry of a fleeing woman came ringing up the winding stairway of Mount San Giovanni's castle tower. At the top of the stairs, its piercing echo shrieked back and forth against the massive walls which formed the tower's prison chamber. In the dark doorway of the cell, there stood a youthful prisoner, still brandishing the flaming stick which he had snatched from the fireplace to repel the advances of a sinful woman. His own brothers had sent the woman into his prison while he was sleeping. Suddenly he turned his back upon the horrors of that stairway. He was trembling with emotion. Once more he raised aloft his burning weapon and, in two bold strokes, amidst a splash of glowing splinters, he traced a mighty sign upon the walls of that forboding place. How fittingly that sign proclaimed the nature of his victory! It was the Cross of Christ, the source of this youth's power, his strength in this encounter whose stakes could have been wagered only in another world.

The prisoner fell prostrate upon the floor, before the crude shrine which he had just erected. Beside him lay the firebrand, still burning with sufficient glow to cast a light upon the young man's features. His strong face was tense, but the freedom of his moving lips bespoke an interior calm, the quiet of a mighty heart and mind. He was at prayer with God. "My dear Jesus," he was saying, "I well know that every perfect gift, and above all others the gift of chastity, depends upon the powerful influence of Thy grace. I know that without Thee no creature can do anything. Therefore I pray Thee to protect, with Thy grace, the chastity and purity of my soul and body. And should I experience in myself a sensual impression that could sully chastity and purity, do Thou banish it from me, Oh, Thou Who art the supreme Lord of all the powers of my soul. Do this so that I may walk in Thy love and service, with a spotless heart, whilst everyday of my life I sacrifice, pure and chaste, upon the most pure altar of Thy divinity." The saintly youth had scarcely finished praying when he peacefully fell asleep.

In a vision which accompanied his slumber, two angels brought a knotted cord from heaven and fastened it about his body. They comforted him by saying, "Behold, by God's command we gird thee

with the cincture of chastity. Thy prayer has been heard, and in the future nothing will ever soil thy purity." In order to prove that all of this was not just an ordinary dream, the angels drew the cord so tightly that it awakened him with a cry of pain. The prison guards, having entered at that moment, questioned him about the cry, but the youth held his secret in his own keeping, until the very day of his death.

About thirty-six years later, March 7, 1274, the great Thomas of Aquin lay dying in the Cistercian Monastery of Fossa Nuova. He called his friend and confessor, Brother Reginald, to his bedside and revealed to him his precious secret. Thomas showed him the angelic cord, saying that he had never once removed it from his body since it had been given him by the angels. The dying saint bequeathed the cord to his companion. Reginald, of course, was neither slow to believe the good saint's story, nor unappreciative of the marvelous keep-sake which had been given to the world through him.

Saint Thomas's cord, which is still in a good state of preservation, is kept in the convent of Chieri, just outside of Turin. This very interesting relic is made of many fine white threads, but of what material the sharpest eye has been unable to detect. One end has a double loop through which the cord was drawn in girding. The part that goes around the waist is flat, somewhat wider than a flattened straw. The other part consists of two fine, four-cornered cords which are tied into fifteen knots, all alike and of peculiar make. The whole length of the girdle is not quite thirty-nine and a half inches.

One may well pause here for a moment to consider the nature of this relic—a *piece of cord*; its material still unknown, even after scientific investigation; *brought down from heaven by angels*; wrapped about the body of a fellow human being by angelic hands; *a powerful instrument of purity*.

In this very modern world of man-made machinery and scientific marvels, some people may be inclined to wonder at the simplicity of the Catholic who puts much stock in saintly relics. These very modern folk have manufactured their own remedies for almost everything. But, as for a remedy against the rebellion of a fleshly appetite which has thrown off its lawful servitude when mankind first sinned against its Maker—Oh, how quaint! They'd just as soon deny the whole of it, including heaven and hell, which are the logical completion of the doctrine. We who are Catholics, however, even before we feel the motions of our bodies rising up within us, are made to realize that the difficult problem of controlling our bodily desires is really an important fact of life. And not only Faith, but even our daily experi-

ence, tell us that we need constant helps to keep ourselves pure and spotless in the sight of God.

But what has this little relic cord to do with our particular problems? Certainly none of us expect to be tempted as Saint Thomas was, when his brothers tried to destroy his religious vocation by turning his attention to fleshly, sinful things, in the tower of Mount San Giovanni. Perhaps our temptations may not come upon us quite so openly. Yet, they can be just as deadly. Our own temptations must be repelled with violence such as Thomas used, lest they overcome us through our indifference to their dangers. Holy Mother Church, realizing this state of affairs, has taken advantage of Saint Thomas' experience to offer us a powerful weapon for strengthening our spiritual armory in our daily fight for purity of life. This splendid instrument of hope and victory is the *Confraternity of the Angelic Warfare*.

The Confraternity itself was not begun immediately after the death of Thomas. In fact, it did not come into existence until some three hundred years later. The preparatory foundation of *The Angelic Warfare*, however, may be attributed to a widespread veneration which goes back almost to the very death of Thomas. Shortly after his death, it had become the popular practice for devout persons to wear cords which had been touched to the tomb or other relics of Saint Thomas. Such cords, when properly used with prayer and devotion, were especially beneficial for preserving the purity of those who wore them. It is encouraging to notice the great number of students and teachers who eagerly embraced this holy means of spiritual combat. More than four thousand in a single day, at Louvain University, not only students, but celebrated members of the faculty, united themselves under the patronage of Saint Thomas on his Feast Day, March 7, 1649. Incidentally, it was only some sixty years before this time that the individual devotees of Saint Thomas were first organized into confraternities.

Under the official guidance of the Church, *The Angelic Warfare* grew and prospered, with great benefit to souls, especially to the souls of youth. No less than eleven Popes have turned their attention to the spread of this confraternity, in many instances, strongly urging the faithful to embrace this remarkable remedy against temptations of bodily concupiscence. Through these Popes, the Church has richly endowed the noble cause, with privileges and indulgences. Pius XI, in his encyclical letter *Studiorum Ducem*, on the six hundredth anniversary of Saint Thomas' canonization, gives this exhortation to the young of our own time: "Let them learn from so great

a master, to fly with watchful care the fascinations of evil delight, lest the eyes of their mind be dimmed to the perfect vision of truth. For Saint Thomas confirms the perfect example of his own life by positive precept: 'If anyone refrains from bodily delights in order more freely to yield himself to the contemplation of truth, this belongs to rectitude of reason.' Wherefore we are warned in Holy Writ: 'Wisdom shall not enter into a sinful soul, nor dwell in a body subject to sin.' (Wisd. 1, 4.) If Saint Thomas had not been victorious when his chastity was in peril, the Church would probably have had no Angelic Doctor. We sometimes see young men allured and ensnared by evil pleasures, despairingly forsaking holy purity and giving themselves up to the worst excesses; therefore, Venerable Brethren, it is our ardent wish that you should propagate, especially among youths destined for the priesthood, the Society of the Angelic Warfare, founded under the patronage of Saint Thomas for the preservation of this holy virtue; and regarding this Society, we confirm all the indulgences granted by Benedict XIII and our Predecessors. In order to make it more easy for anyone to be enrolled in this holy Society, we grant the faculty to members of wearing, instead of a cord, a medal bearing on one side a representation of Saint Thomas being girded by angels and on the other Our Lady, Queen of the Holy Rosary."

"If Saint Thomas had not been victorious when his chastity was in peril, the Church would probably have had no Angelic Doctor." Truly, this is a strong statement. There is no doubt, however, as to the very real connection between purity of life and great learning. Did not Our Lord Himself proclaim "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God." And what greater or more important knowledge can be enjoyed by man, than that he should "see" his God! Herein lies the secret of Saint Thomas' almost angelic insight into the exalted truths of God's own wisdom. Angelic Doctor! "To the pure all things are pure." And this also explains a secret of Saint Thomas' remarkable ability, the angelic delicacy with which he treats of purity in relation to the facts of human nature. Yes, in very truth, he is the Angelic Doctor. It need but be suggested here that the world today could use more angelic teachers, or, at least, more of this Angelic Doctor's teachings.

Certainly purity is most desirable when one sees in it the very breath of that life which is lived in the presence of God. But purity is also a beautiful virtue to be treasured, even for its own sake. This fact is experienced with the joy of drinking in the fragrant beauty of youthful features radiant with the purity of a clean soul and body. And does not one thrill at the realization of the fact that "My strength

is as the strength of ten, because my heart is pure.

A quiet, personal meditation upon these few notions will be sufficient to urge a serious consideration of one's own position in relation to *The Angelic Warfare*. If one is already a member of it, he may be thankful for God's grace which prompted one to embrace so helpful an instrument of purity. Should it be that he is not yet a member, he may consider these simple obligations which can be exchanged for invaluable assistance in one's daily struggle for eternal life: One's name is placed on the books of the Confraternity. Besides wearing a properly blessed cord or medal, one practices some particular devotion to Saint Thomas and Our Blessed Lady. One recites, daily, fifteen Hail Marys, in honor of the mysteries of the Rosary. This last obligation does not bind under sin or loss of indulgences, except the one which is attached to the recitation of those prayers.

Although Saint Thomas is more widely known as the patron of Catholic youth, and especially of our boys, *The Angelic Warfare* has been instituted for girls and older persons also. After all, purity is a virtue which everyone must have, and certainly everyone needs God's help in preserving it. Nor should anyone who has had the misfortune of falling from the path of purity at any time think himself excluded from this holy Confraternity. The very purpose of *The Angelic Warfare* is to supply one with stronger arms and with more powerful allies, so that one will not have to fight single-handed against so powerful an adversary. Organized warfare is more advantageous for the soldier than were he forced to fight this duel, alone.

The Confraternity, as it is generally conducted in schools and parishes, includes within its scope various types of social activity. Besides a regular schedule of spiritual exercises, including a Communion Sunday, the group engages in monthly meetings and study clubs. Everything possible, both human and divine, is offered to the members of the Confraternity to aid them in their united aim of fostering the angelic purity of Saint Thomas in their own lives and in the lives of others.

Note: For more complete details concerning *The Angelic Warfare*, or Sodality of Saint Thomas, as it is sometimes called, one is invited to seek information and faculties from: The Angelic Warfare, 141 E. 65th St., New York City.