

THE FIRST SPRING

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REAT and decisive movements in the progress of mankind, no matter how radical or how beneficial they may be, are never instantaneous developments but products whose roots reach back over a long period. However, once these movements are launched they bear within them a force which must be reckoned with. In quite similar a vein we can refer to the intellectual movement which St. Thomas Aquinas launched in the 13th century. It was something new, yes,—too novel for a great many, but whether it realized it or not the intellectual world was prepared for and in sore need of just what St. Thomas had to offer it. The work of his genius was to strain out the foreign accretions from the elixir of truth and establish a synthesis which would be a permanent and clear framework and a sure guide for Christian thought.

St. Thomas gave to his time the intellectual panacea that it needed—not a mere curative of old ills but a prescription for a new life and the promise of a brilliant future. When he gave up his angelic soul to his Maker St. Thomas bequeathed to his brethren the fruit of his life's labors—his doctrine, since called Thomism.

Looking back over the progress of Thomistic thought we can see that it suffered severely from birth pangs and growing pains. It was not until several years after the death of Thomas that the more violent attacks and demonstrations against his school ceased. It is difficult for us to realize the excitement which things philosophical and theological aroused in the Middle Ages. Perhaps it is due to the indifference and relativism of our modern age which seems to have few principles worth getting excited about.

By reason of his being a Mendicant Friar and also a lecturer at the University of Paris, St. Thomas stepped into a situation toward the middle of the 13th century which was not of his own choosing. The great universities of those days were veritable cities in themselves. Serious difficulties between themselves and the local communities were common. This time difficulties had arisen between some students at Paris and civic authorities and one student had been killed. To bring pressure on the city the university closed its schools. Since the altercation was no business of the Orders, especially the Dominicans and the Franciscans, they continued to give lectures in their schools. This incensed the university doctors who had been

looking on them with no friendly eye anyway. They established the requirement that no one could be admitted to the doctorate of theology unless he first swore to obey all the statutes including the one which suspended all lectures during the university-civic disputes. Such was the *casus belli*—and it directly affected St. Thomas in two ways. He had come to Paris principally with a view to taking the doctorate and when in time he was presented for the degree, it was denied him despite the express order of the Pope that he be admitted. On the other hand, his lectures were very popular and large groups of students came to hear him. This served to focus the ill-will of the Masters upon him. The prolongation of the impasse raised feelings which were already running very high. The Mendicants suffered many an unfortunate episode. Humbert of Romans, the fifth Master General, describes the critical state of affairs in his letter to the Prior and Brethren of the convent at Orleans, about the first of April, 1256.

“ . . . Most of the Masters of Theology at Paris being jealous of the number of our doctors, the multitudes of our scholars, and the liking for our doctrine, some time ago in a secret assembly published certain iniquitous statutes, which they have no right to establish, to our enormous prejudice and that of all religious, to the contempt of the Church of Paris, to the dangerous and evident detriment of souls and of theological study. . . . Indeed, after many defamations both of our learning and our public life which they brought to the ears of their hearers in public sermons, they have written against us letters of exceeding length, falsity and infamy, to all the prelates of the world, in which, by blackening the fame of the Order, they have rendered us in no slight way odious to them. . . . Moreover, the Supreme Pontiff, considering as frivolous and inane the aforesaid appeal (that of the University Senate against admitting the Mendicants), under the demand of justice, rose against them with more solemn commands as excommunicates and public despisers of the Apostolic command. Before these mandates were brought out in the public senate, the aforementioned Masters of theology and the arts, their presumptuous consciences being troubled, discontinued their lectures entirely, so that with the confusion of the crowd, the fury and the scandal incited against us, we might not be permitted to publish the Apostolic mandate. . . . Not content with impious commands (by which they have already forbidden to all scholars that anyone for any cause come to our house, that they receive in their own houses us who come to them, that anyone dare to confess his sins to anyone of us, that they presume to give us any alms, that anyone choose his place of burial with us, that anyone attend our preaching or sermons, all of

which, careless of their own salvation, they adhere to and observe), they have arrived at so great a depth of rage and fury that, everywhere rushing upon us with insulting cries, they do not permit the Brethren to pass through the city, while from all quarters, from houses and hospices both of the clergy and the laity, people of both sexes and all ages hasten to the spectacle and join in the clamor. There you would hear the tumult of shouting, the barking of dogs, the roaring of bears, the hissing of serpents, and the open dishonor of every kind of shame. There you would see on every side attacks, clashes, insults. . . . Even into our own house arrows are shot by the hand of an archer. We have no security anywhere at any time. On account of this the Lord King has our house continually guarded day and night by an armed band of archers just as a besieged fortress. And, what troubles us more deeply, these Masters of theology reproach, tear and gnaw to piece the faith, life and reputation of poor religious before all the people, the barons, the prelates, even before the King. They hurl against the defenders of the faith, the preachers of the truth and those who fight for our belief, and against some consecrated by the spilling of their own blood, the crime of infidelity. They try to show by examples that our doctrine is erroneous and with unflinching design and resolute appearance they publicly accuse a company renowned for its great purity of shameful deeds, before all and everywhere. We are called the false brethren of whom the Apostle speaks, forerunners of the future Antichrist and subverters of the faith in the last persecution.

"With teaching authority they dogmatize that there is nothing in common with the ministry of the Order of Preachers and that of any other religious group. Indeed, these very doctors of theology preach to the people in chapels that we usurp unto ourselves the office of preaching; they ask from the Lord King that a provincial council be convoked against us, lying with their sacrilegious mouths that they are prepared to prove the aforesaid of us. And although these calumnies are heaped on all religious, yet we alone stand firm for the truth against the enemy of truth, to whom, that the truth of the Gospel may remain among us, we have not yielded up till now, nor do we yield. . . . We know for certain from the mouths of their leaders or from their express actions, their perverse intention and purpose in persecuting us. Full of the spirit of ambition, envious of the honors of others, they purpose that no religious can teach publicly or even preach. They have rendered religious so contemptible in order that they may not be believed elsewhere, having already succeeded in bringing this about in Paris, and unless God remedies the situation, it seems

that they will bring this about every place in France. And if most of them restrain their hands from corporal injuries, few or none hold their tongue from uttering scornful words and reproaches."¹

While St. Thomas was preaching one Sunday a University official strode in and, interrupting the proceedings, read before all present a letter from the University doctors in which the Friars and particularly St. Thomas were bitterly reviled. St. Thomas listened till the end, then simply continued his discourse from the point at which he had been interrupted. The gauntlet was finally thrown down with the publication of the book *The Perils of the Last Times* by which William of St. Amour, a professor at the University, attacked the very *raison d'être* of the Mendicant Orders. With St. Bonaventure and others, Thomas was called before the Pope at Anagni to defend the Orders and it was his masterful *Apology for the Religious Orders* which forever settled the dispute. Although St. Thomas' position among the men of thought of his day and the fame of his sublime teaching were now firmly established and steadily grew, it took *eleven* Bulls to secure the doctorate for him at Paris and he spent a great deal of the remainder of his life until his death in 1274 in answering various foes of the truth. All Europe felt the loss at his passing. So numerous and important had his disciples at Paris become that the University petitioned for his body. This letter is interesting and worth reprinting in an English version.

"To the venerable Fathers in Christ, the Master General and Provincials of the Order of Friars Preachers and to all the Brethren assembled in general chapter at Lyons, from the Rector of the University of Paris, the proctors and the other masters at Paris now teaching in the arts, health in Him Who wholesomely disposes all things and wisely provides for the whole universe.

"With broken cry we tearfully lament the general loss of the whole Church and the manifest desolation of the school of Paris and in these days together we choose, not unjustly, to weep. Alas, who can aid us to utter this lament of Jeremias which above the ordinary way lifts the mind out of itself and brings with it an immeasurable astonishment, pierces to the depths of our souls and penetrates as it were fatally our innermost heart? We say what we are scarcely able to express: love withholds us, yet sorrow and vehement anguish compell us to say that we know by the common report and certain rumor of many that the venerable doctor, Brother Thomas of Aquin, has

¹ Translated from Reichert, B. M., O.P., *Litterae Encyclicae Magistrorum Generalium O.P.* (Rome, 1900), p. 31 sq.

been called from this world. Who can realize that Divine Providence has allowed the morning star preeminent in the world, the enlightener of our time, even, to speak truly, the greater light that ruled the day, to withdraw its rays? Indeed, we are not unreasonable in concluding that the sun has recalled its brightness and has undergone a dark and unexpected eclipse when a ray of such splendor is taken from the whole Church. And although we are not unmindful that the Author of nature had by a special privilege vouchsafed him to the world for a time, nevertheless, if we should wish to lean upon the authority of the ancient philosophers, nature seemed to have specially set him here to elucidate its obscurities. But why should we tarry now with such words to no avail? Although, alas, we could not obtain him from your assemblage at the celebration of your general chapter at Florence despite our earnestly made petition, we now in memory of so great a cleric, so great a father, so great a doctor, being not ungrateful but having, rather, a devoted affection, humbly ask as a most special favor for the bones of him now dead whom we could not have again alive, since it is entirely unbecoming and unworthy that another nation or another place than the city of Paris, the most noble of all schools, which first educated, nourished and fostered him, and afterwards from him drew nourishment and ineffable food, should have and possess his bones interred. If indeed the Church justly honors the bones and remains of the Saints, it seems to us not without reason good and holy that the body of so great a doctor be kept in perpetual honor, so that the lasting memory of his burial among us may fix in the hearts of our own successors without end him whose fame is perpetuated with us by his writings. For the rest, hoping that you will effectually subscribe to our wishes in this devoted petition, we humbly beseech that, since we believe that certain writings pertaining to philosophy were begun by him at Paris, which he left unfinished at his departure and which he completed at the place where he had been transferred, your benevolence will see to it that they are shortly communicated to us, and especially those on the book of Simplicius, on the book *De caelo et mundo*, also the exposition of the *Timaeus* of Plato and the book *De aquarum conductibus et ingeniis exigendis*; which by a special promise he made mention of sending to us. If likewise he there composed anything pertaining to Logic, just as when he left us we humbly sought from him, may your kindness communicate any such to our college. As your discretion knows better than we, in this wretched age we are exposed to many dangers, and so we fraternally implore with devout petition that in this your chapter by a special affection you may sustain us by the support of your prayers.

"Given at Paris in the year of Our Lord 1274, Wednesday before the Finding of the Holy Cross."²

Many years were still to pass before all resistance and antagonism to St. Thomas' system of thought were disarmed. The authoritative force which succeeded in this was a series of wise Pontiffs who appreciated the treasure which had been committed to the Church and sought to bind it permanently to her service. "From the very beginning it was the universal Church, in the person of the Pope, who recognized Thomas for its Doctor: it is the papacy, which discerning in him the common spirit of all tradition, both human and divine, the greatest and most assiduous force of preservation of everything in the past which is superior to time—but also the movement of life and the most active power of assimilating and safeguarding everything in the future which is worth more than the moment—foreseeing the descent of night, which divides, and resolving to oppose thereto the great assembly in the mind of all the things of creation under the accorded light of reason and faith, sided with Thomas Aquinas against the routine narrow-minded of the schools and a hidebound conservatism destined immediately to fall into dissolution."³ John XXII in canonizing St. Thomas (1323) declared: "Thomas alone has illuminated the Church more than all the other doctors together. His philosophy can have proceeded only from some miraculous action of God." This was the first spring of Thomism.

It was a pope again who was the harbinger of the second spring of Thomistic thought—Leo XIII. He sought a remedy for the evils besetting modern times and found it in St. Thomas. He made strenuous efforts throughout his long reign to leaven Catholic thought with the wisdom of the Angelic Doctor, purged of the grime of oblivion and the accretions of false interpretations. His successors faithfully followed his lead.

Signs that these efforts are bearing fruit especially noticeable in recent years. Still, there are two possibilities which should be considered. A great deal of interest and activity along Thomistic lines has been exhibited in non-Catholic circles. This is a good omen, indeed. But it is also a challenge and should be a spur to Catholics. Far be it that the role of the University of Paris be reversed and, as it were, Catholics who have the bones of St. Thomas will have to go elsewhere for his heritage. On the other hand, as the old scholasticism gradually fell into disrepute because it "proceeded to squander

² *op cit.*, p. 104 sq.

³ Maritain, J., *The Angelic Doctor* (New York, 1931), p. 66.

its strength in futile rivalries and decadent systems," the Thomistic renaissance can be enervated by those who professing to follow St. Thomas as their guide, water down his doctrine and change his teaching to fit certain exigencies. The popes have placed the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas in the forefront among the means for combating modern materialism. Just as in the 13th century, the fight for truth today is an uphill battle against difficult and subtle enemies. Catholics who wish to bring a Christian cosmos out of a contemporary pagan chaos are assured of success by the popes themselves in the measure in which they adhere to the Common Doctor of the Church.