

## THE GOD WE KNOW

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HE turmoil in the hearts of men and a war among nations in the world today bear testimony to the truth that the moral life of man is disordered. Society is greatly in need of a force which can unify its members and bring order out of chaos. This force can be God alone.

But men today do not know God because they have turned their backs upon the light of eternal truth. They have come to think they are the lords of the world, who may do as they will. Thinking everything they survey is under their dominion and impressed with their own grandeur and power, they have refused to learn of God and His ways. As a result of such hapless thinking, One Who can help man in his difficulties is unknown. It was this state of affairs which aroused the indignation of St. Paul in his missionary labors among the Areopagites. "Standing in the midst of the Areopagus in Athens, Paul exclaimed: Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious. For passing by, and seeing your idols, I found an altar also, on which was written: 'To the unknown God.'"<sup>1</sup>

The error of modern agnostics is like the blind folly of the Areopagites. Their intellectual vision is not raised to the lofty heights of reason, but is focussed upon the depths of the earth alone. Blinded by the dust of materialistic concepts, their God is an "unknown God." However, the Creator of the Universe is above the material; He is spiritual. And unless man uses his reason, he cannot know God, for this noble faculty was given to man precisely to bring him to God.

We have rational certainty not only that God exists but also that He can be known, not perfectly, of course, but at least to some degree here on earth. It is to St. Thomas that we turn for a knowledge of God. For great Saint that the Angelic Doctor was, his life was dedicated to a study of the God we know. His immortal *Summa Theologica* is a complete synthesis of doctrine concerning God both as He is in Himself and as He is the principle and end of creatures.

In his study of God, St. Thomas did not disregard the material things of this created universe. Rather he recognized them as effects of the Creator. Certainly the very notion of a Supreme Being implies a superiority over the things about us. Creation is the effect of

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 17: 22-23.

the Creator as a work of art is the accomplishment of the artist. The sun, moon, stars, earth and sky, hills and valleys, woods and plains, seas and rivers manifest the omnipotent being of God. The order, unity of design, and perpetual renovation of all forms of life reveal Him as the architect of the universe. From a world which is essentially composite and subject to change we reason to an infinitely Superior Being who is absolutely simple, perfect, infinite, eternal, unique, and governing all things by His Providence.

Before we consider St. Thomas' brilliant exposition of each attribute in God's nature, it seems appropriate to give the teaching of the Church concerning the knowledge of God. The Church states emphatically that God's existence and His nature can be known by the natural light of reason. The Vatican Council has declared: "The Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church believes and confesses that there is one true and living God, Creator and Lord of Heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite in intellect, in will, and in every perfection; who, being one, sole, absolutely simple and immutable spiritual substance, is declared to be as really and essentially distinct from the world, of supreme beatitude in and by Himself, and ineffably exalted above all things which, beside Himself, exist and are conceivable." St. Thomas' teaching about the Creator of the Universe is in absolute accord with this decree of the Vatican Council. In fact, in point of time, one might dare to say the Vatican Council is in perfect agreement with the teaching of St. Thomas.

The first of the several attributes of God which are discussed by the Angelic Doctor is simplicity.<sup>2</sup> God is pure act, hence simple. He is pure actuality; man, on the other hand, is rich in potentialities and complex. In commenting on this perfection in God, Father Walter Farrell, O.P., has very clearly explained it in these words: "The being who has no potentialities, but only pure actuality, who is the source of all potentiality, alone escapes the stigma of imperfection and is free of the basic element of complexity. This being is utterly, completely simple; this is the being who receives nothing but gives all things. The simplicity we so admire and respect in created things, the simplicity that smacks of genius, is not really simplicity at all but the appearance of simplicity; men have succeeded in giving to rich complexity a smooth unity by a perfect coordination to a single end and we salute the faint image of divinity thus produced."<sup>3</sup>

When we bear in mind that God is not a body but a spirit, His simplicity seems logical. The Creator is not to be thought of in terms

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<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theol.* I, 2, 3.

<sup>3</sup> "Companion to the *Summa*," Vol. I, p. 58, 59.

of material composition. He is not like "gold, or stone, the graving of art, and the device of man,"<sup>4</sup> as St. Paul told the Areopagites. God is a spirit, a "pure spirit," and exists in material things through His power. He is above all things through the excellence of His own nature, but He is in all things as causing the being of all things—"in Him we live, move and are."<sup>5</sup> Truly, without the power of a Superior Being there would not be the orderly coming into being and ceasing to be of things in the material universe. The succession of created things is unending. As Cardinal Newman has so eloquently expressed it: "It (the material world) is like an image on the waters, which is ever the same, though the waters ever flow. Change upon change—yet one change cries out to another, like the alternate Seraphim, in praise and in glory of their Maker."<sup>6</sup>

A second note which is attributed to God in the Summa is perfection and goodness.<sup>7</sup> The ancient philosophers considered God as a material principle. But St. Thomas refutes this opinion, maintaining that inasmuch as matter denotes imperfection, this is to suppose that the Creator is imperfect. The less material a thing is, the higher it is in the degree or scale of perfection. Thus the human soul, being immaterial and spiritual, is more perfect than the body; angels have greater perfection than human beings because they are spirits. Since God in His existence is higher than angels and is a Supreme Being, He has the most sublime perfection and consequently the greatest goodness. The infinite goodness of God follows. For God is good inasmuch as all the desirable perfections we observe about us flow from Him as the first effective Cause who is all-perfect. All the excellent attributes of creatures exist in the Creator in a most excellent manner—as the summation of goodness.

"God is perfect and infinite,"<sup>8</sup> says St. Thomas. Holy Mother Church has defined this as a doctrine of Faith. The philosophers of ancient times attributed infinity to the first principle of creation, logically reasoning that things flow to infinity from the first principle. But some reasoned falsely about the nature of the first principle, holding that it was material, and consequently maintained that to the first principle belonged infinite materiality. They postulated some infinite body as the first principle of all things. But this is the same as saying that what is finite, namely corporeal matter, is at the same time infinite. We can immediately see the contradiction. Infinity requires

<sup>4</sup> Acts 17: 29.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 17: 28.

<sup>6</sup> Newman, J. H., *The Second Spring*.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theol.* I, q. 45.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theol.* I, q. 7.

immateriality, because matter signifies limitation. Since God is absolutely immaterial, existing independently and neither limited nor contained in anything, it follows that He is infinite in His perfection.

And what kind of God would it be who shook like a "reed in the wind" of time? If God is infinitely perfect, He is not subject to change.<sup>9</sup> Change implies composition and the potentiality to be something else. However since God is always the same in His perfection He cannot be anything than what He is. In the words of the Vatican Council, which we have quoted, God is an "immutable spiritual substance." We don't have to wonder when we pray, "Is God in a good mood?" He is the divine unchangeable. We can always count on Him being the same. It is our own moods we can't trust.

Furthermore, God is eternal.<sup>10</sup> "In the beginning God created heaven, and earth"<sup>11</sup> are the opening words of the Book of Genesis. While the world had a beginning, God is without beginning and end. God's existence is of such a nature to be perpetual. We have a tendency to think of eternity in terms of arithmetic. We consider adding more and more to time will give us eternity. God's eternity is not that. It is all at once—lasting forever, it is true, but unchangeable. God is without succession. He is not only eternal, but He is His own eternity, because nothing else is its own duration since it is not its own being. Thus, the Fourth Lateran Council stated as an article of Faith that "the one true God is alone eternal."

"Every kingdom divided against itself shall be made desolate: and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand."<sup>12</sup> If there were many gods, one would be divided against the other, inasmuch as one would have what another did not. The unity of God has also received the positive affirmation of the Church. The third session of the Vatican Council has defined that "the Holy Church believes and confesses that there is one true God." This Council stated further: "If anybody shall deny that there is one true Lord and God, let him be anathema." In the Book of Deuteronomy are these words: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God."<sup>13</sup> The unity of God is proved by reason, according to St. Thomas,<sup>14</sup> from three things: His simplicity, the infinity of His perfection and the unity of the world. The simplicity of God indicates that there is only one God and not many gods, as the superstitious Areopagites held. God Himself is His own nature and thus He is unique. He is not the created but the Creator, the only Creator. Again, if there were many gods,

<sup>9</sup> *Summa Theol.* I, q. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theol.* I, 2, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1: 1.

<sup>12</sup> S. Matthew 12: 25

<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 6: 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Summa Theol.* I, 2, 11.

there would not be One who would be infinitely perfect. But we know that God is infinite in His perfection. Finally, the fact there is unity in the world could come about only through the ordination of One Substantial Being. Many are not the cause of real substantial unity but only accidental unity. Thus it is necessary that there be one substantial being who is God.

If we were to conceive God as the Creator of the universe who abandoned it to its own resources, we would overlook His Supreme role as its Governor. Divine Providence is one of God's great attributes.<sup>15</sup> As the First Cause of all things, the Omnipotent Creator exists in all things by His power. Describing the act of creation, the Inspired Writer relates: "And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters."<sup>16</sup> Not only is the "spirit of God" in all things, but, according to the plan in the mind of the Divine Architect, it "moves" them to their proper end. In His infinite intelligence and will, God directs the intimate life of every creature. All things that are, act "in praise and glory of their Maker."

And so we have reasoned to a true concept of God. Our knowledge of Him is analogical, that is, from a study of God's effects we have learned something of His nature. How God's perfections exist in Him, we do not know, since He is incomprehensible. To know His nature more completely pertains to the life to come, where "in His own light we shall see light." The vision of God in all His magnificent attributes as they gloriously exist in Him, is the eternal joy of the blessed in Heaven. Here on earth, though our vision be darkened, we can know Him inasmuch as His created effects are images of His perfection and glory.

The God we know is not an "unknown God." Unless the modern skeptic uses his reason, he cannot be blessed with a knowledge of God. The Omnipotent Being, in His Divine Providence, can help man today. But man must turn to Him for guidance by striving to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him in this life and in life everlasting. Men today should hearken to the exhortation of the Psalmist to worship the God we know: "Come, let us praise the Lord with joy; let us joyfully sing to God our saviour. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving; and make a joyful noise to him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Summa Theol.* I, q. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 1: 2.

<sup>17</sup> Psalms 94, 1: 3.