



"WELL HAST THOU WRITTEN OF ME, THOMAS."

DOMINICANA

Vol. XXXI

MARCH, 1946

No. 1

BEGINNER'S SAINT

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EGINNINGS are always difficult. No one knows this better than the one who has achieved success, for he knows intimately every detail of the obstacle that had to be overcome. The cup-winning golfer knows much more about heart-breaks than does the duffer who is valiantly trying to keep the ball out of the rough, for he has undergone the tedious business of gaining the co-ordination necessary for the perfection of the game. Yet, among those who have gained eminence in any field, it is rare that we find one unselfish enough, disinterested enough to have any great concern with the problems of the beginner. Men too often become enamored of the goal and forget the tortuous steps that led to it.

God's saints are different. They have gained the greatest victory, and yet they look upon all beginners with love, for it is their desire that those upon earth will one day gain the same victory. Every saint in heaven is interested in beginners, and none more so than Saint Thomas Aquinas. History and hagiography have not dealt too kindly with this beloved Doctor of the Church, because they have built for him an ivory tower, a tower that common folk feel is "out of bounds" for them. The ordinary Catholic admires Saint Thomas but is afraid to approach him because he lacks the wedding garment—the academic gown.

One sure key to an appreciation of Saint Thomas is the fact that he was, while in this life, a Dominican friar. Throughout the whole of his life he devotedly and faithfully lived the Dominican way as planned by his Father, Saint Dominic; and when he was urged at

various times to accept ecclesiastical honors he refused, for he was at heart a simple friar. He won his sanctity by living the life of virtue according to the rule of Dominic, and hence if we examine this rule, this way of life, we can certainly find proof that Saint Thomas must have loved beginners.

ST. DOMINIC'S PLAN FOR HIS ORDER

The Founder of the Friar Preachers, Saint Dominic, was without a doubt a religious innovator. He was a pioneer in a new form of religious life that had for its object not only the sanctification of its own members, but also the sanctification of all men. No longer were the members of this new society to be confined to one monastery, or to one abbey; the Dominican friars were to have the whole world for their cloister. Theirs was to be a life of prayer the same as the monks; but for them study, the study of sacred truths was to take the place of manual labor. The mortification of physical labor was to be replaced by that higher mortification of the mind that comes from assiduous study. This was the oblation that Dominic planned for his new Order, an oblation of prayer and study that was to ascend to heaven, a token of service and subjugation to God.

The fruits of this double labor of prayer and study were to be, according to Dominic's plan, the means toward the salvation of men. He knew that men were living adrift from God not only because of ill-will, but from what is worse, ignorance. He knew that men were deceived into thinking that they were worshipping the true God, and he dedicated his Order to the conquest of this error. Never for a moment was it Saint Dominic's intention to make his Order a mere society of scholars who were to pursue their studies just for the sake of scholarship. Scholarship and learning were essential but only as means, means of bringing souls back to Christ. His friars were to live the lives of saintly scholars, but were to pass along to others the fruits of their labors through teaching and preaching. This apostolate was to be as universal as the Church itself, not confined to any nation, nor to any class, but to all men, everywhere.

THOMAS, WORTHY SON OF DOMINIC

This is the life that Saint Dominic inaugurated for his friars; this is the life that was developed and expanded by his successors; and this is the life that Saint Thomas, as Brother Thomas of Aquino, lived in the Dominican convents of Italy, Germany, and France. That he lived the life well and to its perfection is attested to by his being

enrolled in the canon of the Saints. If Thomas had deflected from the course or compromised with the life as planned by St. Dominic, he would have never become the saint even though he wore the habit of the Friar Preacher. He lived his profession, the profession to become a worthy son of Dominic.

As a Dominican who perfectly lived the life planned by his father, Saint Thomas was of necessity interested in all men. This interest could not be that disinterested concern of the savant; it was a vital, consuming interest that saw in every man, whether rich or poor, learned or unlettered, a member of the mystical body of Christ and a future citizen of the heavenly city. He saw the sinfulness, the ignorance in men and determined to drive that sinfulness and ignorance away with the truth. He would set men on the path to virtue. Thomas was interested in the beginners, for the beginners needed direction to God.

In declaring Saint Thomas to be the Angelic Doctor Pope Pius V acknowledged not only that his purity of life was comparable to that of the angels, but that his greatness of intellect approached that brilliance possessed by the angelic hosts themselves. Angelic Doctor! Throughout the whole of Christendom this is the affectionate title by which Thomas is known; but unfortunately, its very loftiness tends to scare away the ordinary folk. They feel that Saint Thomas is reserved only for those who are scholars themselves; only for those who are conversant with the philosophical and theological works of the master theologian of all time.

True enough, the Popes have always fostered devotion to Saint Thomas among those who are engaged in ecclesiastical studies; but this must not be interpreted as an exclusivism, a denial to the great bulk of the faithful of the right to feel that in Saint Thomas they have a patron and champion. The sanctity of the Angelic Doctor is as universal as the Church itself, as universal as was his Dominican life which was as far-flung as the boundaries of the earth.

While on this earth Brother Thomas fulfilled perfectly the will of his religious superiors, and it was their wish that he would devote his time and talents to the teaching of the sacred sciences. He saw in this command the will of God and satisfied this obligation to the full, for he had a clear and deep realization of the importance of this apostolic work. He knew that by clearly and forcefully imparting the truth to others he would be helping his beloved beginners, for his students by their priestly ministrations would be winning souls for Christ.

MILK FOR THE LITTLE ONES

The greatest literary monument that we have from the pen of the Angelic Doctor is the *Summa Theologica*, a work that embraces the orderly exposition of the whole of theological science. This work was begun eight years before death overtook the Troubador of Truth and represents the mature, the fruitful results of a life dedicated to the discovery of the answer to the question: "What is God?" Like all great works the *Summa* contains a Prologue—a prologue that could come only from the pen of a great man who was sincerely interested in his fellows, for it is dedicated to the beginner.

"Since the doctor of Catholic truth ought not only instruct the proficient but also to teach beginners as Saint Paul says, "As unto little ones in Christ I give you milk to drink, not meat" (I Cor. 3, 1); it is our intention in this work to treat of the things which belong to the Christian religion in such a way as befits the instruction of beginners."

This was the fruit of a lifetime, a work that was to be milk for the little ones. Saint Thomas goes on in the Prologue to explain that he will seek to avoid those errors which he had observed in other works, so that nothing would hamper the assimilation of truth by the beginners. Truth, to Thomas's mind, was too precious a commodity to have spoiled by improper handling; hence, he would proceed confident in the help of God, to elucidate the matter in the manner best calculated to aid the beginner. The Angelic Doctor with angelic love was laboring for the beginner.

A LETTER TO BROTHER JOHN

But Thomas was not content to merely help others from the rostrum of the lecture room; he went right out to meet the ordinary people. Countless times he preached and the chroniclers tell us that not infrequently he moved his audience to tears of repentance by his eloquent simplicity. Yet, there was still another medium by which he helped the little ones; it was the personal letter. There is extant a very short letter that the great Doctor wrote to a now unknown Brother John who had requested advice as to the best way to proceed in his studies as a Dominican student-brother. It is not difficult to imagine that the request came to Saint Thomas while he was busily engaged in other work, for the life that Thomas led was one crammed-full of apostolic activity and any request, no matter how trifling, would place an additional burden upon him. Yet, Brother John was a beginner who needed direction, and could Master Thomas whose whole life was dedicated to the helping of beginners refuse to answer him? Could he who spent his whole life seeking the truth so that others

might be the beneficiaries, refuse to help a fellow friar, a son of their common father, Saint Dominic?

The following excerpt shows clearly that the answering of this request was completely in accord with the heart and mind of Thomas.

Brother John, most dear to me in Christ: Since you have asked me how one should set about to aquire the treasure of knowledge, this is my advice to you concerning it: namely, that you should choose to enter, not straight-way into the ocean, but by way of the little streams; for difficult things ought to be reached by way of easy ones.*

The very salutation shows how deeply interested was the great Doctor in the problem of Brother John. "Most dear to me in Christ"—here was a little one, a beginner who needed advice, and regardless of his position as the most distinguished theologian of his time, Saint Thomas would not consider the problem trifling.

After giving the young Brother some very simple and practical advice on the best way in which to proceed, Thomas in the closing paragraph reminds Brother John of the greatness of their father:

Follow in the footsteps of that Blessed Dominic, who while he yet had life for his fellow-traveller, brought forth and nourished foliage, blossom, fruit—fruit both serviceable and astonishing—in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts. If you shall have followed these steps, you will be able to attain to whatsoever you have a mind. Fare you well!*

It was not sufficient according to the mind of Saint Thomas that the young Brother become proficient merely in the art of study, but that he follow in the footsteps of his father. His mind was to become one with that of Dominic, a mind dedicated to the service of God in the salvation of souls. Thomas from the heights recognized clearly the danger that constantly besets the student, the danger of becoming learned only for the sake of learning. His love for the beginner was too great to allow this to happen to Brother John.

Youngsters love to taunt one another in their games with a gleefully shouted: "Beginner's Luck!" There is such a thing as "beginner's luck," and we who are striving for the goal of sanctity have it; for we have a very special patron who loves beginners—Saint Thomas Aquinas. Pray that the little ones, the beginners—we are all beginners—will recognize the ivory tower for what it really is—a mirage. Saint Thomas, the Dominican friar, cannot live in an ivory tower, for the whole world is his cloister.

* Translation from: "De Modo Studendi" Latin text with Translation and Exposition by Victor White, O.P. *Blackfriars* Vol. I, No. 10 (1944).