

BLESSED HUMBERT ON STUDY

Translated by DOMINIC ROVER, O.P.

PART I



LET US remember that although it is expedient for all religious to do a great deal of reading, it is nevertheless more incumbent upon the Friars Preachers, and this on account of the manifold usefulness which their Order has attained through study.

First, there is the special prerogative they have over other Orders. For although every type of religious life is good, and sacred study is a good, yet one added to the other makes for a greater good, because, according to the Philosopher in the book *De eligendis*, two goods are greater than one. Therefore just as the Cherubim in whom God not only rests but shines forth, because they signify the plenitude of knowledge, are higher than the Thrones in whom God rests; so, likewise, an Order gifted with science is justly preferred to those in which we find sanctity alone, which is the dwelling-place of God. And this prerogative is conferred by science built up through study. "Take hold on her," that is, science "and she shall exalt thee." (Prov. 4, 8)

Another reason is the acquisition of noble souls. For many good and great persons would never have come to the Order save for the advantages of study there; and many who were lowly when they came have become great through study. And these are the very persons from whom the glorious temple of God has been built, just as Solomon constructed the temple of noble materials—gold, silver, the cedars of Lebanon and such. And therefore those who wish to build a good religious Order must take great pains in this matter, according to the example of the primitive Church, as we read in the Apostle, "And he gave some apostles, and some prophets, and other some evangelists, and other some pastors and doctors . . . for the edifying of the body of Christ." (Eph. 4, 11) Behold what excellent material was used here!

Another reason is the respect of the world, because people in the world usually have more respect for the learned, and show them

greater honor than they manifest towards the unlearned. "For her sake," namely because of wisdom, "I shall have glory among the multitude, and honor with the ancients." (Wisdom 8, 10)

Another reason is fruitfulness among souls, because more can be accomplished through the wise than through the simple, even though the latter be holy. Jerome: "A holy rusticity is of advantage only to oneself: but not so the justice of the learned; for that will instruct many unto justice." Wherefore the Apostle says: "Attend unto reading and to exhortation," (I Tim. 4, 13) because he who is first a conch-shell in study can afterwards be a channel for others in exhortation.

Another reason is the price of our sustenance, for more is due to one sowing spiritual things than to one remaining idly at home. According to the Apostle, "If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great matter if we reap your carnal things?" And later on: "So also the Lord ordained that they who preach the Gospel should live by the Gospel." (I Cor. 9, 11; 9, 14)

Another reason is the victory over temptations. For wisdom is of more value in this conquest than is strength; and for that reason many succumb to different kinds of sins in their war with the devil on account of a defect of wisdom, whereas the wise do not fall. "No evil can overcome wisdom." (Wisdom 7, 30)

Another reason is the formation of the interior man. For rules and ordinances handed down by men form the exterior man in religion in regard to his manner of life; but Sacred Scripture does a much greater thing. It forms the interior man in the virtues. "And if a man love justice, her labors," that is, the labors of wisdom which a man sustains in studying, "have great virtues. For she teacheth temperance and prudence and justice and fortitude, which are such things as men can have nothing more profitable in life." (Wisdom 8, 7) And also: "All Scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach . . . that the man of God may be perfect, furnished to every good work." (II Tim. 3, 16)

Another reason is the avoidance of those errors which many souls, even though inculpably, incur on account of defective knowledge, as in simony and many other things which are the occasions of error. "They have not known nor understood: they walk on in darkness," (Ps. 81, 5) not knowing where they are going. This does not happen to those who know Scripture; they know the way. "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my paths." (Ps. 118, 105)

Another reason is the support of weakness. For many weak persons fall because they do not have a good foundation. Study comes

to the support of such infirmity. Whence Plato says: "Letters are to the infirm soul what the staff is to the infirm body."

Another reason is that it strengthens us in our labors. For many fail in their work because of insufficient food. But sacred study, in which we digest the bread of the word of God, gives us strength: "that bread may strengthen man's heart." (Ps. 103, 15)

Another reason is the occasion for progress in virtue. Insofar as a man grows in charity, he grows in all good. But knowledge of God, which increases more and more through study, makes us grow in His love. Whence Augustine says: "As you know, so will you love." Therefore sacred study gives us opportunity for growing perfect in every good.

Is there anyone who understands the state of life of the Friars Preachers who does not know that these advantages accrue to them and have accrued to them from study? That is why those who love the Order are accustomed to show great zeal in promoting study therein.

CONCERNING THE STUDY OF PHILOSOPHY

Sometimes the question is asked whether the brethren ought to concern themselves with philosophical works and studies.

I reply: some brothers are entirely incapable of making progress in these studies; some are capable of making a certain amount of progress, but not much; while there are still others who show such aptitude for them that great proficiency can be hoped for, and thus great profit in the study of the Scriptures. The first group ought not to be allowed to study philosophy at all; the second group should be allowed some such knowledge, but with discretion, and rarely; but the third should be given full rein in pursuing studies of this sort. Just as to allow such studies indiscriminately to all is wrong, so, on the other hand, to refuse them entirely is a prompting of the evil spirit. "Now there was no smith to be found in all the land of Israel; for the Philistines had taken this precaution, lest the Hebrews should make them swords or spears." (I Kings 13) And the Gloss adds: "The devil, through pagans, through heretics, through false Christians, is zealous to prevent in the Church the presence of Doctors, who can fashion spiritual arms for us in the fray." For instance, the pagans once prevented the Christians from being trained in the liberal arts. Julian the Apostate, as we read in the *Historia Scholastica*, once proclaimed a law directed against the Christians, forbidding them to be schooled in the liberal arts.

Therefore, it is our position that the study of Philosophy ought to be permitted, and this on account of the many advantages which can accrue from it.

One advantage is the defense of the Faith. For not only did the heretics and pagans war against the faith, but they carried on the fight through their philosophy. Wherefore we read in Coloss. 2: "Beware lest any man cheat you by philosophy and vain deceit." But just as no man can defend himself against fallacies if he does not recognize them, neither can he defend himself against such doctrines if he knows nothing of philosophy.

Another advantage is the destruction of errors. Among the philosophers there are many errors and many truths, just as in the serpent there is venom and also a healing fluid. And just as this healing fluid is more effective against the venom than all other cures, so the truths these philosophers hold to are more effective against their errors than are the truths of Faith, because they do not accept the latter. Thus it is that Augustine in *The City of God* shows that Plato and Porphyry both said certain things which can be used to demonstrate their error in denying the resurrection of the body. According to Augustine, "Plato said that the soul cannot exist eternally without the body; Porphyry said that the soul, once completely purified and admitted to the fatherland, would never return to the evils of this world. Both are found to speak the truth, for it follows that the soul will return to the body, but not the wretched earthly body; all of which the Faith teaches us in regard to the Resurrection."

Another advantage is the understanding of the Scriptures. For there are innumerable things in the texts, the glosses, and in the works of the saints, which it is impossible to understand without some knowledge of philosophy. Thus the Hebrews enrich themselves with the spoils of the Egyptians, as we read in Exodus 12, when the faithful take what they find in the philosophers and use it in the exposition of the Scriptures.

Another advantage to the study of philosophy is that it corroborates the Faith. There are many things in philosophy which are of great value in confirming the Faith. Whence in the Prologue to the *De Trinitate* of Boethius it is said that our Faith is drawn from the very depths of philosophy. "Because that which is known of God is manifest in them." (Rom. 1, 19)

Another advantage is a sharpening of one's skill in breaching the wall of Sacred Scripture. "Iron sharpeneth iron"—that is, the iron of natural ability is sharpened by the iron of philosophy, iron indeed in

comparison with Sacred Scripture which is called by the names of silver and gold.

Another advantage is the power it has of moving men. For very often philosophical truths impress us more than theological ones. I knew a certain brother who was skilled in philosophy and theology, and he told me that when he was still in the world he was a student of astronomy. He discovered in the works of Albumasar that ancient astronomers had observed the following sign in the heavens: A Virgin holding a child in her lap, and next to her an elderly man in an attitude of reverence toward her. All of which he interpreted as the Virgin Mary, her Son and Joseph. He maintained that he was more persuaded to good by this than by any sermons he had ever heard. The same thing is said about Dionysius and the Magi. The former was moved and led to Christ by an eclipse of the sun, which from his knowledge of philosophy he knew to be miraculous; while the Magi were brought to Christ by the star of a new sort of wisdom.

Another advantage of philosophy is that it brings honor on one's ministry, a matter about which the Apostle was so solicitous. (2 Cor. 6.) For many religious are held in contempt by others, and their Order along with them, because they are profoundly ignorant of philosophy; while on the contrary if they have this knowledge it redounds to the credit of their Order. For example, a certain Friar Roland, a skilled Philosopher and Theologian, once when he was at Cremona heard a report from some Friars who had just come from the army of King Frederick encamped before Brixia. They confessed that the king's philosopher had greatly confounded them by his wisdom and they were at their wit's end to know how to answer him. Inflamed with zeal for the honor of his Order Roland cried out: "Saddle my mule at once!" (For he was afflicted with the gout and could not travel on foot.) This was done, and entering the camp along with several other Friars, he sought the whereabouts of the philosopher. Many eminent men who knew Roland and respected his ability heard that he was there and gathered about him. Roland summoned the philosopher and said to him: "That you may know, Master Theodore, that the Order of Friars Preachers has philosophers too, behold I give you your choice before this assemblage. Either you will be the protagonist on some point of philosophy which you are at liberty to select, or else you will reply to my efforts." The philosopher chose to be the protagonist, and in the ensuing disputation Roland scored such a triumph over him that it redounded to the great honor and glory of the Order, and the philosopher thenceforth held him in the highest respect. Did not the Apostle show himself highly solicitous for this

esteem when he said: "As long indeed as I am the Apostle of the Gentiles, I will honor my ministry?" (Rom. 11, 13)

Another advantage is a justifiable contempt for philosophical knowledge. For many people who do not understand philosophy hold it in higher repute than it deserves; whereas after they have studied philosophy they do not consider it anything in comparison with theology. That is why Augustine, esteeming philosophical learning as nothing next to theology, could cry out: "All those pages have little in them of piety, little about tears of repentance, about 'thy sacrifice being a troubled spirit,' little about the salvation of the people, or the spouse of the soul, or Charity, little about the pledge or redemption or the Holy Spirit or the chalice of ransom; no one chants there—'Shall not my soul be subject to the Lord?' (Ps. 61, 2); you never hear anyone crying out—'Come to me all ye who labor.' (Matt. 11, 28)."

For these reasons and many others the study of philosophy can be permitted. But beware lest permission be granted to anyone. For in those works there are good things and bad things, just as in a garden there are good plants and evil ones. Augustine found some good things in the works of Plato, where he read, though not in the very words, that 'in the beginning was the word and the word was with God.' But in the same works he read many erroneous things too about the circular revolution in the great year, and other things of that kind. Therefore it is not safe to read these books unless one can discern the true from the false, lest one collect noxious herbs in the place of sound ones. For example, in *Ecclesiastical History* we read about Bishop Dionysius being reprimanded by his brothers because he read the books of heretics. A vision appeared to him saying: "Read whatever comes into your hands because you have the ability to test and weigh everything." From this it follows that it is not safe for the unskilled to read works which are an admixture of good and evil, lest they gather the evil with the good. Thus Theophilus remarks: "Let the man who reads Origen be careful to pluck the blooms in such a way that he does not touch the thorns."

(To be continued.)