HEN ST. THOMAS’ forces began to ebb, close to his death in 1274, he laid aside his pen and related to his confrère, Brother Reginald, that all he had written in his *Summa Theologica* seemed as so much straw. What else could even the most profound treatise about God possibly be? But of that straw European civilization and subsequent Catholic doctrine was to make its bed. It was to be the touchstone to which theologians in succeeding generations would revert for doctrinal synthesis and orthodoxy.

The doctrine of the *Summa*, although trenchant and contemplative, contains thoughts that live and is, in fact, the foundation of a way of life. It is the attitude of an intellect on its knees in the spirit of prayer before the throne of Eternal Wisdom and Love, a mind fortified by Faith, discovering and grafting unto itself the principles of Life Uncreated. It is a way of life in which man’s conversation is with, of, and about God, the Maker of the universe. The ways of men, however, have not always been the ways of God. Witness the sporadic instances in history when men have completely deviated from the path of orthodoxy, or have, in some cases, taken a heretical bent. Even our own times testify to the spiritual vagaries of man.

When the sons of St. Dominic were confronted with these breaks and fractures within Christendom, they applied the clear remedial balm of St. Thomas’ doctrine to the gaping wounds. These Dominican doctors are the commentators of St. Thomas, links in the chain of tradition which has made Thomism a vital organism today. In their hands, each straw of the *Summa* becomes a sword brandished in defense of truth.

The commentator’s chief concern is an apostolate of the mind. It is quite true that the technically philosophical and theological character of their writings have relegated their use to the classroom, but to presuppose that they in no way touched or affected the populace or current opinion is to fail to consider the function of a school. Schools form the future populace; the pattern of literature and of all thought is fashioned and moulded in school lecture-halls, and this ultimately seeps into the conversations of every day living. Schools are the source of a stream of thought. To attack an error in these
schools is to purify the source and prevent its contamination, and such is the task of the commentator. Only in the light of Divine Providence can it be judged that five great commentators were fated to appear in a period of intellectual turmoil, in the years between 1469 and 1545. During this time, theology was deposed from her exalted position as queen of the sciences, and theological speculation was reduced to an empty quibbling. The straws of Thomistic doctrine were strewn to the winds by the capricious and the proud, resulting in a great peril to Christian orthodoxy. Conditions such as these precipitated the Council of Trent (1545), in which the dogmas of Faith were reformulated and the rampant abuses forever condemned.

Upon a consideration of these impending portents of spiritual disaster, we must begin to appreciate what was the doctrinal chaos from which the commentators were to remodel the tower of Christianity with the tools forged by the Angelic Doctor. Even before his canonization in 1323, the work had been begun, the work that was to overshadow the movement of the previous century. It is a paradox of history that the doctrine that was continually to harass Thomism was born in the same century. This was the doctrine of Nominalism, and its standard-bearer, William of Occam, appeared just six years after the death of St. Thomas. To put it briefly, Occam denied that the intellect of man could know things; all the mind knows is words and, since they do not signify anything in the first place, their use has practically no restrictions. The metaphysical truths about God are but words and therefore have no proof, and the only thing that admits of confirmation is what man senses or feels. With reason thus despaired of, the legitimate consequences are that the foundation of all morality is irrational and is held blindly by faith alone. In this way are begun the proceedings for the great divorce between reason and reality on the one hand, and morality and religion on the other. From Occam to Luther is so short a jump that the former is usually given the dubious distinction of being the first Protestant. Luther's errors could flourish only in minds prepared by the hand of Nominalism.

Errors such as these soon gave birth to a whole new line of falsehoods. Unwilling to be confined to the dismal dungeon of subjectivism, man rebelled with an overly-vehement act of the will, only to find himself plunged once more into a new but equally dreary cellar. Later, a tide of false mysticism rose so high that it threatened to swamp the ideas of genuine Christian piety. Still another pitfall was a sentimentality whereby some imagined themselves called to the life of contemplation merely because of certain experiences which were nothing more than their own emotional upheavals. The bankruptcy of
reason shook man's confidence in himself, with the result that within a short time even the certitude of Faith was enscribed under the aegis of Probabilism. Occam’s legacy to thought consisted in the indescribable despair of perpetual frustration.

In the midst of this chronic malaise, man turned hopefully to Humanism, which was enjoying a rejuvenation under the advocacy of Erasmus. Although this trend began as an appreciation of the classical writings of antiquity, it soon became inimical to the Christian way of life, for the literary appreciation rapidly succumbed to an adoption of the paganism and immortality so prevalent in the new learning. In the milieu of this atrophied intellectuality, it was providential that a return to the teachings of St. Thomas should blossom forth with renewed vigor. The first sign of its advent was the substitution of the *Summa Theologica* for the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard as the basis for all theological study. This step was first taken at the University of Pavia in 1480 under the guidance of the Dominicans, and was further sanctioned by the General Chapter of the Order at Cologne in 1483.

The first commentator destined to appear on the scene was Cardinal Cajetan, the most original of them all. He is undoubtedly a medievalist; yet through him we make contact with our own day, for he typifies the Catholic intellectualism of the present. From Cajetan’s pen flowed the rebirth of St. Thomas. James de Vio by birth, his name was Thomas in religion. He was born on February 20, 1469, at Gaeta, Italy (hence he was known to posterity as Cajetan), and died on August 9, 1534, at Rome. In his youth he was devout and fond of study, and it was to complement these dispositions that he was prompted to enter the Order of Preachers, whose ideal is devotion to truth. As a student and later as a professor of metaphysics, he exhibited those God-given talents of intellectual brilliance and prowess to such an extent that in 1494, at the early age of twenty-five, he was awarded the highest academic degree of the Order, the Masterate in Sacred Theology. Elected to the Generalship of the Dominican Order in 1508, Cajetan strove with foresight and ability to promote those prerogatives of religious discipline and study of sacred truths, which were as much his own qualities as they were the rules of the Order. “For other Orders,” he said grimly, “studies might be an ornament; for the Friars Preachers, they are life itself. Once we cease to carry weight as teachers of theology, our Order’s days are over.” In complete accord with this dictum, he was himself a model of diligence, and it is said of him that he could quote almost the entire *Summa* from memory.
On July 1, 1517, Cajetan was created Cardinal by Pope Leo X. As Papal Legate to Germany in 1518, one of his missions concerned Luther who, by this time, had been called to Rome to answer a charge of heresy. The two met at Augsburg on the 12th of October, Dominican and Augustinian, Thomist and Occamist, Papal Legate and rebel. Reconciliation, however, was impossible and Cajetan did not succeed in having the heresiarch arrested. During the interview, he spoke to Luther as to a scholar and a religious, and (we have the heretic’s word for it) treated him with marked kindliness. Some have accused Cajetan of failure, but the Cardinal realized that Luther’s was no ordinary revolt; it was rather a rebellion of the mind. The demands of this man were not a call to the emancipation of the flesh; his was a demand in the domain of the spiritual and theological. To Pope Clement VII, Cajetan was the “Lamp of the Church” and a light amidst the labyrinth of heresy, but if someone arrogantly and deliberately shades his eyes from that light, who is to blame if he stumbles in the darkness?

Cajetan has been described as small in bodily stature, but gigantic in intellectuality. His chief importance lies not only in that he is a commentator of St. Thomas, for in the previous centuries other Dominicans had commented on parts of the Summa, but he is the first to penetrate the Summa with a new light and focus its gleam on the troubles of his times. He synthesized humanism and Thomism wherever a reconciliation was possible; preeminently a metaphysician, he orientated the new learning so that it dovetailed with the old. His commentary, begun in 1507 and completed in 1522, is the work of an original mind and has proved to be a lasting work, for it is still the classic commentary after four hundred years. His style, while purely scientific and unrhetorical, was simple and direct and he spoke to the age of the Renaissance in an idiom it could understand. The relation between Cajetan and St. Thomas was particularly emphasized by Leo XIII when, by his Pontifical Letter of 1879, he ordered the former’s commentary to be incorporated with the text of the Summa in the official Leonine edition.

The flexibility of Cajetan’s genius is most evident in his long series of Scripture commentaries. Following the humanistic spirit, he makes a critical use of the Scriptures in his argumentation, keeping rigorously to the literal sense and not mixing the literal with the spiritual sense. This rule is followed today. By adopting this device, Cajetan sought to counteract the biblical extravagances of the humanists and to defeat the Lutheran movement on the very grounds upon
which it had chosen to reject the authority of the Church and tradition.

Of Cajetan’s doctrine it has been significantly said that he gave a new verve to the wisdom of St. Thomas; his positive teaching was a guide for others and his silence an implicit censure. Those characteristics which make him a singularly attractive author, namely, rectitude, candour, and moderation, were the very qualities for which he was praised even by his enemies.

Cajetan was not an isolated figure during this period, but he was one of the earliest prodigies of the Thomistic Renaissance which had begun when he entered the Order. Almost his contemporary was the gifted Francis de Sylvestris of Ferrara (1474-1526) whose monumental *Commentary on the Summa Contra Gentiles* of St. Thomas is unprecedented. He also took Luther’s claims to task, in a clear and forceful manner, with his work concerning the primacy and organization of the Church. About ten years younger than Cajetan was the accomplished Francis of Vitoria (1483 or 1486-1545). A devotee of humanism, he also brought the new learning to the service of the old so that no branch of knowledge should escape the influence of theology. Turning his attention to world affairs, which included the discovery of America by this time, he became the prime internationalist of his day, and constructed for posterity the edifice of international law upon the foundation of St. Thomas. The last two commentators of this period are Dominic de Soto (1494-1560) and Melchior Cano (1509-1560). Pupils of Vitoria, they absorbed his aspirations of giving to scientific theology a purer diction and improved literary form. Making this endeavor their own, and fusing it with their individual talents of perspicacity, erudition, and theological proficiency, they produced works worthy of niches in the hall of theology. Both were summoned by the emperor, Charles V, to the Council of Trent to serve Holy Mother Church in unraveling the network of heresy, severing truth from error. During the Council, Dominic de Soto expounded his treatise on the Thomistic doctrine of Original Sin and Grace. After the Council, Melchior Cano established an imperishable name for himself by his treatise on theological method (*De Locis Theologicis*), which is fundamentally a development of the framework upon which St. Thomas constructed his *Summa*.

The *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas was the progenitor of all these commentaries. The commentator’s legacy to Thomistic thought has been a development of those principles which are inherent in the *Summa*, styled in the vernacular of their times. Though they were original thinkers in their own right, in the sense that they syncretized
the new learning with the old, yet it is the *Summa* that remains the eternal fundament. It is the catalyst in the crucible of theological controversy, for in the ultimate analysis it alone remains unchanged, yet it aided the process. Undoubtedly, there have been other commentators before the ones mentioned, but the violence of doctrinal attacks was most vehement during this period. It is quite evident that the straw of the *Summa* is not the commonplace straw that dries out, cracks, crumbles, and is blown about by the winds of time to be lost in the crevices of the portals of history. It is rather, a unique type of straw having a vital strength; it weathered the gale of heresy; it was stronger than falsehood, as truth always is; and it calmed the tempest that beat against the doors of the Council of Trent. Nor did such vicissitudes undermine its vigor, for the commentators of the succeeding generations, from the Council of Trent down to our own mid-century, have used it to destroy the doctrinal quicksand into which destiny has plunged them. The doctrinal potential of the *Summa* is inexhaustible, and the preponderance of this stout straw, incredible.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

