

SAINT THOMAS: FAITH AND REASON

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WHO IS A SANE MAN? Everyone would like to think of himself as a living response to such a question. All of us will admit honestly that our intellectual powers have certain and definite limitations; but that we are not rational and therefore insane is something that none of us has ever suspected—nor, we hope, have others. A modern author has defined a sane man as one who lives in the real world and tries to see what else exists in that world. He takes things as they are and recognizes their proper order—in a word, he faces the facts, both material and spiritual.

Saint Thomas Aquinas was an eminently sane man. When the plain truth spoke, he listened in grateful silence; and when the First Truth spoke, that silence became reverent awe. Thomas heard the Word of Life with love, with such a love that he set about re-speaking that truth, as best he could, for all the world to hear.

At this he was remarkably successful. A good part of his life was spent in defining clearly the respective spheres of faith and reason, and in declaring their ultimate harmony. Whenever men despaired at the idea of an irrevocable antagonism between the one and the other, St. Thomas would rise to propound his doctrine that faith and reason can never be at odds. His own work is for us an amazing proof of his stand. If this position seems unquestionable today, it is due to our clear and sound view of both faith and reason, a view which we owe in no small measure to Thomas Aquinas.

DISTINCTION WITHOUT OPPOSITION

Above all, St. Thomas is a theologian, a champion of the faith. In his defense of Christian doctrine he is unflinching; in its exposition he is comprehensive, constructive, penetrating. Why, then, did he devote so much of his time to purely philosophical matters—to commentaries on Aristotle, for instance? Was it not because he longed to assemble all his allies in the battle for Christ? Chesterton remarks that St. Thomas did not

reconcile Christ to Aristotle; he reconciled Aristotle to Christ. Nor was he primarily interested in philosophy, precisely because philosophy is not primary. Recognizing philosophy as human wisdom, he described its foundations, method, and aim, but clearly distinguished it from the science of Revelation, which is Sacred Theology. We do not find in any of his works a body of complete philosophical concepts set out in their logical order. The *Summa Theologica* contains much of his philosophy, demonstrated according to the principles of philosophical argument, but presented according to the order of theology or Sacred Doctrine. The same must be said of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*. In both works the starting point is God, from a knowledge of Whom St. Thomas proceeds to a study of creatures. But he is the Christian Doctor primarily in the aim or goal he set out to achieve. This supreme motive was to teach the truths of faith for the salvation of souls. Hence he did not disdain the homely, shrewd touch of Aristotle, when he could use the Greek for the Gospel.

St. Thomas tells us himself why he bothered at all with the wisdom of the Greeks: "It is quite clearly false to say that as regards the truths of faith it makes no difference what we think about creatures, provided we have a correct knowledge of God. An error about created things can result in a false knowledge of God."¹ Yet a reputable scientist exclaimed not long ago that there is no necessary connection between one's personal religious belief and his outlook on this world of ours! Remember our definition of sanity.

According to some contemporaries, the Catholic faith exercises a stultifying influence on our powers of reasoning and habits of thought. St. Thomas would find little difficulty in disposing of such an objection, based as it is on an enormous ignorance of reality. To put it bluntly, if we see anything at all—ourselves, other men, or the entire universe—without at the same time seeing God somewhere in the picture, then we are seeing it all wrong. The simple truth is that by the theological virtue of faith we are made absolutely certain of the all-important reality: the inescapable presence of God.

Thomas himself was eminently a man of faith and pre-eminently a teacher of the science of faith, namely, theology. With sure vision he saw how faith can be of inestimable service to reason. Revelation has disclosed the infinite riches of Divine

¹ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. II, ch. 87.

Knowledge, and the light of Eternal Truth has illumined our uplifted minds. Truths vitally necessary for the living of a fuller, more abundant life—one with a supremely happy ending—have been made available to all men, so that we rightly marvel that doctrines concerning the nature of God, the immortality of the soul and the duties of men, which the noblest intellects of antiquity could barely grasp, have become the truisms of the village school, the proverbs of the cottage and the lane.

The great schoolmen of the Ages of Faith, as well as their successors in our own era, have had to suffer the absurd charge that they were afraid and contemptuous of using their natural reason. God gave man this faculty, although those who attack the men of faith rarely attribute the gift to its rightful Giver. Few would dare level this insult at the greatest of them, Thomas Aquinas, for he has boldly defended reason; in a sense, he has made an act of faith in reason.

But why faith at all? Isn't reason good enough? St. Thomas would agree that reason is splendid, perfectly competent as far as it goes. Unfortunately, it does not go far enough, and there are too many of us who cannot follow it very far anyway. Aside from the key fact that we are destined for supernatural happiness, we need faith on five solid counts, which the Angelic Doctor has set down for us. It is interesting to note that the holy Doctor culled these five reasons from the renowned Jewish master, Moses Maimonides.

Faith is required, first of all, because of the profundity and subtlety of Divine Truth; secondly, because of the weakness of the human intellect; and thirdly, because of the many preambles requisite for a knowledge of God. Few would be able to investigate, much less comprehend, such truths. A fourth reason why faith is so necessary is this: that the multitude who are unfitted for profound study might not lack a knowledge of those Divine Truths which, from the beginning, are required for right living. Finally, we need faith because of the numerous and distracting occupations which prevent our devoting much time to study and contemplation.

No one dreams of denouncing a red light or danger sign as a brutal, crushing instrument designed to repress human rights and freedom. In the realm of natural reason, faith plays an analogous rôle, safeguarding us from the tragic blunder of intellectual presumption. St. Thomas states emphatically that: "Philosophy is wisdom as long as it is subject to Divine Wisdom;

but when it turns away from God, then it becomes foolishness."² If we arrive at a conclusion which is contrary to faith, something must be wrong, either with our premises or our argumentation. For in recognizing the frontiers of the human mind, Aquinas recognized the beyond, thus enabling the Christian to formulate *fides quaerens intellectum*—faith seeking understanding. We proceed safely along the path of understanding only so long as we heed the salutary warnings of Divine Faith.

The powers of reason were acknowledged by St. Thomas when he declared them capable of attaining certain truths concerning God, His existence and some of His attributes. But the Divine nature so infinitely exceeds our powers, that we do not know God at all, St. Thomas insists, if we do not admit that He surpasses all that we may think of Him. The most effective way of making us accept this incomprehensibility was to reveal to us incomprehensible truths. The tremendous mysteries of Revelation are for us a powerful lesson in intellectual humility, and thus our faith profits as well as perfects our reason. Anyone who does not see this world, explained by St. Thomas with the utmost clarity of analysis, surrounded on all its borders by pathless mystery, does not do him justice. For the Angelic Doctor, the very order which we discover in all creation is itself interwoven with and crossed by mystery. Nor does he fail to remind us that thus far the effort of human thought has been unable to track down the essence of a single gnat.

THE HARMONY OF FAITH AND REASON

It is a cherished axiom of our Catholic faith that grace does not destroy but rather perfects nature. What is true here, in what may be called the order of being, is no less true in the order of knowledge. Fully aware of all the consequences of such an attitude, St. Thomas accepts simultaneously both his faith and his reason, each with all the demands proper to it. His thought never aims at achieving as economically as possible a superficial harmony between the conclusions of reason and the traditional teaching of faith. According to Thomas Aquinas, faith and reason can neither contradict nor ignore each other, nor be mutually confused. The very inalienability of their proper essences and functions guarantees that they may—and indeed must—come in contact without conflict and without confusion.

² In I Cor. lect. 5.

The fundamental truth which underlies this position, which is the only sane, Catholic outlook, is that both faith and reason derive from God, the Source of all truth. There can be no discord between the two, since both are subject to the measure of One Who cannot be the author of error. The light of natural reason can never cloud the light of Divine Faith, even though erring men may vainly attempt to do so. For such an attempt the holy doctor excoriates one Siger of Brabant, a Latin follower of the Arabian philosopher, Averrhoes. Siger had dared to say: "By reason I hold one thing . . . nevertheless, I firmly hold to the opposite by faith." A house divided against itself must fall; but the truth of God, being one and ultimately simple, can suffer no corruption. Brabant's Averrhoism was not two ways of finding one and the same truth; it was an underhanded way of pretending that there are two truths. St. Thomas was willing to allow the one truth to be approached by two paths, precisely because he was sure there was only one truth, one Supreme Truth.

He would certainly maintain that, although to believe recklessly is unsound, to believe is most reasonable, for it can be proved on solid rational grounds that God has spoken. When Thomas sets out to defend the mutual harmony of faith and reason, he begins by showing that all our knowledge comes from the power given us by God, the Author of Truth. Hence all so-called refutations of the truths of faith are not at all of demonstrative value, but are at best of only apparent probability or even downright sophistic.

St. Thomas knew that the supernatural could never be opposed to the natural, so he never hesitated to apply the latter to the former. He failed to see how the study of God's handiwork could in itself harm our knowledge of God. Consequently, he set down a three-fold use which Sacred Doctrine, the science of faith, can make of reason: 1st, to demonstrate the preambles of faith, such as the existence of God, the fact of Divine Revelation, authenticity of Sacred Scripture, etc.; 2nd, to give a clearer notion, by created similitudes, of the truths of faith; 3rd, to refute the enemies of faith. St. Augustine spoke of reason preceding, accompanying, and following upon faith: preceding it, by proving the trustworthiness of the witnesses to Revelation; accompanying it, by demonstrating the possibility, at least, of the truths proposed for our belief; following it, by defending, strengthening, and nourishing it. Thus an act of faith is essentially an act of reason and, for some, their failure in faith is

rooted in one of reason: thinking that the only evidence for a fact is the self-evidence of that fact. This rôle of reason in the profession and exercise of faith is summed up by Frank Sheed: "We believe all that God has said, and thus implicitly possess it. But that we may actually know it, we must use our intellect to find it."³

SERVIRE DEO REGNARE EST

To serve God is to reign, according to St. Antoninus. Faith rules man's natural reason with the dominion of true liberty, not the intolerable rule of tyranny. In using philosophy, the noblest achievement of reason, St. Thomas gave it not only life but further ennoblement. As Father Farrell says: "Philosophy is not superseded by the higher wisdom of theology, it is consecrated by that higher wisdom."⁴ Certain misguided sons of the Church, in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries attempted to defend the need of faith and were led to heresy against the rights of reason. The Church knew she could not be helped by her loving sons' unconscious lies. She was battling for the truth: and so she condemned. Under four headings the Vatican Council defined a number of doctrines as being, in the main, within the discovery of reason. Their fundamental statement was taken almost wholly from St. Thomas—who took it from Moses Maimonides!

The Church has consistently recognized and acknowledged her faithful son, Thomas Aquinas, as the invincible champion of the inviolable rights and ultimate harmony of man's greatest intellectual gifts: in the natural order, reason, and in the supernatural order, faith. In his Encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris*, Pope Leo XIII paid tribute to this glorious office of our holy Dominican Doctor: "Carefully distinguishing reason from faith, as is right, yet joining them together in a harmony of friendship, he so guarded the rights of each, that, as far as man is concerned, reason can now hardly rise higher than she rose, borne up in the flight of Thomas; and faith can hardly gain more helps and greater helps from reason than those which Thomas gave her."

³ Sheed, Frank J., *Theology and Sanity* (New York, 1946) Sheed & Ward, p. 334.

⁴ Farrell, Walter, O.P., *The Companion to the Summa* (New York, 1941) Sheed & Ward Vol. I, p. 19.

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- In I Cor. 15, lect. 5.
- De Unitate Intellectus*, resp. concl.
- Summa contra Gentiles*, Bk. I, chap. 7; II, 4, 87.
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