

HEAVEN COME TO EARTH

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"The *Summa Theologiae* is heaven come to earth."

(Pope Pius XI, in an allocution to the *Angelicum*, Dec. 12, 1924)



THE REJUVENATED INTEREST in Theology on the part of the laity within the past few years has produced many desirable effects. One of the more gratifying of these has been the turning of more and more serious-minded Catholics to the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. Not content with theological manuals and works which suffer from "over-popularization," they have hastened to read the *ipsissima verba* of the Angelic Doctor himself. Recent traditions and editions of the *Summa Theologiae* and other of the Holy Doctor's more important works have been coming forth quite rapidly from various writers and editors. Now it is only natural that the laity should seek the work of Aquinas that is best adapted to their needs, and hence it has been to the *Summa* that they have principally turned. Here we shall attempt to point out in a rather general fashion the nature of St. Thomas' masterwork. Under five headings we shall consider the origin of the *Summa*, the time and place of its composition, its literary genus, proper character, and finally the technique and structure of the individual article.

THE ORIGIN OF THE *SUMMA*

When St. Thomas traveled to Rome in 1265 to assume the office of professor and Regent of studies at the Dominican convent there, he had already behind him a great deal of experience as teacher and writer. He has brought glory to his Order by his brilliant teaching at the University of Paris and the Pontifical Curiae of Anagni and Orvieto. He had penned many important philosophical treatises among them the well known *De Ente et Essentia* which he had completed nine years previously. Over and above his philosophical works Aquinas had written profusely on theological subjects. Among the better known theological treatises which he had already finished were his Commentaries on *Isaias*, *St. Matthew*, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the *De Trinitate* of Boethius, a large part of the *Catena Aurea*, the *Contra Gentes*, and the two disputed questions *On Truth*, and *On the Power of God*. A mere glance at these works and we can well appreciate the

wealth of material which the *Doctor Communis* had already produced.

In all his previous professorial work St. Thomas had made use of what was for all practical purposes the standard textbook of his time, the *Sentences of Peter Lombard*. Aquinas however recognized with his rare insight the shortcomings of the *Sentences*. Its lack of orthodoxy and doctrinal security on various points of capital importance forced him to desire another tool with which to work. He even considered his own commentary on the work adequate and hence in 1265 he commenced another monograph on the same book. The *Sentences* had the weight of Scholastic tradition and Aquinas would save them if it were at all possible. He soon realized however that he had set himself to an all but impossible task. The book of the Lombard simply would not lend itself to the kind of commentary and order which Thomas knew had to be presented. Hence, after completing a commentary on the First Book (which, incidentally, has been lost), he abandoned the project and determined to pen his own theological treatise. The result of his decision was the work we know today as the *Summa Theologiae*, and which after seven centuries still remains the fundamental code of Catholic Theology.

TIME AND PLACE OF COMPOSITION

For the next seven years Aquinas worked incessantly, but in the end he did not live to complete his masterpiece. The *Prima Pars* was written at the convent of Santa Maria de Grazia in Viterbo between the years 1266 and 1267. More than likely he incorporated into this part many of the points he had developed in his second commentary on the First Book of the *Sentences*. In 1269 Aquinas returned to Paris for his second tenure of office as professor there and it was in the city of the Seine that he composed the *Prima Secundae* and *Secunda Secundae*,¹ between the years 1269 and 1272. Next Thomas turned to Italy where he organized a General Studium of Theology at Naples and also served as professor at the University of that city. It was here that he penned the *Tertia Pars* as far as Question 90 (1272-1273).²

¹ The *Second Part* of the *Summa* is sub-divided into two major sections. They are called respectively the *Prima Secundae* and *Secunda Secundae*, which terms are abbreviations for: *Prima pars Secundae partis* and *Secunda pars Secundae partis*.

² The problem of the chronology of the works of St. Thomas is too broad a question to be discussed here. In placing the dates of the composition of the *Summa* we have followed Mandonnet, while being fully aware of the excellent research of Fr. Walz, O.P. (*San Tomasso D'Aquino*, Rome, 1945) and Dr. Martin Grabmann (*Die Werke Des Thomas Von Aquin*, Münster, 1949).

It was after celebrating Mass on the feast of St. Nicholas that Thomas spoke those famous words to Reginald of Piperno who had been his companion on so many journeys: "Ah, Reginald, I can do no more. After what God had revealed to me, I look upon my writings as though they were worthless as straw." It is not to be wondered that the Saint did not finish his masterwork. The wonder is rather that he completed so much of it. His duties as professor, preacher, and spiritual director certainly must have been all-time consuming. We know that many of his brethren as well as though outside the fold of Dominic wrote to him seeking solutions to their philosophical and theological difficulties.³ And over the period of years that he was writing his *Summa* he also composed his commentaries on *Job*, on the part of the *Psalter*, on the *Gospel of St. John*, and on the *Pauline Epistles*. He also completed during this period many commentaries on Aristotle, among them the commentaries on the *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *Politics* (Books I to III). Similarly he wrote many of his opuscula over this period of years among them the famous *De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averroistas*. Among the better known disputed questions compiled at this time are his works *On the Soul* and *On the Virtues in General*. The mind cannot but be staggered at the tremendous literary output of the Sage of Aquino over such a comparatively short span of years. He labored indefatigably to bequeath to the Church he loved the most brilliant intellectual heritage of all time.

THE LITERARY GENUS OF THE *SUMMA*

Just as the twelfth century is known as the century of the *Sentences*, so has the thirteenth been rightly designated as the age of the *Summae*. In the Middle Ages the term *Sentences* marked "theses, questions, and treatises taken from the Fathers, theologians, collections of canons, and grouped under determinate viewpoints."⁴

Since however the writings of the Fathers did not always admit of facile explanation and correlation—recall the *Sic et Non* of Abelard—a sort of comparison and classification was imposed upon their works by the compilers of the *Sentences*, in order to harmonize them among themselves and with Catholic dogma. This system gave rise to the question (*quaestio*) which soon became transformed into the disputation (*disputatio*). The compiler's personal solution to the question

³ Among these responses there is a letter addressed to Blessed John of Vercelli who was Master General of the Dominicans at the time of St. Thomas.

⁴ Grabmann, *Introduction to the Theological Summa of St. Thomas*, transl. by John S. Zyburia (Herder, St. Louis, 1930), p. 2.

or disputation came to be known as the sentence (*sententia*). Thus we see the sentence as the carefully reasoned explanation of a biblical text and the final term of the lecture (*lectio*). The latter was composed of three elements: the letter (*littera*) or purely grammatical explanation of the words; the sense (*sensus*) or the obvious and immediate signification of the passage; and the sentence (*sententia*) or the hidden meaning contained under the letter.⁵

Thus the word *sentence* came to signify not just a block of Patristic authorities, but the solutions and doctrinal explanations of the Masters; and the ordered collection of the same into a body of doctrine took the name of *Sentences*.

About the year 1200 the term *Summa* appeared in place of *Sententiae*. Grabmann explains the difference between the two: "A *Summa* is a more original systematic abridgement of the subject matter of a given science. Whereas *Sententiae* is preferably the title of dogmatic works, *Summa* denotes the epitomized exposition of various disciplines."⁶

Looking at the general outlines of the *Summae* of Alexander of Hales, St. Albert the Great, Roland of Cremona and others, historians and theologians have observed that the authors all intended the same thing in their works, i.e. they agreed as to the content of a *Summa*. They wished to present a brief, complete, and ordered explanation of the body of Catholic doctrine. A gloss on the *Sentences* of the Lombard attributed to his disciple Peter of Poitiers reads: "A *Summa* is a work containing things to be believed and to be done, and consists in the clarification of propositions of the Faith and the assertion of norms for moral action."⁷

This is the same basic idea which St. Thomas expresses in the Prologue to his *Summa*: "... we purpose in this work to treat of whatever belongs to the Christian religion, in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners."

⁵ "The exposition contains three elements: the letter, which is the harmonious ordering of the words, and which is also called the construction; the sense, which is the easy and evident meaning that strikes us at first glance; and finally, the sentence which represents the more profound understanding (of the text) and is not discerned save by exposition or interpretation. Thus the order is: the letter, the sense, and the sentence, and when these three are carefully and accurately set up, then the exposition is perfect." (Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalion*, Book III, ch. 9. ML 176, 771).

⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁷ *Glossae Super Sententias* (Paris, Bibl. Nat., cod. lat. 14423, fol. 411), cited by Grabmann in *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode*, vol. II, p. 504.

THE PROPER CHARACTER OF THE *SUMMA*

From the foregoing we must not be led to believe that the *Summa* of Aquinas is merely one of many books. It is unique in the history of theology. A remarkable originality appears throughout the entire work, grandiose as it is simple.

Theology is the science of God according as He has revealed Himself to man by Sacred Scripture and the doctrine of the Church who is the infallible interpreter of divine revelation. God has revealed the most hidden mysteries of his divinity and the effects of nature and grace in order to draw us to Himself. Especially has He revealed the great work of the Incarnation and Redemption, that is to say, the mystery of Christ who, in so far as He is man, is the only true way to reach God, according to the words of the Saviour Himself: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father, but by me."⁸

Consequently, Theology is divided into three parts: the first part treats of God in Himself and as the first principle of all things; the second discusses God as the ultimate end of all things, especially as the beatifying end of the intellectual creature; the third considers Christ as the true way to gain possession of God. These three parts correspond exactly to the division of the *Summa*. Aquinas insists that nothing but God is considered in Theology. "In sacred doctrine all things are treated under the aspect of God; either because they are God Himself or because they refer to God as their beginning and end."⁹ In another meaningful passage the Angelic Doctor writes: "It belongs to the philosopher and theologian to treat of creatures, but each in his own way. For the philosopher considers creatures as they are in themselves, and hence he inquires into the proper causes and properties of things. The theologian, on the other hand, treats of creatures in so far as they have come from a first principle and are ordained to an ultimate end which is God. Hence Wisdom is rightly called divine since it considers the loftiest cause which is God. As we read in Scripture (*Eccus.* 42: 17): 'Hath not the Lord made the Saints to declare all his wonderful works, which the Lord Almighty hath firmly settled to be established for His glory.'"¹⁰

This intensely theocentric character of sacred doctrine was something entirely new in theological thought of the Middle Ages. Hugh of St. Victor had been principally concerned with the work of the

⁸ John, 14:6.

⁹ *Summa Theol.* I, q. 1, a. 7.

¹⁰ *Prologue to the Second Book of the Sentences.*

Redemption. Gilbert of Porree and Robert of Melun had centralized their work around the whole Christ, that is, in Christ as the head and in the Church militant and triumphant as his mystical body. Peter Lombard fixed his attention on the things and signs of God (*res et signa*). Alexander of Hales, St. Bonaventure, and St. Albert the Great attempted to re-unite all these aspects but they did not meet with much success. St. Thomas placed God in the center of Theology. All other things are merely manifestations of the divinity which is the sole formal and proper object of theological science. "The more something tends toward the true formality of Divinity, the more principally it is dealt with in this science."¹¹

This is not place to expose in detail each part of the *Summa*. All theologians worthy of the name have recognized that each section is assembled with magnificent art: tracts, questions, articles, and objections are brought together with wonderful harmony. Aquinas knew well that a true science cannot exist without order and that the principal defects of many works that had gone before was their lack of order.¹² Unless we can reduce theological conclusions back to their principles in an orderly manner, then we cannot claim for ourselves the theological habit.

As we have already noted, St. Thomas' aim in composing the *Summa* was to supply students of theology with a text that would correspond to their needs. He offered to them and to posterity the absolute fulness of doctrine with remarkable brevity and lucidity. The works of the earlier scholastics multiplied to excess un-profitable questions, articles, and arguments. Aquinas overcame this fault in a most felicitous manner by a process of complete simplification. When we survey the *ensemble* of the *Summa* on its technical side, we see that the systematic arrangement itself is simpler and more perspicuous than in other works of this *genre*. St. Thomas divides his work into parts, the parts into questions, the questions into articles. How much more facile is this than the division of the *Summa* of Alexander of Hales into parts, questions, members, articles, and paragraphs! In Aquinas we find a rigid selectiveness. He shuns all useless questions and discussions as he had promised in his Prologue. The arguments against his position he reduces to three or four; his principal solution to the question has one or two demonstrations (where demonstration is possible) which are incisive and compelling; his answers to the ob-

¹¹ *In I Sent.*, prol. a. 4.

¹² "Conclusions and demonstrations of one science are ordered, and one is derived from the other." (I-IIae, q. 54, a. 4, ad 3).

jections are irrefutable. At the same time the fulness of doctrine is not sacrificed. No essential part is ever overlooked by Aquinas. Every question and article have their own importance in the exposition of Catholic truth.

To quote Grabmann: "By emphatically shifting the centre of gravity in his articles from the arguments *pro et contra* to the *corpus articuli* and to the *responsio principalis* he has increased the compactness, soundness, depth, and clarity of his exposition to an extraordinary degree. In earlier authors the main stress is laid on the arguments *pro et contra* which are often massed in great number. With many the objections and answers, and still other difficulties against these answers, are so intermingled that the perspicuity of exposition suffers considerably."¹³

Such profundity is obviously not intended for novices in the intellectual life as Cardinal Cajetan notes in his monograph on the Prologue: "This work is commended to beginners not by reason of its easiness or the superficial and introductory character of its tracts, but rather because of the fact that it has shunned all superfluities and repetitions, and contains everything in perfect order."¹⁴

Neither is the *Summa* meant for the intellectual dilettante. It is to be studied and not merely read. As Gilson has accurately observed: "There are books that seem clear when we read them for the first time, but which become obscure when we begin to ponder their content. There are others which appear obscure at the first reading, but became clear as we meditate on what they contain. The works of the truly great authors and most especially the *Summa* of St. Thomas belong to this second category."¹⁵

THE TECHNIQUE AND STRUCTURE OF THE INDIVIDUAL ARTICLE

The individual article in the *Summa* usually admits of a four-fold division: 1) The statement of the question in brief and concise terms; 2) Objections against the position of St. Thomas'; 3) Solution of the proposed question; and, 4) Response to the objections. Let us examine briefly these component parts.

First of all, we should note that the title placed at the head of each article in most editions of the *Summa* was not placed there by

¹³ *op. cit.*, p. 81.

¹⁴ Leonine ed. t. IV, p. 5 a.

¹⁵ *Saint Thomas d'Aquin* in the collection *Les moralistes chretiens*, p. 16, Paris, 1930.

St. Thomas himself. The editors of each edition have inserted these in order to facilitate the reading of the article. The authentic statement of the question is found only at the beginning of each question where Aquinas enumerates and distributes all the articles of the question. Each one of these titles contains the statement of a true question or problem as it would be expressed in the rigorously technical manner of Aristotle. Each article involves a doubt, real or methodical, as to the existence, mode of existence, properties, or various other ramifications of some particular reality. This doubt is expressed in the title of each article by the Latin word *utrum* (whether). This word properly and directly signifies that there is some alternative, *utrum . . . necne* (whether . . . or not). But let us allow Aquinas himself explain the peculiar meaning of this word.

"We always use the word *utrum* when we are dealing with opposites; as, for example, when we ask whether an object be white or black, which are opposites by way of contrariety; and whether an object be white or non-white, which are opposites by way of contradiction. We do not ask however, whether a particular object be a man or white, save from the supposition that humanity and whiteness are incompatible in one subject. In this way, for example, we ask whether Cleo or Socrates is coming, supposing that both are not coming together. As we have said, however, this method of questioning in those things that are not opposites is in no way according to necessity, but only by way of supposition. Therefore we use this word *utrum* only with respect to those things that are necessarily opposites. In other things however we speak only according to supposition, since only opposites from their very nature cannot exist together."¹⁶

Such a placing of the question demands a strict examination and an ordered reasoning process concerning the arguments that have been put forth for the other part of the alternative. This is the sole way of giving a well thought out answer to the problem at hand. Thus, we have the second part of the article which is properly called the dispute or discussion (*disputatio*).

In raising objections immediately after he has stated the question St. Thomas is following Aristotle who insists that

" . . . to get clear of difficulties it is advantageous to discuss the difficulties well; for the subsequent free play of thought implies the solution of the previous difficulties, and it is not possible to untie a knot of which one does not know. . . . Hence one should have surveyed all the difficulties beforehand . . . because people who inquire without first stating the difficulties are like those who do not know where they have to go; . . . He who has heard all the contending arguments, as if he were the party to a case, must be in a better position for judging."¹⁷

¹⁶ In X Metaphysic., lect. 7. ed. Cathala, n. 1060.

¹⁷ Aristotle, II Meta., ch. 1 (Ross trans.).

St. Thomas calls this phase of scientific investigation the disputative process (*processus disputativus*). It always begins with the stereotyped formula: *Ad primum . . . ad secundum . . . ad tertium . . . sic proceditur*. This might be rendered freely as "With regard to the first . . . second . . . third . . . question, we proceed thusly." The word procedure (*processio*) as used by Aquinas signifies an ordered movement of the intellect in search of truth by means of dispute.¹⁸

Immediately following upon the objections St. Thomas places his *Sed contra* (On the contrary). Generally this contains either quotations from Sacred Scripture, the Fathers, or the magisterium of the Church. It is most fitting that we find arguments from authority here. For as the Angelic Doctor himself insists, "Although the argument from authority based on human reason is the weakest, yet the argument from authority based on divine revelation is the strongest."¹⁹

The third part of the article is called the *corpus* and in it we find the problem brought to a definitive solution. Grabmann's determination of the nature of the body of the article is brief and accurate:

"As to the *corpus articuli*, which may be regarded as the entelechy of the whole article, all its parts aim to state and solve the question briefly, precisely, and clearly; far from being modeled after a fixed pattern or plan, it shows variations corresponding to the various bearings of problems. Superfluous accessories and distracting digressions are avoided. Under the influence of his great didactic purpose, the author exercises the sternest self-control and limitation. The solution to the question, whether in one or more theses or conclusions, is formulated sharply and precisely; wherever possible, it is demonstrated in a manner that is clear and convincing. In the case of theses for which a strict demonstration is not to be had, St. Thomas notes (at least implicitly) the purely probable character of his argumentation, or altogether foregoes an answer. . . . Here it is not so much the dialectician as the metaphysician that comes to the fore. The great metaphysical principles illumine his process of demonstration."²⁰

The Latin word *dicendum* (it must be said) expresses perfectly the character of the answers that Aquinas gives his readers. For his answer banishes all doubts and fortifies the intellect with the possession of incontestable truth. St. Thomas calls this part the demonstrative process (*processus demonstrativus*) in contradistinction to the disputative or dialectical nature of the second part of the article.²¹

The final section of the article is given over to the objections pro-

¹⁸ cfr. *De Potentia*, q. X, a. 1.

¹⁹ *Summa Theol.* I, q. 1, a. 8, ans. to 2nd obj.

²⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 83-84.

²¹ Aquinas often contrasts these two modes of procedure. See especially: *In IV Metaphysic.*, lect. 1, n. 529; *In I Post Analytic.*, lect. 20, n. 6.

posed in the second section. The erroneous notions contained therein are implicitly dispelled in the body of the article, but St. Thomas nevertheless destroys them one by one, thereby throwing more light on the problem he is discussing.

CONCLUSION

Thus we have pointed out in a fashion necessarily general the splendor of the *Summa* of Aquinas. It is an inexhaustible font of eternal verities, and he who drinks of its waters will never thirst for truth.

"It may be said without exaggeration that there is no department of human life or action, social or individual, which cannot, by the application of the teaching of the *Doctor Communis*, be established on the lines that are in accord with the Divine Idea. In his writings, *especially in the Summa*, (italics mine), will be found the principles through the operation of which perfection can be secured in personal, family, economic, and state life as well as in art, science, and literature. Under his guidance it becomes clear how all these may attain their fullest possible natural development, whilst remaining subordinate to and directed towards the supernatural. . . . It is our duty not to rest idle by the side of this vast treasure; we must strive to make it our own and utilize it for the direction of personal and social activity, with the conviction that in this way lies the restoration of universal order for which all are sighing, and towards which the world wil continue to grope in vain unless it consents to have its searchings lighted by Him Who bears the title of Sun of Wisdom."²²

²² *The Voice of A Priest*, by Edward Leen, C.S.Sp., D.D. (Sheed and Ward, New York, 1946), p. 165.