

ANGELIC TEACHER OF LITTLE ONES

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WITH THE NAME, ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, there is usually and understandably associated such thoughts as: the *Summa Theologica*, profundity of thought, learned treatises.

For this reason his works are commonly considered to be beyond the grasp of people with only average learning. Thus it may be asked: How would St. Thomas write for the average layman? How would he conduct a "Theology for Laymen" class? How would he express profound truths to the average Sunday congregation? In an attempt to answer these questions, we hope to show that St. Thomas did express divine truth for the layman and that such writings, moreover, retained that angelic quality for which he is named.

The title "Angelic Doctor" was given to St. Thomas Aquinas because of the angelic quality of his writings. Not just this or that angelic quality, but for all the qualities proper to the nine choirs of Angels. Now, the Seraphim are so named for their excess of charity, best expressed by the words ardor or fire; the Cherubim, for their profundity of knowledge; Thrones, for learned judgment; Dominations, for freedom; Virtues, for strength; Powers, for order; Principalities, for leadership; Archangels, for the manifestation of great truths; and Angels, for the manifestation of lesser truths.¹ These nine angelic qualities: ardor, knowledge, judgment, freedom, strength, order, leadership, and the manifestation of great and lesser truths form the supporting framework of all the writings of the Angelic Doctor.

Moreover, just as these angelic properties find their source and fullness in Christ; so in the works of the Angelic Doctor, their source is Christ, the Bread of Angels; and for this reason also we will find their fullest employment in his Eucharistic treatises. We ask then, which of his Eucharistic works is best suited for the layman? In the *Summa Theologica* and in the *Summa Contra Gentes* the angelic qualities are certainly used but in a necessarily unbalanced fashion. For the stress is on the Cherubic profundity of knowledge, with Seraphic ardor held to a minimum. Nor is the Office of Corpus Christi suited to our purpose, for its function is to praise and only indirectly to teach. Thus we must turn to one of his smaller and less known works,

¹ *Sum. Theol.*, I, 108, 5, 6.

De Venerabili Sacramento Altaris, The Venerable Sacrament of the Altar.

It must be said that there is a lack of universal agreement on the authenticity of this work. But it will suffice to say here that the Leonine Commission states that this *opusculum* "shows a certain brilliance and erudition not unworthy of Aquinas."² Nor does the Commission hesitate to refer to it often as a parallel place.³

This entire treatise on the Eucharist is written with all the ardor and loving devotion of the Seraphim. As an example of a small spark of this warmth, St. Thomas, speaking of spiritual communion, says: "It is asked, where is this spiritual drink to be found? To this it is to be said that there are as many places as there are wounds of Christ. The Psalmist says: 'He struck the rock and the waters gushed out.'⁴ For just as the Jews drank water from the cleft of the rock, so the faithful drink spiritual blood from the wounds of Christ. Zacharias asks: 'What are these wounds in the midst of his hands?'⁵ And I answer, we draw from them spiritual blood by loving meditation upon His passion. For Isaias says: 'You shall draw waters with joy out of the Saviour's fountains,'⁶ that is, spiritual blood from His wounds to quench the thirst of evil desires."⁷

Nor does this work of the Angelic Doctor lack the profundity and precision of thought for which the Cherubim are named. For example, in speaking of sacramental communion St. Thomas always uses the term *recipere*, to receive; but when referring to spiritual communion to uses *percipere*, to perceive. Thus he delineates the distinction that we consume the body of Christ in sacramental communion by physical mastication, in spiritual communion by thought and meditation.

The learned judgment of the Thrones can be seen in his perfect choice of matter, order, style, Scriptural texts, examples, etc. This is evident in the following example. Illustrating the truth that by consecration the substance of the bread changes while the accidents remain, St. Thomas says: "The exterior appearance of a sinner seems healthy and beautiful; but the interior man is full of bitterness and the poison of sin and sickness. But when converted by the Spirit of God the interior bitterness and sickness of sin is changed into the

² Leo. Ed., Vol. I, p. 253.

³ *Sum. Theol.*, III, 73, 5.

⁴ Ps. 77, 20.

⁵ Zach. 13, 6.

⁶ Is. 12, 3.

⁷ Ven. Sac. Alt., Ser. 31.

sweetness and health of grace; while the exterior appearance of the man remains the same.”⁸ Thus St. Thomas not only has illustrated the truth in question, but the example itself teaches a moral.

The freedom for which the Dominations are named is more manifest here than in any other of St. Thomas’ Eucharistic works. For the manner of expressing a truth is regulated by the audience for whom it is intended. The audience of his other works are particular and determined groups, so his manner of expression is specialized. But in this work his audience is less limited, embracing the layman and the learned theologian alike. Thus, taking advantage of this opportunity, he employs a freer and more extensive use of scripture, examples, and verbal color.

As for the strength proper to that choir of angels called Virtues, this *opusculum* is unshakeable, because its foundation is the work of God. St. Thomas teaches⁹ that God gave us two great books from which to learn about divine things, namely, the book of Scripture and the book of Creation. From the first, he takes more than a thousand texts to support his propositions. Concerning the book of Creation he says: “It teaches the truth without lie, and caused Aristotle, when asked where he learned so many and such great things, to answer: ‘From the things themselves which know not how to deceive.’”¹⁰ And so from this book he takes countless examples of things common to us all, making the truths they exemplify easy to grasp and remember. Moreover, added to these two great sources, he frequently calls upon the authority of the Fathers of the Church.

The next outstanding quality of this work is order, for which the Angelic Powers are named. From the very first letter to the final period, the order found here is geared to perfection. The *opusculum* is divided into seven parts: The reasons for the Eucharist, The veiled appearance, The miracles performed in the Eucharist, Preparation for Communion, Reception of the Eucharist, The effects of the Body of Christ, and The effects of the Blood of Christ. Each part is divided into three sections, and each section into three, and each three into three, etc., forming a perfect, logical outline.

The leadership found in this treatise is worthy of the Principalities of heaven. For St. Thomas never over-writes the matter. He never gives the mind of the reader time to stray. He guides the imagination past every pitfall by keeping it busy penetrating the great

⁸ *Ibid.*, Ser. 12.

⁹ Sun. Ser., Second Sunday in Advent.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

truths before it. Thus he makes the reader think by leading and not carrying him from truth to truth.

Moreover, it is this very manifestation of truth that gives this work the qualities of the Archangels and Angels. For here St. Thomas sets forth divine truths in a simple, unpretentious form, manifesting them, as far as possible, in a way that can be understood by all and yet causing all to think, and when this is no longer possible, to believe. By exposing these truths to the layman he also instructs the theologian. For he shows the theologian how to teach the layman as the Angels would teach him. He shows the priest how to use the pulpit in an angelic way. Finally, to all he shows the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Venerable Sacrament of the Altar.