

DOMINIC SOTO

THEOLOGIAN OF THE COUNCIL OF TRENT (1494-1560)

One of the most renowned and erudite scholars of his time, and one whom the Order of Friars Preachers may proudly place before the present-day scholars of the world as an example worthy of admiration and emulation is Dominic Soto, known as "Theologian of the Council of Trent."

Unlike many scholars of his day Soto was born of poor parents, in the year 1494, in Segovia, in Old-Castile, during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella. At baptism he received his father's name, Francis, and on entering the Dominican Order took the name of Dominic. Here at Segovia his childhood was spent. His father, a poor gardener, had destined the youth to follow this same humble occupation. But Dominic felt himself called to something more elevated, and so evident were his precocious talents and his passion for study that he was finally allowed to attend the schools of Segovia, where he devoted his attention to such subjects as reading, writing and the elements of Latin Grammar. Poverty, however, soon forced him to abandon school and seek employment as sacristan of the Dominican church in the neighboring village of Ochand, where he first became acquainted with the Dominicans. For several years he fulfilled the duties of sacristan, an occupation which was peculiarly agreeable to him, inasmuch as it was favorable to his tender piety and afforded him, moreover, ample time for study. At this period Soto's intellectual development was great and the Lord, Whom he served with all the devotion of his heart, crowned his labors with success by enabling him to pursue his studies in the University of Alcala, where he studied under the famous Thomas de Villanova, afterwards Archbishop of Valentia and later canonized by Pope Alexander VII.

Here at Alcala he formed an intimate friendship with a fellow student, Fernandez de Saavedra, a young noble of kind and generous character, who at a later date joined the Dominicans and became one of the most zealous missionaries of the Indies, and especially of Mexico, where he became provincial superior.¹

The remarkable acumen and progress of Soto soon gained for him the friendship and esteem of his professors, and at this

¹ Cf. Davila, *Historia Prov. Mexicanæ*, lib. I. p. 149.

period he could have placed himself in an honorable situation as professor in any of the cities of Spain. The reputation of the University of Paris, however, was great and evidently exercised its influence on Soto, for, abandoning the course at Alcala, he went to that capital and there pursued his studies. Saavedra soon followed, and both became the disciples of the two Castalian Doctors who then taught with great renown in the schools of Paris. Having given many signal proofs of his ability, and having completed his course, Soto, now a Doctor of Philosophy, returned in the company of his faithful friend to Spain in 1520.

The Chair of Philosophy being then vacant at Alcala, Soto contested for the honor and became professor at the college of Saint Ildefonse, where, as later at Salamanca, he distinguished himself by upholding the philosophical doctrines of St. Thomas. It would seem that a young man of such accomplishments had reached the height of his ambition. But it was not the case with Soto. In 1524 we see him leave the University and seek admission to the Benedictine Monastery at Montserrat. A young religious of this house, however, advised him to join the Friars Preachers, "those masters of science, heralds of preaching and cultivators of virtue and sound doctrine," where leading the active life of a friar he might make fuller use of the talents God had given him, and labor not only for his own salvation but likewise for the salvation of others. Soto received this advice as inspired by God, and after having made a retreat he departed for Burgos, where he received the habit of the Order and entered upon his novitiate in the Convent of St. Paul. The following year, July 25, 1525, he was admitted to profession and was at once made professor of dialectics in his convent.

In 1525 appeared Soto's first work, entitled "*Summulae*," which in simplicity, precision and clearness excelled the manuals of logic then in use. After teaching in his convent for a few years he was called to assume a Chair of Theology in the University of Salamanca, November 27, 1532, and continued to teach there till 1545, when he was chosen by Emperor Charles V as the Imperial theologian at the Council of Trent.² The Master General, Albertus Casaus, having died shortly before the opening of the Council, the honor of representing the Order during the first

² The Imperial letter is dated Jan. 10, 1545. During the month of December, Soto assisted at the first session of the Council. Cf. Quetif. Echard, t. II, p. 171.

four sessions was bestowed on Dominic Soto. In the following sessions he represented the newly-elected General, Francis Romaeus, until he himself could attend. Those authors who have written the history of the Council of Trent inform us of the esteem in which Soto was held by all the Fathers. His singular talents and purity of doctrine, together with his rare prudence and tender piety, excited the admiration of the whole assembly. Frequently he was placed amongst those whose duty it was to reduce the decrees of that Council to their present form. Despite his many duties, Soto found time to write the brilliant masterpiece, entitled "*De Natura et Gratia*," in which he clearly and ably expounds the Thomistic doctrine on Original Sin and Grace. In fact, his treatise was so much admired by the Fathers that he was chosen to draw up the decrees on Justification. Some fragments of his discourses on the interpretation of Holy Scripture have been preserved; also his discourse on the utility of Scholastic Theology, which the heretics endeavored to decry because it served so admirably to expose their sophisms and to convict them of error. In the Ottobon library of the Vatican four codices contain the many unedited theological works of Soto.³

The Council was transferred to Bologne, and soon afterwards interrupted in the year 1547. As an expression of their gratitude to Dominic Soto for his faithful and unselfish service, the Fathers of the Council presented him with a shield similar to the coat-of-arms of the nobility—two hands crossed, from which issued flames with this device: "*Fides quae per caritatem operatur*"—Faith which works through charity.

Charles V summoned Soto to Germany as his confessor and spiritual director, which duties he discharged for some time with disinterested zeal. The See of Segovia being vacant, the Emperor tried, but in vain, to induce this zealous religious to accept the bishopric. Desiring to return to his convent, Dominic sought permission of the Emperor to retire from his Court. In 1550, at last relieved from his duty of confessor, he returned to Spain, intending to carry out his resolution of devoting his future life to solitude, preaching and prayer. Soon after his arrival in Spain, however, he was forced to accept the Priorship of the convent of Salamanca. The religious, who had long witnessed his regularity, his prudence and other great qualities, believed that

³ Der Katholik, Novembre, 1884, p. 501.

it would be difficult to find any other superior so well suited to preserve the spirit of piety in their convent, and at the same time establish and foster an ardent zeal in the pursuit of sacred science. Their hopes were realized, for they found their Superior to be a model of all Christian virtues. He never required others to do that which he did not himself first practice. He was equally incapable of correcting faults through passion and of disregarding them through weakness. His prudent firmness was always accompanied with a tender devotedness, so that even the least fervent were constrained to love him.

Two years later Melchior Cano was made Bishop and Soto was chosen to replace him at the University of Salamanca. Thus, at the age of sixty he returned to his former position as professor. Although Cano's reputation was great, his absence from the University soon ceased to be felt. It was during this time that Soto wrote a treatise on the abuse of oaths in which are to be found some excellent rules.

After four years of glorious work he retired from the University in 1556 and was soon re-elected Prior of his convent. It was the destiny of this great servant of God never to live for himself, never to find repose but in labor. As Prior, he consoled his brethren in their infirmities and distributed to the poor whatever alms the poverty of his convent permitted or the charitable had placed at his disposal. We cannot but admire the humility of a man, who, although he had taught with such renown in the Universities, had been honored at the Court of a powerful monarch and at the great Council of Trent, delighted in serving the sick and seemed to be at the head of his community for no other purpose than to be the servant of all. Such were the tender and pious exercises of Soto until the end of his career. Well might he have said with Saint Paul, when his time for departure from this life had arrived: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." On November 15, 1560, after thirty years of devoted service to God as a Dominican, the soul of this humble religious was transported to the joys of a life unending.

All who have spoken or written of the celebrated theologians of the sixteenth century, or who have written the history of the Council of Trent or of Charles V, have eulogized the memory of Dominic Soto. The Protestants themselves, although they never had a more formidable adversary, respected the talents, the

learning and the virtues of this great man. Nicholas Antoine, when he mentions the veneration in which Soto's writings were held in Spain, remarks that the words, *qui scit Sotum, scit Totum*—he who knows Soto, knows all—had become proverbial in that country.

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