

THEOLOGY FOR THE LAYMAN

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ODAY, the phrase *theology for laymen* is common in Catholic life. Lectures and series of lectures, articles, pamphlets and books appear under its banner; their numbers are numerous and increasing. Yet, the exact nature of the movement as it differs from similar movements to spread Christian doctrine, and its appearance in history, remain obscure to many.

Three factors unite to make theology possible to the Catholic layman. The first is Catholic theology itself. The second is the presence in the Church of a large number of competent theologians, while the third factor is the Catholic layman, grounded in the essentials of his faith, and seeking a deeper and stronger understanding of that faith. It is the Church's love for the truths of faith, both in her hierarchy, clergy and in her layman that unites these factors into the dynamic movement *theology for laymen*.

THEOLOGY AND THE CHURCH

Theology has always been in the Church a flower of the faith. It shows forth the beauty of the faith; it sows the seed of the truths of the faith ever more deeply in Christian hearts. Theology, like faith, is a habit of the mind, a virtue of the mind. It is a permanent, ordered way of thinking. It begins with faith. It ends with faith.

Theology begins with faith. It begins with all the truths which God has revealed to us, and which we believe. It is this sublime beginning that raises theology above every human science. Other sciences begin with the things of earth. Their ultimate discovery is earth's need for a cause not of earth. Theology, on the other hand, begins at the summit, it begins with God. Possessing the truths of faith, theology begins with a share in God's own knowledge and science of Himself. If, then, man's natural science must ultimately look up, how is it that theology should ever look down?

And yet, we know it does. Theology does look to the things of

this world. It does this not to learn about this world as such. Theology's only concern is man's knowledge of God. It must be, then, that theology considers creatures precisely because God has considered them. Because God has looked down, has brought forth all creation, theology looks for God in creation.

Theology does, in fact, find God in creatures. Not that God is one with creatures. This would be pantheism. But theology finds God as He is the Beginning of all things. Theology finds God also as He is the End of all things!

It is this discovery of God as the End of all things that makes theology the most practical of sciences! God is the goal of man. We have come forth from the Creator's hand. It is in Him that we must find our end. Theology shows us clearly just how we have come forth from God . . . what we are. Theology shows us why we must attain to perfect knowledge of Him as our final goal. Theology shows us how we can attain to such beatitude. Always, then, theology's only concern is man's knowledge of God.

. . . AND THE CHURCH

Theology, in broad outline, has never been absent from the Church. It was possessed eminently in the infused wisdom given the apostles. A like knowledge was expected of bishops, the apostles' successors. It was from such a vantage point that the bishops were to enlighten the Church. Theirs was the apostolic mandate to "preach the word; be instant in season, out of season reprove, entreat, rebuke in all patience and doctrine . . ." (II Tim., iv, 2), yet always being careful to "avoid foolish and unlearned questions, knowing that they beget strife" (II Tim., ii, 23). The bishops of the Church took up their duty to preach and teach "not in the persuasive words of human wisdom, but in shewing of the Spirit and power" (I Cor., ii, 4).

THE FIRST THEOLOGIANS

The bishops, then, were the first, the official theologians of the Church. In their service and under their guidance, the theology of the Church was to take upon itself a new role. The Apostle Paul had predicted: "there shall be a time when they will not endure sound doctrine but, according to their own desires, they will heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears . . ." (II Tim., iv, 3). Against such false teachers there would needs be defence. The danger would come from within, many perverting their faith for the sake of human wisdoms. Particularly in the

Christian East, heretics came from the centers of learning. Bishops, in turn, by their defence and exposition of the faith became the Fathers of the Church:

"As God, in His careful foresight for the defence of His Church against the rage of tyrants, raised up the martyrs, very strong and lavish of their mighty souls; so against philosophers, falsely so called, and against heretics, He raised up men great in wisdom to defend even by the help of human reason the treasure of revealed truth."¹

Nor were they lacking in eloquence of expression:

"Whilst the pagan writers are wearing themselves out in the composition of finely worded but empty works, the great Christian orators are employing all their knowledge of language in the service of the doctrine and morals that they have to teach the faithful."²

However, in the West the scene was somewhat different:

"... unlike Christian Byzantium, Christian Rome represents only a brief interlude between paganism and barbarianism. There were only eighteen years between Theodosius' closing of the temples and the first sack of the Eternal City by the barbarians. The great age of the Western Fathers from Ambrose to Augustine was crammed into a single generation, and St. Augustine died with the Vandals at the gate."³

WHAT OF THE LAITY?

But in both East and West the faithful were the beneficiaries of the age. To them were addressed the sermons which were to enlighten and guide the Church in subsequent centuries. It was the Golden Age of the Fathers. In the centuries that followed, the Church would not quickly forget the words of the Fathers. Efforts to combine and unify their teaching gradually mount an imposing system of Catholic doctrine. Bishops are charged to re-echo in the ears of the faithful the doctrine and often the very sermons of the Fathers.⁴ In the East much of the common touch was lost in formality and rigid imitation.⁵ But in the West this could not be so. The truths of the faith had to reach the ear of the barbarian invader, the unlettered. The presentation would necessarily be simple and forthright. St. Augustine had given the example. Understanding (of the most sublime truths) and not grammatical form was to be the ultimate criterion. St. Gregory the Great had given the precept, urging bishops to preach after the example of the apostles. Only from the bishop would Christian

souls receive the doctrinal nourishment so necessary for a lively faith. The advance of the faith in subsequent centuries followed closely upon conformity of bishops to these apostolic standards.

NUMEROUS THEOLOGIANS

The next stage in the development of *theology for the layman* comes in the thirteenth century. The Western Church had by means of her missionary efforts spread throughout Northwestern Europe. The faith of the Church had taken hold. It had been strengthened by the example of her monks, inspired by the holiness of her saints, instructed and nourished by the beauty and meaning of her liturgy. Yet, as time passed, it became clear: that same faith was in jeopardy!

The advance of Islam had left its effects in Southern France.⁶ Heretics expelled from Byzantium were now making a foothold in that area. Furthermore, the classical philosophy espoused by the Islamic world was finding adherents in the West and proving noxious to the faith. The West was plainly unprepared to deal with these developments.

It was not that the Church was in doubt where the remedy lay. The immediate remedy pertained to the episcopal offices of preaching and teaching. Yet these offices had fallen into neglect. Long range remedies included a more thorough training of the clergy and a more vital intellectual life in the West.

What was done to supply for these needs only Peter's successor could have done. "Considering that the brethren of your order are to be champions of the faith and true lights of the world . . ."—in these prophetic almost mandatory words, Honorius III confirmed the order envisioned by St. Dominic de Guzman, founder of the Order of Preachers. Lights of the world! Preachers! Sent to be worthy vicars of the hierarchy; to share in the sublime prerogative of teaching and preaching sacred doctrine!

Such confidence placed in Dominic and his brethren was not to be regretted. Years later Pope Alexander IV was to give the order this tribute:

"The friars of this Order are men proved, filled with divine knowledge, efficacious in zeal, powerful in preaching, whose lips grace has touched to teach true doctrine and direct others in the way of salvation."⁷

If the bishops of the Church were the theologians of the Church by reason of their office, the Friar Preacher was to be a

theologian by reason of his vocation. It was not unfitting, then that one of them should become the theologian par excellence of the Universal Church, St. Thomas Aquinas. All seemed to converge on Thomas: the newly available works of Aristotle, Greece's greatest philosophical giant; the writings of the Ancients; the Roman classics; the writings of the Neo-Platonists, the Arabs . . . all required of the mind of Thomas by his master St. Albert. These disciplines served Thomas well as he ordered his enormous knowledge of Sacred Scripture, the Fathers, and all subsequent ecclesiastical writers. The result is history. Theology flowed from the pen of Thomas in its developed form as true science.

Almost immediately the doctrine of Thomas won recognition among his brethren, his contemporaries, and the Church. The latter's praise and commendation of the writings of St. Thomas resound through papal encyclicals and decrees from his day to ours. That Thomas should be known: this was the will of the Church!

Acceptance of St. Thomas did, in fact, become general. Nevertheless, Thomas' doctrine has not been without its competitors for men's minds. Systems of subtleties, systems of criticism have in turn claimed their adherents. In the face of heresy, however, it was always to the writings of St. Thomas that the Church openly turned.

Later centuries, lost in meticulous and detailed advances in the natural sciences, lost sight of St. Thomas. That St. Thomas and Aristotle should have gone before, should have advanced from prime reality to prime reality, this possibility truly escaped them. Catholics themselves had to be reminded in the last century by Pope Leo XIII concerning St. Thomas:

" . . . carefully distinguishing reason from Faith, as is right, and yet joining them together in a harmony of friendship, he so guarded the rights of each, and so watched over the dignity 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."⁸

Today, St. Thomas' doctrine holds a place of prominence perhaps unequaled in history. Respect for his works is by no means restricted to the Catholic world.

THEOLOGY AND THE LAITY

In this present age, the Church is more anxious than ever to give her children greater insights into the truths of faith

“. . . that having obtained a fuller and more profound grasp of Christian doctrine than has hitherto been customary, they may be able both to defend their faith against the common objections and may strive by explanation and persuasion, to bring it to as many others as it is possible.”⁹

In the ensuing decade following these words of Pius XI on June 29, 1923, the Western World witnessed the advent of its present ideological turmoil. The economic disaster of the late twenties had left many seriously disillusioned. Communism and Fascism received attentive audience and won to their cause many partisans. Liberalism was running rampant.

In the face of these developments, prominent Catholic laymen of New York came together. They felt something should and could be done. Catholics possessed the richest of intellectual traditions. In that tradition, the world was to be seen as the Church sees it; as it actually is. And yet, as one of those first present was later to write:

“. . . most of us have Catholic wills, but not many of us have Catholic intellects. When we look at the Universe, we see pretty well what other people see, plus certain extra features taught us by our religion. For the most part, the same influences that form other people's minds, form ours . . . the same habits of thought, inclinations, bodily senses, indolences worked upon by the same newspapers, periodicals, best sellers, films, radio programs. So that we have not so much Catholic minds as worldly minds with Catholic patches.”¹⁰

These Catholic men, therefore, headed by the Reverend Vincent C. Donovan, O.P., and supported by the Dominican Province of St. Joseph, decided to found “The Catholic Thought Association.” When incorporated in the State of New York in 1935 the Board consisted of: the Very Reverend T. S. McDermott, O.P., Provincial, the Reverend Vincent C. Donovan, O.P., National Director, William J. Donovan, lawyer, Thomas Woodlock, editor of *Wall Street Journal*, William Hard, journalist, Constantine McGuire, economist and historian, Raoul Desvernine, lawyer, and Richard Dana Skinner, business man, dramatic critic and writer. The first object of the association was “to promote among our own people a wider knowledge, appreciation and understanding of the Thomistic philosophy both in itself and in its application to the problems of the day.”

The association called almost entirely upon the Dominican Fathers as lecturers. The late Reverend Ignatius Smith, O.P., opened the first introductory series of twenty lectures in New

York, 1934-35. The following season, the late Reverend Walter Farrell, O.P., began the first complete series based upon the entire *Summa* of St. Thomas. This undertaking extended over the next four years. Father Farrell's *Companion to the Summa* is the published form of the series.

Under the auspices of the newly incorporated association, the movement took on almost nation-wide proportions. In Chicago; Minneapolis; Louisville; Madison, Wisconsin; Washington; Baltimore; Philadelphia; New Haven; Cambridge; Princeton; Charlottesville, Virginia; Annapolis; Greenwich, Connecticut; Waterbury, Connecticut . . . trained Dominican theologians ascended the rostrum. In the Midwest, the movement soon took up separate organization. There it came under the direction of "The Thomist Association." In 1955, with the invitation and encouragement of his Eminence, James Francis Cardinal McIntyre, the movement came to the Far West with the founding of the "St. Thomas Aquinas Institute."

The aim of these lectures is to extend the knowledge of the laity beyond the fundamental stage of the Catechism, to deepen and apply this knowledge to the problems of life. In short, the purpose is not to develop speculative theologians but practical Catholics, Catholics who will be the more devout because of greater understanding of the sublime mysteries of faith. In this way, theology, beginning with faith, ends with faith, with a faith deepened and strengthened. For this reason, then, do Catholic laymen sit at the feet of Thomas

" . . . not so much to be taught by his words, as to be altogether nourished by them."¹¹

Following upon these beginnings, efforts to bring theology to the layman have taken on broad and varied forms. *Theology for the layman* is the weekly column in the diocesan paper; it is the Holy Name pamphlet, the new book, perhaps even the local television program. (Not a little part of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's nationally given television talks represent an effort to bring theological truths into American life.)

Today, the lecture series program continues in the larger cities of the nation. They are also to be found wherever Dominican Fathers are stationed and available for this work. In Boston, the Archbishop Cushing School of Theology has been established to ensure the continuance of these lectures on a permanent and standard basis.

Laymen capable of profiting from such courses and eager to do so are not wanting. At present, what is wanting are instructors thoroughly grounded in the teachings of St. Thomas. Trained theologians, today, are at a premium. Their numbers are not as yet sufficient to supply adequately for the training of teaching sisters—where their first obligation lies. The need for theologians on the campuses and in the classrooms of the nation's colleges and universities is equally pressing.

The need, then, is for apostolic learning—for ever more assiduous study of the science of the faith, particularly by clerics, priests, and religious.

“The chief task of religious is to seek God alone, to cleave to Him, to meditate His divine mysteries, and to *teach Him to others*. They must never forget that it will be impossible for them to fulfill this sacred duty properly and fruitfully and to rise to a sublime union with Christ if they lack that abundant, profound and ever growing knowledge of God and His mysteries which is derived from sacred doctrine.”¹²

What may be expected from such intensified application, so prayerful in nature, to the sacred disciplines? What, save that deeper understanding and devotion which the faith of those in every rank of the Church so eagerly seeks.

Footnotes

¹ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, a. 1879.

² Abbe G. Bardy, *The Greek Literature of the Early Christian Church* (Herder, 1929), p. 91.

³ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (Sheed & Ward, 1950), p. 28.

⁴ *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1919) “Homeletics,” Vol. VII, p. 444.

⁵ *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1910) “Byzantium,” Vol. III, p. 120.

⁶ Christopher Dawson, *op. cit.* pp. 181-187.

⁷ Pére Mandonnet, O.P., *St. Dominic and His Work* (Herder, 1944), p. 73.

⁸ Leo XIII, *ibid.*

⁹ Pius XI, *Motu Proprio*, June 29, 1923.

¹⁰ F. J. Sheed, *Theology and Sanity* (Sheed & Ward, 1953), p. 4.

¹¹ Leo XIII, *ibid.*

¹² Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Sedes Sapientiae*, May 31, 1956. Italics ours.