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LETTER OF THE MASTER GENERAL OF THE DOMINICANS ON THE OCCASION OF THE SIXTH CENTENARY OF THE CANONIZATION OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

To our Beloved in the Son of God:

To the Very Reverend Provincials, Masters, Ex-Provincials, Priors, and to each and all of the Fathers, Brothers and Sisters of the Order of Preachers, We, Fr. Louis Theissing, Professor of Sacred Theology, the Humble Master General and Servant of the same Order, Greetings, and the Imitation of the Angelic Doctor.

The six hundredth commemoration of that universal joy, which scarcely a century after the precious death of our Blessed Father Dominic, affected the entire Order, when the Godlike Thomas Aquinas, his most illustrious son, was numbered among the Blessed, affords us a fresh opportunity of addressing you, dear Fathers and Brothers and Sisters beloved in Christ. For on the eighteenth of July, 1323, John XXII, then resident at Avignon, acceding to the insistent demands of princes, kings and distinguished prelates throughout the world, and to the prayers of the foremost universities, solemnly canonized our brother Thomas Aquinas, whom many had long hailed as a saint, and to whose teachings the Church had paid honor in sundry ways.

As early as the year 1318 the same Pontiff had said in praise of him: "We believe that Brother Thomas is in heaven, for his life was holy and his teaching no less than miraculous."¹ In a discourse delivered on the fourteenth of July, 1323, he had added: "This glorious doctor was second only to the Apostles and early doctors in shedding lustre on the Church of God,"² and among other encomiums declared that "he had worked as many miracles as he had written articles."³ Four days later

¹ Acta S.S. T.I. March, p. 680.

² Percin, Monum. Conv. Tolos., p. 229.

³ Ibid.

during the celebration of the solemn canonization, in unprecedented language he styled the writings of St. Thomas "works of God,"⁴ and eulogized our Holy Doctor in these words of the books of Wisdom: "And he gave him commandments before his face and a law of life and instruction. . . . In the midst of the Church the Lord opened his mouth, and filled him with the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, and clothed him with a robe of glory."⁵

Thus did the Pontiff extol a twofold sanctity in St. Thomas—sanctity of life and of doctrine. And indeed, perhaps in no other individual have purity and excellence of doctrine been combined with such sublime integrity of life as in our brother Thomas. For if, as he himself affirmed, sanctity is but the purity and innocence of a heart raised from earth and made stable in things divine;⁶ and since God has promised the sight of Himself to the clean of heart as it is written: "Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God";⁷ surely that vision of God which was in a peculiar manner vouchsafed to Thomas Aquinas on earth, was but the reward for his angelic purity of heart, since from the first God seems to have disposed his soul to receive the fulness of heavenly light. Well could he be called a vessel of election who from childhood had fixed his mind on God alone, and who with God's assistance had preserved unspotted his extraordinary purity and virginity. In this wise the way to knowledge of the things of God lay open to him without hindrance; to this was joined the abundance of other spiritual goods, so that one may fittingly apply to him the words: "Now all good things came to me together with her, and innumerable riches through her hands."⁸ For, "as a clean eye enables us to see clearly, so is the divine vision promised to the clean of heart."⁹

Justly, therefore, could the Church proclaim such a Master of truth and piety a saint. But since she desired to adorn him with a distinctive title, significant of his twofold sanctity in life and doctrine, she hailed him as the "Angelic Doctor," for

⁴ Bullar, O. P., T.II., p. 159.

⁵ Eccles. XLV, 6; XV, 5.

⁶ Summa Theol. II-II, LXXXI, a.8.

⁷ Matth. V, 8.

⁸ Sap. VII, 11.

⁹ Summa Theol. I-II, LXIX, a.4.

to his angelic morals were united that depth of mind and plenitude of heavenly gifts by which man even on earth is made a citizen of heaven.

We would now consider the qualities, which St. Thomas himself tells us, should be present in a holy Master. "The first is *stability*, that he may not wander from truth; the second, *clearness*, that he may not teach obscurely: the third, *utility*, that he may seek not his own, but God's glory."¹⁰ In an extraordinary degree were these characteristics present in St. Thomas, and we find unmistakable evidences of them in his works.

In the first place his whole life affords us excellent examples of stability in his unwavering love for truth. Even from his earliest years he thirsted for the knowledge of God, and from his first teachers, the monks of St. Benedict in the famous monastery of Monte Cassino, to whose care he had been entrusted, he anxiously enquired: "Who is God?" For the sole purpose of gaining this knowledge of God he bade farewell to the vanities of the world, to honors and riches that he might sincerely say of Wisdom as of a treasure unearthed: "Her have I loved and have sought her out from my youth."¹¹ In later years he staunchly and confidently defended this mistress, marvelously extended her domains, and became her herald and spouse. "And I have desired to take her for my spouse."¹² That he proved loyal to her; that he departed not a hair's breadth from truth, Christ Himself has borne witness when from the cross He addressed these words to Thomas in prayer: "Well hast thou written of Me, O Thomas."

Secondly, so transcendent was the clearness of our Master that, even as the Divine Splendor, he has been likened to the sun. In this regard we may appropriately refer to him these words of Wisdom: "The sun giving light has looked on all things, and full of the glory of the Lord is his work."¹³ Not only did St. Thomas employ unmistakable language in expounding difficult questions, but he likewise discovered a lucid order in truth, resolving them most skilfully into their principles, and demonstrating their connection and harmony. We know that his style in teaching was so intelligible and painstaking that he

¹⁰ Comment. in Matt. C. V.

¹¹ Sap. VIII, 2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Eccles. XLII, 16.

has made truth more lovable, such as in fact, it is made for those who ponder his writings, and has increased in many the desire of becoming acquainted with it.

And lastly, the utility of his teachings is infinite and astounding, inasmuch as it has furthered God's own high glory. "It is our aim," he once wrote, "to set forth, in so far as in us lies, the truth which Catholic faith professes, by confounding the contrary errors; for, in the words of Hilary, I know that I owe this to God as my chief duty in life, that my every word and its meaning may speak of him."¹⁴ And, although he was overwhelmed with praise, signally honored by Pontiffs and kings, applauded while yet alive as the defense and light of the Church, yet he always restored this glory and honor to God, whilst he remained humble to the end; so that we may say of Thomas what he himself said of the spiritual man: "Whatsoever he loves, he loves in God; to the love of God he directs his every affection . . . our whole external life, words and deeds are strengthened by divine charity."¹⁵

Even a brief scrutiny of the salient features in the doctrines of St. Thomas will reveal that one characteristic stands out above all others; one which proves the serviceableness of his teachings in the Church; the depths and beauty of which trained intellects labor to discern—its supernatural character. That the teachings of our Angelic Master are truly supernatural is plain, whether we view their origin or intimate nature, or whether we consider their effects and purpose.

Who, realizing that his doctrine is pre-eminently the fruit of constant prayer before Our Crucified Lord, Jesus Christ, can doubt its supernatural origin? Thomas knew well the advice of St. James the Apostle: "But if any of you want wisdom, let him ask it of God who giveth to all men abundantly."¹⁶ It is related that once he confided to his fellow-friar Reginald that it was his practice to acquire knowledge, not so much through his own study and labor as from divine inspiration. Intimate union with God elevated his mind to the heights of divine contemplation. To quote the words of the Wise Man in his regard: "And I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came upon me."¹⁷

¹⁴ *Contra Gent. Lib. I, c. II.*

¹⁵ *Tract. de vita spirit. Opusc. XVIII.*

¹⁶ *S. James, I, 5.*

¹⁷ *Sap. VII, 7.*

The cloistral solitude which he had chosen, the perfect habit of religious life, the rigorous observance of silence—all these made ready his soul to hearken to the voice of the Lord, to whom might he say with the prophet Samuel: "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."¹⁸ Thus in a short while and by a safe and direct route he arrived at a deep knowledge of supernatural truth. In all his labors, whether in writing, teaching or preaching he always had recourse to prayer: when, however, he wished to explain perplexing passages of the sacred books he fortified prayer with fasting.

It is not surprising, then that the doctrine of St. Thomas drawn from the very fountain-head of divine Wisdom, appears supernatural even in its intimate nature. By means of exhaustive and deft handling of philosophical doctrines it was his aim to refute the errors of such as contemned divine revelation, and to win them over solely by reasoning. To this end he takes care to bring out the distinction of the twofold order of truths: the natural, which is within reach of the finite intellect, and the supernatural, the real existence of which our reason must admit, together with the possibility of an Activity infinitely exceeding that of any created power and wholly distinct therefrom, and concerning which creatures can know nothing except by the particular revelation of Almighty God. But what shall we say of the Mistress of Sciences, Sacred Theology, whose supernatural nature St. Thomas has most ably demonstrated, placing its origin in Divine Wisdom itself? Sacred doctrine, he affirms, is but "the stamp of Divine Science in us";¹⁹ the noblest of sciences, deducing its principles from no other, and inferior only to the knowledge of God Himself and of the Blessed. With these supernatural principles, known only through divine revelation, as a starting point our Holy Doctor searches all truths; truths which concern God and His attributes; those which have to do with the works of creation and especially with the Angels and man; and finally, such as deal with man in particular whether as guiding him to God, or turning him away therefrom. In this examination the light of divine revelation ever assists us even in the realm of natural truths, wherein human reason under the guidance of St. Thomas advances at leisure, and achieves the

¹⁸ I Kings, III, 10.

¹⁹ Summa Theol. I, 1, a.3, ad 2um.

goal beyond which it is unlawful to proceed or speculate. "Moreover," says Leo XIII, "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."²⁰ But if by its inherent disposition limits must be set to human knowledge as to human ability, which we can in no wise exceed since our nature is finite and sense-bound; on the other hand, supernatural knowledge has no such restrictions; it find its objects in ultramundane regions; examines them in a superior light in so far as it can while yet on earth; to understand them fully only in eternity, yet tasting even in this life by faith and theological doctrine, that vision which will make us happy in heaven. Thus does the life of a faithful and discerning Christian become "the beginning of eternal life in us," as St. Thomas has so aptly described it.²¹ And so, in his treatises on such mysteries of our Faith as those of the Most Holy Trinity, the Incarnation of the Word, and the everlasting glory of the Blessed; in his explanations of the Word of God as contained in the Psalms, the Gospels and in the Epistles of St. Paul; in his discourses and lyrics on the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, the fulness of supernatural truth is brought before us as a stream flowing through the vineyard of the Lord, causing the blossoms of spiritual goodness to sprout forth and bear the fruits of life.

It is likewise apparent that the purpose and wholesome effects of his teaching are supernatural, inasmuch as they tend to elevate the soul; enrich it with graces, virtues and all heavenly gifts and thus lead it to eternal life; to the intuitive vision of the One Object, here glimpsed but through the eyes of faith; and to that union with God wherein lies the essence of Christian life.

Hence it is clear, dear Fathers and Brothers, how incumbent it is on us to persevere in the study of his doctrines, and how profitable will it be to broadcast them among Christian peoples. The war which today is being waged against the Church

²⁰ Enc. "Aeterni Patris."

²¹ Summa Theol. II-II, 4, a.1.

by enemies, who though they wrangle with and contradict one another, are yet of one mind in assailing Catholic truths, has but this end in view—the denial of the supernatural order. Whether in the speculative field they would reduce the entire universe to a progressive evolution of matter; or affirm that all being consists in mere subjective conception; or stupidly confound the created nature of things with the uncreated and divine nature: or whether on the practical side they attempt to draw men away from spiritual truth and from the fear of everlasting punishment; or wholly reject the existence of a future life—the one source and head of all these errors is but the haughty denial, either as regards Divine Truth or Divine Activity, of this distinction of the twofold order, the natural and supernatural, which St. Thomas has rationally placed as the keystone and foundation of all his teaching. Let but this distinction be set aside or not rightly established, and the whole supernatural order is either totally demolished or completely removed from our midst. It is on this account that such nonsensical notions are held concerning the Church and its supernatural character; this is why its prerogatives and rights based on divine revelation are denied, and that many assert the self-sufficiency of civil society, maintaining that it might well survive without religion.

There is no doubt that actual ignorance in matters of faith has its share in the denial of the supernatural; for, on the other hand, sciences purely human and attuned only to material life are seen to move forward in a surprising manner. But the inevitable outcome of this ignorance must be the alienation of mankind from its Saviour and Redeemer. For since corruption of morals is always to be traced to depravity of the intellect what can we expect from a society which has embraced the greatest of intellectual follies, atheism; or at least a state of mind which permits one to conduct himself as if there were no God, or as if He were merely ideal?

You well know, dear Fathers and Brothers, that by reason of the very purpose of our Institute there is confided to us the defense of our Faith; even in the Bull of Confirmation Pope Honorius III styled the Friar Preachers “fighters for the faith and true lights of the world.”²² In well formed array, then, and

²² Bull of Confirmation, Dec. 22, 1217.

under the leadership of Thomas Aquinas, must we do battle in defense of the supernatural order, to safeguard and preserve the Faith for the welfare of humanity. A rule has been set down for us. What has been enjoined on all professors of Catholic Theology and Philosophy, namely "to carry out these studies and the teaching of them according to the method, doctrine and principles of the Angelic Doctor and to embrace them lovingly,"²³ we must cherish as a solemn command; not only that we may endeavor to conform to this rule, but that we may reveal to others, many others, the treasures of Thomistic doctrine, bring to light its profound and hidden beauties and make clear its pre-eminent solidity and excellence.

So we see that St. Thomas has proved helpful to the Church of God in two ways: by the sanctity of his life and the soundness of his teachings; to follow in his footsteps, to profit by such a master will be salutary to all. If we seek to "comprehend his teachings by our intellect, and to fulfill by imitation what he wrought"²⁴ we shall then be able to venerate this master of knowledge and piety, who, six centuries ago, was proclaimed by John XXII as an angel abundantly dispensing to all that draught whereby faith is nourished in us, hopes raised and the love of charity increased.²⁵

To you especially, Brothers and Sisters, whose duty it is to nurture the youths of our colleges and institutes, or who in any way are concerned with the interests of our boys and girls, do we appeal. In St. Thomas Aquinas the entire body of student youth possesses a patron and leader. For, since Leo XIII of happy memory declared him to be the heavenly protector of our Catholic schools,²⁶ it beseems not only the young men engrossed in philosophical and theological studies in our colleges and seminaries to revere him in a most especial manner; but it is meet that all other students of Catholic schools treasure him as a life-model. Before St. Thomas was raised to the master's chair he had proved himself a perfect disciple; not only in his surpassing purity of mind and body, which with God's help had come forth victorious from a hard fought struggle; but likewise in that spotlessness of soul which he had preserved un-

²³ Codex Iuris Can. can. 1366, No. 2.

²⁴ Prayer for the Feast of St. Thomas.

²⁵ Bull of Canonization.

²⁶ Brief, "Cum hoc sit . . ." Aug. 4, 1880.

sullied throughout life. Hence could he be enriched with that depth of wisdom which "will not enter into a malicious soul, nor dwell in a body subject to sins."²⁷

We would disclose to you a project close to our hearts—the greater spread among young people of both sexes of devotion to St. Thomas as the guardian of chastity, as also enrollment in the Angelic Warfare which has been approved time and again by our Holy Pontiffs and on which have been lavished countless indulgences. Truly this centenary offers us a splendid opportunity of increasing this devotion which will gain for the Church a larger army of warriors in behalf of Faith and good morals. Let the younger generation be chaste, lovers of integrity, and then may they rightly claim St. Thomas as their Patron. And if under his standard their hearts seek but God's Will, they will stand before the world, their minds unfolded to the light of truth; "ardently desiring, prudently searching, truthfully acknowledging and perfectly accomplishing"²⁸ what is pleasing to God for the praise and glory of His Name.

Farewell. Pray to God, to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, to our Holy Father St. Dominic and to our Angelic Master St. Thomas for us and our companions.

Given at Rome in the Collegio Angelico on the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas in the year of Our Lord, 1923.

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Fr. Angelicus M. Ferretti, Secretary.

Translated by Bro. Leonard Callahan, O. P.

²⁷ Sap. I, 4.

²⁸ Prayer of St. Thomas before study.