

GESTA DOCTRINAMQUE

Let the brothers reflect on and make known the teachings and achievements (gesta doctrinamque) of those in the family of St. Dominic who have gone before them, while not forgetting to pray for them (See Liber constitutionum et ordinationum 160).

THE APOSTOLATE OF JESUS

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Pierre-Thomas Dehau was born August 5, 1870, in Bouvines, a small town in northern France, to Félix and Marie Dehau. He entered the seminary at St. Sulpice at the age of eighteen and was ordained at Cambrai in 1894. After a brief assignment as chaplain of an agricultural school in eastern France, he was sent for theological studies at Fribourg, Switzerland, where he met the Order of Preachers. He entered the Dominican Province of France in 1896, taking the religious name Thomas.

He took up an apostolate of preaching homilies and giving retreats. Partially blind from a young age, he was never able to write books—all the works of his that we have today come from notes of his lectures, homilies, and conferences. In many of these, we see his conviction that contemplation is not reserved to religious, but is rather a gift made available to all. He died in 1956, while serving the Dominican nuns in his hometown of Bouvines.

The selection that follows is taken from *The Apostolate of Jesus* (Tours: Maison Mame, 1954, 105–115). It is a commentary on St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 40. The question he treats here concerns Christ's manner of life.

COMMUNICATION BY WORD

The end of the Incarnation, we have said, required that Christ lead not a solitary life, but a common, social life—the very common life of humanity. He showed himself on the earth, *in terris visus est* (Bar 3:37), in order to converse with men in the most complete and intimate manner, in order to “be all in all” (1 Cor 9:22) as the Apostle says, and as all apostles must do. When one converses with people, he must first conform himself to them in the conversation itself and in all that it implies, *ut se eis in conversatione conformet* (ST III, q. 40, a. 2). Thus, for example, one attempts to take up their language as much as possible, even if he is not very habituated to it and must impose upon himself a certain constraint. We speak a dialect, that is to say not only a language, but something which includes even the minute details of the manner of speech. I recall during the last war [World War II] a conversation between farmers who came from two very distant parts of France, the Northern region and the Midi region. They spoke the same language and did not understand each other; their manner of pronouncing it was so different that a true conversation between them was impossible.

It is the *loquela* (“dialect”) in all the breadth of this word, with all its nuances, which alone allows this manifestation, the complete “epiphany” of someone: *loquela tua manifestum te facit* (“your dialect betrays you,” Mt 26:73), the servant of the high priest says quite rightly to Peter, who tries hard to hide his Galilean manner of speaking without success. It is often a nearly imperceptible accent which sheds light on the most secret recesses of you and me, *te facit*. It is only the *fiat lux* (“let there be light,” Gen 1:3) which can begin to dissipate the shadows on the surface

of this abyss that keeps us from everyone but ourselves. Man manifests himself only by that which comes from his mouth, and it is only by that that we can judge, *de ore tuo te judico* (“Out of your own mouth I will condemn you,” Lk 19:22). It takes not only a delicate politeness, but also a tremendous acumen to speak the same language in exactly the same manner as one’s interlocutor. Clearly, we must avoid wounding someone when they are inferior to us by the somewhat scornful condescension that would cause us to take up his manner of speech too exactly, the flaws and nuances of which are known only to him. This requires a great deal of tact, as is the case with all forms of condescension, which can too easily take a disagreeable tone. But excepting this case, we love to have a conversation with those who speak exactly like us, and one can say that the fullness of communication establishes itself on this fact alone.

What is more, for the truly intelligent, and even more for those who would be nothing other than intellectuals—the true intellectuals, who by definition search to penetrate in “the other as other”—it is a profound joy to be in communion with that which seems the most incommunicable and which is at the same time the most significant. The word is the sign *par excellence*. It has that which St. Augustine magnificently calls *principatum significandi* (“the pre-eminence in signifying,” *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.3.4). But for a word to reveal the infinite riches of its own significance, it must first possess those riches in their fullness, materially, from the simple musical and linguistic point of view. It has been rightly said that in the slightest word many things escape those who, though not exactly deaf, do not have “ears.” Perceiving the slightest of these harmonies, as well as these subtle nuances and allusions, is necessary for communication to go well. St. Albert the Great told us something very sweet concerning the Mother of the One whom certain Church Fathers have called *Christus musicus* (“musical Christ”). He tells us that Mary was also a musician, so that she would not lose any of the slightest nuances of the word of the Word, *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum* (“let it be done to

me according to your word,” Lk 1:38). She was fully “tuned,” these little vibrations passing through her—*fiat mihi*—awakening in her an unbreakable harmony.

We have remarked that, without all that we have just said, communication does not go well. We do not forget the great doctrine of friendship, which is founded precisely on communication. All the faults, all the “almosts” which come up in communication, are inevitably found again in the imperfections and the reductions of the friendship based on this communication. Jesus is the friend *par excellence* and the friend of all, because he is the one who sympathizes perfectly, right to the end, with all and in all, *omnibus omnia factus sum* (“I have become all things to all men,” 1 Cor 9:22). He sympathizes right to the end because he loves right to the end, *in finem dilexit*.

We never come back and insist enough on this admirable word of St. Paul: He made himself all things to all men. Certain people give themselves generously to all, but this does not suffice: one must make himself all to all. “To make oneself” says more, and says something other, than “to give oneself”—something still more efficacious and even more intimate. Something of the other must make himself mine and in me—*fiat mihi*—something which is exactly according to him and according to his word, *secundum verbum tuum*. All of this is difficult. This totality, *omnia*, is difficult, this which entirely takes me and completely gives me, but more difficult, I dare say, is this otherness which takes another and gives him completely to me, until I become him.

Without this mysterious transubstantiation, we note well, not only is there not love, but there is not even familiarity, the slightest experiential familiarity; there is especially not an affective familiarity, the only one which is absolutely fecund and the mother of love. All familiarity already consists essentially in becoming the “other as other,” in an intentional manner—pardon us these technical words, but they say exactly what we want to say. The affective familiarity demands that one become the other not only in its abstract form, but in the fullness of its concrete reality.

Thus without all that which precedes, there is not even familiarity, and certainly there is not love. According to the beautiful Dionysian formula which St. Thomas saw fit to repeat, love is an ecstasy which draws us from ourselves, which throws us outside of ourselves, *ex*, in order to place that which we love, especially the one whom we love, in the place in which we would occupy ourselves. It is why those who are “full of themselves,” as we rightly say, are extraordinarily incapable of love. They would first need to cede their place, come out of themselves, or, according to a familiar but striking shortcut, come out of themselves so that another can enter. When one is full of himself, one inevitably leaves others at the door and the door remains closed, *clausa est janua* (“the door was shut,” Mt 25:10). One cannot respond to the joyous clamor that announces the spouse in the middle of the night, *media nocte clamor* (“in the middle of the night there was a clamor”), which commands us to come out of ourselves, *exite obviam ei* (“come out to meet him,” Mt 25:6).

We come out of ourselves in giving ourselves, in making ourselves all to all. Once again, this is very difficult! We shouldn’t surprise ourselves that it is so rare to succeed; we are so different from each other, such strangers, that even in giving ourselves to one another, we are only able to give ourselves partially to each other. It is this partialness which concerns itself with expanding, completing as much as possible by all the means, by all the ingenuities in our power.

THE WORD AND THE BREAD

It is through the mouth that the word comes. It is through the mouth that food enters, and it is especially about this food that St. Thomas wants to speak to us in the body of this second article (*ST* III q. 40, a. 2). Words and food are the two great means of human communication. *Convivere*, “to live with,” is especially to maintain oneself by the help of the same language and eating the same bread. The sacred text where the profound unity of these

two aspects, of these two means of *conversatio*—the word and the bread—is best shown to us, is perhaps the one in which Jesus victoriously casts away the tempter after the silence and fasting in the desert: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). The word which is the true bread, the bread which comes from heaven, is the word which comes from the mouth, and thus from the heart, of God. *Ego ex ore altissimi prodivi* (“alone I have made the circuit of the vault of heaven,” Sir 24:5), says the Word who is the universal bread. Nothing that comes from the mouth of God does not also come from his heart. The lying word is that which comes from the mouth without coming from the heart; if “all men are liars” (Ps 116:11) to quote the melancholic psalmist, then so much more are the human words which do not come from the heart. We can never be completely sure that every human word we hear coming from the mouth comes truly from the heart, or that it comes in the same manner as it does from the mouth. There is much, it is said, between the glass and the lips! One could say it even better: there is much between the heart and the lips! These imperceptible deviations, these disconcerting dissonances, these nuances, which seem to be nearly nothing—all serve too well to aggravate the pain of misunderstandings!

It is by the word which the unity of hearts and souls is fashioned and refashioned, *cor unum et anima una* (“one heart and one soul,” Acts 4:32). It is by the unity of the same bread, won by a father by the sweat of his brow, which fashions and refashions around the same table the unity of the family, the beginning of all social unity. The family is the most substantial social unit of all, St. Thomas tells us. It is rooted in its own being, in the production of being by generation, in its own conservation and development by education. The family shines around the nourishing hearth. The hearth, that is to say the fire, heats the heart and the body when it is cold, but is used especially to prepare food. It is because our life must perpetually maintain and repair itself by food that the flame must return to life without ceasing and be born again in

the hearth, so that the warmth of life is not extinguished in our veins. Before and after all the labors, all the distractions, all the dispersions caused by centrifugal forces, the unity of the hearth orders itself around the unity of the table, which always tirelessly reconstitutes, in spite of everything, through everything, the sacred unity of the family.

All that we have just said bursts forth particularly in the Church, at the same time the perfect family and society, becoming real especially in the Eucharist. The unity is fashioned and refashioned unceasingly around the holy table and around the “flesh of truth.” I deliberately make use of these last two words, which are so popular and venerable; we could say: the table of charity and the flesh of truth. All that comes down from the flesh of truth to nourish our faith orients us by love towards the holy table. It is necessary to lovingly sense and realize this profound unity of the preaching and the communion of the flesh, from which the word of life falls from the lips of the priest, and of the table where the hand of the priest puts to his lips the bread of life. The living bread comes down from heaven into our mouth by the communion of flesh and blood; it comes down to our ears by the communication of the Spirit living in the word. We are a multitude, *multi*, and yet we are a single body because we are united in the one bread. The bread is at the same time the Word, source of wisdom to the heights of heaven, *fons sapientiae . . . in excelsis* (Sir 1:5), and the flesh and the blood for all below, who, in communion with the little children, are too small to rise higher than the flesh and blood. The Word was truly made flesh precisely to dwell within us, *et habitavit in nobis* (“and dwelt among us,” Jn 1:14). The Word without flesh could only pass like lightning; we would not know, contain, or hold on to it. Thanks to the flesh, it can reside and dwell within our sick selves, who are so quickly rerouted by the promptings of the spirit, *spiritus quidem promptus est, caro autem infirma* (“the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak,” Mt 26:41).

In the Eucharistic sacrifice, there are two great moments: that of the pronouncement of the all-powerful word, of the effecting of the flesh and the blood by the word of the priest, *verbo carnem efficit* (*Pange Lingua*) and that of the consumption, of communion. From the mouth of the priest come the words which transubstantiate; by the mouth and the hand of the priest, by the word and the gesture of the one who provides and distributes the Eucharistic marvel, the bread of heaven comes down, always comes down, to the depths of the poor life that he must raise up from the grip of death, because he is the living and essential bread, *panis vivus et vitalis* (Sequence of Corpus Christi: *Lauda Sion*).

Our two Creeds marked the diverse successive and progressive stages of the descent of the Son. *Descendit de caelis* ("He came down from heaven"), the Nicene Creed tells us; he descends first to the most pure breast of Mary, *de Maria Virgine*, infinitely far already, yet still very near to the breast of the Father on account of the divine affinity of the virginal mother; then, across all the sorrows and all the indignities, he descends to the base of the tomb, *sepultus est*, brought, so to speak, to the bottom by the weight of sin which burdened the Lamb of God and which crushes him. He descends always, *descendit ad inferos*, adds the Apostles' Creed, into the depths of hell from where he leads the captives finally freed from the prison of limbo: *tuos captivos redimens* ("redeeming all the captives"), sings the sublime old hymn conserved by the monastic liturgy. In the descent of the Eucharistic bread, something similar takes place. The living bread descends from heaven, brought dizzyingly down by the sacred weight of love, *amor meus, pondus meum* ("my love is my weight"), he descends also to hell and will seek in the depths of our most humble human and even bodily faculties all that can be purified, freed, and brought up towards heaven in the desire of our hearts, *sursum corda* ("lift up your hearts").

Thus as much as by the unity of word and language, it will be the unity of the food and drink which will express the community, the common life among men. The heart of St. Thomas's argument

in the body of this second article rests upon this last point. By this unity of food, man will convey, in the most striking and significant manner, his good will that is set upon being and showing itself perfectly similar in all things to others, *communiter se sicut alii habere* ("he should conform himself to others," ST III q. 40 a. 2). "Eat what is set before you," *manducate quae apponuntur vobis* (Lk 10:8), with the most perfect simplicity and the thanks of a smile. Jesus always did this, when he received from the hand of Mary at Nazareth the bread won by Joseph, or when he deigned to seat himself by an infinite condescension at the table of the publican. It is always a communion, already a prelude and symbol of the Eucharistic communion where he gives himself to all by his own hands, *se dat suis manibus* (*Pange Lingua*). We accept, eating the sacred body that he offers us through his other self, the priest; we accept it with the same simplicity, the same recognition with which the poor Jesus had received his food each day from the hand of the poor or the hand of the rich.

It was said of John the Baptist and his disciples that they neither ate nor drank. This is, remarks St. Augustine, because they did not eat nor drink the same things as the other Jews. Thus, if it was said of Jesus and of his disciples that they ate and drank, it is because they ate and drank as the others, the same things and in the same way. "The Son of Man came, eating and drinking" (Mt 11:19): it is precisely as the Son of man that he must do this, according to all that we have said. John the Baptist was not the Son of man. The common food was part of the common life, and it is the most striking sign and expression of it.

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