

## CAJETAN THE RATIONALIST

**THE** recent number of the *Revue Thomiste*, completely devoted to the life and work of Thomas de Vio, O.P., Cardinal Cajetan, is a model of its kind. The occasion of this publication was the commemoration of the fourth centenary of the death of that prince of Thomist commentators. He died on August 10th, 1534.

Though the studies are as diverse in character as in authorship, yet they present a remarkable unanimity with regard to that which was the chief characteristic of Cajetan's life and work, namely the independence and objectivity of his mind. Those who have used his works will not be inclined to question this. He has been accused by some, indeed, of having shown an independence which was indistinguishable from rashness. But rashness was not his fault. His independence proceeded rather from a great intellectual honesty and courage which led him to carry principles to their logical conclusions without allowing human respect, or any equally unworthy moral influence, to hinder the steady course of his reasoning. If that was not due to his natural character, he had, at any rate, learnt it from his master, Aquinas, who had himself followed his principles unswervingly even though it meant committing himself to, as some think, terrible conclusions about the relationship of God to this world. But both one and the other preferred to be logical and come to a full-stop at inexplicable mystery, rather than to make compromises with sentiment and end in a contradiction which is irreconcilable with the very notion of God.

Cajetan was so relentlessly logical as to seem to some of his contemporaries to be without ordinary human feeling. But that was merely the superficial judgement of those who were out of sympathy with him. He was human in the best sense of the word, since he did due honour to that which made him human, his native reason. The passion of his life was to fulfil the purpose for which he had received his intelligence, union with objective truth. He had no

patience with intellectual sloth, or with those who accepted a thing as true merely because they were prejudiced in favour of the man who taught it and against those who denied it. 'Examine my reasons,' he wrote at the head of his commentary on the *Summa*, 'and either accept or refute them. I am neither so vain nor so presumptuous as to give my sole authority as the reason of what I write. I go only so far as the reasons which I allege will allow. If you find me in error, have the goodness to give me your help and correct me, and I shall be grateful. If you come across such expressions as error, falsehood, deception, ignorance, please remember that I use them of opinions and not of persons.' He repeats the warning with more insistence at the beginning of the commentary on the *Secunda Secundae*: 'Consider what I say without respect for my personal authority, but having regard simply to the value of the arguments.'

Having learnt from his Master that *locus ab auctoritate quae fundatur super ratione humana est infirmissimus*, he put this into practice by keeping himself always in the background after the example of St. Thomas, and by establishing his teaching on the firm ground of divine authority and sound rational argument. 'I would rather be taught by the Apostolic See than put forward my own opinion,' he writes; and again, 'let it suffice for us in this matter that the Church and the ancient doctors teach us that this is what we are to believe.' But where there was place for the exercise of the human reason, he insisted on its use. He desired that his disciples should think for themselves and not throw the burden upon others; but they must think in the correct way, that is, by assimilating the solid and certain principles in order that these might be pursued to their logical conclusions. *De ratione scientiae absolute . . . est habere conclusiones visibiles in alio, id est in principiis, quoniam omnis scientia ex principiis oritur necessario.* He was the declared enemy of that materialistic method, so familiar to us in these days, which consists in drawing up lists of authors with undigested and often misunderstood quotations, a method which has

given us the mental confusion and inconsistencies of the probabilistic system.

His own example is the best recommendation of his advice. Though loyally devoted to his Order, and especially to St. Thomas, he allowed no misplaced *esprit de corps* to do violence to his reason. His reverence for the very words of the *Summa* is shown by the reputation he enjoyed of being able to quote by memory from any part of it, yet his reverence had nothing of fetichism for the text. On occasion, indeed, he did not hesitate to correct his master, and throughout his commentary he makes a constant appeal from the letter to the spirit. *Auctoritates objective intelligendae sunt*. Words, for him, were no more than signs or symbols intended to lead the mind to the contemplation of the formal essences of things. Hence the severe austerities of his own style, both in diction and imagery. In this connection, we take the liberty of quoting some words of M. l'Abbé Penido from the *Revue Thomiste*.

Thomas de Vio was an ascetic writer, neither imaginative nor affected. He makes no concessions to fine writing or to poetry, a fact that was bound to make him enemies at a period when one estimated the worth of philosophical writers rather for their literary gifts than for their metaphysical ability. We moderns, who are so easily satisfied by what is purely accidental, transient and fortuitous, find it terribly hard to settle down to the contemplation of being in its simple formality. But that was Cajetan's special gift; he fixed his attention upon the object with unshakeable pertinacity and had no use for that fashion of writing which blots out the view of the essential reality beneath a mass of pretty images.

The writer goes on to say that it was not in Cajetan to write one of those compositions, so typical of our own time, in which there is nothing so definite as black and white, but all is a matter of shading and perspective, where one is made to understand that the complete truth is to be found in no one system because so much depends on the point of view; that the more one thinks of a problem, the more it is realized how far away is the ultimate truth of the matter; until at last we are all, of whatever school of thought, lost in a hopeless fog and end by coming to the conclusion that,

after all is said and done, there is very little difference between one school of thought and another. 'N'avons-nous pas lu, et l'année passée encore, cette phrase écrite par une plume qui se croyait thomiste? "Au sujet de Dieu, saint Thomas est beaucoup plus près de Kant qu'on ne l' imagine communément." Cajetan était l'ennemi-né du relativisme doctrinal et des dosages de probabilités.'

His literary style was, indeed, the mirror of his life and character, for he was, one might say, a man all of one piece. When he was placed at the head of his Order and began at home that work of reform which he saw to be necessary throughout the Church, he insisted on two indispensable points as cardinal to the whole situation: the double asceticism of poverty and intense study. To his mind the two were inseparable as far as Dominicans were concerned. And as to the latter, he said quite frankly that unless this obligation were fulfilled then the Order might just as well be dissolved. 'The work of our Order is at an end unless sacred doctrine be our recommendation.' His conception of the nature of the obligation may be estimated from his opinion that the Dominican who was not in the habit of doing at least four hours' study a day was in a state of damnation. There is nothing exaggerated about that remark when we remember that he was addressing those who, for the most part, were engaged not in the active works of a busy parochial life, but in a life in which public prayer, study and teaching by voice or pen were supposed to occupy their time and energies. The Council of the Lateran (1512-1517) bore witness to the bad repute in which the Mendicant Orders were held by the prelates of the Church. The Mendicants begged Cajetan to take up their defence, and he accepted the invidious task; but he made it clear that he was not prepared to defend what was indefensible even among his own brethren.

What these owed to him could not be expressed better than in the words of his successor in the generalship of the Order: *collapsum ordinem sapientia, virtute et prudentia restauravit*. To his inspiration and zeal is due the rise of the great Spanish Dominican school which bore fruit in

so many theologians of the first class. And if the *Summa* of St. Thomas was laid on the table at the Council of Trent along with the Sacred Scriptures it is surely he that must receive no little share of the credit; for when he entered the schools of theology, about 1490, the *Summa* of St. Thomas was only beginning to displace the Sentences as the text-book of the schools. Indeed, his first charge as bachelor in 1493 at Padua was to lecture on the Book of Sentences.

When we think of the character and ideals of the man, and consider the corruption of the age in which his lot was cast, we are inclined to think that his life must have been a martyrdom. At any rate, his courage and fortitude must have been taxed to the very limits. Fortunately, the two Medici Popes, Leo X and Clement VII, in spite of their deficiencies in other directions, were wise enough to recognize the worth of this man who was so much their opposite in many respects. Hence he had full scope for his talents and his zeal for reform. Thus in 1512, while Master General of his Order, he was sent to address the assembled Fathers of the Council of the Lateran, and he did not mince his words to them on the gravity of the situation and the responsibility which lay upon their shoulders.

But it is a supreme tribute to his character and solid virtue that, in spite of what he must have felt, he never allowed impatience to break forth into rash criticism, and much less into revolt. The fact that some of the contemporary Popes (Alexander VI among them) and the Roman Court were a scandal to the world did not disturb his respect for the Papacy. On the contrary, he was its champion against the pretensions of the pseudo-council of Pisa-Milan (1511-1512) and of the Gallican theologians of the University of Paris. Similarly, he never permits himself to give way to his feelings with regard to the moral laxity of the times, even among the dignitaries of the Church, when writing his moral treatises. Once, it is true, he does betray himself in bewailing the fact that the patrimony of the Church was lavished on harlots. But in general, his treatment of the moral problems of the day was so calm and

reserved that some have even accused him of laxism and excessive indulgence. Were this true, it would mean that an inexplicable inconsistency had entered into the character of Cajetan. But it is not true.

In the sphere of morality, as in that of dogma, it was his main object to defend and propagate the doctrine of St. Thomas; to expound it, to free it from superficial and erroneous interpretations, to multiply its followers. There was need of it, for *doctrina haec (quae ad salutis viam spectat) in Italia satis dormit, et tamen opportuna est valde*, as he says in his prologue to the commentary on the *Prima Secundae*. Here, as everywhere, he pleads for the due use of the reason and seeks to establish moral teaching on a sound rational basis; hence he continues: *Suscipiantur autem velim haec, sicut et cetera nostra, si et in quantum rationi consonant: neque enim eis fidem dari majorem posco, quam ea sit quae ex ratione gigni nata est*. But, remembering the warning of his Master: *Sermones morales universales minus utiles sunt, eo quod actiones sunt in particulari*, he goes on to add this piquant remark: *Verumtamen memores sint quod acrobologia mathematica non est expetenda in moralibus*. Morality must be based on eternal and objective principles, but in estimating the morality of a particular action it is necessary to take into account not only the moral object of the action but also the moral circumstances attending the performance of the action. It is because he insisted with such emphasis on this latter point that certain of his contemporaries accused him of laxism. He might just as well be accused of rigorism because he was as firm as a rock in his insistence on the absolute necessity of maintaining the essential objectivity of the law of morality.

It is here that we find the supreme value of the teaching of Cajetan both for his own time and not less for our own. It is significant that he was sent by Leo X in 1518 to deal with Luther; and although his mission failed in its immediate object, still he left behind in his writings the preparation for dealing with that individualism and subjectivism which lies at the root of Protestantism. There is urgent

need for us to adopt that preparation, living as we do in a world that is dominated by those mental aberrations and riddled with nominalism, in which subjective experience and not objective reason is made the test of truth. We want a religion that is true to life rather than one which is logically consistent, we are told. We should be deceiving ourselves if we believed that this attitude of mind did not find a reflection in the mind even of Catholics. It certainly seems to find a reflection in some of the doctrines which are proposed as applications of the law of morality, but which are by no means consonant with a morality that is objective and therefore unchangeable.

Now Cajetan takes this as his first principle: if the law of morality is to be rational it must be objective. An act is good, just as an affirmation is true, when it is in accordance with right reason. And as truth is attained by the conformity of the mind with objective being, so moral goodness is obtained by the conformity of human actions with an objective norm of morality. The supreme norm of morality is the objective eternal law of God; the proximate objective norm is the human reason which dictates the fundamental principles governing the morality of human action; the immediate guide of a man in each particular case is his subjective conscience, that is the judgment of his practical intellect in which the first principles of objective morality are applied to the individual act under consideration. If a man fails to use his reason as he should in applying these principles to a particular case, it is due either to bad will or to ignorance. In the former case he sins; in the latter he suffers from the misfortune of an erroneous conscience. All this is finely developed in Cajetan's treatise on Prudence and the growth of the Moral Virtues. Prudence is the *recta ratio agibilium*, and without Prudence there is no real Moral Virtue.

Cajetan has no use for the methods of probabilism; he considers them dangerous and unsatisfactory. In scientific matters he is not satisfied with probabilities, but goes right to the very heart of the problem until he has found what he calls the *rectitudo interna* of an action, that is its con-

formity with right reason. He condemns those works composed for the use of confessors which are crowded with ten thousand external details but neglect the duty of dealing with the intrinsic nature of moral actions. Instead, they contain lists of authorities and opinions on one side or the other, leaving the poor reader in a hopeless confusion and despairing of the possibility of ever attaining to objective truth. Hence the noble science of morality runs the risk of being degraded to the condition of a mere collection of positive laws from which persons may be dispensed where the observance of them involves a grave inconvenience.

Cajetan is never satisfied with complaining and leaving the matter as he finds it. Hence he seeks to remedy the evil by drawing up his *Summula Peccatorum*, in which the solution of each case is determined, not by enumerating the list of authors, but by the establishment of the problem on the indisputable principles which are to be found at the basis of every case of conscience. He bids the reader to think for himself so as to base his judgment on the solid ground of rational argument. No one has the right to shirk the burden of thinking, above all those who are charged with the grave duty of the care of souls. He expects to find in others that intellectual honesty and fearlessness which was so characteristic of himself. His epitaph might well have been those words of his biographer: *Neminem veretur ubi justitia exigit. Numquam potuit ab ea deflecti, neque pretio, neque precibus aut pollicitationibus.*

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