

THE LETTER OF SAINT THOMAS TO BROTHER JOHN—  
"DE MODO STUDENDI."

**Q**UIA quaesisti a me, in Christo mihi charissime frater Joannes, quomodo oportet incedere in thesauro scientiae acquirendo, tale a me tibi super hoc traditur consilium: ut per rivulos, et non statim in mare, eligas introire; quia per facilia ad difficilia oportet devenire.

Huiusmodi est ergo monitio mea de vita tua:

Tardiloquum te esse iubeo, et tarde ad locutorium accedentem;

Conscientiae puritatem amplecti;

Orationi vacare non desinas;

Cellam frequenter diligas, si vis in cellam vinariam introduci;

Omnibus amabilem te exhibeas, vel exhibere studeas; sed nemini familiarem te multum ostendas; quia nimia familiaritas parit contemptum et retardationis materiam a studio subministrat;

Et de factis et verbis saecularium nullatenus te intromittas;

Discursum super omnia fugias;

Sanctorum et proborum virorum imitari vestigia non omitas.

Brother John, most dear to me in Christ: Since you have asked me how one should set about to acquire the treasure of knowledge, this is my advice to you concerning it: namely, that you should choose to enter, not straightway into the ocean, but by way of the little streams; for difficult things ought to be reached by way of easy ones.

The following, therefore, is my advice to you concerning your way of living:

I urge you to hesitate before speaking, and to hesitate before visiting the common room;

Hold fast to the cleanness of your conscience;

Do not cease from devoting time to prayer;

Love your cell by making constant use of it, if you want to be admitted into the wine-cellar;

Show yourself to be lovable to everybody, or at least try to do so; but be very familiar with nobody, for too much familiarity breeds contempt and introduces factors which retard study;

Also, do not in any way get yourself involved in the doings and sayings of outsiders;

Avoid aimless running about above all things;

Do not fail to follow in the footsteps of the saints and of sound men.

Non respicias a quo sed quod sane dicatur memoriae recom- menda;  
Do not have regard to *by whom* a thing is said, but certainly *what* is said you should commit to your memory;

Ea quae legis fac ut intelligas, de dubiis te certificans;  
What you read, set about to understand, verifying what is doubtful;

Et quidquid poteris, in armario mentis reponere satage sicut cupiens vas implere;  
Strive to put whatsoever you can in the cupboard of your mind, as though you were wanting to fill a vessel to the brim;

“Altiora te ne quaeras.”  
“Seek not the things that are too high for thee”.

Illius beati Dominici sequere vestigia, qui frondes, flores et fructus, utiles ac mirabiles, in vinea Domini Sabaoth, dum vitam comitem habuit, protulit ac produxit. Haec si sectatus fueris, ad id attingere poteris, quidquid affectas. Vale!<sup>(1)</sup>  
Follow in the footsteps of that blessed Dominic, who, while he yet had life for his fellow-traveller, brought forth and nourished foliage, blossom, fruit—fruit both serviceable and astonishing—in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts. If you shall have followed these steps, you will be able to attain to whatsoever you have a mind. Fare you well!

**T**HIS letter is counted by P. Mandonnet among the “*vix dubia*”<sup>(2)</sup> of the writings of St. Thomas. I can see no intrinsic reason in its form or content for doubting its authenticity. We know that St. Thomas did not hesitate to set aside even his major works in order to reply to requests for assistance from his brethren in the Order. We have his patient letter in reply to the Six Questions of Brother Gerard of Soissons—and very frivolous questions St. Thomas considered at least five of them to be—in which he writes, “*Et licet in pluribus essem occupatus, tamen ne vestrae caritatis petitioni deessem, quam cito*

1) The printed editions of this letter differ in several particulars; the Latin text which we here offer is frankly a composite version with no claim to critical accuracy, though based mainly on the version edited by the late Fr P. Mandonnet, O.P. (*S. Thomae Aquinatis Opuscula Omnia*, Vol. IV. p.535; Paris, 1927). The translation which we present attempts to render freely in English the sense which seems most probable in the general context of the letter.

2) “Hardly doubtful”; i.e. those works whose authenticity is not completely established, but concerning which there is little reason for doubt.

facultas se obtulit, vobis rescribere curavi''.<sup>(3)</sup> There is, indeed, a touch of weariness, if not of irony, in the opening of his reply to the thirty-six questions of an anonymous lector at Venice: "Lectis litteris vestris, in eis inveni articulorum multitudinem numerosam, super quibus a me vobis responderi infra quatrimum vestra caritas postulabat."<sup>(4)</sup> But here again St. Thomas will lay aside more imposing tasks to meet the requests of his brethren: "licet essem in plurimis occupatus, ne tamen deessem vestrae dilectionis obsequio".<sup>(5)</sup> Only once do we find St. Thomas at all testy when plied with questions by a fellow-friar: "Fuisset mihi facilius respondere, si vobis scribere placuisset rationes, quibus dicti articuli vel asseruntur vel impugnantur".<sup>(6)</sup> But on that occasion there were not six nor thirty-six but forty-two questions; they had arrived in the middle of High Mass on the Wednesday in Holy Week; they were largely identical with the questions from the Venetian lector which St. Thomas had already answered; they included the question as to whether a workman could move his hand in virtue of the movement of the heavenly bodies but without angelic intervention. And, last but not least, the questioner on this occasion was no humble student nor plodding lector, but none other than the Master General of the Order. There was complete obedience, but almost a protest at the conclusion of that letter: "Haec sunt, Pater reverende, quae mihi respondenda occurrunt ad praesens articulis a vobis transmissis, quamvis plures eorum sint praeter limites theologiae facultatis. Sed ex vestra iniunctione factum est mihi debitum, quod [principii] officii professio nullatenus requirebat."<sup>(7)</sup>

But certainly there is no intrinsic reason why some young Dominican should not have written to the great man to inquire how he should set about his studies, and there is still less reason to assume that St. Thomas was lacking the charity, the patience and the graciousness to reply. The reply is, indeed, brief, but it is very much to the point; and although in his larger works St. Thomas expresses himself more expansively, and with greater

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- 3) "And although I am busied about many matters, I have taken care to reply to you so soon as opportunity offered, lest I should fail the request of your charity."
  - 4) "Having read your letter, I have found therein a numerous multitude of points, concerning which your charity requires me to reply within four days."
  - 5) "Lest I be lacking in respect to your charity, although I am busied about many matters."
  - 6) "It would have been easier for me to reply had it pleased you to write the reasons on account of which these said points are asserted or attacked."
  - 7) "Such, Reverend Father, are the replies which, as they occur to me at present, should be made to the points which you have sent; although many of them lie outside the boundaries of the competence of theology. But what my professional office in no way required of me has become a duty to me by reason of your command."

precision and more exact qualifications on the same themes, its content is fully in accord with what we know from elsewhere to have been his convictions. I think it may be profitable for us to study the letter in the light of what St. Thomas has to say elsewhere on the art of learning and of teaching.

I do not know whether our medievalist scholars have any ideas as to the identity of this Brother John, or even whether this was his true name and not an invention of later editors. It is clear from St. Thomas's reply that he was a Dominican, that he was just starting on his studies, and that he was young<sup>8)</sup>. Brother John, it seems, was in a hurry; bursting, perhaps, with his first fervour; burning with apostolic zeal. The harvest was great, the labourers few—particularly such labourers as were intellectually equipped to meet the pressing needs of the day. There was no time to be lost: Brother John must equip himself without delay, and know all the answers to all the questions; the truth about God and His creatures must be speedily mastered, sorted out, docketed and labelled, ready-made at Brother John's disposal. There was no time to paddle about; he must plunge headlong into the ocean of wisdom and plumb its depths. The world needed, nay, *God* needed, Brother John: besides, Brother John himself wanted to *know*.

Perhaps it was with some such idea as this that he wrote to the famous Master, Thomas of Aquin; in the hope, it may be, that he would learn from him of some short-cut to wisdom, some Pelmanistic technique whereby the treasure of knowledge might be obtained with a minimum of delay. St. Thomas himself seems to have had some instinct which told him that such was the case: "tunc a me tibi super hoc traditur consilium: ut per rivulos, non statim in mare eligas introire, quia per facilia ad difficilia oportet devenire."

Behind this simple, almost trite, admonition lies a whole philosophy—a philosophy of what it means to know, to learn, to teach. Centuries before, matters had been pretty thoroughly threshed out by Plato, notably in his *Theatetus*. Athens was agog with the reputation for brilliance and learning of a young man of this name; "his approach to learning and inquiry" (it was said of him) "is like the noiseless flow of a stream of oil; it is wonderful how he achieves all this at his age." Socrates was delighted, but sceptical, at the news; patiently, laboriously, ruthlessly he puts him to the test. Poor Theatetus does not even know what "to know" means. Step by step he is shown that knowledge is not

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8) Not only because of the content of the letter, but also because St. Thomas addresses Brother John in the second person singular. In all his other letters he uses the second person plural, as seems to have been already usual in the 13th. century when addressing superiors or equals.

just perception, direct experience *AISTHESIS*. It is not even the simple apprehension of the intellect; truth is to be attained only in the judgment. (cf.1.85.5)<sup>9</sup>. But nor is it any sort of judgment; it is not merely acknowledging what other people think, nor a conviction reached by an accumulation of preferences or probabilities. That may be *DOXA*, opinion or belief, or sentiment, but it is not Knowledge. I do not know that *x* is *y*, unless I know *why x is y*—or, at very least, why I *know* that *x* is *y*. And that means argument, ratiocination, the drawing of conclusions from premisses, the critical verification of those premisses themselves, and their application to the data of experience; all of which means time and patience.

St. Thomas, aided by Aristotle's *Analytics* and *De Anima*, will considerably develop these fundamental conceptions, modifying to some extent the Socratic view of the function of the human teacher as mere midwifery. But, especially in his Question *De Magistro* in the *De Veritate* (xi), and in the article "Whether one man can teach another" in the *Summa* (I.117.1.) he will insist that the acquisition of real knowledge can only be an immanent growth, a gradual and interior process. It must be a *gradual* process, for man is no angel, able to see in a flash all the implications of a single, given idea: on the contrary, man can collect his ideas themselves only gradually from successive experience; only gradually can he work out the implications of those ideas, and co-relate one idea with another (cf.1.85). It must be an *interior* process, for still less can truth be acquired vicariously; nobody else can do my Knowing for me. I do not *know* that *x* is *y* when all I do is to remember that my teacher, or some other alleged authority says so. I know it only when I see that it follows from what I already know. I acquire new knowledge only when I proceed *ex notis ad ignota*; from what I already actually knew to what I did not actually know; though for that very reason, what I come to know is already potentially in what I knew before. That is why Brother John must proceed "per facilia ad difficilia"; there is no other way, no short cut. And no human teacher, no lector in his rostrum nor St. Thomas himself in his *Summa*, can do the job for him. Knowledge, wisdom, truth, cannot be imposed upon the mind from without; they can only grow up from within, from the seeds of what we already know. Only by the activity of my own mind, my very own "intellectus agens", as St. Thomas maintains against Avicenna and the Augustinian Illuminationists, can the raw material of sense-experience be rendered homogeneous with the mind itself, rendered intelligible, converted into idea. *De Ver* x.6. (cf.1.79,4 & 5 ad 1). Only the receptivity of

9) All references in the text are to the *Summa Theologica* unless otherwise stated.

my very own mind, my very own "intellectus possibilis", as St. Thomas maintains against Averroes, can ideas be possessed, assimilated, developed, co-ordinated, affirmed, denied (cf. I.76.2). And my very own senses, exterior and interior, are the only windows through which I can see the other, through which I am in direct contact with existing reality, with truth. Nobody else, be he never so wise, can do this for me. The human teacher can never be a principal cause of my knowledge; not even a secondary principal cause. He is a disposing, assisting, auxiliary cause only of my knowledge, as the physician is of my health. He can lead me to the waters of wisdom, but he can neither provide them nor make me drink. He can help me in two ways, and in two ways only: *proponendo signa, auxilia, instrumenta*,<sup>10)</sup> and *proponendo discipulo ordinem principiorum ad conclusiones*.<sup>11)</sup> *Proponendo signa*: the human teacher can speak, or write, and I can hear and read his words, and words are primarily signs of ideas; of reality indeed, but of reality already universalised, classified, mentalised, we might say predigested and rendered apt for the mind's absorption. It is easier, St. Thomas explains, to attain to truth with the aid of signs, which convey to us the results of the workings of other minds on the raw material of sense-experience, than to have to start from scratch with the chaotic multiplicity of that raw material itself. Absolutely speaking the human mind can attain all truth within its range for itself, by way of its own discovery, *per viam inventionis*. But in fact and practice it often needs the assistance of the human teacher, the *via disciplinae*, the way of learning by the aid of words, conventional signs of ideas already attained by other minds. But we must never forget that these are signs only, instruments and helps, not objects. Woe betide us when we mistake the signs for the signified; when we study the *Summa* instead of studying God and his creation with the assistance of the *Summa*. Woe betide us when we put any human teacher in the place which belongs to God alone; giving to his utterances that unqualified assent which belongs only to the humble obedience of faith in the First Truth. "Mens quidem est sui iuris": St. Thomas echoes Seneca in his very treatise on obedience, and explains that the mind in its own interior, incorporeal operations should therefore obey God alone. (II-II.104.5). "Unus est magister vester" said a greater than Seneca (cf. Matt. 23.8); "call no man your master, your Rabbi, your teacher on earth." And St. Thomas comments: "We are forbidden to call any man our master in the sense of attributing to him the authority to teach ("principalitas magisterii") which belongs to God, thus putting our trust in the wisdom of men; but

10) "By setting forth signs . . . helps . . . instruments."

11) "By setting forth the order of premisses to conclusions."

rather, what we have heard from men should we bring to the bar of divine truth which speaks within us by the impression of its own likeness; for by this are we enabled to pass judgment on all things." (*De Ver.*xi.1 ad 1).

But, secondly, the human teacher can assist us *proponendo ordinem principiorum ad conclusiones*. The Thomistic teacher, unlike the Socratic teacher, must himself *know* his stuff. "I am so far like the midwife," and said Socrates, "that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom; and the common reproach is true that, though I question others . . . there is no wisdom in me." (*Theaetetus* 150 c). Neither will St. Thomas, nor a Thomistic lecturer, give birth to wisdom in us; he cannot walk the road to knowledge for us; but *lead* us he can, precisely because, and insofar as, he has himself already trodden the same road, and, knowing the way, is able by signs to show us how one step follows another. So "docere," for St. Thomas, is a "ducere" (*De Ver.*xi.1) a leading, a guiding; or, less metaphorically, "unus alium docere dicitur, quod istum, discursum rationis, quem in se facit ratione naturali, alteri exponit per signa; et sic ratio naturalis discipuli, per huiusmodi sibi proposita, sicut per quaedam instrumenta, pervenit ad cognitionem ignotorum"<sup>(12)</sup> (*ibid*). It is a superb definition which we teachers and pupils might take for a subject for occasional arbitration and self-examination. But the essential task of attaining knowledge is always the task of the "ratio naturalis discipuli", of the thinking faculties of the learner himself. The acquisition of real knowledge means time—and trouble.

A great deal of trouble; for man is no angel, no "intellectus purus." Man is a rational *animal*, and a fallen, disintegrated one at that. In II-II.166. 2 ad 3, St. Thomas succinctly sums up man's tragic condition, and the particular problems which it sets the would-be student. "With regard to knowledge there is in man a conflict of inclinations. From the side of his soul a man is impelled to the desire for knowing "things"<sup>(13)</sup> and in this matter it is needful that he should virtuously bridle this appetite, lest he be absorbed in trying to know things in a disorderly fashion ("ne immoderate rerum cognitioni intendat"). But from the side of his bodily constitution, he is impelled to flee from the labour involved in acquiring knowledge." It is a strange and tragic position indeed: the very appetite for knowledge, uncontrolled, unbridled, undirected, frus-

12) "One man is said to teach another in so far as he expounds to another, by means of signs, the process of reasoning which he has in himself made by his own natural reason, in such a way that the natural reason of the pupil, by means of these signs set forth to him, and using them as a sort of instrument, attains to knowledge of what had been unknown to him."

13) Recalling the opening words of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "By their very nature all men desire knowledge."



trates the acquisition of knowledge; the innate, native desire of the intellect for truth, defeats the attainment of truth. The human mind is the faculty of being; its native thirst is to know being, all being, every being. But "corpus aggravat animam";<sup>14)</sup> and the "anima est forma corporis",<sup>15)</sup> sense-locked, time-conditioned, able to entertain only one idea at a time, to proceed but slowly from one judgment to another.

What is the remedy? The old Platonist, and still more the neo-Platonist, had said in effect: Crush the "animal" to free the "rationale"; repress the body, the senses, the imagination, the emotions; liberate the divine soul from the prison-house of the body, and then the soul may have all its desires in the contemplation of the transcendent ideas. No, says St. Thomas in effect. Truly the "body weighs down the soul," truly the flesh lusteth against the spirit and must be pacified and tamed; the life of the four cardinal virtues is an indispensable prerequisite of the life of study and contemplation. But there is one vice, and one vice only, that directly and immediately militates against the life of study and contemplation, and that vice is *curiositas*. "Curiositas" takes many forms, which St. Thomas enumerates and discusses in II-II.167, but they all have this in common that they are manifestations of a disordered desire to know, an unreasonable appetite for reason, a refusal to accept man's animal condition and its consequences. The first and foremost enemy of the acquisition of truth, the primary concern of the student as such, is not the lust of the flesh against the spirit but the lust of the spirit against the flesh; not the impetuosity of Brother Ass but the impetuosity of his rider.

Now the remedy for this vice is the virtue of "studiositas"; and "studiositas", the distinctive virtue of the student, is not, contrary to what we tend to suppose, a sort of fortitude but a sort of temperance. It is not, that is to say, a bold aggression against difficulties and obstacles, an affair of wet towels, clenched teeth, furrowed brow, but contrariwise a bridling, a controlling, a directing of desire—of the innate desire of the intellect to know. (II-II.166). The intellect, being immaterial, cannot be forced and while the Divine Sophia will give herself to humble souls, she will not be forcibly raped. "Studiositas," says St. Thomas, is to man's mind what chastity is to the body, and "curiositas" is a sort of intellectual promiscuity; as unbridled sexual lust defeats the purpose and even the delight of sex, so "curiositas" defeats the purpose of the intellect, and deadens the delights which the Divine Wisdom finds in dwelling with the children of men. (cf.

14) "The body weighs down upon the soul."

15) "The soul is the form of the body," i.e. the intrinsic vital principle whereby living and organic bodies are differentiated from non-living matter.



Proverbs 8.31).

The natural desire to know of Brother John's mind must not be weakened, still less deadened; it is this that will provide the needed motivation for all his studies. But moderated—not in our sense of diluted, but in St. Thomas's sense of being given "modus", order, direction—it must be. If Brother John wants to attain wisdom, he must not be impatient, in a hurry. It is slow work, and it cannot be done by cramming or by any slick technique. This may be damping and disappointing; but if Brother John thinks so, then there is worse to follow.

For two thirds of the remainder of the letter seem to have nothing to do with intellectual, scientific method at all. Brother John had asked how to *study*; St. Thomas replies by telling him how to *live*. He continues: "Haec est ergo monitio mea de *vita tua*". That "ergo" must seem strangely inconsequential until we remember what St. Thomas, developing the ideas in Aristotle's Ethics, has to say about the relation of the life of virtue to the life of contemplation. *Essentialiter* moral virtue has nothing to do with science, with the search for truth; but *dispositiva, removens prohibens*, it is indispensable: "For the act of contemplation is impeded both by the vehemence of the emotions, by which the attention of the soul is drawn from the things of the mind to the things of sense, and also by external disturbances. But it is precisely the task of the moral virtues to prevent the immoderate vehemence of the emotions, and to quieten the disturbances arising from external business". (II-II.180,2).

So, instead of some elaborate methodologico-paedagogical technique, what Brother John gets first of all from the great Master Thomas is a list of matter-of-fact commonplaces which he might have got any day from his novice-master. He must be careful about keeping the silence; he must be slow to speak; he must embrace purity of conscience; he must not cease to spend plenty of time in prayer: Also, he must keep to his cell, love his cell—"si vis", adds St. Thomas rather unexpectedly, "in cellam vinariam introduci"—from which I can only assume that admission to the wine-cellar was the 13th century novice's idea of bliss; an inordinate desire to which St. Thomas, as a sound psychologist, and mindful of Canticles i.3, gives a symbolic interpretation. He must think twice before wandering off to the common-room;<sup>16</sup> he must be on amiable terms with his companions, neither aloof from any nor too familiar with any; and he must not get himself entangled in the affairs of outsiders. Above all, he must avoid "discursus"—which perhaps we can best translate by "running around" in the colloquial sense—and imitate the examples of the saints and other sound men. Trite, conventional platitudes they

16) The "locutorium", the place for speaking, or "parlour".

may seem; but we know that in St. Thomas's mind they were not platitudinous; they were not, that is to say, just current conventional ideas uncritically accepted, but established conclusions drawn from certain premises, based upon and confirmed by experience. St. Thomas did not merely swallow them; he had argued them all out. Silence is essential to the life of study, because to learn means to listen and one cannot listen when one is talking nor in a hubbub of chatter. It means listening, not merely nor principally to the external, human teacher speaking without, but above all to God "qui solus interior et principaliter docet"<sup>(17)</sup> and without whose interior light no human teaching has any efficacy (*De Ver.* xi.1). Not only the exterior hubbub of talk interferes with study; but still more the interior hubbub of untamed, warring functions and moral conflicts—hence "purity of conscience". Prayer is necessary, not as something heterogeneous to the study of theology but as that which puts us into direct touch with its subject matter, and without which it is remote and lifeless. Theology, "oratio de Deo"<sup>(18)</sup>, is lifeless and unreal without "oratio ad Deum"<sup>(19)</sup>. God cannot be expressed; He can only be addressed—is the motto of the modern existentialist. St. Thomas will agree at least that it is only in the second person and not in the third, in the vocative rather than the nominative, that the "ascensus mentis in Deum" is achieved. (cf. I.13 with II-II.83.4). In prayer only do we stand face to face with the Teacher "qui solus interior et principaliter docet", and without whose constant assistance and light we can learn nothing. (See also II-II.180.3 ad 4). But no matter what we pray for, any prayer is, according to St. Thomas, of its very nature the worshipful subjection precisely of the *mind* to God (II-II.83.1); the fact that differentiates it from other acts of religion; the great safeguard therefore against the Godless autonomy of the intellect, the frightful disaster of intellectual pride, the worst and most original sin (II-II.162,6,7. cf. 3 ad 1).

I confess that when I first read this letter I was surprised that St. Thomas, in this context of study, laid such emphasis on fraternal charity and Brother John's attitude to his companions. But one cannot have lived for twenty years in houses of study without realising to what an extent study is helped or hindered by satisfactory or mismanaged personal relationships. It is enormously advanced and facilitated where there is the *amicitia*<sup>(20)</sup> of good community spirit, allowing of free and frank interchange of

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17) "Who alone teaches *within* man, and as the Supreme Teacher."

18) "Speech *about* God."

19) "Speech to God." "Oratio" means speech, but standing alone is also the ordinary Latin word for prayer.

20) "Friendship."

opinion and mutual criticism of ideas; it is made very difficult where each student is left in lonely isolation, where that interchange is tabu and that criticism resented. But it is not a matter only of understood, consciously directed, collaborative friendship; study can be still more made or marred by those strange, overwhelming, absorbing personal attractions and repulsions which St. Thomas here calls "nimia familiaritas quae parit contemptum et retardationis materiam a studio magis subministrat". Where intellectual development has been accompanied by no corresponding emotional education, these involuntary and sometimes devastating emotional storms are particularly to be expected. A whole paper might profitably be devoted to the profound consideration which St. Thomas gives, particularly in the Second Part of the Summa, to the emotional and moral problems which peculiarly beset the student; his insistence that it is by immoderate sadness or "depression" even more than by immoderate pleasure that the body is apt to weigh upon the mind and hinder study (I-II.37); his analysis of the causes of that sadness, which he finds to lie even more in the privation of sense-pleasure than in the presence to the sense appetite of what is positively unpleasant (I-II.36.1); his treatment of its remedies (I-II.38) and its moral value when properly understood and used (I-II.39). Then, in the *Secunda Secundae*, his treatment of accidie, the besetting temptation of the contemplative, the capital and deadly sin which consists precisely in the misuse of the emotional sadness which weighs down the mind, and which begets an acidity, a disgust or cynicism in regard to the things of the mind and spirit; we now call it sloth or laziness, but for St. Thomas it is less a failure of effort than a failure of love. His insistence, therefore, in II-II.178, on the especial need of those engaged in intellectual pursuits for *ludus*, playful words and works; the repose of the senses which comes, not from their starvation, but from their delight (cf. I-II.24.2), which involves the periodic laying aside of attention to study, especially by the enjoyment, but still more by the production, of art. A vigorous sense-life is not merely, for the student, a condescending concession to his "lower nature"; it is a necessity for his studies themselves. Although "in divinis est imaginatio omnino relinquenda" (21) (In Boeth. de Trin. VI.2), our abstract thought itself becomes a mere game with paper money, concepts corresponding to no real wealth, if it is based upon no real experience of our own. Particularly so in Theology, for sensible symbol and metaphor are the principal medium of God's Self-Revelation (1.i.9).

Only in the last paragraph of his letter does St. Thomas deal

21) "In Divinity the imagination is to be transcended"—the third of the Aristotelian degrees of abstraction.

with methods of study, in the strict sense, with purely intellectual procedure. The paragraph is so concise, so pithy, that it almost defies translation:

“Non respicias a quo, sed quod sane (dicitur), memoriae commenda. Ea quae legis, fac ut intelligas; de dubiis te certifica, et quidquod poteris in armariolo mentis reponere satage, sicut cupiens vas implere. Altiora te ne quaeras.”

It is very brief, but it is extraordinarily rich. “Do not mind *by whom* a thing is said; but *what* is said commit to your memory.” That is the first admonition, and an essential one if we are to attain to knowledge as distinct from mere belief. The beginner is sorely tempted to be more impressed by the prestige and personality of the teacher or the writer than by the truth of what he teaches or writes; it is very much less trouble, but it is fatal to knowledge, to learning, to real wisdom—for this is concerned with the truth that is uttered, never with the personality of the human vehicle. This principle St. Thomas himself carried to limitless lengths; statements or arguments must be accepted or rejected on their own merits, never on the merits of the human spokesman, be he Catholic Christian, Infidel, Turk or Jew. It is well known what extensive, though never uncritical, use St. Thomas made of the work of the infidel Aristotle, of the Moslem Averroes and Avicenna; it is less well known that, in the very first article of the *Summa*, arguing not for some matter of natural philosophy but for the need of Divine Revelation itself, St. Thomas has appropriated the arguments, not of some Catholic Doctor, but of the Jewish Rabbi Maimonides. If what is said is true, it is a reflection of the First Truth, of the Divine Ideas, no matter if it is discovered by a pagan (cf. II-II.177. 1 ad 3): if it is false, it is not made true by being uttered by a pious Catholic. We are to check and verify the utterances even of the Doctors of the Church. They are invaluable witnesses to the Church’s ancient tradition, and their authority provides us with “probable arguments”, but “our faith rests upon the revelation made to the Apostles and Prophets who wrote the Canonical Books, and not upon any revelation, if such there be, made to other Doctors” (I.1.8 ad 2). Their utterances are weighty; when they seem to be at variance with one another or with ascertained truth, they are to be “pie exponenda”<sup>(22)</sup>—or, if that is impossible, set aside. In the fluid realm of human conduct, more especially, docility and trust in the greater experience of our elders is particularly required, as an integral part though by no means the whole of prudence (II-II. 48 and 49). Brother John has sought the authoritative direction of Master Thomas; but now Master Thomas seems to be telling him that what he must attend to is not the reputation of

22) “Respectfully interpreted.”

Master Thomas but the truth of what Master Thomas says. For us still more, there is the danger that the very encomiums and recommendations which Popes and Councils and Congregations and Constitutions have showered upon St. Thomas so intimidate us that we come to regard him, not as a Teacher, a Doctor, a Magister in his own sense, but as an oracle whose "ipse dixit" alone settles every question. We cannot be too thankful that the highest voices in the Church summon us to the feet of such a teacher, yet the very fact that we are his pupils forbids us all such facile ipsedixitism. Because he is our Master and a Christian master, the greatest among us, he will be as him that serveth. He will help and assist our own minds to think for themselves; he refuses to "lord it over them", (cf. Matt.20: 25.26).

But note how careful St. Thomas is. Brother John is to commit what is said to his *memory*; he is not straightway to commit his *intellect* to it. He is not at once to swallow everything that is said; let him remember it in order to test and examine it, but not at once to assent to it. Suspension of judgment is one of the first things a learner has to learn: we have to learn how to entertain ideas without promptly either affirming them or denying them. Here again it is a matter of that difficult business of restraining the mind's own native impetuosity, the natural desire of the reason to be unreasonable. We want to jump to conclusions before we have reached them; to take sides, make a stand, vehemently affirm or deny before we have considered, examined, tested, proved. It is so very much easier to assent to some slick theory of reality as we should like it to be, than to accept it and study it as God made it. So St. Thomas continues: "Set about to understand what you read." We are not on the path to wisdom if we read widely but not deeply, without understanding. It is not enough to remember what an author says, we must understand what he means. We must understand what his terms mean to him, and not be deceived by similarities or dissimilarities of mere words. Moreover, we have to remember that we do not understand a conclusion, and are therefore in no position to affirm it or deny it, even by understanding only its terms. A conclusion is understandable only as a conclusion, i.e. in so far as it follows from its premisses; which premisses must in their turn be understood. This is particularly important in reading so logical an author as St. Thomas himself. It is alarming sometimes to read the fantastic interpretations which critics, and even would-be exponents, of St. Thomas put upon his conclusions, simply because they have not troubled to study his own definitions of his terms or to read the conclusions in the light of his premisses. Here we see the value and importance of the

“scholastic method” with its “dubia”, its “videtur quod non”, “sed contra” and “responsio”<sup>(23)</sup>; its distinctions and sub-distinctions and contra-distinctions: the place which should be occupied in our curriculum by the disputation. It is essential to our own intellectual advancement; no less essential when, in our mission of preaching and teaching, we have to converse with other minds. There are few propositions so true that no false interpretation can be put upon them, so false that they contain no element of truth. The critical discernment of their truth and falsehood is indispensable if we are to learn; no less so if we are to teach. “Verum est bonum intellectus”<sup>(24)</sup>; it is impossible for any human mind, no matter how perverse and erroneous in its opinion, to assent to falsehood except under the guise of, or on account of, some truth; and if that mind is to be taught, we must be able to perceive the truth which it possesses in order to lead it to the truth which it does not. The purely negative refutation of error can remove the obstacles to the attainment of truth; it can never convince that mind of truth (cf. 1.i.8; Metaph. VII.7;17). As we can only truly *learn* by being led “ex notis ad ignota,” so we can only *teach* by being able to do the same for other minds; and to do that it is essential that we be well practised in the art of sifting the gold from the dross—recognising the truth that the minds of others already possess, and making use of that.

Judgment must be suspended; we cannot *know* if we will not *doubt*: “De dubiis te certificans”. “Volentibus investigare veritatem, contingit praeopere, id est, ante opus, bene dubitare, id est bene attingere ad ea quae sunt dubitabilia”<sup>(25)</sup>, says St. Thomas (Metaph III. and cf. I.). For, he explains, the attainment of a truth is like the unravelling of a knot, and you cannot unravel a knot if there is no knot and if you do not first of all examine it thoroughly; and the knots which bind the mind are precisely its doubts. Learners who will not first examine the doubts, St. Thomas goes on, are like people who do not know where they are going; and people who do not know where they are going will probably never get there, and even if they do they will not know when they have arrived, or whether they ought to go on walking. They are, moreover, like magistrates who will hear only one side of a case: “As nobody can judge a case unless he hears the reasons on both sides, so he who has to listen to philosophy will be in a better position to pass judgment if he listens to all the argu-

23) i.e. its “doubts”, its “it seems that it is not so”, “but on the other hand” and “reply”—the formulas used throughout the *Summa*, following the normal procedure of scholastic disputations.

24) “The True is the Good of the intellect”.

25) “Those who wish to discover the truth should previously, i.e. before they set to work, doubt well, that is to say they should examine thoroughly what can be doubted” (concerning the point at issue).

ments of conflicting doubters." (ib.) But doubts are not an end in themselves: they are there to be resolved—in order that Brother John may make himself certain concerning them. The man who patters out all the questions, with no concern for the answers, is as far from wisdom and knowledge as the man who patters out all the answers without ever having asked any questions. But we can never know anything if we ask no questions; and I do not mean merely or chiefly asking questions of the lecture, or of books, but asking question of ourselves, of reality, of life, of God. Wonder, said Aristotle, is the mother of wisdom (Metaph.1); where there is no surprise, no wonder, no inquisitiveness in the face of God and His creatures, there is no conceivable possibility of an immanent growth of knowledge; theology and philosophy can be no more than a dead and deadening structure imposed on the mind from without, instead of being a vital inner response to an inner, personal need. If *curiositas* is an intellectual promiscuity, *incuriositas* is intellectual frigidity: a positive repression of the mind's natural desire to know, which can result only in intellectual sterility.

"Quidquid poteris, in armariolo mentis reponere, satage, sicut cupiens vas implere." You cannot put anything into a cupboard that is already crammed, a glass which is already full. Not only, St. Thomas explains, are belief and opinion not knowledge: they are incompatible. It is intrinsically impossible to believe and know the same thing at the same time and under the same respect. (II-II.1.5). If knowledge is to be born, acts of belief and opinion must be suspended; but once knowledge has been attained, it must be retained—no longer as a memory, but "in the cupboard of the *mind*". Knowledge first comes as a momentary act but it must be allowed to become *habitus*: a permanent possession in our cupboard which we can easily take out and use as demands. It thus becomes part of the living structure of our souls; part of an organic whole with its own immanent life.

"Altiora te ne quaeras"—"Seek not the things that are too high for thee". The text (from Ecclus. 5.22) is sometimes quoted as an excuse for not studying the things of God and of the Spirit at all. It is not in this sense that it is understood by St. Thomas. "Those things are said to be too high for man", he says (*Super Boeth. De Trin.* II.1. ad 1) "which exceed his capacity, not those which are by nature of more value than he. For the more a man occupies himself with things of more worth than himself, provided it be within the limits of his capacity, the more he will be benefitted. But should he exceed the measure of his capacity he will easily fall into error, even should it be in regard to the most insignificant objects" One of the most important things that Brother John will have to discover as he progresses in his



studies is precisely these limits of the capacity of the human mind; what is intelligible to it and what is not and why it is not. In theology, more especially, ‘*omnia abeunt in mysterium*’. He will have to learn just what validity our human ideas and concepts can have and not have in respect to God and the Divine Mysteries. A *docta ignorantia* is one of the most precious results of thorough, scientific study, and it is the very opposite of an ignorant ignorance. But it is not only God above who, because of His transcendence, is impervious to the clear comprehension of the human mind in its earthly condition: there is also the dark enigma of matter beneath, which defies clear intelligibility by reason of its very materiality. There is also the realm of practical human affairs and conduct which escape metaphysical certitude by reason of their contingency and variability (cf. *Ethics*.1). Brother John will not really know, will not be really wise, until he understands these limitations of the human mind: until he knows what he can and cannot know; what he can know directly, and what only by inferences and analogies, and what is the character and value of these analogies. So St. Thomas brings him back to the point at which the letter started: the bridling and directing of the mind’s impetuosity. To seek what is too high for us, to seek or claim fully to understand what is not fully understandable, is not only bad morals; it makes for bad science: and it is bad morals because it makes for bad science.

It is, you may say, a discouraging letter to send to a keen young man on the threshold of his studious career. But St. Thomas will not have us start with any illusions; it is a difficult, exacting, even a dangerous undertaking. And we have not yet read the letter’s conclusion. It runs:

“*Illius beati Dominici sequere vestigia, qui frondes, flores et fructus, utiles ac mirabiles, in vinea Domini Sabaoth, dum vitam comitem habuit, protulit ac produxit. Haec, si sectatus fueris, ad id attingere poteris, quidquid affectas. Vale!*”

I can recall few passages in St. Thomas’s writings more rich and resonant. Moreover, I can recall no other in which he mentions St. Dominic. There are historians<sup>26)</sup> who have darkly hinted that St. Dominic’s original intentions were frustrated by St. Thomas and his like; that the Order of Preachers was originally a band of simple catechists for simple people, and that the entry of his Friars into the business of exact scientific study of systematic theology and philosophy, into the disputatious intellectual world of the Schools and the Universities, was an aberration from the primitive simplicity of the Order. Sometimes in our own day the suggestion is heard that such intellectual activity

26) These historians have in fact been thoroughly refuted on historical grounds by P. Mandonnet and his editors in their *Saint Dominique*.

is worse than useless for Dominicans who are destined to work among simple, unsophisticated souls. Perhaps it is forgotten that the less unsophisticated also have souls. But I think that an even more serious misunderstanding underlies both suggestions—a misunderstanding akin to that which makes us smile when we read the Prologue to the *Summa*, and find that St. Thomas wrote all these vast, thorough-going, closely-written tomes for the especial benefit of “beginners”, of Christ’s “little ones”. St. Thomas was no fool; and it must be seriously questioned whether the burghers and serfs and villeins of the thirteenth century were so vastly more intelligent than their counterparts in the twentieth. But nor was he an intellectual snob; he could not believe that the least of Christ’s brethren deserved less than the best. It is a great mistake, I am convinced, to suppose that anything is good enough to be handed out to the less educated; in my own limited experience it is more especially in trying to deal honestly and understandingly with the genuine personal problems, doubts and perplexities of the less sophisticated that one needs to be able to probe matters to rock-bottom. In such cases, more particularly, it does little good if all we can do is to hand out the foregone conclusions of the modern manuals of “potted theology” without that conviction or that ability to apply general principles to concrete cases and needs, which can alone come from thinking things out for ourselves and so assimilating them into our own minds. If we are to teach and really to help the minds and souls of others, absolute intellectual honesty and candour is the first requisite; we must know what we know, know what we only suspect or believe on human authority; what we believe on Divine authority and what on human authority. We must know also what we do not know, and why we do not know it; and, if it is knowable, how to find it out.

All this a thomistic education should give us; it is a pedagogy which does no violence to our minds, but which assists their own natural growth. The fruits of St. Dominic’s contemplation were useful to others because they were first good in themselves—“utiles” because first “mirabiles”. St. Thomas’s principles tell us what our present-day experience so abundantly confirms, that utility goods which are not honest<sup>27)</sup> are not even any use. (1.5.6 ad 2). But before the grapes, the fruit in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts, come the blossoms, and before the blossoms the foliage—“frondes et flores”—and before the foliage the humble, hidden, sheltered growth of the seed in the earth. It is not very exciting being the tiny seed growing secretly; it is not very easy to believe that it can ever become a strong vine. It is difficult for it to perceive its own growth, and quite

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27) “Honestum”—what is good in itself.

impossible for others. It is quite appalling to think of the immense quantities of moisture, light, heat and air which it must assimilate and transmute into its own vital substance before that can be brought about.

So St. Thomas concludes by bringing back the mind of Brother John to this idea of humble, hidden beginnings, and gradual immanent growth. But the reward is very great, in fact limitless. "If you shall have followed these things you will be able to attain to whatsoever you desire". The natural desire of the mind for knowledge is voracious, limitless; because it is the desire for the possession of being it is an infinite desire. The unrestrained, undirected lust of the mind is still more devouring, more destructive, more calamitous than the unrestrained, undirected lust of the flesh (cf. I-II.30.4); and indeed, St. Thomas shows, the former is the cause of the latter. (cf. I-II.82.3, II-II.173.1 ad 3). "Corruptio optimi pessima." But it cannot be bad in itself; it cannot therefore be insatiable, condemned of its nature to frustration; the "schlechte Unendlichkeit"<sup>(28)</sup> of infinite desire for ever unsatisfied. (C: Gentiles III.25ff). That is indeed the "poena damni"<sup>(29)</sup> of hell. But divine grace comes to meet the infinite yearning of nature: the infinite all-devouring Eros is met, as it only can be met, by the gracious self-giving of the Infinite in Agape. Then alone can our intellect know even as it is known, no longer in *aenigmate*,<sup>(30)</sup> the slow tedious business of collecting and collating sense-experience, the search for "media demonstrationis",<sup>(31)</sup> but "face to face" (cf. I. Cor. 13, 12).

But even in this world, "dum vitam comitem habemus", there is, if we only restrain and direct our impetuosity by true "studiositas", the natural light of reason imparted by the God who "teaches within". If we surrender further to the operations of the Grace of the Spirit, not only actively "learning" but receptively "undergoing", divine things, there is the assistance of the "sapida scientia"<sup>(32)</sup> of His Gifts to illumine both the mysteries of faith and the mysteries of nature (1.1.6 ad 3). Master Thomas is not one to make rash, groundless promises. "Ad id attingere poteris, quidquid affectas.—Vale!"

28) The "bad infinity" of Hegel.

29) The suffering of loss of God, infinite because irremediable loss of the Infinite, and corresponding to the aversion from God in mortal sin; contrasted with the "poena sensus", the positive suffering, of its nature finite, resulting from the positive attachment to the creature in the sin (I-II.87.4 etc.).

30) "through a glass in a dark manner" (Douai version).

31) "means of proof", i.e. middle terms in arguments.

32) St. Thomas's derivation of "sapientia", a "tasting" or "relishing" kind of knowledge (cf. BLACKFRIARS, Jan. 1943, p. 13).

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