

THE WISDOM OF SAINT THOMAS*

'Where is Wisdom to be found, and where is the place of understanding? The abyss saith, it is not in me; the sea saith, it is not with me. God understandeth the way of it, and He knoweth the place thereof.'—JOB xxviii.

THOSE who are familiar with St. Thomas's *Proemium* to his *Summa contra Gentiles* will recall his words on the meaning of true Wisdom. '*Sapientis est ordinare*,' he says, 'it is a wise man's business to deal with things in orderly fashion, and since the goal or end we have in view must govern our procedure, and since the supreme goal for us all must be the Divine Truth, the study of it should be the one preoccupation of the wise man.' That is Theology, or the study of God. Now God is made known to us in nature, and the true scientist is he who endeavours to arrive at a knowledge of the Creator through His creation. But besides the Book of Nature there is also the Book wherein God has spoken to us and shewn us the path to heaven, in which He has 'set before us life and death.'¹ This is His Revelation, the theologian's quarry, the true source of his wisdom. Hence the words above quoted from Job are with peculiar appositeness used by the Church in the Breviary Office for the Feast of St. Jerome, the 'Doctor maximus' whose entire life was spent in toiling in that quarry.

But 'the end of the Law is Christ.' Neither the Book of Nature nor the Book which God had penned for us proved sufficient for the guidance of erring man who had 'entangled himself with an infinity of ques-

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¹ Deut. xxx, 15.

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tions.” Hence the Incarnation whereby the Supreme Truth took human form and as the Incarnate Wisdom ‘found out all the way of wisdom. He was seen on earth and conversed with us men,’² or as St. Paul puts it ‘God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face (or “Person”) of Christ Jesus.’⁴

The theologian, then, is one who, while making the fullest use both of the Book of Nature and of the Bible, realises that ‘theology’ should be no arid study but a personal affair, the study of the Supreme Personality of the Incarnate God by his own personality, or in St. Thomas’s words: ‘the purpose of the study of the Bible is that thereby a man’s soul may be knit to God.’ Rarely does the Angelic Doctor afford us a glimpse into his own soul in the pages of his works, but now and again he lifts the veil for a space. Thus when treating of the Incarnation he says: ‘If a man will but diligently and devoutly dwell on the mysteries of the Incarnation he will discover therein a depth of wisdom surpassing all other human knowledge. To one who thus devoutly meditates there will be made manifest ever more and more marvellous reasons for this mystery.’⁵ Or when treating of the virtue of religion ‘It is God to whom we ought to be more especially bound as to the one unfailing Principle; to Him our choice should ever be assiduously directed since He is our Last End; Him we lose if we neglect Him by falling into sin; Him we are bound to regain by protesting anew our faith in Him.’⁶

² Wisd. vii, 30.

³ Bar. iii, 37-38.

⁴ II Cor. iv, 6.

⁵ *La Philosophie Scolastique*, ii, p. 256.

⁶ *Summa Theol.* 2-2, lxxxi, 1.

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This was St. Thomas's 'wisdom.' For him the goal was clear; and to its attainment he directed the mighty powers with which God had endowed him. It was precisely the lack of this that led the Philosophers of old astray: 'What mental tortures those glorious intellects underwent! But from these we shall be free if we take as our basis the doctrine that men can arrive at true happiness after this life.'

In his great Encyclical on the study of St. Thomas Leo XIII dwells at length on this wisdom of St. Thomas. But in so doing he has no mind to endorse all that the Scholastics who followed him have said. For he continues: 'We say "the wisdom of St. Thomas," for it is not by any means in our mind to set before this age as a standard those things which may have been enquired into by scholastic doctors with too great subtlety; or anything taught by them with too little consideration, not agreeing with the investigations of a later age; or, lastly, anything that is not probable.'⁷

The principle here laid down by the great-minded Pontiff could hardly be better elaborated than in the words of Father Kleutgen: 'Scholastic Philosophy as a whole is susceptible of noteworthy improvements, nay from the circumstances of the time it needs them, insomuch that in this sense it may be superseded by a better philosophy. . . . We have never asserted that all questions now raised were solved in times past; nor have we ever expressed a doubt that for their solution the ancient Philosophy might derive advantage from the modern. What we do deny is that in order to perfect philosophical science it is necessary to deny the fundamental principles of antiquity.'⁸

⁷*Contra Gentiles*, iii, 48.

⁸*Aeterni Patris*.

⁹*La Philosophie Scolastique*, ii, p. 256.

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As Scholastics then of the twentieth century we accept in their totality the principles laid down seven hundred years ago by St. Thomas Aquinas, though many of the speculations which interested him have lost their practical interest for us. It will be well to understand clearly what those principles are. In the first place God has revealed Himself to us men; that revelation is enshrined in the Bible which, among other doctrines, tells us of a teaching Church whose charter is that same Bible. Her duty towards it is two-fold; she has to preserve it down the centuries; she has to expound it officially. Secondly, for the purpose of understanding and assimilating that Revelation God has given man reason or understanding. This God-given gift man is bound to develop to its fullest capacity. Its findings cannot, strictly speaking, be in conflict with Revelation since Truth, like God, its Author, is one and indivisible. To St. Thomas's thinking there can be no more secure approach to Revelation than that afforded by the human intellect thinking rightly.

But to think rightly the intellect must be trained and, since man's nature is now a fallen nature, it must be guided. Passion, prejudice, ignorance—the fruits of the Fall, have all to be taken into account. In fact this would seem to be the main purpose of Revelation given subsequently to the Fall. Consequently the true guide for human reason is Revelation, or God's authoritative teaching. But what is to be said of the human intellect which has never come under the influence of Revelation? In other words: what of the heathen philosophers and their systems of thought? Do they stand self-condemned because they have never fallen under the corrective influences of Divine grace and Revelation?

It can hardly be doubted that after the age of St. Augustine and the Cappadocian Fathers such as St.

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Gregory of Nyssa and St. Basil, whose debt to Plato and Aristotle respectively is so unmistakable, many would have been inclined to exclude the heathen philosophers from all share in the guidance of specifically Christian thought. In fact, this was most noticeably the case in the age immediately preceding the rise of the Scholastics. For St. Bernard nothing but evil could come from the study of Aristotle. He was judging, of course, by its patent ill effects in the case of a man like Abelard, whom he dubs a 'second Aristotle'—though he did not mean that as a compliment. He says again of Abelard: 'He exhausts his strength in trying to make Plato out a Christian, and thus affronts the Church's teachers.'

To argue, then, as did the Scholastics, that intellectual discussion as reduced to a fine art by the heathen Aristotle could and should be used in defence of Revelation was a bold step. It demanded a breadth of outlook which was itself a compliment to the open-mindedness of the age in which they lived.

In all such movements the tendency at first is to exaggerate. This was markedly the case at the University of Paris, where some were apparently tempted to make a god of Aristotle; they consequently ran wild in their speculations. But it must be remembered that only a small portion of Aristotle's works were accessible to them, and then only through the medium of the Arabians who, on certain points at least, had distorted the teaching of the Stagyrte. Hence the prohibition of the study of Aristotle published by Innocent III in 1215. The fact of such a prohibition makes the feat accomplished by St. Thomas and his fellows all the more remarkable. For they succeeded in establishing the position of Aristotle as a vehicle for ecclesiastical teaching after he had been brought into disrepute by the ill-timed extravagances of ecclesiastics.

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The victory thus gained by Albert the Great and St. Thomas was won by the sanity and balance of their views. They never contemplated deifying the Greek, though he did become for them 'the philosopher' par excellence. Yet they did not accept his teachings *en bloc*; nor again did they accept them simply because they were his. If they deified anything about him it was his search for intellectual truth, his conviction that man's intellect was a weapon fashioned solely to secure for man full, adequate and correct knowledge of such truths as lay within its ken. And it was the same with all man's faculties, with his will, his senses and imagination as much as with his intellect. It is this that gives such enormous importance to St. Thomas's use of Aristotle's *Ethics*. By taking these over and Christianising them he glorified the natural powers of man even though 'fallen,' and shewed how they could become as it were the basis of the supernatural life with its virtues. Nor did this involve any change even in human nature, 'fallen' though it was, but only an uplifting or elevation. All this St. Thomas crystallises in his oft-repeated expression: 'Grace does not destroy but perfects nature.'

It should not be necessary to point out that for St. Thomas and the Scholastics as a body Aristotle is but a stepping-stone or a scaffolding which the builder uses and then removes. When once the student's mind has been trained by his study of Aristotelian methods and he has been thereby enabled to enter into the '*Sancta sanctorum*' of theology strictly so-called, he forgets Aristotle simply because he is always using him unconsciously, which is the most perfect form of use, as we see in the geometrical surveyor and his Euclid.

The above will furnish an answer to a question often put to us: How far do you really follow St. Thomas? Do you follow him blindfold and say 'St Thomas says

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so, therefore it is true'? The answer is simple: We do indeed adhere slavishly to St. Thomas's principles, but not simply because they are his, but because his entire philosophical system is so absolutely coherent that if you desert him on one point you find yourself in a quagmire and have to resort to a whole series of qualifications and reservations which can only result in pure eclecticism. But in St. Thomas's writings there are other things than principles. There are views and statements of seven hundred years back. It would be absurd to suppose that these have the same cogency now as then; we may instance his ideas on the possibility of spontaneous generation.

A further question: You call yourselves 'Thomists.' Does this mean that every man who studies St. Thomas and makes up his mind to take him for his guide is technically speaking a 'Thomist'? The answer is in the negative. For by a 'Thomist' we mean one who not only studies St. Thomas and—if you like—takes his stand by him and his doctrine, but who reads St. Thomas through the eyes of that doctor's 'school,' through the eyes, that is, of that mighty army of men who have devoted their lives to the assimilation of the Master's thought, who come to him to learn and not simply to criticise, whose principle is: 'St. Thomas says so, therefore the overwhelming probability is that it is so, though I have not the brains to see it.' Here you have the essence of that 'docility' which St. Thomas ranks among the virtues. Without it no man ever really learned anything, though he may qualify as a destructive critic—if anyone desires to be anything so ignominious.

'Docility' or 'teachableness' spells freedom; 'the Truth shall make you free' as the Essential Truth Himself has taught us.

But true freedom of thought of course means disciplined thought. In a sense a horse in the wilds is

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not really so free as the horse accustomed to bit and bridle, which alone enable him to develop his real capacities. To turn an uneducated man loose in a laboratory with freedom to do what he liked there could only result in disaster to others as well as himself. It would be almost as bad as turning the same man free on the Bible!

And disciplined thought means trained thought. Such training means not merely being taught how to use one's reason, it also inculcates respect for the reasoned work of our predecessors. For we are their heirs; we are what we are because they were what they were. This is true even in the domain of physical science; for though the implements at the disposal of the pioneers in any science would be a nightmare to their descendants, the same cannot be said of their mental equipment. A Newton must always demand the scientist's respect as much as Euclid demands that of the modern mathematician.

The same must hold good in the domains of Philosophy and Theology, and to a far greater degree. For if Theology is the science of the unchanging self-revealing God, and if science is rational knowledge, then there must be somewhere in the world an ordered process of developed and correct thought inspired by God's Revelation and in its turn occupied with its study and investigation. The wanderings and aberrations of many thinkers may have obscured this for long periods, but it must still be there for those who will seek for it. For we children of St. Dominic and brethren of St. Thomas firmly believe that not only is that modicum of Divine Truth which God deemed it necessary for us to know if we would win the Kingdom of Heaven preserved for us in the Bible, safeguarded and interpreted for us by the Church when occasion arises; we also believe that the most efficacious means the Church has yet discovered for bringing that truth

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home to the minds of men is the philosophical teaching of the great Greek Masters purified for us by the wisdom of the Scholastics whom God raised up for that very purpose.

HUGH POPE, O.P.

EVENING

WE are just barbarians.
Our camp is vast.
The present camp and the past
show little variance.

For to-day we do
whatever we did
in times bysped
and the years ago.

All over the ground
is bewildering;
scarcely a thing
where it should be found.

Children and hens,
wherever they group,
all mixed up;
not without offence.