

# Faith of the Fathers

## by Thomas Gilby, O.P.

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The tide has gone out, and the great constructions of Christian thought seem to lie in their harbours like capital ships no longer in commission for active service, some destined for the breaker's yard, others to be retriaged and to lie at their buoys, moth-balled and landlocked. Is St Thomas's *Summa* among them?

This is where the comparison between theological architecture and naval construction begins to limp. Or rather, where we should be careful about committing our idea of a capital ship to one image. For it has a constant meaning under shapes as diverse as a three-decker, a super-dreadnought, an aircraft-carrier, and a nuclear submarine, and the force of its meaning has to be brought to bear so long as sea-power is required for the life of a nation. Likewise, so long as a grasp on the reasons for things is required in the life of the Church, for in this world it must know what it means and be able to show what it means, the need will remain for the systematic and coherent articulation of the implications of divine Revelation in terms of human experience.

And human experience includes quite hard-headed thinking. It is true that it will not take us all the way, yet without it we travel alone and without communicating, except perhaps with those to whom we are united by sympathy. Hence it should be thinking aloud, and, moreover, about the common or garden run of human experience, earthy, rational, profane, comic, and tragic, and not reserved for elevations in some allegedly supernatural enclave. *Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all and in all.*<sup>1</sup>

Here St Thomas stands with singular authority. It is not only that he has been, and still is, earnestly commended to us by Popes, but also that he is so thoroughly at home in God's world, past, present, and to come. To return to the opening analogy. Spars and rigging, barbettes, armoured rams, these are matters for the historical specialist, and soon, it seems, steam catapults will be the same, yet the purpose they were designed to serve remains a constant. And so we must look behind the scholasticisms and the plodding attention to details of medieval but not of modern interest in order to discover the enduring half-answers which justify the ways of God with man.

Does he stand alone? Not at all, for he is but part of a greater whole in Catholic theology and philosophy; other teachers lay emphases other than his, or explore fields he does not enter. All the same, if you want a vindication of human nature, reason, and creatureliness not despite, but because of grace, faith, and God's own embracing perfections, then he especially is your man. His thought, however, cannot be distilled in a short account. He has to be mulled

<sup>1</sup>Colossians 3, 11.

over. Accordingly this edition is no book of the film of the book, but his own opening discussions to his *magnum opus*.

They start with a preliminary account of the status of Christian theology as a scientific discipline about the truths of divine Revelation, and go on to inquire into positions which are implied in religious belief. Does God exist, and what is he, or rather, what is he certainly not? The section ends with a *via media*, a closely reasoned study of talk about God which avoids the extremes of anthropomorphism and agnosticism. The next volume will move from God's being to his acting, and consider his mind and will, so concluding the treatise on the one God, which prepares the student for that on the blessed Trinity. The present discussions (1a. 1-13) were written about 1265, when St Thomas was lecturing at the Papal Court, directing the studies of the Roman Dominicans, and working in close contact with his Hellenist friends.

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Reputations change, even in the theological world; a hundred years ago St Thomas was regarded as the last of the Fathers, fifty years later as the first of the systematic philosophers who wrote of the sacred in terms of the profane, and as the patron of an energetic and growing school of Catholic thought. And now? He is probably honoured more on the first count than on the second, for despite the widespread feeling that religious truth should be carried into the plastic experience of contemporary living, not stiffened in remote and archaic statements, its validity has now come to be tested rather by its social or even political consequences than by more timeless and contemplative considerations. In religion for the time being rationalism and metaphysics are out.

Moreover he labours under another handicap. He is cast for the rôle of representing a medieval phase in the Church's theory, sacramental practice, and discipline: some may allow that it was superior to the baroque, still more to what came after, until, as they say, Vatican II changed all that, yet after all it is little more than a piece of the past, irrelevant to the urgent present. Connoisseurs may savour a fine old crusted port; it is, however, no sort of drink for the thirsting multitude.

Only those who have mulled over St Thomas himself, regardless of the vogue, whether it was running for him, as at the height of the Leonine revival, or against him, as at present when the classical structure of theology is not so much disproved as neglected, can appreciate the extent to which he cannot be dated. If they are not medievalists they may have no taste for the pointed style, they may be fridged by his habit of picking up and looking at every dullish stone as he goes along, they might even wish that he had written like St Augustine or Newman, and of course they recognize that he is sometimes banal and sometimes quaint, and that, since he was no

anachronism when he wrote, much of his Scriptural exegesis, physical science, and social prejudices were those of his age. They may salute yet have little interest in the modern research which has added so much to our knowledge of his place in the history of thought.

What they respond to is a deeper spirit, too diffused through his works to be distilled to a few propositions, a complete security in the truth of God's revelation and a confidence that since it is given to creatures made to think and love in a human way it can be communicated in a reasonable dialogue which uses terms that are provisional when set against eternity, but not against the changing eras of human life. They are constants, yesterday, today, and tomorrow; they mark the apostolic succession of Christian doctrine, so that we know we have the same faith as our ancestors, and can hand on the same hope to our descendants. Admittedly they are not the heart of the matter; for that God alone can search; all the same they are the condition of the common and continuous identity of professing Christians being made manifest in this world—men and women who are to be recognized, not by any especial nobility, for they are sinners, but by what they say and mean.

The Catholic Church is charged with transmitting these meanings, and one of the functions of the Holy See is to see that they are articulated clearly. Critics may complain that they have been articulated too clearly—an occupational hazard which follows from the adoption of any vocabulary and grammar of thought. Remember that theology is not faith, but thinking about faith; it moves as it were, at a lower level and forms the 'civil intercourse' of believers among themselves. A civilization tends to harden into a stylized culture with an accompanying over-insistence on certain conventional forms, which for religion will be the shadows rather than the substance of faith. And in some respects the problem will not be eased if the shadows are strongly defined.

Were the framework of reference adopted for the communication of religious truth merely a passing and pragmatic configuration of thought adapted to the needs of one particular culture then the dangers of cutting the present to fit the past would be obvious. Nor would a historian of the Church as a human institution deny that its officials, like general staffs everywhere, have often been found to enter a new campaign with methods that only just won the last. What is needed is some agreed basis—system is too organological a word—on which believers of all periods and regions can think aloud and talk together about meanings.

That Dominicans have been inclined to make extravagant claims for St Thomas is a topic, sometimes genial, of ecclesiastical table-talk; they are allowed their little swagger, like the Marines when service-men gather together. The Church has managed with him pretty well for seven centuries, yet without him for nearly twice as long. Yet his is a Providential entrance into its history, and in fact

he is largely responsible for the mould in which central theological thinking is now cast. It is not a question of pinning the assent of faith to the profession of a rational ideology. It is just that his philosophy is less sectarian while at the same time less agnostic than most, and more open to serve the translation of revealed truth into the perennial terms of human thought. Such is theology as a technical discipline; it is not the one thing necessary, but it is not far off. If we are to grasp the meaning of a papal encyclical, and not merely receive its teaching with obedience, we have to appreciate the medium of its discourse.

You can be a good American citizen without being a Jeffersonian, a good Catholic theologian without being a Thomist, but in either case if you are to be in the tradition you should know about the political convictions of the founding father or the thought forms of the Church's magisterium. Neither are having a good press just at present, nevertheless they still run strong beneath the spate of new ideas and emotive images, often of protest, and can be enriched by the best of them. Only reason in theology can tell us when vehemence is not value, only a sense of history in theology when and where we can disavow our past.

So then this apologia for St Thomas amounts to saying much more than that there is life in the old dog yet. He is recommended for his perennial vigour. How curiously non-medieval he was. He lived at the headquarters of an impressive movement which almost succeeded, but fortunately failed, to establish a legalized theocracy over Western civilization and was well-versed in its techniques, yet throughout his theological writings the only hints he drops about the project are a few flicks at attempts to put human life with God into a canonical cage. Of course you have to dig for his non-medievalisms, but not very deep, and you find them in the most unlikely places: it is noteworthy that his presentation in Japanese has started with some of his more recondite works, commonly neglected in the West.

Yet even the thirteenth century was more ecumenical than is commonly held, not in political history, for the sack of Constantinople had left a grievous memory, but in theology. Hellenist ideas were streaming into the philosophy and theology of Europe, such as the Logos teaching adumbrated in this volume on the mind of God, so much so that by the time of the Council of Florence the Greeks were respecting St Thomas as an authority. The communion was broken, but that was the fault of the ecclesiastical politicians, the traders, and the Turks, not the high theologians.

Then again, to look north beyond the Alps, the heirs to the Reformation will find in him a theology of grace, adumbrated in this volume in the discussions on predestination, which protests as much as they do against the suggestion that we can strike a contract with God and bind him with our good works and pious practice and merits.

Consequently St Thomas is recommended to Orthodox and Protestant Christian; he does not express the crusading expansionism of the Franks nor the juridical religion of the Romans. Both may be defended, but with little help from the *Summa*. Be warned, however, that the present volume shows him just getting into his theological stride as a Christian. He has given an account of the reasons for holding that God exists and how we can formulate true statements about him. Now he discusses what we mean when we say that God knows and loves and provides in particular for the creatures he has made. All this, however, is a preliminary to his meditations on the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, and the Father's sending of the Son and the coming of the Spirit, that we may dwell with them for all eternity.

## Act and Meaning

### by David John Melling

1. The foundation on which any adequate moral theology or philosophy must be built is an anthropology which does justice to the complexity of human life. The picture of the human agent enshrined in the manuals of moral theology on which the clergy of past generations were reared showed man as an intelligent being making rational decisions. Manualist man was a free agent bound in conscience by various hierarchically ordered systems of law. The ultimate ground of all morally significant law was the positive will of God. This picture has lost its credibility. The insights of contemporary philosophy have shown it to be an arid and distorted representation of the human condition, and moral theologians have already begun to enrich their understanding of man by incorporating into the picture they use elements drawn from existentialist, phenomenologist and even logical positivist analyses.

2. For moral theology as such, not only must an adequate picture of man be developed, there must also be a serious reconsideration of the traditional images of God. The God of the Divine Plan, Lawgiver, Judge, is no more credible in this century than is *homo manualensis*. Once again the work of demolition and reconstruction has already begun: philosophers and theologians (in this country one is tempted to add 'respectively') have already gone far in the work of dissecting and reconstructing or replacing the outmoded images of God. As yet, there is little sign of the more radical aspects of theological revaluation having a transforming influence on many moral theologians.