

THREE VIRTUES FOR TRUTH

By

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I invite you, dear brethren, on this Feast day to pay a visit with me in all reverence to the shrine of St Thomas's soul. The key of entry lies ready to hand; it is in his written works.

Perfect lucidity, unruffled serenity, transparent candour, austere simplicity, complete self-effacement—these are the qualities which emerge eloquent from the pages of St Thomas, and tell us that here is a man utterly devoted to truth. *Ego vox*, said the Precursor John the Baptist. May we not say this also of the Angelic Doctor—that he is a voice, a disembodied voice which, if it were possible, would tell us nothing of the speaker, and bear witness only to the truth? Is there a single word in all the volumes that he wrote which betrays anything of the pride of personal opinion, anything of the sense of triumph over opponents, anything of the glow of self-satisfaction in discovery and achievement? There is an impersonal quality in the writings of St Thomas—not a coldness, no, that would be to mistake him entirely—an impersonal quality which comes not of self-impoverishment, but of self-abandonment, of self-abandonment to truth. His work has the transparency of the crystal which is content only to transmit the light—better, it has the brilliance of a flame which the fire of charity has kindled, a fire which has consumed all the littleness of self as a holocaust to the radiance of truth. Here is a limpidity, here a purity, here a spirituality which is something more than human; it is angelic. He is the Angelic Doctor. Angelic precisely because his sanctity was distinctively such as to deliver his mind almost entirely from those limitations which sin has set upon the human understanding.

In his present condition, man is hampered by two obstacles in his quest for truth: they are, the insubordination of sense and the insubordination of the spirit. In this marvellous microcosm which is man, God had originally designed and preternaturally perfected a mechanism of the most exquisite balance, to bridge the gap between matter and spirit. But sin came to upset the harmony of its working. No longer is the imagery of sense the docile handmaid of the intellect, furnishing at man's behest—and only at his behest—the rich beauties of God's visible creation to be refined, purified, spiritualised into intelligibility by the mind. Insistently now, querulously, rebelliously, the word of sense urges its own claims, and reason is hard put to it to retain its throne. Like many of our domestic servants today, sense has become very much a

(1) The substance of a sermon delivered on the feast of St Thomas Aquinas, at Hawkesyard Priory, March 7th, 1946.

part-time worker in reason's house. Instead of a help to the mind it is often an obsession, instead of bringing light it often blurs the vision, instead of raising the spirit to God it often weighs it down. Whether as an instrument of knowledge or as a stimulus of love, sense is no longer the faithful minister, but the unruly rebel, and our control over it is imperfect and precarious indeed. The bridge between matter and spirit still holds—but how warily we must tread as we cross it! It was a bad day's work for human knowledge when we lost the gift of integrity, and our senses became fantasy uncontrolled. Only by the grace of God and our laborious co-operation in the virtue of temperance can we compensate something of that loss; above all, only that virtue of chastity which is rightly called the humility of the body, can restore something of the balance which original sin has disturbed.

And so we are brought to contemplate in the soul of St Thomas the first of those virtues which, in making him a Saint, made him our Teacher too. Reginald of Piperno, formerly the pupil of our Saint, later his constant companion, and privileged to hear his death-bed confession, has deposed that that last confession was the confession of a child of five, who had never known what it was to commit a deliberate mortal sin. Graced by God in Baptism, that soul retained its innocence until the moment when God called it to His everlasting embrace. From his earliest years his piety was marked by a most tender love and devotion for Our Blessed Lady, and we may be sure that the fascination of his youthful soul for purity and virginity was the motherly gift of her whose unique privilege is to be Virgin and Mother. We know the story of the shameless woman who one day sought to pluck the flower-like virtue from his heart; the burning brand with which he drove her forth was a symbol of the ardent charity that filled his soul to leave room for no other love beside. And the angels who then girt his body with the mystic girdle of chastity, also lent wings to his mind so that, "laying aside every weight and sin that surrounded" him, he might rise untrammelled to contemplate the things of God. God was already preparing his angelic teacher of truth. "Who knows," wrote Pope Pius XI; "had Thomas fallen from chastity in that moment of crisis, the Church might never have had her Angelic Doctor." The soul of our Saint is the soul of our Teacher, because it is the soul of a virgin. "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."

But the chief enemy of truth is the insubordination of the spirit—and this is pride: the sin of great minds that are become little and foolish in their own conceit. And here it seems that, by reason of our very mode of knowledge, we human beings are subject to a danger, to a temptation, from which the angelic mind is immune. The angel, even in the order of nature, receives all his knowledge from above; his eyes, as it were, are raised to God to receive from Him (not in vision, but as though by emanation) the radiance of

that intelligibility of which He is the only source. It is not so with man. His eyes are bent earthwards; it is only in the visible things of earth that he can know the invisible things of God; only in the fleeting things of time that he can know the Eternal; only in the beauty that passes away that he can catch some glimpse of the Beauty that is ever old and ever new. And here lurks the subtle danger that besets him. For there is much in created beauty that may bewitch even the spirit of man; above all there is the joy of knowledge itself, the satisfaction of the spirit in its own achievement. Let the mind of man beware: this way lies vanity, this way darkness, this way the idolatry of self-worship; this way lies pride, the enemy of all truth. "When I rose up against Thee in my pride," wrote St Augustine, "those lower things became greater than I and pressed me under so that I could neither loosen their grip nor so much as breathe . . . I was separated from Thee by my own swollenness, as though my cheeks had swelled out and closed up my eyes." The lower reason must be subject to the higher; the reason that considers the things of earth must be subject to the reason that sees God as the ground, the beginning and the end of all things that are. The knowledge of things finite that does not see that they are as nothing in God's sight, is ignorance and folly; the knowledge of self that does not attain the primary truth that man is a creature, separated from the Creator by an abyss of nothingness that only God's omnipotence can span, such knowledge is no true knowledge at all. Only when the mind has been purified from the dross of self-regard can it be penetrated by the light of truth. Humility is the condition of all true wisdom. If chastity is the humility of the body, then humility is truly the chastity of the mind. In this sense, too, "blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."

And so we are brought to consider the second of those virtues which, in making Thomas our Saint, made him our Teacher too. "It matters little," he said on one occasion, "how you pronounce a Latin word; but it matters much to practise humility and obedience"; so he explained why he had accepted a mistaken correction while reading in the refectory. He was full of gratitude to the fellow-pupil who offered to explain the morrow's lesson to him, though it was he who subsequently had to do most of the explaining. "My learning is unequal to the task!" he protested when required to take the doctorate; and he spent the night in prayer before performing the public act. And later in life he said in all simplicity to one of his companions: "I thank God that neither my learning nor my work of teaching has ever given me a moment's vain-glory to disturb the humility of my soul." They are small but precious indications of that deep humility which, besides being the foundation of his sanctity, was the virtue which more than any other opened his mind to God's truth. Revolutionary he

may have seemed—and was!—in his championship of Aristotle; but it was only because he saw in his philosophy a powerful weapon for the defence of the traditional teaching of the Church. And how he loved tradition! How deeply he revered the Word of God! What profound respect he had for the Fathers of the Church, especially for the master mind of Augustine, and for St John Chrysostom! “Dicendum quod in his Chrysostomus aliquantum forsitan excessit.” This is the severest criticism he will allow himself to make of that great commentator of St Paul to whom he owed so much.

And is not the very psychology which he teaches us marked with the deep humility of his mind? Is it fanciful to suppose that the theory of divine illumination, which appealed so strongly to the eagle mind of Augustine, was less naturally attractive to the humble heart of St Thomas? And does not our Saint show a better understanding of the place which man holds in the hierarchy of created things, does he not take a humbler, as well as a truer, view of man when he makes his mind burrow in the earth, as it were, to discover the jewel of knowledge, and find God's truth stamped as with a seal upon the things He has made?

Chastity and humility, then, the purity of the heart and the purity of the spirit—these are the secret of the wisdom of our Saint. But we have understood nothing of the real St Thomas, unless we have felt something of the warmth of his charity—that charity which, as St Paul tells us, “rejoices in the truth,” that charity which both prompted his desire to know God and was itself nourished by the knowledge which it begot. “What is God?” was the question he used to ask of his teachers at Monte Cassino when he was a child of seven. His whole life was a search for God. “I will rise and will go about the city. In the streets and the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth.” These inspired words of the Canticum of Canticles are the story of St Thomas's life. In his study, in all his actions, in his prayer—above all in his prayer—it was God whom he sought. *Erat miro modo contemplativus*, his biographer tells us—and so God led him by the easy way to knowledge, through love. And that is why, when he writes on charity, it seems as though he can no longer hide his personal feelings behind the veil of his words. “There is no virtue,” he writes, “so prompt in action as charity; no virtue whose practice gives such delight.” These are the words of a man who knows what it is to love. And his love of God overflowed in a tender affection for others. So lovable was he that St Albert the Great, distinguished master who survived his even more distinguished pupil, would weep as he called to mind the Thomas who was no more: *Quod ipse flos fuerat et decus mundi*: “Such a flower was he to grace this earth.” In his love for the poor there is, something of the tenderness of St Francis of Assisi; his biographer, telling us how he would strip the very cloak from his back

to give to the poor, explains that our Saint felt a real need of giving, so much did his heart overflow with love of God and men.

Semper videbant ipsum habentem alacrem vultum, mitem et suavem. "His countenance was ever bright, and very mild and sweet." And as I hear this description given us by one of his contemporaries, I have in mind the portrait that Raphael has painted of our Saint. A face regular in its features, almost childlike in its candid simplicity, a mouth tender and just trembling to a smile; and the whole dominated by those eyes, those deep and limpid Italian eyes, the eyes of a child in their innocence, the eyes of a contemplative in their vision of things that it is not given to man to utter. And then I understand, then I understand why he wrote of charity as one who knows what it is to love. Then I understand why, when he writes in the *Summa contra gentiles* of the reasons for which God became man, his charity seems to break all bounds: *se nascens dedit socium*—what a marvellous summary! Then I understand why he lingers so lovingly over those magnificent articles on the Eucharist, sacrament of charity: *convescens in edulium*. Then I understand why it is in charity that he sees the whole motive and operative power of the Redemption: *se moriens in pretium*. I understand, finally, why, when asked by his divine Master in vision what reward he would have of his labours, he could answer: 'Non aliam, Domine, nisi Teipsum': *se regnans dat in præmium*.

These were his familiar thoughts, the constant theme of his meditation; and he has enshrined them in a verse of one of those beautiful Eucharistic hymns which still rise today, and so long as the Church lasts on earth will rise, on the incense-laden air before the Blessed Sacrament:

Se nascens dedit socium
Convescens in edulium
Se moriens in pretium
Se regnans dat in præmium.

So be it; In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.