

ON A BUS

We had been to a neighbouring seaside resort to visit an old priest living in semi-retirement. The winter afternoon was pallid with weak sunshine that strove to conquer the Crome-grey sky. The top of the bus was thick with stale tobacco smoke. Behind us, as we sat over the driver's cabin, were the quiet low sounds of East Anglian men making speech. My companion, a venerated canon, lived some miles outside the city to which we were returning. A parish priest who had never lost the wonderment of childhood: a student who had learned Hebrew long after leaving college by a correspondence course so as to deepen his love of the Breviary.

We too spoke quietly, but what follows are simply the remembrance of his words. Men are not always the poorer for their gregariousness. Indeed the wealth I have gained, not once but many, many times, from the deep waters of this priest's mind, is a wealth immeasurable and beyond gratitude

What strikes one most in the study of the Reformation is the eclipse of St. Thomas until the Council of Trent. Cajetan and Ferrariensis were contemporaries but were far away from the battlefields. Bañez and John of St. Thomas lived when the havoc had been achieved and their lives were cast on the high Iberian plateau, secure and remote. Indeed the eclipse is heightened by the paradox that the Reformers in their one famous allusion to St. Thomas decry him as a protagonist of a doctrine which neither he, nor any reputable Catholic theologian, have ever held, nor, as Catholics, could hold.

I once heard a cynic apply to Neo-Thomists the words of Papini: 'Not knowing in what way to make the great pay for their greatness, Fate punishes them with disciples.' But to what depths of revenge does Fate plumb when it clothes St. Thomas in the San Benito of heterodoxy!

In order to soften the wrench from sixteen hundred years of tradition the Early Reformers were always intent on using language ambiguous and vague. Sometimes new words were coined, words without patristic or scholastic parentage, words replacing time-honoured terminology that had the misfortune of being too exact. As an example of such methods note Bucer's adoption of the word 'exhibited' in the revised formulary of the Augsburg Confession in the year 1540. The English reformers eagerly borrowed this invention in the Ten Articles since it was a word patient of various

interpretations and could mean nothing or everything according to one's particular brand of heresy.

In the Reformers' effort to represent Tradition, especially Patristic tradition, these efforts won half Europe, but to-day when the dust of battle is cleared away it is strange how little and insecure is their advertised patristic background. Dr. G. L. Prestige has shown how Calvin represents a complete break with tradition, and it is not difficult to show that Dr. Prestige's strictures on Calvin can be equally applied to Luther, Melancthon and the English Reformers. It is easy to quote from the Fathers time and time again; it is easy to fill an index with the names of Chrysostom and Jerome, Cyprian and Gregory, and yet fail entirely to give any indication of the positive contribution of these Doctors to the richness of Christian Tradition. All these Saints, because Reformers themselves, pilloried their fellow Churchmen and Christians, who in their day, as is the case with many in all epochs, scandalised the Faithful by example and weakness. Is it not possible that many have heard and spoken of St. Catherine of Siena, lamenting the Catholic ministry of her day, and yet, how few have studied the Dialogues in their entirety and read with joy the letters she dictated to her secretaries, letters burning with the fire of her great heart?

But when all is said, Patristic Theology is not an easy quarry for definitions. The value of the Mediaeval scholastic contribution was precisely in defining and in synthesising the enormous fields of the earlier tradition. But when we read the Confessions of Augsburg and Wurtemberg; when we study the Institutes and follow again the intricate debates between Luther on the one side and Zwingli and Martin Bucer on the other, we feel that it is incredible that we are studying the minds of men who lived two hundred and fifty years after Aquinas. In the Germanies and France, in England and Sweden, the battle was fought over ground that St. Thomas had carefully mapped out centuries before. Whole battalions of heretics—all Saxony and Hesse, Utrecht and England—fell into the traps the Dumb Ox had laid for his students in the *Videtur quod*, only to be rescued by him later in the *Respondeo dicendum quod* of his incomparably precise articles. We wonder what Martin Bucer studied in the seventeen years of his Dominican life. We wonder at the lack of equipment in those hundreds of young Dominicans who studied in the great *Studia Generalia* that were built all over Europe in the later Middle Ages. The Episcopate was no less to blame. Canonists were the order of the day, wearing out their eyes and coughing in the ink to the world's end:

‘Lord, what would they say
Should their ST. THOMAS walk their way.’

The Paradox of the Reformation is surely the eclipse of St. Thomas. But the eclipse is so pitiable when we realise that his name became the centre of controversy only in connection with a doctrine, palpably heretical, which he never taught.

Melancthon in his defence of the Confession of Augsburg accuses St. Thomas of the opinion that Christ on the Cross satisfied for original sin and instituted the Sacrifice of the Mass for sins, mortal or venial, of daily life. The source of the accusation can be found in a collection of Mediaeval sermons entitled *De Venerabili Sacramento Altaris*, sometimes attributed to St. Albert the Great and found in the collected works of that Doctor. The incriminating words are: ‘Secunda causa institutionis hujus sacramenti est sacrificium altaris contra quamdam quotidianum delictorum nostrorum rapinam; ut sicut corpus Domini Nostri semel oblatum est pro delicto originali, sic offertur jugiter pro nostris quotidianis delictis in altari’ (Opera Alberti Magni, Lib. xxx, 12. Editio Lugdunensis). The paragraph, even when dragged from the context of the sermon can be given a Catholic interpretation. But the point of the matter is that this unique example is made a birch to beat a score of whipping boys: Mass money, multiplication of masses, chantries, simony in general and so forth, whereas nobody acquainted with the careful treatment of the subject of the Sacrifice of the Cross and Redemption and of the whole theology of the Mass by St. Thomas would have dared to attribute to him a heresy so revolutionary and heretical.

It is to be noted that the same accusation was levelled at St. Thomas in the sterile discussions that took place with the consent of Henry VIII in 1548 between the English Reformers and some Lutherans invited from the Germanies. The reply to the pronouncements of the Lutherans was given under the signature of the King, but we know Bishop Tunstall was responsible for it. (Burnet iv, 373, Pocock’s Edition).

In the reply Tunstall refers to the accusation of St. Thomas and makes no effort to defend him. ‘If Private Masses are to be abolished,’ he writes, ‘because of what you describe as wicked doctrines brought in by Thomas Aquinas, Gabriel and others, namely masses merit grace ex opere operato . . . whatever (doctrine) it may be that they have asserted.’

It is difficult to understand how the name and reputation of St.

Thomas could be so loosely misused in these discussions unless we hold that in the hair-splitting of the fifteenth century the works of St. Thomas had become completely neglected. Nobody could have assailed St. Thomas on this point who had the most superficial knowledge of his treatise on the Sacraments. One quotation alone must suffice to show how he treated the Mass not as a separate innovation divorced from the Cross in relation to its object, but a continuation of the Sacrifice of Calvary. 'Quia fructu dominicae passionis quotidie indigemus propter quotidianos defectus, quotidie in Ecclesia regulariter hoc Sacramentum offertur' (III. 83, a.2). The Mass is the Continuation, because of man's needs, of the Sacrifice of Calvary, in itself the infinite Atonement for all sin.

Historians have studied with painstaking care the complicated story of the Reformation, a story that is so rich in documents. They have given various reasons for that European cataclysm causes economic and causes political; the Black Death and the rise of Nationalism; the New Learning and the old sinning; the Renaissance Popes and the sleepy friars; the uneducated clergy and the politician bishops; original sin and the wealth of monasteries. But the eclipse of St. Thomas seems to have passed unheeded. The old campaigner was forgotten and stripling brains strove with the countries of the mind that he had chartered years before.

The days of high controversy have passed. I have in hand a little book published a hundred years ago, 'The Hammersmith Protestant Discussion,' a hectic and rancourous debate between a Scottish clergyman and a Catholic barrister. It is a little sickening to read the reports of their discussion—the heat, the argument, the sarcasm, and the unwholesome atmosphere or rivalry. To-day men prefer the cinema and the *palais de danse*. But these pall and some are willing to listen to the Truth and eager to have their questions answered, not with the easy cleverness of the penny in the slot retort, but eager for the deep well-waters, not of the controversialist, but of the man of prayer. To-day is the opportunity of St. Thomas. Belloc has reminded us of the beauty of the Authorised Version and has told us that its Splendor Verbi has contributed in a very great measure towards the strength of the Anglican Church. In our instructions of converts we speak of the exiled Oxford scholars and the achievement of Gregory Martin. We speak of Challoner, fearful of precipitating persecution, living quietly like some mouse in his London lodgings and tirelessly visiting his shrinking flock in the Home Counties, with his incredible Faith and his hopeless Hope, editing in his leisure moments the Douay

Bible. We hope the catechumen will cherish the Catholic scriptures with all their unmusical Latinisms. We hope they will not feel too deeply the loss of the soaring grandeur of the English Bible.

In all this effort on our part we forget the essential thing.● If St. Thomas was faced with the seeming paradox of the True Church and a second-rate version of the scriptures, and the Anglican Communion the proud possessor of a vernacular version, as lovely as anything in English letters, we know he would not be satisfied with such pedestrian explanations and historical excuses as we usually give our converts. He would delve deeper into the matter than that. I can imagine him writing of the Word of God, Who was in the beginning and became Flesh. I can see him looking at his crucifix from which he claimed all the inspiration for his work :

O God, my God, look upon me :
 Why hast thou forsaken me?
 I am a worm and no man :
 The reproach of men and the outcast of the people.
 They that saw have laughed me to scorn :
 They have dug my hands and my feet,
 They have numbered all my bones.
 Thou knowest my reproach, my confusion and my shame.

The Word made Flesh, a thing of beauty? The Son of Man a joy to the Greeks and a poem in symmetry?

Then the word in which the Word reveals Himself to the world; the word through which is revealed the Way and the Life and the Truth—this word made print must mirror also the Word made Flesh. The crudity of the Vulgate and the poverty of the Douay are at one with the nakedness of the Cross and the wounds of the Crucified. They, like Him, are a reproach to the learned and a stumbling-block to the Greeks.

The bus slowed down to cross the narrow bridge into the ancient city. To our left soared the lovely spire of the Cathedral; on our right could be seen the high roof of the Blackfriars that once housed eighty Friars. Against the tender evening sky stood out the tower of the great Catholic Church. The shell of Blackfriars and the vast emptiness of the Cathedral were the landmarks of the early easy victories in the war against the Mass. England wins wars in which she loses all the early battles. The square tower on the hill appeared to prophecy that this deeper war of hers was lost, precisely because the early battles had been won too easily and too soon.

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