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THE HOLINESS OF TRUTH¹

IN venturing to put in front of you, fellow members of the Aquinas Society, one aspect of the teaching of our Master, I do so diffidently; or I would do so diffidently were I not sure that you will recognise in my attempt merely the effort of a disciple to piece together the deeper teaching of his Master and find in it something which he can use for his own philosophy in life. For this personal reason I have ventured to put together some stray ideas of St. Thomas in order to comfort myself and perhaps, therefore, assist you in the way of life.

We can now see it to have been indeed the very privilege of St. Thomas that he was never anything else than a professor: he is the great patron of teachers, for he was never anything else than a Teacher. You will remember that when on his way to the Council of Lyons he set out north from Naples, he was attacked by some sickness which accentuated the strangeness of that last phase of his life which so perplexed Reginald, his secretary and companion. You have only to read carefully Tocco's text in the Bollandists' *Acta Sanctorum* to see many evidences of this strange condition of absent-mindedness in which he especially laboured. After the vision, or whatever it was, that took place on December 6th, the Feast of St. Nicholas, 1273, St. Thomas, to the consternation of Reginald, refused to write or dictate another word of his still unfinished *Summa Theologica*, and at last, still obdurate in this,

¹ A hitherto unpublished lecture, read by the late Father Bede Jarrett, O.P., to the London Aquinas Society in the first year of its existence, February 4th, 1929.

moved out north of Naples when the papal summons to the General Council came. All through that journey St. Thomas's natural absent-mindedness became a dangerous menace to him, intensified by that vision which made him fix his eyes on God. When on the road by Ticino he fell over a fallen tree and seemed stunned by his fall, Reginald hurried forward and talked hard to him so that he should forget what had happened. Amongst other things that Reginald told him—merely to distract him—this was one, that as soon as he got to Lyons he would be made a Cardinal, like Brother Bonaventure; but St. Thomas answered that he would never be anything else than a friar.

Elsewhere it is said of him that he had obtained the grace never to be a prelate: it is rather humiliating to realise that to escape a prelacy one needs the grace of God. But St. Thomas has his humour for prelates, as when, speaking of elections for religious or other Superiors, he says:

'The less holy and less learned man may conduce more to the common good on account of worldly authority or activity, or something of the kind. The simply less good are sometimes preferred to the better . . . it suffices to elect a good man, nor is it *necessary* to elect the better man, else every election might have a flaw' (2^a2^{ae} 63.2).

'So, too, a fool is honoured if he stand in God's place or represent the community, and in the same way parents and masters should be honoured' (2^a2^{ae} 63.3).

For himself he was always a professor, and never anything but a professor: nor did he ever want to be else than that. Because his life was thus to be lived, teaching, expounding and preaching, he clearly strove for some way of looking at his occupation which should make it valuable for himself, not in the sharpening of his wits merely, but in the development of his soul. So he came, partly perhaps for his own comfort and as an inspiration to his inner life, to insist upon what I have called the *holiness of truth*. Scattered through his works are evidences of how he was at pains to insist to himself, as it were, on all that know-

ledge can do to make a man the better lover of God. Hence, he reverts particularly to the fact that, both in heaven and on earth, the vision of God, or faith in God, or the knowledge of God, is the essential act of the soul by which it is brought into possession of that which is the purpose of life, above and here. Not that by knowledge we really possess it, but that by knowledge we are led on to the possession of this purpose of our lives.

Thus we can take as the starting-point of his theory of life this saying: 'The movement of the appetite cannot tend to anything, either by hoping or loving, unless that thing be apprehended by the sense or by the intellect' (1^a2^{ae} 62, 4). It might seem a strange principle for the theology of a saint: but it is one of his fundamental principles, and its implications, you will remember, colour a great deal of his thought. Thus the whole of his theory of the origins of man's knowledge is based on it in its human meaning, but also in its divine. He maintains that we can only love what has reached us through the senses or through the intellect.

Thus he makes evident through what a narrow portal God has to pass to reach the heart of man. The mind is in a sense narrower than the heart and the senses naturally even more narrow, yet through the mind or sense and not directly through the heart, must even God make His way to our love: 'In this life,' says again our Master, 'we cannot see the essence of God, but we know God from creatures as their principle and also by way of excellence and remotion' (I, 13, 1). So that we have to conceive of our relationship to God as the result of our knowledge of Him, and that knowledge itself as being at least in part the result of the pondering of the mind on the world round about us: 'by way of excellence and remotion.'

It is then for this reason, as you can guess, that St. Thomas insists on the great importance of the contemplative life because it means in itself the gaze of the soul on God (the simple act of gazing on the truth: *simplex in-*

tuitus veritatis (2^a2^{ae} 180.3) is one of the phrases in which he defines it), and in consequence the increase of our knowledge of God. Since God is infinite beauty and infinite truth, the soul here that merely gazes fixedly at Him will become itself full of truth and will continuously deepen its knowledge of truth: as though one might sit quietly gazing at a picture or a landscape for hours and absorbing its ideas as well as its beauty, and then rise from his contemplation with a new, though perhaps speechless, knowledge of the world or art.

But the point that St. Thomas is really making all the while is that this is no barren knowledge that leaves the soul untouched in its moral character, but is a knowledge that inevitably leads to holiness: so he quotes with triumphant delight a saying of St. Gregory (Hom. 14 in *Ezech*) that 'the contemplative life tramples on all cares and longs to see the face of its Creator' (2^a2^{ae} 180, 1, ad 2).

And he explains, too, how this comes about in the very same question: 'Although the contemplative life consists chiefly in an act of the intellect, it has its beginnings in the appetite, since it is through charity that one is urged to the contemplation of God' (2^a2^{ae} 180.7. ad 1^m). We have, therefore, to suppose that the act of the intellect by which God is contemplated is itself motivated by the will, for he says again: 'We are urged to the contemplation of the first principle, namely God, by the love thereof' (2^a2^{ae} 180.1 ad 2^m).

This connection between love and knowledge in the pursuit of God is a theme which perpetually interests St. Thomas, and to it he very frequently refers. Thus in a wholly different part of the *Summa* St. Thomas gives us in a celebrated passage the contrast and yet likeness between the two powers. 'Something,' he says, 'is required for the perfection of knowledge that is not requisite for the perfection of love. For knowledge belongs to the reason whose function consists in distinguishing things which in reality are united, and in uniting together, after

a fashion, things that are distinct, by comparing one with another. Consequently the perfection of knowledge requires that a man should know distinctly all that is in a thing, such as its powers, parts, and properties. On the other hand, love is in the appetitive power which regards a thing as it is in itself: wherefore it suffices for the perfection of love that a thing be loved according as it is known in itself. Hence it is, therefore, that a thing is loved more than it is known; since it can be loved perfectly even without being perfectly known. This is most evident in regard to the Sciences, which some love through having a certain general knowledge of them: for instance, they know that rhetoric is a science that enables man to persuade others; and this is what they love in rhetoric. The same applies to the love of God' (1^a2^{ae} 27.2 ad 2^m).

It is very admirable to see here how St. Thomas is at pains to justify the greater width of the heart as compared to the intellect, for while the intellect in contemplation may still be pursuing every detail of that which it contemplates, the heart has already found its home. Thus, too, it happens that complete knowledge of God is not necessary in order for a soul to love Him, but only that amount of the knowledge of God that all may easily have of Him by grace. But to the searching mind of a professor there is this glory added, that, though the heart may have loved perfectly from the beginning, the intellect can go on increasing its hold on God from day to day.

The endless pursuit of God by the intellect is a fascination for the wise men of the Catholic Faith. In his introduction to the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas says:

Of all the pursuits of men, the pursuit of wisdom is the most perfect, the most sublime, the most profitable, the most delightful'—'the most profitable, because by wisdom itself man is brought into the kingdom of immortality,' 'the most sublime because thereby especially does man approach to a likeness to God' (I, 2).

To account for this likeness it must be remembered that

the intellect itself does hold on to God, or, as our English word expresses it, apprehends God: 'The union of lover and beloved is two-fold. The first is real union: for instance, when the beloved is in the presence of the lover. The second is union of affection: and this union must be considered in relation to the preceding apprehension' (1^a2^{ae} 28.1). This point of union being achieved by love but in relation to the preceding act of the intellect, is elaborated a little more by St. Thomas in the answers to the objections which he puts himself in this article; and again more fully in the next article, too.

'This effect of mutual indwelling may be understood as referring either to the apprehensive or to the appetitive power. Because, as to the apprehensive power, the beloved is said to be in the lover inasmuch as the beloved abides in the apprehension of the lover according to Philippians I, 7, *For that I have you in my heart*' (1^a2^{ae} 28.2). To enforce this even Aristophanes is quoted, Aristophanes at second-hand from Aristotle (*Politics* II), in words in which he says that 'lovers would wish to be united both into one, but since this would result in either one or both being destroyed, they seek a suitable and becoming union—to live together, to speak together, and to be united in all like things' (1^a2^{ae} 28.1. ad 1^m).

But St. Thomas enlarges his former arguments by repeating that 'the lover is said to be in the beloved according to apprehension inasmuch as the lover is not satisfied with a superficial apprehension of the beloved, but strives to gain an intimate knowledge of everything pertaining to the beloved, so as to penetrate into his very soul' (1^a2^{ae} 28.2).

This very marvellous statement of the desire of the lover through love to know the beloved's very soul can be paralleled by two quotations from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* which repeat the importance of knowledge to love: 'This is a property of friendship that a man should reveal his secrets to his friend' (IV, 2); again: 'This seems to be a

property of friendship that a man should talk to his friend.' And here it is brought into relation to holiness. 'But the conversation of man with God is done through the contemplation of Him' (*ibid.* 23).

So we are brought to the view that persistently encouraged St. Thomas, that the knowledge of God such as a theologian possesses can actually, though it need not, increase his holiness or love of God.

- (a) For it is of the nature of love to be the motive that most urges us to know more about Him Whom we love.
- (b) It is the nature of knowledge to lead in the end to a fuller love of Him, for a deeper and truer knowledge of that which is infinitely lovable must make the love of it richer and nobler and more manifoldly attractive and enduring, increasing our other motives unceasingly, and weaving threads of beauty to hold our love to God.

In the Saint's life this teaching was abundantly proved, for it was a constant saying of his that prayer taught him more than books. This is easy enough to explain; for it can be paralleled by the increased likelihood a boy has of getting the right answer to a sum if he happens to know it beforehand. By prayer a man may know the answer; by philosophy he will soon be able to prove that answer true. Thus again he writes:

'Wisdom denotes a certain rectitude of judgment in the contemplation and consultation of divine things, and as to both these men obtain various degrees of wisdom through union with divine things [union effected through the heart deepens knowledge]. For the measure of right judgment attained by some, whether in the contemplation of divine things or in directing human affairs according to divine rules is no more than suffices for salvation. This measure is wanting to none who is without mortal sin

through having sanctifying grace, since, if nature does not fail in necessities, much less does grace fail' (2^a2^{ae} 45.5).

By this he means that the measure of our knowledge of God and of our spiritual success in managing our souls is to be gauged by our love of God or, alternatively, the reality of our love of God can be in part measured by our knowledge of Him and by the spiritual success with which we manage our lives.

And again, when he insists on the value of the gift of knowledge, he does so, he says, because by it 'man judges creatures properly and, because of his true judgment of creatures, he comes into a fuller love of God' (2^a2^{ae} 9.4).

While love, therefore, depends upon 'the preceding apprehension,' nevertheless it itself is the beginning of knowledge of divine things howsoever come by. As we have already twice quoted from St. Thomas, 'Love urges us to knowledge.' We only want to know a thing because our first acquaintance with it has happened to awaken interest in us. Yet we have also quoted him as saying, when he is speaking of the contemplative life, love is also the term of knowledge. Thus the good life must *precede* contemplation. To explain this he cites from Isidore this apt text: 'In the active life all vices must first be extirpated by the practice of good works, in order that in the contemplative life, the mind's eye being purified, one may advance to the contemplation of the divine life' (2^a2^{ae} 180.1).

The same truth, though looked at a little differently, he thus establishes in the *Questiones de Veritate*: 'Man is not only a citizen of an earthly city, but he belongs also to a heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. But for him to belong to this other city, his nature is not enough; he must needs be lifted up to it by grace. For it is clear that those virtues which belong to a man in so far as he is a citizen of this other city cannot be acquired by his natural powers: they are not the result of our own efforts, but are poured into us by a divine gift' *De Verit. qu. I, art. 1*).

'By acquired virtues a man cannot reach to heavenly happiness, but only to that happiness which it is within his powers to achieve by the employment of perfect virtue' (*ibid.*, ad 6^m).

We conclude, therefore, by saying that mere human knowledge or human contemplation cannot lift the soul to that ultimate vision which is sanctifying; *the holiness of truth* can only be distilled by a soul that is lifted up by grace to an intimacy with supernatural truth: in other words, *the holiness of truth* is due to the fact that truth is rounded by love, by love urged, to love tending. To show this let me give that most perfect passage of the *Summa*, written only a few months before he gained his final vision that destroyed wholly his desire to write or speak of what he had seen. Blinded by the sight of infinite beauty, he henceforth stumbled; deafened by its harmonies, he could hear no earthly noises; dumb now, he, who had come in living contact with the Eternal Word, had no language left him to describe its beauty.

'Although the contemplative life consists chiefly in an act of the intellect, it has its beginnings in the appetite, since it is through charity that one is urged to the contemplation of God. And since the end corresponds to the beginning, it follows also that the term and end of contemplative life has its being in the appetite, since one delights in seeing the object loved, and the very delight in the object seen arouses a yet greater love. Wherefore Gregory says (Hom. 14 in *Ezech*) that *when we see one whom we love we are so aflame as to love him more*. And this is the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life, namely that the divine truth be not only seen but also loved' (2^a 2^{ae} 180.7 ad 1^m).

Go back to St. Thomas's justification of that division of life into the active and contemplative: 'This division applies to the human life as derived from the intellect. Now the intellect is divided into active and contemplative, since the end of intellectual knowledge is either the knowledge itself of truth or some external action which pertains to

the practical or active intellect. Therefore life, too, is adequately divided into active and contemplative' (2^a 2^{ae} 179.2), and add those phrases we have already quoted:

- (a) 'The lover is said to be in the beloved according to apprehension inasmuch as the lover is not satisfied with a superficial apprehension of the beloved, but strives to gain an intimate knowledge of everything pertaining to the beloved, so as to penetrate into his very soul.'
- (b) 'This is the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life, namely that the divine truth be not only seen but also loved.'

And you have most clearly in front of you the great principles of the spiritual life as lived by the Saint himself. You ponder those phrases, and his own justification of the keen penetration of his mind stands revealed, busy over everything pertaining to his Beloved (*non nisi Te Domine*), not satisfied till it has entered into His very soul and indeed reaching at last that ultimate perfection of the contemplative life in which the divine truth is not only seen but loved, and even though not perfectly seen yet loved perfectly.

Taking these jejune passages it might seem perhaps that St. Thomas lacks that lyrical mysticism which in the writings of the other Saints gives to their teaching an aroma and a beauty of its own. Thus the eloquence of St. Bernard or of St. John of the Cross not only seems to be more attractive but more appropriate for the language of the love of God than the simple direct speech of this professor. Yet these clear-cut phrases of St. Thomas have a rhythm of their own. There is a saying of Walter Pater in *Marius the Epicurean* which, better than anything we could say, establishes the right of St. Thomas to his own deliberate medium of expression. I say deliberate, for he who wrote his verse so musically could easily (had he

wished) have sung in prose. Somewhere in that book Pater speaks of 'a poetic beauty in mere clearness of thought, the actually æsthetic charm of cold austerity of mind: as if the kinship of that to the clearness of physical light were something more than a figure of speech.'

Moreover, the austerity of St. Thomas is part of the scientific temper of the thirteenth century, seen in the absence usually of any heady eloquence amongst its writers, seen in the simplicity of their kings and the uncovered beauties of their architecture, which is never hidden or draped, but shows bare lines that thrust and carry its weight to the eyes of the beholder, the skeleton ribs and flying buttresses by sheer mathematical precision giving a gay pleasure of their own. Yet in his prayers, as well as in his hymns, St. Thomas suddenly shows us a little of the glory that touched him: 'O ineffable Creator, Who out of the fulness of Thy wisdom hast established the three hierarchies of angels and set them in wondrous order over the highest heaven, Thou Who hast with exquisite grace proportioned the parts of the universe, Thou Who are called the Source of light and wisdom and the First Beginning of all things, deign to let the splendour of Thy light shine upon the darkness of my mind to dispel the two-fold gloom of sin and ignorance in which I was born.

'Make my tongue to speak wisdom, O Thou Who dost make eloquent the lips of babes, and do Thou pour upon my speech the blessings of Thy grace.

'Give me quickness of understanding, steadfastness in remembering, method and ease in acquiring, full grace in speaking. Inspire me to begin, guide me when I have started, perfect me in the ending—Who art at once God and Man and Who reignest for evermore. AMEN.'

But we must not misunderstand St. Thomas as though he taught us that knowledge mattered more than life. On the contrary, in his homily on St. Matthew's Gospel as quoted in the Dominican Breviary for his November Feast, there is a delicious sentence which sums up his whole and

real mind: *Prius est vita quam doctrina, vita enim ducit ad scientiam veritatis*. Life takes precedence of doctrine, for life leads to (or urges us to) the knowledge of truth.¹

What a revelation of his character that phrase shows! What a life must his have been, so vivid, so personal, so fresh and pure and noble, that it urged him into the knowledge of truth. But all life honestly lived must do that. We get pushed and pulled into questions and wonder, and both lead us to truth; yet truth must in turn be holy, for Truth is God.

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¹ Cf. his prayer when composing his *Contra impugnantes religionem*: 'Send Thy meekness, O Lord, into my heart so that while I here fight for the love of truth I may not lose the truth of love.'