

THE CANONISATION OF ST. THOMAS

ST. Thomas Aquinas died on the 7th of March, 1274. He was canonised on the 18th of July, 1323, and therefore last month we kept the six-hundredth anniversary of this crowning event upon a truly wonderful life. We are happy to be able to present to our readers a translation of the present Holy Father's Encyclical Letter, in which he extols the life and works of St. Thomas and calls the attention of all Christendom to his unique glory.

Faithful Catholics who read the Encyclical will do so reverently and without demur. They take him for granted. For them he is a saint, an intellectual giant of undisputed eminence: he is the Doctor of Doctors, whose writings have received an authoritative sanction that no one without temerity would question. Yet we must in a sense try to disengage ourselves from this inherited tradition if we would appreciate to the full the prodigious importance of the Church's action in canonising him. We need a real sense of history to understand its real significance.

Nearly half-a-century passed between St. Thomas's death and his canonisation. The delay is significant and a large volume might be written dealing with its underlying causes. It has been said that it is a family failing of the Dominican Order to be indifferent about pressing forward the claims of its members to sainthood; but this corporate bashfulness was not the only cause that retarded St. Thomas's elevation to the altars of the Church. St. Thomas left behind him an elaborate body of doctrine in many large volumes; and it was those volumes that chiefly caused the delay. Three centuries before St. Thomas's time, Rabanus Maurus had said (himself having written an Encyclopedia in twenty-one volumes): 'He alone can escape calumny who writes nothing.' St. Thomas had written much and had received more than his share of calumny and opposition.

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We must not look upon St. Thomas as a recluse hidden away among his manuscripts: he was no mere obscure university professor. Great thinker and great contemplative though he was, he was yet in the best sense of the phrase a man of action. All Europe knew him. From Paris to Rome, to Naples and Cologne he had journeyed on foot and as Père Mandonnet¹ says, 'he had divided the learned world into two parts,—his disciples and his adversaries. He was either admired or attacked: no one ignored him.'

The Church's action in the process of canonising a saint is proverbially slow and deliberate. If she moves with wise caution in the case of those whose heroic virtues she is considering, her pondered prudence will be all the more marked when the candidate for this highest of honours has been a voluminous writer. Every phrase he has written must be scrutinised and winnowed and no word of doubtful doctrine will escape the severe sifting. In canonising a saint, the Church holds up the life of an heroic soul for our admiration and imitation, but when she sets her seal upon the sanctity of one who was a writer, doctor and theologian, she does something more: she gives her solemn approval to a vast body of positive doctrine. The canonisation of a writer does not give his writings infallible authority, but it does give them a certain, serious definite sanction.

When one thinks of St. Thomas's daring adoption of the Aristotelian philosophy, of his breaking away from conservative methods and of the opposition he brought upon himself as an innovator and a 'modernist,' the wonder is, Père Mandonnet suggests, not that his canonisation was held up so long, but that it was carried through in the comparatively brief period of forty-nine years. In the learned essay already referred to, Père Mandonnet says that the critical state

¹ *La Canonisation de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, par P. Mandonnet, O.P. (Le Saulchoir, Kain, Belgium).

Blackfriars

of Europe at the beginning of the fourteenth century actually hastened the canonisation.

'The Church was on the brink of a crisis which was to work itself out two centuries later in the apostasy of half of Europe. The Holy See, aware of the forces of dissolution already at work to break up her unity, sought to stem the peril by setting up against these forces of destruction the power of resistance and stability contained in the works of St. Thomas. The pontificate of John XXII (1315—1334) marks the critical period of the epoch. Twenty-five years of profound uneasiness, strife and conflict bore witness to the internal ills that had developed in Christendom since the decline of the thirteenth century. The civil and ecclesiastical powers were ranged one against the other in deadly rivalry: a spirit of revolt against religious authority was growing up amongst the laity; signs of discord were appearing within the hierarchy of the Church; there was a revival of heresy and sectarian fanaticism among the common people. The whole world was in a turmoil of impatience and irritation; it was prompt to criticise and ever ready with the most violent invective. The papal authority and the very constitution of the Church itself were threatened. The clergy, secular and regular, became infected with this fever of anarchy. The University of Paris bade fair to become a stronghold of error. The Averroism, against which St. Thomas had so stoutly defended the truth, showed signs of revival under the patronage of Jean de Jandun. Duns Scotus and Durandus of St. Porçain had begun to pick to pieces the synthesis of St. Thomas and were trying to prove his metaphysic illusory. Neo-Platonism was veering into the dangerous semi-panteism of Master Eckhart; and Raymund Lull, who knew no Latin, was rushing into all sorts of theological excesses. Arnold of Villanova, an eminent doctor of medicine, was, with frantic extravagance, following out the revolutionary programme of the Waldenses in an effort to reform the Church.'

In the face of this confusion of events and general intellectual disarray, the Holy See sought for some solid foot-hold, a standard and a rule that she could offer to a convulsed Christendom. It was already at hand in the masterpieces of philosophy and theology which St. Thomas had left behind. It was only necessary to confirm and consecrate his works by solemnly declaring the sanctity of their author.

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The world to-day is perhaps in a worse state, intellectually, socially and morally than it was in the early fourteenth century. It has been shattered and torn by a hideous war; and men, sick of strife, are looking longingly for something stable, positive and constructive. The Holy Father's appeal to the 'method, doctrine and principles' of the Angelic Doctor which, he declares, are as fresh and valid as they were in his own day is worthy of the most serious consideration that Catholics can give it.

THE EDITOR.

THE ANGLO-CATHOLIC CONGRESS

FROM Tuesday, July 10th, to Friday, July 13th, during a summer heat of unparalleled ferocity, the men and women who look upon themselves as the heirs of the Tractarians held a Congress in the Albert Hall. The things said and done by these successors of Froude, Keble and Newman give food for thought and prayer.

(1) The Congress, merely as a social and religious phenomenon, cannot be ignored, and should not be belittled. It is a social and religious fact of no little interest that, during a heat-spell which welted our tropical visitors, one of the largest halls in the world was filled for even the less important meetings of a religious congress.

Moreover, this Congress was representative not of a Church, but only of a party within a Church. It was assuredly a religious phenomenon of significance that this section of a section of Christians could brave tropical heat for a religious idea. This is all the more interesting to us Roman Catholics, because, if we may believe our experts in organisation we, the Roman Catholics of England and Wales, might undertake the task of filling the Albert Hall at general, but hardly at the sectional, meetings of any congress. We are