

Our Aim of Truth

by Vincent McNabb, O.P.

'The true speaking absolutely is prior to the good, as appears from two reasons. First because the true is more closely related to being, which is prior to good. . . . Secondly, . . . knowledge naturally precedes appetite.' (*Summa*, Ia Q. 16, Art 4, Eng. trans.)

The object of the intellect (i.e. Truth) 'is more simple and more absolute than the object of the will' (i.e. goodness). Therefore the intellect in itself and absolutely is higher and nobler than the will—yet 'the love of God is better than the knowledge of God; but on the contrary, the knowledge of corporeal things is better than the love thereof. Absolutely, however, the intellect is better than the will.' (*Ibid.*, Q. 82, Part 3.)

These two texts from the *Summa* of the Blackfriar St Thomas Aquinas must outline the attitude of *Blackfriars* towards TRUTH.

At the risk of failing to express what is in our mind, let us say that we fully accept the consequences of St Thomas's principle: 'Truth is more simple and absolute than goodness, therefore the intellect is higher and nobler than the will.' In our aim of finding and telling the truth we will not primarily concern ourselves with what is good; or only with that highest good, the Truth. This is but to realize that transcendentals, such as truth, must be sought for their own sake or they will not be found in their fullness. Truth-seeking and truth-telling must not be blended and weakened with enquiries into the economic, political, ethical or theological value of the truth. Men should not accept the findings of science because they are useful; nor the axioms of mathematics because of their economic value. So, too, it is a kind of unconscious treason to believe in God (if that were possible) because it profits us in this world or in the next. To serve the Truth otherwise than because it is true, is to withhold from the altar some of the sacrifice.

Our aim of telling the Truth may indeed be unique amongst contemporary literature. Amongst the many who offer the twentieth century a monthly, weekly, or daily issue of their opinions, few would claim to seek truth as their first intent. They would frankly and therefore humbly admit that they speak to their fellow-men through the printed word, not so much because they have something to say as because they have to say something. Their primary object—quite a noble one—is not, indeed, to tell the truth, but to make a living.

Very differently, and diffidently, we purpose to tell the truth; not

knowing or enquiring whether we shall or shall not make a living. Indeed, we have been assured by one of our chief advisers that after a long experience of the world he never knew a man who made a living by telling the truth; but he knew three men who met their death. It may be that *Blackfriars*, in its witness to the Truth, may have as short a career as the Holy Innocents.

Yet the fear of death will not, we hope, tempt us into seeking to make a livelihood of compromise. Life on these terms would be worse than death. Just as we would not complicate our search for truth with any economic, political or ethical considerations, so we would not entangle our telling the truth with any thought of compromising truth in order to let *Blackfriars* live.

We do not deny that there are times when the whole truth may or must be withheld. The Master whom we shall seek to serve with our pen has left us an example in this difficult task of economizing the truth, in the words 'I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now' (John 16, 12). But this *charitas veritatis*, this charity of the truth, is not compromise masking selfishness under a garb of mercy, but a certain tenderness of touch toward the smoking flax and the bruised reed. The policy of compromise, now so ancient in the older civilizations, has led men into such a wilderness of failure that an era of downright truth-telling may well be begun.

In the hope of ending the era of compromise which has betrayed the crown rights of God we will always seek, with the usual human tally of lapses, to tell the stark truth rather than that compromise, 'clothed and in its right mind', which has betrayed the rights of man. Only by this self-denying ordinance in the matter of truth-telling as against compromise may we hope to beget and foster the noble art of telling the truth. In this matter of giving others their due of truth it befalls us as in kindred matters of giving others their due of justice. A man not habitually exercised in doing good and therefore in choosing and willing good finally ceases to be a man of good will. If a man pays such attention to the principles of finance and the facts of business as to be very successful in the hard art of getting wealth, he will not generally be an expert in the harder art of fulfilling justice. So too, if a man is more concerned about whether his words are timely than whether they are true he will more often reach timeliness and compromise than truth. It stands to sense that, although an archer who aims at the sky may perchance hit the target, yet he will more often hit the target if he aims at it. We feel, therefore, that the only success which *Blackfriars* covets will be endangered if our words are weighed primarily for their power to cause pain, or to arouse opposition. Indeed, if these by-products of truth-telling come to be looked upon as our chief concern we shall gradually lose the power and will to tell the truth. Diplomacy is no doubt a fine art; but truth is not one of its common achievements.

Amongst the heirlooms left to us from the Hebrew people is a

priceless psalm which says better than our best all we have meant to say. There seems no doubt that it was written in the time of David. If its author was Nathan, the seer, who told such pointed truths to David, this psalm might almost be looked upon as the seer's prayer to God to nerve him for telling the truth. It opens thus:

Save me O Lord, for there is now no saint;
 Truths are decayed from among the children of men.
 They have spoken vain things every one to his neighbour
 With deceitful lips and with a double heart have they
 spoken.
 May the Lord destroy all deceitful lips
 And the tongue that speaketh proud things.
 Who have said 'We will magnify our tongue.
 Our lips are our own. Who is Lord over us?
 By reason of the misery of the needy
 And the groans of the poor,
 Now will I arise,
 Saith the Lord.'

The writer of these words had a profound insight into the fact that for the craft of truth-telling a man must be a saint, in other words a spiritual hero. When these men decay, truths decay with them. Every reformation must come with an increase in their number and in their fearlessness. Judea owed less to David than to Nathan, who alone amongst the Jews had the boldness to tell David the Truth.

The spirit of this psalm, we hope and pray, to be the spirit of *Blackfriars*. We shall hope to tell the truth with such a fine sense of time and person as to leave no men our enemies except such as are the enemies of truth. Yet we shall seek first to tell the Truth rather than to study the subtle art of adjusting it to the circumstances of time and person. We shall not hold the dangerous axiom that 'Truth is the best policy', because policy is but a means to an end; and Truth is an end, not a means. We have no intention of making truth serve a useful purpose, lest in the end we should be tempted to serve our purpose with a lie. Thus in seeking first the Kingdom of Truth, we may seem to overlook, and indeed we may overlook through human weakness, the charity of truth that tempers the wind to the shorn lamb. But men who understand the fine scorn of St Paul's words, 'Am I then become your enemy because I speak the truth?', will feel that to tell the truth always as it should be told is hardly an endowment of infallibility. The burden we lay upon ourselves is one that human shoulders can only bear with many stumblings. If we undertake to bear it, we do so with the further undertaking that, in case any word of our spoken in defence of truth hurts any man not by its truth but only by its manner, we will unsay it with humble apologies to him, and to the Truth—who is God the Blessed for evermore.