

THOMISM AND MODERN NEEDS

By

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Nor long ago I was honoured by an invitation to address the Aquinas Society which I gladly accepted, choosing as my subject the title of this article. Since then it has been suggested that I should publish as an article the substance of that address, and I readily do so. It would be impossible to reproduce the address itself, because it was delivered from notes which were no more than headings, and these I destroyed as soon as the address was delivered. That, however, is of no consequence. What is important is not to recover what was said on a particular occasion, but to promote consideration of the teaching of St. Thomas in its bearing on the needs of our time.

I must make clear at the outset the fact that I am not in any serious sense a student of St. Thomas—as, for example, my father was. I have read a considerable portion of his writings with close attention, but without that perpetual comparison of one passage with another which is alone entitled to be called ‘study’ in relation to any great writer. I speak therefore from a general impression which may be due to interpreters and critics of St. Thomas as much as, or more than, to himself. If so, those who are real students of his work can easily confute me, but may none the less be glad to have their attention called to points at which the current presentations of his doctrine have produced on one mind at least an impression calling for correction.

We most conveniently start from our modern needs; and among the greatest of these is our need for a map of the country through which the pilgrimage of our life on earth must lie. When I was growing up there was a general sense of security—illusory, no doubt, but none the less influential on that account. Certain principles were universally accepted, so far as outward profession went. The theological doctrines of Christianity were widely challenged, but not as yet its ethical teaching. The great Victorian Agnostics not only believed that the Christian way of life would still claim the homage of those who discarded Christian dogma; they desired that it should, and took it for granted that all well-disposed persons shared their desire. There was an accepted body of convention with

regard to the way in which we should try to live. And society found a place for us—a very inadequate place for many, but broadly speaking some place for all. Moreover the evident abuses of social life were being remedied. Progress might be slow, but it was certain. At such a moment there is little need for a map; the whole countryside is sign-posted, so to speak, and it is fairly easy to find one's way about.

For those who have grown up since 1914, and especially since 1919, all this is changed. There is no security; for very many society seems to have no assured place at all; the conventions of the nineteenth century are no longer accepted; the weight of authority is with science, not with religion; the lure of fashion is with self-sufficiency, not with traditional morals; and the Christian way of life is openly challenged by Marxist Communism, by Nazi-ism, and by irresponsible hedonism accepted as a principle.

The war, it is true, has delivered us for the moment and the citizens of the belligerent nations have found in service of their countries a cause for which they are ready both to live and to die; such a cause at once gives unity to life. But this cause does not cover the whole of life, so that while our *morale* is very high in relation to all that perceptibly affects the war-effort, it is decidedly low in other respects. And the war will end one day; the cause that now gives unity and meaning to so many lives will no longer be exerting its influence. Then multitudes will feel bewildered and lost; they will not know where they are, whither they are going, nor even whither they wish to go. They will desperately need a map of the country.

No one disputes that the most complete map ever drawn is that of St. Thomas Aquinas. Some hold that his map is vitiated by the acceptance of some cartographical illusions; others hold that his map needs correction in some important respects, but that our most hopeful line of advance is to start with his work, making such corrections as we think it needs. To which of these two groups we belong is likely to depend on our admitting or repudiating the possibility of Natural Theology and the value of analogical argument from created nature, including human nature, to the nature of the Creator. It is not sufficiently understood in England that on the European Continent this more than anything else is the point at issue between Catholicism and Protestantism. The Continental Reformers had so interpreted the Fall of Man as to leave in fallen human nature no capacity for recognising divine truth; all faculties were vitiated; and between fallen nature and the divine incorruption no analogy was possible. This finds its logical expression in the doctrine of Karl

Barth that any man's response to divine revelation is as much a miracle as the occurrence of the revelation itself. God's impact on the world, for this view, is vertical only; there is no horizontal guidance of man through the processes of nature, including his own, or through the movement of history.

In my own mind there is no doubt on which side of that division we should stand. The Bible, which is interpreted by the Reformers and their disciples (rightly, as I think) as the record of a vertical thrust of the Word of God into the horizontal process of history is none the less itself the prophetic record and interpretation of that process regarded as the arena where a divine purpose is being fulfilled and divine judgments are manifest in the operation of causal laws. Again I see no alternative to the acceptance of the method of analogy. The use of the word 'Father' in relation to God is itself inevitably analogical. And these inevitable analogies are safe only if the principle of analogy is recognised and accepted so that the use of it may be regulated.

The principle of Natural Law or the Natural Order is of special importance and value in relation to sociology. Many of the troubles of the modern world come from the confusion of means and ends. St. Thomas vindicates the saying of St. Augustine that *omnis humana perversitas est uti fruendis et frui utendis* by pointing out that *lex aeterna primo et principaliter ordinat hominem ad finem* (S.T.I.II. 71.6 ad 3). It is in the light of this principle that St. Thomas reaches his defence and limitation of the rights of property, a most wholesome doctrine much needed in our day, avoiding as it does the unsocial outlook of the individualist and the socialist's check upon initiative (see S.T.II.II.66,2). In his conception of property and in the principles which underlie the doctrine of the Just Price and the Prohibition of Usury, I am convinced that St. Thomas offers exactly what the modern world needs. Of course adjustments to new conditions are required, and the first of the points at which I desire some modification of Thomist doctrines arises from this need for adjustment.

I come now to the points in which it seems to me that supplement or modification is required. It is very likely that I hold this view because my study of St. Thomas is inadequate. So far as that is so, I submit that the fault is partly in his recent interpreters; and if one result of this article is to lead real students to show that St. Thomas meets our needs but has been commonly mis-represented, it will have served a useful purpose.

(1) The first point is not likely to be seriously questioned. In the thirteenth century the framework of European society was fairly stable. There was a ladder of advancement for a really able boy or

young man through the education and offices controlled by the Church. But broadly speaking the grades of society were fixed and had their several rights, obligations and responsibilities. The serf or villain had few liberties, but he had security; and at the other end of the scale, public opinion exacted varied forms of service from the Lord of the Manor or feudal magnate. The modern horror of irresponsible wealth—of economic power divorced from social service—was almost unknown.

The social teaching of St. Thomas—as for example the criterion of the Just Price—has this situation in view. The application of his principles to our fluid society, where there is irresponsible wealth at one end and liberty (in law at least) without much security at the other—a society based on contract rather than on status—requires great adjustments.

(2) The new and less stable order of society is due in part to the new concern for individual personality. This was the great feature of Renaissance and Reformation thought. It often received faulty expression; the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* whereby the individual self-consciousness was made the pivot not only of epistemology but of metaphysic, and the self-seeking aggressiveness of men and nations characteristic of the 'modern' epoch are the perversions of something true and important. The earlier philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome, and the mediaeval philosophy were deficient in appreciation of Personality as a mode of Being. To me it often seems as if St. Thomas is speaking of the human *genus* without due recognition of the fact that one characteristic of this *genus* differentiating it from all others, is the high degree of individuality discoverable in the specimens—a degree so high as to make the particularity of each as fully constitutive of his essence as the generic quality. This, if true, is a principle of supreme importance for applied ethics. From the new emphasis on this has come the change from the society of status to that of contract; from this also spring the next three needs for adjustment in the Thomist tradition to which we now proceed.

(3) One consequence of the static quality of the mediaeval social frame-work was the elimination from ethics of all consideration of either the direction or the methods of social progress. What was required was an ethical interpretation of the existing order and ethical guidance for conduct within that order. There was no criticism of the order itself in the light either of its own underlying principles or of some accepted ideal. In our day one main theme of ethical debate is the justifiability of the social and economic order which we find existing. The individual is conscious of a responsibility for upholding it, mending it or ending it. This results from

that experience of constant change—commonly but (as a rule) unjustifiably called progress—which has become familiar during the last century and a half. We tend to forget how recent this experience is. The changes of social structure are due to the application of power—water, steam, electricity—to economic production and the vast increase in ease and rapidity of communication. In our own country this has led to urbanisation on a vast scale, and the transference of effective social power from the landowner to the capitalist. There are signs that the era of rapid change may be closing and that the next two centuries may be a period of renewed stability; but that expectation may be falsified at any moment by a new scientific discovery, such as the way to release and utilise atomic energy.

If change is to continue we need help to guide its course wisely; if stabilisation is to be expected, we need to secure that what is stabilised is as sound ethically as we can make it; and that involves consciously directed change before stabilisation takes place. Here is a main need of our time for which Thomism gives little help, though of course it remains true that its fundamental principles can still supply the foundation on which to build. There is a danger that devotion to St. Thomas without readiness to supplement his teaching may make us blind to one chief duty of our generation, and make us the allies of the forces of inertia.

To say this is not to criticise St. Thomas, for what we are seeking is the answer to a question proposed to us by our experience but without any relation to his. We need to develop a type of responsible citizenship for which his world made no opportunity.

(4) The new emergence of individuality and consequently of responsible citizenship has led the modern world, so far as it is deeply religious, to a profounder understanding of sin. It is, I think, characteristic of the Reformation, as contrasted with the mediaeval tradition and that of the Counter-Reformation, that it gave a new emphasis to Sin as distinct from sins. Perhaps perspectives have been damaged by the fact that so much of Moral Theology has been written under the impulse of a desire to meet the needs of Confessors and Spiritual Directors for guidance in their difficult and delicate task. The matter of confession is conscious sin recognised as such; and this is bound to be for the most part particular rather than general. The penitent confesses sinfulness in general and passes at once to the particular sins which he is conscious that he has committed. So the Moral Theologian, in his proper desire to help, is liable to be content with a perfunctory definition of sin and proceed at once to its particular manifestations. Thus he concentrates

attention on objective acts of sin from which the penitent by confession dissociates himself, and thereby diverts attention from the essential sin which is the perversion of will issuing in those acts. This easily tends in practice to an unconscious Pelagianism—which I still regard as ‘the only heresy that is intrinsically damnable.’ For the suggestion is easily given that if we can find the right spiritual and psychological technique for remedying what we have seen to be wrong, we can put ourselves right with God.

There is no trace of this in St. Thomas himself—quite the contrary—and so far as there is need for modification of his teaching here it is rather in its manner than in its content. But at this point the quasi-mathematical method of exposition is inevitably misleading. Its merit is a clarity achieved by the elimination of rhetoric or any emotional element. It is thus unable to express that tragedy of human nature to which Luther made men once more alive. Certainly we need to recover the sense or feeling—not only the intellectual conviction—of utter impotence to respond to the divine will, and of complete dependence for all power to serve God upon the divine grace. Whatever may be true of St. Thomas himself, the Thomist tradition as commonly presented does not adequately convey the awful pervasiveness and penetrating potency of sin in all departments of human life, including in its sphere of poisonous influence even our worship and our generosity.

(5) With the insufficient appreciation of individuality in the traditional Thomist scheme there goes an insistence on the priority of knowledge as distinct from love—or, to speak with the greater accuracy of technical terms, there is insufficient appreciation of ‘affective knowledge.’ Of course it is true that I cannot love anyone of whose existence I am ignorant; but when in fact I meet him, my affective reactions towards him govern the extent and quality of any knowledge or understanding of him that I shall reach; and for fulness of knowledge love is the indispensable condition. St. Thomas knew all about this in his own experience; he did not, as I think, give it expression in his systematic writings. I suspect that it was a consciousness of this which led him at the end to say that all his theological writings were ‘straw’; the real faith of the man appears in the Eucharistic hymns.

This theme of ‘affective knowledge’ is admittedly most difficult to handle, and is for that reason commonly avoided. But the result of this is to distort perspectives in many ways. I think, for example, that I can trace exactly this distortion in the attitude towards ‘aridity’ which finds expression in the *Spiritual Letters* of Dom Chapman, and the grounds which he gives for preferring St. John

of the Cross to St. Theresa. But there is no space here to work out what is almost as obscure and involved as it is important. My point is that the inadequate appreciation of individuality in Thomism leads to an insufficient emphasis upon actual personal relations—what some moderns call ‘meeting’—alike in morals and in religion.

(6) Connected as I think with the foregoing is the too conceptual interpretation of Revelation. Thomism proceeds upon the widely accepted view that Revelation is given in propositions. I should contend that the primary medium of Revelation is events. This Revelation can only become fruitful through the apprehension and interpretation of the events by minds enlightened by the Holy Spirit to that end; and their interpretation must be expressed in propositions. These propositions may fitly be described as ‘truths of Revelation’; but they are not ‘revealed truths.’ The action of the Holy Spirit does not over-ride or cancel the personal and individual qualities of the prophet, but uses these. There may therefore always be other, though of course not incompatible, truths to be learnt from the event which is the primary Revelation. And in all Revelation what is revealed is not a truth concerning God but God Himself in action. Thus in the supreme instance the essential Revelation is the Birth, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ—which are accordingly recorded in the Creeds. But while many saw His acts and heard His words, it is only of a few that St. John writes ‘we beheld His glory’; the Revelation became effective through minds attuned to receive it as what it really was. Yet the event is primary, not the interpretation; and penitent sinners can kneel together at the Cross in perfect unity of gratitude and adoration, though they may differ very widely in their interpretations of the Atonement which was there wrought. This point is of considerable importance in connection with the relation of theology to personal religion and the basis of religious communion.

I offer then these six points as those where I think Thomism requires modification or supplementation if it is to meet modern needs:

(1) Recognition that the social order is no longer static; (2) a fuller appreciation of individual personality; (3) a new emphasis on responsible citizenship; (4) a greater emphasis on Sin as distinct from sins; (5) a fuller recognition of the place and value of ‘affective knowledge’; (6) an apprehension of Revelation as given primarily in Events. Some of these are far-reaching, but would be less disturbing to the Thomist scheme as a whole than was the whole method of St. Thomas to the outlook represented by St. Bernard, which he superseded. It may be that those are right who tell us, as Professor

A. E. Taylor has told me, that our age has more to learn from St. Bonaventura than from St. Thomas. I should like to believe that because I am by temperament a Platonist rather than an Aristotelian. But no one is equal to St. Thomas as a map-maker of the spiritual and moral world. If our need is, as I think, first and foremost for such a map, we do well to go back to him, making such modifications as our own survey may dictate.

TASKS FOR THOMISTS

Some Reflections on 'Thomism and Modern Needs' by His Grace
the Archbishop of Canterbury.

By FATHER VICTOR WHITE, O.P., S.T.L.

The address by His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury to the London Aquinas Society was a memorable and important event. To such of us as are students of St. Thomas, teachers and thinkers guided by his principles and thought, it was a very great encouragement. The mere fact that a contemporary thinker and scholar of the calibre of Dr. Temple, who is holder of the most eminent position in the Anglican Communion and exercises so considerable an influence on national life, should think it worth his while to turn from his many and pressing public duties to address us, was an event which should not lightly be forgotten, and which should provide us with stimulus for many years to come.

But his address was something more than an encouragement; it was a very serious challenge. Dr. Temple is a Christian leader who has shown himself to be quite exceptionally keenly aware of 'modern needs' and full of 'compassion for the multitude.' His realisation of the unique role which pupils of St. Thomas have to play in meeting those needs and in providing for the hunger of the multitude presents us with claims which we dare not disregard. The very fact that he addresses us 'from outside' makes his claims upon our attention all the more compelling. For must it not be admitted that we