

Michalon himself emphasizes in the words of his pamphlet which succeed this sentence, that to the outsider, the unbeliever, the voice of the Catholic Church is only one of many discordant voices each claiming to speak in Christ's name. The consequence of this is, as he most truly says, concern, uncertainty and confusion of non-believers in both pagan and so-called Christian countries, and anguish for those who seek the truth.



## KNOWLEDGE AND HOLINESS AND ST THOMAS AQUINAS\*

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**I**N the case of the majority of saints, sanctity and knowledge seem to be two different things. Our admiration goes to the heroic penances they have imposed upon themselves, the uncompromising apostolate they have carried out, the outpourings of love which have been their heart's expression or the martyrdom which has crowned their life. As a general rule, we do not realize that intellectual excellence may have a connection with the merits which raise a Christian to the altars. The interest of the case of St Thomas Aquinas is that in him we are compelled to investigate this problem. That the Church solemnly canonized him less than fifty years after his death is a fact, as is also the circumstance that his life was given in a remarkable degree to the work of the mind. It was spent in intellectual activity as exclusive and intense as one could wish. St Thomas taught and lectured, wrote books, took part in learned disputations—and we honour him as a very great saint. It would indeed be strange if we were to seek the explanation of his sanctity in traits which are edifying indeed, but alien to the real substance of his life. Yet the habit of separating the intellectual from the spiritual life is so strongly-rooted that the biographers of St Thomas often proceed in this way. To read them one would suppose that the subject of their biography sanctified himself in the brief moments of respite in which he ceased to act as a theologian. We cannot

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approve this dichotomy. The purpose of the following pages is rather to illustrate in this privileged example the link which connects sanctity with knowledge.

In the first instance, may we be allowed to stress the austerity of a life as strictly intellectual as was that of St Thomas. One can only adopt an activity of this sort and persevere in it on condition of giving up many others for which one is perhaps made and from which one might have drawn easier satisfaction. Gifted as he was, it is legitimate to think that St Thomas, admitting that he was a churchman or religious, would have succeeded in diplomacy, in the high offices of administration and government. His political writings show that he could have become a far-sighted leader. Nevertheless he resisted this temptation to activity, a temptation which hangs over many intellectuals as they approach maturity. Already a Friar Preacher, he declined the formal and pressing offers made to him to accept the abbatial dignity of Monte Cassino and the archbishopric of Naples. Of its own nature, intellectual research demands concentration of soul. To this we apply ourselves only with reluctance, choosing to relax the strain on our faculties and preferring the sense of well-being which comes from curiosity, the satisfaction of which gives an immediate return. St Thomas seems to have disciplined his mind methodically so as to make tense and continuous thought possible. He recommended the avoidance of distractions. He reduced his relationships to what was indispensable. He was a man given to silence and kept his cell strictly. He cared neither for long recreations nor to be frequently out of his monastery. To the extent to which he practised it, will it not be agreed that intellectual life is an asceticism? In the case of St Thomas neither the ancient chroniclers nor the witnesses at the process of canonization have instanced, except for fasting and abstinence, any of the great corporal mortifications such as the discipline to blood, traditionally in use among those who practise asceticism. It seems clear that the reason is that he did not practise them. His asceticism took a different form and it is this that we have to try to understand. It clearly consisted, as far as he was concerned, in the organization of his capacities and his time in the service of thought. The evidence of this is to be found in his work. Right to the end he kept his mind fixed on the subjects he had set before himself. He worked out from a Latin version and commented detail by

detail the difficult philosophy of Aristotle. To the labours of teaching, he added the composition of his numerous works. The three years of his second teaching period in Paris seem to have been particularly overwhelming. He wrote in a style which is clear, stripped of the superfluous, rigorous, in which there is little to charm one's sensibility. He dealt only with matters that were sublime. He thrashed out many a burning question. St Thomas wore himself out at the task. A work of this magnitude is not accomplished lightly. His premature death was the penalty he paid for his prodigious effort. If there is no sanctity except where there is penance, let us admit that St Thomas, in the mere living of his intellectual life, amply satisfied this primary condition.

But knowledge is something quite different from effort. It signifies a certain contact effected between the mind and what one knows. In this respect it has a power which will make us understand better the relationship in which it stands to sanctity.

The higher the object of knowledge, the more it is capable, we say, of ennobling the knowing subject. It is true that thought possesses a dignity in itself and that it transfigures the humblest or the ugliest realities. No knowledge is base, even if the objects on which it is brought to bear are base. If a doctor has a deep understanding of shameful diseases, the fact gives him greater glory. The historian is proud to explain the most sinister dramas, the psychologist to bring out the most guilty passions into the light of day. At the same time it can be affirmed that an object of knowledge which is in itself sublime contains for the knower an uplifting virtue which other objects do not contain. In the intellectual sphere it does us good to keep company with great minds. To contemplate the order of the stars and their perfect movements is a delight. We derive a certain satisfaction from looking at beautiful things, examining them carefully, penetrating their secret. All we have done so far is to exercise our power of knowing, but we already experience the influence of what we know. It is because knowledge is a contact, as has been said. Better, it is an attention given to the object known. It is that which makes things present to us. We bear the stamp of the knowledge we have in the same way that those with whom we consort inevitably leave their mark upon us.

Among all possible objects, St Thomas chose to know God.

We can bring back to that one point the accumulation of knowledge he carried in the mind. As a child, he asked his master at Monte Cassino the sublime question: 'What is God?' When he reached man's estate he set himself to answer it. He proved to himself that God exists. He probed the depths of divine being, conceiving it in its simplicity, infinity, immutability, eternity. He meditated on the knowledge, the will, the power of God. He tried to understand the Trinity of the divine Persons, the Trinity which in no way diminishes the unity of essence. He considered God as the beginning and end of all beings. God created the world and he governs it by an infallible providence. God is he to whom man should tend by the prudent performance of his actions. But it is only in going through Christ that man can return to God—whence the new and inexhaustible object to which thought wholly taken up with God applies itself. St Thomas applied himself to the mystery of the Word made flesh and scrutinized it with all the energy of which he was capable. The *Summa Theologica*, the monument of his genius, speaks of the things we have just mentioned. Both as a whole and in each one of its pages, it is simply the book of God. It gives a magnificent answer, in so far as it is given to man to answer it, to the child's question which we have recalled. How could a contact of this kind do otherwise than elevate the mind which proved itself capable of it? Without seeking it, so to speak, we contract a certain nobility through the approaches to noble objects by knowledge. We become in some sort like what we think, like in so far as the mind is concerned, certainly, for this similitude is the very definition of knowledge; but like, too, in so far as the whole of our personality is concerned. A man, in short, is worth what he thinks. How could something of the divine perfection fail to pass into him who went to such lengths in thinking of God?

An objection against what we have just said immediately springs to mind. Is it not common, it will be said, to meet men whose life does not correspond to their thought? On the one hand, a high intelligence and vast learning; on the other, a mediocre character or behaviour which is unworthy. But even supposing that such men take a real interest in the objects of their knowledge, it is necessary to inquire in what these objects consist. To be certain about this is of primary importance. It is not the fact that one thinks that is all-important, but that one has chosen

to apply one's thought to one particular kind of reality in preference to some other kind. Even if the objects which these men have chosen are noble, they may well be restricted. The influence of such knowledge on the man who possesses it is limited. This does not change one's life in its entirety even though it gains something thereby. Among all the objects of knowledge, God is the one possessing singular excellence. For the mind he is the most wonderful and most inexhaustible of objects. He fills man with astonishment and wonder. He forces him to conceive of a beauty and perfection far beyond the realities of this world. In this respect he acts upon us with a power that is unique. Among the different categories of intellectuals, it is the theologian who enjoys a privileged situation. Perhaps this last statement will be contested. The divorce of thought from life can be observed, we shall be told, even among theologians. Let us not quibble over the fact. But it is essential to interpret it. Among such theologians something, we believe, holds in check the normal influence of thought on life. They devote all their energies to the knowledge of God, burning the midnight oil. They search the Scriptures. They acquire, patiently and by no means superficially, an understanding of the truths taught by God to the prophets and apostles. We take it for granted that they are serious theologians and that they have come into contact with the reality they are dealing with, penetrating beyond the formulae and the arguments. Yet such men remain commonplace, given over to their passions, liars, quarrelsome, and with other defects. Such a situation is abnormal. It is to be explained by the ill-corrected disorders of sensibility and character. Suitable self-discipline would remedy the situation. If this were applied, the thinking would do its work and would bring about the uplifting of these lives which come under the influence of such a noble object. We do not, then, deny the necessity of moral effort but this should be placed at the service of the intellect. The latter remains the principle of a spiritual elevation and distinction which the rectification of the passions or of tendencies alone would not have brought about. The general régime of life to which St Thomas submitted is to be understood in this way. The effect of it was to leave the thought in him free to exercise the sanctifying influence of which it is capable in itself. It should not be considered separately from the intellectual vocation which remains paramount in St

Thomas. The ascetic practices of which we were just speaking, at the same time that they favour the mind's application, are a guarantee of its universal and normal benefit in the thinker's life. It will similarly be observed that St Thomas lived in the company of his brethren. His study was circumscribed within the ensemble of the organized activities which make up a religious house. When he entered religion he made the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. To each one of them he remained faithful unto death. Reginald of Piperno, St Thomas' inseparable friend, who heard his last confession, said that he found him pure and innocent like a child of five years old. By means of the discipline he imposed upon himself and in the fitting surroundings in which he established his intellectual life, St Thomas benefited, certainly and in the best conditions, from the elevation of soul which thought fixed on God brings. He gradually became conformed to his object of knowledge. In the sphere of the intellect he had become a kind of companion of God. He left his solitude to live habitually in such company. How could he remain unchanged?

We have not yet disclosed the final secret of the connection which was established, we said, in the case of St Thomas, between knowledge and sanctity. We are mistaken when we imagine great intellectual lives as a sheer exercise of thought from which the heart's fervour is absent. In actual fact, philosophers and scholars are men of enthusiasm. They are urged on by an ardent love, for they are in love with truth. Why should not truth be an object of love? Any deep intellectual life involves also an affective life. Clearly, intellectual curiosity is sufficient to set research in motion; love is not necessary for this. Yet knowledge possessed comes in time to be cherished, so that some love is present in one for whom knowledge has become the purpose of life. But when God is in question, love is invited to focus on the object itself. Such was the disposition of St Thomas and the definitive meaning of his intellectual life. On this account, we need not be surprised that his knowledge sanctified him, since we can recognize in it the supreme love which is the very law of all Christian sanctity and which is called charity.

Why should we not admit that there was in St Thomas curiosity of mind and eagerness for knowledge? He was especially gifted for thought. He commented with predilection on the words inscribed by Aristotle at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*:

'All men by nature aspire to knowledge'. But he applied his curiosity to God, the most difficult of the objects of knowledge, and, in a sense, the most disappointing since the human intellect can never seize hold of God with a sure grasp. St Thomas by no means confined himself to this rational investigation. He submitted his mind to the faith and it was from the truths thus admitted that he embarked on his research. The reason for this was doubtless that it was not sufficient for him to discover in God the explanation of the world. Philosophy does not go further. He wanted to penetrate more deeply into the mystery. Intellectually, an investigation of this kind is doomed to failure, for an insuperable disproportion remains between the human mind and the mystery it is confronting. There are triumphs of knowledge which the theologian has renounced. The scholar who can master his subject with absolute certainty can aim at them, and the philosopher can attain to this, since he affirms nothing of which his reason has not convinced him. But the reward of the theologian is to glimpse at least something of what he loves. What other inducement can he assign to his eager investigations which nevertheless cannot hope for more than fairly limited intellectual results? The mind of the theologian is not satisfied. He even experiences a dissatisfaction precisely the contrary of the contentment experienced by the scholar who has achieved success. Among the brethren, St Thomas knew that he did not know God. He did not have to wait for the ecstasy of the final months of his life to be convinced that what he had written was nothing but straw. Why, then, such eagerness to know? Because one cannot do without God. In the absence of satisfaction for his intellect, the theologian experiences a certain contentment of the heart, God is an end for him at the same time that he is a truth. The little he knows of him is of inestimable value in his eyes. In short, the habitual separation of what is intellectual and what is affective is an unsatisfactory explanation of the theologian's experience. If St Thomas had only wanted to taste the pleasure of being equal to his object, and, before all else, to glorify himself in knowledge; if, in a word, to know for him was to love himself, he would certainly not have chosen God as the subject of his study.

Moreover, we ought not to be surprised that charity should take this form. Of its very nature love seeks the presence and possession of what it loves. Not until it embraces its object does

it attain its full fire. Now the faculty in us which loves does not give us this presence. When the object loved is perceptible to the senses, we can possess it by our eyes and our embrace. If it is spiritual, we possess it by thought. God is made present to us in the knowledge we have of him. The perfect attainment of God in heaven is by a vision. In seeking to know God, the theologian is in fact seeking to possess him. Charity normally inspires knowledge. It would suffer if the intellect did not give over to it the object it loves, like a lover reduced to sighs, whose eyes are unseeing and whose arms do not embrace his heart's desire. Love is effective. It does not waste its energy in declaration. Would not charity be merely platonic if it confined itself to repeatedly telling God that it loved him? Theology is the work of charity. We are not in the habit of associating theological knowledge with love. But does not St Thomas impose upon us the necessity of so doing? It is unthinkable that his theology could have been divorced from his deep spiritual life. In the strict sense of the term, we know, there is no need at all for the theologian as such to have charity. It is sufficient for him to have faith. But just as faith is called dead, when deprived of charity, so a theology which is in no way animated by charity must be called dead. It does not cease to be true, any more than dead faith ceases to be true. But it loses nevertheless the value of being the response to the desire of love and for that very reason, despite its truth, it has ceased to be living. St Thomas was certainly not a maker of theology after this manner.

The impassible objectivity of his doctrine might deceive us. He states what-is, without emotion or exclamation marks. He allows nothing of his own emotion to appear. His writings put before us an elaborate network of definitions, distinctions and reasoning. They are saturated with erudition, and the most moving subjects are treated in them in austere fashion. In short, we cannot feel the pulse of love there. But is it not we who do not know how to discover it? To fix a steady and penetrating gaze (such as Fra Angelico has portrayed to perfection in his Crucifixion in the Chapter-house at St Mark's) on the divine object is sublime. St Thomas wants to know God as he is. The serenity which he shows is not indifference; it is, on the contrary, an energetic aspiration towards possessing the object. Can we not understand that the austerity goes hand-in-hand with strong



feeling? St Thomas never thought theology an affective science. He maintained that it was a speculative science, of its own nature ordained to knowledge. Its whole value lies in leading the mind into truth. But it is precisely in this pursuit of pure truth that it is impossible not to encounter love. The difference between a St Thomas and a St Bonaventure is not that the former separated knowledge from love to keep it in a kind of proud isolation. He did not hold love to be an effect deriving from knowledge whence knowledge would receive its *raison d'être*. Love is immanent in speculation itself. In theology, then, we shall not hesitate to give full force to speculation. Once again, it is for us to understand that a certain tenseness of the mind is perfectly compatible with fervour of the will. Love is not there in order to assert itself in open fashion. It is true that St Thomas wrote articles, not elevations, meditations or effusions. But love is not bound to a particular literary *genre*. Moreover, from St Thomas' pen have come expression after expression in which admiration for the object of study is evident. The sheer accurate and unadulterated enunciation of divine realities betrays the attachment he has for them. In truth, the love of a theologian can be measured by the objectivity of his doctrine.

Because it is impregnated with love, this knowledge turns into contemplation. By this last word is meant the gaze fervently and lingeringly fixed on the object which the mind's effort has finally drawn out of obscurity. To the theologian it is the reward for his study. It is true that St Thomas reasoned and argued much, he filled whole volumes with the detail of his subtle explanations, yet we are not deceived into thinking that he lacked the supreme act to which this research was leading and that he did not 'tarry with God'. Certain theologians, perhaps, are not contemplatives. They are like those people who, after making a long journey at the end of which is a famous landscape, do not trouble to look at it and only think of starting off on their travels again. True reason is ordered to contemplation, and theological effort normally ends in it. Among all those who apply themselves to this, the theologian is best qualified to succeed. Contemplation is intellectual in its essence. It is simple, penetrating and pleasurable knowledge, but it is knowledge. It is not a pure act of love in which only the affective powers come into play. If it were, we should be forcing on the word an arbitrary meaning and deliber-

ately making it equivocal. It is unquestionable that there are ways other than theological knowledge of entering upon contemplation, but the latter is, as it were, the king's highway. The visions and ecstasies which the saint's biographers vie with one another in relating, at least show his disposition for silent and prayerful intercourse in things divine. The extent to which St Thomas could become absorbed in his thought was noted by his contemporaries. He received the gift of tears. The man who wrote the *Summa Theologica* was suffused with tenderness before God. The connection, to our way of thinking, is perfect. The two acts derive from the same inspiration. The study of God is the way *par excellence* to the purification which makes man's mind sensitive to his presence.

In the case of one whose knowledge is such as we have just described, it is impossible that that knowledge should not bring about in return an increase of love. Knowledge has its value in itself. It is speculation, as we have said. But the nature of things requires that it should cause an increase of love in us. A cycle is then achieved, the affirmation of which is one of the favourite teachings of St Thomas. We start from love in order to know and we love better for having known well. Do not let us think that the efforts undertaken for the glory of God and the sacrifices endured with good will are the only means of increasing charity in us. Intimacy with the object loved is no less efficacious. It will suffice for the object loved to reveal itself in this intimacy as increasingly lovable. Such surely is the case with God. Like all persons who have real value, God, if one may say so, benefits from being known. In proportion as one knows in truth who he is, all that one discovers in him is beautiful and appealing. He surpasses what we had thought at first. It is those who do not know him who blaspheme or neglect him. Knowledge dissipates these errors. God appears to the mind as infinitely worthy to attract the heart of man. The well-known reply of St Thomas expresses to perfection this delight in God which in him was the effect of his profound study: 'You have written well of me, Thomas; what reward do you wish for?' 'None other than yourself, O Lord.' All good things would be given to him with that. God satisfied his heart. Creatures have in truth lost their charm for one who has become accustomed to fix his gaze on eternal perfection. It is possible, finally, to prove with certainty the connection of

knowledge with the love of God, in which, so we hold, lies the ultimate secret of St Thomas' sanctity. In Christianity, love of God is inseparable from love of one's neighbour. Thus, love of his neighbour is found in this man whose life was spent in the exercise of the intellect. This is not, indeed, to be seen in the form of material or physical help given to the unfortunate. But how can one refuse to admit that the communicating of truth to men's minds is not also a work of love? Men need truth as much as they do bread, and we can render them no more valuable service than when we teach them to know God. St Thomas wore himself out at this task. He was not a solitary thinker, far from men, busied with his own problems. He was a professor, and he carried out his office with a conscientiousness of which his works are the proof. Of its nature, any teaching function is a charity which gives to men's minds. How much more so, when it is theology that is taught. We do not usually realize that a professor can be a man of burning love. We see him going regularly each morning to give his lecture, his books under his arm. He speaks with authority. He is listened to with silent respect. He enjoys an honourable position and one of no little prestige. You might think that a function of this sort would be for the advantage of the person exercising it, but to think that would be to judge by appearances. This man is a benefactor of minds. St Thomas understood the matter in this way. To the audience who listened to his lectures in Paris, to the convent of St Jacques, to the pontifical court in the different towns of Italy to which it moved in turn, he communicated the knowledge of God which he had acquired himself. He wrote the *Summa Theologica*, his most outstanding title to glory, not with the idea of producing a masterpiece, but with a view to facilitating for beginners the access to sacred science. He was moved by an affectionate solicitude for students whom he saw struggling with routine methods of teaching. Many of his works, such as the *Summa contra Gentiles* or his treatise *Against the Errors of the Greeks*, were written in response to requests people made to him, with a view to fulfilling some particular need in the Church at that time. St Thomas is too much in love with God not to give him to others under the species of knowledge. He knew strife and struggle. His life was not free from polemics. He stood out against the adversaries of the religious, and pitted his strength against certain dangerous interpreters of the

philosophy of Aristotle known as the Averroists. He opposed a theological tendency which he considered retrograde. A number of his writings were the outcome of the controversies he undertook. They are evidence of the energy he brought to the contest. We can see in them an encouraging sign. One only fights for what one loves. If the adversary suffers from the arguments with which we assail him or the refutations with which we crush him, the majority of men from this circumstance will have the benefit of truth vindicated and confirmed. In exchange for the displeasure which William of Saint-Amour, Siger of Brabant or John Peckham experienced, we have gleaned a treasure of doctrine which will never be lost. St Thomas loved us dearly when he engaged in controversy against them. The immense influence exercised over innumerable minds in the course of ages by his work proves superabundantly the benefit conferred by an intellectual life thus led. No, the man who produced this work was not indifferent to men. He worked for those of his own time and of all times. He bore in his heart a love of his neighbour, which was one with the love of God.

It is not necessary that every example of sanctity should be as this one. St Thomas, however, offers us a universal lesson. Some knowledge of God claims a place in every spiritual life. We have certainly not done enough when we have satisfied our desire. It still remains for us to adapt our intelligence to the vocation of sanctity which is ours. The moral effort must be accompanied by an intellectual effort. There are ignorances which are no longer permissible to a Christian, prejudices which hinder the soul's flight towards God. On the other hand, the true knowledge of God, proportioned indeed to the condition of each one, brings about effects the power of which we have just been admiring in St Thomas. If he studied and sought after knowledge so much, the reason was that he exercised a special function and was carrying out a professional duty. It is true that the considerable place taken by study in his life indicates a man whose duty of state was thus defined. The degree of knowledge to which he attained shows an exceptional mind. In that sense we have not to become new St Thomases. We should only incur ridicule by making such a claim. He excelled in the study which forms part of the Christian life and it was in order to respond to the deepest and most vital aspirations of his soul that he devoted himself to it.

Moreover, it is sufficient to consider the ravages caused in souls by religious ignorance to be convinced of the urgent necessity there is for all to know God. Men do not sin only because they are wicked or because they have ill-disciplined passions. Ignorance is a deeper cause of their wrong-doings. It is for us to integrate the knowledge of God into the programme of our Christian life. The sanctity of St Thomas is the proof that this method, among all those recommended to us, is not the least efficacious in the matter of our sanctification.



## LIVING WISDOM

GERARD MEATH, O.P.

**I**N attempting to teach religion to sixth-formers in a live fashion one becomes aware of a temptation to go to extremes. We may be so much aware of the needs the boy will experience within a few years of leaving school and the tests to which his faith will be put that we bow to necessity and equip him with a set of slick answers to all the questions with very little understanding of the underlying theological principles; we teach him apologetics rather than theology. On the other hand we may be so aware of the limitations of the ready-made answer that we embark on a long-term policy of teaching theology which of its nature can never be finished in a school life and which, much more disastrous, might easily be confined to a speculative study of principles with little linking up with personal and contemporary problems. In recent years the need for steering a middle course between these extremes has become obvious. Every educated Catholic needs to have at his fingertips ready and complete answers to questions on Marxism, euthanasia, birth control, abortion, and so on; he must know what the Church teaches and the reason for it. He must have his answers and his principles. These problems can be met and in fact are being met by many schools which give their senior boys a firm grounding in the principles of systematic theology with clear applications to matters already within the boys' own experience. During the