

POINT OF VIEW

Conversion, Faith, and St Thomas

IT HAS been suggested to me that I might expand and comment upon the *Point of View* which, under the (perhaps whimsical) title of 'Angelic Comfort for Converts', I contributed to the October number of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*. I have asked myself what useful end could be served by so doing, but I hope that in what follows some such may be discovered. It may not be good for converts to be 'comforted', if that point is isolated and insisted upon, but it may be presumed that all readers of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* are deeply interested in the question of the conversion to the Catholic faith of their non-Catholic fellow-countrymen, and so if one man's experience throws even a beam of light upon the carrying out of this great and difficult work, the recounting of that experience as reflected upon in later life may not be entirely beside the mark.

I would emphasize that I am recounting experience and not writing theology, though in describing the most joyful experience of discovering a wonderful coincidence between that experience and the teaching of the greatest of scholastic theologians, it cannot be pretended that theological science has not been touched upon. But let that pass.

I am glad to have the opportunity of expanding what I said super-succinctly in my *Point of View*, because in expanding what I then said, I can also correct it. And first I would say that in emphasizing the importance attributed by St Thomas in his theology of faith (of all faith), to the subjective element—viz. the inclination to believe—I did not for one moment intend to suggest that in the teaching of the Holy Doctor external leads to faith are negligible or are not really causative. On the contrary, the miracles leading to faith must be real and objective; the preaching must be intrinsically persuasive, the argument must be intrinsically sound; and external leads to faith there must assuredly be. But the point is that only to one who is being led to faith by God will the miraculous events be indubitably evident signs of divine activity; or the preaching a veritable message from God; or the arguments conclusive. It will not escape notice here that the Angelic Doctor is too noble, too charitable, and too honest to

suggest that those who do not believe when faced by these proofs or do not surrender to the persuasiveness of the preacher, are obstinate and insincere, and are resisting grace. No, it simply is *here and now* one man is being led by God to faith, and the other is not.

In this section of the *Summa* (2-2, Q. VI) it is clear that Thomas is dealing solely with the machinery (if I may so speak) of faith, and not with the mysteries of predestination and election or with the wider and more general question of divine providential government of the world and the Church. Here, in the Q. VI of 2-2, he is first asking himself and then telling us, how it is in fact, experientially and psychologically, that in the matter of faith one man sees in a certain event the hand of God and another does not; that one man is moved to the depths of his soul by the voice of a preacher, and another is not; that one man is convinced by certain reasons, and another is not. And his answer to the question is that in each case one man has experienced a divine interior urge to believe, and the other has not.

And here another interesting point in the Holy Doctor's teaching is to be observed, and it was alluded to in our *Point of View*: the man who is being led by God to faith is in some way *conscious* of so being led. For in the *Summa*, 2-2 Q. II, A. ix ad 3 we find the Angelic Doctor defending believers from the charge of believing capriciously (*leviter*); and the Holy Doctor's defence is that nascent believers have 'sufficient leading' (let us note each carefully-chosen word) in the 'authority of the divine doctrine confirmed by miracles', and 'what is more', by an '*interior divine instinct*' which urges them to consent. These last words surely imply that the nascent believer feels deeply that there is at work within him a something not himself which urges him to assent to the truths propounded to him, and causes him to feel that not to follow this leading would be morally wrong. He is being led by God.

All this corresponds precisely with the experience of the Anglican who becomes a Catholic, although it may be that only on looking back, perhaps long after the step has been taken, does he realize what was happening to him and perceive how different all the way along, had been his own mentality when looking 'things Roman' from that of those Anglican comrades of his whom he has left behind. The theology of St Thomas, when he

comes to know it, explains him to himself; and perhaps consoles him in regard of a feeling of aloofness from those comrades at the time of his conversion—an unwillingness to speak to them about the crucial question—which at the time he had found hard to justify even to himself. For in very truth he was being so led personally by God—a most sacred matter—that he could not help seeing in 'things Roman' what his companions did not; an inner divine supernaturalism which in things Anglican was radically lacking, in spite of noble imitation and much personal self-devotion and goodness. Divergent convictions resulting from the consideration of identical reasons and external events, and the consequent separation of friends, is a common factor in human life and presents a problem for philosophers. But St Thomas insists that the reason why in regard of the very special matter of Christian faith, one man believes and another does not, is supernatural; and is dependent upon the presence or absence of an interior divine urge, which for some hidden reason (at any rate, here and now and in this or that situation) is given to one man and not to another.

If it be asked what this has to do with converting our non-Catholic fellow-countrymen into the fold of the Church, the answer seems to be: Ought we not to consider carefully whether perhaps we ought to think more about the spirituality and less about the intellectuality of the conversion-process, and to look out more keenly for signs of deep inward moving in those whom we may be 'instructing'?—and here I am keenly critical of my own past self. In *de Veritate* St Thomas says that the faith-decision results from the inquirer's desire for eternal life. How often does anything like this seem to be the dominating motive in those whom we have in hand?

It might be said, of course: 'Yes—but Anglicans do, as a matter of fact, believe in the Christian Revelation as a whole and as such, and with them the question at issue is only what are its limits and precise content; and especially what is the true Church of Christ: matters to be argued about.' But this is only partially true. In the first place because, nowadays, many Anglicans do not in religious matters really believe at all; they only think, feel or opine. Secondly, and far more, because the question of there being or not being a supernatural society divinely authorized to teach and rule belongs to the very essence of the faith-situation:

is most strictly an article of faith. And consequently, belonging to the true Church can result only from a crucial act of faith and can come about only by virtue of a divinely-given urge to believe. And nothing less than eternal salvation is at issue. But all this and anything like this, surely, is almost entirely lacking among Anglicans. As regards the Church they like and choose; they do not believe and obey. I earnestly hope that these words of mine will not give offence, but they seem to be amply justified by careful perusal of the recently-published and most interesting symposium, *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*; though also contained in that book are to be found some happy exceptions to the general run of the contributions.

We ourselves, surely, we Catholic priests, ought to be very suspicious of and anxious about those who rather confidently proclaim themselves 'convinced' by apologetic arguments as if that were all that is necessary; and likewise, of those who passively accept a course of instruction and then pronounce themselves 'ready to be received' into the Church. How we are to detect the presence of an interior divine urge to believe, an aspiration after eternal life, in those whom we are instructing is no doubt a very difficult question; but it seems that the attempt must be made. We are to guard against subsequent apostasy, or listlessness and unreality in Christian life. Correlatively, we should not be too surprised if inquirers of either type, after many talks and instructions, stop short and fall back. Their mind has been filled, but their will and heart have not been touched; there is no stirring of the depths of the soul or nascent love of God and things supernatural; no desire for eternal life. I have been told, by one well able to judge, that many of the conversions of intellectuals which have taken place in German-speaking countries since the close of the last great war have proved unsatisfactory; and may it not be that at the root of the trouble lay such moral causes as have just been alluded to; defects of spiritual disposition at the time of their baptism or reception? Intellection was clear and to the fore, but pious affection and spiritual aspiration were not thought of or left out? Hence true and real faith was scarcely achieved? On the other hand, we may think that, just as supernatural charity according to St Thomas and all theologians, can be faint yet real, so also is it with faith. These men had faith once.

I may seem to have strayed somewhat from my chosen theme.

of the comfort derived from Thomist theology—from the teaching of the Angelic Doctor himself—by another type of convert; by the one who has been puzzled by the obscurity and individualism of his own conversion. But I have not—at least in intention—cut loose from my foundation of experience and observed facts, and so I hope that I may escape the accusation of amateurish dabbling in high theology.

IDIOTES



EXTRACTS

IT IS TIME that a Christian student of St John of the Cross studied also the Indian systems of spiritual life and compared them with their western counterparts and especially with the great Carmelite Mystic. It has been done the other way round very sympathetically by an Indian in *Vedanta and the West* (Hollywood, California), in its May-June issue. Swami Siddheswaranda has here a long article on the 'Raja Yoga of St John of the Cross'. He seems to understand what the Christian means by the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, and of the Christian critics of Indian Yoga selects only the Calvinistic type that regards the Christian as utterly corrupted by original sin and justified entirely by God without any activity on his side. The author naturally quotes St John of the Cross as requiring the beginner to be active—in discursive meditation and such like. And he goes on to show the similarities between the 'rights' of the senses and of the spirit with the stages of Yoga which passes from the active to the passive.

Yet the close similarity between the Christian mystical 'system' and that of the Indian has to be watched very carefully. It seems, on reading this article, that Yoga comprises an almost exclusively philosophical attitude to the world and does not begin to consider the supernatural which is St John's starting point. Nevertheless, a comparison of the systems of Yoga and St John of the Cross is extremely interesting, especially from such a sympathetic pen.

After comparing the three stages of the spiritual life in the two systems the author continues:

Having stressed the subtle transition of the soul from the active to the passive stage with quotations from St John of the Cross, let us pause now to better our understanding of the second Sutra of Patanjali: 'Yoga consists in keeping the mind-stuff from taking various forms.' There has been much misunderstanding among Occidental theologians concerning the annihilation of the thought-waves according to yoga. Those who interpret spiritual effort as