

THE MASTER MARINER¹

Quam sine fictione didici, et sine invidia communico, et honestatem illius non abscondo; infinitus enim thesaurus est hominibus.—‘The lessons she taught me are lessons honestly won, shared without stint, openly proclaimed; a treasure men will find inexhaustible’ (*Wis.* vii).

At any time during the early years of this century, if you consulted Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, and turned up the reference under ‘Angelic Doctor,’ you would read this: ‘Angelic Doctor, The, Thomas of Aquino, so called because he discussed how many angels could dance on the point of a pin.’ Whether, in fact, any schoolmen did devote attention to this rather specialised subject, I have often tried to discover, but have never managed to trace the legend further back than *Tristram Shandy*, where I strongly suspect that it originated. I only use that quotation here to draw your attention to a singular fact; namely that in the last twenty-five years or so the great saint whom we commemorate to-day has, in a way, come into his own—even in these days of loose thought, and of unlaborious reading. To-day, even Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* has been corrected, and wherever you meet a man who professes interest in things of the mind, you will find that St. Thomas means something to him. Possibly he will use the name ‘Aquinas,’ to indicate that this is not an author with whom he is on friendly terms; almost certainly he will admit that he has never tried to read ‘Aquinas.’ But there will be respect in his voice; he will know that he is referring, not to a medieval quibbler, but to an author whose works are one of the milestones in the history of human thought.

St. Thomas was a great Saint; and what we properly celebrate on the feast of a great Saint are his virtues; his purity of soul, his humility, his easy converse with the other world. If he happened to be a philosopher as well, that does not really concern us; it was part of God's Providence that he should realise his sanctity in the life of a philosopher, just as it was part of God's Providence that St. Benedict Joseph Labre should realise his sanctity in the life of a tramp covered with vermin. There is no more reason to talk about philosophy when you are celebrating the virtues of St. Thomas than there is to talk about entomology when you are discussing the virtues

¹ A sermon preached at Hawkesyard Priory, Rugeley, on the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, March 7th, 1945.

of St. Benedict Joseph Labre. We know, indeed, that God does sometimes give supernatural illumination to the minds of his saints; we know that St. Thomas himself had an ecstasy at Mass in which he saw enough of Divine truth as it really is, to make all his own writings seem poor stuff by comparison. But those glimpses are incommunicable, alas, to us others. No, the theology of St. Thomas is not an esoteric mystery, it is based on hard facts and mathematical reasonings; 'honestly won,' as my text says, not smuggled in from some celestial black market; 'shared without stint, openly proclaimed'—there is no incommunicable quality about it. Penetrated, doubtless, like all the relics which the saints leave behind them, with a virtue not of this world, but not part of the stuff of his sanctity. The *Summa* is only a by-product of his true genius; the composition of it whiled away the leisure hours of a man whose business was prayer. Sanctity is not a work done, it is a life lived.

Yet, in a house dedicated to study under his auspices, it would be out of place to commemorate the thing that happened on March 7th, 1274, without reminding ourselves, in brief and perhaps commonplace outline, of the work St. Thomas did in his day, the work that remains to be done in ours, not least by the children of St. Dominic. I would simply point to two principles, which jut out like buttresses from the great edifice he has left behind him, lucidly evident, yet in danger of being forgotten in our day no less than in his. One is, that you must have a philosophy which covers the whole of your experience, which faces all the facts; not a philosophy which explains half your experience and explains away the other half. And the second principle is, that truth is all one; that you must have a system which dove-tails together the results of all your knowledge; not one kind of truth for the physicist and another for the philosopher, or one kind of truth for the philosopher and another for the theologian.

There is a constant tendency for the human mind, when it philosophises, to cut the knots instead of untying them; to isolate one part of your experience and thrust away the other half into a corner as something that cannot be explained, or is unworthy of explanation. There is no more puzzling riddle for a philosopher to solve than the relation between matter and spirit, between the world which meets our eyes and the eyes with which we look out on it. In the thirteenth century the Church was still grappling with that curious outbreak of heresy in Europe which produced the crusade against the Albigenses. Somehow, nobody quite knows how, the South of France had been invaded by a set of ideas, reintroduced from the East, which Christian people thought had been killed once for all

by St. Augustine eight hundred years earlier. It was not a philosophical system which denied the existence of matter, it was a religious system which held that matter was wholly evil. Marriage was wrong, taking life was wrong, eating animal food was wrong, sacraments were valueless—everything that concerned the material side of man's nature must be thrust away, hidden in a corner. The Catholic religion, these heretics maintained, was something carnal, material, false to its mission.

Against that background of error St. Thomas built up his Aristotelian philosophy, his theology of the Incarnation. Matter was not something which human thought could thrust away out of sight, the sensible world was not something that could be despised utterly; on the contrary, it was from our sensible experience that all our knowledge ultimately came. Matter was not something evil; God himself had become flesh, had sanctified a fallen earth with his tread, had bound up some of his chief graces with the sacramental use of material things. 'God and his Creatures'—what a world of comfort there is in the very formula which, instinctively, the name of St. Thomas conjures up to us; God's creatures, not the work of some jealous demiurge, acting in defiance of his will; creatures representing God and conveying good to man; the cosy furniture of this, our temporary home!

In our day, the chief danger lies in the opposite direction. Our minds are ruled, more than we know, by suggestion and association. And the mechanised world, in which we live, eating eggs that come out of a tin, with unpiloted aeroplanes droning overhead, seems to have put us at the mercy of our own inventions; the machinery we created to be a useful servant has become a pitiless master. And it is not wonderful if the bent of the human mind is towards a mechanical explanation of things; if a popular philosophy traces every act of the mind, every development in history, to blind, irresistible forces that have no human will directing them. And still we need the splendid sanity of St. Thomas to convince ourselves and to persuade others that such a view, once again, is only looking at one side of the picture. Sense experience is not knowledge, does not account for knowledge, could not by itself develop into knowledge; there must be a spiritual principle at work. Trained instinct does not account for all our behaviour; a place must be left in your scheme for purposive will. God and his creatures; those creatures dazzle us by their complexity, daunt us by their persistent presence at our elbows; but they are his.

And the other great buttress which seems to stand out from St. Thomas's thought is the unity of the sciences. It was a decisive

moment in the world's history when St. Albert and St. Thomas, in defiance of so much nervous opposition, determined to make a Christian of Aristotle; Aristotle, the master-knower, the flower of pagan enlightenment. The Arabs had already adopted him, but they never made a Mohammedan of him. It is one of the most striking proofs of the superiority of Christianity to Islam, that when both tried the same philosophical diet we could digest it and they couldn't. In the Mahommedan world, the result was a struggle between the theologians and the philosophers, and the theologians won. They buried Aristotle away, like a dangerous explosive; and the Mahommedan culture, till then a dangerous rival to our own, became sterile. The Crusades were not yet over; we had not yet fought them to a standstill; but we had thought them to a standstill; nay, we had thought them back into the desert.

And if we did that, if the Christian world did that, the praise is due, under God, to St. Thomas's fearless instinct that you must not be afraid of knowledge; that truth could not contradict truth, and whatever in Greek philosophy was true would harmonise with the Christian tradition; they would link together automatically, like St. Peter's chains. He had to fight an ultra-orthodox party, which dreaded Aristotle as a materialist. He had to fight another set of thinkers, who accepted Aristotle as philosophical truth, and, because they could not fit the Christian tradition into his system, invented a distinction between two kinds of truth, philosophical and theological. No, truth was and ever must be one; philosophy was the handmaid of theology, and where you could bring them to an understanding, there you had the perfect *ménage*.

To-day, for a multitude of reasons, we have far less apparatus than St. Thomas's contemporaries ever had for integrating our thought. Learning and speculation have so multiplied that it is hard, even within the sphere of theology itself, for one man to be more than a specialist; and you will find a dogmatic theologian attaching importance, perhaps, to some isolated text which the Scripture professors have decided to interpret in quite another sense. And when you survey the field of the sciences generally, the psychologists interpreting everything in terms of mental aberration, the economist interpreting everything in terms of bread and butter, the physicists annihilating matter, limiting space, and snapping their fingers at law—what synthesis is possible in such a rough and tumble as that? Once more men's minds are tempted to wonder whether religious truth isn't perhaps an altogether different kind of truth, valid in its own sphere just as the economist's truth or the physicist's truth are valid in theirs. Philosophy, even, that was once the handmaid of

theology, seems to have given notice, and the most theology can hope for is a little occasional help. Is it not time, perhaps, that religion should shut itself up in its own precincts, and live its own life in isolation from the debates of the world around it?

Once more, against this subtler peril, we have to arm ourselves with the thought of St. Thomas. Somehow, sooner or later, the multitudinous opinions of our time have got to be integrated, unless we are all to end in the mad-house. And we know that because our religion is true the Christian theology must inevitably fit in with the rest, and fit in as the key-piece of the whole structure. It is, I think, to the sons of St. Dominic; with their roots so firmly fixed in the past, their minds so keenly alive to the atmosphere of the present, that we look most confidently to achieve that vast synthesis in its time.

'A treasure men will find inexhaustible'; those were the concluding words of my text—are the works of St. Thomas inexhaustible? Not, evidently, in the sense that he could foresee all the discoveries which would be made, all the theories which would be propounded, by the scientists of later ages, and frame his speech to allow for them. Not even in the sense that he could foresee, in their precise form, all the hesitations of the philosophers who would come after him, the subtle distinctions they would draw, the analogies by which they would illustrate their thought. But the channel has been buoyed now; and the modern explorer, be he as adventurous as he will, marks, and will ever mark, the indelible traces of the Master Mariner's passage.

Meanwhile, Reverend Fathers, let us remind ourselves again that we did not come here to admire the profundity of a great human genius, and the record of his achievement. We are here to thank God for the life of a poor Friar, who kept the rule and scrubbed his cell and said his office and loved our Blessed Lady like the rest of us. If he had never put pen to paper, earth would be the poorer for it, but heaven would not have missed a citizen. He had that holiness, that setapartness, which would have supernaturalised his life's work, whatever his life's work had been. He entered the kingdom of heaven as a little child; it is the only entrance. Let us ask him to win us his purity, his humility, his love of obedience, before we ask for any tincture of his learning.

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