

‘Consecrate them in the truth’ : a homily for St Thomas’ Day

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

Preached on the 28th January 1987 during Cardinal Ratzinger’s first visit to the Dominican-run Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas (‘the Angelicum’) in Rome.

The gospel-text chosen for today’s feast (John 17, 9—19) gives us the interpretative key we need in order to understand what it was that motivated the life of St Thomas at the deepest level. It discloses the point of departure from which that life began to take on shape and form. ‘Consecrate them in the truth,’ says our Lord on the evening before his death. By this prayer of his, he transformed the Old Testament liturgy of reconciliation into that ‘liturgy’ of the New Testament which consists in the Lord’s own living and dying.

‘Consecrate them in the truth’. The word ‘consecrate’ is founded on the term *sacer*, ‘sacred’, and ‘the Sacred’ is the characteristic being of God, the untouchableness of his majesty. ‘Consecrate’ signifies: make man, this poor and finite creature, able to enter into contact with God in his immense glory. How can man dare to approach God, with impure hands lay hold on the Untouchable One, the Pure One, the Infinite? The world religions have created ritual systems in order to qualify man for dealing with the sacred so as to resolve the tragic enigma whereby man needs contact with God in order to live, and yet is incapable of bearing that light inaccessible. On the feast of Yom Kippur, during the Old Testament liturgy of reconciliation, the high-priest entered once a year into the presence of God, preparing himself for that contact with the Sacred by an exacting ritual of consecration. The death of Jesus is the true Yom Kippur. It is that feast of reconciliation which shall never end. And it is in this context that we find our text: ‘Consecrate them in the Truth’. Truth is the only kind of washing which has any hope of making us fit for contact with God. God is truth. His ‘sacredness’ is his being, and his being is truth. The consecration we need for communion with God is the ablution of truth. ‘Consecrate them in the Truth’. St Thomas located his entire life in the space opened up by these words of the Lord. His life was a life in the truth and for its sake. A humble and constant

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service of the truth was the form taken by his consecrated life and his priestly ministry.

In this homily I would like to draw your attention in brief terms to just three aspects of St. Thomas' commitment to the truth. A remark of G.K. Chesterton has helped me to understand the better Thomas' intellectual and spiritual *figura*. Chesterton suggested that, were we to give to the Angelic Doctor one of those names that Carmelites take on their profession, names like 'of the Child Jesus', 'of the Cross', and so forth, it would not be difficult to find just the right one for Thomas. He should be called 'St Thomas of the Creator'. The truth expressed in that word 'Creator' was a truth hidden from the great philosophers of ancient Greece, even though they had divined so many aspects of the mystery of God and thus prepared the way for human thought to receive the light of divine revelation. Thomas was the first person who drew out all the consequences of this article of faith and discovered that link which connects faith and reason, the human being's natural capacity to receive the truth.

The conviction that being in all its totality is the creature of God brings with it what may be called 'creatural optimism'. It implies the joyous certitude that being is good, down to its very roots. It encourages us to give our 'Yes' to matter, which was no less willed by God than was spirit. It also entails a freedom of the God-created natural being to be itself—though in such a way that this being remains in intimate relationship with God. Redemption is not the suppression of nature, or of the human subject. Redemption is the perfecting, the completing of natural being. It follows, then, that believing is not opposed to thinking, to our intellectual self-engagement, but, on the contrary, demands such thinking, presupposing it and bringing it to maturity. Philosophy thus becomes a necessity for theology, and respect for its autonomy an implication of faith itself. This must be so, since the truth consecrates. To have the courage to pursue the truth is a consequence of faith in God as Creator. By his own intrepid faith, St Thomas broadened the horizons of Christian thought. A self-enclosed fideism is an attitude of fear. It carries the seed of infidelity within itself, reducing faith to a positivism of arbitrary choice and finishing up by renouncing truth altogether. If God is truth, if truth is the real 'sacred', then the renunciation of truth becomes a flight from God. The search for truth is already loving devotion. Where the courage to pursue the truth disappears faith becomes falsified in its very foundations. Such seeming faith is no longer authentic faith. It has ceased to be Christian.

And so the openness necessary for gaining the truth is something threatened from two sides. On the one hand, it is put under threat by a fideistic positivism which is afraid that embracing the truth of creatures would lead it to lose hold on God. On the other hand, it is also menaced

by an agnostic type of positivism which feels itself threatened by God's greatness and, losing the Creator, loses also his creatures.

And this brings me to the *second* dimension of our theme. The courage to pursue the truth requires the virtues proper to truth-seeking. Truth shines forth in the creature only if the latter's creaturely character is not forgotten. Being a creature implies relativity and relationship, and relativity requires humility. In other words, being a creature rules out the spirit of dominion, of arrogance, of self-sufficiency. It excludes, therefore, any isolation into which individual creatures, or the creaturely realm as such, may fall. The message of creatures is picked up clearly only where it is understood that, by the mediation of creatures, another is speaking. From this Other creatures come forth; on him they depend; towards him they tend. But the spirit of sinful, autonomous man is precisely a spirit of dominion and isolation. It is not possible for man to dominate being in its totality. By an inexorable logic, the desire to dominate, to be a god, a law to oneself and a lord to others, leads to isolation and reductionism. Man ceases to listen out for the genuine voice of creatures. He seeks only the applicability of *things* for the improvement of his bio-system.

To the false humility of such reductionism St Thomas opposes the true humility of the creature. And such true humility, a condition of all human greatness, is this: that we are summoned as hearers of the whole message of being. As St Gregory of Nyssa put it, the creature is like a mighty trumpet that speaks to us of God. St Thomas knew how to listen attentively to this music. His philosophy is an abiding invitation to unblock the ears of the human spirit, to transcend the mere use of things so as to reach that stage where they are no longer just things, but creatures of God. When we reach that point we shall find that things themselves can offer us the sacred 'washing' of truth.

The interior dynamism of truth, which is always a *way*, has thus brought us to the third aspect which I wanted to say something about. In today's gospel, our Lord says to the Father: 'I have given them thy word... Consecrate them in the truth; thy word is truth'. Though the creature is a trumpet which makes truth resound, yet, in order to decipher the message of the resounding chorus of creatures we have need of the Word. The truth is personal. The truth is Christ. The Christological fact does not, however, render superfluous the exercise of our human rationality. On the contrary: we would not respond in a fitting manner to the call of Christ if we wished to circumvent thinking, the rational search for truth. And yet that commitment of our own thinking is no substitute for the living Word, Jesus Christ. Since he is the truth, Christ is also the way. In the radiance of Jesus we are enabled to see the splendour of the truth in creatures. Christ opens for us the book of creatures, just as creatures guide our steps to the Lord himself. Love

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of the truth and love for Jesus form one single, indivisible reality in the spiritual personality of St Thomas. Loving Christ, he loved the truth. Seeking an ever deeper relationship with Christ, he received the consecrating power of truth.

‘Thomas, you have written well of me. What do you desire in return?’ According to the legend, this question was put by the crucified Lord to the Angelic Doctor. The reply of Thomas came: ‘Nothing but yourself.’ ‘Nothing but yourself’: this is the synthesis of the life and thought of the great doctor. His life was at once desire for Christ, desire for God, desire for truth. ‘Nothing but yourself.’ It is only by entering into the spiritual movement of these words that we find ourselves within the dynamic movement of his thought. ‘Nothing but yourself.’ If we could make these words our own, we should indeed be responding as we ought to the great promise of the Gospel of today: ‘And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth’. Amen.

Editorial note: The homily was given in Italian. We are publishing this translation with Cardinal Ratzinger’s permission.

Economics and Human Desire

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When, at the end of January, the Vatican Justice and Peace Commission advised debtor countries of the Third World that they were not always morally obliged to repay their international creditors, the announcement did not set off even a tiny ripple in the world’s money markets. But when Reagan blunders yet again or Thatcher slips back in the opinion polls the major stock markets react nervously. The Church is somehow excluded; it does not play any role in the making of economic decisions, though, today, these so deeply influence our personal lives. And Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* accepts at least one of the basic presuppositions of modern economics as a good one: progress ought to be made—albeit it ought to be made within the moral order and oriented to serve mankind. We can read subsections 64 and 65 as a criticism of the modern economic and social process, but at the same time they seem to