

THE MAKING OF A FRIAR-PREACHER†

‘ Friar William of Montserrat of the Order of Preachers having been sworn, said that some sixteen years ago or thereabouts he came to the Roman City, there to keep Lent.

‘ And the Lord Pope who now is who was then Bishop of Ostia received him into his house.

‘ In those days Friar Dominic, the *inventor* and first Master of the Order of Preachers, was at the Roman Court. He often came to the house of the Lord Bishop of Ostia. Hence from that time he had knowledge of him.

‘ The behaviour of the said Friar pleased him so that he began to love him. Very often he talked with him of what concerned the salvation of themselves and other men.

‘ Now it seemed to the witness that Friar Dominic was of great religious holiness, greater than any man he had ever seen, though the witness had spoken with many religious.

‘ Moreover it seemed to him that he was the greatest seeker [zelator] of the salvation of mankind he had ever seen.

‘ In the same year he, the witness, went to Paris to hear Theology; because he had promised and given his word to him that after having read Theology for two years and he had put his brethren in order they would both go together to convert the Pagans who dwelt in Persia and other southern parts.’

IN these unmistakably human words borne to you across seven centuries, you will recognise the sworn witness, and indeed the heart-cry of one of the passionate lovers of Dominic Guzman. But this morning’s duty of opening your year’s course of study will best be served if, in this witness of this young nobleman who went south and died among the pagans you recognise the spirit which Dominic Guzman left as a heritage to his order and to the Church.

The incident sums up a century; perhaps an entire civilization. Some new strange thing is in the world when a young man who has come to Rome for a career, covets to lay down his life amongst the pagans of the South; and, strangest of all, when at the bidding of

† Words spoken at the opening of Studies, St. Thomas’s College, Hawkesyard.

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the saint who has enamoured him of martyrdom he feels he must be prepared for mission work amongst the pagans, and must be cleansed and perfected for holocaust by a course of study at the world's most famous University!

How much was pure intuition in the mind of the saint who thus prepared his fellow-countryman for their apostolic crusade we have no means of knowing. Such a heroic attitude towards the truth may have been the fruit of a mind capable of seeing things as they are; or it may have been a visit of that Spirit who breathes when and where He will and whose foot-fall is so light that the human spirit 'knoweth not whence He cometh and whither He goeth.' The Saint who first saw the light in a Spanish block-house built against Moorish scimitars, and had studied in a University founded to stem Moorish and Jewish philosophy might be expected to remember that any apostle to the Southern parts would be likely to meet, not merely simple souls like the Bethlehem shepherds but even kings of thought like Moses Maimonides.

The quiet witness of Friar William of Montserrat lets us see the special genius of St. Dominic whom the many signs of temporal prosperity could not blind to the desperate plight of God's truth in the world and in the Church. Not every one of the Church's officials in the thirteenth century, even in the vowed atmosphere of the cloister, recognised that because God's truth is a Revelation it is neither discoverable nor communicable by the methods of Contemplation. A mystery cannot be discovered by the human spirit; it can only be communicated by the Divine Spirit. The divine mysteries called Revelation, having been originally communicated to the Church's teachers, necessarily demand the preacher. All this had been already said by the Doctor Gentium in his letter to the Romans—'How shall they call on Him in whom they

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have not believed? Or how shall they believe Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ¹

Few had realised as St. Dominic had realised, in contemplating this wisdom of St. Paul, that Jesus Christ had commissioned Truth to the Church not merely to be contemplated but to be preached. Wherever St. Dominic turned his eyes in the Church of the thirteenth century he saw the ill-effects of a widespread separation between contemplation and preaching. In spite of an efficient system of Church organisation and Church finance, the Church was withering. Yet there was no lack of preaching; and less lack of contemplation. But the secret cause of the Church's blight was that this contemplation bore no fruits in preaching; and the preaching had no roots in contemplation.

For St. Dominic, therefore, the crisis of the Church was a plight of Truth. Again the plight of Truth, springing as it did from the separation between Contemplation and Preaching, centred round the two great medieval institutions, the Cloister and the University. The medieval cloister with its long choral duties had contemplation enough; but it was a contemplation neither deeply rooted in knowledge nor given to preaching the contemplated truth. The medieval University, where every teacher's chair was a preacher's pulpit, did not lack its preachers; but the truths preached were not contemplated in the heart, nor taught to the many who needed them, but only to the few who were fit. Both the genius and humility of St. Dominic coveted to make a synthesis of these two; so that the Church's scientific truth as taught at the University might find in the cloister not merely monks to worship it by contemplation but apostles to worship it by preaching.

¹Rom. X, 14, 15.

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Already the spirit of St. Dominic and St. Thomas has exiled you from home in order to enrol you in a crusade for the deliverance of your beloved land. It was no little part of the genius of St. Dominic to see that the first objective of the intellectual and moral crusade must be the West rather than the East. He was too richly endowed with Spanish warrior-blood to forget that wars are won on drilling-fields as well as on battlefields. He could even recognise without bitterness or unbelief that the Church's chief enemies were those of its own household.

If you in this land of a faith rejected, have a harder task than that which faced St. Dominic you will need, and thanks to the genius of St. Thomas you will have, still greater reinforcement.

Let us for a moment find that reinforcement in two of the unobtrusive articles of the *Summa Theologica* :

‘ Whether Sacred Doctrine is a practical Science? ’

‘ Whether Sacred Doctrine is nobler than other Sciences? ’

You would hardly be human if on the eve of some years of intense study you did not ask yourselves, and—if you are bold!—your masters, ‘ Can any good come of it? ’ or as we say nowadays, ‘ Is it practical? Will it work? ’ St. Thomas answers your question with a quiet wisdom that recalls Rocca Sicca, the bare dry rock on which his home was built :

I answer that Sacred Doctrine being one extends to things which belong to different philosophical sciences ; because it considers in each the same formal aspect, namely so far as they can be known through divine revelation. Hence although amongst the philosophical sciences one is speculative and another practical, nevertheless Sacred Doctrine includes both ; as God by one and the same Science knows both himself and his works.

Still it is rather speculative than practical because it is more concerned with divine things than with human acts ; though it does treat even of these latter, inasmuch as man

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is ordained by them to the perfect knowledge of God, in which consists eternal bliss.²

In accepting the two categories of speculative and practical Science, St. Thomas conditions their acceptance. He will agree that in the lower ranges of truth these categories apply so indisputably that what is practical is not speculative and what is speculative is not practical. But in the higher ranges of truth which are the final expression of God's truth, the two categories of speculative and practical are hardly more than two aspects—we may say, two human aspects—of the same eternal infinite truth. In other words what is transcendently speculative is transcendently practical.

Of those who nowadays so freely use the word *practical* how many would be able to give it any meaning; except, perhaps, the *useful* or the *workable*? We may then be pardoned for a certain hesitation in accepting a view of the practical or useful which has given us a glut of machines and a famine of the first things necessary for human life. If in our hesitation at hearing those who plead the practical we begin to ask 'Practical, for what?' St. Thomas reassures us that the studies on which we are now embarking are more transcendently practical than all the arts and crafts and machines of men. He will even dare to think, and dare us to think with him, that God's main reason for revealing the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity, the speculative mystery of all mysteries, was that it was so practical as to guide your thought about your creation and redemption, about whence you came and whither you were going.³ Perhaps his many foot journeys across

² *Summa Theologica* (Eng. Tr.) 1a Qu 1, Art. 4.

³ The present writer can never forget the thrill of discovery that almost overpowered his mind when first he realised that in the common, and therefore social, life of the Undivided Three in heaven was the exemplar and cause of all truest, highest, social life on earth.

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the snow-capped mountains of his native land had reminded him as they may remind you that the abstract peaks of thought you now make bold to climb are the riches of the plains below. He thus makes his own the splendid boldness of St. Paul, who set the world on fire: To one who might have been despised for his youth, the dauntless word-sower wrote, 'Avoid foolish and old wives' fables; and exercise thyself unto godliness. For bodily exercise is useful for little, but godliness is useful for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come . . . Till I come, attend unto reading, to exhortation, and to doctrine' (I Tim. iv, 7-13).

This challenge to youth given by the Doctor Gentium is reinforced by the Doctor Angelicus in his answer to the question 'Whether Sacred Doctrine is nobler than other Sciences.'

I answer that, since this Science is partly speculative and partly practical, it transcends all others, speculative and practical.

One speculative science is said to be nobler than another, either by reason of its greater certitude—or by reason of the higher worth of its subject-matter.

In both these respects this science surpasses other speculative sciences—in point of greater certitude, because other sciences derive their certitude from the natural light of human reason, which can err; whereas this derives its certitude from the light of the divine knowledge, which cannot be misled.

In point of the higher worth of its subject-matter; because this science treats chiefly of those things which by their sublimity transcend human reason, while other sciences consider only those things which are within reason's grasp.

Of the practical sciences, one is nobler which is ordained to the further purpose. Politic science is nobler than military science; for the good of the Army is ordained to the good of the State.

But the purpose of this science, in so far as it is practical, is eternal bliss; to which as to an ultimate end the purposes

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of every practical science are ordained. Hence it is clear that from every standpoint it is nobler than other sciences.⁴

Our stay amidst theology be it long or short—and the longest is all too short—must then be a practical time when truth learned by heart and rote, truth conned and contemplated is preparing harvesters for the white harvest-field of souls. Of all the sciences we may know, Theology, when known, will be the most practical, because the most ONE. Theology is a synthesis with the attributes of the highest unity, namely, a simplicity of design with multiplicity of function. In these days when we are reminded by scientist and theologian alike that theology must hearken to science—as indeed science must hearken to theology—it is consoling to realise that the theology of your master, Aquinas, had absorbed all the science of his day. Indeed it is significant that on his death-bed St. Thomas whilst dictating a Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles was asked by the University of Paris to send them his promised Treatise on Aqueducts! Our adventure in life must therefore be so to study theology as to absorb what is true in science; and so to teach what we have absorbed that science may absorb what is true and necessary for it in theology.

But theology is not just a synthesis: it is *the* synthesis. No other science can give, as theology gives, a welcome and a home to every being and every truth about every being. Now if philosophy is the synthesis of the thinker's thought about things, theology satisfies our quest for philosophic truth by the unity in totality it alone gives.

Here we may pause to find another proof of the practicalness of theology in its use of words and thoughts. If the most practical thing is that which

⁴ *Summa Theol.*, ut sup. Art. 5.

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holds the most thought in the least matter, then the theology of its most accredited master, St. Thomas, must be accounted most practical. No one, it may be admitted, has a greater vocabulary than St. Thomas. Yet the extent of his vocabulary is measured and controlled by the extent of his subject-matter. In any definite subject he treats of, it is astonishing how few words he uses, and hardly ever an adverb or an adjective. All is substantive and active—a thing in being or a thing in motion. The same asceticism of thought which has measured his words by the demand of reality has forbidden him to add one new word to the vocabulary of the science. Even in the profound thinking of his treatise on the Blessed Trinity he uses scarcely fifty words, as Substance, Accident, Relation, Person, One, Two, Three, Son, Image, Gift, Love. Yet if the genius of St. Thomas has not enriched—as some men have impoverished—the world by new words of his coining, yet how heavily has he enriched the simplest words from his wealth of thought. So thought-charged are the words he uses as almost to become intellectualised into disembodied truth.

Evidence of the practicalness of the Sovereign Science came with dramatic force upon the present writer when he spoke for the first time to what might be called a University audience at Cambridge, the home of modern views on Education. No doubt there are two Cambridges that like the Pauline duality of body and spirit lust against each other. A few days before the present writer's address on the Teaching of Aquinas, Cambridge of the physical schools and laboratories, of the modern and the practical, had decided that Greek should no longer be a compulsory part of the culture that was Cambridge. An age that measures the practical by a foot-rule or a test-tube, and measures the useful by typewriters and aeroplanes, could hardly be expected to find a home for Greek. As

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the lecturer on St. Thomas stood before his audience he could almost overhear the humanists of the sixteenth century at Cambridge and elsewhere crying in despair that the scholastics would soon be the sole heirs of the glory that was Greece. Four centuries had sufficed to show that the City of Grecian culture which had suffered so much from its assailants would in the end suffer most from its defenders. And in presence of these unseen humanists the son of St. Thomas could not withstand the cry that came to his lips—‘if the culture of Homer, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle and the Greeks is driven from every sanctuary in a world of din and stir, it will never die whilst there is a child of Aquinas to know its need.’

But you, my brothers, are learning to be brother-preachers. Are your years of study to be a hindrance or a help to you in your future crusade for Christ? Let me again read to you some golden words of your master St. Thomas, of whom the sworn witnesses said that he was always and everywhere either studying or praying except when these two activities of mind and heart were given vent in the chair of the teacher or the pulpit of the preacher. You may find amongst his wonderful *Questiones* a letter of reply to a certain Friar Gerard, evidently a simple soul who was wholeheartedly if not whole-headedly in the work of preaching. To help him with his sermons he sends to Friar Thomas Aquinas a list of questions amongst which are such as these: ‘Had the Star of Bethlehem the form of a Cross?—of a man on a Cross?’ ‘After Simeon’s prophecy to Our Lady, did she recall it seven times a day until the Resurrection?’ It would be impossible to be more patient than was the reply of St. Thomas to this simple friar. Yet the saint and theologian could not refrain from adding, ‘Yet it ill becomes the preacher of truth to turn aside to such fables.’ And, stronger still, to the question about

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Our Lady, he answers ' This is to be despised with the same ease it is said, since it is supported by the strength of no authority. Nor do I think that such silliness [frivole] should be preached, when things of the most certain truth give such matter for preaching.'⁵

These words might well be cut into the floor of every Dominican pulpit. They are the strong cry of the leader to his fellow-preachers. Whilst every truth of Art and Science finds its place in the great minster of Theology and may therefore serve its turn in the Apostle's sermon, yet the supreme subject-matter of his preaching must be those supreme truths or articles of Faith which are of most certain truth. Some of us whom you will listen to as Masters, have been privileged to speak these truths to simple folk in the high-ways and byeways of this land. I think they are all agreed that it is the great truths now opening to your thought and contemplation which are most welcome to the people. It has even been their experience that no divine truth, however subtle, is without its value to the hearer, if only the preacher can break it into bread fit for simple minds. If these high truths of faith have been the substance, they have been the support of what has been preached. The friar-preacher's knowledge of metaphysics, psychology, ethics, has been daily requisitioned. Some of us have been asked subtle questions on Infallibility, Church History, Patrology, the difficult subject of Grace and Free-Will, Bible Chronology, the nature and scope of Inspiration. Humbly do we here confess that our idle days have found us out, and that the hours of almost despairing toil have turned into the joy of a harvest-home.

Here I must end, if only lest there be an end to your patient hearing. And how can a fitter end be made than with harvest of joy and song? In all you have

⁵ *Opusc. ad Lectorem Bisuntinum.*

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heard hitherto this morning theology has been recommended either as a practical sword sharpened by the soldier preparing to make war; or as a tool in the hands of a workman preparing to make some thing of peace. But our brother and master St. Thomas took another and perhaps a higher view of the truths of faith when he turned them—or they turned him—to song.

*Quantum potes, tantum aude
Quia major omni laude
Nec laudare sufficit.*

Dare all thou can'st; thou hast not song
Worthy his praises to prolong.

You to whom is vouchsafed the gift and call to song may kiss the pages of the book you may now call your own; for in its pages are your unsung songs which your love of the Truest, Fairest, Best must wake to life.

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