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The Aquinas Lecture, 1937

SAINT THOMAS

AND

THE LIFE OF LEARNING

Under the Auspices of the Aristotelian Society of Marquette University

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THE AQUINAS LECTURES

The Aquinas lecture is given annually at Marquette University under the auspices of the Aristotelian Society. It was initiated in 1933 by the Rev. George H. Mahowald, S.J., head of the department of philosophy, for the purpose of bringing to Milwaukee outstanding leaders in Thomistic thought in both its historical and its theoretical aspects.

This year the Aristotelian Society takes pleasure in presenting the lecture of the Rev. John F. McCormick, S.J., founder of the society, former head of the department of philosophy at Marquette, and present head of the department of philosophy in Loyola University, Chicago. Father McCormick is the author of a two volume work on *Scholastic Metaphysics* and has contributed many articles and reviews to *The New Scholasticism, Thought, The Modern Schoolman, The Commonweal,* and other publications.

Father McCormick died July 12, 1945.

Requiescat in Pace.

St. Thomas and The *Life Of* Learning

FROM the time when as a child he wearied the monks of the abbey of Monte Cassino with his question, "What is God?" up to the day when he waved aside his secretary with the words, 'I can do no more," and left the *Summa Theologica* an unfinished monument to his genius, St. Thomas had given all his years to a life of learning, along with what to him was its necessary complement, the life of teaching. For he thought it was unfair to the student and would take from him the greatest spur to study, if at the end of study the right to teach was not accorded him; just as it wOuld be discouraging to the fighting spirit of the soldier if after the toil of battle the fruits of victory were withdrawn.

This life of learning along with his inner life with God makes up his whole biography. Not as if these were two lives lived side by side: the life of learning and the inner life with God. He would not have deserved to

be called "the saintliest of the learned and the most learned of the saints," unless learning and holiness made one life in him, in which there was no discord between study and prayer, or between the labor of writing and the repose of contemplation. St. Augustine had sketched out the plan of such a life when he wrote:

> The charity of truth seeketh a holy leisure; the constraint of charity taketh up a just business, the business, that is, of the active life. But if no one imposes this burden upon us, we are to be at leisure for the reception and the contemplation of truth. If it is imposed, we must take it up, because of the constraint of charity. Yet, not even then must we relinquish the delight of truth, lest the charm of truth be withdrawn from us, and the necessity of the active life bear us down.'

Whether St. Thomas was a bit naive when he said: "In itself the understanding of truth is to everyone lovable,"[9] there can be no doubt that it was lovable to him and no doubt that he sought truth eagerly and with single-

ness of purpose and untiringly. Though he came of a stock that was turbulent enough, he had so disciplined his nature in his early sharp battles for the possession of his soul that he could bring to the life of learning in the pursuit of truth the undivided energy of a strong and clear intellect. John of Salisbury quotes[4] a recipe for the life of learning in which the prescriptions are: a humble mind and eagerness in seeking truth; a life of quiet with silent study; poverty and a foreign land. These prescriptions we find fulfilled in the life of St. Thomas, and conspicuously the humble mind and eagerness in the quest of truth. The life of quiet which he found first among the Benedictines was destined to remain his for the most part, and if it was to be interrupted at times by his family's ambition for him, or by the political strife of the times or by the academic squabbles of the University of Paris, still the interruptions were none of his seeking. And early in his student life he began to be wonderfully sparing in his

speech, as William of Toco tells us.5 When the time came to speak he would show himself not lacking in fluency, but in the meantime, if the legends of his early student days are to be trusted, he was unconcerned that his fellow students should nickname him the dumb ox, or that his quietness might make him appear undistinguished in scholastic achievement. In his eagerness in the pursuit of truth such things would mean nothing to him, and since truth rewards those that seek it sincerely, the reward of his single-mindedness seems to have been what the same William of Toco tells us of him: What he grasped in his reading he always retained.® He fulfilled in his life even the last two of the prescriptions quoted by John of Salisbury: poverty, which he voluntarily chose among the preaching friars, and the foreign lands to which his religious obedience sent him.

When St. Thomas himself is laying down the conditions under which knowledge is to be acquired, he tells us that man arrives at the

knowledge of truth in two ways: First, through what he receives from another, and secondly, through what he gets by his own study. Under what he receives from another is included what he receives from God and what he receives from man. For what we receive from God, prayer, he tells us, is necessary, according to the words of the book of *Wisdom* (VII, 7), *I asked and there came upon me the spirit of wisdom.* For what we receive from men we must be prepared to give: attentive listening, to learn from the words of the speaker, and reading, to gather what has been handed down in writing. But for what we get in the second way, that is, by our own study, meditation is required.[7]

In this outline of a method of learning there is one item that merits our special notice for this reason, if for no other, that it is often omitted in such outlines. This is his recognition that man learns by what he receives from God and that to receive from God prayer is necessary. St. Thomas knows that there can

be no learning from an outside source unless there is in the learner an intrinsic principle of knowledge. This principle is the intellect and the naturally known principles of knowledge. And this principle is from God.§ If it has been so often found true that learning puffeth up, may we not say it is because just so often the part in learning that men receive from God has been forgotten? The humble mind, which the quotation of John of Salisbury requires for knowledge, may come at times from the awareness of the vastness of the unknown compared to the littleness of what has been learned, but it has a surer foundation in the consciousness that the light in which we know is light received from above. The elder Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote somewhere that there are one-storey intellects, two-storey intellects and three-storey intellects with skylights. All fact collectors, who have no aim beyond their facts, are one-storey men. Two-storey men compare, reason, generalize, using the labors of the fact collectors as well

as their own. Three-storey men idealize, imagine, predict; their best illumination comes from above, through the skylight. Now this division is perhaps purely arbitrary and the comparison not very significant, except for the admission that the best intellects are open to light from above. This was eminently true of St. Thomas, and it does not detract at all from his intellectual genius to concede that his best illumination was from above. But the light from above comes to those that ask for it. Hence for St. Thomas the life of learning would necessarily be united to the life of prayer. We have among his *Opuscula* his Prayer before Study, and from what he asks in that prayer we may judge his realization of his dependence on the light that is from above. Give me, he asks, keenness of understanding and the capacity to retain, measure and ease in learning, sublety in interpreting and the fluent grace of speech. Set right my beginning, direct my progress, give completeness to the issue. And if there is any truth in

the words of a recent writer that,[9] "his vast intellectual achievements are out of the natural order and appropriate to a miracle," the explanation would seem to lie in this, that he sought for wisdom at its source, and his prayer was heard.

As a result of what he was by nature and what he became through study and prayer, there was conspicuous in the life of learning as St. Thomas led it a not too common phase of the philosophic attitude which may perhaps be described as light without heat. The love of the immaterial good is intellectual preference, not emotion. Now St. Thomas took seriously the implication of the name, philosopher, and strove to be in reality what that name made profession of—a lover of truth. He gave himself to the pursuit of truth to the extent that his absorption in it eliminated the personal element which is too often the fruitful source of heat in controversy, even in the philosophical arena. He could treat his opponents fairly because he had no personal

hostility towards them, however much he might abhor their doctrines. And he had no personal hostility towards them because it was truth he loved and not himself. He seemed not to be concerned about his own reputation if truth was served. Therefore he could meet his opponents on the ground of reason and let the decision fall to the weight of reason.

He himself has given us a picture of his own attitude towards controversy in what he tells us in his commentary on the *De Caelo et Mundo.*[10] We are to set forth the stand of our opponent and refute it and give our reasons for the other side. When we have done this, he tells us, we are less likely to condemn another's view without reason, as some have done, he adds, out of dislike for their adversaries. But such dislike seems to him most unbecoming in a philosopher who sets himself up as a searcher after the truth. To judge obectively in matters of opinion we must keep free from hostility to the persons whose

opinions we oppose. Rather we must be like arbitrators and investigators of both sides.

But even for him it was hard at times to avoid all heat when the errors to be refuted were especially exasperating. In the *Summa*™ he allowed himself the use of the superlative *stultissime* to characterize David of Dinant in his identification of God with prime matter. Such show of emotion was most unusual with him, but here we must admit the epithet was deserved. Then there is more than a hint at sarcasm in his words aimed at those who thought they had established the impossibility of eternal creation: "So those who have so subtly established this impossibility are the only men and wisdom began with them."[12] And his challenge to the Averroists to answer his refutation of their error shows that his usual restraint was not due entirely to good nature, but that there was fighting blood in the stock from which he came. "This is what I have written to overthrow the aforesaid error, not by means of documents of revelation,

but by the reasons and the text of the Philosopher. But if anyone, priding himself on his science, falsely so called, wishes to say anything against what I have written, let him not speak in corners, nor before boys who are unable to judge in difficult matters. But let him come into the open against this writing of mine if he dares. He will find [as antagonists] not only me who am the least of all, but many others who are lovers of truth."[13] There is a bit of heat here, but plenty of excuse for it, since he thinks error in regard to the intellect which nature has given us to avoid error and find truth, is more than ordinarily unbecoming *(indecentior*

There is something of the personal note here too. Otherwise it is most unusual for him to make use of the first personal pronoun, except in those *opuscula* which are answers to requests for his opinions. I can think of only one other place in which the personal note is admitted. It is in the beginning of the *Contra Gentiles,*[15] but here it is without heat.

He is telling us how, relying on the divine goodness, he is about to take upon himself the office of the wise man, however much this may surpass his powers, and is going to set forth the truth of the Catholic faith according to the measure of his ability.

But as we go on studying the life of learning as exemplified in the person of St. Thomas, we can hardly escape the growing conviction that this is not the life of learning as it is understood today. There is an unbridgeable difference between the mind of St. Thomas and the typically modern mind. This difference, I think, rests on the divergence of their respective conceptions of what the life of learning is and what it is for. For the modern mind learning is the path to the attainment of truth, and the end of the path is knowledge. For St. Thomas, though learning is still the path to the attainment of truth, the end of the path is wisdom. And thus both St. Thomas and the typical modern can be dedicated to the life of learning,, but. the out-

come of the dedication will be entirely different in each case. The modern mind stops at the way-station; St. Thomas goes on to the terminus.

Perhaps we can see this difference in the things that would be considered most worth while to know according to St. Thomas and according to our modern man of learning. I do not think it is libeling the modern man of learning to say that, since the establishment in the days of Thomas Huxley of the dictatorship of what the modern calls science, those things only are thought worth while objects of serious pursuit as knowledge which are amenable to the methods of science. These are the things that are measurable and can be submitted to the laboratory test. Such are, of course, material things. Now these things are many and diverse. And since science, whether in the sense of St. Thomas or in the modern sense does not aim any further than that which is the ultimate end in some genus of the knowable, and since there are many gen-

era of the knowable and therefore many ends, there will be many sciences.[18] If the end of the path to truth is science, then, there will be no unity of truth. I wonder if this is not the typical modern intellectual climate: many truths, but no Truth.

But to St. Thomas the things worth while knowing are the higher things, and in his mind the higher things are divine things. For since the perfection of man is in union with God, man should employ his intellect in contemplation and his reason in inquiring into divine truth.[17] And even though there may be more certainty in the sciences which have for their subject-matter less honorable things, still a little knowledge of the more honorable things is better, even when less certain, of less noble things.[18] For the human intellect desires more and loves and delights in the knowledge of divine things, however little we may be able to grasp of them, than in perfect knowledge of lower things.[1']

This is such a far remove from the attitude of the modern mind that we find ourselves in an entirely different intellectual atmosphere. For the modern mind appears to have lost sight of what Aristotle had said, that each thing is mostly that which is principal in it, and that man is mostly intellect, because intellect is that which is principal in him. And so it may be slow to grasp with St. Thomas that to be devoted to the intellectual contemplation of truth is to have reached happiness so far as happiness can be reached in this life.[20]

But in what he thinks the life of learning is *for,* St. Thomas is, if anything, further removed from the modern mind. Men speak nowadays of adding to the sum of human knowledge as a worthy goal for such a life, without much specific regard for what the addition to human knowledge is, beyond a certain liberation of the human spirit, which the increase of knowledge is believed, perhaps too optimistically, to achieve. The boast

of our intellectual progress is that it has freed man from superstition. But in putting off an error you do not necessarily put on truth. Intellectual progress ought to be measured, not just by what we have been led out of, but especially by what we have been led into. Is the modern mind at ease in the belief that the end of the life of learning is agnosticism? *Ignoramus et ignorabimus* is but a lame and impotent conclusion for the heroism of untiring research.

St. Thomas on his part is in no doubt about what the life of learning is for. It is to be directed towards the knowledge of God as the ultimate happiness of man. The study of creatures is the study of the works of God, and should lead to a fuller recognition of the wisdom of God, a greater reverence for. the power of God, and a greater love for the goodness of God as manifested in the universe. And the same study of creatures, too, can safeguard us against errors regarding the nature of God, which ignorance of the nature

of creatures may easily lead into. It is ignorance of the nature of creatures that makes men idolaters and plunges them into superstition. And therefore right knowledge of creatures is of high importance, because right knowledge of God depends upon it.[21] St Thomas, too, believes that advance in knowledge liberates the spirit of man when it leads him out of ignorance into the possession of that truth which is the origin of every truth because it is the principle of all things and the final end of all.[22] And this is wisdom, to set all things in order with reference to the final end of all. And here alone, in wisdom, do we find the unity of truth.

Learning, then, as intellectual knowledge, must take the second place to wisdom, and that is where St. Thomas puts it. Yet he never seeks to disparage learning, but speaks of it always as good and desirable.[23] All science is good, he tells us, and not only good, but also honorable. It is good because it is the perfection of man as such. But among

things that are good, some are praiseworthy, because they are useful for an end but others are honorable, because they are for themselves; for we pay honor to ends. In the case of the sciences, some are practical, some speculative; the practical being for the sake of something to be done; the speculative for themselves. Hence the speculative sciences are good and honorable, but the practical sciences are praiseworthy only.[24] Yet knowledge, good as it is in itself, may be evil accidentally because of consequences flowing from it, as when man grows proud of his knowledge or uses it to do wrong.[23] And it is better for us not to know evil things and trifling things, if such knowledge occupies the mind to the exclusion of better things, or inclines the will to evil.[20]

And thus because there may be evil in knowledge, even though only accidentally, the desire to know, which St. Thomas following Aristotle says is natural to all men, needs to be moderated. Knowledge of truth is in-

deed the good of man. Still man's highest good is not found in the knowledge of any and every truth, but in the perfect knowledge of the highest truth. And so there may be evil in the knowledge of some truths, because that knowledge is not properly regulated with reference to the knowledge of the highest truth.[27] The desire to know all, without regard to the suitableness of what we learn to the one truth that is the ultimate end, is what St. Thomas calls the vice of curiosity.[28] And in showing how this vice may be incurred he quotes a passage from St. Augustine which could easily be applied to other times than St. Augustine's own: "There are," he says, "some who giving up the pursuit of virtue and not knowing what God is or how great is the majesty of that nature which always remains the same, think they have accomplished something great, when with the utmost curiosity and intensity they have inquired into this bodily mass which we call the world. Hence such great pride is begotten in them that they

seem to themselves to be already dwelling in the skies about which they so often dispute."[29]

Is not this again typical of the modern intellectual climate: minute knowledge about things in nature, and agnosticism about God?

Because it is possible for us then to desire knowledge to our own hurt, there is need to moderate the natural desire to know. Man is not perfecting himself by mere indiscriminate learning, but only by attaining knowledge that is ordained to the first truth. The poet was not wrong who said,

> Knowledge is as food and needs no less
> Her temperance over appetite.

Nor was St. Thomas wrong when he found room among the moral virtues subordinated to temperance for a special virtue which he called studiousness and which is concerned with the moderation of this desire to know.'[0] But because of the complexity of human nature the exercise of this virtue meets with a conflict of inclinations. On the part of the

mind is the desire to know, which of itself knows no limitation, but needs to be held in check according to the necessary moderation of virtue. On the side of the body is the inclination to shirk the labor of search after knowledge and this slackness must be keyed up to the tension that is demanded for a properly regulated pursuit of truth.[31]

Then only do we find in knowledge the perfection of our nature when our desire to know is rightly tempered. And it is rightly tempered only when in giving it scope the knowledge which is sought after is at the same time evaluated in the light of the supreme truth which is the ultimate end of life. St. Thomas will not set the seal of approval on a life of learning as if learning were its own end. For him life itself would be without unity and, as it were, at loose ends if there could be many independent ends for human activity. Only the life of learning that seeks truth with wisdom as its end would measure up to what he demands. For it is only of wis-

dom that he speaks with unqualified approval, telling us that,

> Among all human pursuits the study of wisdom is more perfect, more sublime, more useful and more pleasant. More perfect it is because in as much as a man gives himself to the pursuit of wisdom, in so much has he already won some part in true beatitude; hence the Wise man says, *Blessed is the man that shall continue in wisdom* (Eccli. XIV, 22). It is more sublime, because through it before all else man approaches to the similitude of the divine which *has made all things in wisdom* (*Ps.* CIII, 24). And hence, since similitude is a cause of love, the study of wisdom especially joins man in friendship to God. For this reason it is said in the book of Wisdom, that wisdom is *an infinite treasure to men, which they that use become the friends of God* (VII, 24). And it is more useful, because through wisdom itself is the way to the kingdom of immortality: *The desire of wisdom bringeth to the everlasting kingdom* (*Wisdom* VI, 21). And it is more pleasant, because *her conversation hath no bitterness, nor her company any tediousness, but joy and gladness* (*Wisdom* VIII, 16)"

And in following wisdom he finds new meaning in the name and the profession of the philosopher, realizing what St. Augustine had said: "If Wisdom is God . . . then is the true philosopher the lover of God."[33]

NOTES

1. *Contra Impugnantes Dei Cultum et Religionem,* c. 2.
2. *De Civitate Dei,* XIX, 19.
3. *Summa Theologica,* II-II, q. 15, a. 1, ad 3.
4. *Policraticus,* VII, 13-
5. *Vita,* III.
6. *Vita,* VII, 42.
7. *Summa Theologica,* II-II, q. 180, a. 3, ad 4.
8. *Contra Gentiles,* II, cap. 75.
9. George G. Leckie: *Concerning Being and Essence by St. Thomas,* preface, xv (Appleton-Century Co. 1937).
10. *In de Caelo et Mundo,* I, xxii, 5.
11. *Summa Theologica,* I, q. 3, a. 7.
12. *De Aeternitate Mundi contra Murmurantes.*
13. *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas* (end).
14. *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas* (beginning).
15. *Contra Gentiles,* I, cap. 2.
16. *Summa Theologica,* I-II, q. 57, a. 2.
17. *In Boethium de Trinitate,* q. 2, a. 1.
18. *In I de Anima,* lect. 1.

19. *Contra Gentiles,* III, cap. 25.
20. *In X Ethic.,* lect. 10.
21. *Contra Gentiles,* II, cap. 2 and 3.
22. *Contra Gentiles,* I, 1.
23. *Sumina Tl.eologica,* II-II, q. 167, a. 1; I-II, q. 29, a. 5.
24. *In l de Anima.* lect. 1.
25. *Summa Theologica,* II-II, q. 167, a. 1.
26. *Summa Theologica.* I, q. 22, a. 3 ad 3.
27. *Summa Theologica,* II-II, q. 167, a. 1, and ad 1.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *De Moribus Ecclesiae,* III, 21.
30. *Summa Theologica,* II-II, q. 166, a. 2.
31. *Summa Theologica,* II-II, q. 166, a. 2, ad 3·
32. *Contra Gentiles,* I, cap. 2.
33. *De Cit itate Dei,* VIII, 1.