

## The Authority of St Thomas Aquinas in Theology \*

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LET us now pass to treat of the authority of St Thomas Aquinas in Theology which is the main object of this article. We have said that the most specific quality of a Father or a Doctor of the Church is the approbation of the Church. The Church does not approve all the Fathers and Doctors in one and the same way; but there are degrees and differences in the approbation according to the value of the works of each Father and Doctor.

St Thomas was born at the end of the first quarter of the XIII century about the year 1225 and in less than half a century he fulfilled his mission on earth and died at the Cistercian Abbey of Fossa Nova while on his way to the Council of Lyons. on March 7, 1274. During his short life he proved to be a real wonder for his intellectual achievements, leaving behind him, according to Father Mandonnet, no less than seventy five works some of which are very voluminous, such as the *Commentaries* on the books of the Old and New Testaments, the Commentary "*In IV libros Sententiarum*", the "*Quaestiones Disputatae*", and most particularly the two Summae, the "*Summa Contra Gentiles*" and the "*Summa Theologiae*", which by itself would have amply sufficed to put St Thomas at the head of all the expositors of Catholic Doctrine.

The first years after the death of St Thomas were spent in controversies about the accuracy and the correctness of his doctrine and some Universities went so far as to condemn some of his propositions; thus the University of Paris in 1227, that is, hardly four years after his death condemned some of his teachings. But the triumph of St Thomas was well secured when Pope John XXII, on the 18th July, 1323, in the Church of St Mary at Avignon, canonised Thomas Aquinas.

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St Thomas Aquinas who even before his canonisation was known as the *Doctor Communis*, a title explicitly given to him since the year 1317, was solemnly declared Doctor of the Church by Pope St Pius V on April 11, 1567. The act by which Pius V declared St Thomas a Doctor of the Church was only an implementation of the intention of the Council of Trent, concluded a short time before, which had made a great perusal of the works of St Thomas in its important decisions. Besides, St Pius V, in view of the great heights reached by St Thomas in his writings together with his saintly life, gave him the title, by which he is more commonly known, namely that of "Angelic Doctor".

In more recent times, Pope Leo XIII, in his immortal Encyclical Letter *Aeterni Patris*, dated 4th August, 1880, having received petitions from all the Bishops of the Catholic Church, declared St Thomas the heavenly Patron of all Catholic Schools and Universities.

The saintly Pope Pius X, in his famous Encyclical Letter *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* of the 7th September, 1907, paragraph VI De Remediis. I, in order to check what he calls the most malicious of all heresies, Modernism, prescribes: "In the first place with regard to studies, it is Our will, and We hereby explicitly ordain that the Scholastic philosophy be considered as the foundation of Sacred Studies. It goes without saying that if there be any proposition too subtly investigated or too inconsiderately taught by the Doctors of the School, any tenet of theirs not strictly in conformity with subsequent discoveries or in any way improbable in itself, it is no part of Our intention to propose that for the imitation of our age. What is of capital importance, however, is that in prescribing that the Scholastic philosophy is to be followed: We have in mind particularly the philosophy which has been transmitted to us by St Thomas Aquinas. We therefore declare, that all the orders issued in this regard by Our Predecessor remain in full force and where need be We renew and confirm them and order them to be strictly observed by all concerned. Let Bishops urge and compel their observance in future in any Seminary in which they may have been neglected. The same injunction applies also to Superiors of Religious Orders; And we warn teachers

to bear in mind that to deviate from St Thomas especially in metaphysics is to run very considerable risk."

These solemn words of Pope Pius X found a faithful echo in the Codification of the Ecclesiastical Laws. In fact in the New Code of Canon Law drawn up under Pope Pius X and promulgated under his successor Benedict XV, it is prescribed in Can. 589 par. 1: "Religious, after having been duly instructed in the Humanities should devote themselves for at least two years to philosophy and for four years to Theology according to the teaching of St Thomas in accordance with the instructions of the Apostolic See". Can. 1366 par. 2 deals with the diocesan Seminaries and prescribes: "The study of Philosophy and Theology and the teaching of these sciences must be accurately carried out by Professors according to the arguments, doctrine and principles of the Angelic Doctor which they must reverently hold".

In the light of this ecclesiastical legislation one can easily see that Thomistic Philosophy as well as Theology was bound to flourish. But there was still an easy way of evading it, namely to give to the text of St Thomas a different interpretation from that which was traditionally kept by the Thomistic School. In fact in this way many claimed to follow the doctrine of St Thomas, whereas in reality they were twisting St Thomas to their own ideas.

In order to restrain this tendency the Sacred Congregation of Studies, on July 27, 1914, published a list of twenty four theses which were declared to contain the evidently genuine doctrine of the Angelic Doctor: the decree as usual was signed by the Sovereign Pontiff, Pope Pius X.

Benedict XV at the beginning of his Pontificate, in the *Motu Proprio* of December 3, 1914, directed to the Theological College of Bologna, recalled the prescriptions of his predecessors Leo XIII and Pius X and ordained that the doctrine of St Thomas be followed scrupulously in Catholic Schools and also exhorted the said College to adhere most firmly to the principles of the Angelic Doctor and to follow the text of the *Summa Theologiae*. And later on, in another decree of the same Congregation of Studies published in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* of 1916, he prescribed that the *Summa Theologiae* should be adopted as the text for Scholastic Theology and the twenty four

propositions were to be considered as certain and directive rules which express the genuine doctrine of St Thomas.

In 1923, on the occasion of the VI centenary of the canonisation of St Thomas the Supreme Pontiff Pius XI published his Encyclical Letter *Studiorum Ducem*. Pius XI is to be considered as the great reformer of ecclesiastical studies. His Apostolic Constitution, *Deus Scientiarum Dominus* of May 24, 1931, will for many years to come be the Magna Charta of all Catholic Universities. In this Constitution the Holy Father following in the footsteps of his immediate predecessors prescribes: "In the Faculty of Theology Sacred Theology shall occupy the principal place. This Science shall be taught in the positive and the Scholastic method; consequently after the exposition of the truths of Faith and their demonstration from Holy Writ and Tradition, the nature of, and the intimate reason for, those truths is to be investigated and explained according to the principles and the teaching of St Thomas Aquinas." With regard to the Faculty of Philosophy it is prescribed: "In the Faculty of Philosophy Scholastic Philosophy shall be taught in such a way that the students may obtain a whole and coherent synthesis of the doctrine according to the method and principles of St Thomas Aquinas. With this doctrine in view the various systems of philosophers are to be examined and scrutinised" (art. 29, a and c). These same rules are then explained in the "Ordinationes" of the Sacred Congregation of Studies, dated 12th June, 1931 (art. 18) which accompany the aforesaid Constitution.

The reigning Pontiff in the first year of his Pontificate renewed the prescriptions of his predecessors with regard to the study of St Thomas (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1939, 246 s.), and in his memorable speeches, one to the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus and the other to the Members of the General Chapter of the Order of Preachers, both delivered in September, 1946 (*Osservatore Romano*, September 19, and 23-24, 1946), he insisted on the necessity of the study of the doctrine of St Thomas Aquinas and recalled the prescriptions of Canon Law and of the Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XI.

It is meet, therefore, to repeat the words of an eminent Jesuit, the late Cardinal Billot, who in the inaugural speech

of the Academy of St Thomas held on March 11, 1915, said: "The Popes succeeded one another; Popes of different nationality, with characters and tendencies much divergent from one another; but all, from John XXII down to Benedict XV (We can today add: down to Pius XII), have unanimously recommended the doctrine of St Thomas" (A.A.S., 1916, p. 412).

From all these documents it follows very clearly that the doctrine of St Thomas is particularly approved by the Church, nay, his works are also prescribed as the text to be followed in the schools of philosophy and theology. This does not mean that every point of teaching found in the works of St Thomas is to be considered as pertaining to the Catholic Faith, nor can we pretend that everything in St Thomas is to be considered as certain but we can safely affirm that in things pertaining to faith and morals the doctrine of St Thomas can and must be held as to exclude its opposite doctrine, even if held by other schools or doctors. This conclusion is not an exaggerated one for it seems to be in conformity with the prescriptions of the Sovereign Pontiffs, as the following quotation taken from Leo XIII will amply prove. Leo XIII after presenting to the faithful the singular qualities of the doctrine of St Thomas goes on to say: "For these reasons learned men of the highest eminence in theology and philosophy, in preceding ages more particularly, eagerly sought the immortal works of Thomas and devoted themselves, not so much to cultivating the angelic wisdom, as to soaking themselves in its principles. It is plain also that nearly all founders and lawgivers of Religious Orders made it compulsory for their brethren to devote themselves and to adhere religiously to the doctrines of St Thomas and forbade them to depart in the slightest degree from the path traced by so illustrious a man. Not to mention the Dominican family which boasts this consummate master as one of its own special glories, their respective statutes testify that Benedictines, Carmelites, Augustinians, the Society of Jesus and many other Religious Orders are bound by the same law. In this connection the mind dwells gladly upon those well celebrated schools and academies which were once so flourishing in Europe, the Universities of Paris, Salamanca, Alcalá, Douai, Toulouse, Louvain, Padua, Bologna, Naples, Coimbra and numerous other cities. Everybody knows that the reputation of these schools

increased with time, that their opinion was solicited in matters of the gravest moment and universally held in the highest esteem. It is also the fact that St Thomas sat enthroned, like a prince in his kingdom, in all those great houses of human wisdom and that the minds of all, even the Doctors, reposed with marvellous unanimity upon the teaching and authority of one Angelic Doctor. What is even more important, the Roman Pontiffs, Our Predecessors, bestowed the most singular commendation and the most lavish testimonials on the wisdom of Thomas Aquinas. Clement VI, Nicholas V, Benedict XIII, and others testify to the lustre shed upon the universal Church by his admirable doctrine; St Pius V, indeed, declares that by this same philosophy heresies are confounded, convicted and dissipated, and the world daily delivered from pestiferous errors; others, such as Clement, say that his writings have conferred the most fruitful blessings upon the universal Church and that he is to be accorded the same respect that is accorded to the supreme Doctors of the Church, to Gregory, Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome. Others again have had no hesitation in proposing St Thomas as a model and master whom academies and Colleges could safely follow. The words which the Blessed Urban V addressed to the Academy of Toulouse may fittingly be recalled in the context: 'We desire and bid you by these letters to follow the doctrine of the Blessed Thomas as truthful and Catholic and to strive with all your strength to develop it'. The example of Urban V was followed by Innocent XII in a letter addressed to the University of Louvain, and by Benedict XIV in a Brief addressed to the Dionysian College of Granada. The testimony of Innocent VI, however, may be considered as the summary of all the judgements pronounced by the Supreme Pontiffs on Thomas Aquinas: 'His doctrine exceeds all others, with the exception of Canon Law, in propriety of expression, precision of definition and truth of statement, so that those who have once grasped it are never found to have deviated far from the path of truth; and anyone impugning it has always been held suspect of error'. The Oecumenical Councils, also, so distinguished by the presence of an élite of wisdom chosen from the whole world, have always been zealous to pay particular honour to Thomas Aquinas. He may be said to have taken part in, nay, to have presided at, the deliberations and the

decrees of the Fathers at the Councils of Lyons, Vienna, Florence and the Vatican; and to have combated with invincible energy and the happiest success the errors of Greeks, heretics and rationalists. The greatest honour ever paid to St Thomas, however, an honour never accorded to any Catholic Doctor, is that the Fathers of Trent decreed that during their sessions the Summa of Thomas Aquinas should be laid open on the altar with the books of Holy Scripture and the decrees of the Supreme Pontiffs for them to resort to it in case of need for counsel, arguments and oracles. Lastly, this laurel also seems to have been reserved for this incomparable man, that he was able to wring respect, praise and admiration even from the enemies of the Catholic name. For it is well known that many leaders of heretical factions have openly declared that, if the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas were once disposed of, they could easily 'engage in the contest with and vanquish all the Catholic doctors' and 'scatter the Church'. It was an idle hope, to be sure, but not an idle testimony".

After this exposition of weighty testimonies on the authority of St Thomas in philosophy and theology given by Universities and Schools of higher studies, by Supreme Pontiffs and Oecumenical Councils and even by enemies of the Catholic name, I deem it superfluous to insist any longer on proving my point. The authority of St Thomas Aquinas in Theology has always been acknowledged, nay, it has been continually recommended and even prescribed by the ecclesiastical authorities and it is therefore the duty of all Catholics particularly of those who devote themselves to the study and the teaching of the Catholic Faith to adhere wholeheartedly to the doctrine of such an incomparable doctor.

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