SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, 1323—1923

ONE of the few advantages of living in the twentieth century is that we can keep centenaries. And judging by the yearly crop of these celebrations, it is an advantage we seem to make the most of. St. Dominic, St. Francis, St. Ignatius, St. Jerome, Dante, Napoleon, Shakespeare, Columbus, Cervantes, Shelley and Pascal have all of late been in the thoughts of those who glory in greatness and set store by antiquity. When we are wearied by our present woeful strifes or anxious about the ill-foreboding future, we can look back and take comfort in the past. It is natural that we, who are made for an eternal destiny, should find the thought of never-ending time entrancing; and length of days seems to us a symbol and a suggestion of eternity—a hint of immortality. A man who lives a hundred years is an object of praise and wonder, but the centenarian who preserved all the grace and sprightliness of youth would be an object of envy too. It is precisely this combination that attracts us in a centenary. We are not simply revering immemorial age: we are honouring someone who has been proof against time's decay, who is ever ancient yet ever new, as old as the hills yet as fresh as the dawn.

This month we keep the six hundredth anniversary of the canonization of St. Thomas Aquinas. The occasion seems appropriate to indulge a few reflections upon the enthusiastic interest his name still evokes, and to remind ourselves that the influence of his genius is as strong upon the minds of men of all schools of thought to-day as it was when the Church set her seal upon his greatness six hundred years ago. We must not look upon St. Thomas as an isolated

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thinker of the dim past, whose writings provide entertaining speculations for the learned. He is not just a lonely figure in a niche. He is a philosopher of all time, the heir of the past, the benefactor of our own day and of all future ages. A modern writer[1] hails him as 'the first of the modern philosophers in the full sense of the word: not because he has created the principles and invented the attitude by which we live; not merely because all the tendencies of thought by which the thirteenth century prepared the way for our modern epoch were concentrated in his work, but because he is the first western whose thought was not merely conservative or enslaved to a system.[2] Situated in his place in history St. Thomas continues the speculations of the Arabian and Jewish philosophers; but in regard to us, he is truly the first link by which our chain is connected with that of the philosophies of the Easterns and the Greeks. He has not only left us a legacy of wisdom, but made abundantly fruitful the heritage with which he has enriched us.'

Does anyone at this time of day still speak of the Renaissance as the time when the intellectual daylight came after the long mediaeval night? And are the reformers still lauded as the emancipators of thought and the heralds of liberty? If there are any who still affect this unenlightened fashion of speaking, they forget, as M. Gilson[3] says, that 'if to-day there

[1] M. Etienne Gilson, *Etudes de Philosophie Médiévale* (Strasbourg, 1921).

[2] Parce qu'il est le premier occidental dont la pensée ne se soit asservie ni à un dogme, ni à un système. M. Gilson of course refers to philosophical dogmas not to revealed dogmas which were St. Thomas's postulates.

'For although the argument from authority which is founded on human reason is the weakest of all, the argument which is founded upon divine revelation is the most efficacious.' (Summa. Ia, I, 8 ad. 2).

[3] *La Philosophie au Moyen Age.* (Vol. II, p. 9.)

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exists a system of philosophy worthy of the name, it is due to the patient labour of the mediaeval thinkers. By their wise and pondered persistence, they succeeded in establishing a kingdom of independent thought and in recapturing for reason rights that reason had allowed herself to lose.' John Stuart Mill acknowledged a like indebtedness to the thirteenth century when he said: 'It is to the Schoolmen that the vulgar languages are indebted for what precision and analytical subtlety they possess.' And Condorcet declared that 'logic, ethics and metaphysics itself owe to Scholasticism a precision unknown to the ancients themselves.'

But to appreciate the real debt we owe to St. Thomas we must try to put ourselves back into his epoch. It was a critical time for Christian thought. A complicated struggle was raging around the name of Aristotle. A fierce controversial battle was being waged as to how far his philosophy should be allowed to influence Christian thinkers. It was not a clear cut issue between those who were *for* and those who were *against* the Philosopher. Most scholars already knew something of Aristotle, and the *Organon* had been studied more and more since the ninth century and had been widely used in the teaching of the seven liberal arts. In the thirteenth century a sudden change was brought about by the ready and easy access that was given to Aristotle's works in the Latin translations of the Arabian philosophers. Aristotle's Metaphysics and Physics now became an open book at the disposal of any daring spirit athirst for novelty.

In such a crisis there will always be two extreme types, the headlong innovators and the timid conservatives. We shall always find those who are over-anxious to hurry on too impetuously and those who proceed with an over-cautious slowness, suspicious and fearful of every kind of change. Thus we find

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one group, fascinated by the new science, following with a blind enthusiasm every jot and tittle of the Arabian writings and swallowing wisdom and folly without discrimination. The tendency of this section to treat with a cold rationalism the most solemn truths of religion, and their undisguised scorn for authority only increased the fears of the conscientious and orthodox. But it was not just a question in which these two extreme parties were ranged one against the other. There were half-rights and half-lefts, and views of every shade and colour in the dispute. For instance, the Dominican,[4] Robert Kilwardby, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal, was a very vigorous figure in the fray. His voluminous writings show him to have been an ardent Aristotelian, and yet he strenuously opposed with official condemnations the adopting of the Philosopher into a Christian scheme of thought wherever it seemed to him that the authority of St. Augustine might be weakened.

It is to St. Thomas's everlasting credit that he would not allow himself to be stampeded by fears or sentiments or policies. He did not so much take sides as become the mediating influence in this complex discussion. It was no small part of his genius to be able to extract from the most diverse and unwonted sources the soul of truth they contained. He would not sacrifice the good on account of evil, or stifle truth because it had an accompaniment of error. Had the methods of narrow conservatism been followed, the victory might have gone to Avicenna and Averroes with disastrous results to Christian thought and civilization; but St. Thomas was not concerned with a system, a school of thought or a party. He was not even the slave of Aristotle. His single quest was

[4] Dr. Jessopp's *Coming of the Friars* still asserts in its eighteenth edition that Kilwardby was a Franciscan.

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Truth. 'The aim of philosophical study,' he said, 'is not to know what men have thought, but to know the truth of things.'[5]

One does not associate the calm, gentle St. Thomas with a life of stress and strife. Nor do we think of him, who was never known to utter a harsh or angry word, as the leader of a revolution. And yet the great task he performed of assimilating and transforming Aristotle's philosophy, of baptising it and creating a Christian philosophy, 'more Aristotelian than Aristotle himself,' is among the most wonderful revolutions in history. Who can calculate its influence for good and for truth upon all subsequent human thought? St. Thomas died before victory was assured. Exactly forty-nine years after his death (the very span of his earthly life) the Church set her seal on St. Thomas's sanctity and canonised his *perennis quaedam philosophia*, which has become the recognised basis of her theological teachings.

[5] *De Caelo.* Lib. I, xxii.

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