

# Homily on the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas

Notre Dame, January 28, 1994

Leo Elders, S.V.D.

**A**s disciples and admirers of St. Thomas Aquinas we have come together to keep alive and to celebrate the memory of this great saint, the *doctor communis* of the Church. Of all the teaching staff and the student body we are only a small group. Not that that matters much, but one nevertheless wonders whether some might not consider us people of the by-gone days of a smug, well protected Catholic life, isolated from the rest of society, a time when it was a sign of good manners to be a Thomist? Surrounded as we are by an ocean of new outlooks, daring opinions, scientific discoveries, are we, disciples of Aquinas, a sort of relic of the past? To use the words of Karl Rahner, has Aquinas gone away from us for ever? has he lost his privileged position in sacred studies? has he become just one of the many theologians, hardly more important for us than Hans Kung, Edward Schillebeeck or Karl Rahner himself, the self-styled Aquinas of the 20th century?

I would like to answer this question in three points, arguing first St. Thomas's irreplaceable importance for society at large, to deal next with his position in sacred studies in the Church, to say finally a few words about the significance for us of the saint Aquinas is.

## I

**W**e are living in strange times: on the one hand we see an abundance of all sorts of things, an unlimited food supply, boundless entertainment, fascinating discoveries, the general feeling of increased individual

freedom and of an enhanced self-awareness. Yet there is the reverse side of the picture. On this joyful day I do not now want to make you feel uncomfortable depicting in vivid colors the evils of our time although these are so threatening that, to use the words of Cardinal Newman, they would frighten even such undaunted personalities as Pope Gregory the Great and Innocent III. I just draw your attention to the perhaps most serious problem of our contemporary culture: modern man has lost his bearings; he has lost the sense of the transcendental, he has lost God; he does no longer know where he comes from, who he is, what to do except to grab his share of wealth and pleasure. He has no absolute values or laws any more, even worse he thinks there is no absolute truth; St. Thomas as a timeless philosopher is just not possible, for there are only differing perspectives, historical circumstances, individual time bound views. As there is no absolute truth, there is no natural law, no absolute justice either. To a certain extent our legal system has been resorting to loopholes and using tricks to gain suits; it is concerned as little with justice as the sophists of Socrates's day. Flooded as he is by all sorts of options and ideas, images and impressions, modern man drifts along with the currents and follows the prevailing winds. We have lost the common Christian values underpinning our social life. Cultural philosophers and historians like Christopher Dawson voiced doubts as to whether a culture can survive without a common religion and common values. As a friend of mine put it very drastically, how can our society be united if we do not even agree on what to have for breakfast?

Needless to say, in order to avoid the dissolution of our western societies it is imperative to have some firm ground to stand on, instead of the drifting sands of always shifting views and opinions. We must go back to basics. A society cannot survive without a good deal of agreement on the basics, that is also on God, creation and man, on our stewardship of the world and on what goes and what does not go. It is here that the responsibility of the intellectuals stands out.

Believe me, the horrors of Auschwitz were prepared in the study rooms of our philosophers, not all of whom were Aryans...As a Croatian proverb, dear to the late Cardinal Franjo Seper says, a fish turns bad from the head downwards. Apparently correction of errors, improvement of morals, renewal of ideals also have to start from the head. Now, as far as I can see, overlooking the ruins of modern philosophy, only the realism of Aquinas can help us. To become intellectually certain of the basic truths, to uphold them and to argue them successfully we need a correct grasp of things as they are, an analytic, clear and dispassionate mind, sound principles and straight reasoning. Aquinas' philosophy gives us the insight to make us understand, it gives us the tools to analyze and to reason correctly. Is Thomas's thought not antiquated? Pius XI said one day that just as natural things such as water or iron retain their being as long as they exist, St. Thomas's thought does not grow old. It is not a closed system at all, for it purports to embrace all of reality, all true knowledge, all authentic experience and the valid conclusions of the sciences.

## II

**T**he study of Aquinas is of paramount importance for the Church and for the doctrine of the faith. Without a good philosophy, errors will abound in theology. Tertullian spoke of the Platonists as the grocery storekeepers of ideas which led to errors in expressing the doctrine of the faith. Hippolytus of Rome extended it to all the non-Christian schools of philosophy. It can be shown, indeed, that the great heresies in the ancient church resulted from the influence of wrong philosophical ideas on theology, as contemporary deviations in the field of theology are likewise a product of an unwarranted intrusion of the spirit of our time into the exposition of the faith.

---

**Believe me,  
the horrors of  
Auschwitz were  
prepared in the study  
rooms of our  
philosophers, not all of  
whom were Aryans.**

---

However, in theology, one cannot do without philosophy. If you try to throw it all out, as some of the reformers did, it re-enters through the back door and warps your analyses and arguments without your even noticing it. The only valid use of philosophy in theological studies is to apply the categories and principles reflecting the order, not of man made things but of God made

creation. This provides us with analogies to help explain or to clarify somewhat the supernatural mysteries of the faith.

Aquinas's doctrine as laid down in his major works, shows us how to meditate and to study such mysteries of the faith as the Holy Trinity, creation, man's road to God, the realm of the virtues, grace and law, incarnation and redemption, the church and the sacraments and the fulfillment of all things in the eschaton. You want to penetrate deeper into the mysteries of the faith? Study St. Thomas. You want to be on the safe highways of the living tradition of the Church, of the documents of the councils, of the new catechism of the Catholic people, of the latest encyclicals? Study St. Thomas. You want to turn your intellectual work into a loving contemplation of God's marvelous wisdom? Study St. Thomas. The declaration *Optatam totius* of Vatican II tells us to carry out our theological work *sancto Thomas magistro*, that is, listening to what Thomas has to say, letting ourselves be inspired and guided by him, and respecting and loving him. Some will say that my advice is old fashioned stuff. The answer is that a lot of what is now passing for theology is not real theology but an endless discussion of social ideas and personal preferences. If you follow Aquinas, you do not adhere to one particular system: you accept something greater than the man Thomas, you open yourself to revealed doctrine and to the world as made by God. One might add that whenever certain points of the faith are falsely interpreted, the Church turns to St. Thomas for

the tools to refute errors and to defend true catholic doctrine. A splendid example of this is the latest encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.

### III

In my last point I want to say a few words about what St. Thomas the saint means for us. He is our friend, our model and our patron whose intercession we should constantly invoke during our intellectual work. Thomas is also our ideal in his total dedication to the vocation of Christians at large, of educators, of scholars and of students. He went to the point of sacrificing his personal likings for the sake of learning and making known the truth. He is our model in his humility and his silence in the face of reality: as a matter of fact, Thomas does not care about his own views. Thus, in a way, it is non-sensical to ask whether he sometimes puts his own views into his Aristotelian commentaries; he simply has no ideas of his own; he only conveys the message that comes to us from God through the creation and revelation. He is our model insofar as his studies always went together with prayer and meditation. He is our model in his love for the Church, his willingness to help all those who asked him to explain a point or to defend the faith. He is our model in his exemplary chastity of mind which excludes everything from his striving which is an impediment on his journey to God. He is our model in his love for the poor, in his willingness to preach to the plain people of Naples who, by the way, were the first to proclaim his saintliness. He is our model in that all his work tended to know God better and to make his holy name known to people. Thomas was a saint whose spiritual nourishment consisted in the meditation of God's word. In his Commentary on the Gospel according to John he writes: "You want to know which road to take? Accept Christ...Are you looking where to go and where to stay? Hold on to Christ, for he is the Life. Hold on to Christ, if you

want to be secure." St. Thomas will help us to meditate on God's greatness and love. I end with this quote: "Our knowledge of the divine Word will be perfect when we arrive in the house of the Father to be embraced by the love of the Father for his Son" (*In evang. Ioan.*, nn.218-220). So let us begin the celebration of the Eucharist by joining Aquinas in his burning love of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and his deep understanding which made him compose those marvelous hymns for the office of the Blessed Sacrament:

*Noctis recolitur coena novissima,  
Qua Christus creditur agnum et azyma  
Dedisse fratribus iuxta legitima  
Priscis indulta patribus.*

*Leo Elders, the recipient of the 1994 Saint Gerard Fellowship awarded by the Jacques Maritain Center and Philosophy Department of Notre Dame, teaches in the seminary at Rolduc, Holland and is the author of many books and articles.*

### ~ ~ RARE BOOKS ~ ~

*Laid paper laid to rest  
holds up better than the best  
preoccupied newsprint.  
However fine the document  
woodpulp acid, culpable  
convenience, leads to jaundice, illness,  
yellow journalism, while  
rag-heavy, out of style,  
poetry survives the purge,  
its alkalai a desert urge  
among the mills of industry,  
its libertine economy  
an outward range of blank space,  
an inward chemistry of grace.*

Kevin Cawley