

THE DEATH OF SAINT THOMAS

IN January 1274 St. Thomas Aquinas set out from Naples, where he had been teaching since October 1272, to attend the second Council of Lyons. He was under fifty years of age, and though he was extremely sensitive to physical pain, there is no evidence that his health was bad. He had been working as hard as ever during 1273, when he published, among other works, his commentaries on Romans, First Corinthians, and Aristotle's *De Generatione* and *De Cælo*. Moreover his commentaries on the *Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria*, *Credo* and on the Decalogue are the notes of his sermons preached in the vernacular during the Lent of 1273. Hence there is very little to suggest that he was in failing health, and at all events, he was well enough to undertake, on foot and in winter, the long journey from Naples to Lyons. He got no further than Fossanuova, some seventy miles from Naples, where he was taken suddenly ill, and died on March 7th.

It was known that he had many enemies, even among his own brethren, and his scathing attack on the Averroists, contained in *De Unitate Intellectus*, must have made him unpopular in the Averroist stronghold of Naples.

It is not surprising that his untimely death should have aroused in the minds of some a suspicion of foul play. Even his family had not treated him with scrupulous fairness when he first chose his vocation, and death in that rugged age frequently settled differences of all kinds.

In justice it must be said that there is no Dominican tradition that his death was due to any but natural causes. Not one of his early biographers gives the slightest hint that there was any treachery, though some of them remark that it was sudden and unexpected, and the news seems to have come as a bombshell to the Faculty of Arts at Paris.

Modern biographers of the saint do not even allude to the incident. Père Petitot suggests that his death was the indirect effect of that remarkable vision which was vouchsafed him at Naples, when the greatness of revealed truth overpowered him, and he cried out to Reginald, '*Venit finis scripturæ meæ.*' This vision took place on the feast of St.

BLACKFRIARS

Nicholas, December 6th of the previous year, six months before his death. As a consequence of it he laid aside his pen: 'he hung his harp on a tree by the waters,' and considered all that he had written as so much straw. But, that his death was due to this supernatural cause would not seem conclusive to those who were wedded to the theory that he was foully murdered by slow poisoning.

There was, then, a suspicion of murder, and a legend sprang up and grew. As it is perhaps the most neglected legend connected with the saint, it may be interesting to trace its growth.

It seems that the earliest reference to it occurs in a stanza of Dante's *Purgatorio*:

Carlo venne in Italia, e per ammenda
Vittima fe' di Curradino, e poi
Ripinse al ciel Tommaso per ammenda.¹

This Charles is Charles I of Anjou, who was invited by two succeeding Popes, Urban IV and Clement IV, both Frenchmen, to take the crown of the kingdom of Naples and Sicily. He arrived in 1265 (the year in which Dante was born) and in 1266 annihilated the army of Manfred in the battle of Benevento. It was at his request that St. Thomas founded the *Studium Generale* at Naples in 1272. He was brother of St. Louis IX, the great benefactor of the Dominicans and personal friend of St. Thomas. Conradin was the young son and heir of Conrad IV, and the last representative of the Swabian royal line. He was captured by Charles in the battle of Tagliocozzo, in which Manfred was slain, and two months later, October 1268, he was mercilessly beheaded in the market-place at Naples.

Whether Dante was here actuated by his hatred of the French and his particular loathing for Charles, or whether he had some grounds for making the accusation, we shall never know. He probably got the story from the *Chronicles of Villani*,² but in Villani the King's doctor is made to poison St. Thomas without any authority from Charles,

¹ Cant. xx, 67-69. Charles came to Italy, and by way of making amends made a sacrifice of Conradin, and then, to make amends, sent Thomas leaping back to Heaven.

² Lib. ix.

THE DEATH OF SAINT THOMAS

‘thinking thereby to ingratiate himself in the king’s favour.’

In his continuation of the Annals of Baronius, Spondanus, a loyal child of France, rejects the whole story with some vigour. ‘*Somnia haec lymphatica inferni sunt, non Purgatorii . . .* These are assuredly not the weapons of Frenchmen, unless Charles learnt them in Italy . . . Dante, being a poet, is allowed to imagine and to lie.’³

Whatever the origin, it was undoubtedly Dante who popularised the legend, and gave it what lasting fame it attained. It is in his early commentators, and apparently nowhere else, that we find it preserved, repeated and embroidered.

One of the earliest of these was Constanzo, who soberly explains the reference thus:

‘Charles had St. Thomas of Aquin poisoned in the Abbey of Fossanuova in Campania, where his body still lies, and this he did because he feared that he might become Pope.’

The mention of St. Thomas’s body as being still at Fossanuova, enables us to place this manuscript definitely before 1368, when the saint’s body was translated.

A few years later, about 1374, a second commentator, Benvenuto, embellishes the story, and tries to give it a greater show of probability by detailing the King’s reasons for wishing Thomas out of the way:

‘To understand the reference to this ghastly crime, you must know that this Charles was suspicious of Thomas, either because he had offended members of his family, or because he had heard that Thomas, who was on his way to the General Council of Lyons, would not keep quiet about the persecutions going on at Naples. He therefore had him poisoned on the way by one of the family doctors, and he died at Fossanuova . . .’

There is preserved at Paris the codex of the *Divina Commedia* which belonged to the private library of Pius VI. The author of the commentary is, I believe, unknown, but it was written towards the close of the fourteenth cen-

³ Ad annum 1274.

BLACKFRIARS

ture, and probably before that of Andrea de Orvieto, which was published in 1389. Here we have what might be an eye-witness account, together with the *ipsissima verba* of the parties concerned:

‘Now friar Thomas Aquinas, the great doctor and saint, was advisor to this King Charles, though Charles rarely took his advice. He was summoned to the Pope’s Council, and before setting out went to salute the king. The king said to him: “If the Pope should ask you about me, what will you say?” Thomas replied: “I shall certainly tell him the truth.” Then the king, conscious of his many vices, was much afraid and disquieted. While St. Thomas was on his journey, a certain doctor noticed that the king was angry, and cautiously asked the cause thereof. The king told him, and the doctor set out on his horse and rode day and night till he caught up with Thomas, and said to him, “The king has sent me after you because he did not like you to be without a doctor.” Thomas was very grateful to the king and to the doctor, who, however, turned out to be a traitor and murderer, for he poisoned . . . St. Thomas and he died.’

The story thus elaborated reminds us of the death of another St. Thomas a century earlier.

From the end of the fourteenth century the legend seems to have been forgotten. It was revived in 1860 by Uccelli, an editor of the *Contra Gentiles* and of some other of St. Thomas’s works, who seems to have believed it.

This cumulative evidence will probably appear no more conclusive to modern readers than Père Petitot’s account would have appeared to Dante.

Anyhow, that is the way the legend grew. And that is the way most legends grew—and grow.

GODFREY ANSTRUTHER, O.P.