

ST. THOMAS ON THE INCARNATION

(continued).¹

THERE is only one way of making supernatural truths manifest, only one way of showing such truths to be truths, and that is by showing them to be vouched for, and therefore revealed, by God. If they are really truths, before they were revealed, they were, as being supernatural, known to the Divine Wisdom alone, and we can come to the knowledge of them only by getting His word for them and taking them on His authority. Before, then, we can accept such truths as truths, the assertion of them must come to us clothed in some way with the light of His divine authority.

By adequate signs the Divine Wisdom showed His presence in the Christian Faith, showed that what was asserted in the preaching of that Faith originated from Him; from Him, too, the inspiration of those who preached it. These teachers of the Christian Faith taught, not only by the spoken, but also by the written word. This written word was later gathered together to form what we know as the New Testament. Hence what is taught in the New Testament comes to us invested with divine authority.²

It may be remarked here that this divine authority of the New Testament does not do away with what

¹ Cf. BLACKFRIARS, December, 1928.

² It is hardly necessary to point out that we are not here deducing the authority of the New Testament from its inspiration as defined by the Church, but, like St. Thomas in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, from the historical fact that it is part of the teaching of the first preachers of the Christian Faith, which teaching as a whole was visibly corroborated by God.

Blackfriars

we might call its human authority. I mean that something of this kind may happen : A man may take up the writings that constitute the New Testament, and may read them without paying any thought to the claim of the preachers of the Christian Faith to teach in God's name. He ignores, that is to say, or perhaps is ignorant of, the innumerable proofs which go to show the presence of the Divine Wisdom in the Christian Faith, proofs which are notorious facts in the history of the world and would be accessible even if the writings which make up the New Testament had perished. I mean, of course, the positive proofs or facts which St. Thomas has so admirably summarised in Bk. I, ch. 6 of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, and Newman has set out so impressively, from a slightly different angle, in the last section of his *Grammar of Assent*. It is the simple truth that those proofs or facts were the environment in which the writings of the New Testament arose, and to ignore that environment is to read the New Testament utterly out of its context. As the part, to be appreciated, should be seen in the whole, such a way of treating the New Testament is, even from a merely critical point of view, incomplete and so far unreal; and, regarded as complete, would be erroneous. Regarded, however, as a step on the way towards something further, it can be profitable. It is, for instance, the method used with conspicuous success and all his characteristic freshness by Mr. Chesterton in Chapters II and III of the second part of his *The Everlasting Man*. He there makes no attempt to make supernatural truths manifest, which, as St. Thomas remarks (Bk. I, ch. 9), can only be done from the authority of Scripture divinely guaranteed by miracles. History is ignored, and the New Testament is treated as new—new, that is, to the reader. 'The argument which is meant to be the backbone of this

St. Thomas on the Incarnation

book is of the kind called *reductio ad absurdum*. It suggests that the results of assuming the rationalist thesis are more irrational than ours I must try to imagine what would happen to a man who did really read the story of Christ as the story of a man; and even of a man of whom he had never heard before. . . . I am speaking as an imaginary heathen human being, honestly staring at the Gospel story for the first time.' It is a fact that 'a really impartial reading of that kind would lead, if not immediately to belief, at least to a bewilderment of which there is really no solution except in belief.'³ For even when the documents are thus lifted out of their proper setting, the impartial reader will, for instance, recognise that the Master and His disciples were truthful men and sincerely believed what they assert. And if, faced with the final problem, he is not content with mere indecision, but goes on to pass a deliberate judgment on the alternatives, he will hardly fail to recognise that Jesus being at least the man He was, it is incredible that He should have been deluded about Himself, and also that what His disciples assert of Him they could, in view of its nature and of their own upbringing, have believed for only one reason ultimately, namely, that they were fully satisfied for adequate reasons that God had given His word for it.

This intrinsic quality of the assertions of the New Testament, a quality ascertainable in the reading by any intelligent reader, we may call their human authority, and it coexists with the authority with which the New Testament is invested as a part, the written part, of the divinely accredited teaching of the first preachers of the Christian Faith, an authority guaranteed by, and ascertainable through, historical facts such as miracles. Here as elsewhere, we may

³ *The Everlasting Man*, p. 215 (cheap edition).

Blackfriars

say, the superhuman does not destroy, but perfects the human.

When St. Thomas comes to treat of the Incarnation in the Fourth Book of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, he has, as we have seen, already set out adequate reasons for holding the teaching of the New Testament to be invested with divine authority. He is in a position to appeal to that as well as, like any other reader, to its human authority. The next question, therefore, is: What does the New Testament give us? In Ch. 27, 'On the Incarnation of the Word according to the tradition⁴ of Holy Scripture,' he has an orderly compendious grouping of the data, which we will set before the reader, taking the liberty to introduce divisions for convenience of reference:

We acknowledge this wonderful incarnation of the Son of God, very God, because we have it on divine authority.⁵

(a) For it is stated, John i, 14: *The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us.* And the Apostle says, Phil. ii, 6 (he is speaking of the Son of God): *Being in the form of God, He thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and being found in fashion as a man.*

'Tradere' means 'to deliver, transmit, hand over,' and hence, transferred to things of the mind, 'to deliver, transmit, by teaching.' This notion of 'delivering, handing over,' is prominent in St. Thomas's use of the word. But the emphasis is not on the transmission from one *generation* to another. What is essential is the notion of transmission from one *mind* to another. Those truths are 'delivered' which cannot be reached by reasoning, but have to be wholly *given*, i.e., which we have to be told of and to hold on the word of another, whether they be ordinary facts distant from us in time and space, or supernatural truths. 'According to the tradition of Holy Scripture' means, then, 'according to what Holy Scripture delivers.'

⁵ Auctoritate divina tradente.

St. Thomas on the Incarnation

(b) The Lord Jesus Christ's own words, too, indicate the fact clearly. For sometimes He says lowly and human things about Himself, such as : *The Father is greater than I* (John xiv, 28), and, *My soul is sorrowful even unto death* (Matth. xxvi, 38)—these are predicable of Him in virtue of His having assumed a human nature. At other times lofty and divine things, such as : *I and the Father are one* (John x, 30), and : *All things whatsoever the Father hath are mine* (xvi, 15)—these are true of Him in virtue of His divine nature.

(c) Our Lord's own deeds, recorded in Scripture, also indicate it. For His being afraid, sad, hungry, His death, all this is to be ascribed to His human nature. But His healing of the sick by His own power, His raising of the dead, the power of His mere word over the elements, His casting out of devils, His forgiving of sins, His rising from the dead when He willed, all show forth the divine power in Him.

We spoke of this admirable grouping as an orderly grouping. We mean that it not only gives the essential data of the 'traditio,' but also gives them in their proper perspective. In grouping the authorities for this foundation doctrine of the Christian Faith St. Thomas begins, in (a), not with an assertion of Our Lord Himself, but with assertions of two Apostles. 'We acknowledge this wonderful incarnation of the Son of God, because we have it on divine authority,' and then follow two passages, in one of which St. John is speaking, in the other St. Paul. They are clear assertions of the doctrine of the Incarnation. In the next two divisions we should note the terms St. Thomas uses. The words of Our Lord Himself, so far as recorded (b), unlike those of the Apostles, do not precisely assert the Incarnation; 'ostendunt,' they indicate it, let it be seen. At *one* time He speaks human things about Himself—which implies a human nature; at *another* divine things—which implies a divine nature; but He does not in one and the same sentence formally affirm the Incarnation. Still

Blackfriars

less do His recorded deeds formally affirm it—they could not of course; they too, 'ostendunt,' indicate it. It might seem, then, that St. Thomas begins his summary with the two passages in question, John i, 14, and Phil. ii, 6, for the reason that they happen to furnish the most formal affirmations to be found in the New Testament of the doctrine of the Incarnation precisely as such, that is, as an event in which a pre-existent Divine Person, at a definite known period in history, took to Himself a human nature and became man. It is truer to say that St. Thomas's fundamental reason for beginning with them is that they are affirmations made by Apostles, and that, in his eyes, it is only in accordance with the divine plan that the most explicit recorded affirmations of the doctrine should be affirmations made by Apostles.

The point may perhaps become clearer, and we may appreciate better the essential rightness of the order in which St. Thomas has grouped the data of the 'traditio,' if we consider two other passages of the New Testament.

The first is John xiv, 12 : *'Amen, amen, I say to you, he that believeth in me, the works that I do, he also shall do, and greater than these shall he do, because I go to the Father.* On this passage St. Thomas, in his *Expositio in Evangelium Joannis*, makes the following comments :

'Amen, amen, I say to you. It is as if He said : The works that I am doing are great enough to furnish sufficient proof of my divinity;⁶ but if they do not satisfy you, look to the works that I am about to do through others. For the most telling sign of the greatness of a person's power is for him to accomplish extraordinary things, not only immediately himself, but also by means of others. Hence

⁶ This refers back to v. 11, in which Our Lord says : ' Believe me (i.e., take my word for it) that I am in the Father and the Father is in me ; but if you do not take my word for it, believe it because of the works.'

St. Thomas on the Incarnation

He says: *Amen, amen, I say to you, he that believeth in me, the works that I am doing, he also shall do.* These words show not only the power of the divinity in Christ, but also the power of faith, and the union of Christ with believers. . . . By the works which Christ did, and His disciples do by His power, are meant miracles.

What He adds is a subject for wonder: *And greater than these shall he do.* This has a twofold interpretation: (i) Our Lord does more and greater things through the Apostles than He did Himself personally. For one of the greatest of Christ's miracles was when the sick were healed by touching the hem of His garment (Matth. xiv, 36). But of Peter we read (Acts v, 15) that the sick were healed by his shadow. Now it is a greater thing that a shadow should heal than that the hem of a garment should. (ii) Christ did more through His disciples' words than He had done through His own. For Our Lord is here speaking of works wrought through words; as Augustine says: 'What works did He then mean but the words He was speaking? The fruit of these words of His was their (*i.e.*, the disciples') faith.' Of Christ we read (Matth. xix, 22) that the young man was not prevailed on to sell what he had and to follow Him. For when He said to the young man: *Go, sell what thou hast and give to the poor,* the result was, *he went away sad.* But of Peter and the other Apostles we read (Acts iv, 34, 35) that at their preaching people sold their possessions and all they had, and brought the price and laid it at the feet of the Apostles.'

'The quotation is from *Tract. LXXI in Joann.*: 'What works did He then mean but the words He was speaking? The disciples heard and believed, and the fruit of those words of His was their faith. But when the disciples preached the Gospel, not just a few individuals like them, but nations believed.' *Tract. LXXII*: 'Did not that rich young man go away from His presence sorrowful, when he asked for counsel about eternal life? He heard it, but refused it. Yet afterwards what one individual heard from Him and did not do, that many did, when the same good Master spoke through His disciples: contemptible in the eyes of the rich man to whom He gave counsel in person, He proved loveable to those whom, after being rich, He made poor by the agency of poor men. Behold, He did greater works when spoken of by those believing in Him than when speaking to those who heard Him.'

Blackfriars

In John xiv, 12, therefore, Jesus foretells that, viewed from the outside—as it must be by a man when he first hears the Gospel—what the disciples will accomplish after His death will surpass what He accomplished during His lifetime on earth. This greater effectiveness will, of course, be due, not to themselves, but to Jesus. ‘Because I go to the Father.’ He is returning to the Father, and, as St. Thomas notes, when He shall be glorified it will only be fitting that His activity shall no longer be restricted within the limits which the divine plan had placed on His earthly activity. But His withdrawal to the Father, if it means a greater manifestation of power, means also that He *does* go to the Father; that is, He will no longer be seen or listened to on earth. It is in His place, as His representatives, of course, that the disciples will speak, and He it is who will put the visible seal of miracles on what they say. But the fact remains that it is they who do the saying; it is through their words, through their acknowledgement of Him, that He becomes known. ‘Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard from the word of Christ.’ But ‘how is a man to believe in One whom⁸ he has never heard? And how is he to hear without a preacher?’ (Romans x, 17, 14).

The other of the two passages we mentioned above is Hebrews ii, 3, 4: ‘How shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation?—a salvation which was first proclaimed by the Lord, and guaranteed to us by those who heard Him, while God added His testimony to theirs by signs and wonders, and divers miracles, and impartings of the Holy Spirit, according to His will.’ This striking text is quoted by St.

⁸ ‘Whom,’ not ‘of whom,’ is the meaning of the Greek. It is also the rendering of the original Rheims (1582): ‘How shall they believe him whom they have not heard?’ which Challoner, apparently, changed to ‘of whom they have not heard?’

St. Thomas on the Incarnation

Thomas in the chapter (Bk. I, ch. 6) in which he shows that we have good reason for assenting to the teaching of the Christian Faith: concerning Christ we have the testimony of men who heard Him, and their testimony God corroborates with His, which consists in external miracles and in evident proofs of the divine inspiration of the preachers. God testifies, then, and in no uncertain way; but it is in a special way. Testimony, as St. Thomas notes (*In epist. ad Hebr.*) 'is through speech. Now speech is a sensible sign, and God testified by a twofold sensible sign, miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit.' In that sense, then, God testified, but it is a special sense. Testimony through speech properly so called, affirmation, remained with the preachers; it was they who expressed the content of the message in words, though God corroborated their words with works.

All this illuminates, and is in turn illuminated by, what St. Thomas points out in a passage in the *Summa Theologica*, a passage that is important for several reasons, though usually little attention is paid to it. In III, xlii, 4, he asks: *Ought Christ to have delivered His teaching in writing (doctrinam suam debuerit scripto tradere)?* He replies:

It is fitting that Christ should not have written His teaching.

First, on account of His own dignity. The more excellent teacher rightly follows the more excellent way of teaching. The way, therefore, that was appropriate to Christ as the most excellent of teachers, was for Him to inscribe His doctrine on His hearers' minds. And for this reason, as we read, *He taught as one having authority* (Matth. vii, 29). It was from the same motive, too, that among the pagans, Pythagoras and Socrates, who were most excellent teachers, chose not to write. For that is the goal, to inscribe the doctrine on the learners' minds, and writings are only a means thereto.

Secondly, on account of the excellence of His doctrine, which could not be comprised within anything written,

Blackfriars

according to the saying in John xxi, 25 If Christ had committed His teaching to writing, men would think that its profundity did not exceed what was contained in the written expression of it.

The third reason was that the doctrine might pass from Him to all men in a certain order; He personally taught His disciples, and then they taught others by word of mouth and by writing. If He Himself had written, His teaching would have reached all men without passing through the medium of the disciples.

It is simply historical fact that Jesus' plan was to give Himself to the world through the medium of His Apostles. For that He intended to give Himself to the world in some way or other, that He intended to fashion men after His own mind, need not be argued here. Yet He certainly committed nothing to writing in furtherance of that purpose. But, as we read (Mark iii, 14), 'He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them forth to preach, with power to cast out devils.' That is, instead of trying to 'compress the excellence of His doctrine into a book,' He chooses gradually to imprint an image of Himself and the knowledge of His doctrine on the minds and hearts of twelve men, and to send them out, thus prepared, to carry on His work. What a venture! Yet 'the works that I am doing, he also shall do, and greater than these shall he do, because I am going to the Father.'

Let us try to sum up in a few short paragraphs the thoughts which guided St. Thomas in his task of recommending to unbelievers the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The Apostles were the depositaries of Christ's teaching. The 'traditio' of supernatural truths was from His mind to their minds, and from theirs on to other men's. The Incarnate Word committed Himself and His purpose for other men into their hands. 'The Apostles,' wrote Clement of Rome before the

St. Thomas on the Incarnation

end of the first century, 'received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. So, then, Christ is from God, and the Apostles are from Christ. Both therefore came of the will of God and in an ordered manner' (I, 42).

Jesus Himself foretold that His divinity would be more evident from His disciples' words and works than it had been from His own. 'It is,' says St. Thomas, commenting on John xiv, 12, 'as if He said: The works I am doing are great enough to furnish sufficient proof of my divinity; but if they do not satisfy you, look to the works that I am about to do through others. . . . He did more through His disciples' words than He had done through His own.' 'He did greater things,' says St. Augustine, speaking on the same text, 'when preached by those believing in Him than when speaking to those who heard Him.'²

St. Thomas insists on the point (*Summa Theol.* III, xlii, 1 ad 2): 'To effect a thing by means of others is characteristic, not of a lesser, but of a greater power than to effect it by oneself. Accordingly the divine power in Christ was shown with most force (*maxime*) in this, that He conferred on His disciples such great power in teaching that they won for Him nations who (unlike the Jews) had never heard of the Christ.'³

Christ conferred these powers after He had gone to the Father. The glorified Christ was the source, but the *hidden* source, of these powers; He had to be made known through the Apostles. 'How shall men hear without a preacher?'

'They taught by word of mouth and by writing' (III, xlii, 4). The New Testament contains part of

² Cf. *Grammar of Assent*, pp. 457-9 (1st ed. 1870).

Blackfriars

the 'traditio'—a part, not the whole.¹⁰ If Christ did not attempt to 'compress the excellence of His doctrine into a book,' how could the Apostles?

At the same time, though only a part, there can be no doubt—since the documents were written by them—that it is a part of the teaching of the first preachers of the Christian Faith. And once that teaching as a whole is shown to have been guaranteed by God, the teaching in those documents shares in that guarantee, and comes to us clothed with divine authority.

The divinity of Jesus was more evident in the life of the primitive Church than in His own. He comes to us enshrined in the teaching of the Apostles, and in accordance with this fact St. Thomas arranges the 'traditio' as he does (Bk. iv, ch. 27).

This is what he calls (Bk. i, ch. 9) arguing from the authority of Scripture divinely corroborated by miracles. There is no need to point out that it is a method usually neglected nowadays. Even Catholic apologetical treatises generally begin with the Gospels, and consider them, for the moment, as ordinary historical documents: that is, they argue from what we have called their human authority. St. Thomas's is the completer and more scientific method; it restores the documents to their place in history, and

¹⁰ 'It is absolutely evident that in the primitive Church the Faith was preached before there was any thought of writing anything, and the writings we possess themselves call for this supplement [from oral tradition]. The Gospels are hardly more than a part of the teaching given by the Apostles on the life and miracles of Christ, His Passion and Resurrection. These facts were interpreted in a certain way, they had a divine meaning which the Gospels do not draw out, and which the Epistles of the Apostles imply rather than state clearly. Take St. Paul, for example. He explains to the Romans at some length that the Gospel is the power of God to every one that believeth. But he simply alludes in a phrase to what is believed, known as it was to every Christian.'—Lagrange: *Le sens du christianisme*, p. 15.

St. Thomas on the Incarnation

considers them as part of the divinely guaranteed teaching of the primitive Church. It leaves their human authority all its force, to be used as we will. But it insists first on the evidence of their divine authority, and how impressive that evidence can be shown to be anyone knows who has read the *Contra Gentes*, Bk. i, ch. 6, and the last section of the *Grammar of Assent*.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

LUKE WALKER, O.P.

THE HILL OF POETRY

A high mountain apart
 His face did shine as the sun
 His garments became white as snow.
 —Matt. xvii, 1, 2.

The poet ere he sings hath been
 Apart in that vision-place,
Where in the snow God's gown is seen,
 And in the Sun, God's face.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.