

WE TAKE OUR STANCE¹

SINCE we are to try to lay a foundation for future discussion, the first essential seems to be that we shall know our own mind. And as catholics that means in the words of St. Paul: 'to let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus' (Phil. ii, 5). When we begin to appreciate what that means we can take our stance.

The world for us is explained in terms of reason and of faith—two ways of knowing the truth, different in mode and complementary in what they give the mind. In common with every human being we can use our mind on the world as we discover it, and we do. Asking the how and why of things, sorting out the wealth of experience and facts and activity, trying to discover some purpose in it all, to get a view of things as a whole and in their causes, and this is to philosophise. *Sapientis est ordinare*. Men have done this from the beginning with more or less sincerity, more or less success. Sometimes philosophers have succumbed to the temptation to pursue one aspect at the cost of the whole, sometimes philosophy has been prostituted by being made the handmaid of propaganda. So that at first glance the history of philosophy seems to present an overwhelming confusion of theories that contradict, an *embarras de richesses*. But a closer inspection does yield a developing body of thought, as indeed we can rightly expect, since the raw material of philosophy is God's revelation of Himself in nature. This body of

¹ [Editorial Note. We are happy to publish this paper as an example of the difficult art of 'putting Thomism across.' We print it just as it was delivered to the 'Thirty-Five,' a group of Catholic boys at Leicester of 18 to 21 years of age. The group meets once a fortnight for table-tennis, darts—and talk. The present paper was a first response to the demand that the talk should become more definite, and to serve as a basis for discussion in the future of more particular questions.]

thought, the *philosophia perennis*, synthetised by Aristotle among the pagans, and Aquinas among the Christians—that is not to exclude others, but to name the morning stars—and enriched, sometimes unwittingly, by their successors, will provide us with principles when we begin to sort out the richness of knowledge and achievement, the bewilderment of chaos and confusion we find ourselves in to-day.

But we don't stop there. As St. Thomas says (*Cont. Gent.* IV, i), 'God, knowing that our minds of themselves are not adequate to reach to the first cause of all things, to God as He is in Himself, has revealed to us something of Himself. So that our knowledge is of three kinds: first, the knowledge of God and of things that we can attain by the light of the reason that we have because we are men; second, the knowledge of the divine truths that have been revealed to us and that our mind could not have reached unaided; third, the knowledge that will be ours in the perfect beholding of these divine truths.'

So that even though God as He is in Himself is out of our grasp in this world, nevertheless through His revelation of Himself in Christ, which revelation is perpetuated in the Church, we go far beyond anything we could hope to attain by our reason. And with the certain hope that ultimately we shall *know* what here we hold by faith. To-day then we have these truths accessible to us. In the living teaching and tradition of the Church (*e.g.*, the Encyclicals), and in theology, that body of thought that has arisen through man using his mind on all this revealed truth, this Christian dogma. So that besides God's revelation of Himself in nature we have His revelation of Himself in Christ. Both coming from the same source, both true and both complementary, and the latter providing, as Newman says: 'facts, primary points of thought, and landmarks, as it were, upon the territory of knowledge.' And far from stifling and limiting us, this matter and fact of revelation infinitely enlarges our scope, both objec-

tively and psychologically. 'Faith gives the understanding access to these things, and unbelief closes the door upon them' (Ep. CXXXVII, iv), says St. Augustine, and experience richly endorses his remark.

What sort of an explanation does this revelation provide? Primarily a universe centred in God, Who created and maintains it. Who while He is completely independent of it and perfect in Himself, cares for it in its every detail so that it is immediately and completely dependent on Him for its existence. And it reveals man as a creature who is compounded of body and soul, so that while he is of this world his powers can reach beyond the material to God Himself: a creature for whose sake God Himself became man. And the reason why that amazing thing happened is most illuminating. As a being with a spiritual nature man is free, and by an abuse of that freedom the first man lost the ability with which God had endowed him, of sharing in the life of God. And the Incarnation was the means of readjusting the resulting lack of harmony; but God did it in such a way, through the Incarnation of His Son, that in it all not only did he respect the free nature of man, but that any man who did accept the grace God so offered him, could accept it from God's justice and not exclusively from His mercy. Man is made with a certain nature and naturally seeks his happiness. God in His dealings with man respects that nature, working always in accordance with it, and gives His grace in such a way that we can accept or refuse it, and that through it our whole nature is wholly fulfilled.

Our attitude to the whole of life then is tied up with all this. And our sets of values arise from this position. This plan of God, on Whom we are all eternally dependent and Who yet eternally respects in us the nature He has given us, do what we will, works itself out in this world not only as an inner law that concerns the soul of every individual, be he Christian or not, but in time as well. So that the Incarnation is the focal point of all his-

tory, and the ways and consequences of the Incarnation both an explanation and a method of all living. 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (John xiv, 6). The position is eternally the same and eternally different, as M. Maritain has shown in his *Humanisme Intégral* (p. 153): 'It is true, as a Christian cannot but think, that God governs history, and that in it, in spite of certain obstacles, He pursues certain plans and so a divine work and its preparation are accomplished in every age, and it would be to struggle against God and His supreme control of history to try to lock up in an outmoded form any ideal of a culture that is worth putting as an end of our striving.' The same eternal principles, yes; but different ways of finding them in action as often as the circumstances change. As M. Maritain remarks elsewhere in the same book, it is a subtle form of blasphemy for us to try to confine the working out of God's plan within the limits of any particular social form. It is the eternal principles that we need if we are to take our part in the working out of this plan of God's; and His help through His unchanging grace and sacraments. The Church, in our Lord's teaching, is always referred to in terms of something alive. 'I am the vine and you are the branches,' a thing alive, not dead; and so dynamic and not static; capable of growth and assimilation, but always on and from the old stock. And capable, too, of being pruned, of losing old and used wood, without in any sense being truncated. For the root remains always the same.

As with the Church, so with separate individuals. We are alive and must grow and assimilate, and as Christians we have the basis *par excellence* and the life *par excellence* that makes us capable of the fullest and most complete growth in every way.

So we have the whole position. Our nature completely respected and completely fulfilled within a framework that reaches to God Himself for eternity. As far as our mind and our thinking is concerned, our reason is in its own

sphere, capable of fulfilment speculatively, in knowing, in philosophy and the sciences; and practically in the arts—in the widest sense of art, that of right making; and in our moral life—in right doing. And it is perfected still further in the region of faith (where God has made Himself personally known to us, so to speak), again both speculatively in our knowledge of revealed truth and its elaboration in the living church and in theology; and practically, in the life of grace and of the virtues. And finally we can hope with a certain and trusting hope that the God Whom we know here by faith, and adhere to in love, will one day be known to us in the beatitude of heaven.

When it comes to discussion all this is behind our thought, which is no longer struggling unaided. We philosophise, as Fr. Roland Potter, O.P., said in *BLACKFRIARS* (p. 188, 1936): 'in an atmosphere of explicit faith and baptismal grace'; the first principle of action is participation in the eternal law. But this is not so for all people, and we shall do well to remember in all the various questions that vex the world and so intimately concern us as Catholics, that not only do other people not think in that atmosphere of explicit faith, but that the various questions most often arise precisely because of that lack of faith and that ignorance of the eternal law. So when we turn from a domestic discussion that aims at understanding and the wisdom that will teach us prudence in doing, and begin to make public our principles and their consequences, we must be prepared for a very complete misunderstanding, that will call for a great exercise of charity on our part. What seems to us so obvious, so familiar, will often be greeted as childish or silly, or as wilfully obscurantist or mendacious, and what is perhaps even harder, as partisan and provincial and a deliberate misuse of truths for our own ends. Such a complete reversal of values horrifies, and we must realise in the face of its often sincere persistence that where we see as far as a man on the top of a hill would, and the vision of others is limited as the vision

of a man in the valley would be, that our responsibility is thereby infinitely increased; the more so, too, in that our position is from God and not of our own devising.

Any apologetic therefore must begin with a realisation of our own position, and as complete a one of other people's as we can attain by continual and sympathetic discussion and study. No need for a weakening of the head, but every need of a warmth of the heart. And a warmth of the heart that springs from that efficacious love of God which we call charity. As St. Paul said: '. . . if I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal' (I Cor. xiii, 1).

Then secondly, and it may seem a minor point, but it is an application of a most important general principle, we must mind our language. Words are vehicles of thought, and just as the modern world is completely out of touch with traditional Christian thought, so it completely fails to understand words that are traditional Christian currency. Charity, grace, soul and spirit and a thousand other words pregnant to us, to others mean something quite different, or an emasculate approximation, or just nothing at all. So that a minor concern, but a necessary one, is our vocabulary.

More important still, and a further application of the same principle, and part of our aim in thinking out our own position is that we should make all these teachings of philosophy and of faith so much of our own that we can discard the source in its external forms. By this I mean that we must so grasp this doctrine and that principle that we can clothe the substance in whatever matter most suits the case in hand. We can't be much use as Thomists till we are able to discard St. Thomas's works. That may seem an unrealisable ideal—and is sometimes perhaps unnecessary—but it is a thing to aim at being able to do if the *philosophia perennis* and the teachings of the Church are to be of use to-day to those people, and they

are many, who are right outside the Christian tradition. And it has the advantage of being a thoroughly alive and positive programme. As Fr. Gerald Vann says: 'To treat a scholastic system as something which has meaning for modern problems, and to free it from the accidentals of language and treatment which confine it to one particular age, is to treat it as living; to hold it buried in the accidentals of history is to make it a relic of the past' (*Morals Makyth Man*, p. 129). No one has use for a museum piece as a guide to living.

And the same is true of the revelation that is embodied in the traditional formulæ of the faith. Not that in this case one wants in any sense to discard, that would be fatal to truth and against the mind of the Church, but those formulæ are the end of a process for us as they were for the Church, and what they contain must first be grasped in substance and seen in its implications before it can be validly or fruitfully accepted in its traditional forms by those so far from the tradition.

When we have begun to do this, to make our own the teachings of the faith and the synthesis that we know as the philosophy of St. Thomas, safeguarding ourselves on the one hand by a constant obedience to facts on every level and, on the other, by a constant obedience to God Who is truth, then we shall be able to take our stance and carry out in every field, be it speculative or practical, for ourselves or for others, the motto of the Pope: *Restaurare omnia in Christo*.

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