

DE REGIMINE PRINCIPUM AND
ITS HISTORICAL
BACKGROUND

THIS well-known treatise of St. Thomas Aquinas on the principles of good government was addressed, there seems little doubt, to Hugh II, de Lusignan, king of Cyprus, who died in 1267 at the untimely age of seventeen years. On the death of the promising youth the Saint discontinued his work, when he had reached the fourth chapter of the second book; but the task was completed, not altogether unsuccessfully, by one of his pupils, Ptolemy de Lucca, a Dominican who lived to become bishop of Torcello and died in 1327. St. Thomas included fifteen chapters in his first book, and Ptolemy added twelve more to the second, and completed the whole work by adding two more books, one of twenty-two chapters, the other of twenty-eight, so that of the whole work *De Regimine Principum* as it appears in the collected works of St. Thomas, Ptolemy's share is sixty-two chapters out of a total of eighty-one.

I have no intention of giving here a *resumé* of the book whose principles are so well known to students of St. Thomas; I merely wish to indicate the broad historical background in which it was composed.

St. Thomas, we have to remember, was an Italian, and by birth a subject of his distant kinsman, the Emperor Frederic II; being born in the kingdom of Naples, then an appanage of the Imperial crown. Under Frederic's harsh rule the Saint lived out his youth, but after joining the Dominicans found peace under the just and therefore tranquil government of St. Lewis IX of France.

After Frederic's death in 1250 Naples continued to suffer from political turmoil, but its bitter lot was not a whit worse than that of the other parts of the peninsula, pro-

bably it was much better. Italy at that time was, except for the considerable political division known as the Papal States, an agglomeration of petty states and republics. Of the republics the only respectable one was that of Venice, and even there liberty found it hard work to flourish in an atmosphere of tyranny and intrigue. On the other hand, Milan, Florence, Siena, Pisa, and other republics were very much worse.

The most peaceful and flourishing country in the Europe of St. Thomas's day was undoubtedly France, governed from 1226 to 1270 by St. Lewis IX, a devoted admirer and friend of St. Thomas. Another saintly king whom St. Thomas may have met both in Paris and London was Henry III, king of England from 1216 to 1272. Of Henry's personal sanctity there can be no question—it was, in the opinion of his most estimable friends, very great. But his theories of monarchy would have commended themselves more to the Anglican divine of the court of James I than to St. Thomas; for there were wanting in them the practical ideas of government for the good of the whole realm to replace Henry's over-insistence on the divine right of kings. Henry, with all his good will, was not the father of his people to the same extent as was St. Lewis IX. But Henry's great son, Edward I, proved himself the wisest and greatest of England's rulers; and it is of interest to notice the reliance he, like Lewis IX, placed on St. Dominic's brethren, and chiefly on that brilliant friar, William de Hotham, St. Thomas's successor at Paris. Hotham, who twice as Provincial governed his English brethren, was an ardent follower of St. Thomas's teaching. His death in 1299, just after his elevation to the see of Dublin, was politically a heavy blow to Edward I.

With St. Lewis of France was worthy to be ranked the king of Leon and Castile, St. Ferdinand III. It is true his reign closed in 1252 before St. Thomas had fully entered upon his great career as teacher and writer, but it is by no means unlikely that much of the good government

of St. Lewis which St. Thomas admired was influenced by that of the great Spanish king. Both monarchs admirably approached the ideal of a just and great ruler as set forth in *De Regimine Principis*. A more successful crusader than St. Lewis, Ferdinand retook from the Moors almost all the southern half of the peninsula, leaving to the infidels little more than the tiny kingdom of Granada. The glory of God's Church and the happiness of his own people were the sole objects of his ambition during the thirty-five years of his reign, and had his son, Alfonso X, surnamed 'the Wise,' come near him in ability and holiness, the completion of an entirely Catholic Spain would not have lagged for two more centuries. But Alfonso was vain and profligate, and went to an unhonoured grave leaving unravelled the mystery of his surname. Mediaeval folk, however, possessed far more humour than they have been credited with. Did not the same age describe the evil Frederic II as 'Stupor mundi,' a surname which, later writers, sacrificing humour to anti-papal prejudice, assumed to have been complimentary?

Alfonso spent much time and treasure trying to play the part of Emperor of Germany, a dignity to which he had been raised by a minority of the electors. The majority had given their votes to a far more admirable prince, Duke Richard of Cornwall, the wise and wealthy brother of Henry III of England. Richard actually obtained the Empire, and Alfonso was content to flaunt his imperial finery within the confines of Spain. Perhaps it was thus he earned his surname. Richard held the empire until April, 1272, the date of his death. As he spent much time in England and France it is not improbable that he knew St. Thomas personally. Moreover, St. Lewis was their mutual friend. Richard as a king showed some of the greatness of his nephew, Edward I.

Meanwhile, distant Scotland, the friend and ally of France, was enjoying at the period of St. Thomas's life her golden age under her two best kings, Alexander II (1214-