

## The Authority of St Thomas Aquinas in Theology

REV. PROF. S. M. ZARB, O.B.E., S.T.H.M., S.S.D., O.P.

**T**HE Angelic Doctor in his principal work, the *Summa Theologiae*, before treating of the great subjects explained in the various treatises of Theology, prepares the mind of his readers by explaining to them in a short but very comprehensive treatise the nature of this supreme science or rather wisdom that is called Theology. "To place our purpose within proper limits, says St Thomas, we first endeavour to investigate the nature and the extent of this sacred doctrine" (Qu. I, Prol.). Then follows the division of the treatise into ten articles. The first article proves the *raison d'être*, the necessity or the existence of such a science, whereas the other nine articles explain its nature (article 2), its unity (article 3), its speculative and practical character (article 4), its relation to (article 5) and its excellence over all the other human sciences (article 6), its object (article 7), its method and its sources (articles 8 to 10). We are here concerned with these last three articles, and more particularly with the 8th article, because articles 9 and 10 are dedicated to the interpretation of Holy Scripture which is one of the two sources of divine revelation.

In the 8th Article St Thomas asks: Whether Sacred Doctrine is a matter of argument, *Utrum haec doctrina sit argumentativa*. In other words he investigates whether Theology is a matter of faith only, in which case it cannot be called a science; or rather whether Theology is a science, that is a knowledge of the causes, of things, so that a conclusion is logically deduced from its principles. He answers in the affirmative, Theology is a matter of argument, because "as other sciences do not argue in proof of their principles, but argue from their principles to demonstrate other truths in these sciences: so this doctrine does not argue in proof of its principles, which are the articles of faith, but from them it goes on to prove something else; as the Apostle from the resurrection of Christ argues in proof of the general resurrection (1 Cor. 15).

Theology is not faith. By divine faith we believe all that is revealed by God in the canonical revelation, and this knowledge is common to the theologian as well as to all the faithful; Theology is the sacred doctrine which argues from principles known to us by divine faith and from which it derives its conclusions. The object of Theology are not the principles revealed, but the conclusions derived from the revealed principles, and so Theology is indeed a science. Hence the Angelic Doctor says: "Although arguments from human reason cannot avail to prove what must be received on faith, nevertheless this doctrine argues from articles of faith to other truths" (ad 1).

Theology is, therefore, a matter of argument. But an argument is either from authority or from reason. Hence St Thomas proceeds further to show whether Theology is based on arguments from authority or from arguments of faith, and says: "This doctrine is *especially* based upon arguments from authority, inasmuch as its principles are obtained by revelation: thus we ought to believe on the authority of those to whom the revelation has been made... But sacred doctrine makes use even of human reason, not, indeed, to prove faith..., but to make clear other things that are put forward in this doctrine. Since therefore grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity. Hence the Apostle says: *Bringing into captivity every understanding unto the obedience of Christ* (2 Cor. X. 5). Hence sacred doctrine makes use also of the authority of philosophers in those questions in which they were able to know the truth by natural reason, as Paul quotes a saying of Aratus: *As some also of your poets said: For we are also His offspring* (Acts XVII 28). Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as *extrinsic* and *probable arguments*; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an *incontrovertible proof*, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable. For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets, who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelation (if any such there is) made to other doctors. Hence Augustine says: *Only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learnt to hold in such honour as to believe their authors have not erred in any way in writing them. But other authors I so read as not to deem any-*

*thing in their works to be true, merely on account of their having so thought and written, whatever may have been their holiness and learning'' (ad 2).*

In these few phrases the Angelic Doctor has condensed many doctrines which are to-day the object of much longer discussions. It will not be out of place or without interest if we expound a little this important argument.

In the first place St Thomas classifies the arguments from authority as used in Theology into three classes :

(a) The first class comprehends those arguments which are *proper* and *incontrovertible*. Such are the arguments taken from the authority of the canonical Scriptures : The reason is : "For our faith rests upon revelation made to the apostles and prophets, who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelation (if any such there is) made to other doctors". In this the Angelic Doctor makes a clear distinction between *canonical* and *private* revelation. Private revelation is not the source of the articles of faith and cannot as such be the basis of doctrines pertaining to the common belief of the Church. Only the revelation made to the prophets and to the apostles, that is to those who were constituted by God as the organs or ministers of his revelation, is the basis of the divine faith of the Church. St Thomas, following in the footsteps of St Augustine, whom he quotes explicitly at the end of this article, says that "our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets, who wrote the canonical books". From these words, many Protestant writers, such as Adolf von Harnack, conclude that the Angelic Doctor as well as St Augustine do not admit another source of revelation besides the sacred Books of the Bible; in other words Divine Tradition is not a source of revelation according to these two great Doctors of the Church. It is well known that the exclusion of divine tradition, since the days of Luther, has been a fundamental doctrine of Protestantism and constitutes one of the fundamental divergencies between Protestantism and Catholicism.

It is true that Divine Tradition as a source of revelation is a dogma which was only defined in the 4th Session of the Council of Trent, 8th April, 1546. But this dogma is clearly contained, at least implicitly, in the doctrine of the Fathers and of the Doctors of the Church. In fact, both St Augustine and St Thomas, though none of them lays down in proper terms the doctrine de-

fined by the Council of Trent as regards divine tradition, make use of that tradition in their writings. Indeed, some of the articles of St Thomas are a mosaic of quotations from the Fathers and the Councils of the Church, particularly in points where Scripture is of no avail. Therefore, it is more than clear that in practice St Thomas makes recourse not only to the Holy Books, but also to divine tradition, because they both derive from God. The dogmatic definition of the Council of Trent is most clear and gives the fundamental reason why divine tradition has the same force as the Holy Books. Here is the text: "The most sacred, oecumenical and general Synod of Trent, legitimately congregated in the Holy Ghost, presided over by the three legates of the Apostolic See, having ever before its eyes the removal of error and the preservation of the Truth of the Gospel in the Church—that Gospel which, promised beforehand through the Prophets in the Holy Scriptures, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated with his own mouth and then ordered to be preached to every creature by His Apostles as the fountain of all saving truth and moral instruction — is contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions. These traditions were received by the Apostles from the very mouth of Christ, or were delivered, as it were by hand, by the Apostles themselves at the dictation of the Holy Ghost, and came down to us. The Synod, following the example of the orthodox Fathers, accepts and venerates with equal piety and affection all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament, because the author of both is one and the same God, and the traditions pertaining to faith as well as to morals, as either given by mouth by Christ or dictated by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in continuous succession in the Catholic Church." And after enumerating the Holy Books, it concludes: "Whosoever does not accept as sacred and canonical those same books in all their integrity and in all their single parts, as it is the custom to read them in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the Old Latin Vulgate, and knowingly and prudently despises the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema" (D. 783f.).

In this most important definition the Council of Trent clearly teaches that divine revelation is contained not only in the Holy Books, but also in the divine traditions, because these divine traditions have no less than the Holy Books a divine origin and

consequently they are both accepted and venerated by the Church with equal piety and affection. In fact these divine traditions are only those received by the Apostles from the very mouth of Christ, or were delivered, as it were by hand, by the Apostles themselves at the dictation of the Holy Ghost, and came down to us, that is were preserved for us in a continuous succession in the Catholic Church. Therefore these unwritten traditions, including and surpassing all doctrine contained in the Holy Books, are preserved in the teachings of the Catholic Church, that is in the solemn definitions of the Councils and of the Roman Pontiffs, in the ordinary teaching of the Church contained in its Liturgy and in its ministry, that is in its cult and in the administration of Holy Sacraments, in the writings of the Roman Pontiffs and of the Bishops, of the Fathers and of the Doctors of the Church, of Catholic theologians and canonists, and in all other doctrinal manifestations accepted and approved by the Church. This does not mean that every single doctrine contained in these various sources is a divine tradition. Only that doctrine is to be kept as divine which is commonly accepted and approved by the Church as universal both with regard to time and to space. Indeed, what is received in the whole Church and is known to have been received at all times in the whole Church, goes evidently back to the Apostles and through the Apostles either to Christ or to the Holy Ghost, and so is divine.

(b) The second class of arguments from authority used in Theology are also *proper*, but only *probable*: such are the arguments taken from the authority of the doctors of the Church: "The authority of the doctors of the Church, says St Thomas, is one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable." Hence the writings of the Fathers and of the doctors of the Church bear authority and pertain intrinsically to this science, because they are the organs of divine tradition, but they are not *incontrovertible*, unless there is a moral unanimity among the Fathers and the Doctors of the Church which could clearly prove that such doctrine goes back to the Apostles; if this proof fails, then that authority does not exceed probability. This probability may have various degrees according to the competence of the Father or of the Doctor of the Church. We aim at proving the authority of

St Thomas Aquinas in Theology, and therefore we immediately return to this subject.

(c) The third class of arguments from authority used in Theology are the arguments of human reason. These arguments are *not proper*, but *extrinsic*, because things of faith cannot be proved by human reason.

The purpose of this article is to ascertain the authority of the Angelic Doctor in Theology. We have already said that the arguments taken from the authority of the doctors of the Church "may properly be used, yet merely as probable". The reason is because no particular doctor is a source of divine revelation. This does not exclude that God can, if He so wills, communicate directly with saintly and learned persons; but only the revelation granted to the prophets and to the apostles is to be considered as canonical, that is authoritative, on which dogmas of faith can and should be based. Whence comes therefore the authority of these doctors? From the approbation of the Church.

The Church, as the Vatican Council puts it, together with the apostolic mission of teaching, received the task of keeping the faith (D. 1798). The Church is the custodian of the faith. In order to be a custodian, it is not required to be the recipient of revelation; the Church is not a source of revelation, but it enjoys the assistance of God to give out to the faithful the right meaning of revelation without any possibility of error. The Church is therefore the authentic interpreter of revelation.

The Church may present to the faithful the doctrine contained in revelation either *directly*, when she gives a teaching as contained in the revealed doctrine; or *indirectly*, when she approves the doctrine of the Fathers or of the doctors of the Church. Indeed, when the Church approves a doctrine, that doctrine becomes the doctrine of the Church, and as such it must be accepted as authentic catholic doctrine. When the Church proclaims one as a Father or a Doctor of the Church, she invests him with her own authority: whether the Church approves every single proposition contained in the writings of that Father or Doctor of the Church appears from the terms of her approbation. Hence there are degrees and differences among the Fathers and the Doctors of the Church according to the approbation given to them by the Church.

Four qualities are required in order that a writer may be declared a Father of the Church, namely, sanctity, orthodoxy, antiquity and approbation of the Church. These same qualities are to be found in a doctor of the Church, one excepted, namely antiquity.

Thus St Augustine is a Father of the Church, because together with sanctity, orthodoxy, and approval of the Church, he lived between the years 354 and 430; whereas St Thomas Aquinas is a Doctor of the Church, because though he possesses sanctity, orthodoxy, and his doctrines were often approved by the Church, he lived in the middle of the XIII century and so he lacks that antiquity required to be a Father of the Church.

Of these four qualities the one most peculiar or specifically required, is the approval of the Church. Thus St Augustine's Doctrine is particularly approved by the Church in matters concerning the doctrine of original sin, predestination and grace. But it would be erroneous to say and to hold with the Jansenists that "one can absolutely admit and teach any doctrine, provided it is clearly founded in the writings of St Augustine, without taking into consideration any Bull of the Sovereign Pontiff" (D. 1320). In fact this proposition has been condemned by Alexander VII on the 7th December, 1690.

The reason is because a Father or a Doctor of the Church is to be considered either as a private doctor or as a witness of the Catholic Faith: as a private doctor he explains the doctrine of the Church according to his own intellectual abilities, and thus he has a double authority, *scientific* and *historical*; as a witness of the Catholic Faith he is only a ring in the long and uninterrupted chain of learned people who bear witness to the correctness of the Catholic Faith in his own days, and in this he has a *dogmatic* authority. Hence one can easily find in the writings of a Father or Doctor of the Church a threefold authority, namely *scientific*, according to his greater or lesser competence in the matter under consideration; *historical*, in as much as he is a witness to the Catholic Faith as admitted and professed in his own time; and finally *dogmatic*, because he is a link between his own time and the preceding Fathers and Doctors of the Church in witnessing to the correctness of the unchangeable Catholic doctrine back to the days of the Apostles.

(To be continued)