

# THOUGHT

---

VOL. IV

MARCH, 1930

NO. 4

---

## Catholic Thought and its Mission

JACQUES MARITAIN

**T**HE intellectual task of the Catholic is a difficult one—as difficult as it is important. As a human being, he lives in the world and is subject to its various changes. As a member of the Mystical Body of Christ, he is in contact with eternity; his interior life has its roots where there is neither alteration nor vicissitude. His mind is fixed upon Eternal Truth, fidelity to which is the foundation of the edifice of grace within him, and the first favor which every creature expects of him. For the Catholic mind this species of mediation between time and the eternal must be likened at once to a painful cross and to the glorious mission of a Redeemer.

The Catholic must at each instant interpret the world, which changes and passes, in the light of eternity. Our problem today is thus to interpret the modern world; not only to seek intelligence of the eternal *outside* the world—which is the contemplative's first commandment; but also, according to a second commandment like unto the first, to explain the world of the present moment as a part of, and in terms of, eternity. This problem becomes the more acute as we see loosening and crumbling all about us so many of those tem-

poral forms in which for ages the cultured world had received the imprint of Eternal Truth. Here is a serious loss doubtless; for we are thus deprived of a considerable number of supports which helped us to maintain within us the life of the spirit. At the same time it is from a certain angle an invaluable advantage; for by that very fact this life of the spirit—and the life even of the Church of Christ—is freed of that awful weight of human error and treachery which former ages, once Christian, had to bear.

A new world emerges from the chrysalis of history, clothed in new human institutions. Perhaps (as I am quite inclined to believe) it is to be for Christians a less habitable world than the other. But there is surely *some* good and *some* truth involved in these new forms; they certainly represent in *some* way the will of God—which is absent from nothing that exists. To this extent they may serve our eternal interests here below. The question which confronts us, is to understand the world round about us, to form a judgment upon it, and to regulate accordingly our loves, our hates and our apostolate.

## I

A double danger, a double error must be avoided here. In practice, if not in theory, we might be tempted to abandon, more or less completely to lose sight of, the eternal to the advantage of time; to allow ourselves to be carried along by the changing current instead of dominating it by the spirit. Those who choose this method really endure the world instead of explaining it. They are acted upon by the world without reacting upon it in turn, except as the instrument of these same worldly forces. They float like dry leaves or heavy logs on the stream of history. Often generous, and made alive to the necessities of the moment by their heart's intuitions, they forget, in their eagerness to sympathize with their age, in

their haste to attain practical results, the prime requisites of all practical efficiency, which belong to the realm of the spirit, which suppose an intellectual courage sufficient to strip bare appearances, to attack principles, and at all cost to keep the mind fixed upon the immutable.

Under pretext of fidelity to the eternal, the second error, just the opposite of the first, consists in remaining attached, not to the unchanging, but to fragments of the past, to certain moments of history, rendered motionless and embalmed by the memory, upon which we comfortably lie down to sleep. This is not to despise the world as the saints despised it; this is a contempt born of ignorance and presumption. It is the attitude of those who reject the world instead of assimilating it. They compromise Divine Truth by adhering to institutions which are dying. And if they do happen to have a firmer grasp upon unchanging principles than those in the first category, and a keener perception of the errors, defections and deficiencies of the age, this knowledge remains sterile, incomplete and negative, because a certain narrow-mindedness hinders them from "understanding the work of man" and from doing justice to the work of God as manifested in the world's history.

The first error might be described as ingratitude towards the Word, by whom all things were made, and whose Cross has overcome the world; it would render Christian thought impotent and variable before the ages. The second is a kind of disdain for the Spirit which moves upon the waters, which renews the face of the earth; it would make of Christian thought the world's ungrateful enemy.

It is not easy to remain entirely untainted by one or the other of these aberrations; not to incline towards this or that excess. For there is here no question of "selective dosage," nor of an equilibrium where two weights are in balance. The correct view in this matter, as generally in the domain of the

virtues, may be obtained only *by eminence*, by lifting oneself high above the opposing extremes. Only with great difficulty can a man attain to this detachment. Fortunately, Catholicism is in no way the slave of the narrowness and deficiencies of individual Catholics. The Church goes Divinely on her way in the midst of the errors, too human or too little human, of certain of her children. She realizes in its full perfection the *juste mesure* of virtue, that sublime union of opposing terms which is represented in an absolute allegiance to eternal reality and a diligent attention to the things of time.

## II

However strewn with obstacles the path to this reconciliation of extremes may be for each of us, our duty, nevertheless, lies that way. Moreover, for the reasons mentioned above, the task is obviously an urgent one. If not for the Church, which has the promise of eternal life, at least for the world and for culture, every delay opposed to its accomplishment runs the risk of an irreparable catastrophe.

Who shall be our guide in this undertaking? And by the same token, who is to establish unity of thought and action among workmen engaged by the same God, and whose dissensions make for the success and the joy of the devil? It is odd that such a question should have to be posed, as though the Church had not answered it in advance. Beneath the firmament of revealed dogma, which groups all Catholics together in the unity of Faith, but above the plains where the diverse opinions of men must crash inevitably, there lies an intermediate domain, the sphere of the summits of human reason enlightened by grace; whence the teeming waters flow down to the valleys below, and where the children of light may certainly realize, insofar as it is possible here below, a living unity of the speculative and the practical reason. This

unity may not be *imposed* dogmatically and under pain of heresy, like that of the Faith. But the Church commends it to her children by all the devices of which a watchful mother is capable. She not only proposes it to them; she urges them to make it effective. And the more she appeals to our liberty, the more generous should be our answer.

What is the plain fact? She herself dispenses to us a doctrine which, while it embodies no solemn dogmatic definition, remains nevertheless, after and below this formulation of Divinely revealed truth, the noblest and most venerable, the surest and holiest doctrine which men may receive: it is the teaching of the Encyclicals and Pontifical documents. And she points out to us the teacher who will lead us along the safest paths to the science of things human and Divine: he is her Universal Doctor.

The guide we are seeking, the guide who will aid us to interpret the world, *our* world, in the light of eternal truth, is above all he who watches upon the towers of the Church, exercising a living and unbroken magistracy. He is the visible head of the Mystical Body of Christ, our sovereign teacher here below. And ever since the publication of the Encyclical *Vix pervenit*<sup>1</sup> down to that of *Quas primas*<sup>2</sup> and its successors, the Papacy has never wearied of instructing, reminding, setting off for us in bold relief the essential conditions and fundamental truths without which the modern world must look in vain for the solution of its gravest problems and for the satisfaction of its most pressing needs.

Whether there be question of the major errors which afflict our age: Rationalism, Liberalism, Naturalism, Modernism; of the harmonizing of Faith with reason, of Divine wisdom with human knowledge; whether we concern ourselves with the world-wide expansion of the Kingdom of God, embracing

---

<sup>1</sup>Benedict XIV, 1745.

<sup>2</sup>Pius XI, 1925.

all nations and all races, or with the return of dissident sects to religious unity, or with the true notion of culture, of man's dignity, of human liberty; whether we treat of the problem of marriage and family life, of children's education, of civil society, of the origin of authority, of obedience to law, of the political evolution of modern institutions, of peace between the nations and its necessary bases, of the Kingship of Christ over all peoples, of the condition of the workingman, of private property, of interest and usury, of the living wage, of strikes and labor unions; in general, wherever there is question of the relations of politics and economics with the Gospel and morals—we have at our command a vast and continually augmenting treasure of instructions from which not only theologians but also the Catholic laity are invited to draw a speculative and practical guidance of the highest value, thoroughly adapted to the needs of modern civilization.

Catholic Action, upon the necessity of which His Holiness Pius XI insists so firmly, must evidently assume in each country the form which is best suited to milieu and circumstances. But its intellectual charter should everywhere be based upon the great Pontifical teachings. It would be a splendid thing to see formed a league of Catholics who in each country and throughout the world would be animated by a common desire to study, interpret and apply all the doctrines contained in the Papal decrees—not an isolated principle here or there, selected according to personal preference—but the Pontifical documents *in their entirety*.

If these teachings bring to light the supreme guiding principles of which the Catholic mind has need in order to accomplish its special mission, it is nonetheless necessary that this same Catholic mind should vitally assimilate the science of principles and causes upon which all else depends; that it should develop within itself the spiritual energy inherent in the *virtues* of metaphysics and of theology, in order to vivify

the specialized studies required by present-day problems. By these arms alone can it hope to be victorious, to discover, to invent, to dominate intellectually the vast and complex network of modern fact. *Veritas liberabit vos.* It is colossal folly to pretend to accost all the sphinxes which our contemporaries have set up at each of the world's crossroads, without first putting on the armor of light and of eternal wisdom. This is to run the risk of promoting, unconsciously, the very evils whose effects we are combating.

Our first specifically *Catholic* duty, therefore—and the one most commonly neglected by Catholics—is to purify the mind, lovingly, in the truth. “If thine eye be not simple,” says the Gospel; and for us Catholics of today that means: if thou dost not make simple the eye of thy spirit through wisdom, through a wisdom which is not that of Descartes, of Kant, of Hegel, of Bergson, of Herdegger, but through the wisdom of authentic metaphysics, and theology, and the science of the saints; if thou canst not distinguish clearly the true from the false in a universe where Freud and Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and Lenin and Gandhi cross fire; if thou art incapable of *judging* this world spawned by Luther, Descartes and Rousseau; “if thine eye be not simple, thy whole body remaineth in darkness,” thine influence upon the world will be nil—if, indeed, thou dost not positive harm, and take not advantage of the night. In other words, we must begin by being *anti-modern*, passing judgment upon the errors of our century according to the rules of immutable wisdom, to the end that in virtue of this same wisdom we may become *ultra-modern* and save the rich, living treasure of truth for the needs of the future.

### III

The Church actually points out to us the teacher par excellence who can instruct us in the most necessary of all

sciences, and inculcate that *authentic understanding and love* which our work here below imperiously demands. The light and direction we receive from him is one with that offered us by the teaching of the Popes, because he is the common Doctor of the Church. His doctrine is that which the Mystical Body of Christ uses in its own intellectual life. *Thomae doctrinam*, wrote Benedict XV, *Ecclesia suam propriam edixit esse*.<sup>3</sup> And Pius X before him had said: "Since the holy death of the saintly Doctor, the Church has not held a single Council in which Saint Thomas has not participated by the treasures of his doctrine."<sup>4</sup>

It must be clearly understood at this point that the Church does not impose the philosophical and theological teaching of Saint Thomas as a dogma; she does not hold us to any sort of "ideological conformity." She appeals to our intelligence and to our filial devotion. If she prescribes that those who exercise in her name the teaching office shall "model their courses in rational philosophy and theology, and form their pupils in these sciences, after the method, doctrine and principles of the Angelical Doctor, religiously maintained,"<sup>5</sup> it may be said that where there is question of the loyalty of the Faithful as such to Thomistic teaching, she is content with a *counsel*; but with what insistence, with what ardent desire she surrounds it! She knows that we cannot desert Saint Thomas without grave danger and without compromising the work we have to do.<sup>6</sup>

She knows, on the other hand, that no philosophy, no

<sup>3</sup>Encyclical *Fausto Appetente*.

<sup>4</sup>Motu Proprio, *Doctoris Angelici*. This sentiment of Pius X is repeated by His Holiness Pius XI in the Encyclical *Studiorum ducem*.

<sup>5</sup>*Codex Juris Canonici*, canon 1366, §2.

<sup>6</sup>"It is our desire that all those who devote themselves to the teaching of philosophy and of sacred theology should be warned that they cannot without serious detriment part company with Saint Thomas Aquinas, even by a single step, especially in the field of metaphysics." Pius X, Motu Proprio, *Doctoris Angelici*.

human system of thought, could be imposed upon the mind in the name of Divine Revelation; she realizes that a philosophy is essentially the work of the reason. Consequently, she projects all possible light upon the philosophy of Saint Thomas; using all the signals at her command, she cries: "Here are the living waters!" She does not force us to drink from them. "Come and see." Good tidings are always thus announced. Just as it was said of old to the Egyptians during a severe famine: Go to Joseph to receive the corn necessary for your bodily nourishment; so today, to all those, of whatever cast of mind, who are in quest of the truth, we say: Go to Thomas of Aquin.<sup>7</sup>

#### IV

In his own day Saint Thomas was quite an innovator. "New method, new reasons, new arrangement of arguments, new light, above all, a new usage of the profane science of philosophy and of Aristotle the great suspect,"—William of Tocco is never tired of stressing the "modernity" of brother Thomas. Not that Aquinas had ever sought novelty for its own sake, like so many thinkers of our day! He looked for the truth, using a method essentially universalist and positive, which aims at retaining all that humanity has achieved, while complementing and perfecting it. He succeeded thus in removing the rust from Scholasticism.

Side by side with his profound loyalty towards the complete heritage of abiding wisdom, his philosophical courage and intellectual independence should serve as examples for us. It is my belief that the great and bold innovation to which Providence would have us dedicate ourselves today is what we might call the *activation* of Thomism in view of the problems of our times. What Saint Dominic said of men is like-

---

<sup>7</sup>Pius XI, Encyclical *Studiorum duces*.

wise applicable to ideas: *the seed withers when it is hoarded, and fructifies when it is sown*. The axiom: "Goodness tends to communicate itself" is true also, and especially, of the goods of the mind. The doctrine of Saint Thomas is in itself a doctrine of conquest, a missionary doctrine. It seems to be entering today upon the most *apostolic*, and at the same time upon the most *laical* period of its development; it is being requisitioned by all cultural problems. The mind which everywhere has need of it could never forgive it for resting content with what it has acquired.

Let me add that by this recovery of its spirit of conquest, by this bold assault upon new problems and new positions, the doctrine of Saint Thomas will aid us to resolve an apparent contradiction which is secretly troubling many minds today in its regard. They understand, on the one hand, that the Church in recommending this teaching so insistently intends before all to recommend her common teacher *as* a common teacher, rather than to revive the old disputes which opposed system to system. On the other hand, they realize also that the *pensée* of the Angelic Doctor is so strongly bound together, so perfectly organized, that it resists the least adulteration of its principles, and can succeed in penetrating to reality only on the condition that it retains inviolate its intellectual integrity. The common Doctor is not the *banal* Doctor, in whose teaching we may find simply that upon which all other teachers agree. He is the Doctor *par excellence*, who alone can teach us to coordinate by means of the principles of a higher unity, the truth which others, frequently not without a special talent for setting forth this or that aspect of the real, have uttered.

In order that Thomas of Aquin may be effectively our common teacher, without losing any of his particular force and excellence, and without at the same time prolonging outworn controversies with rival schools of thought, we must

take him for what he really means to us: an apostle of modern times. Upon the material of contemporary problems we must use the precious tools of wisdom, the puissant *Denkmitteln* that he has placed at our disposal. Disputes between savants we shall have always; but let us once be up and doing, let us once attack the new difficulties, and under the very aspects where they are most painfully in contact with reality, and we shall better understand the necessity—under penalty of sinking to a level of impotent mediocrity—of a rigorous fidelity to Saint Thomas; we shall have the good fortune to see reunited in the light of his pure doctrine minds gathered from the four corners of the horizon.

An apostolic mission to the modern mind—this, then, is the duty which devolves upon the ever-vital *pensée* of the Church's common Doctor. If it is ever vital, it is precisely because of this mission. If it preserves the admirable universality which may be called its distinctive trait, and which constitutes its human and properly *Catholic* nobility, it is again on account of this mission; because in the guise of instrument of the intellectual life of the Church, it shares the Church's very universality, and finds itself in continuity with the wisdom of the saints. For it is the wisdom of contemplation alone that can keep philosophical and theological doctrine safe, encompassed by that universal peace which surpasseth human understanding and which banishes the sectarian spirit.

## V

There are some who seem afraid that in grouping themselves under the standard of the doctrine from which Holy Mother Church bids them go and ask nourishment, Catholics may lose their independence in research, their contact with the restlessness, the worries and the enterprise of the modern mind, and the means of making fruitful progress in ecclesias-

tical and profane science. A very human, a much too human view! The very contrary is true. Once more, there is no question of receiving Thomism by force, by way of barrier or impediment. "Come and see." There is question of discovering it, lovingly, for ourselves, and of requiring of it the keys of those heavy doors which subjectivism and a prolonged adoration of man have closed against us. We are speaking of a stock of tools with which to cross barriers, break down impediments and force a passage to reality.

Either we shall let ourselves be carried on by the current of time, or we shall have principles forceful enough, a doctrine rooted strongly enough in reality, and of a scope sufficiently universal, to permit us to join time to eternity and to interpret the world in the light of God. The wider the opening of the compass, the more firmly it must be held. The vaster, the more complex, the more varied the field embraced by thought, the more solid should be the axes of that thought.

Need we add that the fact of having been elaborated into a system in the thirteenth century amounts to a very accidental condition because of the intrinsic qualities of the doctrine of Saint Thomas? It was to be expected that Christian thought should attain to its complete synthesis in an age when Christian culture arrived at its widest historical expansion. But in itself the body of truth placed under the egis of Saint Thomas rises above time and history and the contemporary conditions encountered by Thomas himself. It is a doctrine *of all times*. Likewise, we should not judge a philosophy as we would the cut of a coat. The first question we should ask in its regard is not: "What year was it launched? What is its position in time?" but: "What is its relation to existing reality?"

Be not deceived! Confronting the Christian mind today is a series of grave and difficult problems, touching very closely

the heart of humanity. These problems are massed as though they had long been kept in reserve for a general assault; and the philosophy, the research in science or the arts, the methods of thought and culture which the Catholic mind must affront, conquer or assimilate are marked by a rare technical perfection and a valuable human achievement. We can hope to succeed at this task only by arming ourselves with a knowledge the most precise, a science the most exacting, an intellectual equipment as perfect and as sure as possible, a doctrine and a method as rigorous as they are comprehensive. The Angelic Doctor will enable us to dominate and judge the present moment of history without ignoring it, to measure it intellectually in its veritable reality, according to eternal standards. Thus shall we accomplish that work of discrimination—itself in a sense angelic—which consists in saving for the future the true and living values which the present contains, letting fall that which is destined to die.

## VI

Amid the world's deafening noise the wisdom of Saint Thomas comes down to our public places and speaks to the people of our time. This is an event in the history of thought, due chiefly to the initiative of Leo XIII, the reality of which is obvious even to the superficial observer. Far be it from us, indeed, to shout victory. We are witnessing a simple beginning; almost everything has yet to be done. Yet the fact is there, and it rests with Catholic thinkers of all countries to see that its effects are fruitful for the world's needs. A wide field of action is offered them; everywhere substantially the same questions are to be met. Thus we may foresee a common Catholic intellectual approach, a world-wide collaboration along spiritual and cultural lines, in which the workmen, however few they may be in each land, will be conscious that they have in hand a task of capital importance.

In France up to the present it has been in the department of criteriology—and by its effort to reestablish the connection between philosophy and the natural sciences—as well as in the field of juridical and sociological studies, that the Thomistic renaissance seems chiefly to have manifested itself. This is to say nothing of indispensable research in the history of thought and in medieval texts, or, in theology, of the noteworthy revival of speculative mystical science. The philosophers and savants who collaborate with *La Société de Philosophie de la Nature* and with the enterprise to which Doctor Hans André of Cologne has contributed his splendid studies in vegetal biology, have resumed a tradition that had been interrupted for several centuries; and little by little we see lowered the absurd barrier which separated laboratory experiment and philosophical inquiry as though they were two strange, if not hostile, worlds.

In the same way, artists and philosophers have renewed their contacts, and a kind of friendly understanding is coming into being between the principles of Thomistic esthetics and the latest findings of the painters, the architects, the musicians and the poets.

Among the theoretical tasks that it seems now necessary to take in hand under the patronage of Saint Thomas, and for which we hope the laborers will be available, we may mention, in pure philosophy, the critical interpretation of the principles of modern mathematics; and in theology, the thorough and systematic examination of those truths which would restore to exegesis, so often and so deplorably neglected in our teaching today, its full stature and influence.

But what would appear to be the most urgent and practical single undertaking which confronts us, is, in addition to the metaphysical and scientific work mentioned above, the elaboration of a vast synthesis reorganizing all the moral and human sciences; the building up of a philosophy of the State and of

civilization which is definitely free from the errors of the last three centuries as well as from the chimeras of humanism and naturalism, and with which the world in the making under our eyes may be reasoned out, judged and redressed.

## VII

I propose these remarks with no presumptuous and unreasonable pretention of tracing a program of research. Their purpose is merely to render more concretely and exactly intelligible the nature of the mission to which, as I am persuaded, Catholic thought is called. As I pointed out in the beginning, the very fact that it is a Catholic mission makes it in some sort a crucifying one. *Quis scandalizatur et ego non uror?* Catholic thought must be lifted up with Jesus between heaven and earth. It is by living the painful paradox of an absolute fidelity to the eternal closely linked with a keen compassion for the tribulations of our time, that we are asked to labor for the reconciliation of the world to the truth.

