

## THE "SUMMA" OF ST. THOMAS IN ENGLISH\*

IT is now eleven years since the publication of the first volume of the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. The contemporary book-market hardly noticed the arrival of the stranger who modestly took his place amidst the "recent books." Few of the buyers and sellers in the market suspected the toil and hope that had prepared this translation for its place on the already overcrowded mart of books in English. Still fewer, even of those, whose toil was thus realized, could have foreseen the success which welcomed the translation almost from the first.

Daring, so great as to be akin to foolhardiness, had inspired the makers of the translation. Although the audience who might reasonably be expected to read and buy the translation was, if fit, yet few, the translators printed an edition of two thousand. The edition proved, not too great, but too small. In some three years a new edition was needed; and was delayed only by the stress of the Great War. Since then three other volumes have been exhausted. Upwards of 20,000 copies have been sold. When it is remembered that this great sale is of a classic of the deepest philosophy and theology, our readers will see how the success of the venture has astonished even its most daring promoters. To them it has seemed that to have placed before their contemporaries, without one penny of endowment, and almost without advertisement, some twenty thousand volumes of the

\* The English translation of the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. In Seventeen Volumes. 8/- per Vol. (Burns, Oates & Washbourne, Ltd.)

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Church's classic of Scientific Theology is perhaps to have achieved one of the greatest literary feats in the modern English tongue.

This success if alone would have been sufficient for men whose one aim was to place on the book-market a book that would sell. But the translators of the *Summa* were only accidentally interested in this financial side of their work ; in so far as it was an index of the essential success which had inspired their hopes. As one of those, indeed as one of the least of those who had a hand in preparing the translation, I may be allowed to sketch out the aim of the translators.

In the first place they did not wish that the translation should rival the original. The Editor of the first volume (the late Fr. Wilfrid Lescher, O.P.) wrote, " Our aim in this translation is to induce readers to become students of St. Thomas " (p. lxxx). Far from wishing the translation to compete with the original the translators wished and foresaw that it would help the original. Even in their most daring moods they never imagined that a masterpiece would be of less value than a copy. Indeed they felt that the more widespread the copies became, the more would the masterpiece be valued.

Another subtle reason for the translation akin to this was that the *Summa* was a masterpiece, like the *Republic of Plato*, or the *Ethics of Aristotle*. Now these masterpieces had been translated into English. Indeed they had been again and again translated into English. The ready acceptance of these translations dispensed the translators of the *Summa* from any elaborate apology for their hardihood.

Another reason lay at the back of their thought. To them it seemed, and still seems, that a "clear literal translation" into the common speech of men is for most men almost of the nature of a commentary.

## *Blackfriars*

The translators were of those who think that not even the most accomplished master of the original languages of the Bible is dispensed from reading the Bible in his native tongue. The parables of our Blessed Lord are sublime in the original language of the gossellers. But who has not felt new depths of meaning when reading in his own tongue, "I am the Good Shepherd"? The translators of the *Summa* felt, therefore, that their English translation would serve as a commentary on the original Latin even for those who could read it easily in Latin.

But an additional reason for the English translation was the fact that many readers qualified to understand much of the thought of the *Summa* could not understand it easily or at all in any but their mother-tongue. For them a clear and literal translation became a necessity. There seems no doubt that many of them to whom the Latin of St. Thomas was practically a closed book, have found in the translation a key to unlock what would otherwise have remained closed.

One of the main reasons for the enterprise of translation was the desire to provide some basis for the discussion of the ultimates of human thought. Almost all discussions carried on to-day about what is most important to discuss are futile through lack of a common language. There is, to be sure, a common stock of words inherited from our grandparents. But though the spelling and sound of these words have changed through the centuries, they have been almost stationary when compared with the changes of meaning. How differently do men use words such as faith, reason, justice, cause, object, end, principle, act, motion, world, grace, love, incarnation, substance. Yet these are the very necessities of thought. Now even when words are taken in a fixed or agreed meaning, it is difficult for men to agree about the reasoned consequences of these words and their meaning. But dis-

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agreement becomes something more than a by-product of discussion when men begin to discuss words to which each disputant gives his own meaning. The author of *Alice in Wonderland* was tragically diagnosing one of our most deadly mental diseases when he made one of his characters say, "I can make a word mean anything I like."

The translators of the *Summa*, filled with the horrors of this shambles of thought, had a hope that their work might serve to standardize the intellectual currency of English-speaking thinkers for the next few centuries. As far as they could see, the unit of philosophical language is not set by any democracy or aristocracy of thinkers. It is largely the work of some accepted sovereign of thought. Just as the king's fore-arm, or ell, became the living standard of medieval quantitative measures, so does the thought and forethought of a king amongst thinkers become the standard of thought for centuries after his death. It is not unlikely that if to-day a plebiscite of thinkers was taken on the philosopher whose words and meanings should be accepted as authentic and current, the majority would poll for the genius who incorporated Hebrew religion, Greek ethics and Roman law in his *Summa Theologica*. Behind the minds of the translators was the noble quest to bring about a Reunion of Christendom by an attempt to disperse by an agreed vocabulary verbal confusions and disagreements which are still setting brother against brother.

Another aim was supplementary to this attempt to standardize philosophical and theological language. It was felt that some kindred attempt should be made if not to standardize, at least to simplify methods of scientific thought and exposition. Plato, in his derision of the poets, suggested that if only their poetry was written in prose, men would see its worthlessness! We are sufficiently lovers of good poetry to differ from

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Plato ; or to agree with him only if he allows us to add that Poetry turned into prose is life turned into death ! But we accept his principle when applied to many of our modern books which purport to deal either with the philosophy or theology of human life. Authority, which is still throned in the mathematical and even in the biological sciences, is far to seek in modern philosophy and theology. Every writer has his own vocabulary and method. Glossaries, necessary for us to understand one writer, are worse than useless for another. There is no common method whereby we can clearly see what manner of thesis a writer supports and what are his supporting arguments. Our perplexed contemporaries would be not a little helped if, in the spirit of Plato's advice to the poets, the thinkers would set down clearly their theories and would then add their arguments or proofs in some unrheterical form. We are even naïf enough to suggest that much of the rhetoric and obscurity of modern philosophical works would be the better for being compressed into a series of syllogisms. At any rate it would be all to the good if philosophers were to adopt some of the noble compression and restraint of the *Summa*, where nothing in the words, style, or structure of the great book delays the reader's approach to the truth. In these days of steel-structured architecture there are lessons to learn from the century which allowed its "Sainte Chapelle" to express its religious sentiment with something of the gossamer lightness of a cloud whilst the *Summa* was expressing its religious philosophy with all the hard solidity of the mountain beneath the cloud.

Perhaps the main motive for venturing to express the masterpiece of St. Thomas in the language of Shakespeare was the desire to make a people naturally religious acquainted with the only religious synthesis yet attempted or accomplished. We have elsewhere

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said that a man's philosophy is not something that he thinks, but everything that he thinks. Knowledge is merely knowledge whilst it is multiple; it becomes philosophy only when it becomes one. The greater the unity, the greater the philosophy. If synthetic unity of thought is *the* test of truth, it was evident to the translators of the *Summa* how deeply the modern mind stood in need of being introduced to St. Thomas. Those of us who may be said to have spent a lifetime in the *Summa* whilst making no claim to have fathomed its depths, grow daily more and more amazed at its unity. Our experience thus verifies, as it were by personal recapitulation, the collective experience of seven centuries of thinkers which has not yet detected one inconsequence in the thought. The modern mind which more and more needs a centre of truth for its ever-widening circumference of discovered truths could not be offered a more timely gift than this vast synthesis of thought from which all new-found truths may radiate and to which for final valuation they must all return.

It may be that a further objective aim, not consciously before the translators, has largely motivated the translation. To some of us it seems that the growing Industrialization of the English-speaking peoples may gradually destroy the human mind's historic culture, which is so dominantly Greek in phraseology and thought. This destruction would not be complete until, under pressure of Industrialism, our historic universities became, in the biting phrase of Giordano Bruno, "widows of sound learning." There are not a few signs, enough for the weatherwise, that this destruction of culture is possible if not imminent. The thought and language of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are threatened even in "the Home of Lost Causes"! But the defeat may be arrested, and perhaps changed into victory by the wisdom of that

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humble student of the Grecian trinity of thinkers,  
St. Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa* has synthesized all  
that was best in the three languages, nailed with the  
Crucified to the Cross.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.



## LOURDES

AMID the deepening combat came a call :  
“ Come thou apart, behold awhile and see  
The battle set, the certain victory,  
And know indeed that God is over all.

“ Know thou and see the menace of the foe  
As broken foam on Peter’s steadfast rock,  
His seeming triumph but an idle mock,  
The mark ordain’d he may not overgo.

“ Know thou and heed His unforsaking care,  
Poor weakling, of thyself and all thy ways,  
Who fashion’d thee and set thy term of days,  
Behold and mark and thou shalt not despair.

“ And I, poor stumbling child, have care of thee.  
Can I forsake whom ne’er my Son forsook ?  
On thee at Lourdes a Mother’s smile shall look,  
And thou return to combat presently.”

H. E. G. ROPE.

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