THE FUTURE OF THOMISM

When the Very Reverend Donald Kraus so kindly invited me address you, I asked him what might be a suitable topic and he suggested, among others, the one I have chosen, The Future of Thomism. However, in accepting this task, despite the title which refers to the future, I am not presuming to don the mantle of a prophet and so I beg you to excuse me if I devote my time, first, to some account of the work of St. Thomas himself, secondly, to the Thomism developed to meet the needs of the classicist period and, thirdly, to the transpositions that are necessary for a contemporary Thomism to be viable. I am afraid that my treatment of these three topics can be no more than sketchy, but I venture to offer such outlines because, I feel, they suggest the appropriate orientation and attitudes, neither simply rejecting the past nor, on the other hand, I trust, falling short of the exigences of the present.

The Work of St. Thomas

The more vital and efficacious religious activity is, the more it infiltrates, penetrates, purifies, transforms a people's symbols and rituals, its language, art, and literature, its social order, its cultural superstructure of science and philosophy, history and theology. So the early Christian church set about transforming the Greco-Roman world. So the medieval church was a principal agent in the formation of medieval society and culture. So the Renaissance church took over the forms of a classicist culture. So today in a world whence classicist culture has vanished, we have before us the task of understanding, assimilating, penetrating, transforming modern culture.

Precisely because this vast problem is ours, we are in an excellent position for appreciating the work of Aquinas. It is true enough that his work commonly is thought of as a theological synthesis or a philosophic synthesis. But besides being a theologian and philosopher St. Thomas was a man of his time meeting the challenge of his time. What he was concerned to do may be viewed as a theological or philosophical synthesis but, if considered more concretely, it turns out to be a mighty contribution towards the medieval cultural synthesis. As in our day so too in his there was a feverish intellectual ferment. As in our day we are somewhat belatedly coming to grips with the implications of the modern sciences and philosophies and bringing our theology and Christian living up to date, so too in his day Western Christendom was being flooded with the then novel ideas of Greek and Arabic science and philosophy. As in our day there is a demand for an aggiornamento of our thinking, so in his there was a demand for an aggiornamento of earlier medieval thought. Such updating, of course, cannot be the work of a single man. St. Thomas had his forerunners, his collaborators, his disciples and followers. But the magnitude and brilliance of his achievement permit us to single him out as the example, the specimen, of what was going forward in his day, namely, discovering, working out, thinking through a new mould for the Catholic mind, a mould in which it could remain fully Catholic and yet be at home with all the good things that might be drawn from the cultural heritage of Greeks and Arabs.

This effort at cultural synthesis is most evident, perhaps, in the four books of the _Contra Gentiles_. Only in the fourth book where he presents distinctively Christian doctrines on the Trinity, the Incarnation, original sin, the sacraments, the resurrection of the body, hell fire, the general judgement, does he proceed deductively from scripture and tradition. Even there he is careful to add the profound analogies that yield some imperfect understanding of the truths of faith and so save the dogmas from being formulae that must be repeated although no one need understand them. But in the first three books deduction from scripture and tradition generally is absent. There speaks the voice of Christian wisdom on God, on creation, on the distinction of creatures, on angels and men, on the last end, the beatific vision, divine providence and divine law, on sin and grace. It is a voice that constantly quotes scripture but it does so usually, not to posit a premiss from which conclusions are to be drawn, but to confirm a position for which many reasons already have been given, whether demonstrative reasons when demonstration is possible, or _rationes convenientiae_, convergent probabilities, where human reason cannot demonstrate.

The goal, at which Aquinas explicitly aimed in this work, was the manifestation of Catholic truth and the exclusion of opposite errors. But it is obvious that he was showing his contemporaries that one could be a master of Greek and Arabic thought and yet use it to present Christian doctrine, that the presentation could extend over five hundred pages of fine print in double columns, that it could be always coherent, always up to the minute, always persuasive and, when the occasion permitted, even demonstrative. St. Thomas wrote against the Gentiles, but he used their own weapons, and he did so so skilfully that he provided his age with a concrete instance in which essential features of Catholic truth and of Greek and Arabic culture were fused into a single, organic whole.

What is conspicuous in the *Contra Gentiles*, is no less to be discerned in his other works. His commentaries on Aristotle not merely reveal his mastery of the text but also bring to light the manner in which Aristotle can be transposed from his Hellenic to a Christian context. His commentaries on Scripture are theological: they express scriptural doctrine in the categories of the theology he was doing so much to develop. The endless *quaestiones* raised in his work on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, in his numerous *Quaestiones disputatae*, and in his *Summa theologiae* put him in the mainstream of medieval thought. For that stream was a stream of *quaestiones*. Peter Abelard in his *Sic et Non* had taken over a technique of the canonists. He listed about one hundred and fifty-eight propositions and with respect to each he adduced authorities to prove from scripture, from the fathers, or from reason both the affirmative and the negative. Gilbert of Porreta had defined that a *quaestio* exists if and only if authorities and arguments can be adduced for both sides of a contradiction, and so traditionally *quaestiones* began with a proof of their existence, with a *Videtur quod non* and a *Sed contra est*. Each question called for a statement of principles of solution and of the application of the principles to each of the authorities invoked. But a series of questions on a single topic, such as De Veritate, De Potentia, De Malo, demanded a coherent set of principles for all solutions on that topic, while a Summa needed a single coherent set relevant to every question that might be raised.

So it was that the development of medieval theology along the lines laid down by the technique of the quaestio created a need and an exigence for a coherent set of theoretical terms and relationships that would make possible coherent solutions to all the problems created by the apparent inconsistencies in scripture and in tradition. This need was met in two steps. The first was to take over Aristotle's organized knowledge of this world. The second was to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural and to conceive the supernatural on the analogy of the naturally known.

I have been endeavoring to depict the work of St. Thomas in its historical setting. It was concerned to carry forward the vast task, initiated over a century previously, of organizing coherently all the data from scripture and tradition. Because it was an organizing of data, of an enormous array of data, it had a marked empirical character; there were no quaestiones unless there was established a conflict between authorities or between authority and reason. On the other hand, the task was not merely empirical; there was sought a coherent organization, and this could be achieved only by the exercise that took the form of taking over Aristotle for things natural and extending Aristotle analogously for things supernatural. Finally, this solution not only enabled theology to attain the goal of intelligentia fidei but also enabled medieval culture to maintain its identity while taking over the products of Greek and Arabic culture.

Classical Thomism

Classical Thomism prided itself on its fidelity to St. Thomas. It met new questions by extending medieval solutions, and it could do so all the more confidently because of its classicist presuppositions. Truth is immutable. Human nature does not change. God has revealed himself once for all in Christ Jesus. It is true enough that times change and that circumstances alter cases. But all such change is accidental. The same eternal principles are equally valid and equally applicable despite the flux of accidental differences.

Along with other Scholastic schools, Thomism cultivated logic. It distinguished different meanings of the same term, and it defined each meaning. It reduced propositions to their presuppositions and worked out their implications. With meanings fixed by definitions, with presuppositions and implications fixed by the laws of logic, there resulted what used to be called eternal verities but today are known as static abstractions.

It derived its notion of science from Aristotle's Posterior Analytics. There is science properly so called, and there is science in some weaker, analogous sense. Properly so called, science consists in the conclusions that follow necessarily from self-evident, necessary principles. In some weaker, analogous sense, science consists in conclusions that follow not necessarily but probably, or its principles may be necessary without being evident to us, or they be not even necessary but only what is fitting, convenient, suitable.

It had much to say on the metaphysics of the soul, but it was little given to psychological introspection to gain knowledge of the subject. Behind this fact there did not lie any neglect of introspection on the part of Aristotle and Aquinas; I believe they hit things off much too accurately for that to be true. The difficulty was, I think, that while Aristotle did practice introspection, still his works contain no account of introspective method. In his De anima Aristotle employed one and the same method for the study of plants, animals, and men. One was to know acts by their objects, habits by acts, potencies by habits, and the essences of souls by their potencies. The procedure was purely objective, and made no explicit mention of direct introspection of acts and of their subject.

Human nature was studied extensively, in a metaphysical psychology, in an enormous and subtle catalogue of virtues and vices, in its native capacities and proneness to evil, in the laws natural, divine, and human to which it was subject, in the great things it could accomplish by God's grace. But such study was not part of some on-going process; everything essential had been said long ago; the only urgent task was to find the telling mode of expression and illustration that would communicate to the uneducated of today the wisdom of the great men of the past. As the study of man was static, so too man was conceived in static fashion. There was no notion that man had existed on earth for hundreds of thousands of years or that they there had been and still was going forward man's ascent from crude primitive cultures, through the ancient high civilizations, to the effective emergence of critical intelligence in the first millenium B. C. and, finally, to the triumph of scientific intelligence in the last few centuries.

Finally, classical Thomism stressed first principles. It did not undertake to give an exhaustive list of all first principles with each of them defined with complete accuracy. But its commitment to logic and to the Aristotelian notion of science was such that to deny first principles was to involve oneself in skepticism while to ignore them was to condemn oneself to superficiality.

Thomism for Tomorrow

A Thomism for tomorrow will involve, in my opinion, first, a shift from the emphases of classical Thomism and, secondly, a revision of the results obtained by medieval theology.

To begin from the second point, the technique of the quaestio aimed at a logically coherent reconciliation of conflicting authorities. It met the demands of human intelligence seeking some understanding of its faith, and it did so in the grand manner. But its scrutiny of the data presented by scripture and tradition was quite insufficient. On the whole it was unaware of history: of the fact that every act of meaning is embedded in a context, and that over time contexts change subtly, slowly, surely. A contemporary theology must take and has taken the fact of history into account. Inasmuch as it does so, St. Thomas ceases to be the arbiter to whom all can appeal for the solution of contemporary questions for, by and large, contemporary questions are not the same as the questions he treated and the contemporary context is not the context in which he treated them. But he remains a magnificent and venerable figure in the history of Catholic thought. He stands before us as a model inviting us to do for our age what he did for his. And, if I may express a personal opinion of my own, a mature Catholic theology of the twentieth century will not ignore him; it will learn very, very much from him; and it will be aware of its debt to him, even when it is effecting its boldest transpositions from the thirteenth century to the twentieth.

What are such transpositions? I have prepared my answer to that question by my list of five emphases of classical Thomism. A Thomism for tomorrow has to move from logic to method, from science as conceived in the Posterior Analytics to science as it is conceived today, from the metaphysics of the soul to the self-appropriation of the subject, from an apprehension of man in terms of human nature to an apprehension of man through human history, and from first principles to transcendental method. Before considering these transitions singly, let me remark in general that they are not exclusive; a transition from logic to method does not drop logic, and similarly in most of the other cases.

First, then, from logic to method. Today we frequently hear complaints about metaphysics as static. But what is static is not metaphysics as such but a logically rigorous metaphysics. Indeed, anything that is logically rigorous is static. Defined terms are abstract and abstractions are immobile. Presuppositions and implications, if rigorous, cannot shift a single iota. Logic embodies an ideal of clarity, coherence, and rigor. It is an ideal that we must ever pursue, but the pursuit is a matter not of logic but of method. A method is a normative pattern of related and recurrent operations. There are operations: for instance, to take the simplest example, in natural science there are observing, describing, defining problems, making discoveries, formulating hypotheses, working out their presuppositions and implications, devising experiments, testing hypotheses by experiments, determining whether the hypothesis so far is satisfactory or already is unsatisfactory, and so proceeding to new questions or to a revision of the hypothesis already made. All such operations are related, for each leads on to the next. They are recurrent, for they form a circle that is repeated over and over and cumulatively extends the mastery of human intelligence over ever broader fields of data. The pattern of such related and recurrent operations is normative, for that is the right way to do the job. Finally, while this pattern includes all logical operations, it also includes many operations that lie outside a formal logic, such as observing, discovering, experimenting, verifying.

Secondly, from the conception of science in the Posterior Analytics to the modern conception of a science. On point after point the two conceptions are opposed. In the Aristotelian notion necessity was a key category; in modern science it is marginal; it has been replaced by verifiable possibility. For the Aristotelian, science is certain; for the modern, science is no more than probable, the best available scientific opinion. For the Aristotelian, causality was material, formal, efficient, exemplary, or final; for the modern, causality is correlation. For the Aristotelian a science was a habit in the mind of an individual; for the modern science is knowledge divided up among the scientific community; no one knows the whole of modern mathematics, of modern physics, of modern chemistry, or modern biology, and so on.

Thirdly, from soul to subject. I do not mean that the metaphysical notion of the soul and of its properties is to be dropped any more than I mean that logic is to be dropped. But I urge the necessity of a self-appropriation of the subject, of coming to know at first hand oneself and one's own operations both as a believer and as a theologian. It is there that one will find the foundations of method, there that one will find the invariants that enable one to steer a steady course, though theological theories and opinions are subject to revision and change. Without such a basis systematic theology will remain what it has been too often in the past, a morass of questions disputed endlessly and fruitlessly.

Fourthly, from human nature to human history. The point here is that meaning is constitutive of human living. Just as words without sense are gibberish, so human living uninformed by human meaning is infantile. Next, not only is meaning constitutive of human living but also it is subject to change; cultures develop and cultures decline; meaning flowers and meaning become decadent. Finally, Christianity is an historical religion; it is a statement of the meaning of human living; it is a redeeming statement that cures decadence and fosters growth.

Fifthly, from first principles to transcendental method. First principles, logically first propositions, are the foundations for a mode of thought that is inspired by logic, by necessity, by objectivity, by nature. But the contemporary context, the tasks and problems of a theology that would deal with the issues of today, call for method, verified possibility, full awareness of the subject, and a thorough grasp of man's historicity. Its foundations lie, not in abstract propositions called first principles, but in the structural invariants of the concrete human subject. When the natural and the human sciences are on the move, when the social order is developing, when the everyday dimensions of culture are changing, what is needed is not a dam to block the stream but control of the river-bed through which the stream must flow. In modern science what is fixed is not the theory or system but the method that keeps generating, improving, replacing theories and systems. Transcendental method is the assault on the citadel: it is possession of the basic method, and all other methods are just so many extensions and adaptations of it.

Finally, let me note that, when such transpositions are effected, theology will be more strictly theology than it has been. The development of method makes an academic discipline stick to its own business.

Method refuses to confuse the task of the theologian with the office of the bishop. Religion is one thing, and theology is another. Religion is necessary for salvation and theology is not. It is the office of the bishop to teach religious truth. It is the task of the theologian to reflect on the religious fact, and it is the task of the Christian theologian to reflect on the Christian religious fact.

Conclusion

You may ask, however, whether the introduction of the five transpositions just outlined would leave anything left of Thomism. And at once I must grant that the five emphases I attributed to classical Thomism would disappear. One may doubt, however, whether such emphases are essential to the thought of St. Thomas or of the great Thomists.

St. Thomas practised a method, the method of the quaestio. The great Thomists practised a method, the method of the commentary.

St. Thomas accepted the Aristotelian ideal of science, but he restricted a theology in accord with that ideal to the mind of God and the minds of the blessed in heaven. His theology was content not to demonstrate but to show how the mysteries of faith might be manifested.

St. Thomas treated of the soul at length, but he said enough about the subject for me to be able to write my Verbum articles.

St. Thomas did not have the modern concern for history and for man's historicity. But St. Thomas was an extraordinarily erudite person, and if one wishes to evade history and historicity, one wishes to live in a world that no longer exists.

Finally, while Aristotle and St. Thomas did not elaborate a transcendental method, they understood its point. This may be illustrated by Aristotle's advice for dealing with skeptics, namely, get them to talk, and by St. Thomas's argument against Averroes: Averroes's position implied the conclusion that <u>this man does not understand</u> and St. Thomas concluded that therefore <u>this man was not to be listened to</u>.

You have been listening long enough. I thank you.