

COMMENTARY ON 24 THESES OF ST THOMAS ENDORSED BY THE SACRED CONGREGATION OF STUDIES

27th July 1914

In a recent paper addressing the abyss between the teaching of the Church's greatest philosopher and theologian and the thinking of neo-Modernist theologians¹, Dr John Lamont referred to a document issued by the *Sacred Congregation of Studies* (as it then was) with the approval of Pope Pius X which summarised certain teachings of St Thomas Aquinas to be held with sacred regard. A study of the document, whose English translation by this commentator is included in the Appendix, may assist those who know little of the teachings of the Angelic Doctor.

Preliminary

The English student of St Thomas is hamstrung in large measure by his own language. English is, as anyone who has endeavoured to master it as a second language knows, a polyglot of tongues (derived from the Angles, the Saxons, the Danes and the Norman French, from old German and from Latin) whose rules are frequently abstruse and often contradictory. It is a rich language for the poet but, regrettably, problematic for the philosopher. It can be a clumsy language in which to express the concepts of that philosophy which adequately reflects reality, the metaphysics of Aristotle amended by St Thomas.

The word which in English signifies something in being, the word *exist, existing*, is a case in point. The very root of the word, the Latin verb *existere*, does not mean 'to be', or 'to exist', but 'to step forth' or, 'to arise', or (by extension) 'to become'. It is a vapid word to convey the rigour required of the critical term 'be'.

Moreover, the verb *to be* in English presents difficulties. We call one who carries out the act *walk* a walker, one who carries out the act *talk*, a talker, the one who *fight*s, a fighter, the one who *think*s, a thinker. Why do we call one who carries out the act of *be*—i.e., one who exists (!!)—a being? Why don't we call him an exist-er, or a be-er? Why do we not call the act he is exercising the *act of be* (*actus essendi*) rather than the vacuous *act of existing*? The appropriate Latin word to signify the act *be* is the infinitive of the verb, *esse*, and the noun derived from it, *ens entis*, being. It is used in English derivatively in *essence, essential*, etc., words which have more to do with the *entity* (there's another) which exercises the *act of be* than the reality *be* itself. The third person singular of the verb to be in English is *he (or she, or it) is*. It would make much more sense if, to carry the infinitive to its logical conclusion, we were to say *he, or she, or it be's*. (I apologise for the apostrophe, but it is the only way one can convey the use of the noun *be* as a verb without obscurity.) By its very obtuseness the English language makes it difficult to comprehend the most fundamental of all distinctions, namely, that between—

[<i>what</i> something is	its <i>essence</i> (quiddity or nature)
[and,	
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[<i>that</i> something is	its <i>be</i> (existence or <i>esse</i>)

¹ *Thomism and Neo-Modernism* at <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2015/01/a-christmastide-gift-for-our-readers.html>, footnote 3.

Esse, as St Thomas remarks, is the act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections. Nothing more fundamental can be said of this thing or that, of the beauty of a girl, for instance, than that *it is* (i.e., it exists in the real), or as we would put it for the budding philosopher, *it be's*.

Commentary

Every discipline has its own terminology, every science, every art ; so, too, does philosophy, and the pity is that with the swamping of the ground upon which sound philosophy was established by the sea of materialism and subjectivism that followed the Protestant Revolt, English speakers lost the true sense of their philosophical terms. The word 'substance', *substantia* in the Latin, signifies *something that stands under* (*stare*, to stand ; *sub*, under). Stands under what ? Its appearances or, as the modern philosopher or scientist might put it, its phenomena. First let us understand, as the *Sacred Congregation* makes clear (in thesis X), that substance is *per se* indivisible "because it is outside the order of dimensions". Here, if only he would allow himself to depart from the strictures of materialism, the citizen of the modern world would discover a great secret : ***the substance of any thing is not material***. Weighed down by the views of the empiricists of his day, Newton abandoned this Aristotelian notion. And, incident to this, he failed to grasp that space, in the sense of void or vacuum, is impossible. He preferred the nostrums of the philosophers of his day to the demands of the principles of logic. For the assertion breaches the principle of non-contradiction. Non-being, by definition, does not, nay *cannot*, exist. This abandonment of principle has only become more entrenched with the passing of the years as materialism and subjectivism and their companion in folly, atheism, have flourished.²

A substance manifests itself to our senses via accidents (a word from the Latin verb, *accidere*, to happen, or to befall). The first accident, on which all others depend, is *quantity* which gives the substance extension, i.e., a body, and parts ordered and subordinated. This accident is what the modern world under the influence of Newton and his successors in science erroneously calls a thing's substance. To make it clear to the budding student of philosophy and of theology that he was not to be misled by the secular thinkers of his age, the *Sacred Congregation* spelt it out in the same thesis X, "[Q]uantity... gives to a material substance extension [,] really differs from (its) substance [,] and is truly... an accident".

An understanding of the reality of this distinction between substance and its first accident, quantity, is probably the most difficult issue for the modern student of metaphysics to grasp. He can only do so if first he has immersed himself in the Doctrine of Causality ; has ruminated over its principles constantly until he reaches the stage where he not only understands the teaching, *but realises it*, i.e., makes it a reality in his intellectual life. This is a most difficult undertaking for anyone who does not sequester himself from the thinking and mores of the modern world.

Here, in summary, is the doctrine. There are four causes of every effect in the world, as in the universe.³ There are no less than four ; there are no more than four. Two of these causes are *extrinsic* to the effect ; two are *intrinsic*. Of the two intrinsic causes one is material and

² There is not a scientist on earth who does not think that space is effectively devoid of any material being. This defect in thinking has warped the scientific grasp of the most basic realities, such as light and the absolute need of a material medium for its passage, such as the assumption, even if there was a 'big bang', that it did not need a place in which it occurred. The modern scientist confuses his imagination with his intellect : he thinks that because one can *imagine* a void—non-being somehow existing—it must exist.

³ Cf, for instance, St Thomas Aquinas's commentary on the *Physics* of Aristotle, II, lecture 10, 240.

the other immaterial. The *substance* of a thing (whose full title is 'substantial form') is the immaterial cause. The substantial form of a thing is much more important than the material cause because it is its form that determines matter to be this thing. And, to insist upon the point to the level of exasperation, **THIS INFLUENCE IS NOT MATERIAL**. An impartial thinker will see immediately the problem for the budding student of metaphysics. He must take a step—must cross a threshold—which all the influences in the modern academic and scientific world clamour against him taking. For they insist that it is impossible that there be a reality which is immaterial. But the truth is the opposite : *most of reality is immaterial*.

But what of the *extrinsic* causes, i.e., the causes not found also in the effect ? The obvious one is the maker, the *efficient* cause (a word from the Latin prefix *ex-* and verb *facere*, to do or make). The less obvious (to modern thinkers) but *the most significant of all* (because without its operation the effect will never exist) is the final cause, the *raison d'être*, the reason why the maker brings the effect into being. The efficient cause is further distinguished according as it is *principal* or *instrumental*. It is distinction the modern thinker is reluctant to make because he feels it in his bones, and rightly, that should he once admit it he would expose the philosophy to which he subscribes to ridicule. The materialist is *eo ipso* atheist, at least inchoately, just as the atheist is a materialist.

Aristotle thought the world eternal in its revolution of coming and going, of becoming and passing away. St Thomas insisted, consistent with Divine revelation, that it had a beginning.⁴ So he posed a question Aristotle had not considered : *Why is there something rather than nothing?* There is much more to reality than the issue of the essences (*essentia*) of the infinite variety of material things; there is the significantly more important issue of their *ens*, their *be*, or existence. The distinction between form and matter is Aristotle's, the distinction between essence and be belongs to St Thomas. The essence of a thing CAN BE. It is another matter entirely that it DOES BE. Here we discover St Thomas's doctrine of potency and act.

Act derives from the Latin, *actus*. The word signifies 'does-[be]-ness'. Potency (or power; capacity; capability) derives from the Latin *potentia* which signifies 'can-be-ness'. A man exercising the act *walk*, does-walk. He exercises a power (potency) implicit in his nature. It is a power a tree cannot exercise because a tree lacks the power of locomotion. The child, Tom, is not a mathematician but has the *potency* to be one. The dog, Spot, is not a mathematician, nor will he ever be *because he lacks the potency*. Hence, though it be as yet undeveloped, the child has something real which the dog lacks. Hence, potency is not just something nominal, something mental : it names *a reality*. This is what underlies thesis VIII.

Now, if be, *esse*, *actus essendi*, is the act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections, could it be that there is a being—a BEING—which (or who) is its own act of existence ? Whose very essence is to be ? What did the Almighty say to Moses when (*Exodus* 3: 13 et seq.) Moses asked Him : "Who shall I say has sent me ?" He responded, "Tell them that He Who Is has sent me to you." God defined Himself : "I am Who am." Let us listen to Thomas

⁴ Something, be it noted, which has now been confirmed by science.

Merton in one of his early (and more lucid) moments as he comments on his discovery of this reality in Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* :

“[One] concept I got out of its pages was to revolutionize my whole life. It is contained in one of those dry compounds that the scholastic philosophers were so prone to use : the word *aseitas*... *Aseitas* simply means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, requiring no cause, no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is to exist. There can be only one such being : that is, God.”⁵

Thesis XXIII puts the issue in summary form.

It is clear, then, that when *being* is said of God, it does not mean what is meant by *being* when said of a creature. Were it so, the term would be used univocally, as for instance, the word 'horse' is used univocally of Phar Lap, Bernborough and Makybe Diva. In each of these it signifies the possession of a character simply the same, namely, a creature possessed of the same nature. We use analogy frequently but are often quite unconscious that we are doing so. The word 'good', for instance, has dramatically different applications when used of food, of one's health, and of one's moral character. The word 'being' is another. When used of a creature it does not signify the same character as when it is used of God. There is some sameness, it is true, but there is un-sameness and, critically, *there is more un-sameness than sameness*. For in the one it signifies 'possessor of be (or existence)', something contingent ; in the other it signifies 'He who is be', the one necessary Being, the being that cannot be-not. This is what the Sacred Congregation was adverting to in thesis IV when it referred to St Thomas's teaching concerning analogy.

Every created thing is both *contingent* and *dependent*. It is, but it can be-not for it does not keep itself in existence. But neither does it provide itself with its internal organisation or with those elements which, moment by moment, it needs for its existence. It depends constantly on the influence of its Author (its Creator) for its continuance, which part of creation is called *conservation*, as it does for the many goods essential to this continuance. Hence, the terms of theses V and XXIV.

Thesis XIII highlights the reality of the division of the natural world into things living and non-living. Every material thing is a composite of form and matter. But in living things that form, the soul, is responsible also for its life. The comment of Aristotle on this reality is profound : “Among living things to live is the same as to be”. The implications are obvious : take from a rabbit its life and you also take from it its *actus essendi* (its *be* or existence). The corollary is that whatever gives life to a living thing also gives it *be*. But man can create, nothing ; he is, after all, only a creature himself. Hence, man will never create life. There is another corollary which exposes the folly of the modern habit of mocking creation. An act of creation occurs whenever a living thing arises from its seed. *Every conception is an act of creation*. Creation is going on millions of times every day throughout the world. The fact that the Almighty has so ordained things that instrumental causes facilitate His creative acts is irrelevant. Instruments cannot create ; they are but means to an end.

⁵ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York, 1948. Published in Great Britain with certain excisions and editing by Evelyn Waugh as *Elected Silence*, London (Burns & Oates), 1949 ; my copy, *Elected Silence*, 1969 reprint, at p. 92. The word was contrived, it would seem, from *ab + se + ire* (*ab*, from ; *se*, self ; *ire*, the verb to go or to proceed)

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The 24 theses contain much more besides, including the distinction between the mere brute animal and the rational animal (man) and the distinctive character of intellect as the power to grasp universals which the modern academic loves to mock, even as he enjoys its exercise. But this is quite enough to be going on with.

Until we get, once again, a pope who is a metaphysician, one who is prepared to resurrect the Church's philosophy, the philosophy of St Thomas, to endorse these theses and to insist they be taught in every seminary and house of religious formation, the Catholic faithful will continue to languish in ignorance of the immense riches of the Church's intellectual patrimony.

Michael Baker

18th February, 2015—*Ash Wednesday*

APPENDIX

SACRED CONGREGATION OF STUDIES

DECREE OF APPROVAL OF SOME THESES OF THE DOCTRINE OF ST THOMAS AQUINAS AND PROPOSED TO THE TEACHERS OF PHILOSOPHY

AFTER OUR MOST HOLY LORD Pope Pius X by His Motu Proprio *Doctoris Angelici*, of June 29, 1914, prescribed for their welfare that in all schools of philosophy the principles and major pronouncements of Thomas Aquinas be held in a holy manner, not a few masters from diverse Institutions proposed some theses for this Sacred Congregation to examine, which they themselves had been accustomed to hand down and defend as required according to the chief principles of the saintly teacher, especially in the subject of metaphysics.

This Sacred Congregation, having duly examined the aforementioned theses and presented them to our most holy lord, by the mandate of the same, His Holiness, replies that they plainly contain those principles and major pronouncements of the holy Doctor.

They are as follows—

- I. Potency and act so divide being [*ens*], that whatever is, is either pure act or coalesces necessarily from potency and act as its first and intrinsic principles.
- II. Act, as perfection, is not limited but by potency, which is a capacity for perfection. Hence, in whatever order act is pure, it is unlimited and unique ; where, however, it is finite and multiplex it is limited through composition with potency.
- III. Wherefore God subsists by reason of be its very self as one alone, one most simply, through which all other things participate in being under the constraint of nature and constituted really existent through distinct principles of essence and be.

IV. Be [*ens*], which is denominated from *esse*, is not said of God and creatures univocally ; yet neither is it said of them entirely equivocally, but analogically and by an analogy both of attribution and of proportionality.

V. Moreover, in every creature there is a real composition of the subsisting subject with forms, or accidents, which have been added secondarily : but if these were not really received in a distinct essence, this composition could not be understood.

VI. Apart from the accidents simply so called [*be-in*], there is the accident of relation or *be-towards*. For though *be-towards* does not signify in its reason anything inherent, yet it often has a cause, and for that reason has a reality distinct from its subject.

VII. A spiritual creature is entirely simple in its essence. Yet there remains within it composition of essence with be, and of substance with accidents.

VIII. But let it be noted a corporeal creature as regards its very essence is composed of potency and act, and these, in the order of essence are designated by the names *matter* and *form*.

IX. Neither of these parts has be through itself, nor is it produced or corrupted through itself, nor is it posited in a predicament, save inasmuch as it is a principle of a substance.

X. Even though extension into integral parts follows on corporeal nature, yet it is not the same for a body that it be a substance and that it be extended. A substance is, of course, indivisible, not indeed after the manner of a point but according as it is outside the order of dimensions. But quantity which gives to a material substance extension really differs from the substance and is truly called an accident.

XI. The principle of individuation, that is, of numerical distinction—which cannot be in pure spirits—of one individual from another in the same specific nature, is matter marked by quantity.

XII. By the same [accident] quantity is it effected that a body may be encompassed in place and that it be able to be in one place only in this manner, under whatsoever potency.

XIII. Bodies are twofold : some are living some non-living. Among living bodies there is a part which is moved and a part, the substantial form, which moves ; this form is designated *the soul* and requires organs duly disposed or heterogeneous parts.

XIV. Vegetative and sensitive bodies do not subsist through themselves nor are they produced through themselves, but live and exist only as the principle by which the living thing lives and exists and, since they are fundamentally dependent upon matter, should the compound be corrupted, by that very fact *per accidens* they are corrupted.

XV. Contrary to this, the human soul created by God when infused into a sufficiently disposed subject, and by nature incorruptible and immortal, subsists through itself.

XVI. The rational soul is so united to the body as to be its unique substantial form : through it a man is constituted man, animal and living, as well as body, substance and being. Hence, the soul gives to a man every essential grade of perfection as well as communicating to his body the act of be whereby it is its very self.

XVII. From the human soul there emanate naturally the faculties of its twofold order, organic and inorganic : the prior faculties, i.e., the senses, are rooted in the composite being, the latter in the soul alone. Hence the faculty of intellect is intrinsically independent of any organ.

XVIII. Intellectuality follows necessarily on immateriality and thus the grades of intellectuality are determined by the grades of removal from matter. The adequate object of the intellect is being taken in common ; but in the state of union of body and soul, the proper formal object of the human intellect is the quiddity [i.e. essence, nature] of things abstracted from their material conditions.

XIX. We accept, therefore, the cognition of sensible things. But since a sensible thing is not intelligible in act, apart from the intellect formally understanding there must be in the soul an active power which abstracts the intelligible species from phantasms.

XX. Through these species we know universals directly. The singulars we attain by sense, as also through the intellect considering the phantasms of things. The cognition of spiritual things, however, is achieved by the intellect through analogy.

XXI. The will does not precede but follows the intellect [as its proper appetite] and appetises what the intellect presents to it among the variety of things that may satisfy it, and from among these many goods it chooses freely from those the mutable judgement proposes as desirable. It follows, accordingly, that the choice falls to the last practical judgement and it is the last to which the will gives effect.

XXII. We neither perceive God's being by immediate intuition, nor can we demonstrate it *a priori* but we may do so *a posteriori*, that is through those things which have been made with an argument proceeding from effects to cause : namely, *from things which are moved* to the principle of their movement and the First Immovable Mover ; *from the progression of mundane things* from causes that are subordinate to one another to a First Un-caused Cause ; *from corruptible things* which hold themselves equally as regards being and non-being to the absolutely necessary Being ; *from those things which be, live and understand* more and less according to the lesser perfections of being, living and understanding, to Him who is supreme in the order of intelligence, the order of living, and chiefly, the order of being ; and, finally, *from order in the universe* to the separated Intellect which has ordered and arranged all things and directed them to an end. [*Emphasis added to assist clarity.*]

XXIII. The Divine Essence, through this that it is identified with the exercised act of its own be, or through this that it is itself Subsistent Be, is rightly proposed to us in its metaphysical reasoning and in this same reasoning the infinity of its perfection is demonstrated.

XXIV. God is distinguished from all finite things by the very purity of His being. From this there is inferred, first, that the world could not have proceeded from God without being created, next that the creative virtue by which a thing exercises the act of be is not communicable to any finite nature, and finally, that no created agent influences the be of any effect whatsoever except as a consequence of the movement of the First Cause.

Given at Rome, 27th July 1914

B. Cardinal Lorenzilli, Prefect

Ascensus Dandini, a Secretis

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