Saint Thomas Aquinas: "The Apostle of Common Sense"[1]

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GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON (1874–1936) tackled the arduous task of interpreting Saint Thomas Aquinas a decade after the renowned British essayist had penned his thoughts about Saint Francis of Assisi. As Guy Bedouelle notes above, the "life" of the troubadour of God was published just a year after Chesterton came into (what today we call) full communion with the Catholic Church. However, even before his conversion to Catholicism, Chesterton had grown to love Francis of Assisi.

The "lonely man" of Assisi, who had upset established orders both domestic and ecclesial, exercised a strong pull on the young Chesterton, at least since the 1890s, a period when decadence in European society had achieved almost a certain respectability. Americans still glamorize the "Gay 90s." Oscar Wilde's disgrace in the British police courts, however, marks a turning point in this trajectory of misspent energy, though not the end of elite European intellectuals' flirtation with the culture of Transgression. At the same time, not a few of *le beau monde* learned to sympathize with Wilde's lament in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: "How else but through a broken heart/May Lord Christ enter in?" By the time in 1900 when Wilde dies a Catholic in Paris, Chesterton already is waxing rhapsodically on the "inconsistency in the position of St. Francis."[2]

More than two decades later, in July 1922, Chesterton followed Wilde's death-bed example. But unlike Oscar Wilde, Chesterton discovered happily

[1] For the French version of this article, see "Thomas d'Aquin, apôtre du sens commun," *Pierre d'Angle* 13 (2007): 49–56.

[2] In a 1 December 1900 article in *The Speaker, the Liberal Review*, a London publication that appeared under this title from 1899.

that the Catholic Church affords a good place in which not only to die but also to live. It nonetheless took Chesterton another ten years or thereabouts to explore the other side of the Catholic mystery and ethos. He had been drawn first by Dionysus, by the inconsistency of Saint Francis, half-troubadour and half-friar (what Chesterton imprecisely refers to as a "monk"), but the author of *Orthodoxy*, inspired perhaps by the sunburst found on baroque portrayals of Thomas Aquinas, found his *quies* in Apollo. Chesterton embodies greatness, as a man and as an author. So it would be unfair to pigeonhole him into categories as neat and narrow as those evoked by the Dionysiac and the Apollonian. At the same time, his 1933 *Saint Thomas Aquinas* demonstrates that Chesterton came to both appreciate and champion the capacity of the common man to know something for sure, what he calls, "the conclusion of common sense."[3] Were he to have known that the first Christians adapted representations of Apollo to depict Christ, Chesterton would have found no trouble grasping the symbolic transposition.[4]

The inter-war years in Great Britain were dominated by epistemological outlooks other than those espoused by Thomas Aquinas. Chesterton therefore was keen to clear up mythologies that colored the way that just about everybody, in this period marked by both hubristic science and uncertain politics, esteemed the overall worth of medieval writers. Like earlier Enlightenment thinkers, Chesterton's contemporaries, so he tells us, considered the Schoolmen "all crabbed and mechanical medieval bores."[5] They were dismissed as "unscientific." By the time that he penned these words, Chesterton had already begun to intuit that Aquinas possessed and proceeded upon a view of science different than what had become regarded as the only kind of science, namely modern, inductive science. What today

[3] G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas/Saint Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 138. Chesterton's book on Aquinas was first published in 1933 (New York: Sheed & Ward, Inc.). The first French translation, by Maximilien Vox, with a preface by Stanislaus Gillet, O.P., appeared in 1935, a year before Chesterton's death: *Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Plon, 1935). Martin Stanislaus Gillet, a Frenchman, was the seventy-eighth master general of the Order of Friars Preachers (1929–46). References in this essay are to the Ignatius Press edition (San Francisco, 2002), with an introduction by Ralph McInerny, which combines in one volume Chesterton's chapters on Aquinas with those on Saint Francis.

[4] There is a representation of Christ as the sun-god Apollo riding in his chariot in a third-century mosaic on the ceiling of the tomb of the Roman clan the Julii in the Vatican scavi under St. Peter's Basilica.

[5] Chesterton, *Aquinas*, 143. Gillet, in his preface, observes: "Un des grands mérites de Chesterton, dans le portrait qu'il vient de tracer se saint Thomas, consiste précisément dans l'art avec lequel il a replacé saint Thomas dans son milieu, en plein moyen âge, non le moyen âge que la Renaissance a volontairement obscurci, mais celui que l'histoire a remis en lumière" (Gillet, preface to *Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, iv).

we call "research." Chesterton's embrace of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church helped him to see that the human mind is made for and so wants to possess more than a collection of logically interconnected probabilities. Chesterton had moved far beyond the seduction of Nietzsche's 1872 critique of the Apollonian in *The Birth of Tragedy*, a text that Nietzsche himself later disparaged as smelling "offensively Hegelian."[6]

A decade of Catholic belief and practice brought Chesterton to understand why the early Christians found reasons to use the symbols of Apollo, though never those of Dionysus, to represent Jesus Christ. Just as the Charioteer of the Sun brought the light of the new day, so the Son of God brings a new light of Truth. Chesterton above all praises Aquinas for his ability to recognize this Truth. When it comes to discovering Truth, we face, as Chesterton sees it, two options. Put simply, "in this world there is nothing except a syllogism—and a fallacy."[7] Chesterton's Catholic life taught him to appreciate the importance of right thinking for everyday life. No wonder author Dale Ahlquist has dubbed Chesterton "The Apostle of Common Sense."[8]

By the 1930s, the Leonine renewal of Thomism had begun to take off, at least in the Catholic countries of Europe. Although Dominican Father Gerald Vann (1906–1963) would not publish his own essay on Thomas Aquinas until 1940, renewed interest in Friar Thomas D'Aquino had begun to gain ground in England since the return in 1921 of the Dominicans to Oxford.[9] Chesterton would also have learned about Aquinas from his close association with the Distributist-movement community at Ditchling, whose circle included, besides his close friends Hillaire Belloc and Dominican Father Vincent McNabb, the nowadays controversial artist Eric Gill, who would one day sculpt Chesterton's gravestone. It stands today at his burial site in the Catholic cemetery in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire.

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Saint Thomas Aquinas is not about St. Thomas Aquinas. The American philosopher and novelist Ralph McInerny even wonders how Chesterton

[6] See Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 270.

[7] Chesterton, *Aquinas*, 142.

[8] Dale Ahlquist, *G. K. Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense* (Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 2001).

[9] Gerald Vann, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (London: Hague & Gill Ltd, 1940). For further information on the revival of interest in Aquinas in early twentieth-century England, see Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Dominican Gallery: Portrait of a Culture* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1997), 11: "In the later 1920s the [Dominican] priory [in London] was irregularly attended by a number of the Catholic *literati* of the period such as Maurice Baring, Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton."

ever acquired so much intuition into the significance of Aquinas.[10] For it is highly doubtful that Chesterton had actually devoted much time to reading Aquinas or to studying Thomism. In fact, it is reported that Chesterton began the book without the benefit of extended research. The volume is dedicated to Chesterton's secretary, Dorothy Collins, who told one of his early biographers, Maisie Ward, that Chesterton had dictated the first half of the book to her before he asked her to go to London and to buy up whatever books may be available about Aquinas.[11] Picture this poor woman rummaging through the bookstores of London in the early 1930s—when *entre-deux-guerres* intellectuals like Christopher Isherwood and W. H. Auden were courting the transgressive decadence that many savants of the late nineteenth century had the good sense eventually to eschew—asking for books on Thomas Aquinas. She must have come back with a few. In the later chapters of his *pensées* on Aquinas, Chesterton cites some prominent figures of the early twentieth-century Thomist revival. At the same time, this does not mean that Chesterton missed the point. On the contrary, one of the giants of Leonine Thomism, Étienne Gilson, said that he was spot on; indeed, he esteemed Chesterton's *Saint Thomas Aquinas* as one of the best presentations of the Dominican teacher. Like the French Father Gillet, the Frenchman Gilson was in a position to know.[12]

Chesterton found in Aquinas just what the doctor ordered for the several malaises that affected the inter-war generation of Western Europe. Two major documents of the Pontificate of Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) exercised influence upon him: the 15 May 1891 Encyclical Letter on Capital and Labor, *Rerum Novarum*, and the earlier 4 August 1879 Encyclical Letter on the Restoration of Christian Philosophy, *Aeterni Patris*. It is generally accepted that Chesterton's attachment to the socio-economic doctrine of Distributivism grew out of his reading of the former, whereas his evident appreciation for Thomist moderate realism developed as a result of the latter. He stood up staunchly for Aquinas even before Catholic intellectuals, such as the accomplished Jesuit theologian Martin Cyril D'Arcy (1888–1976), opted to become "Thomists." Chesterton was always spot on. For instance, he wryly observes that Father D'Arcy chose to point out some "remarkable differences" between St. Thomas and Hegel in this way: "For St. Thomas it is impossible that contradictories should exist together, and again reality and intelligibility correspond, but a thing must first be, to

[10] See Ralph McInerny, introduction to *Aquinas*, 9.

[11] See Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), 619.

[12] Étienne Gilson provided an endorsement for Chesterton's volume: "I consider it being without possible comparison the best book ever written on St. Thomas."

be intelligible."[13] This erudite comparison of Hegel and Aquinas provides Chesterton with his opening for the best line in the whole book: "Let the man in the street be forgiven," retorts Chesterton, "if he adds that the 'remarkable difference' seems to him to be that St. Thomas was sane and Hegel was mad."[14]

Chesterton wrote *Saint Thomas Aquinas* during a period when people generally tended to oppose faith and reason. Scientific people thought that reason is sufficient. Believing people were persuaded that reason is alien. Chesterton tried to address both audiences. He was especially keen to explain how Aquinas took on the errors of Latin Averroism. Chesterton's success at the task stands as another testimony to his genius.

Recall that about one hundred years ago in 1907, Pope Saint Pius X published his encyclical letter *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, which set in motion within the Church the anti-Modernist measures that lasted until the eve of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. *Pascendi* and its companion decree from the Holy Office, *Lamentabili*, defended the authenticity of divinely revealed truths that were unavailable to reason, and thus strengthened Catholics to resist the hubris of religious scientism and of other "researchers."[15] Unfortunately, neither Pius X nor his successor, Benedict XV, was able to stabilize the uncertain political environment that pushed old Europe into the First World War. In 1914, Chesterton suffered physical and psychological exhaustion.

The Condemnation of Modernism helped Chesterton to realize that Catholic faith and the act of belief that sustains it require vigilance. At the same time, he was too smart to renounce thinking about the faith in favor of a blind acceptance of whatsoever came his way from even ecclesiastical authorities. Thomas Aquinas gave him the model both for believing what is revealed and for pondering what faith teaches. There is something prophetic about Chesterton's 1933 book on Aquinas. It clearly anticipates what Pope John Paul said of the Common Doctor in the 1995 encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*: "Although he made much of the supernatural character of faith, the Angelic Doctor did not overlook the importance of its reasonableness; indeed he was able to plumb the depths and explain the meaning of this reasonableness."[16] The words come from Pope John Paul II. They also could have been composed by Gilbert Keith Chesterton. Just

[13] Martin D'Arcy as quoted by Chesterton in *Aquinas*, 135.

[14] Chesterton, *Aquinas*, 135.

[15] Chesterton entered the Roman Church twenty-five years after the condemnation of the Anglo-Irish Jesuit George Tyrrell, for whom Scholasticism was a relic from a bygone age with no relevance to the modern world.

[16] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §43.

as at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, popes had to defend the reality of supernatural faith, so at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, popes have found it necessary to defend man's capacity to reason. Aquinas did both.

It is strange that a book like *Thomas Aquinas* written almost seventy-five years ago still sells in bookshops. Again, there is something prophetic about G. K. Chesterton. For example, his views on Islam today make for very interesting reading. Chesterton's *Saint Thomas Aquinas* provides a balanced address to questions no person of good will and bright intelligence can avoid. They make up the recurrent questions that human existence forces upon every member of the race: for example, about God, about the goal of human existence, about personal immortality. Chesterton holds that Saint Thomas Aquinas in his own writings presents a perennial, indeed an everlasting, philosophy that will not disappoint those who take the time to discover what he says.

Chesterton remains careful to point out that he is presenting Aquinas's philosophy. Today there are those who suggest that Aquinas may not have thought of himself as doing philosophy. I would be surprised to see that this opinion persuades many perceptive people who read, for example, the Thomist commentaries on Aristotle. At the same time, there abides a kernel of truth in the above-mentioned, overwrought proposal. Let Chesterton have the last word, and let him explain what he considers the key to Aquinas's philosophical genius. "I emphasize, even in the first few pages, the fact that there is a sort of purely Christian humility and fidelity underlying Aquinas's philosophic realism. St. Thomas could as truly say, of having seen merely a stick or a stone, what St. Paul said of having seen the rending of the secret heavens. 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.' For though the stick or the stone is an earthly vision, it is through them that St. Thomas finds his way to heaven; and the point is that he is obedient to the vision; he does not go back on it."[17] N V

[17] Chesterton, *Aquinas*, 162.

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