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Abp DiNoia: Thomas Jefferson & Thomas Aquinas

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Distinctly Catholic

As part of the festivities inaugurating Teresa Sullivan as the new President of the University of Virginia, Archbishop J. Augustine DiNoia, O.P., Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship gave a talk at an inter-faith prayer service held at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Charlottesville. Of course, at first blush, we might think that Thomas Jefferson, who founded UVA, must be rolling over in his grave at the prospect of a Catholic leading his university, even more so at the idea of a Vatican Archbishop coming to Charlottesville to participate in the festivities! But, as Archbishop DiNoia demonstrates, the fraternity of scholars crosses the ages and many other, and lesser, boundaries in his remarks "Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Aquinas: An Imagined Encounter." Here is the text:

Imagine if the great Dominican theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas were to come here to Charlottesville to meet another great thinker whose given name he shared. What if the two Thomases, Aquinas and Jefferson, were, through some suspension of time, to dine together?

The potential difficulties of this imagined encounter spring immediately to mind, especially if the conversation were to turn to the subject of religion! Mr. Jefferson famously re-wrote the New Testament, expunging all the miracles and doctrinal claims. For Aquinas, seeking the intelligibility of doctrine was his life?s calling and, as to miracles, he might well have considered Jefferson?s genius at least something of a miracle.

But for all their differences of time and belief, Jefferson and Aquinas had similar minds. Sir Isaiah Berlin begins his justly famous essay on Tolstoy by recalling a fragment of Greek poetry which read: ?The fox knows many things. The hedgehog knows one big thing.? While admitting the danger of oversimplification, Berlin suggests that we can recognize two distinct ways of knowing in the great minds of history: those who, like the fox, focus on the many and the varied, and those who, like the hedgehog, concern themselves with one great thought or insight. Berlin counts Shakespeare, Aristotle, Erasmus, Goethe, Pushkin and Joyce among the foxes, and Plato, Dante, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky and Ibsen among the hedgehogs. Our Thomases were consummate foxes. For all their differences of opinion and belief, each had a remarkably similar cast of mind. In part, this explains the wide range of the questions they both posed and answered. Of one thing we can be certain about our imagined dinner conversation: it would not have been boring.

Jefferson might well have served macaroni and a bottle of Nebbiolo wine to his distinguished Italian guest, but French would almost certainly have been their medium of communication. Although both were also quite comfortable in Latin, French they would have known as a conversational language and, while Aquinas? medieval French would have differed from the French of Jefferson?s day, they could have made themselves understood.

French might have also suggested itself because of their surroundings. If they were dining at Monticello, Jefferson might have explained that his beautiful home was modeled in part on the Palais de Salm, in Paris, a city they both knew. That palace was not yet built when Thomas Aquinas was there in the thirteenth century, of

course, but the classical architecture which it evoked would have been quite familiar to both men. Indeed, the two men might have first met not at Monticello, but here on campus. In 1824, when the Marquis de Lafayette came to Charlottesville, a great banquet in his honor was held at the Rotunda. Had Aquinas been feted there too, he would have recognized the building, modeled after the Pantheon, which he knew from his time in Rome, a city Jefferson never visited but whose buildings he knew from architectural drawings.

These architectural affinities might have served as a conversation starter, but they point to another affinity, an intellectual affinity that might have pervaded their conversation. Both men looked to the ancients for inspiration and learning. Neither was hampered by that vanity unique to our own culture, with its protean, self-made sensibilities, which assumes that we have nothing to learn from the past. Both men wrestled, neither of them slavishly, with the intellectual greats of the past. Aquinas, of course, saw himself very consciously as part of an intellectual and spiritual tradition, while Jefferson certainly saw as much to overcome in tradition as to be enshrined. But Jefferson, too, functioned within the intellectual tradition of Western civilization. Both were free of the crippling effects of the kind of contemporary hermeneutic of suspicion that forms part of our intellectual legacy. It would be a grave misreading of Jefferson to interpret his commitment to rationality, his condemnation of superstition, and his intolerance for religious dogma as harbingers of this skepticism. This was a man who did not reject the possibilities of reason, but relished them.

Both Thomases sought to purify the intellectual discourse of their day with new insights, but neither man ever denied the possibility that human reason can and must work out for itself basic ideas of justice, of morality, and of human flourishing. Contemplating our dull and conformist consumerism, both Thomases would have concurred in the judgment that a man committed to the life reason would be more readily able to resist the subtle slavery to merely materialistic yearnings.

In the course of their conversation, Jefferson might well have offered the witness of this institution itself?the University of Virginia?to counter any impression of skepticism prompted by a few stray sentences among his writings. Jefferson was more proud of his work founding this university than he was of being President of the United States. A man who is not committed to the proposition that human reason is capable of ascertaining the truth of things, of penetrating into the mysteries of nature and articulating the premises for justice and moral decency?we can imagine him saying to Aquinas?such a man does not found a university dedicated to the transmission of human knowledge and wisdom.

Thomas Aquinas was equally committed to university life. To be sure, when Thomas taught at the University of Paris, universities were themselves something of a novelty. The University of Paris was more than 500 years old when Jefferson established this great university in Charlottesville. But, Thomas Aquinas, like Thomas Jefferson, was not content merely to gain knowledge, he wished to share it and dedicated himself to a life of teaching as well as learning.

The desire to share knowledge, and not just to acquire it, exhibits not only a conviction shared by our two Thomases, but a shared virtue. Each understood, albeit in very different ways, that his prodigious gifts were not solely at his own disposal but were intended by their very nature to be shared. Aquinas would have located that desire to share his knowledge in human nature which was, in turn, rooted in the very essence of the Trinitarian God he worshipped. Jefferson likewise would have recognized the desire to share his knowledge in human nature, and would have seen that nature as rooted in a less personal God, but in a God who created the universe nonetheless.

Indeed, the first thing we learn about God in the Bible is that He is the Creator. Jefferson understood his deistic God in similar terms. For all the differences in their understanding of the Godhead, perhaps it is here that we find in both men something that made them godly: They used their talents and energy to create. So far from despairing at the injustices and cruelties of human existence, both men recognized the goodness of life and

sought to create ways to better understand their fellow men, to provide the intellectual architecture for a just and decent society, and to pass this on to future generations. They would have rejected, albeit not without reasoned argument, the nihilism and relativism that pervade our culture. If it turned on these issues, their conversation would surely have been a lively one.

Here this evening, inspired by these two great Thomases, we commit ourselves to rigorous and hopeful intellectual endeavors, and, in this interfaith vigil at the Church of St. Thomas Aquinas, we unite in calling God?s blessing on Dr. Teresa Ann Sullivan, the new president of Mr. Jefferson?s University. Jefferson and Aquinas, I think, would be pleased.

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