

THE STUDY OF GOD

By

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THE subject of our Summer School this year is put down quite simply as “GOD.” You will have a number of papers dealing with various aspects of the subject. Some of the speakers will put before you the proofs of God’s existence. Others will discuss His nature and attributes and so forth. But it seems desirable first of all to consider a few preliminary questions, and to get some general ideas of the proper methods of the study of God.

Now the first question that arises is: Why should we make a special study of God? What advantages are we likely to gain from it? Have we not all a sufficient knowledge of God in the simple truths of faith which we learnt long ago in the Catechism? What is the advantage of going more deeply into the matter, and studying it all in such detail?

The answer seems to be twofold. In the first place we live today in England among people who have largely lost the true idea of God. Most non-Catholics will still tell you, if you ask them, that they believe in God. But their notions of God are generally very vague and often quite erroneous. They do not believe in God in the same sense as we do, and they have no accurate ideas of what we mean by God. So far has the drift gone since the majority of the people of England fell away from the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. The differences between us and them are no longer merely questions of the relation of faith to good works, or the nature of the Church, or the number of the sacraments. They go much deeper than that. They are fundamental differences as to the very being and nature of God.

If therefore we are to be ready to give an intelligible account of our faith to those who ask, and to defend it as we ought, we must first of all get clear in our own minds what the Catholic idea of God is, how it differs from other current ideas, and on what reasonable grounds it is based.

But, apart from the necessity of thus justifying and defending our faith, there is another and more fundamental reason why it is profitable to go as deeply into the study of God as our opportunities will allow. It is simply that union with God in love is the end for which we were created. But we cannot love and seek to attain what we do not know. It is essential, therefore, to have some knowledge of God at the outset. No doubt the only knowledge that is strictly necessary in this world is a quite simple knowledge of the truths of faith. But on the other hand it is evident that the more we can learn about God the better. The more we know of Him the more we shall love Him, and the more fervently we shall seek to attain Him.

That is why St. Thomas says that the study of God is the only study which can be called wisdom in the fullest sense of the word. People who are learned in some particular science or art may be called wise in a limited sense. They have wisdom of a partial kind. But true wisdom is the knowledge of that which is the first beginning and last end of the whole universe, and that is God

And so he says that the study of wisdom, thus defined, is among all the studies of men the most perfect, the most sublime, the most useful and the most pleasant. It is the most perfect, because in so far as a man gives himself to the study of wisdom, to that extent he enjoys already some portion of true happiness. Hence the Wise Man says: “Blessed is the man that shall dwell in wisdom.” It is the most sublime because by it man comes closest to the likeness of God, “who hath made all things in wisdom.” Hence, because likeness is the cause of love, so the study of wisdom specially unites us with God in friendship, and so it is said in the Book of Wisdom that “she is an infinite treasure to men, which they that use become the friends of God.” It is the most useful, because by this same wisdom we arrive at the realm of immortality. “The desire of wisdom shall lead to an everlasting Kingdom.” It is the most pleasant, because “her conversation hath no bitterness, nor her company any weariness, but gladness and joy.”

Our next preliminary question is as to the means that we have of knowing God. And in fact there are two distinct ways by which, in this world, we can know God. The first is by the use of reason, and the second is by revelation.

Apart from revelation the only means we have in this world of knowing God is by reasoning from created things. It is necessary in these days to insist upon this, because non-Catholic writers are getting more and more confused about these elementary truths. Over and over again you find the most eminent Protestant writers saying that it is impossible to prove the existence of God by reason. They say that reason can only lead to a probability, and that you must accept the fact of God’s existence by faith. That is, in the literal sense of the word, preposterous—putting the cart before the horse. But then they do not

know what faith is. To us the statement that you can only have a conviction of God's existence by faith is an evident contradiction, because faith (i.e., divine faith) means believing a thing because God has said it. Therefore you cannot make any act of faith until you have been convinced by reason, first that God exists, and secondly that God has spoken. But to them faith seems to mean believing just a little more than you can prove, without having any particular reason for doing so—a wholly irrational proceeding.

For us, however, there can be no question. Any particular proofs of God's existence may or may not seem to us personally convincing. When we have heard a detailed exposition of the proofs, we may be inclined to say with the rustic, who had just been listening to a very learned sermon on this subject: "Well, no doubt it was a very fine sermon, but in spite of it all I still believe there be a God." The fact is, of course, that it is by reason and reason alone, that we are convinced of God's existence. Only our reasoning is of the rough and ready kind that we are accustomed to call instinctive. We are sure of the conclusion, and yet we could not put the process of reasoning, by which we arrive at it, into words. Probably a good deal of it is subconscious. And so, when we try to put it into words, we fail. Or, when we have heard it put by others in logical form, the reasoning does not seem to be conclusive, although in fact we are certain of the conclusion.

This is a very common experience in other matters. For example, a farmer will tell you with clear conviction of a coming change in the weather. But, if you ask him how exactly he knows, he will very likely not be able to tell you. He has, in fact, reasoned the thing out from observed facts, but his reasoning has been largely subconscious, and therefore he cannot fully explain the process. He is sure of his conclusion, but he cannot tell you why. Similarly, a learned old judge is said to have given this advice to a younger man, who had just been raised to the bench: "When you give a decision, never give your reasons. I believe that you are a man of sound judgment, and therefore your decisions will generally be right, but if you try to give your reasons, they will nearly always be wrong." The old judge was quite right. The young man would have reached his conclusions by a perfectly valid process of reasoning, but when he attempted to put it into words, it would seem unconvincing.

In any case, however, we are bound as Catholics to hold that the existence of God can be proved by reason. The Vatican Council says: "Holy Mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can certainly be known from created things by the light of reason, 'for the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.' . . . If anyone shall say that the one true God, our Creator and Lord, cannot be certainly known by the natural light of human reason from the things that are made, let him be anathema."

Reason, then, tells us that God exists, and it also tells us much about His nature. It does not merely tell us that there is a First Cause or a self-existent Being, unknown and unknowable. By perfectly clear processes of reasoning it can be shown that the self-existent Being must be one, eternal, immutable, infinite, in power, wisdom, love, justice and so forth.

The other way by which we can know God is revelation. God has revealed to us a number of facts about Himself. And here again we must be careful to be precise, in opposition to the loose thinking and writing of most non-Catholics. They are getting more and more vague about what they understand by the term *revelation*. In fact the word can quite properly be used in two different senses, a wider and a more precise. In the wider sense we can talk about God's revelation of Himself in nature. God does reveal Himself through nature, because by the things that He has made we are able to learn many facts about Him. But in the strict sense revelation means a direct communication of definite truths by God to man. It implies something that may be called *locutio Dei* — God speaking to man. It is not necessary that the person to whom the revelation is made should hear any audible words. God has many ways of speaking. All that is essential is that God should somehow convey a knowledge of definite truths directly to the mind of some man or woman chosen as His instrument to make these truths known to the world.

This we believe that God has done through a long series of such chosen instruments, beginning with our first parents and ending with the last of the Apostles, and that thus we have a definite body of truth made known directly by God, and committed to that teaching body which is His Church.

Now this body of truth, which we receive by faith, consists partly of truths that we can also know by reason, and partly of truths that we could never have discovered by reason.

Here two questions naturally arise. The first is: Why should God have revealed what it is possible for us to know by reason? To this St. Thomas answers that, although these truths can be found out by reason, in fact very few people would have found them out, because to do so requires much study, and from that study many people are hindered either by their natural inability, or by their time being all occupied in providing for their temporal wants, or by laziness. Moreover, even those who did attain to that knowledge would require a long time to do so, and would hardly arrive before the time of old age. And even then, because of the weakness of the human intellect, the truth acquired would usually be mixed with much error. And so in His mercy God has been pleased to reveal even those things that could be discovered by reason, in order that all men may easily be partakers of the knowledge of God, and that without doubt or error.

The other question is: Why has God revealed to us those further truths that reason could never attain? The answer is that God has ordered man to a supernatural end, to the attainment of which he has to direct his intentions and actions. But no one can aim at an end which he does not know. That, however, which is strictly supernatural cannot be known by the natural reason, for it is the very meaning of supernatural that it is beyond the reach of all natural powers. Therefore for the attainment of this end a revelation is strictly necessary.

To this St. Thomas adds some other reasons. The revelation of mysteries, that reason cannot attain, gives us a truer knowledge of God, for it makes us understand that He is in His nature above all that the mind of man can conceive. And thus also we are saved from “presumption, which is the mother of error.” “For there are some,” he says, “so presumptuous of their own genius as to think that they can measure with their understanding the whole Divine Nature, thinking all that to be true which seems true to them, and that to be false which does not seem true to them. In order, then, that the human mind might be freed from this presumption and attain to a modest enquiry after truth, it was necessary for certain things to be divinely proposed to man, which were altogether beyond the grasp of his intellect.”

And finally he quotes the saying of Aristotle that it is better to have a small knowledge of higher things than a wide knowledge of lower things. “From all which,” he concludes, “it appears that even the most imperfect knowledge of the highest things confers a very great perfection on the soul.”

There are, then, these two sources, from which all our knowledge of God is derived — reason and revelation. And so there are two distinct ways of studying God. We may confine ourselves strictly to what we can learn from reason. That is the business of that branch of philosophy which is called natural theology. It reasons first from creatures to the existence of a Creator, or from contingent beings to the existence of a self-existent Being. And then it proceeds to draw out all that it can deduce about the nature of that self-existent Being, of our relation to Him and so forth.

Or we may include in our study both the truths naturally known by reason and those that have been supernaturally revealed. This is the business of what is sometimes called revealed theology, or sometimes simply theology in the strict sense of the term, as distinguished from philosophy. And this is, of course, the study of God in its fullness—the study leading to that true wisdom of which St. Thomas speaks.

We must now, however, take a general view of this study, and see what is the whole scope of it, and the several divisions into which it falls.

Theology is the study of God. But it is not confined to God only as He is in Himself apart from creatures. The consideration of creatures must come in, because we have to study God, not only in His eternal Being, but also under the aspect of Creator, and that involves a study of the relation of creatures to God. So, although it is not concerned with creatures in themselves, for under that aspect they are the subject of other sciences, it is concerned with them in their relation to God. And so theology, in its full scope, may be defined as the Science which deals with God, and with creatures in their relation to God.

Now this relation of creatures to God is twofold. For creatures come from God and tend to God. God is not only the Origin but also the End of all created beings.

Hence we get the arrangement of the Summa of St. Thomas. He begins in Part I with the study of God as He is in Himself — His existence and His nature. He then goes on to the distinction of Persons, considering God as He has revealed Himself as a Trinity of Persons — Father, Son and Holy Ghost. And then he deals with God as the Origin of creatures, the Creator. And this involves a discussion of the meaning of creation, of the origin of evil, and of the nature of angels and men. So that briefly we may say that Part I deals with God as He is in Himself and as the Origin of creatures.

Part II deals with God as the End of man. It proves that the true end of man is his perfect union with God in the beatific vision, and then goes on to show in great detail how man is to attain that end. We may seem in large sections of this Part to have got very

far away from the study of God. We have long discussions on the nature of human acts, on human passions, on habits good and bad, and so forth. But it is all an exposition of how man attains his End, which is God, and so it is all quite rightly included in the study of God as the End of man.

Then in Part III we have the work of God Incarnate, showing how, in order to bring man to his end, God the Son became man, suffered, died and rose again. The meaning of the Incarnation and Redemption are drawn out at length, and it is shown how the work of the Incarnation is continued in the Church and in the Sacraments. And we end with the doctrine of the last things, the resurrection of the dead, and the state of the blessed in Heaven when they have attained their last End.

So St. Thomas includes the whole range of theology in the Summa. And, although it seems to embrace a multitude of subjects, its subject is really one. It is all the study of God — God as He is in Himself, and God as the Origin and End of creatures.

It is customary, however, in these days to divide theology into several divisions, and it seems useful here to give these divisions, in order that the whole scope and method of our study may be more clearly seen.

We begin, then, before entering on theology strictly so called, with philosophy, culminating in that branch of philosophy which is called natural theology. That is our necessary starting-point. We cannot deal with questions of revelation until we are assured at least that God exists, and know something of His Nature. We must at least know that He is a Personal Being, possessed of intelligence and free-will.

So much having been proved by philosophy, we proceed to what is called fundamental theology. The object of this is to establish the fact that a revelation has been made by God, and that the Catholic Faith is that revelation. We begin by establishing the possibility and necessity of a revelation. Then we examine the evidence for the fact that a revelation has been made, beginning with the Prophets of the Old Testament, and completed through Christ and the Apostles. We have to prove that all these did give a message from God, as they claimed to do. Then we have to prove that this revelation was committed to a teaching body, which is the Catholic Church, or in other words that the Catholic Church is the authorised teacher of the divine revelation, with the promise of divine assistance guaranteeing its infallibility.

We have now established our second source of knowledge of God. To the truths known by reason we can now add all the dogmas taught by the Catholic Church as truths revealed by God. And from this we can build up the structure of a systematic theology. This is dogmatic theology proper. It is the study of God in its most complete form. It is the establishing and systematising of all that we know about God from the two sources of reason and revelation.

Dogmatic theology is far more than a mere tabulation of the dogmas of the Faith. It starts with the truths of faith as its data. Its task is to prove these from the sources, to explain and illustrate them, to defend them, to deduce further conclusions from them, and finally to arrange them, along with the conclusions, in one harmonious and orderly system.

Dogmatic theology proves the dogmas of the Faith from the sources, that is from Holy Scripture and tradition. This division of theology is what is called positive theology. It does not, of course, undertake directly to prove the truth of the various dogmas to those who have not accepted the sources, or the conclusions of fundamental theology that a revelation has been given, and that the Catholic Church is the authorised teacher of that revelation. It can only confirm the Church's teaching indirectly by showing that every defined dogma is in accordance with the teaching of Holy Scripture, and with the tradition of the Church from the beginning. But even in doing that it greatly strengthens the Church's claim. It shows that in fact the Church's teaching does not change, but, although the expression of its teaching develops, it does hand down faithfully what was taught from the beginning. The next task of theology is to explain and illustrate the truths of faith, so far as that is possible. On this the Vatican Council (I) says:

“When reason enlightened by faith makes diligent, pious and sober enquiry, it attains by God's gift most fruitful knowledge of mysteries, both from analogy of things naturally known and from the relation of mysteries with one another and with the end of man.” The same Council, however, bids us note the limitations of this understanding of the truths of faith.

“Still,” it goes on, “it is never rendered fit to perceive them in the same way as the truths which are its own proper object. For the divine mysteries, by their very nature, so far surpass the created intellect that, even when conveyed by revelation and received by faith, they remain covered by the veil of faith and, as it were, hidden by a cloud, as long as in this mortal life we are absent from the Lord, for we walk by faith and not by sight.”

It is important to bear this limitation always in mind. The mysteries of faith are of their very nature beyond the understanding of the finite mind, and when we try to elucidate them by analogies drawn from natural things, we must always remember that they are mere analogies and nothing more. Even the words that we use in attempting to describe the nature of God must be words that

are primarily used for natural things. We must use such words, because they are the only words we have. But in applying them to God we are using them analogically. For example, when we speak of the wisdom of God, we are not using the word in the same sense as when we speak of wisdom in man. We mean that in God there is something which is analogous to human wisdom, but infinitely higher. We call it wisdom because that is the best word we have got. And so with all the other concepts that we form of God and the words by which we express them.

The nature of these analogous concepts, by which we try to grasp something of the being of God, may be expressed in this way. They are formed by affirmation, negation and eminence. For example, we say that God is wise. That is an affirmation. We find this perfection, called wisdom, in creatures, and we affirm that it must exist in God, because all perfections found in creatures must exist first in God, from whom they come. Therefore we affirm confidently that God is wise.

But then we go on to negation. Wisdom in creatures is something very imperfect and limited, and therefore, to avoid attributing that imperfection and limitation to God, we deny that God is wise in the same sense in which creatures are wise. And then we complete this by the way of "eminence," saying that God is wise in an infinitely higher sense than that in which man is wise. There is something in Him which is analogous to wisdom in man but infinitely higher. This is true of all the terms that we use, and all the concepts that we form of God, even such fundamental concepts as being and existence. When we attribute being and existence to God, we are thinking of something analogous to, but infinitely higher than being and existence in ourselves. In the sense in which God is He alone is. We *are* not in the sense in which God *is*. We *are*, but in an infinitely lower sense. Being in us and being in God are not the same thing, but only analogous.

The inadequacy of our concepts is further seen, when we consider that God is absolutely simple. In Him wisdom, goodness, love, justice, mercy and so forth are all one and the same thing. God's wisdom is His goodness, His mercy is His justice, His love is His mercy, and so forth. Or rather these are all identical with His essence, and His essence is identical with His existence. We have to think of God under a multitude of inadequate concepts, because our finite minds are incapable of doing otherwise. We cannot form that one concept which would express completely what God is.

All this, then, shows how exceedingly imperfect our knowledge of God is in this life, and how very imperfectly we can express what we know. But it does not follow that, because it is imperfect, it is therefore false. On the contrary, it is true so far as it goes. When we say that God is good, wise, just and merciful, we are saying what is true, although it is a very imperfect expression of the truth.

The next function of theology is to defend the truths of faith. But here we must make a distinction between those truths that can be attained by reason and those that are known only by revelation. The former can be defended directly by drawing out the rational proofs, and answering all the reasoning that may be advanced to the contrary. But with regard to the truths known only by revelation, it is obvious that this cannot be done. There are only two ways in which we can defend them. We can go back to fundamental theology, and prove that God has in fact given a revelation, and then argue that, since the dogmas are part of that revelation, they must be true. And then we can confirm them by showing that they are not contrary to reason, and showing the falsity of all arguments adduced against them. Further than that, as St. Thomas says, "there are some probable reasons that can be adduced for the declaration of truths of this kind, for the exercise and consolation of the faithful, but these are not to be used for the convincing of opponents, because the very insufficiency of such reasoning would rather confirm them in their error, since they would think that we assented to the faith for such very weak reasons."

Theology, however, does not confine itself to those truths which are strictly contained in the body of doctrine revealed by God. It is not content merely to record, explain and defend the defined dogmas. It goes much beyond that, for it has a large department which is called speculative theology, the function of which is to take the revealed truths and deduce other truths from them by processes of reasoning. This is a perfectly legitimate process, which is followed in every science. But it is clear that the conclusions at which theologians thus arrive have not the same degree of certainty as defined dogmas. Some of them have a very high degree of certainty. Such are the doctrines which are technically described as being "theologically certain." This means that the process of reasoning by which they are deduced from revealed truths is so clear that there can be no reasonable doubt about them. And yet they have not the absolute certainty of the truths that are *de fide*, and a person who denied one of them would not be a heretic. Then there are many other conclusions which are much less certain, and about which competent theologians do in fact differ. As to these everyone is free to form his own opinions.

It is of course in this region of theological conclusions that much of the fascination of theological study lies. Starting from revealed truths, by following out various lines of argument and deduction, you learn to see further and further into the mysteries of God, just as by research in the natural sciences you see further and further into the mysteries of nature.

And it is in this way that theology makes progress. Two Protestant theologians, members of this University, have recently put forward the remarkable statement that it is only Protestant theology that has made any progress since the sixteenth century, while Catholic theology has remained stationary. Such a statement can only be due to crass ignorance of all Catholic theology since the sixteenth century. The fact, of course, is that it is only Catholic theology that has made progress. Protestant theology cannot make progress, because it is never sure of anything. It is continually doubting its previous conclusions, running back to its starting-point to see whether it has not somewhere taken a wrong turning, putting the whole thing back into the melting-pot, and beginning again *de novo*. Catholic theology, on the other hand, goes steadily on. It does not want to go back and “re-state” what has already been adequately stated. It has a large body of ascertained truth upon which it can safely work, and from which it can go on to work out further and further conclusions. Sometimes these conclusions will ultimately be found to be implicitly contained in the original deposit of faith, and will come to be defined as dogmas. Others, although they can never be said to be actually contained, even implicitly, in the deposit, will be seen to be so clear that all theologians will agree upon them, and they will be regarded as theologically certain. And then beyond this will always remain a fruitful field for further speculation and research.

The final task of dogmatic theology is to arrange the truths of faith, together with its own conclusions from them, in one systematic whole. And then we see that all our knowledge of God — of God as He is in Himself, and of God as the Origin and End of creatures — forms one harmonious body of truth. We see the interconnection of one part with another, the bearing of one truth on another, and the logical connection of the whole. And the fact that this can be done is no small confirmation of the truth of our religion.

It is really a most astounding fact. A little body of men, devoid for the most part of human learning, Galilean peasants and fishermen, put forward a number of strange doctrines. Some of them are written down in a fragmentary way, others are handed on by oral tradition. These doctrines are discussed, analysed, fought over, by generation after generation. And gradually you find them being built up into a perfectly harmonious system, showing the perfect harmony of all the original doctrines, deducing a multitude of conclusions from them, without any contradiction, but all fitting in, so as to give us a consistent and intelligible doctrine of God and of the whole universe of things as related to Him. How could such a thing have happened unless the original doctrines had all been part of one truth coming from the Author of truth, and unless the Church, by which this developed system was worked out, had been guided and directed throughout the process by that same Author of truth?

So far I have been dealing chiefly with dogmatic theology. A few words must now be said about what are called moral theology, ascetic theology and mystical theology, for they are really branches of the same science. They are all truly parts of theology, or the study of God. Indeed St. Thomas makes no distinction. All that we now consider under these titles is dealt with by him in Part II of the *Summa*. For him there is only one science of God — God as He is in Himself, and God the Origin and End of creatures — and what we call moral, ascetic and mystical theology all come under the heading of God the End of Creatures. They teach the way by which man reaches that End.

Moral theology deals with God’s laws, with the distinction of acts that are right and wrong, that is to say those that, being in harmony with God’s law, lead us on our way to God, and those that, being against God’s law, lead us astray from the right path. Moral theology gives us the fundamental rules by which we must regulate our actions, if we would attain to God as our End, and discusses the application of these rules to an innumerable variety of circumstances, so as to cover the whole of human life.

Ascetic theology goes a step further. Taking the fundamental laws as known, it considers the various methods by which we may make progress in the pursuit of perfection, that is to say all the ordinary ways of self-discipline, of prayer and so forth, by which we may bring ourselves more and more into harmony with God’s will, and so make more progress towards our End.

Mystical theology goes further still, and considers, not the ordinary ways of perfection, but the extraordinary ways. There are many holy souls to whom God gives special graces by which they enter into an extraordinarily close union with Him, such as is not attainable without such very special supernatural gifts. And so it deals with what is called infused contemplation, and all the supernatural experiences and phenomena that accompany such contemplation.

Such, then, are the methods of the study of God, the various ways in which we can acquire such partial and fragmentary knowledge of Him as is possible in this life. But it must be remembered — all through — that to study God rightly, and to acquire a true knowledge of Him, is not exclusively an affair of the intellect, not even of the intellect enlightened by faith. If we are to

acquire a true and fruitful knowledge of God, we need also the gifts of the Holy Ghost, especially those that are called wisdom, understanding and knowledge, for these are the gifts that perfect the intellect, and make it capable of dealing rightly with supernatural truths.

So long, however, as we are in a state of grace, we all have these gifts. They are all infused into the soul along with grace. It remains for us to use them, and that we shall do if all our study of God is fertilised by prayer. For it is the nature of these gifts to make us well disposed for receiving the guidance and enlightenment and motions of the Holy Ghost. And it is by prayer that we open our souls to Him, and so allow Him to act freely upon us. That is why it is related of St. Thomas, admittedly the greatest theologian, and perhaps the greatest intellect, that the world has ever seen, that he learnt more of those divine things of which he wrote so profoundly by prayer than by study. And so the inspired Psalmist himself says : “*Super senes intellexi, quia mandata tua quaesivi* — I have understood more than the aged because I have sought Thy commandments.” And the author of the *Imitation* says that “a good life makes a man wise according to God and expert in many things.”

But all the knowledge of God that we can gain in this world is chiefly of value because it leads up to that perfect knowledge of Him which we hope to have some day in the beatific vision. If God has revealed Himself to us in a fragmentary way now, it is because He intends to reveal Himself clearly to us hereafter. The partial truths that we can learn here and now are intended to prepare us for that full knowledge of the truth to which it is God’s purpose to lead us. We study to know God as much as we can here and now, in order that we may love Him more, and desire more earnestly that perfect knowledge which is to come, when we shall see no longer “through a glass in a dark manner,” but “face to face.”

Being a Lecture Given at the Summer School of Catholic Studies
Cambridge, July 26ⁿ — August 4ⁿ, 1930
