

## · DOCILITY ·

The words “doctor,” “doctrine,” and “docility” are etymologically connected. Their distinct meanings all converge upon the same reality. This point is illustrated, for example, when we say that a doctor teaches a doctrine to students who are docile. A doctor is primarily a teacher. A doctrine is that which he teaches. Docility is the virtue of teachableness in students who allow themselves to be taught by a doctor, who teaches them a doctrine.

Docility, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, is related to the virtue of prudence.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, it is that part of prudence that allows us to acquire knowledge through the teaching of another. The Angelic Doctor points out that even the most learned people need to be docile, since no man is completely self-sufficient in matters of prudence. We all stand in great need of being taught by others.

### **Intellectual Blindness**

It is easy for people to be docile when they are aware of their own desperation. If one is lost in a foreign city, let us say, it is easy to be docile to a local citizen who can give us directions. The great problem with docility, however, is that people are often unaware of their own desperation. That is, they do not know they are lost.

Contemporary university students, as Allan Bloom has

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<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 49, art. 3.

pointed out in *The Closing of the American Mind*, are notoriously lost and indocile. When a person who is lost is also indocile, needless to say, his indocility assures that he will continue to be lost.

Aquinas teaches that there are two obstacles in particular that lie in the path of acquiring the virtue of docility. One is laziness, the other is pride. Pride, however, is far more insidious than laziness. The lazy person has difficulty concealing his laziness, even from himself. Perhaps part of the reason is that he is even too lazy to think up ingenious excuses! The lazy person usually knows that he is lazy. Therefore, he recognizes his laziness as a vice, not a virtue.

But the proud person, who often has contempt for those who know things that he does not know, is not only able to conceal his indocility (as well as his pride) from himself, but is able to misinterpret his vice as a virtue. Thus, the indocile person who is proud may think that, by his stubborn refusal to allow others to “impose” their ideas on him, he is maintaining an open mind.

### **Mind Without Matter**

We now come to what may be the single greatest problem concerning docility: a false conception of an open mind. The mind that is forever open, forever fearful of losing its freedom, forever indocile to truth, is entirely useless. Such a mind is really indistinguishable from no mind at all.

Samuel Butler, the nineteenth-century British novelist, saw through the hoax of the eternally open mind when he wrote:

An open mind is all very well in its way, but it ought not

to be so open that there is no keeping anything in or out of it. It should be capable of shutting its doors sometimes, or it may be found a little draughty.

G.K. Chesterton agreed. He, too, thought that the mind has a nobler function than serving as an intellectual breezeway between the ears. The mind, when it functions properly, seizes, apprehends, and grasps its object. In criticizing the notion of the ever-open and never-closed mind, as espoused by H.G. Wells, Chesterton stated:

I think he thought that the object of opening the mind is simply opening the mind. Whereas I am incurably convinced that the object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.

Students and others who are indocile because they distrust or despise their teacher, or because they fear the truth or the personal responsibilities that knowledge brings, are not preserving their independence, but squandering their intellects. They are like the ultra-fastidious person who, in waiting for the perfect friend to come along, never meets anyone he deems good enough to be his friend and, as a result, suffers atrophy of the heart.

### **Nothing to Stand on**

One of the curious features concerning the triad of doctor, doctrine, and docility is that it is now quite popular to prize the position of doctor, but to despise both doctrine and docility. But the status of doctor that so many people esteem is hollow and wholly unworthy of their admiration. If a doctor has no doctrine to teach (Who knows what truth is?) and no docile students whom he can teach (because they fear ideas that are “imposed” on them), then

his role is entirely bankrupt and useless. He is the equivalent of the buggy-whip salesman who has neither producers nor consumers.

The mark of the docile person is his willingness to be taught. But since docility is part of prudence—the virtue of realism—the only thing the docile person wants to know is the truth. The roots of docility are in humility and self-knowledge, while its fruits are in realism and practicality.

In a series of reflections on the Trinity entitled *Celebrate 2000!*, Pope John Paul II reminds his flock of the eminent role of Christ the Teacher, who reveals God to man and man to himself. He proclaims:

The majesty of Christ the Teacher and the unique consistency and persuasiveness of His teaching ... can only be explained by the fact that His words, His parables, and His arguments are never separable from His life and His very being.<sup>2</sup>

The Christian should have no misgivings about being docile to Christ the Teacher or the teaching ministry of Holy Mother Church. It is sad to witness so much indocility both to Christ and His Church by Christians who fall prey to the distortions of truth promulgated by our secular world.

Pope John Paul II has reminded us again of the importance of docility amidst the wiles of the world in his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. There he quotes Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Liberty*: "The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it wins

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<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Celebrate 2000!* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1996), 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 35, as translated in Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1975).