
Saint Thomas Aquinas: *a theologian for our times*

by
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St. Thomas was born in 1225 near the ancient Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino which dates back to 529 A.D. when it was founded by St. Benedict. The actual place of his birth was Rocca Sicca which is the modern Roccasecca, Italy. He was one of six children and the third boy. His father was Count Landulf of Aquino. This noble family had relatives in half the ruling houses of Europe and hence its influence was great. One of Thomas' ancestors was Barbarossa, described as "the almost legendary red bearded terror."

As you will read, Thomas at an early age was presented to the monks of Monte Cassino who were charged to educate him. This proved no difficulty, for Thomas was a very willing and dedicated student. He made such progress that they decided to send him to the University of Naples when he was fourteen years old. In Naples, Thomas spent a great deal of time with the Dominicans and made up his mind to abandon his family wealth and join them.

The Dominicans were an order of begging friars and not suitable to receive so great a noble as was Thomas. At least that is what the family of Thomas thought. They were willing to have him become a priest but they wanted him to become abbot of Monte Cassino. They were even willing to allow him to become a secular priest since his chances of becoming a bishop and even Cardinal were excellent, not only because of the importance of his

family, but also because of his brilliance. But to become a begging friar, *that* was out of the question. The family had its mind made up. They were going to stop Thomas from becoming a Dominican no matter what they had to do and no matter what it took. They would stop at nothing.

Family Opposition

Of the Ten Commandments, it is number four which has attached to it a promise. In the Book of Deuteronomy, the fifth chapter, the sixteenth verse, we read: "Honor thy father and thy mother, as the Lord thy God, has commanded thee, that thou mayest have a long life and prosperity in the land which the Lord, thy God, is giving thee."

If any one person knew and respected this commandment, Thomas Aquinas was certainly that person. He realized his duty to his parents. Like all good sons, he was docile and obedient and responsive to their will, as long as it was in accord with the higher authority of God. Conscious then of his responsibility to his parents and made aware of their complete opposition to his entering the Dominican Order, he made up his mind that he was going to pursue God's will come what may and regardless of what pressures would be brought against him. And so, while he recognized his duty to his mother and father, he saw that they had not the authority to prevent him from fulfilling his vocation.

He must have reasoned that while they did have jurisdiction over him, it did not extend to preventing him from becoming a poor Dominican. Loving his parents, he loved God more. As Our Lord said: "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me..." (*Mt. 10:37*). In later years, this genius-saint was to write in his masterpiece, the *Summa Theologica*: "It is written (*Acts 5:29*): 'We ought to obey God rather than men.' Now sometimes the things commanded by a superior are against God. Therefore, superiors are not to be obeyed in all things." (*S.T. II-II, Q. 104, Art. 5.*)

The mind of young Thomas was made up. He would devote the whole of his life to Christ as a poor Dominican and would shun both the riches of the world and the glories of ecclesiastical position. He had but one treasure—Christ; and that is where his heart was.

Thomas was seventeen when he told his family about his decision to become a Dominican. And though he had his mind made up, he was soon to realize that his mother had her mind made up as well in the opposite direction to the point that her opposition would seem nearly to match his determination. We can well imagine her saying: "Thomas, you might as well get it through your thick intellectual skull, you are not going to become a Dominican. You are not going to bring shame on this family by joining that group of ragtag beggars. And that's that." Well, that was not that because

Thomas did become a Dominican, and he even asked his superiors if he could leave the kingdom of Naples and go to Rome. At Rome, he thought he would be beyond the grasp of his domineering family. His superiors granted his request and off he went to the Eternal City. In hot pursuit came his noble mother. Next, Thomas sought to leave Italy completely and be done with this unpleasant matter once and for all. This may seem strange. You might ask: why did not Thomas simply explain the situation to his mother again and let it go at that? The reason was that his mother would not let it go at that. The family was determined to get Thomas out of the Dominicans by any means and all devices, even to the point of resorting to kidnapping and immoral tricks. Hard to believe? Well, when Thomas left Rome on the way out of Italy, he was captured and was forced to return to his home in Rocca Sicca. Theodora, his mother, had all the roads watched, and so when Thomas left Rome, he was seized by his brothers, who were soldiers in the army of the Emperor Frederick. Thomas did not physically fight them, nor did he spend much time protesting. Yet his determination in the face of such tactics was not decreased. And again, he refused to abandon his vocation. This refusal was met with imprisonment for one year. During this time every means was used to destroy his determination and ruin his vocation. They coaxed him with flattery and with threats. They were nice and they were mean. They treated him harshly and kindly. They even deprived him of food and his books. Nothing worked. Finally, his brothers devised a scheme to lead him into sin, thinking that if they could make him sin against chastity, they would destroy his high resolve. It did not work. Thomas drove out the temptress with “a flaming brand which he snatched from the fireplace.” “The chroniclers, with their characteristic lack of interest in purely human activities and situations, failed in this case to record the young lady’s comments for posterity. But they do tell us that with the departure of the woman Thomas had several other visitors, this

time angels from heaven, who girded him with a cord as a badge of merit.”

Defeated by the iron will of their son, Thomas’ parents gave in. And while they did not actually release him from his prison in the tower, they did permit him to escape. He rejoined his Dominican brothers and the family was content to make just one more attempt to stop him. They appealed to the Pope, hoping to force Thomas to leave the Order; but this did not work. And so “the Aquinos allowed their headstrong son and brother to go his beggarly way.”

These events in the early life of St. Thomas give us an insight into his character and personality because what he was in his youth, he was for the full course of his life except in a more perfect way.

Against those of his day who

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sought to pervert the Catholic religion, as do the modernists of today, Thomas wrote angrily: “If anyone labors under the delusion that the claptrap he hands out is real science and wishes to dispute anything I have written, let him oppose this treatise if he dare. And let him oppose it publicly; not by whispering in corners or by refuting it before youngsters who have not the mental maturity necessary to be judges in questions of this kind. If he is looking for antagonists he will be able to find many, and not only myself (who am the weakest of the lot) but a host of others who love truth and who will be only too willing to refute his errors and instruct his ignorance.” (*De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas*, 1270.)

And when the Savior of the World and creator of the universe appeared to

him and said “Thou hast written well of me, Thomas. What wouldst thou claim as reward?” Thomas answered: “Only Thyself, O Lord.” Thus do we see the soul of the saint revealed in the first instance in his zeal to protect the integrity of the Faith and in the second the motive for this zeal and for everything that he did during the course of his holy life.

His intellectual achievements were truly staggering and his effect on Western Civilization immeasurable. Even a certain famous, anti-Christian, modern novelist was forced to admit, in a moment of honesty, that civilization walked across the shoulders of St. Thomas. One cannot begin to praise the genius of Thomas with the most lavish superlatives. He was not one in a million. He was, one would dare to say, one in the history of a race—the human race that is. And all the time this genius radiated from a disarming, wonderful setting of a profound humility and a boundless devotion to the Savior of this world.

This single minded devotion and whole hearted dedication to Our Lord marked the entire life of St. Thomas, as you shall read. Truly was he one of the most extraordinary men that ever lived. It is fitting that he is called “prince of theologians” for he is the exemplar of what any good theologian should strive to become. Indeed one might call him “prince of Christians,” for when encountering this spiritual giant one cannot help but be inspired by his devotion, uplifted by his purity, startled by his brilliance, awed by his holiness, and disarmed by his humility and poverty.

Here then is not just the angelic doctor, prince of theologians and paradigm of virtue, but here is the image of Our Divine Savior, our minds and our hearts are drawn to him who was called “the dumb ox.” As we relish the words of Albertus Magnus, his teacher: “You call this man a dumb ox, but I tell you that the time will come when the bellowing of his doctrine will be heard to the ends of the earth.” So it has been since the time of Thomas and so it will be when all things are restored in Christ.