



# St. Thomas Aquinas

BORN 1225; DIED 1274  
PRIEST AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH  
FEAST DAY: JANUARY 28

**T**HOMAS AQUINAS has been characterized as “the most saintly of learned men and the most learned of saints.” He is often referred to as the “Angelic Doctor” because his bril-

liant intellect was so especially tuned to divine things.

Thomas was born to a noble and wealthy family, the youngest of four sons (there were also several daughters) of Count Landulf of Aquino and Theodora, Countess of Teano, in the family castle of Rocca Secca between Rome and Naples, Italy. On his father’s side he was related to two Holy Roman Emperors (an elective position of semi-leadership over part of Europe in the Middle Ages) and to French and Spanish kings. While he was still an infant, his youngest sister and their nurse were killed when the castle was struck by lightning, creating a lifelong fear of lightning so strong that, during thunderstorms, he would pray with his head resting on a tabernacle where the Eucharist was reserved.

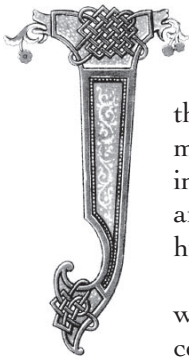
At five, Thomas was sent to the nearby Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino to study, with the expectation that he would eventually join the order. He entered the University of Naples at fourteen, where he became acquainted with the Dominican order, which, to the great distress of his mother because the Dominicans supported themselves by begging, he joined at nineteen. At his mother’s behest, his brothers kidnapped him on his way to Bologna, where his superiors had sent him. His family kept him locked for over eighteen months in a castle near Rocca Secca. There he spent his time studying the Scripture and theological works provided by one of his sisters, but he was subjected to a combination of sweet persuasion from his mother and sisters and harassment and abuse from his brothers. The most dramatic episode of his captivity was the sexual temptation forced on him by his brothers sending a harlot to his room. He chased her from the room with a burning brand, after which an angel appeared and girded him with a cord in token of God’s gift of perpetual chastity. His brothers eventually let their guard down and, helped by the same sister, he was lowered in a basket from his prison into the waiting hands of his Dominican brothers.

Thomas was sent first to Cologne, where the renowned St. Albert the Great (a future Doctor of the Church) became his teacher. It was there that he acquired from his fellow students



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the nickname “the dumb ox” because of his humility and his habit of thinking rather than talking, a nickname that fitted well his large head and heavy body, but utterly failed to describe his brilliant intellectual power.

Within a year, both St. Albert and Thomas were sent to Paris, at that time the intellectual center of Europe, for additional training. There Thomas enjoyed the close friendship of the learned and holy Franciscan friar St. Bonaventure, who in time also became a Doctor of the Church, the “Seraphic Doctor.” St. Albert and Thomas remained in Paris for three years and then returned to Cologne, where Thomas completed his studies and was ordained a priest. By this time, he had become known for forceful sermons that were Scriptural, solidly instructional, and full of devotion, and throughout his life his sermons would frequently fill people with joy or move them to tears.

About three or four years later, Thomas returned to Paris to teach theology at the University of Paris. This was a period of great intellectual ferment, centered primarily on the re-discovery of the pre-Christian Greek philosopher Aristotle. Thomas guided the Church in the interpretation and understanding of Aristotle, and helped Church scholars to develop an appreciation of philosophy as a foundation for the truths of the faith.

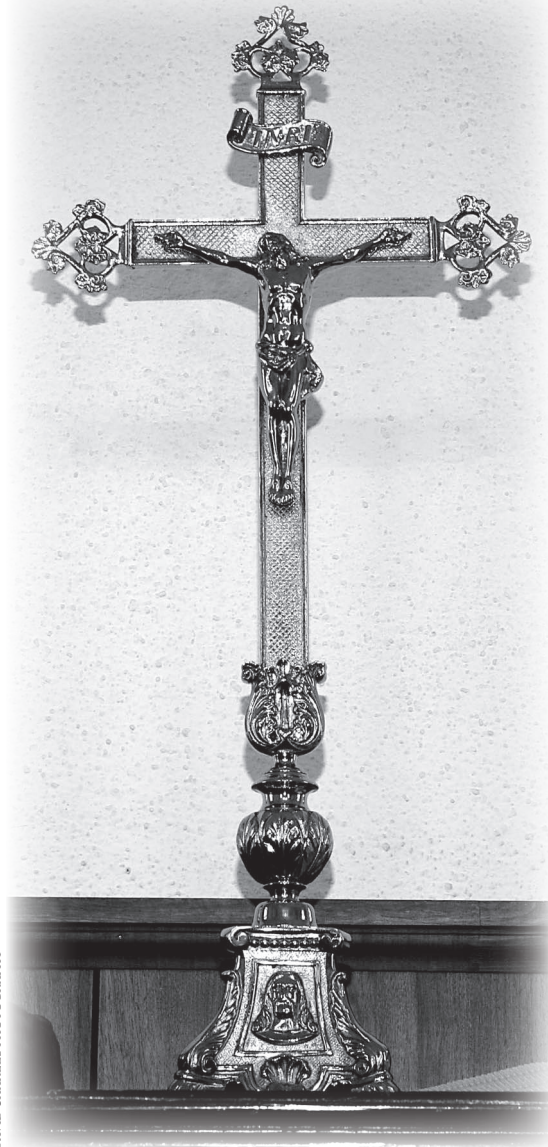
Thomas was a gifted teacher and prolific writer. He was blessed with one of the greatest intellects in human history. His greatness

lay not only in the area of theology but in philosophy as well. Unlike many philosophers before or since, he had his feet firmly planted on the ground. He taught that the human intellect can truly know reality, and he built his dazzling edifice of philosophy and theology on a bedrock of sound reason. He taught that faith never contradicted reason, nor did he find that reason

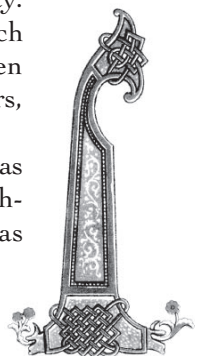
ever contradicted faith. Truth, he taught, was made by God and was knowable by man. His teachings were contained in over sixty written works, including commentaries on Scripture, treatises on the controversial topics of his day, defenses of doctrine for Church councils, and two epic works of systematic theology, the *Summa theologiae* and the *Summa contra gentiles*. The *Summa contra gentiles* was a treatise that presented the truths of the faith from the standpoint of pure Aristotelian reason, intended to counteract university professors who used Aristotle to undermine Christianity. The monumental *Summa theologiae*, a comprehensive, methodically-arranged exposition of theology as well as a summary of Christian philosophy, is one of the finest presentations of the truths of the faith

ever written and is still indispensable today. He traveled widely in Italy and France, which makes the quantity and quality of his written work, done in a period of just over twenty years, all the more astonishing.

Gentle in speech and even-tempered, Thomas thought pride in his own gifts and accomplishment utterly unreasonable. His learning was



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*“Unlike many philosophers before or since, he had his feet firmly planted on the ground. Truth, he taught, was made by God and was knowable by man.”*

the product even more of prayer than of genius. A profoundly holy man, he was devoted to the Blessed Virgin and deeply, fervently devoted to the Holy Eucharist. Ten years before his death, at the request of the Pope, he composed for the new universal Feast of Corpus Christi (called in English the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ), a liturgical office that is a remarkable union of doctrine and tender love for Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. The sequence *Lauda Sion*, sung before the Gospel for this feast, is one of the few still retained in today’s Masses. The hymns *O salutaris hostia* (English title, “O Saving Victim”), *Pange lingua gloriosi*, and *Verbum supernum* — the final verses of which are part of every service of Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament — are treasures bequeathed to all Catholics from the heart of a lover. Finally, he composed the surpassingly beautiful Eucharistic hymn *Adore te devote* (English title, “God with Hidden Majesty”), including the following two verses that express humble belief in the author of truth, the truth of Jesus’ teaching and of his divinity, and the truth of the Church’s teaching about the Blessed Sacrament:

Godhead here in hiding, whom I do  
adore  
Masked by these bare shadows, shape  
and nothing more,  
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here  
a heart  
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.  
Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee de-  
ceived;  
How say trusty hearing? That shall be  
believed;  
What God’s Son has told me, take for  
truth I do;  
Truth himself speaks truly or there’s  
nothing true.

He also wrote prayers such as the following, for use after reception of the Blessed Sacrament:

Lord, Father all powerful, and ever-liv-  
ing God, I thank you, for even though I  
am a sinner, your unprofitable servant,

not because of my worth, but in the kindness of your mercy, you have fed me with the precious body and blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that this Holy Communion may not bring me condemnation and punishment but forgiveness and salvation. May it be a helmet of faith and a shield of good will. May it purify me from evil ways and put an end to my evil passions. May it bring me charity and patience, humility and obedience, and growth in the power to do good. May it be my strong defense against all my enemies, visible and invisible, and the perfect calming of all my evil impulses, body and spiritual. May it unite me more closely to you, the one true God, and lead me safely through death to everlasting happiness with you. And I pray that you will lead me, a sinner, to the Banquet where you, with your Son and Holy Spirit, are true and perfect light, total fulfillment, everlasting joy, gladness without end, and perfect happiness to your saints. Grant this through Christ our Lord.

In 1272, Thomas was sent to Naples, where his prayer life, already intense and blessed with ecstasies and levitation, blossomed into even greater mystical experiences and visions. While he was writing the final sections of the *Summa*, he suddenly had a profound spiritual experience after Mass. He said about this experience, “all that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me.” He never wrote again, and died of an illness three months later.

On Thomas’ feast day, the Antiphon for the Canticle of Mary prayed in Evening Prayer is: “The Lord God has given him wisdom in great abundance, and he has communicated it to others without pretense and without envy.” All who are gifted by God can make no better use of their talents than to offer them to others for the glorification of God. This Thomas did with saintly generosity.

