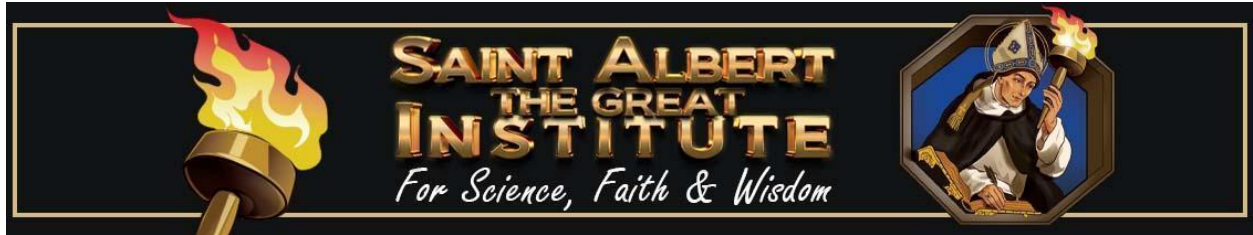




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CHRONICLE OF THE SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT INSTITUTE



Thematic Issue (Inspiring Faith)

SAGI: The Greatest Experiment

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS: THE ANGELIC DOCTOR

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Words of Wisdom: “The future is with God, future events are in His hands. If the merchants to whom Joseph was sold by his brethren had passed by one hour sooner, he would not have gone into Egypt, and the whole course of his life would have been changed. Our lives also are dependent on events controlled by God. Daily fidelity and trusting self-abandonment thus give the spiritual life its balance, its stability and harmony. In this way we live our lives in almost continuous recollection, in an ever-increasing self-abnegation, and these are the conditions normally required for contemplation and union with God.” (Fr. Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., in *Providence*) (1)

“Rejoice, my lady, for the son you are bearing shall be called Thomas, and he shall be famous throughout the world for learning and sanctity, and a member of the Order of Preachers.” (2) Thus spoke a holy Italian hermit to Countess Theodora of Naples, shortly before the birth of her ninth child, St. Thomas Aquinas. (3) Not only would this prophecy be verified in its fullest during Aquinas' brief life, but he would also become the greatest theologian in the history of the Church—one whose holiness of life and sublimity of teaching would be acclaimed by popes, saints, and scholars throughout the centuries.

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

Perched on a quiet cliff of central Italy and overlooking a picturesque valley, the castle of Roccasecca was the home of the counts of Aquino who, closely allied with various other nobility, exerted their power and influence in Italy. Though now in ruins, the castle of Roccasecca nevertheless remains known not only as

an historical landmark of the Middle Ages but also, more significantly, as the birthplace and childhood home of St. Thomas Aquinas. (4)

Born in 1225, St. Thomas Aquinas was the youngest son of Count Landulf of Aquino and Countess Theodora of Naples. Belonging to one of the most distinguished families of Italian nobility, Aquinas was closely related to many historical figures of the thirteenth century, including Emperor Frederick II. (5) Aquinas as a child showed a great love for books and art, and he was of a sweet, peaceable, and introverted disposition. (6)

STUDENT AT MONTE CASSINO AND THE UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES

When Aquinas reached his fifth year, his parents sent him to the renown Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino to be entrusted to monks for his upbringing and education. (7) This monastery, located about 80 miles from the Eternal City, holds particular historical and spiritual significance, as it had been the very dwelling place of St. Benedict and some of the first monks of his Order nearly seven hundred years before Aquinas' birth. (8) Thus, in his early childhood, Aquinas became immersed in a long tradition of Benedictine life and spirituality, which includes a great devotion to study. In addition to religious and catechetical studies, Aquinas' education at the monastery included "Latin and vernacular grammar, reading, writing, elementary mathematics, and harmony." (9)

As Aquinas progressed in his studies at the abbey, his teachers quickly became aware of his holiness and exceptional intelligence. Further, Aquinas' budding interest in philosophical and theological investigation began to evince itself, as he showed great eagerness in asking his teachers questions about God and truth. (10) G. K. Chesterton aptly describes young Aquinas as "a large and heavy and quiet boy, and phenomenally silent, scarcely opening his mouth except to say suddenly to his schoolmaster in an explosive manner, 'What is God?'" (11)

After completing his studies at Monte Cassino, Aquinas, at the age of eleven years, matriculated at the University of Naples to study the liberal arts under the celebrated masters who taught there. During the seven years he spent studying in Naples, he continued to show signs of great talent and promise. (12) Bernard

Gui, one of Aquinas' biographers, says: "In all the usual scholastic exercises—the repetition of lectures and compositions and so forth—[Aquinas] showed a depth and subtlety of mind that won general admiration." (13) Moreover, amidst pervasive immorality in Naples, and while his peers often engaged in sinful diversions, Aquinas remained firmly rooted in God and continued to lead a virtuous life. (14)

DOMINICAN FRIAR

Although Aquinas wished to embrace the consecrated religious life rather than to pursue a military career as his brothers had, his parents intended to determine the precise form of religious life he would follow, hoping to place him in a position that would be considered most appropriate for a nobleman. Accordingly, they arranged that, upon the completion of Aquinas' studies in Naples, he would return to the Abbey of Monte Cassino to become a Benedictine monk and to eventually receive the great ecclesiastical distinction of being made abbot of the monastery. However, while Aquinas was in Naples, he suddenly frustrated his parents' designs when he decided to wholly renounce all secular and ecclesiastical prestige to join the newly-founded, mendicant Order of Friars Preachers (also known as Dominicans)—an Order consisting of poor, itinerant friars, dedicated to the study of theological truths and to preaching. (15)

Shortly after Aquinas began his novitiate (the probationary years of religious life) as a Dominican friar, he entered upon a long and severe trial to his vocation: his family, having received word of his decision, and being greatly opposed to it, apprehended him as he was traveling and confined him to a tower of their castle. Over the course of nearly two years, they employed threats, maltreatment, and attempts at persuasion so as to deter him from pursuing a way of life that was inconsistent with their desires. However, Aquinas remained entirely unmoved in his resolution, and he passed this time in prayer and diligent study. Further, although his secular-minded sisters did their utmost to dissuade him from continuing as a Dominican, Aquinas, by word and example, rather brought about a change of heart in them, and they began to lead devout lives. (16)

As the efforts of Aquinas' family continued to meet with no success, his brothers conspired to occasion his moral downfall, hoping that by the loss of his chastity he would decide to abandon the religious life altogether. Thus, while Aquinas was alone, they sent a prostitute into the tower, offering her a significant payment should she bring him to sin. However, Aquinas quickly expelled his visitor, chasing her out of the tower with a burning log that he seized from his fire. (17) He then used the log to mark a cross on the wall, before which he wept and prayed that God would always grant him the graces to keep his virginity. Shortly thereafter, he went into an ecstasy, during which two angels appeared to him; they girded his waist with a white cord, saying: "We come to thee from God to bestow upon thee the grace of perpetual virginity." (18) At this time, Aquinas also received the special grace of being thenceforth entirely free from temptations against purity—a privilege which, according to theologian Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange, was granted to Aquinas so that, unhindered by concupiscence, "he might devote his entire life to the contemplation of divine things which he was to teach to others." (19)

STUDENT OF ST. ALBERT THE GREAT

Through the mediation of Pope Innocent IV (d. 1254), Aquinas was freed from his family's tower, and he joyfully returned to communal life with his Dominican confreres. However, to avoid any further disturbances on the part of Aquinas' family, Fr. John of Wildeshausen, Master General of the Dominican Order, wished to promptly transfer Aquinas to a location outside of Italy. Thus, Fr. Wildeshausen and Aquinas began a 1,500-mile journey on foot to Cologne, where Aquinas would be placed under the care and theological instruction of one of the greatest scholars of medieval Europe: St. Albert the Great (d. 1280) (20)—a Dominican friar, theologian, philosopher, and scientist who, "more than any one of the great scholastics preceding St. Thomas, gave to Christian philosophy and theology the form and method which, substantially, they retain to this day." (21)

As Aquinas began his theological studies in Cologne, his great modesty, accompanied by his reticent disposition, quickly led his fellow students—and even Albert the Great—to suppose that his intellectual aptitudes were much less than desired. This, combined with Aquinas' large physique, earned him the epithets "the dumb ox" and "the great Sicilian ox." However, though Aquinas

endeavoured to conceal his giftedness, Albert soon became aware of his new student's exceptional abilities—especially of Aquinas' profound understanding of theological and philosophical truths. (22) Thus, “Albert...gave himself heart and soul to the task of developing and directing the magnificent mind that had been confided to his care,” (23) understanding that Divine Providence had endowed Aquinas with such talent for a reason of great import. Aquinas and Albert developed a lifelong bond that is considered to be one of the most extraordinary and fruitful friendships in the history of Dominican saints. (24)

Shortly after Aquinas began his studies in Cologne, he accompanied Albert to the University of Paris, where he continued his studies of Sacred Scripture, medieval theological works, and Aristotelian philosophy. Aquinas likewise studied the copious writings of the Church Fathers, which span a millennium from the Apostolic times to the age of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153). (25) Aquinas' familiarity with these and other texts was extraordinary, for his memory was such that, by reading a work only once, he was able to memorize it in its entirety. Aquinas' retentive memory not only facilitated his work of writing and teaching, but it also enabled him later to easily produce his *Catena Aurea*: an extensive compilation of Gospel commentaries of the various Church Fathers—a work which Aquinas is believed to have assembled almost entirely from memory. (26)

PRIEST AND MASTER OF SACRED THEOLOGY

When Aquinas was twenty-two years old, he returned to Cologne to begin teaching alongside Albert, “whose high reputation he equalled in his very first lessons.” (27) While in Germany, Aquinas was also ordained to the priesthood by the bishop of Cologne. (28) Aquinas' lifelong and profound devotion to the Blessed Sacrament embodied his life as a priest. He was often seen in ecstasy while saying Mass, and he was frequently brought to tears by the consideration of God's great love for us so beautifully exemplified in the Holy Eucharist. (29) Fittingly, he was later chosen by Pope Urban IV (d. 1264) to compose the prayers and hymns for the liturgy of Corpus Christi (a feast day instituted to give special honour to Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament). These prayers and hymns, redolent of Aquinas' loving contemplation of the Divine Mysteries, are a paradigm of his poetical skill combined with his lucidity of thought. (30)

Having finished his theological studies in Paris, Aquinas received his degree as Master of Sacred Theology (equivalent of a doctorate), four years before the customary age to receive such a degree. (31) He soon began teaching theology at the University of Paris in the capacity of Master. From this time until a few months before his death, his life was characterized by teaching theology in various universities in Europe—particularly in Italy—and by devoting a great part of his time to praying, writing, studying, traveling, and preaching (32)—each of which, in turn, he performed almost constantly, despite difficulties occasioned by his poor health. (33)

During this time, while in Rome, Aquinas met Fr. Reginald di Piperno, an Italian Dominican priest and theologian (34) who would become not only his closest friend but also his confessor, altar server, scribe, travel companion, and lifelong assistant. Fr. Reginald received the complete confidence of Aquinas, who frequently revealed to him many of the special graces he received. Additionally, after Aquinas' death, Fr. Reginald composed the Supplement of Aquinas' incomplete *Summa Theologiae*. (35)

AUTHOR OF THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE

Among Aquinas' immense literary output, his *Summa Theologiae* stands not only as the most recognizable of his works but also as the most important theological manual of the Catholic Church. Being "a complete scientifically arranged exposition of theology and at the same time a summary of Christian philosophy," (36) the *Summa Theologiae* is divided into three main sections in which are presented an entire synthesis of theology, broadly classified as follows: firstly, God in Himself, and God as Cause and End of creation; next, morality; and, lastly, Christology and Sacramentology. The *Summa* consists of 612 questions, each of which are subdivided into articles (totalling 3,120 articles). (37) Each article contains a series of objections, a clear treatment of the subject, and answers to the objections.

Due to the veracity and clarity of Aquinas' theology ("Thomism"), popes throughout the centuries have repeatedly emphasized the importance of faithful adherence to it. Pope Benedict XV (d. 1922) states that Aquinas "...was divinely raised up that the Church might have a master whose doctrine should be followed in a special way at all times." (38) Fidelity to the truths explicated so

clearly by Aquinas in his *Summa*, and in his other writings, is especially necessary in an age such as ours, in which doctrinal error is particularly widespread.

Among some of Aquinas' other writings are additional theological and philosophical works of varying lengths, Scriptural commentaries, and several treatises on the natural sciences, including cosmology, meteorology, psychology, and biology. In the course of twenty years, Aquinas wrote over sixty books and treatises (39) which, taken together, total over eight million words. (40) His prolificacy has aptly been compared to that of Mozart, whose numerous musical compositions were likewise produced during a short career. (41)

MODEL OF STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS

Aquinas, like other Doctors of the Church throughout the ages, coupled his studies and work with his spirit of prayer and mortification, thus directing all his efforts towards God and likewise receiving from Him especial enlightenment. (42) Further, although Aquinas was, indeed, gifted with exceptional natural intelligence, his deep understanding of theological truths was not merely the result of his intellectual aptitudes and his dedication to learning. Rather, Aquinas himself said he “learned more at the foot of the crucifix than in books” (43)—an assertion all the more striking considering the extent and variety of his oeuvre.

Pope Bl. Pius IX, in his encyclical, *Studiorum Ducem*, describes some aspects of Aquinas' prayer and mortifications: “[He] would frequently fast, spend whole nights in prayer, lean his head...against the tabernacle containing the august Sacrament, constantly turn his eyes and mind in sorrow to the image of the crucified Jesus....” (44) Aquinas was known for his profound humility and meekness, as well as for his great fraternal charity, which evinced itself especially in his love for the poor, to whom he readily offered whatever he could of his own belongings. (45) One of Aquinas' contemporaries describes him as having been “a sweet-tempered man, humble and gentle; free from all worldly ambition....” (46) This and other similar testimonies reveal Aquinas' constant uprightness of intention, as he undertook all his work for the glory of God, in a spirit of humility.

Aquinas frequently prayed that he would never be compelled to assume any episcopal distinctions. Although he was chosen by the pope to become the archbishop of Naples, he successfully implored the sovereign pontiff to select another candidate for such a position, (47) wishing to pass his entire life as “a simple religious man.” (48)

“NOTHING BUT YOURSELF, LORD”

Throughout his life, Aquinas experienced many extraordinary graces which, though not an essential part of sanctity, can sometimes accompany it. In addition to his frequent ecstasies, Aquinas was sometimes seen levitating as he prayed; he received visions and revelations from Our Lord, Our Lady, angels, saints, and souls in Purgatory; he had a type of mystical experience of Christ's Passion; and he worked miracles during his life. While Aquinas was composing his *Commentary on the Book of Isaias*, he reached a passage that presented particular difficulty, and so he applied himself to fervent prayer for light and understanding. As he was thus praying, Sts. Peter and Paul appeared to him and instructed him in the meaning of the passage and what he should write about it. (49)

During the time Aquinas was composing the third part of his *Summa Theologiae*, one of his confreres observed him entering the convent church early one morning before the other friars arrived for the Divine Office. As Aquinas was “praying fervently and weeping” (50) before a crucifix in the church, he began to levitate to the level of the crucifix, from which a voice said to him: “Thomas, you have written well about me. What reward will you have?” Aquinas responded: “Lord, nothing but yourself.” (51)

DEATH AND MIRACLES

On December 6, 1273, as Aquinas was saying Mass in the chapel of St. Nicholas, (52) he experienced a prolonged and especially deep ecstasy, after which he ceased to compose the treatises to which he had hitherto so dedicated himself. Aquinas thus left many of his works unfinished—including the *Summa Theologiae*. (53) When Fr. Reginald urged him to continue writing, Aquinas answered, “Reginald, I cannot.... All that I have written seems to me like straw compared with what has now been revealed to me.” (54)

Though Aquinas soon fell ill, he obeyed the orders of Pope Gregory X (d. 1276) when the latter called for his presence at the Second Council of Lyons, which would be held in May of 1274. As one of the aims of this council was to reunite the schismatic Greek Orthodox Church with Rome, it required the presence of skilful theologians such as Aquinas and St. Bonaventure to facilitate such a reunion. (55)

Accordingly, Aquinas, accompanied by Fr. Reginald, began his journey to Lyons, France—a journey quickly cut short when Aquinas suffered a serious head injury on the road and was thus impeded from traveling further. During a brief stay at his niece's castle, he experienced a rapid loss of strength and became unable to eat. Feeling that he was approaching death, and wishing to die in a monastic context rather than in a castle, he asked the abbot of the nearby Cistercian monastery of Fossanova if he could be taken there to spend his final days. Accordingly, Aquinas was taken to the abbey, where he spent the following weeks leading up to his death in the care of Fr. Reginald and the Cistercian monks of the monastery. (56)

As his condition began to greatly worsen, Aquinas was given the last rites (which includes one's last confession, last Communion, and the reception of the sacrament of Extreme Unction). (57) After making his general confession to Fr. Reginald, and when the Blessed Sacrament was about to be carried into his room, Aquinas asked the monks to take him out of bed and lay him prostrate on the ground before the Eucharist, (58) about which he spoke "many beautiful things" (59) to the monks who were with him.

On March 7, 1274, in the presence of about a hundred priests and monks who were praying for him, Aquinas died peacefully in Fr. Reginald's arms, at the age of about fifty years. (60) Numerous miracles were soon granted by his intercession, such as the restoration of sight to the blind and the curing of paralysis. (61)

Notably, God revealed Aquinas' death to St. Albert the Great, who, though a great distance from Italy where Aquinas died, was aware of the moment in which his former student entered heaven:

...[W]hen Thomas left the earth his ancient and venerable master, seated at table with his Brethren in the Convent of Cologne, suddenly began to weep. The Prior and the other Religious having pressed him to tell them the cause of his tears, he exclaimed with a mournful voice, "Thomas, my son in Christ, the bright luminary of the Church, passes at this very moment from the world to his Lord!" (62)

St. Thomas Aquinas was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope St. Pius V in 1567. In 1880, Pope Leo XIII declared Aquinas the patron saint of Catholic schools and universities, and he is called "Angelic Doctor" for the sublimity of his theological teaching and for his angelic purity. (63)

A SPECIAL MESSAGE

St. Thomas Aquinas is a model of sanctity not only for theologians and philosophers but also for all Catholics everywhere. Because Aquinas surrendered himself, his talents, and every circumstance of his life entirely to God's disposal and guidance, he placed no obstacle to the workings of Divine Providence, which would bring about, through Aquinas, inestimable good. He thus found peace and strength by relying on God's infinite Wisdom, especially amidst circumstances which seemed unfavourable to his pursuing God's will as a Dominican friar. Continuing in fervour to follow God's will until the end of his life, Aquinas left a rich legacy for all future generations.

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