

Introduction

The Life of a Teacher

The greatness of Thomas Aquinas as a saint, a Doctor of the Church, and a thinker is well known. His philosophy and theology, in fact, have been commended by many popes and by Vatican II. His greatness as a guide in the spiritual life, however, is not always recognized. Yet, no author has more clearly shown that the morality of the Christian must be a life in the Holy Spirit by which we are conformed to Christ, the word of God—a spirituality of truth.

The first decisive step in his development of this spirituality was taken by Thomas when against the opposition of his noble family he chose to become a begging friar rather than abbot of Monte Cassino for which they had destined him. Thomas Aquinas was born in 1224/5, the youngest of four sons of Landulf, Count d'Aquino of Roccasecca in the Kingdom of Sicily, by his second wife Theodora. He had two half-brothers by Landulf's first wife and four sisters by Theodora. Two of his older brothers served in the armies of the German Emperor Frederick II, but his parents offered their youngest son to the Benedictines of Monte Cassino as a future monk. When he had completed his primary education the abbot sent him to the University of Naples for his liberal arts, expecting him to return to the monastery as a novice.

Thomas, however, had by then become acquainted with the mendicant orders founded by Dominic de Guzman and Francis of Assisi only a generation before. These two orders were spreading

rapidly throughout Europe, attracting many young men from the universities, as well as young women from domesticity. This new form of religious life differed from monasticism, then a thousand years old, by its effort to restore the "apostolic life" of the early Church, a life of utmost simplicity and fraternity, unburdened by the complex structures and properties that the monasteries had accumulated over the years. Francis called youths to follow Jesus as the poor man, the crucified. Dominic called them to walk with Jesus the preacher searching for his lost sheep.

Why did Thomas choose Dominic's Preachers rather than Francis' Little Brothers? Thomas was a big, strapping young man but so silent that his schoolmates had nicknamed him "the Dumb Ox." Within his silence was an intense questioning—question after question that would never cease till his death. It is said that as a child he kept asking his parents, "Who is God?" Francis met the problems of his day by the example of a simplicity and humility of life which put little emphasis on academic erudition. But Dominic realized that his preachers would be of little use to the bishops if they were not prepared to confront the many difficult questions raised in those days by heretics as well as Jews and Muslims.

Consequently, from the very beginning Dominic sent some of his friars to the universities to study theology in depth and provided every priory with a teacher (the "conventual lector") to promote life-long study by all the priests. This was just what Thomas was seeking: a ministry of the Word, rooted in a spirituality of truth. Although his own brothers tried to change his mind by imprisoning him for some months, they finally had to give in to his firm determination to become a Friar Preacher.

On joining this order, Thomas was at once sent to Paris to make his year of novitiate and then enter its great center of learning, the *alma mater* of all modern universities. There he became a pupil of Albert the Great, the first major Dominican philosopher and theologian. When Albert went to Cologne to establish a new school, Thomas accompanied him and was there ordained priest in 1250/51; but soon he returned to Paris to complete his studies and begin his teaching career. During this time he wrote his first major

work, a commentary on the standard theology textbook of the day, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard.

In this work we already find that spirituality of truth which was to characterize all of Thomas' work and life. He liked to quote Ambrose, who said that "All truth is from the Holy Spirit" and himself said, "It makes no difference who said it, but whether or not what was said is true." This attitude enabled Thomas to find even in error some true insight he could use to widen and deepen his vision of God and creation. On a first reading, Aquinas' writing may seem colorless, but this is precisely because it is so transparent to the light of truth, unclouded by merely personal opinion or prejudice, open to all reality. Throughout his career he generously and patiently answered the many letters of inquiry about theological problems sent him by rulers, bishops, clergy and laypersons.

Yet, for all his serenity Thomas was not a cold intellectual. For him truth was not an abstraction, but Jesus Christ, the Son of God, present in the scriptures, the Church, and the eucharist. Indeed, the most detailed analysis of human feeling produced in the Middle Ages is to be found in Aquinas' treatise on hate, love, disgust, fear, anger, despair, hope and joy in the *Summa Theologiae* I-II. A brother Dominican who was often with Thomas at the liturgy tells us he had seen the learned master's eyes swell with tears when the beautiful Lenten antiphon "In the midst of life, death is ever present" was sung. We feel something of these deep emotions expressed in the hymns he was asked to write for the Feast of Corpus Christi.

In 1256 Thomas was made a Master of Theology (our modern doctorate) but was not immediately accepted by the Paris faculty, because a secular priest, William St. Amour, had instigated a campaign against the friars, calling them "anti-christs" imposed on the university by the popes who had wrongfully given them rights to teach and preach anywhere in the Church. Aquinas vigorously defended these rights and finally, as a result of papal action, was admitted to the university faculty. Like Francis and Dominic, who wanted their orders to serve the whole Church and not just a small territory as did monasteries, Aquinas always worked to unite the Church under the successor of Peter.

Thomas was not, however, a mere conformist but a very independent thinker. Until his time, Catholic theology and spirituality both in the Eastern and Western Church were chiefly expressed in terms of the dualistic philosophy of Plato, as it had been best formulated for Eastern Christians by the mysterious figure Dionysius the Areopagite and in the West by Augustine of Hippo. For Platonism the human person or self is the *soul alone* and the body merely its temporary garment. Such an anthropology is not easy to reconcile with the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation and the resurrection.

In contrast to this traditional view, Albert the Great had done much to make understandable to his times the anti-Platonic philosophy of Aristotle for which the human person is a *complementary unity* of body and soul; but even Albert hesitated to abandon Platonism decisively. Hence, many of his disciples, notably the great mystic Meister Eckhart, developed a whole Pseudo-tradition of radically Platonic spirituality, today still influential. The Franciscans and most medieval theologians, however, remained loyal to Augustine's more moderate Platonism. Thomas was not satisfied with either form of Platonism. Aided by Albert's work on Aristotle, Aquinas very early made the decision to adopt the Aristotelian understanding of the human person wholeheartedly. Yet, he also strove to revise whatever of value the Church had learned from Plato so as to free it from dualism and make it consistent with Aristotle's holistic anthropology. Thus he was able to present a richer spirituality of creation, incarnation, and resurrection.

When Thomas' three-year term as Regent Master in Paris was complete he returned in 1259 to Naples to his home province of his Order. There, at the request of a former Master of the Order, St. Raymond of Penyafort, he finished his second major work, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, to assist Dominican missionaries in Spain in their discussions with Muslims and Jews. But soon he was called to Orvieto to be theologian of the papal court from 1261 to 1264. Next he was assigned as head of studies for the province of Rome, 1265-66, and in 1267 again taught at the papal court in Viterbo. From 1259 on, he was faithfully assisted by Reginald of

Piperno, O.P., but was aided also by three or four other secretaries, to whom he often *simultaneously* dictated on different subjects!

This great power of concentration is evident in the conciseness, precision and consistency of his works, although many of them were taken down by students from his lectures. Witnesses relate that even in the presence of dignitaries at court Thomas often became so absorbed in thought that it was difficult to gain his attention. Once when he had to have an operation on his leg, he endured the intense pain by concentrating on a theological problem. This abstraction, however, was not merely scholarly, because sometimes, saying Mass, his face bathed with tears, he stood for a long time entranced. Reginald reported that once when Thomas was struggling over a hard text of the Bible, he prayed and fasted until one night Reginald heard him talking with visitors in his cell. Reginald repeatedly pressed Thomas to tell him who the visitors were, and finally Thomas made him swear not to reveal that it was Saints Peter and Paul who had explained the text to him. On another occasion he said to his students, "I have learned more from my crucifix than from my books."

A renewed attack on the mendicant orders at the University of Paris led Aquinas to return there in 1268 for his second Regency to again defend them. But now he found himself involved in another fight, one between the Faculties of Theology and of the Liberal Arts. Students of theology first had to pass through the liberal arts program based on the study of Aristotle, but an Aristotle commented by the great Muslim thinker Ibn Rushd (Averroes) that emphasized such of the Greek's theories which were irreconcilable with Christian faith. Hence, naturally enough, the Faculty of Theology had grown increasingly unfavorable to an Averroistic Aristotle against whom they had to defend to their students their own traditional Augustinianism.

First in 1270, then more effectively in 1277 after Aquinas' death, this quarrel resulted in condemnations of Averroistic Aristotelianism by Stephen Tempier, Archbishop of Paris, and at Oxford by a Dominican Archbishop, Robert Kilwardy, which also seemed to implicate Aquinas' Aristotelian views although he was not named.

Thus the final period of Aquinas' life was devoted to the mature formulation of his theology in the *Summa Theologiae* and to defending his use of Aristotle in theology by writing commentaries on Aristotle's works, many of them dealing with problems in natural science, ethics and politics. Until Thomas was canonized in 1323 his teaching remained suspect in Paris and Oxford, especially among Franciscan theologians loyal to the Platonism of Augustine. The loyalty of his Dominican disciples alone kept it alive.

Yet, Aquinas' last years at Paris (1269-72) and then at Naples (1272-73) were his most fruitful, during which, besides the major works just mentioned, he wrote extensively. He was able to get so much work done only by unremitting concentration. Rising early each day he confessed his sins to his companion Reginald of Piperno and said Mass, made his thanksgiving by serving Reginald's Mass, and then went to his classroom. After teaching the morning class he wrote or dictated to several secretaries until noon. After dinner he prayed in his cell, took a brief siesta and then wrote, dictated, and prayed until time to attend midnight Matins and only then went to bed to rise early for another day.

It was at Naples during the Lent of 1273 that Aquinas preached in the vernacular on the creed, the commandments, the Our Father, and the Hail Mary. But on December 1273 something occurred during his celebration of Mass that caused him to cease all writing and teaching. To Reginald's anxious inquiries he simply said, "I can write no more. Compared to what has now been revealed to me all I have written seems only straw." He went to see his sister, Countess Theodora, but was hardly able to speak to her and soon took to his bed. Since he had written much on the differences between the Eastern and Western Churches, Pope Gregory X sent for him to attend the Council of Lyons at which an ecumenical reunion was to be attempted. Thomas set out on the journey, hoping no doubt to meet his old teacher Albert again, who had also been summoned. As he rode along in his strange condition of mind he struck his head against a low branch, and was cared for at the home of his niece Francesca in the castle of Maenza. There he was still able to celebrate Mass, but growing worse he asked to die in

the nearby Cistercian Abbey of Fossanova. On receiving viaticum in preparation for his death on March 7, 1274, he said to those at his bedside, "I have taught and written much on this most holy Body and the other sacraments, according to my faith in Christ and the holy Roman Church, to whose judgment I submit all my teaching."

Thomas was canonized in 1323 and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1567. In 1879 Leo XIII commended his teaching as the "Common Doctor of the Church" in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, and in 1880 made his philosophy and theology the basis of Catholic education. Vatican II said, "In order to make the mysteries of salvation known as thoroughly as possible, students [for the priesthood] should learn to penetrate them more deeply with the help of speculative reason exercised under the tutelage of St. Thomas." His spirituality is indeed an "in-depth penetration" of "the mysteries of salvation."

A Spirituality of the Love of Truth

For Aquinas God is truth, but that truth is also love and therefore above all things lovable. Because God is truth and truth breathes forth love, so from God proceeds the Word of truth and the Holy Spirit of love. For no other reason than a love that seeks to share its joy with others, God has freely created the universe in all its variety and order. The crown of creation are creatures who are persons, that is, endowed with intelligence and free will, who therefore can share in God's truth and love. The vast throng of these persons are pure spirits, the angels, but the least of them are human beings who are able to acquire knowledge only through their bodies and the material world in which they live. Yet, these human persons, just as the angels, are created in God's image, since they have the intelligence to know him and the will to love him.

Human beings were created not only naturally good, but "very good" (Gn 1:31) because, endowed with the grace of the Holy Spirit so they might transcend the limits of mere human nature, they seek