



Saints Catholics Should Know

Vol. 1

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Feast Day: January 28

The Lord: Thomas, you have written well of me; what do you ask of your labor?

Thomas: None other, Lord, but yourself

St. Thomas Aquinas, also known as The Angelic Doctor, is a saint all Catholics should know. No other theologian, doctor, or father of the Church has received the intensity of praise by Popes regarding writings and teachings: "At least 66 popes have expressed approval of his teachings."¹ Perhaps the only other saint who comes close to this type of papal approval is St. Augustine. Not only has he been declared the patron saint of all schools and universities, but as recently as 1983, Canon (Church) Law prescribes that the teachings of Thomas be especially used in the study of the faith. Today it is impossible to progress through seminary formation or toward advanced theology degrees without studying his works. Pope Pius XI felt it was simply a matter of common sense to seek the counsel of St. Thomas when studying theology (the study of God).

Thomas was born in 1225 or 1226 into a noble family of strong Catholic roots in the town of Roccasecca, located between Rome and Naples, Italy. When he was only 5 years old, his family took him to the Benedictine Monastery at Monte Cassino, to be educated. His family hoped young Thomas would rise through the order's rank and, one day, become the abbot. Already at such a young age, Thomas was searching for truth. His childish mind was asking simple, yet complex questions that would shape his entire life. It is said that one day in a particular class, young Thomas raised his hand and asked of his teacher this probing question: "Master, what is God?"²

At an early age, Thomas displayed an astonishing aptitude for serious and seemingly tireless study and reflection. In his early teens, He was also drawn toward the religious life, but not as a Benedictine as his family as hoped, but to the Dominicans, an order that sustained itself through begging. His choice was met with much resistance by his family. His mother, brothers, and sisters went to great extremes to prevent Thomas from entering. It is said that his brothers even once kidnapped Thomas and locked him in a room in their castle and hired a seductress to tempt him. When Thomas saw the woman's intention, he ran to the fireplace, grabbed a red hot burning stick, and chased her from the room with it. He then traced the sign of the cross on the wall with the charred wood. That night, he had a dream in which two angels appeared to him and offered him protection against sexual impurity. From that night on, Thomas was not once tempted to break his chastity and he remained "as innocent as a little child throughout his entire life."³ Pope Pius XI believes: "If Thomas had fallen from chastity, even in extreme danger, it is very likely that the Church would never have had its Angelic Doctor."⁴

His teaching was, more than any other, fully in keeping with the truths that God has revealed, with writings of the Holy Fathers, and with the principles of right reason, and therefore the Holy Church has adopted it as her own, and has given the name of common or universal teacher to its author.

*--Pope John XXIII
(Address to the Fifth International Thomistic Congress, September 16, 1960)*

As it was once said to the Egyptians ... 'Go to Joseph,' from whom an abundance of food would be supplied to them for nourishing the body, so now to those seeking truth We say, 'Go to Thomas', that they may request, for the everlasting, life of their souls, the food of sound doctrine with which he overflows.

*--Pope Pius XI
(Encyclical of Scholastic Philosophy)*

¹ Christopher Rengers. *The 33 Doctors of the Church*. (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 2000), 382.

² Rengers, 366.

³ Rengers, 375.

⁴ Rengers, 375.

After some time, Thomas continued his study under St. Albert the Great. It was during this time that he received the nickname, the Dumb Ox. Thomas was a quiet man who did not speak much and he was also largely built. Nevertheless, his brilliance shown through his quietness and after seeing how brilliant Thomas was, Albert said of Thomas: "You call him the Dumb Ox, but one day the bellowing of this ox will resound throughout the world."⁵

St. Thomas' only motive was to love and serve the Lord. Centuries earlier, Anselm of Canterbury defined theology as Faith seeking understanding. St. Thomas had a tremendous faith that he kept alive by continually seeking to understand God, not only for intellectual reasons, but also for spiritual reasons. For Thomas, the Word of the Lord was always at the forefront of his mind, on his lips, and in his heart. Whether praying, studying, writing, or teaching, his purpose was to love and serve the Lord and to help others also do so.

Thomas was a very humble and respectful person. He was loved by many as a great teacher and spiritual leader, but he also had his share of critics, some who were sharply opposed to his teachings. Regardless of another's opinion of him or his work, he always treated everyone with respect and never spoke ill of people. He had a very special quality within that allowed him to remain calm and collected during debates. He believed that the best way to win another over to his way of reasoning was to begin from the opponent's point of view. He began by respecting his opponent and thoroughly understanding his opponent's position. From there, with his logic, he could persuade another to his point of view.

In his effort to better understand his faith and to help others also better understand, he undertook the burden of writing many, many works. The most famous and best known work is *The Summa Theologica*, which translates into a summary of theology. Thomas wrote the Summa for the average Christian. At first glance, it may not appear basic. It takes a little while to get used to his writing style. Thomas begins with a question of faith. Then he lists all the possible objections to the question, (and sometimes even other replies to those objections!) and spells them out. Then he responds with his answer to the question and the objections.

St. Thomas Aquinas illumined the Church more than all the Doctors; in his book man will advance more in one year than in the teaching of the others for a lifetime.
--Pope John XII

When we sing one of Thomas's hymns, such as *Tantum Ergo*, we receive a glimpse of his intense spirituality. Thomas Aquinas spent much time in prayer. He never opened a research book or wrote a word without first praying about it. Many who knew him have testified that his prayer sessions and masses were often so emotional that he shed tears during them. One day in 1272, as had been his custom, he went one day to pray before the crucifix. The Lord spoke to St. Thomas from the Cross: Thomas, you have written well of me; what do you ask of your labor? Thomas Responded: "None other, Lord, but yourself."⁶

St. Thomas wrote extensively, especially in the Summa Theologica and was well into the third part of the Summa, when on December 6, 1273, he experienced a transformation while saying Mass. It was of such an indescribable caliber and so beautiful that he put his pen aside for good. When questioned why he had stopped writing, Thomas answered, "I cannot go on. Because all that I have written seems to me like straw compared with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me."⁷ Perhaps this is Thomas's way of saying that no matter how eloquent of prose one uses, it is impossible to describe in words, what you can experience in God.

Thomas died on March 7, 1274. He was canonized in 1323 by Pope John XXII and declared Doctor of the Church in 1567 by Pope Leo XIII. St. Thomas never personally attended one Church council during his lifetime. Since then, however, he has been present at Councils, in the form of his teachings. Calling to mind the words of St. Albert: "You call him the Dumb Ox, but one day the bellowing of this ox will resound throughout the world."⁸ Albert was right!

For More Information ...

Encyclopedia of Saints.
(Revised) Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2003.

Lives of the Saints. Catholic Book Publishing, 1999.

Rengers, Christopher. *The 33 Doctors of the Church.*
Rockford, Illinois: Tan, 2000.

⁵ Rengers, 368.

⁶ Rengers, 369.

⁷ Rengers, 370.

⁸ Rengers, 368.