

Saints
by Our
Side

Thomas Aquinas



Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, FSP

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INTRODUCTION



Can a Medieval Friar Capture Your Heart?

The Aquino family castle still sits atop a craggy hill in Roccasecca, Italy. Small grassy plants cover the rocks on the slope of the hill. On a clear day, a few wispy clouds might float through the deep blue sky, but one can still see the valley below and, looking toward Rome, the hills in the north.

Medieval castles can conjure up images of dashing knights seeking to find and rescue their beautiful ladies-in-waiting. And in a sense, Saint Thomas Aquinas was a knight, but not the Don Quixote type who jousts with windmills. Thomas was a knight in search of the truth, always seeking his lady: Wisdom. This text from the Book of Wisdom could describe him: “I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of

wisdom came to me. I preferred her to scepters and thrones, and I accounted wealth as nothing in comparison with her” (7:7–8). Some of his spiritual knight-errantry included running away from home to follow his dream and stubbornly persisting in it even when his family kidnapped him. They held him under house arrest for a year but Thomas didn’t waver. Some years later, at the University of Paris, he walked through crowds of rioting students in order to get to his classroom to teach, despite the sticks and stones flying through the air. This knight did not wear shining armor and carried no sword. Instead, he put the belt of truth around his waist, wore the helmet of salvation, and carried the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (see Eph 6:14–17). Thomas sought truth in God. The word of God became his constant companion and the light of his life.

A Friend of Truth

Once I was at a talk in which the speaker mentioned Thomas in reference to a theological point. Then he said that while he has a great respect for Thomas, he didn’t consider him to be like a friend. Immediately I thought, “Oh no, that’s not the way it is for me. Thomas is my *friend!* I love him.”

The Book of Wisdom continues, “In every generation [Wisdom] passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets” (7:27). In his generation Thomas Aquinas was one of the foremost friends of wisdom, and so he became a prophet—not a prophet in the sense of predicting the future, but of speaking the word of God. For that is the primary task of a prophet. As a friend of God and now a saint in heaven, Thomas

can be our friend too. Like all the saints, he is ready to intercede for our needs.

As a child I was rather quiet and shy, drawn to books. I loved spending time in the library and in the summer would try to read as many books as I could. The first time I heard about Thomas at my Catholic grammar school, I thought, “A saint who loves books? He’s my kind of saint!” I read Louis de Wohl’s novel about Thomas, *The Quiet Light*. I asked my older brother Paul, who was in high school and liked to read about the saints, to tell me all he knew about Saint Thomas. Two things stood out: Thomas was quiet, and he read and wrote books. I could identify with both of those, and in effect it was love at first sight. Gradually, over time, as I read more about Thomas and even started to ask his intercession, I felt him to be more and more of a friend. He captured my heart.

Thomas was enigmatic, though, and that added to his mystique. Other great saints, such as Augustine, wrote freely of their own struggles and desires along the way of holiness. Augustine’s passion and penetrating analysis of his inner life in *The Confessions* can easily resonate with people in its pathos and depth. But Thomas did not write about himself. He wrote thousands of pages, but nothing about his personal life, although here and there he does drop a few clues. For example, in discussing the role that memory plays in the virtue of prudence, he offers four tips to cultivate a good memory (see *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 49, a. 1). I suspect that Thomas used those aids in developing his own prodigious memory. But even such slightly revealing texts are rare in his writings. Yet the lack of personal information can also tell us something about him. It probably reflects his personality as a

studious, reflective person. The scholarly texts that he wrote didn't lend themselves to personal disclosure. His sole aim was to write for the glory of God and to fulfill his mission as a Dominican friar, which was to preach. Thomas exhausted himself in writing commentaries on the Bible and on the works of Aristotle in order to help the young Dominican friars in their studies. His motive for doing all this work was not to glorify himself but to help others. He became a saint because of his humility and love.

His humility is all the more striking because Thomas was certainly one of the great geniuses of Western thought. Though he is best known for his *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, his writings run to about fifty large folio volumes containing over eight million words¹ in thousands of pages. Thomas played a key role in helping the Church to use the thought of the philosopher Aristotle, which was then becoming better known in the West. Though controversial at the time, especially at the University of Paris where Thomas taught, he always discussed Aristotle's teachings in the clear light of reason and faith. He never stooped to personal attacks, but dealt with the issues. That in itself is a great lesson for us today, when it's so easy, especially online, to shoot down other people or quickly send out anonymous zingers. Thomas is a model of charity and civility in discourse. Instead of criticizing people, he critiqued ideas.

About twenty-five years ago I decided to read the *Summa*. I thought that if I read an article a day, I could finish it in about seven years. I still haven't finished it! But that's all right because it's more important to read Thomas slowly and savor his writing like a fine Italian wine. Reading Thomas is both challenging and engaging. Sometimes I struggle to get his meaning, and at other

times he leaves me in awe at a profound yet beautifully simple response. I love his logic, how he sets out his points one by one, puts objections up front, and responds to each one. I was particularly drawn to how he describes grace, especially how Jesus gives us grace and works through the sacraments. I also liked his idea that charity or love is friendship with God.² Thomas has become a great guide for my spiritual life. The ideas he presents in the *Summa* are not just abstract theological points, but profound spiritual wisdom on how to live a holy life.

Perhaps because he grew up in the sunny Italian countryside, Thomas seems to have had a happy disposition. He had an optimistic view of human life and its possibilities. While he certainly observed the rules of his Dominican order, he was not known for doing extreme penances. Instead, doing what God asked of him each day was his way to holiness, something that we can do too. Thomas had a deep understanding of human nature and sympathy for its weaknesses. For example, in discussing how much time we should spend in prayer, he noted that we have our limits, writing, “It is fitting that prayer should last long enough to kindle the fervor of interior desire, but when it exceeds this measure, so that it cannot be continued any longer without causing weariness, it should be discontinued” (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 83, a. 14).

Thomas was a great friend of God, and ultimately that is why we honor him: it’s what made him a saint. His philosophical and theological writings are enduring treasures, but if that’s all we remember about Thomas, we are missing the secret of his greatness. Through the centuries he has touched countless people through his great Eucharistic hymns, drawing them into a deeper love for the Lord. How many times Catholics have gathered to

worship Jesus present in the Eucharist at a Benediction service, and amid the fragrant clouds of incense they sing the words Thomas penned in his famous hymn *Tantum Ergo*:

Down in adoration falling,
Lo! the sacred Host we hail,
Lo! o'er ancient forms departing
Newer rites of grace prevail;
Faith for all defects supplying,
Where the feeble senses fail.

Perhaps by his silence about himself, Thomas wanted to point us to the One who really matters: Jesus Christ. A beautiful story that has come down to us captures the essence of Thomas' life. Once, after having written his great Eucharistic hymns, Thomas was praying on his knees before a crucifix. Suddenly the crucifix seemed to come to life and Thomas heard a voice saying, "You have written well of me, Thomas. What reward would you like?" He replied, "Only you, Lord, only you."³

Thomas had found the secret to happiness and holiness in his friendship with the Lord. And Thomas is ready to befriend us, too. I hope that everyone who reads this book will find in Thomas not only a great theologian and philosopher, but also a great friend: "Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter: whoever finds one has found a treasure" (Sir 6:14).

CHAPTER ONE



A Determined Young Man

The Aquinas castle towered high into the sky in the sleepy little town of Roccasecca (dry rock) in Italy—a perfect setting for the birth of a giant. Thomas Aquinas was that giant, not only because he was a great philosopher and theologian, but because he was a saint. Like all the saints, however, he was not born a saint but had to struggle like we all do.

While the exact date of his birth is unknown, he was probably born in 1224 or 1225. Thomas came from a rather well-to-do family. Since the tenth century they had held lands in Roccasecca, located in what was then known as the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The town was about halfway between Rome and Naples. The family was known as “de Aquino” because in earlier years they had controlled the county of Aquino. Their location in Roccasecca was important because it placed them between the lands of the pope and the emperor.

Thomas was the son of Landolfo and Theodora. They had at least nine children, four boys and five girls. Thomas was the youngest of the boys. His two oldest brothers, Aimo and Rinaldo, were soldiers and fought in the army of the emperor, Frederick II. But they both switched sides and joined the papal forces when Frederick campaigned against the Pope. Of the third brother, Landolfo, we have no information.

Thomas' oldest sister, Marotta, became a Benedictine nun, while another sister, Theodora, married Count Roger of San Severino. The third, Maria, married William of San Severino, while a fourth, Adelasia, became the wife of Roger of Aquila. We don't know the name of the last girl, who died when she was a baby. Tragically, she was killed by lightning in a bad storm while she was sleeping in the castle. Thomas, then a toddler, was also taking a nap in the same room but was unharmed.¹ While we don't know all the details of this incident, it must have had a big effect on the little boy. His mother may have rushed in to the room, but perhaps in her grief would not have been able to comfort him. This incident may explain his lifelong fear of storms. Later, as a friar, on his frequent travels he would take with him a relic of Saint Agnes, whom he would invoke for protection during storms.

A legendary story about baby Thomas says that one day his mother and his nurse took him to the baths in Naples. Little Thomas picked up a piece of parchment from the ground and wouldn't let it go despite his nurse's prodding. Later, when his mother finally wrested it away from him, the paper was found to have the Hail Mary written on it. It's also said that whenever he

would cry, he wouldn't stop unless someone gave him a parchment, which he would always put in his mouth. Naturally his early hagiographers made much of these stories, as if they indicated what he was destined to become. If they are true at all, it's more likely that baby Thomas just liked to put things in his mouth, as babies often do.

Life was good in the Aquinas castle. Perhaps Thomas acquired his generally optimistic view of things when he was a boy. He would have spent happy days playing with his brothers and sisters while his father oversaw the lands and his mother kept the household going. Mama Theodora was a very competent woman. As we will see from later events in Thomas' life, she helped her husband manage the family's affairs and did not shrink from asserting herself.

The Middle Ages were a time of faith, when people easily acknowledged God, and the Church played a large role in society. It was customary for the youngest son of noble families to be dedicated to the Church. The famous monastery of Monte Cassino was only about fifteen miles away from Roccasecca. Founded by Saint Benedict, it became one of the most important monastic centers in Europe. In Thomas' day, the monks ran a school for boys. His parents decided to send him there for his schooling, with the idea that he could later become a Benedictine monk. They probably assumed that with his family connections, he would eventually become the abbot.

Landolfo brought Thomas to this school sometime between July 1230 and May 1231. Thomas was about five or six and was accompanied by his nurse during the trip. It may seem odd to us

that he was brought there at such a young age, but that was a normal procedure in those days. Landolfo made a gift of twenty ounces of gold to the monastery, in lieu of a set tuition. The abbot of Monte Cassino was Landolfo Sinibaldi, a distant relative of the Aquinas family.

A studious child with an eager mind for learning, Thomas enjoyed school. He would have followed the typical course of study of the day, which meant studying Latin, grammar, reading, writing, math, and harmony. Monte Cassino was an intense center of learning. The monks transcribed many important manuscripts, not only in theology and philosophy but also works of poetry from the Greeks and Romans. Thomas received not only an academic but also a cultural education, including music and poetry. This foundation served him well later when he composed his famous hymns for the feast of *Corpus Christi*.

With the death of Abbot Sinibaldi around the year 1236, a new abbot, Stephen de Corbario, took over. Things went on as usual in the monastery, but trouble was stirring in the outside world. In his battles with the Church, Emperor Frederick had banished from his kingdom any monks who had not been born there. Since most of the monks at Monte Cassino were from other areas, they had to go, leaving only a few to run the monastery. Thomas stayed there until he had to leave, around 1239, since the monks could no longer staff the school. So he returned to the family castle at Roccasecca.

His time at Monte Cassino left its mark on Thomas. This early familiarity with Benedictine spirituality gave him an appreciation for the monastic life. For example, throughout his life Thomas was fond of reading the *Conferences* of Saint John

Cassian, which contained principles of the ascetical life from the desert fathers. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas cites Cassian over a dozen times.² The time Thomas spent in the monastery gave him a solid foundation in the spiritual life.

Thomas didn't stay home for long. His parents wanted him to continue his education, so they sent him to the *studium* at Naples in the fall of 1239. The emperor, Frederick II, had established this center for learning at a time when Italy, and all of Europe in general, was experiencing a great revival of learning and study. The works of the great Greek philosophers, Aristotle in particular, were being translated and circulated. Scholarly Arabic works were being translated as well. We can imagine the young Thomas diving into his studies, his natural eagerness for learning fueled by the heady mix of the new ideas that were being spread.

During his five years in Naples, Thomas studied the liberal arts and philosophy at the Faculty of Arts.

Medieval universities followed an ordered program of study. The liberal arts were divided into two sets: the *trivium*, which consisted of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the *quadrivium*, which consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. In this program, Thomas would have learned skills for correct speech and writing. In his later years as a theologian, he put both of those disciplines to good use, not only in writing but also in his oral disputations and preaching.

Although we don't have a lot of documentation about Thomas from these years, we do know the names of two of his teachers. Master Martin taught him grammar and logic, and Master Peter of Ireland taught him the natural sciences.³

The Dominicans

Founded by Saint Dominic, the Order of Preachers (later commonly known as the Dominicans) gained papal approval in 1216. Dominic's passion for preaching the Gospel flowed from his zeal in trying to convert the Albigensians, or Cathars. This heretical group with Gnostic beliefs had been spreading in southern France. Dominic realized that to reach out to them effectively, holy preachers were needed. He dreamed of a group of learned, zealous, and holy priests who would study so as to be able to preach. Thus, the Dominicans were born. They were mendicant preachers, which meant they often traveled, begged for their food, and could move quickly from place to place. The Dominicans valued the intellectual life since their mission of preaching required it. The young Order spread quickly throughout Europe and attracted many candidates.

A Dominican friary had been established at Naples in 1231, and Thomas somehow discovered its existence. Because Frederick II didn't want many mendicants in his empire, by 1239 only two friars lived there, John of San Giuliano and Thomas of Lentini. The latter later became a bishop and was named Patriarch of Jerusalem. Thomas probably saw these friars as they were preaching in the city. Though we don't know the details, he became acquainted with them and grew more and more interested in their life and mission, which was naturally appealing to a devout and studious young man like Thomas. The Dominicans had a freshness about them, that of a new charism⁴ in the Church that readily attracted generous young men. Through them Thomas heard the call that Christ directs to young people in every age,

“Come, follow me!” (see Mt 4:19). By now Thomas had been studying in Naples for almost five years. He had probably been praying and reflecting on his vocational calling for some time. In the spring of 1244 he decided to enter the Order of Preachers and received the habit from Thomas of Lentini. But this seemingly simple action would soon ignite a firestorm.

A Family Fight

Thomas’ parents already had the idea that he would one day enter the service of the Church. But for them this meant that Thomas would return to Monte Cassino in view of eventually becoming the famous monastery’s abbot. After all, they would have thought, a member of the family de Aquino had a certain status. It was only appropriate in their eyes that Thomas should rise to an important position. It would have been a great honor for the family if Thomas had been the abbot at such a renowned center of learning and culture.

As mendicants the Dominicans were the exact opposite of what his family had in mind for his future. The idea of Thomas walking about the countryside begging for food and sleeping in barns with smelly animals revolted them. His mother in particular was upset that Thomas wanted to become a preaching friar. *What?* She must have thought. *Going around the countryside in rough robes, preaching and begging for food? Never would my son lower himself to that!* As soon as she heard the news, Theodora hurried to Naples in hopes of persuading him to abandon this radical idea. Though Thomas’ father was still alive, his mother took charge of getting Thomas back. Landolfo was away

inspecting his various estates and taking care of business matters. The competent Theodora lost no time as she sprang into action.

But it was too late. The friars knew from previous experience that noble families often did not like the idea of their sons becoming roaming preachers. So they had hurried Thomas out of Naples and sent him to Rome, then on the road toward Bologna. He traveled with John of Wildeshausen, also known as John the Teuton, who was the master general of the Dominicans. Having missed meeting Thomas at Naples, Theodora hurried on to Rome, but by that time Thomas was already gone.

Theodora, however, was a woman who would not easily give up. She sent a messenger to her son Rinaldo, who was a soldier in Frederick's army. Rinaldo was in Acquapendente, an area north of Rome. He took a small force with him and rode off to get Thomas.

The small group of friars were no match for the soldiers, and Rinaldo picked Thomas up easily to carry him back to the family castle. In the scuffle that ensued, however, Thomas adamantly refused to take off his Dominican habit and resisted the soldiers' efforts to tear it off. Although torn and muddied, he was still wearing it when they brought him back to Roccasecca.

Thomas had no intentions of giving up his Dominican vocation. As the story goes, his brothers sent a prostitute to his room to try and tempt him. But Thomas simply chased her out. Then he took a flaming torch, etched a cross on the door of his room, and fell to his knees to pray for the virtue of chastity. Is the story factual? It seems unlikely, though many earlier biographers repeated it.⁵ It would not be in keeping with what we know of Theodora to think that she would have approved of this attempt.

Though it is probably only legendary, it is said that after this incident, two angels appeared to Thomas and bound him around his waist with a cord to symbolize chastity. Later, this symbol of the angelic cord would be used as a form of devotion to Saint Thomas, especially to ask his intercession for the virtue of chastity.⁶

Things stood at an impasse. Thomas inherited his mother's determination! He refused to give up his dream of becoming a Dominican. But his family, and his mother in particular, were just as determined to force him to abandon his plans. Back home in the family castle, Thomas was under a sort of house arrest in the sense that he could not freely travel. But he was treated well—it wasn't that he was like a prisoner. Since he had a lot of time on his hands, he put it to good use for study and prayer. He read the entire Bible and studied theology. At that time, taking up theology meant studying the book of *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the most comprehensive textbook at that time. Thomas began to read this important work, which he would later comment on as a theologian.

The Dominican friar John of San Giuliano visited Thomas in the castle and even brought him a new habit to replace the one that had been torn and dirtied in the scuffle with the soldiers. Thomas also discussed religious topics with his family. He may have even persuaded his sister Marotta to enter the religious life.⁷

After about a year, seeing that Thomas would not budge, his family relented. They let him go back to the Dominicans in Naples. It would have been in the summer of 1245. Despite the conflict, Thomas remained warmly attached to his family. We know from accounts of his later life that he would stay with

family members on his travels, and he aided them in certain times of need, such as when he became the executor of his brother-in-law's estate. Thomas had a warm, kind heart that was attentive to the needs of others.

Still, this experience marked Thomas in certain ways for the rest of his life. He had the firm conviction that a person must follow God's will in choosing a vocation and not bow to family pressure. In this regard, an interesting detail sheds some light on how resolute Thomas was.⁸ In discussing duties toward one's parents in relation to God, Thomas strongly maintains that parents should not try to thwart religious vocations in their children. He quotes Saint Jerome who wrote to a monk on this topic: "Should your father prostrate himself on the threshold, trample him underfoot (*per calcatum perge patrem*) and go your way. With dry eyes fly to the standard of the cross." But Thomas added a phrase in Latin, *per calcatum perge matrem*—trample one's mother underfoot!⁹ No doubt he was thinking of Theodora. With these words, he did not mean to say that one should disrespect one's parents, but to put God above all else. Still, his vehemence demonstrates the passion he felt about his own vocation. Since Thomas hardly ever wrote about himself, this is a precious clue that helps us glean something of his personality.

Thomas was now free to follow his vocation. What did the young man think about as he returned to the priory in Naples? He now knew by experience that the journey to God was an arduous road. This episode of his life shows that even as a young man he had remarkable fortitude and a holy stubbornness in doing God's will. Years later, in writing about the virtue of courage, he said, "the chief activity of courage is not so much attacking

as enduring, or standing one's ground amidst dangers" (*Summa*, II-II, q. 123, a. 6). Did he perhaps think of his own year in the castle when he wrote that line? Far from being detached from experience, his theology was worked out in the midst of human struggles. With the help of God's grace, he had overcome his first major obstacle. It was only the beginning.