



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 2 June 2010

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After several Catecheses on the priesthood and on my latest Journeys, today we return to our main theme: meditation on some of the great thinkers of the Middle Ages. We recently looked at the great figure of St Bonaventure, a Franciscan, and today I wish to speak of the one whom the Church calls the *Doctor communis* namely, St Thomas Aquinas. In his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* my venerable Predecessor, Pope [John Paul II](#), recalled that "the Church has been justified in consistently proposing St Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology" (n. 43). It is not surprising that, after St Augustine, among the ecclesiastical writers mentioned in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* St Thomas is cited more than any other, at least 61 times! He was also called the *Doctor Angelicus*, perhaps because of his virtues and, in particular, the sublimity of his thought and the purity of his life.

Thomas was born between 1224 and 1225 in the castle that his wealthy noble family owned at Roccasecca near Aquino, not far from the famous Abbey of Montecassino where his parents sent him to receive the first elements of his education. A few years later he moved to Naples, the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily, where Frederick II had founded a prestigious university. Here the thinking of the Greek philosopher Aristotle was taught without the limitations imposed elsewhere. The young Thomas was introduced to it and immediately perceived its great value. However, it

was above all in those years that he spent in Naples that his Dominican vocation was born. Thomas was in fact attracted by the ideal of the Order recently founded by St Dominic. However, when he was clothed in the Dominican habit his family opposed this decision and he was obliged to leave the convent and spend some time at home.

In 1245, by which time he had come of age, he was able to continue on the path of his response to God's call. He was sent to Paris to study theology under the guidance of another Saint, Albert the Great, of whom I spoke not long ago. A true and deep friendship developed between Albert and Thomas. They learned to esteem and love each other to the point that Albert even wanted his disciple to follow him to Cologne, where he had been sent by the Superiors of the Order to found a theological *studium*. Thomas then once again came into contact with all Aristotle's works and his Arab commentators that Albert described and explained.

In this period the culture of the Latin world was profoundly stimulated by the encounter with Aristotle's works that had long remained unknown. They were writings on the nature of knowledge, on the natural sciences, on metaphysics, on the soul and on ethics and were full of information and intuitions that appeared valid and convincing. All this formed an overall vision of the world that had been developed without and before Christ, and with pure reason, and seemed to impose itself on reason as "the" vision itself; accordingly seeing and knowing this philosophy had an incredible fascination for the young. Many accepted enthusiastically, indeed with a-critical enthusiasm, this enormous baggage of ancient knowledge that seemed to be able to renew culture advantageously and to open totally new horizons. Others, however, feared that Aristotle's pagan thought might be in opposition to the Christian faith and refused to study it. Two cultures converged: the pre-Christian culture of Aristotle with its radical rationality and the classical Christian culture. Certain circles, moreover, were led to reject Aristotle by the presentation of this philosopher which had been made by the Arab commentators. Avicenna and Averroës. Indeed, it was they who had transmitted the Aristotelian philosophy to the Latin world. For example, these commentators had taught that human beings have no personal intelligence but that there is a single universal intelligence, a spiritual substance common to all, that works in all as "one": hence, a depersonalization of man. Another disputable point passed on by the Arab commentators was that the world was eternal like God. This understandably unleashed never-ending disputes in the university and clerical worlds. Aristotelian philosophy was continuing to spread even among the populace.

Thomas Aquinas, at the school of Albert the Great, did something of fundamental importance for the history of philosophy and theology, I would say for the history of culture: he made a thorough study of Aristotle and his interpreters, obtaining for himself new Latin translations of the original Greek texts. Consequently he no longer relied solely on the Arab commentators but was able to read the original texts for himself. He commented on most of the Aristotelian opus, distinguishing between what was valid and was dubious or to be completely rejected, showing its consonance with the events of the Christian Revelation and drawing abundantly and perceptively from

Aristotle's thought in the explanation of the theological texts he was uniting. In short, Thomas Aquinas showed that a natural harmony exists between Christian faith and reason. And this was the great achievement of Thomas who, at that time of clashes between two cultures that time when it seemed that faith would have to give in to reason showed that they go hand in hand, that insofar as reason appeared incompatible with faith it was not reason, and so what appeared to be faith was not faith, since it was in opposition to true rationality; thus he created a new synthesis which formed the culture of the centuries to come.

Because of his excellent intellectual gifts Thomas was summoned to Paris to be professor of theology on the Dominican chair. Here he began his literary production which continued until his death and has something miraculous about it: he commented on Sacred Scripture because the professor of theology was above all an interpreter of Scripture; and he commented on the writings of Aristotle, powerful systematic works, among which stands out his *Summa Theologiae*, treatises and discourses on various subjects. He was assisted in the composition of his writings by several secretaries, including his confrere, Reginald of Piperno, who followed him faithfully and to whom he was bound by a sincere brotherly friendship marked by great confidence and trust. This is a characteristic of Saints: they cultivate friendship because it is one of the noblest manifestations of the human heart and has something divine about it, just as Thomas himself explained in some of the *Quaestiones* of his *Summa Theologiae*. He writes in it: "it is evident that charity is the friendship of man for God" and for "all belonging to him" (Vol. II, q. 23, a. 1).

He did not stay long or permanently in Paris. In 1259 he took part in the General Chapter of the Dominicans in Valenciennes where he was a member of a commission that established the Order's programme of studies. Then from 1261 to 1265, Thomas was in Orvieto. Pope Urban IV, who held him in high esteem, commissioned him to compose liturgical texts for the Feast of *Corpus Christi*, which we are celebrating tomorrow, established subsequent to the Eucharistic miracle of Bolsena. Thomas had an exquisitely Eucharistic soul. The most beautiful hymns that the Liturgy of the Church sings to celebrate the mystery of the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the Eucharist are attributed to his faith and his theological wisdom. From 1265 until 1268 Thomas lived in Rome where he probably directed a *Studium*, that is, a study house of his Order, and where he began writing his *Summa Theologiae* (cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Tommaso d'Aquino. L'uomo e il teologo*, Casale Monf., 1994, pp. 118-184).

In 1269 Thomas was recalled to Paris for a second cycle of lectures. His students understandably were enthusiastic about his lessons. One of his former pupils declared that a vast multitude of students took Thomas' courses, so many that the halls could barely accommodate them; and this student added, making a personal comment, that "listening to him brought him deep happiness". Thomas' interpretation of Aristotle was not accepted by all, but even his adversaries in the academic field, such as Godfrey of Fontaines, for example, admitted that the teaching of Friar Thomas was superior to others for its usefulness and value and served to correct that of all the other masters. Perhaps also in order to distance him from the lively discussions that were going

on, his Superiors sent him once again to Naples to be available to King Charles I who was planning to reorganize university studies.

In addition to study and teaching, Thomas also dedicated himself to preaching to the people. And the people too came willingly to hear him. I would say that it is truly a great grace when theologians are able to speak to the faithful with simplicity and fervour. The ministry of preaching, moreover, helps theology scholars themselves to have a healthy pastoral realism and enriches their research with lively incentives.

The last months of Thomas' earthly life remain surrounded by a particular, I would say, mysterious atmosphere. In December 1273, he summoned his friend and secretary Reginald to inform him of his decision to discontinue all work because he had realized, during the celebration of Mass subsequent to a supernatural revelation, that everything he had written until then "was worthless". This is a mysterious episode that helps us to understand not only Thomas' personal humility, but also the fact that, however lofty and pure it may be, all we manage to think and say about the faith is infinitely exceeded by God's greatness and beauty which will be fully revealed to us in Heaven. A few months later, more and more absorbed in thoughtful meditation, Thomas died while on his way to Lyons to take part in the Ecumenical Council convoked by Pope Gregory X. He died in the Cistercian Abbey of Fossanova, after receiving the Viaticum with deeply devout sentiments.

The life and teaching of St Thomas Aquinas could be summed up in an episode passed down by his ancient biographers. While, as was his wont, the Saint was praying before the Crucifix in the early morning in the chapel of St Nicholas in Naples, Domenico da Caserta, the church sacristan, overheard a conversation. Thomas was anxiously asking whether what he had written on the mysteries of the Christian faith was correct. And the Crucified One answered him: "You have spoken well of me, Thomas. What is your reward to be?". And the answer Thomas gave him was what we too, friends and disciples of Jesus, always want to tell him: "Nothing but Yourself, Lord!" (*ibid.*, p. 320).

To Special Groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I send my greetings to those gathered during these days in Scotland for the centennial of the First Edinburgh Missionary Conference, which is now acknowledged to have given birth to the modern ecumenical movement. May we all renew our commitment to work humbly and patiently, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to live again together our common apostolic heritage.

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*, with the wish that each one may always serve God joyfully and love his or her neighbour with an evangelical spirit.

I would now like to remind you that at 7: 00 p.m. tomorrow, the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, I shall be presiding at Mass outside the Basilica of St John Lateran and it will be followed by the traditional procession to St Mary Major. I invite everyone to take part in this celebration to express together faith in Christ, present in the Eucharist.

Lastly, dear friends, I ask you to accompany with your prayers the Pastoral Visit to Cyprus on which I shall be setting out the day after tomorrow, so that it may be rich in spiritual fruits for the beloved Christian communities in the Middle East.

APPEAL

I am following with great trepidation the tragic events taking place close to the Gaza Strip. I feel the need to express my heartfelt sorrow for the victims of these most painful occurrences that disturb everyone who has at heart peace in the region. Once again I repeat with distress that violence does not settle controversies but rather increases their dramatic consequences and spawns further violence. I appeal to all who have political responsibilities, at both the local and international level, to seek constantly, through dialogue, just solutions in order to guarantee the peoples of the area better living conditions, in harmony and in serenity. I ask you to join me in praying for the victims, for their relatives and for all who are suffering. May the Lord support the efforts of those who never tire of working for reconciliation and Peace.

Video Message of the *Holy Father* to the *Catholic Media Convention, New Orleans*

I send cordial greetings to the delegates gathered in New Orleans for this year's Catholic Media Convention.

The theme of your meeting, "*Spreading the Good News – Byte by Byte*", highlights the extraordinary potential of the new media to bring the message of Christ and the teaching of his Church to the attention of a wider public. If your mission is to be truly effective - if the words you proclaim are to touch hearts, engage people's freedom and change their lives – you must draw them into an encounter with persons and communities who witness to the grace of Christ by their faith and their lives. In this sense, it is my hope that your days together will renew and refresh your shared enthusiasm for the Gospel. Notwithstanding the many challenges you face, never forget the promise of Christ, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt 28:20*).

Dear friends, with these few words of encouragement, to all of you gathered for the Convention I am pleased to impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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