

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS
January 28th
A Reflection
by S. Agnes Lanthier, OP

When I first made the acquaintance of St. Thomas, I was in my early teens. I used to recite the prayer of St. Thomas to be said after receiving Communion. But there was one thing about this prayer which puzzled me: St Thomas was always referring to himself as a sinner. **I quote in part from the prayer: “Lord, Father, I thank you for even though I am a sinner, your unprofitable servant, I pray that this Holy Communion may purify me from my evil ways and put an end to my evil passions.”** “ (Christian Prayer - Liturgy of the Hours)

How could he be a saint and a sinner at the same time? I did not know anything about syllogisms at that time, but my thinking seemed to follow these lines

All saints tell the TRUTH

But St. Thomas did not tell the TRUTH when he said he was a SINNER

Therefore St. Thomas was not really a SAINT.

What kind of a saint could he be if he were not truthful?

That ended my devotion to St. Thomas!

In college, most of what I read and studied about St Thomas related to philosophy and theology.

But what was St. Thomas really like? Some of his biographers imply that he was hidden too long in the shadow of his Summa Theologian, and that even in his own time, he became more an institution than a personality. Reginald Coffey, O.P. has pictured for us a man with very human characteristics. (The Man from Rocca Sicca)

We know that as a student, he was nick-named the “Dumb Ox.” But we also know that his bellowing was heard, not only during his lifetime, but for centuries after, in spite of his opponents and enemies. It is difficult to understand how he managed to hide his brilliant intellectual gifts from his fellow students and his teachers, but when his talents were discovered, he rose swiftly to the heights of the academic world—much to the joy of his renowned teacher Albert the Great. He must have been good-natured to take the teasing, knowing that his intellectual gifts far surpassed not only those of his classmates, but also those of his teachers.

Thomas was humble. His noble birth did not seem to impress him. Evidently he understood clearly, and was attracted to the Dominican quest for truth as lived out by the early friars. Desiring to become a humble friar, he suffered much from the opposition of his family, who because of their nobility could have obtained for him many honors if he would become a Benedictine. They were incensed that he would join a mendicant order which at that time were looked down upon by the nobility and the intelligentsia. But Thomas became a Dominican.

As a preacher, St. Thomas drew crowds because of his simplicity, fire and zeal. His wisdom left many in awe. Where did he get his deep insights into human nature? He preached

in Germany, France, and Italy. Reginald Coffee says that he had numerous acquaintances ranging from the poor to popes and royalty.

“None of his labors as teacher, preacher, and writer detracted from his interior life. Prayer preceded all his work.” (Ibid p.74)

As Jacques Maritain tells us, When asked where he received the wisdom for his writing, St. Thomas replied that whenever he had a problem, he had recourse to God for help—often with tears. (The Angelic Doctor p.137)

The Masterpiece of St. Thomas’ mystical writings is the Office for the feast of Corpus Christi which Pope Urban IV commissioned him to compose. In that office is the only poetry that Thomas wrote. Eight hundred years after, we still sing in Latin or English his **O Salutaris, Pange Lingua, Panis Angelicus** and **Lauda Sion**.—all taken from that feast.

With what love he spoke of the Blessed Sacrament: **“O precious wonderful banquet that brought us salvation and contains all sweetness! Could anything be of more intrinsic value?...The true God is before us as our food!”**

We are privileged daily to introduce our evening prayer with words of our brother, St. Thomas, **O Sacred Banquet.....**

Thomas’ thirst for TRUTH was phenomenal. His whole life was consecrated to truth. He never quoted another author just because the writer was famous. e.g. Augustine, but only if the work of the author met the criterion of truth. His style was a combination of modesty and audacity when dealing with friends and opponents to defend his work. According to Gerald Vann, **“Humility, complete self abnegation in face of truth is the basis of St. Thomas’ thought.”** (St. Thomas Aquinas p.47)

As for my faulty teenage philosophy and theology, I think St. Thomas would have encouraged me to heed Gilbert Chesterton’s words **“Every saint is a man (or woman) before he is a saint”**

He might also want me to know in the words of Gerald Vann that

“The whole of his life was simply to be a medium through which the light of truth, of THE TRUTH might reach the minds of men, (women. and teenagers.)”

(St. Thomas Aquinas p. 46)