

Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*

A Biography



Bernard McGinn

LIVES OF GREAT RELIGIOUS BOOKS

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A BIOGRAPHY

Bernard McGinn

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Jacket art: *Triumph of Saint Thomas Aquinas over Heretics* by Filippino Lippi (ca. 1457–1504), fresco, Basilica of Saint Mary Above Minerva, Carafa Chapel, Rome, 1489–1492 / De Agostini Picture Library / V. Pirozzi / Courtesy of The Bridgeman Art Library. The scene shows Thomas seated on a throne between personifications of Philosophy and Theology on his right and Dialectic and Grammar on his left, with the figure of vanquished Evil under his feet. In the foreground groups of the heretics refuted by Thomas in the *Summa theologiae* are escorted to Thomas by a papal official on our left and a Dominican on the right.

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To my classmates at the North American College

Class of 1966

Ad multos annos, gloriosque annos, viva

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This book owes its origin to the polite persistence of Fred Appel of Princeton University Press, who kept asking me to think of contributing something to a new series, Lives of Great Religious Books. I considered composing a short book on a mystical classic, such as Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, but the more I thought about the possibilities the more I was drawn to the scary idea of writing a book on Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*, one of the longest works in the canon of religious classics and one of the most studied. I am not a card-carrying member of any Thomist party and I've written only a few things on Thomas over my academic career. Nevertheless, I've been reading Thomas for almost sixty years and teaching him for over forty. When I was studying a dry-as-dust version of Neothomist philosophy from 1957 to 1959, I was rescued from despair by reading the work of Etienne Gilson, especially his *Being and Some Philosophers*. Doing theology at the Gregorian University in Rome between 1959 and 1963, I was privileged to work with two great modern investigators of Thomas, Joseph de Finance and Bernard Lonergan. It was then I realized that no matter what kind of theology one elects to pursue in life, there is no getting away from Thomas. So the opportunity to come back to Thomas and the *Summa* was both a challenge and a delight. Rereading the *Summa* and trying to catch up on at least some of the always increasing literature on Aquinas was a homecoming. I hope the reader may be able to experience some of the intellectual stimulation I felt in what follows. I want to thank Fred Appel for valuable suggestions about shortening an originally bloated text to more manageable dimensions, and I also thank my wife, Patricia, for her customary discernment in helping with the editing process. Debbie Tegarden of Princeton University Press was unfailingly helpful in the editing process. My friends and colleagues Susan Schreiner and David Tracy gave valuable assistance with the last two chapters. Finally, three anonymous readers were also very helpful with corrections and suggestions. Any errors that remain are my own.

A Note on Citing Thomas

There is no best edition for all of Thomas Aquinas, although the Leonine Edition begun in 1880 and still under way offers a critical text for most of his writings, but not the *Summa theologiae*. I cite and translate the *Summa* from the student edition based on the Leonine text and published by the Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos in Madrid in 1955. Abbreviating the work as *STh*, I cite from the three parts in four sections as Ia, IaIIae, IIaIIae, and IIIa, making use of the standard divisions into question (q.) and article (a.). For example, Ia, q. 1 indicates the First Part, the first question, and the third article. Sometimes, for greater precision, I use corp. for the body of Thomas's response, and ad 1, ad 2, and so on for his responses to the objections to his position. Other works of Thomas are cited according to standard abbreviations, a list of which can be found at the end of the book. I have included a number of endnotes to the chapters. These can easily be disregarded by readers who wish to follow the narrative without distraction, but they may be useful for those who wish to pursue

aspects of Thomas's thought on specific issues, especially in light of the vast literature on the
Summa.

Bernard McGinn
Chicago, January 201

Every civilization has classic expressions. There are some cultural artifacts that come to sum up a period and a style while also becoming part of the common patrimony of human society. In European civilization Shakespeare's plays not only epitomize Elizabethan England, but continue to be read around the world. The same is true of the art of Michelangelo and Leonardo, the music of Bach and Beethoven, the writings of Cervantes and Goethe. In terms of the long Middle Ages (ca. 500–1500 C.E.), when Catholic Christianity was a dominant force, it is not surprising that many of the most famous cultural artifacts are religious. Disputes about which expressions of medieval culture are the most characteristic continue, but few would question that in art the medieval cathedral plays a central role, just as Dante's *Divine Comedy* does in literature. From the perspective of religious thought the *Summa theologiae* of the Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) has a unique place, in terms of both its profundity and its influence. Given its length, few have ever read the whole of the *Summa*. College graduates, especially students of religion and philosophy, may have studied a few selections, but somehow the *Summa* remains one of the few medieval works, along with Dante, known to the general public, at least in name.

This is a brief account of the *Summa theologiae*. More specifically it is a biography of the *Summa*, introducing its intellectual gestation in the mind of Thomas, its structure and contents, and some aspects of its impact on later history. It may seem foolhardy to attempt a short book about such a large book. The *Summa* is a massive work, containing over a million and a half words divided into three large parts containing 512 topics (*quaestiones*) and more than 2,668 articles (*articuli*) dealing with particular issues (some topics are given on two articles; the longest receives seventeen). In the translation of the English Dominican published in the early decades of the past century the *Summa* takes up 2,565 double-column pages. Even more daunting is the vast literature that has been devoted to explaining the *Summa*. Although the work was contentious from the start, and its history has had ups and downs, the *Summa* has never lacked for readers and commentators. It has been calculated that over a thousand commentaries have been written on the *Summa*, not a few longer than the original. Commentary, however, scarcely tells the whole story, because some of the most interesting chapters in the reception of the *Summa* in the seven and a half centuries since its writing concern thinkers who did not consider themselves followers of Thomas, but who pondered his thought to enrich their own speculation, sometimes in appreciation, sometimes in opposition. Even today, when the age of long commentaries seems over, scores of books and even more articles are published every year dealing with Thomas and especially with what is universally admitted to be his most important work, the *Summa theologiae*.

The following account is selective and personal—one scholar's attempt to present what an interested and curious reader might want to know about the *Summa* and its reception. In thinking about the book, I have been guided by something dear to Thomas and central to what he was trying to do in writing the *Summa*—what he called *sapientia*, that is, wisdom. According to Thomas, wisdom is to be numbered among the “intellectual virtues,” one of the operative habits of the mind. It is the greatest of these because “it deals with the highest cause, which is God.” Thomas continues, “And because judgment is made about an effect

through its cause, and the same is true about lower causes through the higher cause, wisdom is the judge of all the other intellectual virtues; it belongs to it to put them all in order. It has a kind of commanding role (*quasi architectonica*) with respect to all the others. Thomas tells us at the start of the *Summa* (Ia, q. 1) that the subject of the work is what he calls *sacra doctrina* (sacred teaching or instruction) and argues that it is a *scientia*, a “science” in the Aristotelian philosophical sense of an organized body of knowledge based on strict deductive reasoning (see [chapter 2](#)). But he also insists that *sacra doctrina* is a *sapientia* (1.6), and not just the metaphysical wisdom that Aristotle argued was the judging and ordering habit of the human mind insofar as it philosophically considers the First Cause, but wisdom that is found *in* God and communicated to humans through revelation. The cultivation of this higher form of wisdom rooted in revealed truth is what the *Summa* is about. Sometimes this wisdom rooted in faith is supplemented by a third form of wisdom, the *sapientia* that Christians held was one of the seven special graces or gifts of the Holy Spirit enabling the recipient to have a “connatural” awareness of divine truth and proper action.

Thomas, like other medieval authors, thought that the etymological root of *sapientia* was *sapida scientia*, literally, “tasteful, or savory knowing,”² thus emphasizing that *sapientia* has a greater affective, even experiential, quality than abstract deductive reasoning. He also holds that wisdom is its own reward: finding wisdom is not merely instrumental to achieving some other goal. In the prologue to his *Commentary on Boethius’s “De hebdomadibus”* he summarizes, “Zeal for wisdom has this privilege, namely that in pursuing its work, it pleases itself even more. ... Hence, the contemplation of wisdom is like a game for two reasons. First, because a game is enjoyable and the contemplation of wisdom brings the greatest delight. ... Second, because a game is not ordered to something else but only to itself; thus it belongs to the delights of wisdom.”

The wisdom found in revelation and the wisdom that is the gift of the Holy Spirit go beyond any wisdom we can acquire by our own thinking—they are what Thomas calls “supernatural gifts.” They come forth *from* God and are integral in our return *to* God, that is, they are salvific. For Thomas there is a cycle of wisdom, a circular process of emanation and return to God, following the order of the circular model of the creation and return of the universe. This cycle is also written into the plan of the *Summa* (more on this in [chapter 2](#)). For Thomas, as for most ancient and medieval thinkers, circular movement was the highest form of motion. As he put it in his other *Summa*, the *Summa contra Gentiles* (SCG), “An effect is most perfect when it returns to its source. Hence the circle among figures and circular motion among all the forms of movement are the most perfect, because there is a return to the source in them. For this reason in order that the whole of creation attain its final perfection, it is necessary for creatures to return to their source.”³

The cycle of wisdom is a useful way of thinking about the production of the *Summa theologiae* in Thomas’s mind and the story of its reception. The friar’s efforts in creating his masterpiece were generated by wisdom and designed to cultivate and increase wisdom (not just knowledge) in those to whom the book was taught, as well as in its later readers. What follows is my attempt to illustrate the cycle of wisdom that for Thomas Aquinas was the purpose of the *Summa theologiae*.⁴

The intimate relation between culture and religion in the Middle Ages is helpful for understanding Thomas Aquinas. As Bernard Lonergan once put it, “Besides being a theologian and a philosopher St. Thomas was a man of his time meeting the challenge of his time. What he was concerned to do may be considered as a theological or philosophical synthesis but, considered more concretely, it turns out to be a mighty contribution towards the medieval cultural synthesis.”¹ In order to comprehend the significance of Thomas’s synthesis, it is helpful to consider three contexts that formed Thomas’s life and work: first, the papal reordering of Western medieval Christianity; second, the rise of the university and scholastic theology; and third, the birth of the mendicant religious life, including the Dominican Order to which Thomas belonged.

In early medieval Latin Christianity the bishops of Rome often had little influence over what went on in other parts of Europe. Popes, bishops, and priests were mostly under the control of lay lords, especially the Carolingian and German emperors. In the mid-eleventh century, however, a group devoted to reforming Christian society emerged in Rome, one whose adherents not only argued for freeing ecclesiastics from lay control, but also held that the pope, not the emperor or any layman, had ultimate authority over Christian society. These reformers, of whom the most forceful was Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–85), set out an agenda for the cleansing of church and society that led to ideological clashes and even armed conflict between the emperors and their followers and Gregory and his adherents. As is often the case with revolutionary movements, several decades of turmoil eventually led to a compromise based on a clearer distinction between what belonged to Caesar and what belonged to God. The Gregorian Reform, by freeing the papacy from lay control, helped spur important advances in the legal, financial, and administrative machinery of the pope and his court. The growth of papal government in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was not only a material reality, but also a symbolic triumph as the popes came to be seen as the direct masters of Western ecclesiastical structures and the arbiters of Western religious beliefs and values. The Gregorian Reform emphasized the separation between the clergy and the laity while encouraging efforts to support more effective education of priests. Precisely how much authority the popes had in what today we would call political decisions remained a contentious issue; subsequent conflicts between popes and lay rulers disturbed Europe throughout the later Middle Ages. Nevertheless, no good Christian in Thomas’s time doubted the pope’s supremacy over the church, and Thomas and his fellow Dominicans were among the papacy’s most loyal supporters.

The emergence of the medieval university and its distinctive style of theology, that is, scholastic theology, are also important for grasping Thomas Aquinas’s intellectual world. Scholasticism, understood in the broad sense as a structured, “rationalized” interpretation of religious belief, was integrally related to the growth of the university as *the* distinctive institution for higher learning between the late eleventh and the early thirteenth centuries.

The eleventh century witnessed the beginnings of a revival in both the monastic and the episcopal schools that had experienced serious decline in the ninth and tenth centuries. The French monastery of Bec, under the leadership of Lanfranc (d. 1089) and Anselm (d. 1109) both later archbishops of Canterbury, became a center of advanced theology. Episcopal schools in Germany (e.g., Cologne) and especially in France (e.g., Chartres, Laon, Paris) acquired reputations as effective places for the education of the clergy. By the mid-twelfth century the episcopal schools of northern France had begun to acquire an organization showing much similarity to modern universities, including structures of administration, basic curricula of teaching, and the employment of famous “masters” (*magistri*) who could attract students on an international level. The stages in the development of the schools in Paris (there were several in the twelfth century) into the full-fledged university which emerged between about 1150 and 1215 are not fully clear, but by the time Thomas Aquinas went to study there in 1245, the university had been flourishing for about a half century.²

Many disciplines were taught in the medieval universities, but theology was the highest “the queen of the sciences,” as some put it.³ This was certainly the case at Paris. But what exactly was the scholastic theology of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries? Scholastic theology is a particular way of thinking about belief, done in a special *location*, the formal setting of the university and the lower theological institutions that prepared students for the university. In other words, scholastic theology is distinguished primarily by a method of approach, as well as by a style of teaching.⁴ We should not think of the scholastic method as uniform and rigid. Different modes of argumentation—expositive, deductive, inductive, axiomatic, analogical, and more—were all employed by the scholastic masters. These masters used the same materials (the Bible, the Fathers of the church, the councils, papal decrees, etc.); they employed logical modes of argument based directly or indirectly on Aristotle; and they argued to new conclusions. Nevertheless, their ways of arguing and the conclusions they reached were often diverse, so we cannot summarize scholastic theology according to any particular set of teachings, or to a single system of thought. We should rather see it as a rationalized system of ways of appropriating Christian faith in an organized academic setting.

The scholastic theologians were professional educators and rigorous scientists in the pursuit of an understanding of belief. In line with the search for order and logical clarity that marked twelfth- and thirteenth-century society in general, they strove to organize the diversity of patristic theology (the thought of the Christian Fathers of East and West), with its inconsistencies, contradictions, and unsolved problems, into a coherent and teachable model that would not only educate the clergy and instruct the faithful, but also rebut attacks on Christianity both from without (Jewish and Arabic thought) and from within (i.e., heresy). The schoolmen were convinced that there was a reasonableness to faith, albeit they saw this in different ways. In this sense, there was a common purpose to the scholastic endeavor despite the differences among its practitioners.

The scholastic masters based their curriculum on the Bible, but as taught in formal courses that demanded organized tools for scriptural study and using methods that subjected the text to philological and logical investigation. The earliest great textbook of the medieval school, composed by different authors in the first half of the twelfth century, was the *Ordinary Glossa* (*Glossa ordinaria*), an immense running commentary on the entire Bible culled from the Fathers, especially Augustine. Glossing, or explaining, the Bible by citing authorities was not

new, but the academic context of the professional classroom demanded a new and more extensive kind of textbook. Classroom study of the Bible produced a more positive sense of the importance of the literal meaning of the text, though not to the detriment of spiritual readings.⁵

Education in the schools was based on reading and explaining the text (*lectio*), both of the Bible and of a variety of other textbooks. What was essential to scholasticism, however, was the second academic operation: the *quaestio*, that is, asking what the issues revealed in the texts meant. Aristotle had said that questioning was the essential operation of the human mind, a passage often quoted by the schoolmen. Setting the “question” was a complex endeavor, involving not only attempting to know what could be known about the truths of faith, but also discerning the limits of reason in investigating belief. In studying the Bible and Christian tradition, scholastic teachers encountered a mass of “authorities” (*auctoritates*), that is, positions argued by the early church Fathers and found in ecclesiastical texts. These authorities often seemed to be (or actually were) in conflict, but the need to order church and society sought to bring coherence out of differing viewpoints. Legal scholars led the way at the end of the eleventh century in pursuing a “concord of discordant views,” and the early twelfth-century theologians soon followed their example. The first task in working toward the solution of discordant positions was to create textbooks that would gather and organize the data of Christian teaching (often called *Books of Sentences*, that is, compilations of statements of doctrine); the second was to establish principles and procedures that would allow teachers to identify solutions in cases where authorities disagreed. An early example of this was Peter Abelard’s *Yes and No (Sic et non)*, composed about 1122, in which he says, “It is by doubting that we come to investigation, and by investigating that we attain truth” (*Prologue*). The quest for solutions to inherited problems centered on the nature of the *quaestio*. By the mid-twelfth century, one of the masters of this era, Gilbert of Poitiers, put the issue this way: “Not every contradiction makes a question ... , but where both sides appear to have valid arguments, there you have a question” (*Commentary on Boethius’s ‘De Trinitate’*).

By this time scholastic masters were producing works of linked *quaestiones* on difficult biblical texts or knotty theological issues. The evolution of the *quaestio* was furthered by a variety of factors, especially greater accessibility to Aristotle’s logical works (the “Old Logic” had been known for centuries, but the “New Logic” of the *Analytics*, *Topics*, and *Sophistics* was translated ca. 1120–50). Aristotle was not only the master of logic, but also a philosopher who wrote on every aspect of philosophical learning. Scholastic hunger for access to the full Aristotle led to several waves of translations of his corpus between circa 1190 and 1260, a development that had a great impact on Thomas Aquinas.⁶ Late in the twelfth century the academic evolution of setting and solving questions evolved into formal “disputations” (*disputationes*), public events where a master and his pupils would debate various aspects of a problem and set forth their solution. In the thirteenth century such disputations became a regular part of every master’s job description.

New modes of investigating faith were only half the story. Rational differentiation of teaching operations and new methods of analysis called out for better models of organizing what had been found. How could the masters of the schools summarize this rapidly expanding knowledge for the students who were expected to convey it to the church in preaching? The

drive for systematization led to the creation of textbooks and surveys of theology. The theological textbooks of the twelfth century, however much they used new methods of arguing, looked to the patristic past for their organizing principles, thus showing the continuity of Western theology. Augustine dominated early scholastic efforts at creating textbooks. The most successful textbook was produced about 1140 by Peter Lombard, a Paris master and later bishop of the city. Titled *The Books of Sentences* (*Libri sententiarum*), it consisted of four books of theological passages culled from the Fathers with discussions and explanations, arranged according to the Augustinian model (found in *On Christian Teaching*) of the difference between things and signs and between use and enjoyment. Some of the Lombard's early followers toyed with his structure, occasionally anticipating aspects of the ordering procedures found in Thomas's *Summa theologiae*, but these minor adjustments do not seem to have been a factor in Thomas's break with the Lombard's model. By the 1220s the Lombard's *Sentences* had become the dominant theological textbook—a position it maintained for almost three hundred years.

One popular way of describing the scholastic enterprise, “distinguish in order to unite” raises the question, “Unite for what purpose?” What was the ultimate aim of the new, carefully articulated form of theology? Some monks, like Bernard of Clairvaux, criticized masters such as Abelard for seeking knowledge only for the sake of knowledge, but the majority of the scholastics insisted that deeper understanding of faith was intended to foster the spiritual life, both of individuals and of the church as a community. This meant that theology had to be not only taught, but also preached. The Paris master Peter Cantor (d. 1197) summarized the different aspects of scholastic teaching as follows: “Learning sacred scripture consists of three things: reading, disputing, and preaching. ... Reading (*lectio*) is the foundation as it were and basis for what follows. ... Disputation (*disputatio*) is like the wall of this work and edifice, because nothing is fully understood or faithfully proclaimed unless it has first been broken up with the tooth of disputation. Preaching (*praedicatio*), which they serve, is like the roof that covers the faithful from the heat and storm of vices. Thus, you should preach only after, not before, the reading of sacred scripture and the questioning of doubtful matters through disputation” (*The Abbreviated Word*, chap. 1). Calls for the renewal of preaching grew toward the end of the twelfth century, partly in response to the threats offered the medieval church by heresy, especially dualist heretics called Cathars or Manichaeans. The need for sound doctrinal preaching against heresy was an important factor in the foundation of the Dominican Order, the third context for Thomas Aquinas's life and work.

The Dominicans were part of the religious groundswell of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that sought to find more effective ways of living the *vita apostolica*, the “apostolic life” of Christ and the first disciples. Medieval monks had seen themselves as following the apostolic life, taking the image of the Jerusalem community described in Acts 4:32 as their model; but the spiritual strivings of nonmonastics that began in the early twelfth century viewed the apostolic life according to the picture of the apostles presented in Luke 10 and similar texts—those who went forth in poverty to preach the Gospel and convert the world. There were many apostolic poverty groups in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Some led to the formation of new religious orders that gained papal approval, such as the Franciscans and Dominicans; others, after promising beginnings, came to be condemned as heretical. The

reasons for success and failure are not always easy to determine and often seem due to historical accidents or personality clashes.

Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181–1226), born into a mercantile family, experienced a conversion about 1205 and turned to a life of penance, poverty, and service to the poor, especially lepers. Francis's model of apostolic service proved attractive. By 1208 he and a few companions began to form a "brotherhood" of those devoted to poverty, and about 1209 they went to Rome to gain papal approval and the "license to preach everywhere," although the preaching was a matter of moral exhortation and preaching by example. Their new "mendicant," or begging, life expanded rapidly. Francis's contemporary, the Spaniard Dominic Guzman (ca. 1174–1221), took a different path in his founding of the Dominican Order of mendicants.⁷ After his ordination, Dominic joined a group around the bishop of Osma in Spain who were reviving the canonical life (i.e., priests living in a monastic way). He and his bishop traveled to France on embassies in 1203–5 and became involved in preaching against the dualist heretics. They became convinced that only itinerant preaching by priests practicing apostolic poverty could counter this danger to the church. Dominic dedicated himself to this work and by 1215 was put in charge of a group of priest-preachers in Toulouse. This "Order of Preachers" (*ordo praedicatorum*) received papal approval between 1216 and 1218. Dominic, a superb organizer, traveled widely to attract followers. From the beginning, the Dominicans were meant to receive the best theological education to foster their preaching mission, so it is no surprise that as early as 1217 Dominic established a house at Paris connected with the university. An insight into the preaching charism of the Dominicans can be found in the *Treatise on the Formation of Preachers* written by Humbert of Romans (d. 1277), the fifth Master General of the order. Reflecting on the relation of study and preaching, Humbert says, "Though the gift of preaching is surely had by God's gift, a sensible preacher still ought to do what he can to ensure that his preaching is commendable by carefully studying what he has to preach."⁸ Thomas Aquinas fully agreed.

The Life of Thomas Aquinas

We know a fair amount about the life of Thomas, and several good biographies have appeared over the past half century.¹ While we have considerable information about the details of Thomas's career, given the objective character of his writings, we have almost nothing from him that reveals his inner reflections and feelings. We also need to note that many of the stories about him come from the materials put together for his canonization process,² and since hagiography has a different purpose from biography, these need to be used with circumspection. Still, there is much of historical worth in the sources.

Thomas was born in 1225 at the castle of Roccasecca, south of Rome, the son of nobility of the lands of the Emperor Frederick II (1196–1250). His father, Landolph, belonged to the house “de Aquino,” hence his name; his mother, Theodora, was an aristocrat from Naples. Thomas, the last of his father's numerous progeny from two marriages, was destined for a career in the church. At the tender age of five his family “offered” him to the famous Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino, where he was brought up as an oblate destined to become a monk and (according to the hagiographers) future abbot of Monte Cassino, given his family's status in the region. Thomas was thus raised in a monastic environment: the religious life and liturgy formed him in his most impressionable years. Although he preached in his own south Italian dialect, he taught, wrote, and probably often thought in Latin.

Noting his intellectual precocity, when he was about fourteen (ca. 1239) the abbot of Monte Cassino sent Thomas to study at the new university of Naples founded by Frederick II in 1224—the first state university. Here he absorbed the seven liberal arts and began the study of some of Aristotle's works under the guidance of first-rate scholars, such as Peter of Ireland. The Dominicans were also present at the university and Thomas began to feel a strong attraction to the new order. Sometime around the age of sixteen (ca. 1242) he joined the Dominicans, much to the chagrin of his family. Their opposition led the Dominicans to attempt to spirit him away from Naples to Paris, but he and his companions were overtaken and captured by some of Thomas's brothers north of Rome. Thomas spent well over a year in a kind of house arrest, resisting his family's attempts to make him abandon his Dominican garb, and (at least as recounted in the early sources) his chastity, by introducing a comely young woman into his room—whom he drove off with a burning fireplace log.³ He also profited intellectually from the forced detention, reading the whole of the Bible and beginning to study Peter Lombard's *Books of Sentences*.

By 1245 his family relented and Thomas was back on the road to Paris. From 1245 to 1248 the young friar studied in Paris at the Dominican convent of St. Jacques. He probably took courses under the other great intellect of the thirteenth-century Dominicans, the theologian and polymath Albert the Great (ca. 1200–1280). Albert's capacious mind embraced scientific interests in botany, zoology, and mineralogy, not of concern to Thomas, but he was

also a profound philosopher and theologian, important for encouraging the study of Aristotle and of the “Dionysian corpus,” the body of difficult theological works attributed to the “Dionysius of the Areopagus” mentioned in Acts 17:16, but actually composed by a Syrian monk around 500. Thomas accompanied Albert to Cologne in 1248, when the Dominican Order called on Albert to set up a new general house of theological studies (*studium generale*) for the Dominican convents of Germany. Thomas remained there as Albert’s assistant between 1248 and 1252. Although Thomas does not mention Albert by name in his writings, the fact that he spent seven years with this master had a profound influence on his thought. It is likely that it was in Cologne that Thomas began to act as a “Biblical Bachelor,” teaching introductions to biblical books. His *Commentary on Isaiah* probably dates to this period and is his earliest theological work.

By 1252 Thomas was in his late twenties and his character and genius were evident. Albert advised the Dominican Master General to send him back to Paris to complete his theological studies. The hagiographical accounts give a consistent picture of the young Italian friar. Physically, Thomas was tall, corpulent, and balding. Personally, he was humble, mild, and gentle. What struck his contemporaries most was his silence and his tendency to what his contemporaries called “abstraction.” Thomas lived in his head, constantly occupied with thinking through theological issues, or “rapt in contemplation,” as the hagiographers understood it. He often seems not to have noticed what was going on around him. An illustrative story of Thomas at this stage is the account of “the dumb ox” (*bovus mutus*) from his Cologne years. According to this tale, Thomas’s reticence to speak up in the classroom led some of his classmates to refer to him by this title. Albert, however, was impressed by Thomas’s grasp of his lectures on the Dionysian *Divine Names* and commissioned the young friar to take part in a public disputation. Thomas’s role as Albert’s assistant was to summarize arguments for and against the thesis, but when he offered his own distinction to settle the issue, Albert pressed him vigorously about his solution. Satisfied by his answers, Albert exclaimed, “We call him a dumb ox, but he will still give out such a bellowing in doctrine that it will sound throughout the whole world!”⁴

Another aspect of Thomas’s life noted by the sources, both in his youth and later, was his devotion to prayer. He prayed even more than required by the Dominican daily round of liturgical and personal prayer, and is said to have often had recourse to prayer when confronted by difficult theological problems. The sources are also unanimous that Thomas was characterized from his early years by remarkable powers of memory. He seems to have had what we would call today a photographic memory, that is, he was able to recall word by word almost everything he had ever read. We may take this with a grain of salt, but when one considers the tens of thousands of texts, long and short, cited throughout his works in an age before modern bibliographic or electronic search engines, it is hard to deny that Thomas had phenomenal powers of recall.

The quiet, prayerful, brilliant young friar began to teach at Paris in 1252 as a “Sentences Bachelor” responsible for teaching and writing on the four *Books of Sentences*. Thomas’s massive *Writing on the Books of Sentences* (*Scriptum super libros sententiarum*) was his first major work (it contains almost a million and a half words). Although positions advanced here were later superseded in the *Summa theologiae*, the testimony of William of Tocco and others on the impact his novel lecturing and writing had in Paris in the early 1250s is telling:

When he was made a bachelor and had begun to pour out in his lectures what he had beforehand chosen to hide in silence, God infused such great knowledge into him ... that he was seen to surpass even all the masters [of theology], and, by the clarity of his teaching, to move the students to love of knowledge more than others did. In his teaching he argued new articles; he found a new and clear way of deciding questions; he brought in new proofs in scholastic determinations to the extent that no one who heard him teaching new matters and settling doubtful questions with new proofs doubted that God had enlightened him with a new kind of illumination.⁵

Although there is doubtless a bit of *parti pris* in one Dominican writing for the canonization of another, it is hard to doubt that Thomas's Parisian students were "blown away," as we saw, by his brilliance and originality.

Thomas remained teaching in Paris from 1252 to 1259. After several years expounding the *Sentences*, he was promoted by papal letter to the position of *magister in sacra pagina* (Master of the Bible) in the spring of 1256 and had to prepare an inaugural lecture and dispute several questions over two days. The lecture, discussing Psalm 103:13 ("Watering the mountains from his places on high, the earth will be filled from the fruit of your works"), gives us a sense of how the young friar understood his vocation. Thomas says that all wisdom comes down from God to water the mountains, that is, the teachers of doctrine. Hence the "mountains," the masters of sacred scripture, are called to be high in the quality of their lives, enlightened in their lecturing, and well-armed to refute errors. In communicating true teaching to make the earth (i.e., their hearers) fruitful, they do not depend on themselves. "God communicates wisdom by his own power," says Thomas, "and so he is said to water the mountains by himself; teachers can only communicate wisdom in a ministerial role."⁶ What is worth noting is not only Thomas's emphasis on the communication of wisdom, but also the humility with which he approached his calling.

Thomas and his contemporary, the Franciscan Bonaventure of Bagnorea (1217–74), who had been promoted in 1253, were not accepted into the lists of the masters until 1257, and then only under papal pressure. The reason was the quarrel that had erupted between the friars and the nonmendicant masters at the university in the 1250s, a controversy that had considerable impact on Thomas's thought and career. Religious novelty was often suspect in the Middle Ages, and although the mendicants had won papal support, they had many opponents. The favors the mendicants gained from the popes, both in pastoral care and at the university, provoked a group of secular masters led by William of St. Amour to attack them from 1252 on. The Franciscans and Dominicans were accused of setting dangerous precedents and of being religious hypocrites, even of being the false preachers and forerunners of the Antichrist who were predicted to arise at the end of the world (Matt. 24:11–12). The persecution was real: the supporters of the secular masters threatened the houses of the friars to the extent that King Louis IX had to call out the royal archers to defend them. On the intellectual side, both orders turned to their rising young stars to answer the charges. In 1256 and 1257 Bonaventure and Thomas wrote defenses of the mendicants, upholding their status as true followers of the "apostolic life" of Jesus and the disciples.⁷ While Thomas's temperament seems to have been basically irenic, his writings against those who attacked the mendicants as well as later against the radical Aristotelians, show that in polemical situations he could be

roused to expressions of anger and exasperation. Nevertheless, Thomas's mode of engagement was always to encourage discussion, not invective. In a passage from a later work in defense of the mendicant life, the treatise *On Perfection* written in 1270, he says,

If anyone wants to write against what I have said, it would be most welcome. There is no better way to open up the truth and to refute falsity than to answer opponents, as Solomon says, "Iron sharpens iron, and a person sharpens his friend's face" (Prov. 27:17). God himself, who is blessed forever, will make the judgment between us and them. Amen.⁸

During the period 1256 to 1259 Thomas taught at Paris as one of the two Regent Masters of the Dominicans, disputing and composing his questions *On Truth*, perhaps the most significant of his disputations,⁹ as well as works like a *Commentary on Boethius's "De Trinitate,"* important for its view on the relation of philosophy and theology. We should remember that Thomas, a member of the Order of Preachers, also preached. Even though he was an academic and not assigned to a parish, he was required to preach Latin sermons to the university community during the year, and, when in southern Italy, he preached to broader audiences in the vernacular. Only about twenty of Thomas's academic sermons survive, but we have Latin collections of sermons on important religious texts, such as the "Our Father," the "Hail Mary," the "Apostles' Creed," as well as homilies on the ten commandments (probably originally given in Italian). These sermons show Thomas was a strictly doctrinal preacher, but clear, concrete, and easy to follow. He avoided the lively exemplary stories and rhetorical flourishes found in much medieval preaching.¹⁰

Sometime in late 1259 or early 1260 Thomas returned to the Roman province of the Dominicans, probably first going to his home convent in Naples. In 1261 he was ordered to the convent at Orvieto north of Rome, which was also the location of the papal court. Thomas was the "Reader of Theology" at this house between September 1261 and September 1265. It was during this time that he brought to conclusion a project he had begun in Paris, what is called in the manuscripts both the *Summa against the Pagans* (*Summa contra Gentiles*) and *The Truth of the Catholic Faith against the Errors of Unbelievers*. In four books (some surviving in his own hand), this work was intended to show that theology could make good use of philosophy in its investigation and defense of revealed truths, both those that have been studied by the philosophers, though often erroneously (books 1–3), and those, like the Trinity and Incarnation, that cannot be attained by reason (book 4). By consensus, this work is Thomas's other great synthesis, along with the *Summa theologiae*. In the second chapter of the first book of the work Thomas expresses his intention with a rare personal tone: "Taken up by divine kindness the task of pursuing the office of a wise person with confidence although it is beyond my powers, my intention is to make known the truth that the Catholic faith professes to the best of my ability by eliminating the errors against it."

Friar Thomas's intellectual efforts during these four years extended widely. He completed a long *Commentary on Job*, one of his most important biblical works, and at the behest of Pope Urban IV wrote a treatise *Against the Errors of the Greeks* (1263 or 1264), in which he appealed to the Greek Fathers to correct what he considered the errors of contemporary Greeks. It was also at the pope's request that Thomas began one of his most popular works

The Golden Chain (Catena Aurea), a running commentary on the four Gospels culled from the Greek and Latin Fathers, showing a deep knowledge, unusual for the time, of many Greek writers. Finally, and again at the request of Urban IV, Thomas composed the Mass and Office for Corpus Christi, which was proclaimed as a universal feast on August 11, 1264. Despite some doubts about its authenticity, this collection of readings, prayers, and hymns to the Eucharist (the famous “Pange lingua,” or “Sing My Tongue”) reveals Thomas’s sacramental piety and considerable skill as a poet. On September 8, 1265, the provincial authorities again sent orders to Thomas, commanding him to repair to nearby Rome and the convent at Santa Sabina on the Aventine. It was at Santa Sabina that he began the writing of the *Summa theologiae*.

During the 1260s Thomas made contact with the new and improved translations of many of Aristotle’s works by a fellow Dominican, William of Moerbeke, who had spent time in Greece and learned the language well. Older claims about Moerbeke’s influence on Thomas are now considered exaggerated, but there is no question that during this decade Thomas deepened his knowledge of Aristotle by beginning to write a series of commentaries on the Greek philosopher. Thomas was to write no fewer than a dozen commentaries on Aristotle in a relatively brief time (ca. 1267–73). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Thomas was seen as an “Aristotelian” in outlook, these works were carefully mined to extract an “Aristotelico-Thomistic” philosophy. That view is now disputed, and some have questioned whether we should speak of Thomas as an “Aristotelian” at all (a term he never used). Nevertheless, Thomas knew Aristotle well, cited him extensively throughout his works, and generally followed Aristotle’s philosophical views. But we still can ask why Thomas expended so much energy in writing his commentaries, some quite long, on Aristotle’s writings.

The answer lies in Thomas’s conception of the vocation of the theologian. As he began the writing of the *Summa theologiae* in 1266, Thomas seems to have become more and more convinced that a careful study of the philosophical resources found in Aristotle could help him deepen his thinking on important theological issues, such as the nature of the soul. He may also have been aware of the growing disputes over the use of Aristotle, the “Aristotelian crisis” that began to disturb the University of Paris in the 1260s. Thomas thought that in the midst of debates over the legitimacy of employing Aristotle in theology, it was necessary to correct misinterpretations and to give students a clear and correct understanding of how the “Philosopher” (as he was named in the medieval schools) could be used in theology, as well as the limits of that use.

In 1268 Thomas was called back to Paris to assume one of the two Dominican chairs in theology. This was an unusual privilege, but the Order seems to have become convinced that Thomas’s presence at Paris was important in the midst of the conflict over the use of Aristotle and the deeper issue of the role of philosophy in theology. Although the teaching of Aristotle’s natural philosophy had been banned at Paris in 1210 and 1215, it proved impossible for both the masters of the arts faculty and the theologians to refrain from employing such a useful intellectual tool, not only in logic, but also more broadly in philosophy. By the 1230s Aristotle was creeping back in, and in the 1240s Albert the Great and others were teaching and commenting on Aristotle and using Aristotelian elements in their theology. Like most medieval textbooks, Aristotle’s writings were used within a “commentarial envelope,” that is, along with the extensive explanations of the Islamic

philosopher Ibn Rushd (1126–98), or Averroes. Aristotle’s philosophy, however, especially as filtered through Averroes, conflicted with Christian belief at key points, such as its claim for the eternity of the universe and its denial of personal immortality because of the teaching that there was only one universal Intellect in which all humans participate (monopsychism). Some teachers of Aristotle in the arts faculty, often called “Averroists” (Thomas was the first to use the term) or “radical Aristotelians,” presented Aristotle’s teachings on these controversial points as necessary conclusions of reason, much to the annoyance of the conservative theologians who used such claims to attack any use of Aristotle in theology beyond his logic. These theologians, of whom Bonaventure can be considered the founding father, are often called Neo-Augustinians, because they insisted that Augustine’s authority extended equally to both theology and philosophy.

The Dominicans, led by Albert and Thomas, defended a broad use of Aristotle’s philosophy as helpful for constructing a reasonable and coherent account of Christian faith, though, of course, they stood ready to convict Averroes, and even Aristotle, of error when the latter’s teachings conflicted with revelation. In this heated atmosphere, with Dominican theology under suspicion by the Neo-Augustinians who stressed the dangers of Aristotle, as well as the presence of Radical Aristotelian philosophers who argued that *from the point of view of reason* some important Christian doctrines could not be sustained, the Preachers summoned the premier theological mind back to Paris. Another factor in Thomas’s recall was a new flare-up in the attacks on the friars by the secular masters, one that prompted Thomas to write several more defenses of the mendicant life after his return to Paris.

The details of the Aristotelian quarrel cannot delay us here. Suffice it to say that the positions of the Radical Aristotelians, like Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia, were condemned by Stephen Tempier, the Bishop of Paris, in December 1270, while the opposing theological camps of those who were suspicious of Aristotle (mostly Franciscans) and those in favor of using philosophy, including Aristotle despite his problems (mostly Dominicans), were left to fight it out. Many issues were under contention. Two key differences between Thomas and his opponents, such as the Franciscans Bonaventure and John Peckham, involved Aristotle directly or indirectly. The Philosopher had argued for an eternal universe; Christian revelation taught that the universe was created in time (*in principio*: Gen. 1:1). The Franciscans contended that reason *alone* could prove Aristotle wrong, while Thomas, against most of his contemporaries, argued that the duration of the universe, that is, whether it was eternal or temporal, could not be demonstrated by reason—creation in time is a truth of revelation. A second major issue concerned the unicity of the substantial form of the human person. Thomas held that the soul was the single substantial form of the body; his opponents believed that a number of different forms or souls (vegetative, sensitive, rational), including a “form of corporeity,” constituted the human person, something like the layers of an onion. Though there had been differing views about this issue, even in the recent past, by Thomas’s time most masters held to a plurality of forms, often citing Augustine (incorrectly) in their favor. The dispute seems arcane to us, but it had implications regarding personal immortality and the status of Christ’s body after death that were important to the scholastics.¹¹ These quarrels, among others, disturbed Thomas’s second Paris period and continued to dog his reputation after death.

The dozen years 1261–73 in Italy and France saw Thomas at the height of his powers.

number of incidents recounted by the hagiographers provide us with a sense of what he was like. These tales seem to come in part from the witness of Reginald of Piperno, the friar who was assigned to be Thomas's special companion (*socius*) from as early as 1259 until his death, functioning as the master's helper, secretary, confessor, and (in the case of the absent-minded Thomas) what we might call his "minder." One such story, meant to indicate Thomas's indifference to worldly matters, rings especially true. It seems one day Thomas and some students walked out to St. Denis in the Paris suburbs to reverence the church's relics.¹² On their return, as they sat down looking out at Paris, one of the brethren said, "Master, see what a beautiful city Paris is. Wouldn't you like to be Lord of the city?" "Why," answered Thomas, "what would I do with it?" The student said that he could sell it to the king to build houses for the friars. "I would rather have the homilies of Chrysostom on Matthew's Gospel," responded Thomas. William of Tocco gives some moralizing remarks he ascribes to Thomas about not wanting to be put in a position where his contemplation would be impeded, but the original exchange reveals Thomas's academic obsessions.¹³

In early 1269 Thomas had less than five years of teaching and writing left. They were to be years of almost incredible productivity, because he was not only continuing work on the massive *Summa theologiae*, but also teaching, disputing, and writing commentaries on Aristotle and the Bible at an astonishing rate, not to mention various treatises, short and long. Thomas lived in a tearing hurry—he probably thought he never had enough time. Few great thinkers have produced so much material of such quality in so short a time—quite probably to the detriment of his health. Most of the Aristotelian commentaries come from these years. With regard to the Bible, Thomas wrote long commentaries on the Gospels of Matthew and John, the latter possibly his greatest exegetical work. He also composed two important polemic treatises against his opponents. In 1270 his *On the Unity of the Intellect Against the Averroists* attacked the claim of the radical Aristotelian Siger of Brabant that there is only one Intellect in which all humans participate. In the same year he rebutted John Peckham's argument that reason alone can prove that the world must have had a beginning in *On the Eternity of the World Against the Murmurers*. These polemical writings did not preclude Thomas's obligations of teaching the Bible and conducting public disputations, later put in written form in the *Disputed Questions on the Virtues* and a number of his *Quodlibet Disputations*.

Thomas returned to Italy in the spring of 1272. On June 12 the Roman province assigned him the task of setting up a new *studium generale*. Thomas chose his home convent for the house of studies. Thus, his life as a Dominican, begun in Naples thirty years before, was to see its last chapter there. In the First Canonization Inquiry of 1319 we are given a picture of Thomas's daily routine by a layman Nicholas Fricia, who used to hear Mass daily in the Dominican church and attend Thomas's lectures:

Very early in the morning Thomas would say his Mass in the chapel of St. Nicholas, after which ... he heard another Mass, and then, taking off his vestments, at once began his teaching. This done, he would set himself to write or dictate to his secretaries until the time for dinner [midday]. After dinner he went to his cell and attended to spiritual things until siesta, after which he resumed his writing. And so the whole of his life was directed to God. It was the common view ... that he had wasted scarcely a moment in

Thomas had little more than a year left in Naples, but it was filled with the same intense activity that marked his second professorship in Paris. He pursued the writing of the Third Part of the *Summa*, possibly begun in Paris. He continued to lecture on the Bible, to dictate a variety of other works, and, of course, to organize the new house of studies. Along with the ongoing work on the *Summa*, it seems that most of the commentaries on Paul were either given or revised in Naples, as well as his commentaries on the Psalms. As always, Thomas continued to write treatises, both by request and for his own interests. Among the most important of these was the *Compendium of Theology*, a doctrinal synthesis organized around the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity that he wrote for Friar Reginald. He seems to have begun this in his time at Rome, finishing off the chapters on faith. Now he took up the chapters on hope, but death was to preclude completing the work.

Thomas did not get to finish the *Summa* either. On December 6, 1273, something happened that ended his writing career and seems to have hastened his death three months later. The hagiographical sources provide us with considerable detail about these months, but leave us with many questions. Several sources indicate that when Reginald noted that Friar Thomas was even more abstracted than ever and asked him why he was no longer writing, Thomas replied, "Reginald, I cannot, because all I have written seems like straw to me."¹⁵ He also expressed the wish that the only thing left for him was death. What is certain is that the immensely productive Thomas never wrote another word and that he seemed even less aware of his surroundings than ever. What had happened?

The medieval lives put the end of Thomas's writing down to a mystical experience, a foretaste of the vision of God in heaven, the *visio beatifica* that Thomas had written about so brilliantly. God showed Thomas that however much he strove to penetrate the meaning of the beatific vision, his efforts were nothing more than the merest hint of an explanation (something Thomas himself would not have contested). A mystical experience? Perhaps. Modern investigators, noting the incredible pressures Thomas had been under for the past five years, think that there was also a psychological and/or physical component to the event of December 6, that is, a mental breakdown of some sort, or even a stroke.¹⁶ These medieval and modern explanations are by no means mutually exclusive.

As is customary with medieval hagiography, we are given a detailed picture of Thomas's last months to demonstrate the sanctity of his death. In January 1274 he received a command from Pope Gregory X to attend the planned council at Lyons, where Thomas's expertise would have been useful for the attempted reconciliation with the Greek Church. Thomas, Reginald, and their companions began the trip north. During the trip, he struck his head against a fallen tree encumbering the road and was injured (Thomas's impaired mental state may have had something to do with this). According to one story, Reginald tried to cheer Thomas up by saying that he and his Franciscan contemporary Bonaventure would probably both be made cardinals at the council. Thomas was not amused and told him to be quiet. Providence had other things in store for Thomas. Within a few days, he felt the end was near and asked to be taken to the nearby Cistercian monastery of Fossanova south of Rome in order to be found "in a religious house" when the Lord came for him. Many stories surround his last few days at Fossanova, because the medieval impetus for saint-making was already

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