

St. Thomas Aquinas

Doctor of the Eucharist



By Irene Dutra

*O salutaris hostia,
Quae caeli pandis ostium
Bella premunt hostilia.
Da robur, fer auxilium.*

“**O** SAVING VICTIM OPENING wide, the gates of heaven to man below...” How many of us have sung this Latin hymn at benediction without realizing that it was written over seven hundred years ago by St. Thomas Aquinas. We usually associate St. Thomas with heavy tomes of theology and philosophy, and especially with the *Summa Theologica*. But he was more than a brilliant scholar. He was a great saint with a passionate love for the Eucharist and a profound understanding of its mystery. And this is what we will focus on in this article.

First, a brief biographical sketch: Thomas Aquinas was born around 1225 in the castle of Roccasecca near Aquino, a small town between Rome and Naples. He came from a noble family of Germanic lineage and great political ambitions. At the age of five, Thomas was sent to the Benedictine

abbey of Monte Cassino for his early education and training in the hope that he would eventually enter the Benedictines and become abbot of that renowned monastery. Later he was sent to the University of Naples. When Thomas was about 20 years old, he entered the Dominican Order against the wishes of his family, who did not want to see their aristocratic son begging for food as a mendicant friar. The Dominicans sent Thomas to the University of Paris and later to Cologne to study with the Aristotelian scholar, Albert the Great. Thomas was habitually so taciturn that at first his fellow students referred to him as “the dumb ox.” However, his teacher, Albert, recognized Thomas’s brilliance and declared, “We call him the dumb ox, but one day he will emit such a bellowing in his teaching that it will be heard throughout the world.” And indeed over the next 25 years Thomas used his prodigious intellectual gifts in the service of the universal Church through teaching, preaching, and writing (over 100 volumes). By bringing together Aristotelian philosophy and Christian revelation, he powerfully demonstrated that the Christian faith is credible, defensible,

and intelligible.

There was a remarkable unity of mind and heart in Thomas; he was both a brilliant scholar and a humble contemplative. His vigorous intellectual efforts fed his spirit, while his intense prayer life nourished his intellect. Yet, toward the end of his life, after a profound mystical experience during Mass, he seemed to repudiate all his intellectual efforts. On December 6, 1273, returning to his cell from the celebration of the Eucharist, Thomas declared to a fellow monk that writing had become repugnant to him. “All that I have written seems to me nothing but straw—compared with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.” From that day on Thomas wrote no more, and three months later he died. He was 50 years old, and his great synthesis of Catholic beliefs, the *Summa Theologica*, was left unfinished.

Thomas’s work always flowed from his prayer life. Early each morning he went to confession and said Mass and immediately after that, attended another Mass. At times while celebrating Mass he was so overwhelmed in remembering the painful Passion of Jesus that he would break into sobs. At other times halfway through the liturgy he would fall into

ecstasy; his brother friars would have to approach the altar and touch him so that he could come back to himself and go on with the Mass. After Mass, Thomas would spend the rest of the day reading, praying, writing and teaching.

He would spend hours before the tabernacle when wrestling with intellectual difficulties, often leaning his head against it to be closer to the Lord. On one occasion he was even seen hitting his head against the tabernacle, imploring the Holy Spirit to give him the light of understanding. A prayer he composed and often said included this plea:

Pour forth a ray of Your brightness
into the darkened place of my mind;
disperse from my soul
the twofold darkness
into which I was born:
sin and ignorance.

After a long period of prayer and contemplation in front of the Blessed Sacrament, Thomas would go back to his cell and serenely take up his pen again.

Thomas's profound writings on the Eucharist flowed from the same grace that impelled him to celebrate Mass each day with such ardent love and devotion.

For Thomas, the Eucharist is the central sacrament, the culmination and goal of all the others. We were baptized precisely so that we can receive the Eucharist; we are confirmed in order to be drawn more powerfully to it. The sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick prepare us to receive the Lord more worthily. The sacrament of Marriage is a symbol of the union of Jesus with his Church, the deepest sign of which is the Eucharist. Finally the sacrament of Ordination is ordered in a special way to the Eucharist as its culmination.

The Eucharist is our true medicine—nourishing, healing and strengthening us. Most of all, it is our true food. Jesus gives us nothing less than Himself, the living bread. "O sacred banquet," Thomas ardently writes, "at which Christ is con-

sumed..." Yet unlike earthly bread, this food changes us into itself; in "eating Christ" we are incorporated into and united with Him.

Two incidents in the saint's life reveal how profound was his understanding of the Eucharist. On one occasion some theologians at the University of Paris consulted Thomas about a difficult question regarding this sacrament. He wrote his reply and placed it on the altar, submitting it to the judgment of God. His companion and several other brothers were there watching him. Suddenly they saw Christ standing above the copybook and they heard these words: "You have written well of the Sacrament of My body, as well as can be said in human language by one still living this mortal life." Stupified, they saw the saint then joyfully lift himself up in the air about an arm's length.

On another occasion, in a convent chapel in Naples, the sacristan saw Thomas levitate several feet from the floor, then turn toward a carved crucifix, weeping. Suddenly a voice came from the crucifix: "Thomas, you have written well of Me." What reward will you take from Me for your labors?" To which the saint replied, "Lord, nothing except You." He was then writing about the Passion and Resurrection of Christ.

In 1264, Pope Urban IV decided to institute Corpus Christi as a universal Church feast. He asked Thomas Aquinas to compose all the liturgical texts, both those of the Mass and those for the Divine Office of the day. It was thus that Thomas came to compose *O Salutaris Hostia*, and another hymn we still sing at benediction, *Tantum Ergo* which is part of the longer *Pange Lingua*.

Thomas Aquinas died on March 7, 1274. On his deathbed he made a special profession of faith in the "Real Presence," avowing that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist had been the focal point and motivation of all his theology. When the Blessed Sacrament was brought to him shortly before he died, with extreme effort he raised himself out of bed and pros-

trated himself in adoration. Those around him heard him pray: "O price of my redemption and food for my pilgrimage, I receive You. For Your sake I have studied and toiled and kept vigil. I have preached You and taught You."

In 1323, 50 years after his death, Thomas Aquinas was canonized. He was proclaimed a Doctor of the Universal Church in 1567. His feast day is the twenty-eighth of January.

Over the past seven centuries, St. Thomas Aquinas has been honored in many ways. When the Council of Trent convened in 1545, for example, the Fathers resolved that two volumes only, Holy Scripture and the *Summa Theologica*, should be reverently laid open on the altar during their deliberations. In 1879, Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical letter "On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy" urged the Church to continue to study the teachings of St. Thomas, who "single-handed...victoriously combated the errors of former times, and supplied invincible arms to put those to rout which might in after-times spring up." In 1923, Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical letter to commemorate the six-hundredth anniversary of Thomas's canonization, in which he called the saint "the poet and panegyrist of the Divine Eucharist" and said, "For wherever the Catholic Church is to be found in the world among whatsoever nations, there she zealously uses and ever will continue to use in her sacred services the hymns composed by St. Thomas." In our own day, the new Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes the *Summa Theologica* more than any other single work by an ecclesiastical author.

At Garabandal, Our Lady warned the Church that less and less importance was being given to the Eucharist. What better saint than Thomas Aquinas to lead us to a deeper love and understanding of this "Sacrament of sacraments"! □

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