

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS



Thomas Aquinas – whose feast day is celebrated on 28th January – was a philosopher and theologian, perhaps the most gifted and influential systematic theologian of all time. Although he died before he was fifty, he produced more than sixty works, culminating in the *Summa Theologica*, a massive work intended to provide a comprehensive exposition of all points of theology which remained unfinished at his death. Many of the Doctors of the Church were given epithets: Thomas is known as *the angelic doctor*, a tribute to his personal qualities as

well as the supreme quality of his work.

Thomas was born in either 1225 or 1227 in Roccasecca, in the Kingdom of Naples. His was an aristocratic family, related both to the Holy Roman Emperor and to the King of France. He was the youngest son, and his parents intended him from an early age to join the Benedictine Order, and sent him at the age of five to school in the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino. In his early teens, however, while he was extending his studies in Naples, he became attracted to the idea of the intellectual life and resolved to join the newly formed order of teaching friars, the Dominicans. Overcoming initial parental opposition, he joined the order in 1245, and studied under Albert the Great, first at Paris and then at Cologne. Albert, known as the *universal doctor* because of his mastery of all subjects including botany, mineralogy, astronomy, physics, chemistry, cosmography as well as philosophy and theology, was a great influence on Thomas, especially by introducing him to the thought of the great Greek philosopher, Aristotle. In 1252 he became a lecturer in Paris and thereafter his life may be summed up in a few words: praying, preaching, teaching, writing, journeying. He taught both in France and Italy, and attended several of the general chapters of his order, including one in London in 1263. He died in the monastery of Fossanuova in 1274 on his way to attend the Council of Lyon, and is buried at Toulouse, in the beautiful Church of St Sernin.

Thomas was always a very popular teacher and students flocked to hear him. This is perhaps because he always adhered to five principles: clarity, brevity, usefulness, sweetness and completeness. All of us who teach could learn something there.

One theme that runs through all Thomas' writings is the relation of faith and reason, the importance of both, and their proper place with respect to one another. Some things he held can be known by reason, but many of the most important truths of Christianity such as the Trinity, the Incarnation and the creation of the world in time, can only be known through the response of faith to revelation. Here too, however, reason had a part to play: things known by faith must be shown as not contrary to reason. His method in the Summa Theologica was always: first pose a question; next list the objections to his preferred answer, as stated by other writers, contemporary and ancient; third give his answer, backed by quotations from scripture or the Church fathers; fourth to give positive arguments for his view, and finally provide a detailed rebuttal of each of the objections listed in the second step. In this way he is able to ground his positions firmly in the teachings of scripture and the Church, while showing that it is also consistent with reason.

Thomas also had a rich spiritual life, and a particular devotion to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. He wrote the beautiful Office for the Feast of Corpus Christi, in which solid doctrine, tender piety, and enlightening Scriptural citations are combined, and which are expressed in remarkably accurate, beautiful, and poetic language. Translations of some of the hymns taken from that office are still sung today.

Thomas ceased to write in 1273. While saying Mass he had an ecstatic vision which caused him to say: The end of my labours is come. All that I have written appears to me as so much straw, after the secrets that have been revealed to me! After that he gave himself entirely to God and prayer. I will end with a verse from one of his Communion hymns:

*Therefore we, before Him bending,
This great Sacrament revere;
Types and shadows have their ending,
For the newer rite is here;
Faith, our outward sense befriending,
Makes our inward vision clear.*