

THOMAS AQUINAS

CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- Small container, paper, pens
- Copies of the downloadable “622 service” and “Prayers & Thanksgivings” booklets
- Copies of the lesson handout
- Copy of the leader’s notes
- OPTIONAL: Bibles (ESV or similar recommended)
- OPTIONAL: A white board, easel pad, or chalk board with markers/chalk
- OPTIONAL: Have notebooks on hand for teens to take home and use as prayer journals if they wish

ICE BREAKER: ON THE SPOT: THE “DIVA” VERSION

Write out some of the starter phrases below on scraps of paper (you may wish to add some of your own), fold them, and place them in an opaque container. Have the teens sit in a circle. Begin by asking your teens to describe what a “diva” is (someone who is self-absorbed and egotistical). One at a time, ask each teen to select a paper from the container and give a brief monologue, taking on the character of a “diva” and beginning with the starter phrase selected.

FOR SMALL GROUPS, YOU MAY WANT TO TAKE MULTIPLE TURNS. FOR LARGE (OR TALKATIVE) GROUPS, YOU MAY HAVE TO TIME RESPONSES (FOR EXAMPLE, EACH PERSON HAS THIRTY SECONDS TO SPEAK).

- “There’s not a doubt in my mind that I’m always right...”
- “My friends are lucky just to be around me...”
- “I refuse to wear anything that isn’t the very best quality...”
- “I’m a winner and I don’t have time for losers...”
- “I can talk my way out of any situation...”
- “There should be a fast-lane everywhere I go just for me...”
- “I always look amazing when I go out...”
- “If I have a problem with you, you’ll know it...”
- “If I interrupt others, it’s because what I have to say is more important...”
- “I make up my own rules as I go along...”
- “I deserve the best because I am the best...”
- “The party doesn’t start till I arrive, which is always fashionably late...”

622: BEGINNING WITH PRAYER

Begin the formal part of the lesson by saying together the first part of the order for service for young people in the booklet, up to the middle of page 4.

AT THIS POINT IN THE LESSON, ASK IF THE TEENS SUCCEEDED IN DOING LAST WEEK’S CHALLENGE, HOW IT WENT, AND WHETHER THEY HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE.

DISCUSSION: THE ART OF GIVING AND RECEIVING CORRECTION

As an introduction to the lesson ask the teens to discuss the following questions.

DEPENDING ON THE COMFORT LEVEL FOR SHARING IN YOUR GROUP, IT MAY BE EASIER TO HAVE THEM VOLUNTEER ANSWERS WITH ALL RESPONSES WRITTEN TOGETHER ON A BOARD.

- What is the worst way you can try to correct someone? What is the best?
- What is the worst way you can respond when someone corrects you? What is the best?
- Why do you think giving and receiving correction is so hard for people?

THOMAS AQUINAS

A few things worth pointing out (if they don't otherwise arise during the discussion):

- It's best to ask yourself two questions before you attempt to correct someone: Does it matter? Are you the right person to point it out? It's always best to correct someone in private if possible. Taking someone to task publicly is usually unnecessary and embarrassing for them. Approaching someone gently is also more effective than being harsh. Do your best to be empathetic and constructive. Try to help the person see how they can move forward.
- No one likes to be on the receiving end of correction, but because we are all imperfect, sometimes correction is necessary. When someone approaches us with correction, we need to meet them with humility, giving that person the benefit of the doubt and listening without becoming combative. We should try to discern whether the correction is wholly or partly true and how to move forward in light of that. Even if we do not agree with the correction, being willing to listen, consider, and respond graciously is the best way to go.
- Pride is often what gets in the way for us. If we are humble in our approach to correcting someone else, it slows us down long enough to consider that we may not have the full story. It makes us gentle and patient, willing to listen, and therefore able to offer a correction that is considerate instead of judgemental. If we are humble when others approach us with a correction then we can avoid reacting defensively, rather simply listening to what is said and then being willing to consider whether the criticism is valid. Humility means not being a diva, but knowing that we are sometimes in the wrong.

THE LESSON: GRACE TO BE HUMBLE

Lessons 13-42 follow a slightly different format from previous lessons. The story of the saint being studied is interspersed with verses from scripture that provide added perspective. You may prefer to read the lesson text aloud together as a group, or ask the teens to read it silently to themselves.

*“Be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”
(Philippians 2:15)*

Thomas Aquinas was born in Italy in 1225. As a child, he attended school at Monte Cassino (the monastery founded by Benedict many centuries earlier). Then as a teenager he went to Naples for further schooling, from there going on to study under the Dominican professor Albert the Great. It was during his time in Naples that Thomas decided that he wanted to become a Dominican friar.

Now the Dominicans were a “mendicant” order, similar to the Franciscans. At the time, the mendicant orders were a new response to a changing world – and they controversially lived by begging. Over the centuries the leaders of the Church had become rich and powerful, and their lives were often far from holy. The Dominicans believed that this worldly living by Christians and Christian leaders was getting in the way of the Church's witness to non-believers. This was why they were very serious about living in poverty, coupled with intensive study – so that both their lives and their arguments would be as effective as possible in the preaching of the Gospel.

Thomas' family was strongly opposed to this direction for their son, so much so in fact that they captured and imprisoned him for a year. But in 1244, Thomas got his wish and became a Dominican friar. He would spend the remainder of his life studying, teaching, and writing.

*“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain.
On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”
(1 Corinthians 15:10)*

While still at his studies, Thomas' peers described him as very big, quiet, and balding already in his youth. For these reasons they called him “the dumb ox of Sicily” – not very kind. But his teacher knew better; he had read

THOMAS AQUINAS

some of Thomas' work and realized his incredible intellectual gift. He turned the insult on its head, saying that one day this "dumb ox" would make his bellows heard throughout the world. And Thomas' teacher was right. Thomas went on to become one of the most important theologians and philosophers of his time, with a lasting influence right up to the modern day.

As the years passed, Thomas gained respect in the eyes of others, though his tendency towards mental abstraction remained. On one occasion when Thomas was the guest of a king, he was quietly working through a problem in his own mind, and then suddenly hammered the table with his fist, declaring one particular heresy to be "finished" – to the astonishment of those around him. A senior monk had to gently point out his social foible, after which Thomas apologized – and then hurried to get his thoughts written down.

*"For by the grace given to me I say to every one among you
 not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think."
 (Romans 12:3)*

In spite of his keen intellectual gifts and accomplishments, Thomas was modest, unpretentious and even childlike. He believed the greatest gift he'd received from God was simply to be able to understand what he read.

Thomas' teaching and writing did not receive universal acclaim during his life. There were some who were concerned that a rising interest in secular philosophy (led in part by Thomas) might undermine Christian orthodoxy. These concerns were shared by the Bishop of Paris – Paris being the city in which Thomas was teaching at the time.

Thomas died at the age of 49. Two years before his death, he received a vision while praying, which he said made all that he had written seem "like straw", and at this point he set his writing aside. Then, while he lay dying on his sickbed receiving holy Communion for the last time, he prayed that all he'd written and taught might be submitted to the correction of his Lord and his Lord's Church.

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: DAVID FARMER, "OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS" | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, "THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1" | GERARD SAMPSON, "LAYMAN'S BOOK OF SAINTS".)

Then ask the teens to respond to what they've just read. Here are some questions to help guide the discussion.

- What special gifts did Thomas have?
- What are some of the instances of correction – or attempted correction – that can be found in today's lesson? Were they effective?
- What can we learn from Thomas' example?

A few notes and reflections for reference:

- *Thomas had a keen mind. His intellectual ability allowed him to become a prominent theologian and philosopher in his own day, one whose work has survived throughout the centuries. But Thomas had also cultivated the gift of humility, which meant that he never became a "diva", instead remaining open to correction.*
- *The "mendicant" orders were themselves a corrective response to corruption in the Church. The survival of these orders as well as the works produced by their monks are evidence that their goal was achieved, at least to some extent. Thomas' family tried to "correct" his decision to become a Dominican friar by capturing and imprisoning him. This was ultimately ineffective. We could speculate that Thomas' peers were attempting to "correct" his quietness with their rude nickname, but even though Thomas became famous and certainly had a powerful voice, he remained modest in his manner. Thomas' lack of social grace at the king's table received a gentle correction from his prior, which he accepted and apologized for, though we cannot say whether this was the last time he forgot himself in a similar manner. Most importantly, Thomas was ready to receive correction from God. He*

THOMAS AQUINAS

responded to his vision by stopping his work, and his deathbed prayer tells us that he wished to place all his efforts under God's authority and correction.

- *We can seek to emulate the seriousness with which Thomas and the Dominicans regarded their witness, being willing to make personal sacrifices so as not to get in the way of others hearing the Gospel. Like Thomas, we can use the gifts God has blessed us with, but at the same time strive to be humble. Most of all, we can seek to follow his example by being willing to submit to God's correction throughout our lives.*

DURING EACH LESSON, IF THE TEENS RAISE THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL QUESTIONS THAT YOU DON'T FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT ANSWERING, SAY SO, BUT LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU'LL FIND THE ANSWER AND RESPOND AT THE NEXT MEETING.

PREVIEW: AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Take a brief moment to look at the at-home challenge together.

THE WEEKLY "AT-HOME CHALLENGE" IS TYPICALLY A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT TO SPEND SOME QUIET TIME IN PRIVATE PRAYER. ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO GET NOTEBOOKS THAT CAN BE USED AS PRAYER JOURNALS. ASSURE THEM THAT THEY WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO SHOW THEIR JOURNAL OR THEIR PRIVATE PRAYERS TO ANYONE.

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE "FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES", WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Review today's lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Thomas that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you've chosen.

Decide on one concrete action you can take this week based on your reflections, *and* share your reflections and your plan of action with a friend.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following prayer.

O God, who by thy Holy Spirit hast given unto one man a word of wisdom, and to another a word of knowledge, and to another the gift of tongues: We praise thy Name for the gifts of grace manifested in thy servant Thomas, and we pray that thy Church may never be destitute of the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH, POET, OR SCHOLAR, P. 317)

CLOSING PRAYERS (622 AGAIN)

Close with any prayers that might be appropriate in the context of the discussion of the day.

AT THE END OF EACH LESSON, IF YOU FIND THAT YOU STILL HAVE LOTS OF TIME REMAINING, YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLORE THE "PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS" SECTION IN THE BCP (PAGES 39-62, OR YOU CAN USE THE DOWNLOADABLE BOOKLET). AS YOUR GROUP MEMBERS COME ACROSS PRAYERS THAT THEY FIND RELEVANT, PAUSE AND PRAY THEM TOGETHER. IF YOU'RE PRESSED FOR TIME, YOU MIGHT CLOSE WITH THE THEMED PRAYER FROM THE AT-HOME CHALLENGE.

Then finish with the "Grace", the final prayer in the booklet.