

THOMAS AQUINAS

THE LESSON: GRACE TO BE HUMBLE

“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 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.

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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”.)

AT-HOME CHALLENGE

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)