

## **1. The Birth of Baby Thomas**

Thomas Aquinas was born in a castle in the year 1225. He is called "Aquinas" because he was born eight kilometers north of Aquino. Thomas, we might say, was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. His father was the Count of Aquino and his mother was the Countess of Theate. This noble bloodline related Thomas to the Hohenstaufen dynasty of the Holy Roman Empire - a dynasty that includes the infamous Emperor Frederick Barbarossa.

From infancy, his wealthy and noble family began to prepare him for one of the most prominent positions in medieval Europe. He was positioned to become the Abbot of Monte Cassino. Monte Cassino was the motherhouse of medieval monasticism. Saint Benedict established his first monastery at Monte Cassino, and all of Europe's Benedictine monks and nuns looked to Monte Cassino as the spiritual capital for their way of life. To be the abbot of Monte Cassino was to reign as a prince.

Sinibald, the uncle of Thomas, was the abbot of Monte Cassino. Thomas' father, the brother of Sinibald, had every intention of ensuring his baby boy would one day succeed his brother as abbot. Beginning at the age of five, Thomas began his education at the monastery at Monte Cassino. A legend says he was called "the dumb ox" because Thomas was large like an ox but silent. Many assumed he was merely a dumb, stupid giant when in fact his large frame housed an immense intellect.

One time his classmates shouted, "Look Thomas! Look outside. A pig is flying! Come and see!" The large boy scampered over to the window and looked outside. The classroom filled with snickers. "Ha! Thomas, are you so dumb as to think that there are pigs flying outside?" The Dumb Ox replied, "I would rather believe that pigs can fly than that my own Christian brothers would lie to me." When Thomas Aquinas was about fourteen, political strife between Pope Gregory IX and Emperor Frederick II led to war in the surrounding region. Since the noble house of Aquino was related to Fredrick II by blood, Thomas' parents quietly relocated him to the newly established university of Frederick II situated in Naples.

**His Two Early Mentors at Naples:** The University of Naples was a controversial place in the 1200s. It was here that Thomas Aquinas met two men that would change his life forever. On account of these two men, Thomas would thwart his parents' plans and never become the esteemed Abbot of Monte Cassino.

As a student in Naples, the young Thomas Aquinas fell under the influence of an inspired preacher by the name of John of Saint Julian. John of Saint Julian belonged to a new order of religious that did not identify themselves as "monks," but rather as "brothers" or "friars." John of Saint Julian belonged to a new movement, considered fanatical by some, known as the Order of Preachers or "Dominicans." In 1216, a charismatic and penitent priest by the name of Saint Dominic established a new religious order to revive the Christian Faith and reconcile heretics with the Catholic Church. This Order of Preachers was simply that - a brotherhood of itinerant preachers who went from town to town, often barefoot and begging for food. They slept in fields, barns, or wherever they were allowed. Unlike the Benedictine Abbot of Monte Cassino who rode stately horses and wore jewels and silk, the Dominicans lived a radical life of poverty and preaching. This radical life of penance and preaching appealed to the young Thomas. To the shock of his parents, it just so happened that John of Saint Julian had been appointed as a recruiter of young men for the Order of Preachers.

While in Naples, Thomas also fell under the influence of Peter of Ireland—one of the most revered scholars of Europe. Peter tutored the young Thomas in the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music, and exposed him to the texts of the Greek pagan philosopher Aristode. Often the writings of Aristode were accompanied by commentaries - commentaries written by Muslims and Jews. Christians of this time were divided as to whether these texts should be studied and to what extent they might be reconciled to the Catholic Faith. As we shall see, Thomas Aquinas devoted his immense intellect to correcting and commentating on these texts by Aristode. This synthesis of Thomas clearly defined the roles of reason and faith and how they relate to one another.

**Thomas at the Age of 19:** Thomas announced to his family that he would not become a Benedictine monk and pursue the office of Abbot at Monte Cassino. Instead, he would become a Dominican. Now to the ears of his mother, the Countess, this would have been tantamount to becoming a hippie, a beggar, a fanatic, and a social outcast. The Countess would not have her son, a nobleman born in a casde, sleeping in pigsties and preaching to peasants. Yet, Thomas was resolute. He would not obey his mother - he would rather obey God.

So at the age of nineteen, Thomas ran away from home in order to join the Dominicans in Rome. His countess mother would have none of it, and so she arranged for Thomas to be captured by his brothers. When Thomas stopped for a drink from a brook, his brothers jumped him and carried him back to the casde of Monte San Giovanni Campano. Here at the casde, his mother held Thomas

prisoner for two years.

Now Thomas was not held in a dungeon. Rather, he was under house arrest with the hope that he might finally abandon the idea of becoming a Dominican preacher and embrace his imposed "vocation" to become the Abbot of Monte Cassino. To pass the time, this university-educated student spent time tutoring his sisters. He also secretly sent messages to his Dominican friends.

**Thomas the Virgin & the Miraculous Cord:** The most famous account from this time in his life recalls how members of his family hired a whore and sent her into Thomas' room in order to seduce him. Perhaps it was thought that a seduction would destroy his sense of vocation and discourage him from joining the fanatical Dominicans. When the prostitute entered the room and attempted to seduce Thomas, he ran to the fireplace, pulled from it a burning log, and lunged toward the terrified whore. When she ran from the room, Thomas used the log to scratch the sign of the cross on the wall. Then, two angels appeared and girded his waist with a miraculous cord that he wore for his entire life. It is said that Thomas Aquinas never struggled with a lustful thought or action from that moment until his death - that he became "an angel in the flesh."

His pious resolve revealed that Thomas would never renounce his vocation to the Dominicans. His mother, still ashamed that her noble son wanted to become a poor man without rights or privileges, would still not give her blessing. So instead she relented by allowing Thomas to sneak out of a window during the night. In this way, Thomas could fulfill his dream of becoming a Dominican and she could claim, "Well, he escaped from our watch by night and became one of those Dominicans against our will."

**Thomas Goes to Paris:** The Dominican order, reassigned Thomas to Paris where he would teach and continue his studies. In Paris, he met the man who would influence him even more than John of Saint Julian and Peter of Ireland - he met Saint Albert the Great. Albert the Great was perhaps the most learned man in the world and was an expert in natural science, history, astronomy, music, Sacred Scripture, philosophy, and theology. Thomas Aquinas attached himself to Albert and followed him from Paris to Cologne, Germany. In Cologne, Thomas became a professor of Sacred Scripture and wrote commentaries on Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lamentations. In 1252, Thomas returned to Paris and completed his master's degree in theology and spent three years writing his four-volume commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard (*Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*). He also composed his famous philosophical treatise *On Being and Essence* (*De ente et*

essential during this time.

In the spring semester of 1256, Thomas was appointed regent master in theology at Paris. Both the Dominicans and Franciscans were under attack by certain Church officials, and Thomas set his pen to defending their life of poverty and preaching. During his tenure from 1256 to 1259, Thomas wrote numerous works, including: *Questiones disputatae de veritate* (Disputed Questions on Truth), a collection of twenty-nine disputed questions on aspects of faith and the human condition, *Quaestiones quodlibetales* (Quodlibetal Questions), a collection of his responses to questions posed to him by the academic audience, *Expositio super librum Boethii De trinitate* (Commentary on Boethius's *De trinitate*) and *Expositio super librum Boethii De hebdomadibus* (Commentary on Boethius's *De hebdomadibus*), commentaries on the works of 6th century philosopher Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, and *Summa contra Gentiles*, one of his most famous works.

**Thomas Becomes the Most Controversial Theologian of His Time:** From 1268 until 1272, Thomas was again the regent master at the University of Paris. During this time, it was Thomas' task to refute those who were using the philosophy of Aristotle to deny certain Christian doctrines, such as the creation of the universe and the immortality of the soul. This extreme philosophical movement was called "Averroism" after the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd, known in the West as "Averroes." If you're at a cocktail party and you need to refer to this, the correct way to pronounce this name is: "Ah ver row ease."

The Averroists pitted reason against faith. Thomas wished to show that right reason never conflicted with the true faith. Averroism held that reason conflicted with the doctrine of Christ. According to Saint Thomas, this version of Aristotle's philosophy introduced a dangerous bifurcation between philosophy and theology. Averroists, in their reading of Aristotle, held a number of positions contrary to the faith. For example, they taught that all men shared one single active intellect. This theory introduced pantheism (belief that God is all things) and obscured the Christian doctrine of the soul. Some Catholic theologians at this time felt the right answer was to abandon Aristotle and philosophy altogether. The threat of the errors of Averroism was just too great.

Thomas, on the other hand, held that Aristotle could be reconciled to Christianity in a revised way. In the storm of this controversy, many began to turn against Thomas Aquinas and accuse him as being an Averroist who was willing to sacrifice the Catholic Faith in exchange for Aristotle. Things were made worse in December 1270, when the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, issued an edict

condemning thirteen Aristotelian and Averroistic propositions as heretical and excommunicating anyone who continued to support them. Yet, Thomas continued to defend the use of Aristotle against the philosophical errors of Averroists on one side and the concerned theologians on the other side. From this crucible, Thomas created what the Catholic Church would recognize as a perfect synthesis between faith and reason.

**The Mystical Death of Thomas Aquinas:** In 1272, Thomas returned to Naples to teach and finish his magnum opus, the *Summa theologiae*. While celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass on the feast of Saint Nicholas (December 6, 1273), Thomas fell into ecstasy. He heard the voice of Christ speak to him. Christ asked him what he desired, and Thomas replied "Only you Lord. Only you." During this vision something happened, but Thomas never spoke of it. His secretary, Reginald of Piperno begged him to continue his work on the *Summa theologiae*, but he refused saying: "Reginald, I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me {mihi videtur ut palea}." Thomas never wrote or dictated again.

Meanwhile, Pope Gregory X announced the Second Council of Lyon to be held on May 1, 1274. The Pope desired to reconcile the estranged Greek Orthodox bishops into the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church. Knowing that Thomas Aquinas was the greatest mind in Christendom, His Holiness summoned Thomas to attend. However, on his way to the Council, riding on a donkey along the Appian Way, Thomas struck his head on the branch of a fallen tree. He was carried to the monastery of Monte Cassino (perhaps a divinely appointed tribute to his parents' wishes) where he recovered. He set out again only to fall ill.

While resting at the Cistercian Fossanova Abbey he took a turn for the worse. He was given the last rites and asked for the monks to read the Cantic of Canticles as he died. He passed on into his eternal reward on March 7, 1274. His last words: "I receive Thee, ransom of my soul. For love of Thee have I studied and kept vigil, toiled, preached and taught..."

Thomas Aquinas was canonized as a saint of the Catholic Church only fifty years after his death. Two centuries later, in 1567, Pope Pius V proclaimed St. Thomas Aquinas a Doctor of the Church and ranked his feast with those of the four great Latin fathers: Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, Jerome, and Gregory. The world has never since seen his equal. Today he is still studied in every university of the world by Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and even atheists. He who was called the Dumb Ox continues to bellow.