



THOMAS AQUINAS c.1225-1274

The family of St. Thomas Aquinas was one of nobility. His parents were related to Emperors Henry VI and Frederick II, as well as to the Kings of Aragon, Castile, and France. Born about 1225 in southern Italy, he was a part of the dynamic age of chivalry, the Crusades, and Marco Polo. During his early education, Thomas exhibited great acumen in grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Because of his high birth, Thomas' entry into the Dominican order in the early 1240s was very surprising. They had hoped he would seek political office. His family employed various means to dissuade him from his vocation. On his way to study in Paris his family had him kidnapped along the way and imprisoned him in their castle tower for seventeen months – a royal version of a "time out." Adding to the familial dysfunction, his brothers got him a prostitute, but he chased her out. Ultimately, his mother respected his resolve and helped him escape.

He resumed his efforts to study in Paris and after completing his education, Thomas devoted himself to a life of traveling, writing, teaching, public speaking and preaching. Religious institutions and universities alike yearned to benefit from the wisdom of "The Christian Apostle." This was a time when almost all education was in the hands of the church, and teachers were trying to systematize the teachings of Scripture and church writers. At the forefront of medieval thought was a struggle to reconcile the relationship between theology (faith) and philosophy (reason). People were at odds as to how to unite the knowledge they obtained through revelation with the information they observed naturally using their mind and their senses. Thomas asserted that "both kinds of knowledge ultimately come from God" and are, therefore, compatible. Not only were they compatible, according to Thomas' ideology (later named Thomism), they could work in collaboration: He believed that revelation could guide reason and prevent it from making mistakes, while reason could clarify and demystify faith. His proofs for the existence of God are still used in modern apologetics.

In what are considered his greatest writings, he painstakingly questioned-and-answered his way through two major works: *Summa Contra Gentiles* ("Summary of Arguments against the Disbelievers") and his final synthesis, *Summa Theologica* – a work in three books on God, humanity, and the Redeemer. In his later years, he was given to periods of mystical ecstasy. During one such experience, on December 6, 1273, he resigned from his writing project of completing the *Summa Theologica*, indicating that he had perceived such wonders that all his previous work seemed worthless. The *Summa Theologica* was left unfinished, proceeding only as far as the ninetieth question of the third part. He never wrote again.

His philosophical and theological writings spanned a wide spectrum of topics, including commentaries on the Bible and discussions of Aristotle's writings on natural philosophy. The influence of St. Thomas Aquinas' writing has been so great, in fact, that an estimated 6,000 commentaries on his work exist to date. Today, Thomist theology stands at the center of the Roman Catholic tradition. He became a "doctor of the church." Often called "The Universal Teacher," he also became known as the "Angelic Doctor."

An authority of the Roman Catholic Church and a prolific writer, Aquinas died on March 7, 1274, at the monastery of Fossanova in Italy. On his deathbed, St. Thomas Aquinas uttered his last words to the monks who had so graciously attended him: "This is my rest forever and ever: Here will I dwell for I have chosen it." (Psalm 131:14) He was canonized by Pope John XXII in 1323.