

Feast of St Thomas Aquinas 2009
St John's Seminary

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28 January commemorates the day in 1367 when the relics of St Thomas Aquinas arrived in solemn procession at the outskirts of Toulouse. The Avignon Pope Urban V had been a student of the Dominicans in this French city situated on the banks of the Garonne. And it was he who had made the decision to house the relics of the recently canonized Friar Thomas d'Aquino in the French Midi instead of in Paris, where Thomas had made his name as a theologian, or at Naples, where he had attained his maturity and had entered the then newly-founded Friars Preachers. Since his death almost a century before, on 7 March 1274, the body of Aquinas had been in the possession of the Cistercian monks of Fossanova, the Italian abbey where Thomas died while journeying north toward Lyons to serve as a *peritus* at the fourteenth ecumenical council known as Second Lyons.

Liturgical feasts of course celebrate more than past events. We venerate the saints because they are alive today in Christ. In the case of Thomas Aquinas, the Church venerates him as her Common Doctor. Many official texts confirm this title, but Canon 252 suffices to establish Aquinas's preeminent place among the Doctors of the Christian Church. The Code invokes his name in the ablative absolute—*sancto Thoma praesertim magistro*—when it ordains that clerical students learn about the mysteries of salvation—St. Thomas, especially, being the magister, the master (*CIC* 252). The founders of Saint John's Seminary recognized Aquinas's special place in the lives of seminarians when the designers of the chapel placed his image among those of the ancient Fathers of the Church that adorn the apse of the sanctuary. Aquinas in fact was the first post-patristic author to attain the official rank of Doctor of the Church. Pope Saint Pius V arranged this in 1567, four years after the close of the Council of Trent at which Thomas Aquinas became, clearly, the Church's *Doctor Communis*.

Why does the Church hold Aquinas in such high esteem? There are many reasons. Let me single out one that reveals his importance for contemporary theology. I refer to Aquinas's genius for taking the

world seriously. The late Josef Pieper once remarked that just as the Little Flower, Therese of the Child Jesus, is known by her title, “of the Child Jesus,” so Aquinas should have been called Brother Thomas of the Creation. Why? Aquinas’s profound respect for the created order distinguishes his work from much of the theology that preceded him. It also sets him and true Thomists apart from much of the theology that is developed today. As we have been reminded in *Fides et ratio* (no. 44), Thomas Aquinas welcomed truth on its own terms and from whatever source it came, and he encouraged others to follow his example. His deployment of Aristotelian philosophy provides a good example of Aquinas’s inclusiveness.

Because he respected the truth of things, *veritas rerum*, Aquinas is able to distinguish without separating the orders of nature and grace, and this allows him to illuminate the specific ways in which God acts in each order. In the first, God is the creating and sustaining cause of all that exists, such that without his immediate, sustaining presence no creature remains in being. But in the second order, that of divine grace, Aquinas recognizes a distinctive divine activity that transforms intelligent yet dependent creatures into God’s good friends. The Church esteems Aquinas’s proper respect of created natures within the larger outpouring of divine grace, because, again to give one reason, it enables her to fulfill her missionary mandate. The work of evangelization.

It may come as a surprise to learn that between 1654 and 1678, the *Summa theologiae* was published twice in Peking (Beijing), having been translated by two Jesuit missionaries into Chinese. It came as even more of a surprise to me when, just yesterday, a Salesian missionary on his way to China asked permission to publish in Chinese more than a few pages of what I have written on the history of Thomism. We should interpret this somewhat remarkable request as an indication of just how much Aquinas fulfills still his task of Common Doctor. The seventeenth-century missionaries undoubtedly

concluded that Aquinas's openness to the world of creation made his writings of potential interest to the men and women of all cultures.

On last Monday many people from the Asian continent celebrated the first day of the lunar new year. I confess that I was relieved to learn that we have begun a Year of the Ox. It would have made this opportunity to preach on the Feast of Thomas Aquinas less attractive if I had found myself preaching in the Year of the Rat, or of the Snake, or of the Monkey. On the contrary, there is no better luck than to preach when the feast of Thomas Aquinas falls in the Year of the Ox. Why? We need to return to the pages of Aquinas's biography. It is said that when in Cologne certain young classmates taunted him by referring to Aquinas as "The Ox." This was during the Middle Ages of course. Seminarians never act this way today In any case, these young theology students wanted to draw attention to his large frame. Aquinas's teacher, Albert the Great, retorted prophetically: "The bellows of this ox will be heard around the world." He was right. There are many examples. The seventeenth-century Chinese editions of the *Summa* supply an important one.

The people of Asia, I am told, pronounce three wishes for the New Year: blessings, prosperity, and longevity. Aquinas would have had no difficulty appropriating these wishes to the Christian religion. Blessings constitute the communion of benevolent love that forms the heart of the Church. Prosperity means reasonable provision in this life, though above all the hope of complete fulfillment in the world to come. Longevity, which includes the wish for progeny—the basic natural law instinct for the continuance of the human race—reveals the desire for eternal life. In a seminary context, this wish can also point to the spiritual paternity of the priest, who, in an instrumental way, begets children not according to the flesh, but in the order of grace. This generation occurs both by his sacramental ministry and his preaching of the Word of God.

The twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once remarked that the encounter of Christianity with Greek philosophy produced nothing comparable to what he anticipated would result from the full encounter of the Gospel with the culture of the Orient. We rejoice that the first fruits of this felicitous meeting are represented among us in our Asian brothers from Viet Nam, Korea, and the Philipines. And we can expect that the Common Doctor will hold his own in the Church's missionary outreach to the peoples of Asia. You don't have to take my word for it. Just remember those seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries. Jesuits, as we Dominican long ago discovered, rarely back a loser!