

## Feast of St Thomas Aquinas 2005

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The Liturgy of the Hours informs us that 28 January marks 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 so made the decision to house the relics of the recently canonized Friar Thomas d'Aquino in the French Midi. Not Paris, where Thomas had made his name as a theologian, or Naples, where he had attained his maturity and where also he 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 abbey where Thomas died while journeying north toward Lyons to serve as a peritus at the 14<sup>th</sup> ecumenical council.

Liturgical feasts of course celebrate more than past events. We venerate the saints because they are alive in Christ. In the case of Thomas Aquinas, the Church venerates him as its Common Doctor. Many official texts confirm this title. Canon 252 suffices to establish Aquinas's preeminent place among the Doctors of the Christian Church. The 1983 Code invokes his name with special grammatical emphasis—sancto Thoma praesertim magistro—when it ordains that students learn about the mysteries of salvation—Saint Thomas, especially, being the magister, the master (CIC 252). More recently—

15 years later—Pope John Paul in his encyclical Fides et ratio enlarged on this theme.

Why does the Church hold Aquinas in such high esteem? There are many reasons. Let me single out one that suits this year's celebration of Brother Thomas. It has to do with Aquinas's genius for taking the world seriously. The late Josef Pieper once remarked that Aquinas should have been called Brother Thomas of the Creation; just as Therese of the Child Jesus is known by her title. Aquinas's profound respect for the created order distinguishes his work from much of the theology that preceded him. To put it differently, Thomas Aquinas welcomed truth on its own terms and from whatever source it came, and encouraged others to follow his example. His deployment of Aristotelian philosophy provides a good example. Nowhere else that I can imagine on earth besides Thomas Aquinas College could I make this assertion without also making an apology.

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 real friends. The Church values Aquinas proper respect of created natures within the larger outpouring of divine grace,

because, again, to give but one reason, it enables her to fulfill her missionary mandate.

It may come as a surprise to learn that between 1654 and 1678, the *Summa theologiae* was published in Peking (Beijing), having been translated by two Jesuit missionaries into Chinese. We should interpret this somewhat remarkable fact as an indication of just how much Aquinas fulfills his task as a common Doctor. The missionaries undoubtedly concluded that Aquinas's openness to the world of creation made his writings of potential interest to the men of all cultures.

The feast of St Thomas Aquinas now falls around the lunar new year, which many Asian people celebrate. I don't know whether there exists a Year of the Ox. Were however St Thomas Aquinas to have been born under one of the signs of the lunar calendar, it should have been during a Year of the Ox. You know why this is so. It is repeated that certain young classmates taunted him with that epitaph because of his large frame, but that Aquinas's teacher, Albert the Great, retorted prophetically: "The bellows of this ox will be heard around the world." The 17<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese editions of the *Summa* come to mind.

The people of Asia pronounce three wishes for the New Year: blessings, prosperity, and longevity. Aquinas would have had no difficulty appropriating these wishes to the tenets of 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. For some young men, however, 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. Both by his sacramental ministry and his preaching of the Word of God. Each of these tenets find lived expression at Thomas Aquinas College in a way that excels. And on account of this disposition, I am able to pronounce you most prepared to meet the needs of cultural diversity.

The great 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once remarked that the encounter of Christianity with Greek philosophy produced nothing comparable to what the full encounter of the Gospel with the culture of the Orient will one day occasion. We rejoice that the first fruits of that meeting are present with us in Catholic communion. 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 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jesuit missionaries. They rarely back a loser!