

## **Get to know: St. Thomas Aquinas**

### **Michael Gormley**

Hi, everyone on the Pray More Advent Retreat. My name is Michael Gormley, and I'm excited to continue this journey with you. Let us pray.

### **Opening Prayer**

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen. Lord Jesus, we thank you for the great gifts of the saints throughout the course and history of the church. We want to praise and honor you and give honor where honor is due and respect to where respect is due. So we want to honor all of the saints, these great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us in the sign of faith, marked by the cross and resurrection, Lord Jesus, filled with your divine grace and the power of your Holy Spirit, that they have become signposts. As St. Paul said so many times, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." So Jesus, today we in particular want to honor St. Thomas Aquinas, how his whole life, his writings, his teachings, but more importantly, his own personal prayer and devotion to you has become a tremendous light in the church and in the world. Jesus, I trust in you. Jesus, I trust in you. Jesus, I trust in you. And in your matchless name we pray, amen. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.

### **Who is St. Thomas Aquinas**

Okay, we're going to talk about my homeboy, St. Thomas Aquinas. I think it's so important. I love this guy, he's great. I am Thomist, which means I spiritually and philosophically and theologically follow in the footsteps of St. Thomas Aquinas. I'm going to tell you a handful of stories about him, kind of paint you the picture of his biography, his life because it's very important for us to understand these things because this guy is, you could say he is the most important when it comes to doctrine, the most important doctor of the church. His teachings affected more people, and they still do than any other single person with the exception of maybe St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom maybe, maybe, I don't know. I don't know.

But let's dive in. Thomas Aquinas was born by two parents of Germanic ancestry who had settled through Italy. Now, it was very important for us to understand, right? Remember, the Roman Empire split. There was east and west. The east kept thriving when the west started falling apart. The east would set up like these colonies, the northern Germanic peoples, right? The barbarians, they would keep sacking, the vandals, the Visigoths. All these people were coming from the north and sacking Rome and all these wonderful ancient cities. And then they settled there, and then they became the Europeans that we know and love today, right?

So essentially the Lombards and the Normans, these great barbarian peoples would settle in different parts of Italy and would set up the new, what we would consider medieval houses, the courts, the royal places, right? After Charlemagne and all this stuff, the Holy Roman Empire. You have an interesting thing. When we think of Europe today, we think of here's

Italy, and here's Austria and Switzerland and Germany and France and Spain. Like we kind of understand the geography. But back then it was tied to kingdoms and families and houses. It was tied to princedoms, right? And city states, these were not understood, very cut and dry like, oh, just because this thing's shaped like a boot, that all belongs to one country called Italy. That didn't happen until the middle of Vatican 1, kind of ended it in the middle when they started firing artillery rounds into the Vatican.

## **Born in A Wealthy Aristocratic Family**

But Thomas existed at this unique time where the old world, the old Roman imperium, was now giving way completely to this new medieval synthesis of these northern Germanic peoples, the French, the Normans, Normandy, resettled the land. New courts were started, new places, towns were growing. The dark ages are over. The Crusades kind of off in the distance, the first one being around the year 1000. So all this stuff, very interesting how the medieval world is working itself out. And here comes a man named Tomo, Tomo de Aquin, Thomas from the country or from the city of Aquinas, right? Aquin. We just call him Thomas Aquinas because we're Americans and we just lump everything together.

Thomas was born of a wealthy aristocratic family whose family was, they owned Sicily and Naples, that was the kingdom of Sicily. They owned part of the northern part of Spain in this kingdom of Sicily. But then right in the middle was the papal states, all these little states, principalities, all controlled from Rome by the pope. The pope was a worldly king, and he controlled these things. There's a lot of war go that would go between the kingdom of Sicily, of whom Thomas Aquinas's parents were aligned with, and the pope. So it was weird. There was all these feudings and all this stuff. And so born in 1225, Thomas is a part of this. His dad, Thomas Aquinas's dad sacked the Monte Cassino, a Benedictine monastery.

So if you could think of the Imperium Romanum right at its ending in the West, you have the rise of the monasteries, especially Monte Cassino the great Benedictine monasteries. These were built like fortresses on the edge of cliffs and on top of mountains, famous passes go. And they were political by the time of Aquinas, as much as they were spiritual. And so he sacked, in a war with the pope, Monte Cassino 15 years or so earlier, and then kind of a way to make peace with the pope, he sent him, when Thomas was five, he sent Thomas to go live there as a monk. His hope was, because he's an aristocrat, that one day Thomas would become the abbot of Monte Cassino. Abbots had a lot of power. They're basically like one step below a bishop at that time. They had a lot of political power, especially if they were at very wealthy and established monasteries, like Monte Cassino, the most important one at that time. And so something happens though. They realize that Thomas is incredibly intellectually gifted.

## **His Time At The University of Naples**

So they send him to the most important university, one of the first universities in the Western world. That is a modern university, and that's in the kingdom of Sicily, in Naples. So they send him to the University of Naples, which still exists today. You know, it's 800 years old or whatever. So he goes there. Now, because of the fights with Thomas or with the Kingdom of Sicily and the papal states, the things that the pope outlawed and censured, they were not outlawed, actually were celebrated. There was this guy named Aristotle, a great Greek

philosopher, followed in the footsteps of Plato. He would take his own philosophy, called Aristotelianism, off in this different direction. But a lot of his works were lost. They were lost mainly from the Nestorian heresy that denied that Mary was the mother of God. They said she was the Christotokos, the bearer of Christ, but not God, Theotokos, the God bearer; that Mary couldn't have God in her womb, but only Christ. But if Jesus is God, then she has God in her womb. It's famous heresy.

Well, they're exiled from the Roman empire. And because the language they used was Aristotelian Greek and not platonic Greek, we don't really have to get into this, but it's interesting. They took the works of Aristotle with them when they left the Roman Empire and went to Persia. Then a couple hundred years later, Persia was conquered by Islam. So then people in Persia, modern-day Iran and Iraq, the caliphate, right? Remember all this stuff? They translated the works from Greek into Arabic. Then as Islam conquers all the way around Northern Africa and then into Spain, all the way. I mean, they got really far into Spain and then towards Poland and all this, eventually Aristotle would go from the Greek into the Arabic, all the way around into Spain at the University of Cordoba. A lot of translation was made. Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars translated it into Latin from the Greek, pretty crazy.

## **The Dominican Order**

And that's how Thomas Aquinas got access to it. But it was illegal to read Aristotle according to the pope. It was on censored, banned lists. So the people in the Kingdom of Sicily were like, "Yeah, you want to come to our university, you can study the works of Aristotle." So he did, and he loved it. He was incredible. That's where he encounters the work, not just of Aristotle, but the friars of the Dominican order.

The Dominican order was a new order, similar to the Franciscans. They were like dynamite. We don't understand this. Mothers, when they would hear that Dominicans or Franciscan friars were coming to their town, like, oh, these friars are walking along their journey, they're going to stop at the town and preach. Mothers would lock their sons up out of fear that their sons would immediately go and follow them. I mean, Francis had tens of thousands of followers. Dominic too, I mean, within their lifetime, had thousand of followers because I don't know about you, but I get very sick and tired of hearing people talk about following Jesus radically.

I just want to see people follow Jesus radically, and then I want to go and do that. And that's what they saw in Francis and Dominic, but not just in Francis and Dominic, in Francis's first followers and Dominic's first followers. And so this was a dynamism that was being unleashed by the Holy Spirit in the life of the church where there was a lot of reform and renewal happening all at once.

And I can tell you, Thomas' family did not want this to happen because the rich looked down on them. They didn't have big monasteries that had vast amounts of wealth. They were poor beggars. See, the new thing that had happened was cities had arisen. The older cities that rose after the Dark Ages, they were built around the monasteries. The word Munich literally means monk because they were built around the monastery, the monasteries that were settled there. And so you have now the rise of these independent cities. Well, how do you get access

to the cities if you're an evangelist? Well, what you do is you go and you beg on the streets of these cities. And so Thomas Aquinas sees these Dominicans at Naples, and he joins them. And his parents were furious. But what he did was he hid the fact that he was a Dominican. He took the vows of the Dominican, wore the habit, and then put his Benedictine habit over it. I don't think he ever took permanent vows because he was so young.

## **A Chaste Man**

He was like 14 when he went to go study at the University of Naples. So I don't think he took his permanent vows for the Benedictines. But eventually his parents would find out and they would imprison him when he's 18, 19 years old in a tower. This is like Rapunzel stuff. They would imprison him in this tower and they would try to destroy his vocation. His dad was furious. So what they did was his brother, his oldest brother, got a madam, a prostitute, and brought her up into the tower and locked her in with Thomas.

Thomas was praying when she walked in, and she tried to seduce him. He chased her off with the hot poker from the fireplace, right? Kept her back. And then she opened the door, pounded on the door. They opened it, they let her out. And then Thomas took the poker and he carved a cross into the wood of the door. And there he gave his chastity to the Lord. And he had an experience that night of what he called the perpetual gift of chastity.

That night, an angel came and put a cincture, a little rope you tie around your waist, priests do, put the cincture on him and sealed it tight. And he never struggled with sexual sins. This was something that was born from a lot of pain and suffering that he endured at the hands of his own family. After about a year, he was eventually released. And the crazy thing about this is they wanted to contain him because they thought this thing would destroy him and mar their family name when in fact, no one remembers the name of his dad or brothers. But we all remember Thomas Aquinas.

There are people, like me, who are Thomists. His name is incredible. So he goes on to the University of Cologne, which was run by the Dominicans, and he studies under, or he goes first in Paris and then to Cologne where he studies under St. Albert the Great, Albertus Magnus, and it is there he gets his nickname. So he was very quiet, very reserved. He would rarely speak. He was a shy boy by temperament. The other kids in the class would talk and answer and all this stuff, and they would make fun of him.

Because he was such a big dude, they would call him the dumb, meaning mute, the dumb ox. And because he was this, they would mock him and say this, Albert heard one day, Saint Albert, it's good to have a saint for a teacher. Albert heard this and said, "You call him the dumb ox, but one day his bellowing will be heard throughout the whole world" because he realized that this student of his, quiet and shy, had mastered the material of Aristotle before others had. This material that is just being introduced, he had consumed it and taken it in, as well as John Chrysostom and San Augustine and the church fathers. He was steeped in the writings of the Fathers and in sacred scripture.

So eventually he becomes a magister, a master, which enables him to be a professor. And he goes to the University of Paris. There was a riot against the Franciscans and Dominicans from being able to have chairs of professorhood at the University of Paris, which was the best

university at that time. St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas had to write all these letters defending the Franciscans and Dominicans and their rightful place there.

They're like, "Oh, no, you took a vow of poverty. You can't hang out with us secular priests here teaching theology." So eventually they would win over it, and they would start this year of formation, year of formation, they would start this time of formation that was radical in the life of the church. You see, the Medieval project was about synthesizing things, collecting the ancient wisdom of classical Greece, classical Rome, pagan Rome, but also of sacred scripture and other cultures. And they would synthesize it with the gospel. And this is the great work of St. Thomas Aquinas. You could say that he was an Augustinian in theology who harmonized and united Aristotle to it, getting rid of or correcting Aristotle where necessary and correcting Augustine and others where necessary because he believed that he was in pursuit of the truth.

He would write two huge works, "The Summa Contra Gentiles," the Summa, the summary, against, contra, Gentiles, the nations, right? This is how you train and equip Dominican friars to go out and preach the gospel to Muslims and Jews and heretics and pagans. And then you have the "Summa Theologica" or the "Summa Theologiae," which is the summary of theology. Thomas thought, "Yeah, we're going to start with question one. Is there a science of religion? And then is there a God? How can we even say that there's a God?"

## **Nothing but you, O Lord**

He questions everything. Thousands of questions arranged in an objection, response, and then answer to objections format. It's a dialogue. This great work is a massive dialogue to help the person encountering the word of God and encountering philosophy and theology for the first time to slowly make their way one question at a time through the highest and most advanced objections to Catholicism and their responses, all at the feet of Thomas Aquinas. Now, this is a master work. It takes him years to do.

And then one day, he's celebrating mass and he's elevating the host, and he looks up and there he has a vision of our Lord. And in this, Jesus says to Thomas, "Thomas, you have spoken well of me. What do you ask of me? What can I give you?" And Thomas responds, "Nothing but you, O Lord. Nothing but you, O Lord." The great sadness of St. Thomas Aquinas's life is that it would be cut way too short. He would die at the age of 49 while en route to the Council of Lyon in order to reconcile east and western churches together. Imagine if Thomas was there at the Council of Lyons. That would've been incredible.

But unfortunately, he fell sick, and there he was taken into a Benedictine, ironically enough, a Benedictine monastery, who tried to help him. He made his confession. One confessor said, "Dear God, it is like I've heard the sins of a child." And he died. A lot of the stuff that we know about his personal life and his spiritual life, the fact that he was a mystic, not just a thinker, was from his friend, Brother Reginald, who was his closest friend. He would hear Thomas speaking to the crucifix, sitting in front of the tabernacle.

Thomas spent every day asking to be blessed by the wisdom of Jesus Christ and the Eucharist. He would pray, he would offer mass. He would do all of his writings in front of the Eucharist. In fact, when the pope wanted to have a feast day of Corpus Christi, it was Thomas

Aquinas who would write the poetry and the prayers of that feast day. The "Tantum Ergo" is part of the "Pange lingua." I would encourage you to get the Eucharistic hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas and just to have them written out, one in the Latin, one in the translated English, and then one in the literal English translation. So you could understand.

## **Nobis Natus Nobis Datus**

One of my favorite parts, which ties to Advent. "Nobis natus nobis datus" The Latin words. Everything, St. Thomas wrote, it all rhymed, right? Nobis natus nobis datus What does that mean? Nobis, for us. Natus, where we get the word nature or nativity. For us born. Nobis datus. For us given. He's talking about the Eucharist, but he's tying it to Jesus Christ in his very birth. Like, where do we get this eucharistic flesh that we offer on our altars? We get it through the great story of Advent and Christmas.

We get it through like, so this is why the Eucharistic hymns often reflect and tie back to Mary's yes. And they tie back to the blessed mother, who alone with all the priests of the world, can say, "This is my body. This is my blood." It is that flesh that Mary's yes gave the world, with the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, that Mary's yes, and the Holy Spirit gave to the world that priests offer on every altar throughout the world. Nobis natus, for us born, Nobis datus, for us given.

St. Thomas Aquinas loved his Catholic faith to the point where when he died, he said this mere moments before his death. In a prayer after confession, he said, "I have never written anything against you, Lord. And if I have, I give all of my teaching," I'm paraphrasing here, "to be submitted to the Holy Roman Church for judgment", right? Even though he was a genius who out geniused all the geniuses, he still was humble enough to say, "Maybe I got stuff wrong. Take it, Church, discern and tell me what it is." When we look at the stories of St. Thomas Aquinas, there's a lot of fun stories. Like he's a big fat guy. So they carved out a little half circle at his table so he could sit closer to it, but he often never ate, which is weird for being a big fat guy. He never ate because he kept getting distracted and thought. So one of his brothers was assigned to him to remind him to eat and drink.

One day he was at the court of St. Louis, the king of France, of which St. Louis the town is named after. And he said, he was so distracted that he's in the middle of the presence of the king, and he totally forgets and he smashes his hand on the table, upsets the cups, the plates, all this stuff. People look at him and he goes, "That's how you defeat the Manichees." He's thinking about how to fight or "That settles the Manichees," that was the phrase. How to fight a heresy, right? He's like going back and forth. This is a beautiful thing. My favorite story though, of all these different Thomas Aquinas stories, and I'll wrap up, I promise, is when one of his brothers, they were in a classroom, I believe, and they said, "Thomas." He believed everyone.

He was very gullible to a certain extent. So they said, "Brother Thomas, come quickly. There's a pig flying outside." And Thomas ran or not ran, he calmly got up and lumbered over to the door to look. And they were laughing at him, like they just pulled the prank at him. They go, "Do you really believe a pig would be flying?" And he said this, here's the quote, I'm going to read it. "I would rather believe that a pig could fly than that my brothers would lie." Oh. Yeah. His bellowing was heard throughout the world. Thomas said, at the end of his

life, "I can do no more. All that I have written seems to be straw compared with what I have seen, given a glimpse of the edge of heaven." His words were straw compared to the mystical reality that awaits every one of us when we die.

So brothers and sisters, St. Thomas Aquinas, reflecting this advent, how can we bring the spirit of St. Thomas more into our lives? Well, just realize, he devoted himself, mind, body, and spirit. His chastity was consecrated. He was virginally pure, gave his whole, every bodily temptation, he even penned a prayer on how to do this and give all, he gave everything to our Lord, even his writings. But he never lost sight of the fact that at the end of the day, we don't worship a proposition. We are in love with a person, Jesus Christ. He never lost sight of that. The very flesh he adored in the Eucharist is the very flesh that came from the Virgin Mary's yes to God. And so this advent season, let's just echo it, read his prayers, take it into ourselves and acknowledge Thomas deserves to be honored. Let's pray.

### **Closing Prayer**

Father, Son, holy Spirit, amen. Lord Jesus, I receive you the price of my soul's redemption. For love of you, I have studied, kept vigil, labored, preached, and taught. Never have I said anything against you. With these final words of St. Thomas, may they become our own. May we labor and teach and study. May we keep vigil, may we stay up all night in prayerful adoration of you.

May we let your presence drive all that we do, so that at the end of the day, we can receive our soul's redemption and be with you forever as Thomas Aquinas, great doctor of the church, the angelic doctor is enjoying your beatific vision. Jesus, I trust in you and in your name we pray, amen. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, amen. God bless you all, St. Thomas Aquinas, pray for us.