

St. Thomas Aquinas

Written by W.J.Pais

[Philosopher](#) , [theologian](#) , [doctor of the Church](#) ([Angelicus Doctor](#)), [patron](#) of [Catholic universities](#)

,
[colleges](#)

, and
[schools](#)

. Born at Rocca Secca in the
[Kingdom of Naples](#)

, 1225 or 1227; died at Fossa Nuova, 7 March, 1274.

The great outlines and all the important events of his life are [known](#) , but biographers differ as to some details and [dates](#) .

Death prevented

[Henry Denifle](#)

from executing his project of writing a critical life of the
[saint](#)

.
[Denifle's](#)

friend and pupil, Dominic Prümmer, O.P., professor of
[theology](#)

in the

[University of Fribourg, Switzerland](#)

, took up the work and published the "Fontes Vitae S. Thomae Aquinatis, notis historicis et criticis illustrati"; and the first fascicle (Toulouse, 1911) has appeared, giving the life of St. Thomas by Peter Calo (1300) now published for the first time. From

[Tolomeo of Lucca](#)

. . . we learn that at the time of the
[saint's](#)

death there was a

[doubt](#)

about his exact age (Prümmer, op. cit., 45). The end of 1225 is usually assigned as the
[time](#)

of his birth. Father Prümmer, on the authority of Calo, thinks 1227 is the more probable
[date](#)

(op. cit., 28). All agree that he died in 1274.

About the year 1236 he was sent to the University of [Naples](#) . Calo says that the change was made at the instance of the

[Abbot](#)

of

[Monte Cassino](#)

, who wrote to Thomas's father that a boy of such talents should not be left in obscurity (Prümmer, op. cit., 20). At

[Naples](#)

his preceptors were Pietro Martini and Petrus Hibernus. The chronicler says that he soon surpassed Martini at grammar, and he was then given over to Peter of Ireland, who trained him in

[logic](#)

and the

[natural sciences](#)

. The customs of the times divided the

[liberal arts](#)

into two courses: the Trivium, embracing grammar,

[logic](#)

, and rhetoric; the Quadrivium, comprising music, mathematics, geometry, and

[astronomy](#)

. . . . Thomas could repeat the lessons with more depth and lucidity than his masters displayed. The youth's heart had remained pure amidst the corruption with which he was surrounded, and he resolved to embrace the

[religious life](#)

.

Some [time](#) between 1240 and August, 1243, he received the habit of the [Order of St. Dominic](#), being

attracted and directed by John of St. Julian, a noted preacher of the [convent](#)

of

[Naples](#)

. The city wondered that such a noble young man should don the garb of

[poor](#)

[friar](#)

. His mother, with mingled feelings of

[joy](#)

and sorrow, hastened to

[Naples](#)

to see her son. The

[Dominicans](#)

, fearing she would take him away, sent him to

[Rome](#)

, his ultimate destination being

[Paris](#)

or

[Cologne](#)

. At the instance of Theodora, Thomas's brothers, who were soldiers under the

[Emperor Frederick](#)

, captured the

[novice](#)

near the town of

[Aquapendente](#)

and confined him in the fortress of San Giovanni at Rocca Secca. Here he was detained nearly two years, his

[parents](#)

, brothers, and sisters endeavouring by various means to destroy his

[vocation](#)

. The brothers even laid snares for his

[virtue](#)

, but the pure-minded

[novice](#)

drove the temptress from his room with a brand which he snatched from the fire. Towards the end of his life,

[St. Thomas](#)

confided to his faithful friend and companion,

[Reginald of Piperno](#)

, the secret of a remarkable favour received at this

[time](#)

. When the temptress had been driven from his chamber, he

[knelt](#)

and most earnestly implored

[God](#)

to grant him integrity of

[mind](#)

and body. He fell into a gentle sleep, and, as he slept, two

[angels](#)

appeared to assure him that his

[prayer](#)

had been heard. They then girded him about with a white girdle, saying: "We gird thee with the girdle of perpetual

[virginity](#)

." And from that day forward he never experienced the slightest motions of

[concupiscence](#)

.

The [time](#) spent in captivity was not lost. His mother relented somewhat, after the first burst of [anger](#) and grief; the [Dominicans](#) were allowed to provide him with new habits, and through the kind offices of his sister he procured some books — the

[Holy Scriptures](#)

,

[Aristotle's](#)

Metaphysics, and the "Sentences" of

[Peter Lombard](#)

. After eighteen months or two years spent in

[prison](#)

, either because his mother saw that the

[hermit's](#)

[prophecy](#)

would eventually be fulfilled or because his brothers

[feared](#)

the threats of

[Innocent IV](#)

and

[Frederick II](#)

, he was set at liberty, being lowered in a basket into the arms of the

[Dominicans](#)

, who were delighted to find that during his captivity "he had made as much progress as if he had been in a

studium generale

" (Calo, op. cit., 24).

Thomas immediately pronounced his [vows](#), and his superiors sent him to [Rome](#). [Innocent IV](#)

examined closely into his motives in joining the

[Friars Preachers](#)

, dismissed him with a

[blessing](#)

, and forbade any further interference with his

[vocation](#)

. John the Teutonic, fourth master general of the

[order](#)

, took the young student to

[Paris](#)

and, according to the majority of the

[saint's](#)

biographers, to

[Cologne](#)

, where he arrived in 1244 or 1245, and was placed under

[Albertus Magnus](#)

, the most renowned professor of the

[order](#)

. In the schools Thomas's

[humility](#)

and taciturnity were misinterpreted as signs of dullness, but when

[Albert](#)

had heard his brilliant defence of a difficult thesis, he exclaimed: "We call this young man a dumb ox, but his bellowing in [doctrine](#) will one day resound throughout the world."

In 1245 [Albert](#) was sent to [Paris](#), and Thomas accompanied him as a student. In 1248 both returned to [Cologne](#). [Albert](#) had been appointed regent of the new *studium generale*, erected that year by the [general chapter](#) of the [order](#), and Thomas was to teach under him as Bachelor. (On the system of graduation in the thirteenth century see [ORDER OF PREACHERS](#) — II, A, 1, d). During his stay in [Cologne](#), probably in 1250, he was raised to the [priesthood](#) by [Conrad of Hochstaden](#), [archbishop](#) of that city. Throughout his busy life, he frequently preached the Word of God, in [Germany](#), [France](#), and [Italy](#). His [sermons](#) were forceful, redolent of [piety](#), full of solid instruction, abounding in apt citations from the [Scriptures](#).

In the year 1251 or 1252 the master general of the [order](#), by the advice of [Albertus Magnus](#) and [Hugo a S. Charo \(Hugh of St. Cher\)](#), sent Thomas to fill the office of Bachelor (sub-regent) in the [Dominican](#)

studium

at

[Paris](#)

. This appointment may be regarded as the beginning of his public career, for his teaching soon attracted the attention both of the professors and of the students. His

[duties](#)

consisted principally in explaining the "Sentences" of

[Peter Lombard](#)

, and his commentaries on that text-book of

[theology](#)

furnished the materials and, in great part, the plan for his chief work, the

["Summa theologia"](#)

.

In due [time](#) he was ordered to prepare himself to obtain the degree of Doctor in Theology from the [University of Paris](#), but the conferring of the degree was postponed, owing to a dispute between the [university](#) and the [friars](#)

. The conflict, originally a dispute between the

[university](#)

and the

[civic authorities](#)

, arose from the

[slaying](#)

of one of the students and the wounding of three others by the city guard. The

[university](#)

, jealous of its autonomy, demanded satisfaction, which was refused. The

[doctors](#)

closed their

[schools](#)

, solemnly

[swore](#)

that they would not reopen them until their demands were granted, and decreed that in future no one should be admitted to the degree of Doctor unless he would take an

[oath](#)

to follow the same line of conduct under similar circumstances. The

[Dominicans](#)

and

[Franciscans](#)

, who had continued to teach in their

[schools](#)

, refused to take the prescribed

[oath](#)

, and from this there arose a bitter conflict which was at its height when St. Thomas and

[St. Bonaventure](#)

were ready to be presented for their degrees.

[William of St-Amour](#)

extended the dispute beyond the original question,

[violently](#)

attacked the

[friars](#)

, of whom he was evidently

[jealous](#)

, and denied their

[right](#)

to occupy chairs in the

[university](#)

. Against his book, "De periculis novissimorum temporum" (The Perils of the Last Times), St. Thomas wrote a treatise "Contra impugnantes religionem", an apology for the religious orders (

[Touren](#)

, op. cit., II, cc. vii sqq.). The book of

[William of St-Amour](#)

was condemned by

[Alexander IV](#)

at

[Anagni](#)

, 5 October, 1256, and the

[pope](#)

gave orders that the

[mendicant friars](#)

should be admitted to the doctorate.

About this time St. Thomas also combated a dangerous book, "The Eternal Gospel" ([Touren](#) , op. cit., II, cxii). The

[university](#)

authorities did not

[obey](#)

immediately; the influence of

[St. Louis IX](#)

and eleven

[papal Briefs](#)

were required before peace was firmly established, and St. Thomas was admitted to the degree of Doctor in Theology. The

[date](#)

of his promotion, as given by many biographers, was 23 October, 1257. His theme was "The Majesty of Christ". His text, "Thou waterest the hills from thy upper rooms: the earth shall be filled with the fruit of thy works" (

[Psalm 103:13](#)

), said to have been suggested by a

[heavenly visitor](#)

, seems to have been

[prophetic](#)

of his career. A tradition says that

[St. Bonaventure](#)

and St. Thomas received the doctorate on the same day, and that there was a contest of

[humility](#)

between the two friends as to which should be promoted first.

From this [time](#) St. Thomas's life may be summed up in a few words: [praying](#), preaching, teaching, writing, journeying. Men were more anxious to hear him than they had been to hear

[Albert](#)

, whom St. Thomas surpassed in accuracy, lucidity, brevity, and power of exposition, if not in universality of

[knowledge](#)

.
[Paris](#)

claimed him as her own; the

[popes](#)

wished to have him near them; the

studia

of the

[order](#)

were eager to enjoy the benefit of his teaching; hence we find him successively at

[Anagni](#)

,
[Rome](#)

, Bologna,

[Orvieto](#)

,
[Viterbo](#)

,
[Perugia](#)

, in

[Paris](#)

again, and finally in

[Naples](#)

, always teaching and writing, living on earth with one passion, an ardent

[zeal](#)

for the explanation and defence of

[Christian truth](#)

. So devoted was he to his sacred task that with tears he begged to be excused from

accepting the
[Archbishopric](#)
of
[Naples](#)
, to which he was appointed by
[Clement IV](#)
in 1265. Had this appointment been accepted, most probably the
["Summa theologia"](#)
would not have been written.

Yielding to the requests of his brethren, he on several occasions took part in the deliberations of the [general chapters](#) of the [order](#). One of these [chapters](#) was held in [London](#) in 1263. In another held at Valenciennes (1259) he collaborated with [Albertus Magnus](#) and Peter of Tarentasia (afterwards [Pope Innocent V](#)) in formulating a system of studies which is substantially preserved to this day in the *studia generalia* of the [Dominican Order](#) (cf. Douais, op. cit.).

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