

Holy Theology: St. Thomas Aquinas **Sermon by Archbishop Christoph Schönborn O.P.**

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Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas is a holy theologian. He is not holy despite his theology, but was pronounced holy *as* a theologian.

In the Church there are all kinds of saints: holy housewives and holy kings, holy fools and holy artists. Among these saints there are also holy thinkers and theologians. Thomas Aquinas is considered the greatest of them. Thomas did not take care of the sick, he did not deliver great sermons. Like few others he only studied, searched, taught and wrote. And for this he is revered as a saint. In addition to his activity as a theologian, Augustine was also a bishop, a healer and a fascinating preacher and this is part of the image of his sanctity. Bonaventure, Thomas's contemporary, was a theologian, but he was also the superior of his order and in the end a cardinal—and this belongs to the contours of his sanctity.

Thomas is only a thinker, philosopher and theologian, so much so that his person stands behind his theological work almost like a shadow. And in fact, his biography is of comparatively little interest. When one speaks of Thomas Aquinas, one means his work. He is holy in his work. Now, this means: since every saint reflects certain features of Christ in living fashion, the Church has seen a reflection of the image of Christ in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Holy theology! Holy Thought! The Church confesses that this is possible, and she points to Thomas to show how this is possible.

When the Church declares someone a saint, she recognizes that the mystery of Christ clearly radiates from him, the wisdom of the cross, the weakness of God which is more powerful than all human wisdom. In what is the theology of Thomas Aquinas a visible expression of the mystery of the cross? Thomas did not die the death of a martyr, nor did he have the cross of great physical suffering. He probably had to endure the envy and infighting of his colleagues, as is customary at Universities, but even this suffering did not go beyond the usual measure. His brother Dominicans respected and revered him. Where, then, was the cross of Christ in his life? In the manner in which he did theology! This claim sounds at first unusual. Is not the folly of the cross, of which Paul speaks, something quite different than the sober, intellectual manner in which Thomas speaks of God and the world? Do not theology and wisdom fall silent before the cross? In fact, Thomas did stop writing a few months before his death after a mystical experience on St. Nicholas day 1273 in Naples. He felt that what he had written was mere straw in comparison with what he had then seen and experienced. And yet, his theology itself is holy, and this means that the mystery of the cross shines in it. Why? I want to show that Thomas was a holy theologian, because he did theology, not to please others, not to become famous, not to be interesting, not to develop "his own original point of view" and then defend it obstinately, but because his theology flowed from an unconditional surrender to the truth, which is Christ. And in this surrender Thomas follows the very movement of Christ himself, who completely surrenders himself into the will of the Father, "Yes, I come to do your will" (Hebrews 10,7 and 9a).

Selfless surrender to truth—in this selflessness of Thomas's theology one can see the light of the wisdom of the cross. He selflessly communicates the light of truth. He selflessly allows himself to be penetrated by the light of truth. This twofold selflessness, in relation to God and neighbor, is what I want to examine a little.

Thomas often speaks of the task of the teacher, the Magister. In these texts we can see how he understood his own office as a teacher, his own Magisterium.

In one text he is asked the question whether men can be teachers of others, or only God (De Veritate 11,1). Against the view that not only God, but also a man can teach another the objection is made that the Lord himself said, "Do not let yourselves be called teacher (magister) for one alone is your teacher, God" (Matt 23,8). One can almost see how the Parisian students want to get their teacher, their Magister Thomas, into a tight spot! Thomas answers calmly and in an astonishing way. This saying of Jesus is not an absolute prohibition against the use of the title "teacher" (Thomas always rejects such biblical literalism). No, something much more radical is at stake. This saying of Jesus does not reject certain titles, but a certain understanding of authority. What Jesus rejects, Thomas argues, is that human beings make others into teachers in a manner belonging only to God, namely, by turning the wisdom of a human teacher into the final authority and setting their entire hope in the wisdom of men. And now comes the surprising thing. Instead, Thomas says, everyone must himself examine and interrogate in the light of divine truth what he hears from his teachers. And where do we find this light of divine wisdom? Here again we find a surprising point: in ourselves! It is imprinted on us by God, our only true teacher. The light of reason, of our capacity to understand, has been instilled in us by God. And so we bear in us the mirror of divine truth in which we "can judge everything" (De Veritate 11,1 ad1).

This is the selflessness of the great teacher: not to put on imposing airs as an intellectual, not to use complicated technical jargon to impress and blind students and thereby to make them unfree and immature under tutelage. Thomas does not want students to remain attached to the wisdom of the teacher. He expressly says that God alone can teach man from within, from within his own heart. Human beings can only teach from the outside by providing help in order that the student himself reaches knowledge in the light of truth which he bears within himself (cf. *De Veritate* 11,1 ad 7).

Now, this does not mean that the teacher is of no importance. Rather, it is precisely in this light that the enormous responsibility of the theologian becomes evident. The knowledge which the teacher of theology must mediate is the highest and most important. “The entire salvation of man depends upon the knowledge of truth” (Ia 1, a.1). The higher a truth is, the greater the responsibility not to obscure it by posing as important. For, although a teacher cannot by himself cause knowledge in students, he can confuse and impede it.

The teacher of theology is thus faced with the demand of that other selflessness, that of an unconditional surrender to divine truth. He must allow himself to be grasped and formed by it, to be determined by it. This is why the teacher, especially the teacher of theology, must be one who sees, he must be a contemplative. “The seeing of the teacher is the origin of his teaching,” Thomas says (*De Veritate* 11, 4 ad3). It is only as one who looks away from himself, one who looks toward God, that a teacher can be free, free from himself, free selflessly “to pass on to others what has been seen” (*contemplata aliis tradere*) (cf. Oeing-Hanhoff, in: Eckert, Thomas von Aquino, p. 304 f). This is why Thomas can say together with Christian tradition (Gregory the Great), “the contemplative life is freedom” (IIa-IIae 182,1 ad 2)

This “freedom” of the theologian has nothing to do with a complete absence of bonds. The freedom of such wisdom consists in the love of God, in the friendship which grows from the contemplation of the one who loves me.

This familiar intercourse with God is the gift of God to us when we seek to do his will. Those who do his will, as today’s Gospel reading says, become “brother and sister and mother.” Nothing is more joyful for human beings than this loving familiar intercourse. It is from this loving innermost center of the heart that Thomas’s holy theology springs. It is a humble opening of oneself to the truth and the will of God. This opening is, in turn, a humble answer to reality, to the truth of things themselves.

Where do we find the wisdom of the cross here? Thomas says that the cross is God’s wisdom, not because it is horrible and painful, but because it is the expression of the most selfless love—and this is what is most joyful for man. Thomas’s holy theology radiates this joy. And so, let Thomas give us the concluding words about joy in the Holy Spirit as a little taste of his theology. “It is also a property of friendship that one take delight in a friend’s presence, rejoice in his words and deeds, and find in him security against all anxieties; and so it is especially in our sorrows that we hasten to our friends for consolation. Since, then, the Holy Spirit constitutes us as God’s friends and makes him dwell in us and us dwell in Him, it follows that through the Holy Spirit we have joy in God and security against all the world’s adversity and assaults” (CG IV,22).