



Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas

January 28, 2008

Recently the newspaper carried an article about a Marine who found a huge, 42-pound heart-shaped rock in Afghanistan. He lugged it to his barracks and printed on it his initials and those of his fiancée. He viewed his treasure as a symbol of what they both wanted: a rock-solid relationship: a love that would withstand ANYTHING from life, time, or circumstances.

That is what our Brother, Thomas Aquinas desired—a firm, steadfast relationship with God. He sought it even at the age of five, when he was generally silent except for asking others: “What is God? Who is God? How can I know Him?” His mother, Countess Theodora, had a magnificent scheme for her gifted youngest son: she sent him to the Benedictine Monastery, planning to do all in her power to see that he became first, the Abbot, then later, the Pope.

Ten years later, after having been well educated by Benedictines, but having no interest in the schemes of his mother, Thomas was inspired by Dominicans, whose LOVE for God and Truth called to him. Hungry for Wisdom and Divine Light, he petitioned for entry to the Order. Finally his parents gave grudging permission, and Thomas, wearing the Dominican habit, set out to join other novices in Paris. On the way he was kidnapped. His mother—who had never abandoned her ambitious schemes, had instructed two of his brothers to take Thomas by force and keep him bound in their castle’s prison.

Theodora and her sons supplied him with all he needed, every day reminding him that he wouldn’t be treated this way by the poor Dominicans. But whenever he was asked if he had changed his mind, the answer was always the same. “I am a Dominican novice. All I need is my habit and some books so I may study about God and learn the holy ways of Wisdom.” The brothers felt thwarted and impatient with Thomas, but his two sisters, Theodora (named for their mother) and Marietta, secretly provided their younger brother with freshly laundered habits and precious books from the Friars.

After almost a year of failing to influence their brother, the captors decided upon a different scheme, hiring a woman to seduce him. It's true that he was as innocent as a child; however, Thomas was neither ignorant nor stupid. Inspired by the Light of the Spirit, he snatched a burning torch from the wall and chased the screeching woman down the stone steps.

Finally Countess Theodora gave up, tired of the battle she had waged over this 17-year-old giant who was her son. "Let him go to those rag-tag Preachers," she said.

Studying at the University of Paris under the professorship of the internationally known Dominican Albert the Great, Thomas was again quiet, contemplative, reflective. Fellow-students called him "A Dumb Ox." But Albert had an answer for them: "You call him 'a dumb ox,'" he said, "but I tell you his bellowing will one day be heard all over Europe."

Albert was right. Eventually the prodigious intellect of Thomas became known, and he was honored for his illuminating, perceptive writings. As he wrote, however, he cautioned both himself and others that it is not enough to have WORDS with which to speak about God. "We must experience God intimately," Thomas insisted. "And it is in and through the Eucharistic Christ that we find God, Light, and Wisdom."

Near the end of his life, when he was 48 or 49 years old, he considered all his work—the Summa, the hundreds of books, treatises, hymns, lectures, prayers—worthless "straw." Yet a Dominican testified that he had seen the statue of the Crucified detach an arm, embrace Thomas, and say, "You have written well of Me, Thomas. What reward would you have?" Thomas replied, "Nothing but Yourself, Lord." Could anyone have given an answer more full of loving wisdom?

Of all that he himself had become—Prodigy of Science, Doctor of the Church, Patron of Youth, of Schools-- the greatest is that of a human who ever strove to become more and more united to God through a rock-solid relationship with the Eucharist. We can do the same as we approach this table. This is the way our humanity is united to Christ's, the means by which our humanity will put on His divinity. And we ask: How did the Son of God live in our condition of humanity? How did He, clothed in borrowed humanity, live, act, speak? Then we pray for the grace to do likewise.