

ADVENT *and*  
CHRISTMAS  
WISDOM  
— *from* —  
SAINT THOMAS  
AQUINAS

Daily Scripture and Prayers  
Together With  
Saint Thomas Aquinas's Own Words

*Compiled by Andrew Carl Wisdom, OP*



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# Introduction

WHEN PEOPLE HEAR THE NAME Saint Thomas Aquinas, OP, they might conjure up an intimidating image of a ponderous, theological know-it-all who has an answer for everything. Certainly some have approached him in this way. But this picture of Aquinas does a disservice to him and to the Church he so zealously loved, nurtured, and defended.

I would invite another reading altogether. Thomas's spirit was characteristically one of being in conversation with God, himself, and the world, allowing the truth of things to surface out of that dynamic exchange. His instinct was not a knee-jerk appeal to authority but a careful search for the truth, respectfully weighing differing and sometimes opposing perspectives. For Aquinas, the starting and ending point were the same: the singular desire for God.

A popular story offers a fitting introduction to this spiritual and intellectual giant. Growing frustrated as he worked on the composition of a text on the Eucharist, Thomas stood before a crucifix and beseeched the Lord to render judgment. A voice said: "Thomas, you have written well of me. What would you like from me?"

"*Nil nisi te, Lord. Nil nisi te,*" Thomas replied. (Nothing but you, Lord. Nothing but you.) The desire that led to such an unparalleled output as a philosopher and theologian flowed from the religious commitment he had made as an obedient, gener-

ous, and compassionate Dominican friar. The living out of this desire made him more than simply one of the greatest and most creative minds in the history of Western civilization. Lifelong fidelity to the pursuit of his desire for God alone is what made him a saint, his greatest achievement.

Far from the dry scholastic that his formal style might suggest, Thomas was a deeply affective man, passionately and unequivocally in love with God. Thomas enjoyed an intimate relationship with God and sought to share it with others. It started as all great, enduring love affairs do, with a mysterious fascination upon being introduced to his future Beloved. As a small boy, Thomas surprised his Benedictine teachers again and again with the question: “But Master, what is God?”

To even begin to understand something of Aquinas, one has to appreciate the significance of this question as the one that ceaselessly haunted him throughout his life. This profound inquiry of the heart gave shape to Thomas’s Herculean output as both teacher and scholar and defines his remarkable and unprecedented legacy. It would become the defining purpose of his life: striving to describe who and what God is, and spending his life sharing that discovery with others through his preaching, teaching, and writing in the Dominican tradition.

Born the youngest of ten children in a well-to-do family at their castle near Aquino (between Rome and Naples) around the year 1225, Thomas was sent, at the age of five, to the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino. There he would be educated by the monks and, it was assumed, would one day rise to the prestigious position of abbot. At least this was the hope of his mother, Theodora, and his father, Landulf, a minor nobleman. But Thomas had other ideas.

After nine years, Thomas left the abbey in 1239 to take up

undergraduate studies at the University of Naples where he was exposed to the newly discovered thought of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. This would have a lasting and, for his detractors, unfortunate influence on him. At the university in 1243, Thomas met a new and exciting “ragtag” group of wandering religious known as the friar preachers and stunned his family by joining them. A generation before, a charismatic Spaniard named Saint Dominic de Guzman had gathered a band of preachers around him to respond to the spread of heresy and to promote a true understanding of the Catholic faith.

What captivated Thomas about the Dominicans was the attractive integration of a monastic rhythm of life, as he had known and loved it with the Benedictines, and a mission to the world that was concrete, active, and compelling. Contrary to anything the world had seen at that point, these white and black-robed friars traveled the highways and byways, living hand-to-mouth and holding all things in common like the early Apostles and, like the Apostles, preaching the Good News to all they met. The apostolic life of preaching for the salvation of souls proved too much for Thomas to resist. He joined the friars in 1244, a decision G. K. Chesterton said was akin to running away and “[marrying] a gypsy.”

The years from 1245 to 1273 saw Thomas, ever the generous, obedient friar, moving in response to his Order’s needs and traveling between Paris, Cologne, Rome, and Naples. In Cologne, his intellectual collaboration and friendship with Saint Albert the Great, OP, had its genesis. Albert made his famous prediction of “the dumb ox” (as his classmates called the shy, quiet student with the big six-foot frame): “You call him the Dumb Ox; I tell you this Dumb Ox shall bellow so loud that his bellowings will fill the world.”

On December 6, 1273, Thomas had just finished celebrating Mass on the Feast of Saint Nicholas when he had a mysterious, religious experience after which he stopped all of his writing and teaching. When his friend Reginald asked him why, Thomas simply explained: “Reginald, everything that I have written seems like so much straw compared to what has been revealed to me.”

Three months and a day after that event, Thomas died, but not before one final confession and act of faith. After receiving Communion, he prayed: “I am receiving thee, Price of my soul’s redemption: all my studies, my vigils, and my labors have been for love of thee. I have taught much and written much of the most sacred body, O Jesus Christ; I have taught and written in the faith of Jesus Christ and the holy Roman Church, to whose judgment I offer and submit everything.”

Pope John XXII canonized Thomas in 1323. Two hundred and forty-four years later, he was declared a doctor of the Church by Pope Pius V, himself a Dominican. Finally, in 1880, Pope Leo XIII appointed “the angelic doctor,” as Thomas became affectionately known, patron of all Catholic universities.

These selections from Thomas’s inspirational works will show him to be a practical spiritual guide and accessible spiritual director of the first order, as well as a noted scriptural commentator, poet, mystic, and philosopher. They are drawn from his works: *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, *Sermon on the Apostles’ Creed*, *The Three Greatest Prayers*, *Commentaries on the Commandments and Sacraments (God’s Greatest Gifts)*, and *The Compendium of Theology*, a synopsis of his masterpiece, *Summa Theologiae*, which is also referenced extensively. This last work was Thomas’s greatest contribution, because while other theologians stitched together helpful opinions to explain a theological

issue, Thomas, in the *Summa*, went further in weaving a rich tapestry of the whole. For him, these interconnecting threads weave a magnificent picture of a Creator who loves us with lavish abundance and who wants a dynamic relationship with us best likened to intimate human friendship. We are not merely God's sons and daughters; we are destined to be his beloved friends. God wants us to know that he is our deepest truth and that all the goods in the world are for our enjoyment as long as they lead us to him.

Aquinas has been the subject of many artists who generally show him in various postures of study, happily besieged by his beloved books. But Father Robert Staes, OP, offers an artistic rendering of Thomas that is as unprecedented as it is provocative. It is also the one I want to offer you as we begin this liturgical season brimming with hope-filled anticipation. It captures Thomas at the time of his mystical revelation, not pushing away his pen and books, but up on his feet, waving straw in both hands, dancing as though deliriously happy at what has been revealed to him. May we who walk through Advent and Christmas know something of that same dizzying delight!

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Advent—that period of great anticipatory joy—is a time of preparation for the celebration of Christ's arrival in Bethlehem as a helpless infant. In the Western liturgy, Advent begins four Sundays prior to December 25—the Sunday closest to November 30, which is the feast of Saint Andrew, one of Jesus' first disciples.

The annual commemoration of Christ's birth begins the Christmas cycle of the liturgical year—a cycle that runs from Christmas Eve to the Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany. In

keeping with the unfolding of the message of the liturgical year, this book is designed to be used during the entire period from the first Sunday of Advent to the end of the Christmas cycle.

The four weeks of Advent are often thought of as symbolizing the four different ways that Christ comes into the world: (1) at his birth as a helpless infant in Bethlehem; (2) at his arrival in the hearts of believers; (3) at his death; and (4) at his arrival on Judgment Day.

Because Christmas falls on a different day of the week each year, the fourth week of Advent is never really finished; it is abruptly, joyously, and solemnly abrogated by the annual coming again of Christ at Christmas. Christ's Second Coming will also one day abruptly interrupt our sojourn here on earth.

Since the calendar dictates the number of days in Advent, this book includes Scripture quotations and meditative excerpts from the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas for twenty-eight days. The daily readings make up Part I of this book. The reader may want to begin with Part I and, on Christmas Day, switch to Part II, which contains materials for the twelve days of Christmas. If there are any "extra" entries from Part I, these may be read by doubling up days or by reading two entries on weekends. Alternately, one may just skip those entries that do not fit within the Advent time frame for that particular year.

Each "day" in this book begins with the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Following that quotation is an excerpt from Scripture that is related in some way. Next is a prayer, also built on the ideas from the two preceding passages. Finally, an Advent or Christmas "action" is suggested as a way to apply the messages to one's daily life. A prayer meditation is offered on page 113 to read morning or evening before reflecting on Saint Thomas Aquinas's words each day.

PART I



*R*EADINGS FOR  
*A*DVENT



# DAY 1

The first point about eternal life is that man is united with God. For God himself is the reward and end of all our labors: *I am your protector and your supreme reward.* This union consists in seeing perfectly: *At present we are looking at a confused reflection in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face.*

Next it consists in perfect praise, according to the words of the prophet: *Joy and happiness will be found in it, thanksgiving and words of praise.*

It also consists in the complete satisfaction of desire, for there the blessed will be given more than they wanted or hoped for. The reason is that in this life no one can fulfill his longing, nor can any creature satisfy man's desire. Only God satisfies, he infinitely exceeds all other pleasures. That is why man can rest in nothing but God. As Augustine says: *You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart can find no rest until it rests in you.*

CREDO IN DEUM: OPUSCULA THEOLOGICA 2  
SERMON ON THE APOSTLES' CREED

*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand.*

JAMES 5:7–8

## PRAYER

Gracious God, why do I have to learn this lesson over and over again: to wait for you, that my heart will not rest until it rests in you? Since the moment of my conception, I was destined for union with you. That's why nothing and no one else can ultimately satisfy me. Unite my heart this day to yours that I may patiently rest in the lesson learned of your peace and grace. May my daily life mirror its promise of you.

## ADVENT ACTION

Advent is a time of patient waiting for the Lord to be reborn once again in our hearts. Today, identify two or three of the most common issues you wrestle with that continually hinder restful, patient waiting. Write them down and tape them to your mirror. This will remind you of your personal roadblocks to a peaceful union of your heart with God's each day.

