

Saint Thomas Aquinas

The Common Doctor

A source-first historical biography

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1 The Common Doctor and the Missing Man

No saint's teaching carries more official weight in the Catholic Church, and few saints' inner lives are so nearly invisible. When Leo XIII set out in 1879 to restore Christian philosophy, he wrote that "among the Scholastic Doctors, the chief and master of all towers Thomas Aquinas," who gathered his predecessors' doctrines "like the scattered members of a body" into one whole, and he exhorted the bishops of the world "to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas" (*Aeterni Patris* 17, 31). The Church's present law tells seminarians to penetrate the mysteries of salvation "especially with St. Thomas as a teacher" (canon 252 §3), and her universal Catechism quotes him on why God became man, on why the Eucharist can be grasped only by faith, and on why the Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers (CCC 460, 1381, 2763). Seven centuries of popes have returned to him by name—1323, 1567, 1879, 1914, 1923, 1965, 1974, 1998, 2010, 2025—an official reception without parallel among theologians.

The man behind the reception is strangely hard to reach. Thomas of Aquino wrote perhaps a hundred works and almost no sentences about himself: no autobiography, no personal letters of consequence, no diary of his quarrels. What survives of the life is institutional—where the university, the order, and the popes put him—plus a body of vivid biographical memory that was collected only when the Church began to consider his canonization, more than forty years after his death. The famous stories—the family that locked him up, the temptress and the firebrand, Albert's prophecy over the "dumb ox," the crucifix that spoke, the morning in 1273 when he put down his pen because everything he had written seemed as straw—all reach us through that late, loving, promotional dossier, and a truthful biography must say so every time.

This study therefore asks three questions. First, what can be established about the life itself—from Roccasecca and Monte Cassino through Naples, Paris, Cologne, Orvieto, Rome, and Naples again, to the silence of December 1273 and the death at Fossanova on 7 March 1274—when institutional record and canonization-era memory are kept in their separate registers? Second, how was the astonishing written work actually produced—under what commissions, in what institutions, against what opposition—and what did its author say, in the rare places he speaks, about what he thought he was doing? Third, what exactly has the Church's official reception claimed, act by act, from the condemnations of 1277 that brushed his theses, through the canonization of 1323 and the revocation of 1325, to the Doctor's title, the Leonine edition, and the modern legislation—and what has none of those acts ever claimed? Disagreements the sources cannot close—the birth year, the captivity's length, the witness chains of the famous anecdotes, the scope of the 1277 censure, the itinerary of the relics—are preserved, not resolved. The terminal appendix states the conventions, chronology, and limits that govern every page.

2 Roccasecca, Monte Cassino, Naples

2.1 A younger son of the house of Aquino

Thomas was born at or near the castle of Roccasecca, in the county of Aquino between Rome and Naples, into a family of the minor military nobility caught between empire and papacy: his father Landulf held the Aquino lands, his mother Theodora came from the Neapolitan aristocracy, and his brothers served the emperor Frederick II. The old encyclopedic tradition styles the parents count and countess; the family's actual rank was more modest, and nothing in the contemporary record fixes the household's inner life. Of the boy himself the sources preserve nothing contemporary at all: every childhood detail comes from the canonization dossier assembled two generations later.

No document states Thomas's birth year. Modern reconstruction from later age notices places it in 1224 or 1225—Benedict XVI's biographical catechesis says "between 1224 and 1225," the standard modern chronologies c. 1225, the Leonine Commission c. 1226—while the older literature argued for the end of 1225 or even 1227 (so the 1912 Catholic Encyclopedia, reporting Prümmer's preference). This study writes 1224/5 and treats every dependent age as approximate.

About the age of five, "according to the custom of the times" as the 1912 Encyclopedia puts it, Thomas was given to the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, a few miles from Roccasecca, as an oblate—a child placed in a monastery for rearing and, in the family's evident hope, for advancement: an Aquino abbot of Monte Cassino would have been worth a great deal to the house. The arrangement was ordinary, the ambition transparent, and neither tells us anything about the boy's own will. When war between Frederick II and the papacy engulfed the abbey in the 1230s, the young oblate was withdrawn, and in the later 1230s his family sent him to Naples, to the *studium generale* Frederick had

founded—the first state university of Europe—where, as Benedict XVI’s catechesis notes, he met the new Aristotle: the natural philosophy and metaphysics then flooding into Latin Christendom through translations, and still suspect in Paris.

2.2 The Dominican habit and the family’s answer

At Naples something happened that no Aquino had planned. The city housed a convent of the new Order of Preachers—mendicant friars, voluntarily poor, vowed to study and preaching, begging their bread—and Thomas, drawn by a Naples Dominican remembered as John of San Giuliano, took their habit: probably in 1244, when he was about nineteen (the older literature argued for a date between 1240 and August 1243; the discrepancy has never been closed). The choice was socially outrageous. A great family could place a son honorably as a Benedictine abbot; a begging friar was another matter. The order, which knew exactly what the family would think, moved the novice north, away from Naples.

The family answered with force. His brothers seized him on the road near Acquapendente, north of Rome, and brought him back to the family strongholds—the fortress of San Giovanni (Montesangiovanni) and Roccasecca—where he was held while mother and brothers worked to break the vocation. On the duration the witnesses disagree: the modern reconstructions say about a year; the older literature, following the canonization-era Lives, “nearly two years.” On the outcome they agree: Thomas would not put off the habit, spent the detention reading, and was at last released or allowed to escape—the Lives disagree even on that—returning to his order intact. To this detention the tradition attaches its most famous private scene, the temptress driven off with a firebrand and the angelic girdle of chastity; its witnesses are late and its chain runs through a single deathbed confidence, and it is examined with the other traditions in section 9. What history can keep is the public fact: a family prepared to imprison its own son for becoming a mendicant, and a son who outlasted it.

3 Paris and Cologne: The School of Albert

3.1 The student itinerary

Released to his order about 1245, Thomas was sent north for formation, and for the next seven years his address is Albert’s address. Albert of Lauingen—“the Great” already to his contemporaries—was the Dominicans’ most learned man, engaged in the audacious project of digesting the whole of Aristotle and the Arabic learning for Latin Christendom.

The exact itinerary of 1245–48 is reconstructed variously. The 1912 Encyclopedia has Thomas go first to Cologne, arriving “in 1244 or 1245,” then accompany Albert to Paris in 1245; the standard modern chronology (so the Stanford Encyclopedia) sends him to Paris 1245–48. Both agree on what matters: from 1248 to 1252 he was at Cologne, in the new Dominican *studium generale*, as Albert’s student. This study asserts the shared core and leaves the first leg open.

At Cologne the canonization-era Lives place the story that named him for posterity: the big, silent southerner whom his fellow students called “the dumb ox,” until Albert, having heard him defend a difficult thesis, declared—in the wording the 1912 Encyclopedia transmits—“We call this young man a dumb ox, but his bellowing in doctrine will one day resound throughout the world.” No record from Cologne or Paris in Thomas’s lifetime preserves the nickname or the prophecy; the anecdote is examined in section 9. What the documents do support is its premise: Albert judged the student exceptional, and it was on Albert’s nomination, in 1252, that Thomas returned to Paris to begin the theologian’s apprenticeship.

3.2 Bachelor of the Sentences

From 1252 to 1256 Thomas lectured at Paris as a bachelor, first on Scripture, then on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the standard theological textbook of the schools. His commentary—the *Scriptum super Sententiis*, his first major work—already shows the method that would define him: the calm division of every question, the fair statement of objections, the appeal to Aristotle as philosophical common coin, the refusal of rhetorical violence. In these same

years he wrote for his brethren the small treatise *De ente et essentia*, on being and essence, whose metaphysical distinctions became foundations of his system. The impersonality is total: nowhere in thousands of pages does the young master record a feeling about the family that had imprisoned him or the university that was about to try to bar his way.

4 Master amid the Mendicant War

4.1 William of Saint-Amour and the right to teach

Thomas became a master of theology in the spring of 1256, in the middle of the fiercest institutional fight of the century. The secular masters of Paris, led by William of Saint-Amour, were campaigning to expel the mendicant orders from the university's chairs: the friars, exempt from local obedience, answerable to pope and order, refusing endowed property, seemed to the seculars a corporate menace, and William's tract *De periculis novissimorum temporum* ("On the Perils of the Last Times") cast them as the false apostles of the end-time. The friars' student was licensed and incepted anyway, under papal protection, and answered the attack himself: his *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem* ("Against Those Who Assail the Worship of God and Religion," 1256) defended the friars' right to teach, to beg, and to exist. Rome settled the immediate war: Alexander IV condemned *De periculis* at Anagni on 5 October 1256 (so the 1912 Encyclopedia), and William was exiled from the university. The quarrel would return in Thomas's second regency; he answered it then with two further defenses of the religious life (*De perfectione spiritualis vitae*, *Contra retrahentes*).

4.2 First regency, 1256–59

For three years Thomas held one of the two Dominican chairs at Paris, performing the master's three offices—to lecture on Scripture, to dispute, to preach. From the disputations of these years come the great question-series *De veritate* (on truth, knowledge, providence); from the classroom, biblical commentary; and through it all the habits of production that made the later output possible: dictation to secretaries, parallel projects, the reuse of disputed questions in synthesis. The modern critical reconstructions (Torrell's above all, cited here at record level) have mapped that workshop in detail; this study asserts only its visible result—a rate and range of composition that contemporaries already found hard to believe, and that required an institution, not a hermit's desk. In 1259 the order recalled its master to Italy, and the second, most productive act of the life began.

5 The Italian Decade: Orvieto and Rome

5.1 Lector at Orvieto; the Catena aurea

From 1259/61 the order stationed Thomas in its Roman province—the sources name Anagni, Orvieto, Rome, Viterbo without a fully secure year-by-year map—and at Orvieto, where Urban IV held his court, he served as conventual lector, teacher of the ordinary friars. The papal court put him to work. For Urban he began the *Catena aurea*, the "golden chain": a continuous gloss on the four Gospels woven entirely from the Fathers, Greek as well as Latin, its Matthew portion dedicated to Urban himself (so the 1912 Encyclopedia, which cites the work as proof of his "prodigious memory"—a judgment about the sources he commanded, since the chain required hunting Greek patristic material then almost unknown in the West). At the same court he wrote *Contra errores Graecorum* on the disputed questions between the Latin and Greek churches—a work honest history must qualify: it depends on a dossier of patristic quotations supplied to him, some of them spurious, a limit of his sources rather than his honesty.

To Orvieto in 1264 belongs also the act that tied Thomas's name forever to the Eucharist: Urban IV's bull *Transiturus* instituted the feast of Corpus Christi for the whole Church, and tradition holds that the pope asked Thomas to compose its Mass and office—the texts from which come *Pange lingua*, *Lauda Sion*, and the rest of the Church's classic Eucharistic poetry.

The attribution deserves exactness. The papal-commission tradition is canonization-era; by 1912 the Encyclopedia could report it as “established beyond doubt” on Mandonnet’s authority; twentieth-century liturgical scholarship then complicated the question—Lambot’s study of the office’s origins (1942) and Gy’s re-examination (1982) frame the modern debate over how the Roman office relates to an earlier Liège office and what precisely Thomas composed or reworked. Those studies are identified here at bibliographic level only, so this study asserts the early tradition and the debate, not an item-by-item authorship. The Church’s own practice is instructively careful: when the Catechism quotes the hymn *Adoro te devote*, its footnote attributes it to “St. Thomas Aquinas (attr.)”—attributed—and no more (CCC 1381 note).

5.2 The office of the wise man

To this Italian period belongs the completion of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, the four-book exposition of Christian truth argued, wherever possible, on grounds a philosophical opponent could share. Its preface contains the nearest thing Thomas ever wrote to a personal manifesto. Taking up Hilary’s words, he makes them his own: aware that he owes his life’s “chief office” to God, he declares—“*Propositum nostrae intentionis est veritatem quam fides Catholica profitetur, pro nostro modulo manifestare, errores eliminando contrarios*”: the purpose of our intention is to make plain, according to our small measure, the truth that the Catholic faith professes, eliminating the contrary errors; and so, “taking confidence from God’s mercy to pursue the office of the wise man, though it exceeds our own powers” (“*Assumpta igitur ex divina pietate fiducia sapientis officium prosequendi, quamvis proprias vires excedat. . .*”), he begins (*Summa contra Gentiles* I.2, Leonine text as presented by the Corpus Thomisticum). It is the whole man in two sentences: the work is an office, the measure is small, the confidence is borrowed.

5.3 Rome: the Summa begun

About 1265 the order set Thomas over its house of studies at Santa Sabina in Rome, with young Dominicans to form—and it was for them, not for the schools’ virtuosi, that he conceived his masterwork. The *Summa theologiae* announces itself in its prologue as a book for beginners: an ordering of the whole of sacred doctrine, briefly and clearly, “as the matter will allow,” stripped of the useless questions, digressions, and repetitions that (he says) weary students in the existing books. The plan is a single arc, stated at the head of the second question in words Benedict XVI’s catechesis on the *Summa* quotes: “we shall treat: (1) Of God; (2) Of the rational creature’s advance towards God; (3) Of Christ, Who as man, is our way to God”—all things from God, all things back to God, through Christ.

The first article states the founding claim of the whole, in the sentence this study reproduces from the Leonine edition: “*Respondeo dicendum quod necessarium fuit ad humanam salutem, esse doctrinam quandam secundum revelationem divinam, praeter philosophicas disciplinas, quae ratione humana investigantur*”—“It was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason” (*Summa theologiae* I.1.1, Leonine ed., vol. 4, 1888; English Dominican translation). Reason keeps its whole domain; revelation is necessary because man is ordered to an end that exceeds it. On that double affirmation—the integrity of nature and reason, the primacy and gratuity of grace and revelation—the entire structure stands, and Benedict XVI’s catecheses present exactly this mutual friendship of faith and reason as Thomas’s permanent achievement. The First Part was written in Italy; the immense Second Part, on human action, virtue, law, and grace, belongs mostly to the second Paris regency; the Third, on Christ and the sacraments, to Paris and Naples; and the whole would never be finished.

6 The Second Paris Regency, 1268/69–1272

The order sent Thomas back to Paris for an almost unprecedented second regency, and into a triple war. On one flank the secular masters had renewed the assault on the mendicants’ place in the university, and Thomas wrote his later defenses of the religious state. On the other flank stood the radical Aristotelians of the arts faculty—the “Averroists” of the later textbooks, Siger of Brabant at their head—whose reading of Aristotle through his great Arabic commentator yielded conclusions no Christian could hold: one shared intellect for all men, a world necessarily eternal. Thomas fought them with their own weapons. His treatise *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas* (c. 1270) argues on strictly philosophical grounds that the intellect is each man’s own—for if thinking were done for us by another substance, “this man” would not think, merit, or be responsible at all—and ends with a rare flash of personal heat, challenging his opponent to answer in writing rather than to boys in corners. In December 1270 the bishop of

Paris, Stephen (Étienne) Tempier, condemned a first list of propositions drawn from the radical arts teaching (the Stanford Encyclopedia’s account of the Paris condemnations records censures by Tempier in 1270 and 1277); Thomas’s own position was harder to place, for he was fighting on a third front at once: against conservative theologians for whom the Aristotelian instrument itself—one substantial form in man, a philosophically defensible account of nature’s integrity—smelled of the same fire. In the middle of the battlefield he kept producing at a rate that still defines the standard chronologies’ problems: the Second Part of the *Summa*, commentaries on Aristotle work by work, disputed questions *De malo* and *De virtutibus*, the great Pauline and Johannine lectures. In 1272 the order called him home to Naples to found a provincial *studium* of theology, and the Paris chapter of his life closed.

7 Naples, the Silence, and Fossanova

7.1 The last teaching year

At Naples in 1272–73 Thomas organized the province’s theology school, lectured, and pressed on with the Third Part of the *Summa*—God incarnate, the Passion, the sacraments, reaching the Eucharist and penance. In Lent 1273 he did something the professional theologian was not required to do: he preached to the people of Naples, in their own tongue, a course of instructions on the Creed, the Our Father, the Ten Commandments, and the Hail Mary—catecheses whose plan, as Benedict XVI observed in presenting them, is recognizably the plan of the Church’s present Catechism: what Christians believe, pray, and do. To these Naples months the canonization dossier attaches the most famous of the visionary stories, the crucifix in the chapel of St. Nicholas that spoke—“Thou hast written well of me, Thomas; what reward wilt thou have?” “None other than Thyself, Lord”—examined with the other traditions in section 9.

7.2 6 December 1273

On the morning of St. Nicholas’s day, 6 December 1273, Thomas celebrated Mass, and then stopped. He wrote no more, dictated no more; the *Summa* halts in the questions on penance. To his companion Reginald of Piperno, who pressed him to return to work, he gave the answer the whole world knows in the form the old Encyclopedia renders: “I can do no more. Such secrets have been revealed to me that all I have written now appears to be of little value”—or, in the wording modern accounts prefer, that all of it seemed to him “like straw.”

The witness chain deserves to be stated exactly, because the remark has become the most quoted sentence Thomas never wrote down. The event—the cessation itself—is secure: the unfinished *Summa* is its permanent evidence, and every strand of the tradition presupposes it. The words rest on one deposition: Bartholomew of Capua, high official of the kingdom of Naples, testifying at the canonization inquiry of 1319, forty-six years later—and not as an eyewitness. He recounted what had come to him through Dominican intermediaries from Reginald, to whom the words were spoken (the standard modern reconstructions print the chain; this study verified it at reported level, the process text itself remaining uninspected). The English renderings differ—“straw,” “of little value”—because they translate a second-hand Latin memory. What the historian may assert: Thomas stopped; his intimates connected the stopping with an overwhelming experience at Mass; the “straw” formulation is how the canonization generation remembered his own explanation. What no one can verify: the sentence’s exact wording, or the inner event it gestures at. This study certifies neither a mystical grace nor a medical collapse; the sources permit both vocabularies and settle neither.

7.3 The road to Lyon and the death at Fossanova

Gregory X had convoked a general council at Lyon for 1 May 1274, to attempt reunion with the Greek church, and ordered Thomas to attend, bringing his *Contra errores Graecorum* (so the 1912 Encyclopedia). Obedient, the sick man set out in January 1274 with Reginald. On the road he failed: the canonization-era memory tells of a blow to the head against a fallen tree, then collapse near Terracina; he was carried to the castle of Maenza, home of his niece Francesca, and, sensing the end, asked to die in a religious house. The nearest was the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova. There, the tradition continues, he dictated at the monks’ request a brief commentary on the Song of Songs—if so, his last teaching, and it does not survive; there, before receiving the Viaticum, he made the profession the dossier preserves, submitting all he had written “to the judgment and correction of the Holy Roman Church, in

whose obedience I now pass from this life.” He died in the early hours of 7 March 1274, aged about forty-nine. The date is as secure as any in his life; the deathbed speeches are received tradition, recorded here as such. The Cistercians buried him before their high altar, and kept him—a possession that would itself become a story (section 9).

8 Condemnation, Canonization, Revocation

8.1 7 March 1277

Three years to the day after the death at Fossanova—the coincidence of dates is arithmetic, not a documented intention—Stephen Tempier, bishop of Paris, condemned 219 philosophical and theological propositions, forbidding them to be taught in the arts faculty. The document named no one, speaking only of “certain scholars,” and its principal targets were the radical Aristotelians Thomas had himself fought. But its net was wide, and whether it deliberately caught the dead Dominican master has been argued ever since.

The relation of the 1277 articles to Thomas’s theses must be bounded honestly, and the modern specialist literature, as digested in the checked Stanford Encyclopedia entries, is the fairest available summary. On one side, Wippel’s judgment that “some of the positions were taken from his writings” and that his teaching was implicated in the condemnation; on the other, Hisette’s article-by-article argument that most censured propositions represent arts-faculty readings, not Thomas’s own doctrine. Two adjacent facts are documented: in the same weeks Tempier’s commission censured fifty-one propositions of the theologian Giles of Rome (concluded before 28 March 1277); and, according to Wielockx’s reconstruction, a distinct process against Thomas’s teaching was begun and then halted when, during the papal vacancy of 1277, the curia ordered Tempier to stop. Days later in England, the Dominican archbishop Robert Kilwardby prohibited at Oxford theses that—as the 1912 “Thomism” article already put it—embodied “doctrines taught by St. Thomas,” notably on the unity of substantial form and individuation. This study therefore asserts: the 1277 acts did not name or condemn Thomas; several articles touch or seem to touch his theses; contemporaries on both sides believed his doctrine was at stake; and the exact intended overlap remains a live scholarly disagreement, preserved here rather than resolved.

The order fought back. Albert, old as he was, is remembered as hastening to Paris to defend his dead student (so the 1912 “Thomism” article); Dominican general chapters from 1278 onward imposed and then required the defense of Thomas’s doctrine within the order; and a generation of Dominican *correctoria* answered the Franciscan “correctories” of Thomas line by line.

8.2 The inquiries and the canonization of 1323

By the 1310s the cause of the friar buried at Fossanova was moving. John XXII received the petition of the Dominicans and the kingdom of Naples; William of Tocco, promoter of the cause, gathered the life and miracles into his *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino* (composed 1318–23, the oldest substantial biography); a first inquiry heard sworn witnesses at Naples in 1319, a second at Fossanova in 1321—the depositions that preserve, at their various removes, nearly everything personal we think we know about Thomas, from the captivity stories to Bartholomew of Capua’s account of the last months. On 18 July 1323 John XXII canonized Thomas at Avignon. The act’s object should be stated precisely: canonization declared the man’s sanctity; it did not adjudicate the Paris articles, authenticate the anecdotes of the dossier, or define the doctrine.

Paris drew the consequence anyway. In 1324/25—the older literature says 1324, modern accounts 14 February 1325, the discrepancy probably a matter of old-style reckoning and left open here—Stephen Bourret, Tempier’s successor, revoked his predecessor’s condemnation insofar as it touched or was asserted to touch the teaching of the new saint, declaring (in the words the 1912 “Thomism” article transmits) “that blessed confessor and excellent doctor, Thomas Aquinas, had never believed, taught, or written anything contrary to the Faith or good morals.” The revocation was as bounded as the censure: it freed Thomas’s theses at Paris; it did not condemn his old opponents, and the Oxford prohibitions were never formally the Paris bishop’s to undo.

9 Traditions Examined

Everything vivid in Thomas’s biography comes from one archive: the canonization dossier—the inquiries of 1319 and 1321 and the Lives of William of Tocco (1318–23), Bernard Gui, and Peter Calo (c. 1300)—assembled by devoted men, for the purpose of proving sanctity, forty to ninety years after the events of the youth they describe. Such evidence establishes memory, cult, and the shape of a reputation; it cannot, by itself, backdate a private scene to 1244. This section examines the memorable traditions one by one, without credulity and without ridicule.

9.1 The temptress and the girdle

The story: during the family detention his brothers introduced a woman into his room to seduce the novice; Thomas snatched a burning brand from the fire and drove her out, marking a cross on the door; asleep, he was girded by angels with—in the wording the 1912 Encyclopedia transmits—“the girdle of perpetual virginity.” The chain: the tradition itself says Thomas told no one but Reginald, and Reginald only near the end; every witness is thus canonization-era, and the scene reaches the record as a reported deathbed confidence. The status: the detention is historical; the bedroom scene is unverifiable and its literary shape—trial, victory, heavenly investiture—is the shape hagiography loves. Its reception, however, is real history: the “angelic warfare” of the story made Thomas a patron of chastity, and the girdle a devotional emblem. This study asserts the detention, reports the story with its chain, and claims nothing about the relic traditions attached to the girdle.

9.2 The dumb ox

The Cologne anecdote (section above) has the same profile: late witnesses, no contemporary record, a prophecy remembered after its spectacular fulfillment—the classic form of retrospective master-recognizes-genius stories. It may preserve a real nickname and a real judgment of Albert’s; it cannot be verified; and its function in the Lives is transparent, converting the saint’s youthful silence into foreordained greatness. This study’s searches found no witness earlier than the canonization generation (a bounded negative result).

9.3 The straw remark

The witness chain of 6 December 1273 is set out beside the event itself (with the cessation secure and the wording second-hand); it belongs in this audit as the tradition’s most instructive case: a saying universally quoted, resting on one sworn but hearsay deposition of 1319, whose English forms disagree because the Latin memory was itself a report. The remark’s fame is modern as well as medieval—the Stanford Encyclopedia quotes it, Benedict XVI retold it—and none of that reception adds a witness.

9.4 The speaking crucifix and the levitations

The Naples story—the sacristan’s vision of the friar raised in the air before the crucifix in St. Nicholas’s chapel, and the voice: “Thou hast written well of me, Thomas”—is canonization-era memory, and the 1912 Encyclopedia honestly notes that “similar declarations are said to have been made at Orvieto and at Paris.” The multiplication is the audit’s datum: the scene was how the tradition expressed its conviction that the doctrine and the sanctity were one thing, the truth of the books certified by the Christ they describe. Benedict XVI retold the story in 2010 as a spiritual exemplum; a papal catechesis hands on the tradition and does not convert it into an eyewitness record. This study narrates it as the cause’s memory, invents no natural explanation, and certifies no miracle.

9.5 The restless corpse: relic history

The posthumous history of Thomas’s body is documented in layers of very unequal strength.

- **Secure core.** Death and burial at Fossanova, 1274; the Cistercians’ jealous custody of so valuable a grave; and the translation of the remains to the Dominicans of Toulouse, arriving 28 January 1369 (the 1912 Encyclopedia;

the medieval custody conflicts and the 1369 ceremonies are the subject of Räsänen’s 2017 monograph, cited at record level). The canonization-era sources already tell of exhumations and translations within Fossanova, and later accounts of the Cistercian custody include grim expedients—separation of the head, even boiling of the remains—which this study reports only as tradition-history at the reported level of the modern scholarship, not as verified events.

- **Reported extensions.** During the French Revolution the relics are reported to have been moved from the suppressed Jacobins church to the basilica of Saint-Sernin, and in 1974, for the seventh centenary, returned to the Jacobins, where the shrine now stands (current public accounts checked 2026-07-25; no official custodial document was checked, and no current authentication is asserted).
- **Competing claims.** Head and arm relics are claimed elsewhere—the checked modern account names San Domenico Maggiore in Naples; other head traditions attach to Priverno, near Fossanova. This study adjudicates none of them. The cult, it should be said plainly, does not depend on the adjudication: the Church honors the saint, not a forensically certified skeleton.

9.6 Iconography

The standard image—the corpulent friar with book, sun or star on the breast, sometimes a dove at the ear, often a chained Averroes beneath the feet—is reception, not portraiture: no verified life-portrait exists, and the attributes encode the reputation (doctrine radiating from the breast, inspiration, the defeated adversary). The ox and the girdle entered art from the anecdotes audited above; the images are evidence for the centuries that painted them, and this study uses them for nothing else.

10 Reception: From Doctor to Common Doctor

10.1 Doctor of the Church, 1567

The medieval schools’ verdict was ratified by the Counter-Reformation papacy: in 1567 Pius V declared Thomas a Doctor of the universal Church (so the 1912 Encyclopedia)—the first addition to the ancient four Western doctors—and a Dominican pope’s act sealed what the order’s chapters had long required. Leo XIII’s later encyclical records the Tridentine emblem of the same standing: that the fathers of Trent ordered “the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas” laid on the altar of the council “together with sacred Scripture and the decrees of the supreme Pontiffs,” from which to draw counsel and answers (*Aeterni Patris* 22)—a ceremonial honor whose report is itself part of the reception, and which ranked a theologian’s book with the sources of the Church’s judgments.

10.2 Aeterni Patris and the Leonine edition

On 4 August 1879 Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* on the restoration of Christian philosophy “according to the mind of St. Thomas”—to be distinguished carefully from Pius IX’s 1868 bull of the same opening words, which convoked the First Vatican Council and has nothing to do with Thomas. The encyclical’s claims are large but specific: among the scholastics Thomas is “the chief and master of all”; he “collected together and cemented” the scattered doctrines of his predecessors “like the scattered members of a body”; and the bishops are exhorted “to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas, and to spread it far and wide for the defense and beauty of the Catholic faith” (*Aeterni Patris* 17, 31). Leo matched the program with institutions: by his direction a critical edition of the complete works was set on foot (the 1912 Encyclopedia records his *motu proprio* of 18 January 1880 for the *Contra Gentiles* volumes, and the edition has borne his name—the Leonine—ever since, its commission still at work today); and by a Brief of 4 August 1880 he named Thomas patron of all Catholic universities, academies, colleges, and schools.

10.3 The twentieth-century legislation

The Leonine program hardened into law. Pius X’s *motu proprio Doctoris Angelici* (29 June 1914) ordered that the principles and main teachings of Thomas be held in the philosophy schools of Italy (the act is used here as reported: it is not posted on the Holy See’s site, and this study checked it through the preamble of the decree it occasioned and

through Pius XI's citation); a month later, 27 July 1914, the Sacred Congregation of Studies approved twenty-four theses presented as the core of Thomas's philosophy. The 1917 Code of Canon Law wrote the master into the seminary curriculum: professors are to treat philosophy and theology "according to the method, doctrine, and principles of the Angelic Doctor" (canon 1366 §2, quoted here as cited in *Studiorum Ducem*). Pius XI's *Studiorum Ducem* (29 June 1923, sixth centenary of the canonization) crowned the titles: Thomas should be called not only the Angelic but "the Common or universal Doctor of the Church"—*Doctor Communis*.

The Second Vatican Council kept the name and softened the exclusivity: seminarians are to penetrate the mysteries of salvation speculatively "under the guidance of St. Thomas" (*Optatam totius* 16), and the 1983 Code translates the same rule: dogmatic theology is to be learned "especially with St. Thomas as a teacher" (canon 252 §3). For the seventh centenary of the death Paul VI wrote the apostolic letter *Lumen Ecclesiae* (20 November 1974, to the Dominican master general Vincent de Couesnongle), the fullest modern statement of what the Church intends in commending Thomas: not the canonization of every thesis, but the recognition of his doctrine as an eminently faithful expression of her teaching and of his method—confident reason inside confident faith—as permanently exemplary; the letter equally tells Thomists that fidelity means continuing the inquiry, not embalming it (paraphrased from the Italian text at the Holy See's site). John Paul II's *Fides et ratio* (1998) restates the boundary exactly: "the Church has been justified in consistently proposing Saint Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology" (n. 43)—a master and model, not an oracle—and calls him an "apostle of the truth" (n. 44).

10.4 The Catechism's Thomas and the present standing

The universal Catechism quotes Thomas at load-bearing points: on the purpose of the Incarnation—"The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods" (CCC 460, citing *Opusc.* 57)—on Eucharistic faith, where the presence of Christ's body and blood "cannot be apprehended by the senses, but only by faith" (CCC 1381, citing *Summa theologiae* III.75.1, with the hymn *Adoro te devote* quoted as attributed); and on prayer: "The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers. . . In it we ask, not only for all the things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired" (CCC 2763, citing II-II.83.9). Benedict XVI devoted three general audiences to Thomas (2, 16, and 23 June 2010): the life, the harmony of faith and reason, and the *Summa's* architecture, ending with the Naples catecheses whose believe-pray-live plan the Catechism itself follows. And the reception continues to move: on 1 November 2025 Leo XIV, declaring John Henry Newman a Doctor of the Church, named him co-patron—together with Thomas Aquinas—of the Church's educational mission (reported from the checked press account of the act; the pairing itself is the newest sentence in a seven-century file).

Official reception is bounded by its objects, and the acts above claim less than their fame suggests. Canonization declared sanctity; the Doctor title and the curricular canons commend doctrine and method for the Church's schools; *Aeterni Patris* commends a philosophical patrimony; none of these acts asserts the historicity of any anecdote, authenticates any relic, fixes the birth year, or makes every thirteenth-century opinion—his inherited natural science, his acceptance of coercive practice against heretics that his century took for granted—part of the Church's faith. *Lumen Ecclesiae* and *Fides et ratio* say this almost in so many words: the commendation is of principles, method, and exemplary sanctity of intellect. This study reports the acts to their stated objects and no further.

11 Conclusion: The Office of the Wise Man

Strip the life to what the evidence best supports and it is still extraordinary. A younger son of a minor military house, destined by his family for a great abbey, chose instead the begging friars, outlasted his own kin's imprisonment, and was formed by the one master in Europe big enough to form him. In roughly twenty-five working years, inside three institutions—an order, a university, a papal court—he produced a body of teaching so large, so calm, and so ordered that the Church eventually made it a curriculum: Scripture lectures, disputed questions, Aristotle commentaries, the golden chain of the Fathers, two *summae*—one of them written, by its own prologue, for beginners. The rare sentences in which he speaks for himself all say the same thing: the work was an office, the truth was the Catholic faith's, the measure was "our small measure," the confidence borrowed from God's mercy. Then, one December morning, the most productive pen in Christendom stopped by its own choice, and three months later its owner died on the road to a council he had been ordered to serve, submitting everything he had written to the Church's correction.

The reception is the second life, and it is better documented than the first. Within three years, articles that touched or seemed to touch his theses were condemned at Paris and Oxford; within fifty, the same Paris see revoked its censure of “that blessed confessor and excellent doctor”; within three hundred, his book lay on the altar at Trent; and the modern papacy, from *Aeterni Patris* to *Fides et ratio*, settled on a formula that is both immense and careful: master of thought, model of method, Common Doctor—not oracle. The famous stories, this study has argued, must be held in their own register: late, promotional, unverifiable, and historically eloquent about the memory of the man—a silence mistaken for dullness, a chastity worth an angelic investiture, a doctrine worth a voice from the crucifix, a life’s work worth exactly one sentence of self-assessment, and that sentence a renunciation.

What remains open is stated in the appendix: the birth year, the captivity, the chains of the anecdotes, the intended reach of 1277, the bones. What is closed is the shape of the whole. Thomas defined wisdom’s office as making plain the truth that faith professes; his Church, after seven centuries of acts each bounded and each cumulative, has judged that he performed it—and on the one occasion he was asked, before the crucifix of the tradition’s telling, what he wanted for it, the answer the dossier remembered is the only sentence of the legend that no historian needs to correct: nothing, Lord, except yourself.

A Scope, Chronology, and Evidence

A.1 Identity, names, and range

Subject: Thomas of Aquino (Thomas Aquinas; Tommaso d’Aquino), Dominican friar, priest, master of theology, saint, Doctor of the Church (“Angelic Doctor”; “Common Doctor”). Whole-life range used in this study: born 1224/5 at or near Roccasecca in the county of Aquino (older reconstructions run to 1227; no source fixes the year), died at the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova, 7 March 1274. Principal places: Roccasecca and the Aquino lands, Monte Cassino, Naples, Paris, Cologne, Orvieto, Rome (Santa Sabina), Fossanova; Toulouse in relic history. No contemporary vital record, personal archive, or self-narrative exists; the documentary base is the authenticated corpus (impersonal by genre), institutional and papal acts, and canonization-era memory.

A.2 Reader, question, and thesis boundary

Written for a serious general reader, student, or researcher who wants one coherent, evidence-controlled life. The governing questions are stated in the opening section. The organizing synthesis—a thin personal record beneath a vast work and a vaster reception, each to be read in its own register—is historical, not ecclesiastical. This study does not adjudicate the birth year, the detention’s length or legal form, the historicity of the canonization dossier’s private scenes, the intended scope of the 1277 censures, the authorship detail of the Corpus Christi texts, the authenticity or location of relics, or any doctrinal question; it claims no theological, canonical, liturgical, or rights review and no ecclesiastical approval.

A.3 Corpus and citation conventions

Thomas’s works are cited by conventional Latin titles and standard internal divisions (part, question, article). The *Summa theologiae* I.1.1 corpus opening is quoted from the Leonine edition (vol. 4, Rome, 1888) as centrally verified in this repository’s source library; *Summa contra Gentiles* I.2 is quoted briefly from the emended Leonine text in the Corpus Thomisticum web presentation; English wording of the *Summa* follows the public-domain English Dominican translation (1920) as transcribed at New Advent; the *Summa*’s general prologue is paraphrased, no verbatim witness having been successfully retrieved at the checked pages (a bounded negative result). The plan-of-work quotation at I.2 is given as cited in Benedict XVI’s audience of 23 June 2010. Biographical wording attributed to the canonization tradition (girdle, dumb ox, straw, crucifix, deathbed) is quoted in the renderings of the 1912 Catholic Encyclopedia, identified as such; the underlying process texts and Lives were identified but not inspected. All web sources were checked on 2026-07-25 (URLs in the References).

A.4 Evidence classes

Class	Meaning
A	Thomas’s own works at exact loci: authenticated but impersonal by genre; a treatise records doctrine, not biography, and reported lectures and dedications carry their transmission limits.
N	Contemporary external witness: university, order, and papal acts bearing on Thomas in his lifetime (used here through the reporting literature, so ordinarily N-through-K).
E	Early received tradition: the canonization inquiries (Naples 1319; Fossanova 1321) and the canonization-era Lives (Tocco, Gui, Calo)—sworn but late, promotional, and often second-hand; the class establishes memory and cult, not eyewitness record.
L	Later tradition: relic itineraries, iconography, devotional elaboration, school legend.
M	Official ecclesial reception, limited to each act’s object: 1323 canonization; 1325 Paris revocation; 1567 Doctor declaration; <i>Aeterni Patris</i> (1879); 1880 patronage; 1914 acts; canon 1366 §2 (1917); <i>Studiorum Duce</i> (1923); <i>Optatam totius</i> 16; <i>Lumen Ecclesiae</i> (1974); canon 252 §3 (1983); CCC 460, 1381, 2763; <i>Fides et ratio</i> 43–44; the 2010 audiences; the 2025 co-patronage act (reported).
K	Named modern critical reconstruction at its stated inspection ceiling: the Stanford Encyclopedia entries (checked); the 1912 Catholic Encyclopedia articles (checked; reception-era); Torrell, Grabmann, Räsänen, Le Brun-Gouanvic, Lambot, Gy (publisher or bibliographic records only; not inspected).
S	Source-grounded project synthesis, never attributed to a source (e.g. the observation that 7 March 1277 fell on the third anniversary of the death).

A.5 Chronology

Dates are claims with stated bases; competing reconstructions are preserved throughout.

Date	Event	Basis	Status
1224/5	Birth at or near Roccasecca (older literature: 1225 or 1227)	Modern reconstruction from age notices (K); Benedict XVI (M); CE 1912 (K)	Disputed range; unresolved
c. 1230/31	Oblate at Monte Cassino, about age five	Canonization-era memory as received (E via K/M)	Approximate
later 1230s	Student at Naples (Frederick II’s studium); first Aristotle	CE 1912 (c. 1236) (K); Benedict XVI (M)	Approximate
c. 1244	Dominican habit at Naples	SEP (age about 19) (K); CE 1912 argues 1240–43 (K)	Event secure; year disputed
1244/45	Seized near Acquapendente; detained at San Giovanni/Roccasecca about a year (older literature: nearly two)	Canonization-era memory (E); SEP and CE reconstructions (K)	Event secure; duration disputed
1245–48	Studies under Albert: Paris first (modern) or Cologne first (older literature)	SEP vs CE 1912 (K)	Period secure; itinerary open
1248–52	Cologne studium under Albert; “dumb ox” placed here by the Lives	SEP, CE (K); anecdote E/L	Period secure
1252–56	Paris bachelor; Scriptum on the Sentences; De ente et essentia	SEP (K)	Secure as period
spring 1256	Master of theology; Contra impugnantes; De periculis condemned 5 Oct 1256	SEP; CE 1912 (K/M)	Secure
1256–59	First Paris regency; De veritate	SEP (K)	Secure
1259/61–65	Italy; Orvieto lector; Catena aurea begun; Contra errores Graecorum; 1264 Transitus and Corpus Christi office question	CE 1912 (K); office attribution audited	Period secure; details approximate
1265–68	Rome, Santa Sabina studium; Summa theologiae begun	CE 1912, SEP (K)	Secure as period

Date	Event	Basis	Status
1268/69–72	Second Paris regency; Averroist crisis; De unitate intellectus (c. 1270); Tempier’s first censure (1270)	SEP entries (K)	Secure as period
1272–73	Naples studium; Third Part of the Summa; Lent 1273 catecheses	SEP (K); Benedict XVI (M)	Secure
6 Dec. 1273	Cessation of writing after Mass; “straw” remark chain: Reginald to intermediaries to Bartholomew of Capua (deposition 1319)	Unfinished Summa (A); deposition at reported level (E); CE, SEP renderings (K)	Cessation secure; wording second-hand
Jan.–Mar. 1274	Journey toward Lyon; collapse; Maenza; Fossanova; deathbed traditions	CE 1912 reporting the dossier (E via K)	Journey and death secure; details E/L
7 Mar. 1274	Death at Fossanova; burial there	CE, SEP (K); all reception acts (M)	Secure
7 Mar. 1277	Tempier condemns 219 propositions at Paris; relation to Thomas’s theses disputed (Wippel vs Hissette; Wielockx’s halted process); Giles of Rome censured before 28 Mar. 1277	SEP “Condemnation of 1277” (K)	Act secure; scope disputed
1277	Kilwardby’s Oxford prohibitions touch unity of form and individuation	CE “Thomism”; SEP (K)	Year secure; day not asserted
1278–88	Dominican chapters impose and defend the doctrine	CE articles (K)	Reported
1319; 1321	Canonization inquiries at Naples and Fossanova	Fontes vitae identified at catalog level; modern reports (K)	Reported; process texts uninspected
18 Jul. 1323	Canonization by John XXII	CE 1912 (K/M)	Secure
1324/25	Bourret revokes the Paris censure as it touches Thomas	CE “Thomism” (1324) (K); modern accounts 14 Feb. 1325	Act secure; date open
28 Jan. 1369	Translation of the remains to Toulouse	CE 1912 (K); Räsänen (record level)	Secure as reported
1567	Doctor of the Church (Pius V)	CE 1912 (K/M)	Secure
1789–1974	Revolution-era transfer to Saint-Sernin; 1974 return to the Jacobins	Current public accounts (reported)	Reported; unverified
4 Aug. 1879	Aeterni Patris (Leo XIII; distinct from Pius IX’s 1868 bull)	Vatican text (M, checked)	Secure
1880	Leonine edition ordered (18 Jan.); patron of Catholic schools (4 Aug.)	CE 1912 (K/M)	Secure as reported
1914–23	Doctoris Angelici (reported); 24 theses (27 Jul. 1914, checked); canon 1366 §2 (1917); Studiorum Ducem (1923, checked)	Congregation decree; Vatican Latin text (M)	Secure
1965–2025	Optatam totius 16; Lumen Ecclesiae (1974); canon 252 §3 (1983); CCC citations; Fides et ratio 43–44 (1998); Benedict XVI’s audiences (2010); Leo XIV’s co-patronage act (2025, reported)	Vatican texts (M, checked); 2025 act reported	Secure; 2025 at reported level

A.6 Method, limits, and negative results

Earliest controlled evidence governs; witnesses separated by decades are never silently merged; the canonization dossier is used as evidence of memory and cult, with chains stated wherever the record states them. Geographic and linguistic limits: the study reads English, Latin, and Italian web witnesses as identified; no manuscript, archival, or archaeological research was undertaken; the Fontes vitae, the process texts, and the named modern monographs (Torrell, Grabmann, Räsänen, Le Brun-Gouanvic, Lambot, Gy, Foster) were identified but not inspected beyond publisher or bibliographic records, and nothing from them is asserted beyond that ceiling. Bounded negative results, from checks of 2026-07-25: no pre-1300 witness of the “dumb ox” anecdote located; no verbatim witness of the Summa’s general prologue retrieved at the checked pages; the Latin of the straw remark unverified (an archive.org full-text query against the located Fontes scan failed at the API level); *Doctoris Angelici* not located on the Holy See’s site;

the Leonine Commission’s page checked states its charge but not its founding year. These are bounded, correctable search results, not proofs of absence. Mutable online sources (vatican.va, New Advent, Corpus Thomisticum, SEP, publisher and press sites) were used as checked on 2026-07-25; mutable custodial and institutional claims are asserted only at reported level as of that date.

A.7 Rights and review state

Project prose is original. Quotations follow: the public-domain 1912 Catholic Encyclopedia; the public-domain English Dominican translation of the *Summa* (1920) at New Advent; brief Latin loci from the Leonine text (1888; public domain) as centrally verified or as presented by the Corpus Thomisticum (database presentation © 2019 Fundación Tomás de Aquino; quoted briefly with attribution); Vatican web texts quoted briefly with attribution and otherwise paraphrased; the Stanford Encyclopedia quoted in brief attributed snippets; the 24-theses decree in the translation hosted at franciscan-archive.org as identified. Foster’s 1959 documents volume is in copyright and is not quoted. No image is reproduced. This publication has received internal editorial checking only: no independent specialist, theological, liturgical, canonical, or rights review, and no ecclesiastical approval, is claimed.

B References

All web sources were accessed and checked on 2026-07-25. Citations in the text use conventional titles and standard internal divisions.

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- *Summa theologiae*, English: *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd rev. ed. (1920; public domain), as transcribed at New Advent (<https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1001.htm> for I.1); the general prologue is paraphrased in this study, not quoted (see appendix).
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