

*A*DVENT *and*
CHRISTMAS
*W*ISDOM
— *from* —
SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

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ADVENT *and*
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AQUINAS

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

Compiled by Andrew Carl Wisdom, OP



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Contents

Introduction

~ vii ~

How to Use This Book

~ xi ~

Part I

Readings for Advent

~ 1 ~

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Part II

Readings for the Christmas Season

~ 77 ~

Part III

Daily Meditation

~ 111 ~

Sources and Acknowledgments

~ 115 ~



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 bellowsings 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



READINGS FOR
ADVENT

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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.

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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.





DAY 2

The reason why we must hope in God is chiefly the fact that we belong to Him, as effect belongs to cause. God does nothing in vain, but always acts for a definite purpose....

A cause that operates intellectually not only confers on the effect, in the act of producing it, all that is required for the result intended, but also, when the product is finished, controls its use, which is the end of the object. Thus a smith, in addition to forging a knife, has the disposition of its cutting efficiency. Man is made by God somewhat as an article is made by an artificer. Something of this sort is said in Isaiah 64:8: "And now, O LORD, Thou art our Father and we are clay, and Thou art our Maker."

Accordingly, just as an earthen vessel, if it were endowed with sense, might hope to be put to good use by the potter, so man ought to cherish the hope of being rightly provided for by God. Thus we are told in Jeremiah 18:6: "As clay is in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."

LIGHT OF FAITH: THE COMPENDIUM OF THEOLOGY

For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare, not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you, says the LORD, and I will change your lot...

JEREMIAH 29:11–14

PRAYER

God of hope, I belong to you. I was not made in vain. As clay in your gentle hands, form me into something beautiful and unique for you. Send me out for your holy purposes. Direct this earthen vessel of your making toward only that which fulfills your purpose in, through, and with me.

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ADVENT ACTION

With gentle heart and hands, can you imbue others with hope? Today, monitor your thoughts, words, and gestures to avoid catering to the cultural cynicism so often found at the water cooler. Instead, be a “herald of hope” at the breakfast table, in the lunch line, or at the company dinner meeting.





DAY 3

This kingdom is desirable because of its perfect liberty....
all shall be of one will with God: whatever the saints will,
God shall will; and whatever God wills, the saints shall will.

Therefore, their will shall be done with God's will. In this way,
all will reign, since the will of all will be done, and God shall
be the crown of all: "In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a
crown of glory and for a diadem of beauty unto the residue of
His people."

This kingdom is also desirable because of its wondrous
wealth: "The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things
Thou has prepared for them that wait on Thee." "Who satisfieth
thy desire with good things."

Take note that whatever man seeks in this world, he will
find it more perfect and more excellent in God alone. If you
seek delight, you will find supreme delight in God: "You shall
see and your hearts shall rejoice." "And everlasting joy shall be
upon your heads." Do you seek wealth? You will find in Him all
things you desire in abundance: "When the soul strays from Thee

she seeks things apart from Thee, but finds all things impure and unprofitable until she returns to Thee.”

THE THREE GREATEST PRAYERS

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself.

PHILIPPIANS 3:20–21

PRAYER

Loving God, I don't like to wait. So I don't wait to see the unfolding of your kingdom or to rejoice in the Savior you have given me, because I would have to relinquish control. Too often I end up creating my kingdom rather than turning to *thy* kingdom. Impatient, I stray from your presence, grasping at things and people rather than letting you alone satisfy my deepest desires. You see, Lord, if I am really honest, while I believe in you, I don't always trust that you will be there to pick up the pieces. This Advent, make my will one with yours so that I may put greater trust in true wealth—your saving presence—especially on the days when mine feels so impoverished.

ADVENT ACTION

Instead of being impatient when you are waiting somewhere today, whether in traffic, the grocery line, or the doctor's office, say a prayer for the person in front of you.



DAY 4

The Son of God is nothing else but the Word of God, not like the word that is uttered externally (for this is transitory) but as the word conceived inwardly. Therefore this same Word of God is of one nature with God and equal to God....

We ought to be willing to hear God's words....to believe God's words....The Word of God abiding in us should be continually in our thoughts....We ought to communicate God's Word to others by admonishing them, preaching to them, and inflaming their hearts....We ought to put God's Word into practice: "Be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

THE THREE GREATEST PRAYERS

*What was from the beginning,
what we have heard,
what we have seen with our eyes,
what we looked upon
and touched with our hands
concerns the Word of life—
for the life was made visible;
we have seen it and testify to it
and proclaim to you the eternal life
that was with the Father and was made visible to us—
what we have seen and heard
we proclaim now to you,
so that you too may have fellowship with us;
for our fellowship is with the Father
and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*

We are writing this so that our joy may be complete.

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1 JOHN 1:1-3

PRAYER

God of light and love, let your Word be born in me, spoken through me, written upon my heart. In whatever way you speak to me today, may I be open to receiving your Word and not hesitate in believing your Word. May all my tasks today emanate from the power of your Word. May I share that Word in spoken and unspoken ways. It feels like a tall order, Father, but I never want to stop trying. Grant me the courage of my request and the grace to live its answer.



ADVENT ACTION

This morning, take a line from a psalm, hymn, or other prayer and memorize it. Use this line to bring yourself continually back to God's presence by repeating it quietly throughout the day during routine activities like driving, washing the dishes, or deleting emails.

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DAY 5

We should also bear in mind that, while Providence watches solicitously over all creatures, God exercises special care over rational beings. For the latter are exalted to the dignity of God's image and can rise to the knowledge and love of Him, and have dominion over their actions, since they are able to discriminate between good and evil. Hence, they should have confidence in God, not only that they may be preserved in existence in keeping with the condition of their nature...but that, by avoiding evil and doing good, they may merit some reward from him. We are taught a salutary lesson in Psalm 35:7: "Men and beasts Thou wilt preserve" (that is, God bestow on men and irrational creatures alike whatever pertains to the sustaining of life). And then the Psalmist adds, in the next verse: "But the children of men shall put their trust under the covert of Thy wings," indicating that they will be protected by God with special care.

LIGHT OF FAITH: THE COMPENDIUM OF THEOLOGY

*Can a mother forget her infant,
be without tenderness for the child of her womb?
Even should she forget,
I will never forget you.
See, upon the palms of my hands,
I have written your name;
your walls are ever before me.
Your rebuilders make haste,
as those who torn you down and laid you waste
go forth from you;
Look about and see,
they are all gathering and coming to you.
As I live says the LORD,
you shall be arrayed with them all
as with adornments,
like a bride you shall fasten them on you.*

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ISAIAH 49:15–18

PRAYER

Gentle Father, I am under your care at all times and in all places and circumstances. There is not a moment of the day that I am not under your protection and loving gaze. You see and love in me what you see and love in your Son. You give me what I need to make choices that will lead me closer to you, as well as what I need to avoid false choices that take me away from you. May the confidence of your ever-present concern be at the center of all I do and say today.

ADVENT ACTION

Examine the recent pattern of your choices among people and with things, and note whether they have led you closer to God or made you feel more distant. Resolve to make today's choices with confidence, and trust in God's ever-present guidance in your life. Note whether these choices drew you toward God or away from him, whether they left you filled up or "on empty."

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