



THOMAS AQUINAS 1225 -1274

Thomas Aquinas' appearance in a window of a Catholic educational institution such as Holy Cross is entirely appropriate. His scholarly achievements in philosophy, theology and devotional works merited his being named by Leo XIII (1879-1903) as the patron of Catholic schools. At Holy Cross, his presence in the curriculum assured widespread recognition from students and faculty alike.

Aquinas was born the youngest son of a family of lesser nobility of Roccasecca, mid-way between Rome and Naples. The family lands were situated in the northernmost area of the kingdom of Sicily, a position made precarious because of the intense, if intermittent friction between the Papal States and those ruled by the Emperor. In a not-unusual custom for younger sons of the nobility, he was brought at about the age of six to the Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino, with the expectation that he would eventually become abbot. Political unrest, however, brought the abbey under the control of Emperor Frederick II. Thomas and the other young charges of the abbey were removed to a more stable environment of the Benedictine foundation in Naples. From 1239 through 1244 Thomas pursued studies in philosophy and the arts at the *Studium Generale* of Naples, becoming acquainted for the first time with the works of Aristotle on natural science and the recently translated commentaries of the Islamic scholar, Averroes.

He also was exposed to the newly formed Order of Preachers, or Dominicans, who were dedicated to a mendicant life of evangelical poverty, with particular service to the newly emerging urban centers of Europe. Rejecting his family's plans, he joined the Dominicans, who sent him to continue his studies in Paris, then Cologne. Returning to Paris, he became a professor at the University. The author of prodigious feats of scholarship such as the *Summa Theologica*, he applied Aristotelian philosophy as well as other classical traditions of thought to Catholic revelation. Thomas lived at a time when it was possible to see a unity among the sciences and the arts and to approach the whole of the created world as an appropriate sphere of study. Later his writings were to exert enormous influence on the direction of the Catholic Reformation through their frequent citation during the Council of Trent (1545-63).

In the construction of Catholic education in the nineteenth century, Thomas reemerged as a powerful force, evidenced by the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) in which Leo XIII affirmed the special importance of the work of Thomas for Catholic studies. It is therefore no surprise to find that the curriculum at the College in the 1920s reflected the influence of Thomas in its required core of courses in ethics, logic, philosophy and theology.

Like the representations of Jerome and Ignatius, Thomas is depicted as both scholar and visionary. In the central panel he holds a book and writing instruments. A dove in a rose-colored cloud descends. In the narrative scene below he is kneeling before an image of a glowing crucifix.



The banner inscribed *Bene scripsisti de me Thomas* (You have written well of me, Thomas) refers to Thomas's role in composing the office for the Feast of Corpus Christi, which honors the real presence of Christ under the appearance of the bread and wine of the Eucharist (the image presented in the lunette above Aquinas's head). Urban IV extended this feast to the universal church in 1264 and is known to have requested Thomas to write an office for it. Thomas's authorship of the feast's prayers as they are used today is generally accepted. Some scholars also credit him for other devotional writing, especially the hymns *Adoro Te* and *Tantum Ergo*, part of the benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, which was a familiar part of the liturgy for Holy Cross students in the 1920s.

