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*Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Non-Recluse*  
*Julie Stanoch*

Although Saint Thomas Aquinas is mostly known for his religious, political, and philosophical documents such as *Summa Theologica*, there is more to the man than his writing and the events of his life. What of the man himself? He is often considered a man who was withdrawn from society and is thought to have merely sat alone in his cell, writing famous religious works. However, this is not the case. The events in his life, the activities in which he partook, and the character of the man himself would not allow for Aquinas to be a man of reclusion. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to prove that Thomas Aquinas was not a recluse.

To begin, let us first recognize where most of our information on Thomas Aquinas derives from. The acts of his canonization process on July 18, 1323, by Pope John XXII, left behind most of the information available today on this Saint. In fact, the canonization bull presents an extremely valuable document that sets forth the very character of Aquinas. Most of these canonization documents have been organized and analyzed by author Dr. Martin Grabmann, who remains the most well-accepted historian on Aquinas. The second main source of our knowledge of Aquinas is his personal writing. However, these do not prove extremely useful discovering the interior life of the Saint. Most of Aquinas's writings are so far removed from the writer that they often seem not human at all; it appears as if Aquinas wrote directly from the Holy Spirit or some other divine nature rather than from his personal thought process. Unfortunately, Aquinas never had the time to write about his personal life, and we therefore lack another main source. Despite this fact, Aquinas's religious documents provide us with a base to start from. At the very least, he believed, followed, and created what he was writing, and therefore we can discover important insights into his very character from these texts.

Physically, Aquinas was a man of very lofty stature and heavy build, but very straight and well proportioned. His complexion was like the color of new wheat. His head was large, well shaped, and slightly balding. Most artists have represented Aquinas as being noble, meditative, yet gentle and strong (Newadvent.com). He had a heavy chin and jaw, with a very Roman nose. Thomas even good-naturedly joked that he was like a walking wine barrel (dur.ac.uk.com). However, his bulky, sluggish appearance and quiet ways earned Aquinas the nickname "dumb ox" at Cologne while studying under St. Albert the Great (saints.catholic.org). But St. Albert Magnus thought better of Aquinas than his fellow classmates: "You call him Dumb Ox; I tell you this dumb ox shall bellow so loud that his bellowing will fill the world (Catholic.org)."

And bellow Aquinas did, even at an early age. At the age of five, he began his education at Monte Cassino with his uncle, Abbot Sinibald (Grabmann B1). Studying here aided in the development of his strong religious beliefs and may have led him to a religious life. In class, he surprised his teachers by easily becoming learned in his studies and the spirit of virtue. He did not sit quietly at his desk, as a recluse would, but, rather entered into calm, mild, yet heated arguments. Further, he asked his teacher one day, with his heavenly, inquisitive manner the most profound of questions, when he asked, "What is God?" (Grabmann B1) For the rest of his days, Aquinas sought an answer to this most perplexing question.

With this question in mind, he set out at the age of 19 to join the Dominican order. His parents, especially his mother, were outraged. Not only did he join a religious order, but the

Dominicans of all things! His mother ordered his two brothers, who were soldiers, to lock him in the castle fortress of San Giovanni at Rocca Secca for two years. There he was to stay until he changed his mind. However, this would not be the case. He was not swayed from his decision. Aquinas was a man who was certain about his convictions and beliefs, and this matter was no different. During this time, his brothers and mother arranged for a woman of impurity to enter his chamber and tempt him. His response was clear as he chased her out of his room with a piece of burning wood from the fire (domesticchurch.com). He later confided in his friend Reginald of Piperno that, after the whore left his chamber, he knelt and asked God for integrity of mind and body. He then fell into a deep, gentle sleep, and two angels appeared and put a white girdle on him and said, "We gird thee with the girdle of perpetual virginity." From that point on, he had no concupiscence (NewAdvent.com). Obviously, Thomas Aquinas was a man of self-control, and virtue. Instead, he focused on the goals he hoped to achieve.

As rumor has it, he eventually escaped his chamber by his sister, whom he was very fond of, using a basket/pulley system and letting him down the side of the castle. It would have to have been a very large basket for a very large man, and no one is quite sure if the rumor is true. Whatever the case, Aquinas was let out of the castle and eventually became the Dominican that his heart was set on. We can see from this incident that he was not a recluse of his own choosing as some may misconstrue. He evidently wanted to exit this prison cell, but could not do so without disturbing the peace; being a man of peaceful character, Aquinas was unable to escape by his own doing.

But why did he join the Dominican Order, and why did his parents object? During the years of his early childhood, Aquinas attended the order of St. Benedict on the holy heights of Monte Cassino. He would probably have joined this Order if his father had not removed him in 1237 in fear of looming war. However, the Dominican and Benedictine Orders are similar in the fact that both believe in "*veritas et pax osculatae sunt*"- truth and peace embrace (Grabmann A 51). This search for truth in a peaceful manner also characterizes our champion Aquinas, and drove him to join this Order of Preachers.

Also, at the time Aquinas was joining his Order, there was a voluntary poverty movement taking place within the mendicant orders. This was brought about by a radical return to the Bible, a want of evangelical perfection, and an attempt to imitate Christ. With this all going on around Aquinas, he evidently could not be a recluse, as he seemed to be participating in the movement as well (Pieper 22, 29).

Concurrently, Aquinas ventured to the University of Paris, where he became an intense teacher, dedicated to his profession. Aristotelian ideas were being brought into existence, and Aquinas, immersed in the culture around him, was severely affected by it; Aristotle became a major component of most of the major works he completed. His dedication to teaching can be seen through the way in which he wrote his major work, *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas wrote this piece in the form of a textbook, as much of his work came from his teachings. Clearly, Thomas's character fit perfectly with the role of a teacher. Said the Saint:

"Teaching is one of the highest manifestations of the life of the mind, for the reason that in teaching the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* are joined- not just patched together superficially, not merely connected "factually," but united in a natural and necessary union. The true teacher as grasped a truth for itself, by purely receptive contemplation; he passed it on to others who likewise despite to partake of this truth. The teacher, then, looks to the truth of things; that is the

contemplative aspect of teaching. It is also the aspect of silence, without which the words of the teacher would be unoriginal in the primary meaning of that word, would be empty talk, gesture, chatter, if not fraud. But the teacher simultaneously looks into the faces of living human beings- and he subjects himself to the rigorously disciplined, wearisome labor of clarifying, of presenting, of communicating. Where this communication does not take place, teaching does not take place (Pieper 93).”

Obviously, Aquinas believed that, as a teacher, he had to communicate with his students. He did not sit back quietly, and write notes on the board or sit at his desk. Rather, he was an orator that spoke to large groups of people in order to live his life objective: “I feel that I owe it to God to make this the foremost duty of my life: that all my thought and speech proclaim Him (Pieper 92).” When he spoke to groups outside of his classroom, listeners sought him out; they enjoyed his clarity of thought, accuracy, lucidity, brevity, and power of exposition even more than they enjoyed his mentor, St. Albert Magnus (newadvent.com). In fact, many enjoyed his speeches so much that he was believed to have a certain *castitas*-that is, a purity and radiance that made anyone who met him feel like they just encountered a fresh cool breeze (ophthrd.com). And in reality they did. Aquinas spoke of new, fresh ideas that were being heard for the first time. He was not the cold, rigid intellect that many believed him to be. Rather, he had an attractive personality and manner. (Grabmann B 30). Once again, we see that Aquinas is not the recluse that many make him out to be. In fact, he seemed to live a balanced life of both peace and discourse. In the testimony of the Dominican, Peter of St. Felix, for St. Aquinas’ canonization, he swore to the following:

“I myself have seen him, have been his student, and have lived him in the Order for one year. I have seen him in his cell in the Convent at Naples, in the choir of the church, and in the lecture-hall teaching and preaching (Grabmann A 11).”

Despite the fact that he was very active in teaching, Aquinas was also active in his role in the Church. He highly respected the leaders of the Church, and tried to fulfill his duties to the best of his ability. He had a high sense of responsibility to them. However, when granted the position of Archbishop of Naples by Pope Clement IV in 1265, he refused to accept it so that he could continue to write his works (newadvent.com). Although this can be seen as being a bit reclusive, that is not the case. He merely wanted time to be able to teach, pray, preach, write, and journey (as he did constantly) rather than being tied down to just one job.

His other tasks in life required him to travel and Aquinas only did so by foot. He refused to use luxuries such as horses or carriages. He also was very sparing on his food. He did not indulge in any excessiveness; he deemed it unnecessary. As the Dominican James of Cajatia said: “Never did he seek special food, but was content with whatever was placed before him, using it moderately (Grabmann A 10).” Aquinas came from a wealthy family and could have quite easily indulged in the finer things of life, but he chose not to. This shows yet more characteristics of the Dumb Ox: humility and modesty. He was free from worldly inclinations and ambitions, allowing his soul to remain innocent and pure (Grabmann B 31). This *fervor charitatis*, this undivided and unhampered “adhering to God through charity,” as he said, allowed Aquinas to love God whole-heartedly and without distraction (Grabmann A 38).

The same can be said regarding Aquinas’s opinions on earthly and material possessions. He

once had the opportunity to dine with King Louis IX of France, and reluctantly attended. His companion remarked when they arrived at the king's palace, "How wonderful it must be to own all this!" Aquinas' reply was, "I would rather have that Chrysostom manuscript I can't get a hold of." He did not care much about anything but his work for God; pious Thomas' life goal was to serve Him (saints.catholic.com).

At the same banquet, Aquinas entered into a type of trance, stopped eating, and stared off into space. At one point, the Frenchmen stopped their noisy chatter, and in that instant, Aquinas slammed a fist down onto the table, shaking the food and goblets alike. He proclaimed: "And that will settle the Manichees!" King Louis, recognizing that the man probably had a great revelation of thought, sent two scribes to Thomas's side to take down the argument that he had just settled in his head (catholicism.com). In this, we see that Aquinas was a deep thinker, and unconcerned with pomp and circumstance.

This leads us to another side of Aquinas: the way in which he thought. Thomas believed that one must be chaste in order to gain a God's wisdom. Even theology to him was not merely a science, but rather a wisdom- *sapientia divina* (Grabmann A 29). He was a thinker living totally in the world of the supersensory, the supernatural, and the divine (Grabmann A 17), yet used his life experiences to refine his thought. The scholar within him was thought to be inseparable from his ethical and religious personality (Grabmann B 30). His pursuit of wisdom was so strong that he believed the meaning and happiness of life was reached through metaphysics, supernatural theology and the gift of wisdom received from the Holy Spirit (Grabmann A 21). Most of his ideas came from Aristotle, Plato, and the Holy Scriptures (Grabmann B 54). He was smart enough and capable enough in his religious manner of thinking to reach his own conclusions using the history of philosophy (Pegis xxx).

In his search for wisdom and truth, other characteristics of Aquinas are seen. For example, he avoided exaggeration, and wrote in a steadfast, logical method. He was clear in thought, and used Latin, not his native tongue, Italian. This was the language of the universities, of the schools, and of scholasticism at its apogee, all for clarity (Pieper 106). He also believed in *nominibus utendum est ut plures utentur*- we must use names as they are generally used (Pieper 114). This belief and usage of language was not true only in his writing, but also in his daily life. He rejected anything that might conceal, obscure, or distort reality. In this, he was special by trying *not* to be anything special (Pieper 21). Perhaps this and his manner of clear thought is the reason that his writing was so successful; the man behind the writing used words as they were meant to be used and believed in everything that he wrote.

However, despite all this, we cannot ignore certain reports of Aquinas being a recluse. For example, Bartholomew of Capua, a young student who personally saw and studied Thomas in Naples reported the following:

"I have heard from John of Cajatia that Brother Thomas was always the first to arise for prayers during the night, and as soon as he heard the others approaching, he withdrew and returned to his cell...When the brethren brought him to the garden for recreation, he would suddenly go off alone, wholly abstracted from his surroundings, and return to his cell (Grabmann A 14)."

However, as always when analyzing historical documents, we must prove the validity of statements and information. First, consider the above quote; it is merely hearsay from John of Cajatia. We know little of Bartholomew himself, and therefore have no support or ability to test this statement. Therefore, we can give little credit to this assessment. Also, all the other reports

of Thomas's teaching, preaching, and speaking to groups must be taken into consideration. There are more accounts of Thomas being open and expressive than those referring to Aquinas's reclusive behavior. It is impossible for him to have done so. We have accounts of his travels, jobs, and other events in which he partook; it is impossible for him to have only lived in his cell without ever leaving.

There is also the fact that his divine revelations and his moments of deep thought may have falsely led many to believe that he was reclusive and extremely introverted. For example, once he was so deep in thought, while writing at night, he did not realize that his robe's arm caught on fire. He was capable of cutting himself off from the world in order to hear God speak to him. It was also revealed to Bartholomew by Nicholas Fricino, a Dominican who attended the lectures of Brother Thomas and heard daily Mass at the convent of the Friars Preachers that:

"After hearing this Mass, he put aside the vestments and at once ascended the lecturing chair. His lectures being finished, he immediately began to write and dictate to numerous secretaries. After eating, he returned to his cell where he engaged in divine contemplation until time to rest. After this he would again assume his writing, and thus his whole life was ordered by God (Grabmann A 14)."

Bartholomew only recalled but two occasions when he had seen Aquinas outside of the cloister: once near the time of vespers and a second time in Capua at the royal court where he went because of some difficulty concerning his nephew (Grabmann A 14). Once again, we must look upon this Bartholomew character with a critical eye.

James of Cajatia also commented on Aquinas being withdrawn from the world: "I have known Brother Thomas to be a contemplative man (*hominem contemplativum*), totally withdrawn from worldly things and drawn to diving things (Grabmann A 10)." But other accounts must be taken into account as well. Conrad of Sues, an elderly priest of the Order of Preachers stated that: "Every day he either celebrated Mass with great devotion, or celebrated one or two. Except for the hours spent in necessary repose, he continually devoted himself to lecturing, writing, praying, or preaching (Grabmann A 11)." Out of those four descriptive actions of Thomas, two, lecturing and preaching are obviously done vocally. It is impossible for Aquinas to be described in this way if he were a recluse. Perhaps it was merely the fact that he turned to prayer, a silent activity, in order to gain insight for his writings. As William of Tocco, Aquinas' biographer, reported from his close, personal friend Reginald of Piperno:

"Thomas did not acquire his knowledge by natural ingenuity, but rather through the revelation and infusion of the Holy Spirit, for he never began to write without previous prayer and tears. Whenever a doubt arose, he had recourse to prayer. After shedding many tears, he would return to his work, now enlightened and instructed (Grabmann A 12)."

From this we see that Thomas was not cut off from the world, but rather had a mind that was constantly troubled and full of strife (opthird.com).

Although certainly not an extrovert, Aquinas was not a man who was completely introverted either. Rather, he was a deeply religious man who was deep in thought a large majority of the time, contemplating his one main task: presenting the Christian view of the universe while incorporating both Church and Aristotelian views.

Aquinas presented this view in his writings, which will allow us to gain more insight into his character and personality from. For example, from his *On Princely Government: To the King of Cyprus*, Book One, Chapter I.- The Necessity for a Political Regime, Aquinas wrote:

“So if it befitted man o live a solitary life, after the fashion of many other animals, he would need no other guide, but he would be a king unto himself, under God, the King of kings, and would have the gull ordering of his own actions by the light of God-given reason. When we consider all that is necessary to human life, however, it becomes clear that man is naturally a social and political animal, destined more than all other animals to live in community. Other animals have their food provided for them by nature, and a natural coat of hair...Even so, one man alone would not be able to furnish himself with all that is necessary, for no one man's resources are adequate to the fullness of human life. For this reason the companionship of his fellows is naturally necessary to man (Dawson 3).”

From this, it is clear that Aquinas believed that humans need other humans (Kerlin). With this belief and the fact that we know Aquinas tried to live the words that he wrote, we see that Aquinas did not believe in the concept of being an introvert. It was a foreign idea to him, and therefore it is impossible for him to have been a recluse.

Saint Thomas Aquinas was a man of many vocations that displayed his character and personality. He was a pure, humble, peaceful, patient, obedient, serene, friendly, kind, chaste, amiable man. He was the type of person who made one feel calmer after an encounter with him. With all of the activities that he participated in, it is clear that it is impossible for Aquinas to have been a reclusive introvert.

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