

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: January 28

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IN BRIEF

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Dominican friar, theologian and philosopher, Doctor of the Church, author of the Summa Theologiae.

Feast day	January 28
Born	c. 1225, Roccasecca (Kingdom of Sicily, present-day Lazio, Italy)
Died	March 7, 1274, Fossanova Abbey (Lazio, Italy)
Canonized	July 18, 1323, by Pope John XXII; Doctor of the Church in 1567
Era	13th century
Patron saint of	students, theologians, Catholic universities, Catholic schools

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Couvent des Jacobins in Toulouse, Tomb of Saint Thomas Aquinas

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Saint Thomas Aquinas was an Italian Dominican friar of the thirteenth century, considered one of the greatest theologians in the history of the Church. Teaching in Paris, Naples and other Italian cities, he showed that faith and reason are not opposed, and left an immense body of work, including the *Summa Theologiae*. He died on March 7, 1274, was canonized in 1323, and is a Doctor of the Church. He is celebrated on January 28, the date his relics were transferred to Toulouse.

Who was Saint Thomas Aquinas?

Thomas was born around 1225 in the castle of Roccasecca, between Rome and Naples, into the family of the counts of Aquino, a noble family linked to the emperor Frederick II. Around the age of five, he was entrusted as an oblate to the nearby Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino: his family no doubt hoped he would one day become its abbot.

Around 1239, he went to study the liberal arts at the University of Naples. There he discovered the works of Aristotle, then being rediscovered in the West, and a community of Friars Preachers, the order founded a few years earlier by Saint Dominic.

Key dates in the life of Thomas Aquinas

- **c. 1225**: Born in Roccasecca.
- **c. 1230-1231**: Oblate at the abbey of Monte Cassino.
- **c. 1239**: Studies at the University of Naples.
- **1244**: Joins the Dominicans; his family holds him for about a year in the family castle.

- **1245-1252**: Studies under Saint Albert the Great in Paris and then Cologne.
- **1256**: Becomes a master of theology at the University of Paris.
- **c. 1259-1265**: Writes the *Summa contra Gentiles*.
- **1264**: According to tradition, composes the office of Corpus Christi at the request of Pope Urban IV.
- **c. 1265-1273**: Writes the *Summa Theologiae*, which remains unfinished.
- **1268-1272**: Second period of teaching in Paris; he then founds a house of studies in Naples.
- **December 6, 1273**: After a mystical experience during Mass, he stops writing.
- **March 7, 1274**: Dies at the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova, on his way to the Council of Lyon.
- **July 18, 1323**: Canonized by John XXII in Avignon.
- **January 28, 1369**: His relics are transferred to the Jacobin convent in Toulouse.
- **1567**: Saint Pius V proclaims him a Doctor of the Church.

A nobleman's son who chose poverty

In 1244, Thomas received the Dominican habit. For his family, it was a scandal: the Friars Preachers were mendicants, with no lands and no prestige. His brothers intercepted him on the road to Paris and brought him back to Roccasecca, where he was held for about a year.

According to an account by his first biographers, a young woman was sent into his room to turn him from his vocation; he drove her out with a burning brand from the fire, and angels then girded him with a cord of chastity. His mother finally let him go.

He then joined Albert the Great in Paris and later in Cologne. Tall, heavy and silent, he was nicknamed "the dumb ox of Sicily" by his fellow students. Albert is said to have replied that the bellowing of this ox would one day resound throughout the world.



The Temptation of Saint Thomas Aquinas by Diego Velázquez (1631-1632), after the traditional story of the cord of chastity.

The master of Paris

Having become a master of theology in 1256, Thomas taught at the University of Paris, then the most prestigious in Europe, and later in several convents in Italy, including Santa Sabina in Rome, before returning to Paris from 1268 to 1272. He commented on Scripture, held public disputations on the great questions of his time and wrote tirelessly, sometimes dictating to several secretaries at once.

His great insight is that truth cannot contradict truth. Human reason, enlightened by the philosophy of Aristotle, can know many things about God and the world; revelation goes beyond reason without contradicting it. He did not fear objections: every article of the *Summa Theologiae* begins by fairly setting out the opposing arguments. He also took part in the debates over the place of the mendicant orders at the university and over the interpretation of Aristotle, without ever giving in to easy polemics.



The Triumph of Saint Thomas Aquinas by Benozzo Gozzoli (c. 1471, Louvre Museum).

The Summa Theologiae and the Eucharistic hymns

The *Summa Theologiae*, begun around 1265, was meant to be a handbook for beginners in theology. It contains several thousand articles, ranging from God and creation to Christ and the sacraments.

Thomas was also a man of prayer. Tradition attributes to him the office of Corpus Christi, established by Urban IV in 1264, with the hymns *Pange lingua*, whose final verses, the *Tantum ergo*, are still sung at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and *Lauda Sion*. The *Adoro te devote* is also attributed to him.

On December 6, 1273, during Mass, he had an experience that overwhelmed him. He stopped writing and told his secretary, Reginald of Piperno, that everything he had written seemed to him "like straw" compared with what he had seen. Summoned to the Council of Lyon by Pope Gregory X, he fell ill on the way and died on March 7, 1274, at the abbey of Fossanova.



The palm-tree pillar of the Jacobin church in Toulouse, where the relics of Saint Thomas rest.

Why is Saint Thomas Aquinas the patron saint of students?

Saint Thomas Aquinas is a saint of the intellect, but of a humble intellect. He placed all his power of thought at the service of truth without seeking honors: he is said to have refused the archbishopric of Naples. His life shows that study can become prayer, and that it finds its fulfillment in adoration.

That is why he is invoked as patron of students, theologians, Catholic universities and Catholic schools, and by teachers, researchers and anyone preparing for an exam. Many Catholic schools and colleges in the English-speaking world bear his name.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Thomas Aquinas in art

- **The black and white Dominican habit**.
- **A radiant sun on his chest**, the sign of the light of his teaching.
- **A book**, sometimes a church in his hand, for his works and his service to the Church.
- **A dove at his ear**, the Holy Spirit inspiring him.
- **The cord of chastity** given by angels, in scenes of his youth.

Where to pray to Saint Thomas Aquinas

- **Toulouse** (France): the Jacobin convent, which has housed his relics since 1369.
- **Fossanova** (Lazio, Italy): the Cistercian abbey where he died, and the room where his death is traditionally placed.
- **Roccasecca** and **Aquino** (Lazio): the ruins of his family castle and the town whose name his family bore.
- **Naples**: the Basilica of San Domenico Maggiore, where he lived and taught.

- **Rome**: the Basilica of Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill, where he founded a Dominican house of studies.

PRAYER

Prayer of Saint Thomas Aquinas Before Study: "Ineffable Creator"

The prayer "Ineffable Creator" is traditionally attributed to Saint Thomas Aquinas, who is said to have recited it before setting to study or teach. It has remained very popular with students, teachers and researchers, especially before exams. Below you will find a translation, a verse from a Eucharistic hymn attributed to him, and an original prayer for students.

Prayer before study ("Creator ineffabilis")

Translated from the Latin by Saintspedia; the original medieval text is in the public domain.

Ineffable Creator, who from the treasures of your wisdom established the three hierarchies of angels, set them in wonderful order high above the heavens, and arranged the parts of the universe with such harmony,

you who are called the true source of light and wisdom and the first principle above all things, graciously pour a ray of your brightness upon the darkness of my mind, and drive away from me the double darkness in which I was born: sin and ignorance.

You who make eloquent the tongues of little children, instruct my tongue and pour upon my lips the grace of your blessing.

Give me sharpness to understand, capacity to retain, method and ease in learning, subtlety in interpreting, and abundant grace in speaking.

Prepare the beginning of my work, direct its progress, and bring it to completion. You who are true God and true man, who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Source: the prayer *Ante studium* ("Creator ineffabilis"), handed down among the prayers attributed to Saint Thomas Aquinas. Its attribution is not absolutely certain, but it is ancient and constant.

A verse to meditate on: the Adoro te

Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore,
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more,
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.

Source: first verse of the hymn *Adoro te devote*, attributed to Saint Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century), in the English translation by Gerard Manley Hopkins (public domain).

Prayer to Saint Thomas Aquinas for students

Saint Thomas Aquinas, you sought the truth with all your mind and all your heart: help me in my work and my studies.

When I doubt my abilities, give me the patience to move forward step by step. When I am tempted to show off or to look down on those who think differently, remind me of your humility and your fairness toward those who disagreed with you.

I entrust to you pupils, students and all who are preparing for an exam, their teachers and all who are searching. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

May all that I learn lead me to know God better and to serve others better, and at the end of every search, may I know, like you, how to remain in silence before the Lord. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Thomas Aquinas is celebrated on January 28, the date his relics were transferred to Toulouse in 1369; before the calendar reform of 1969, his feast was March 7, the day of his death. The prayer before study can be said at the start of a study session, a class or an exam. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Thomas Aquinas and read the life of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Thomas Aquinas

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Thomas Aquinas and his way of uniting study and prayer. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, start on January 19; it ends on January 27, and his feast falls on January 28. You can also pray it during the nine days before an exam.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, and say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for each day helps make your work a place of prayer.

Students can pray it alone before a test, a thesis defense or a new school year; teachers can pray it for their classes; families can pray it for a child who is struggling at school. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off. The nine days follow the life of Thomas, from the questions of his childhood to the silence of his last months.

Day 1: The desire to know God

As a child at Monte Cassino, Thomas is said to have kept asking his teachers: what is God? His whole life grew out of that question, and all his books are, in a sense, long answers to it, given with the patience of someone who never stopped wondering.

Prayer: Lord, keep alive in me the child's question: who are you? Never let me grow used to you.

Today: Write down the question about God that stays with you most.

Day 2: Choosing freely

Against his family's wishes, Thomas chose the poor life of the Friars Preachers. He held firm, without breaking with his family.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to follow the call you address to me, and the gentleness to stay close to those who do not understand it.

Today: Pray for a family member with whom you disagree.

Day 3: The dumb ox

His fellow students made fun of this tall, silent young man. Thomas did not try to show off. Albert the Great, however, sensed his worth.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the need to be seen. Teach me to recognize the hidden worth of others.

Today: Show appreciation for the quiet work of someone around you.

Day 4: Learning from a teacher

Thomas followed Albert the Great from Paris to Cologne. Genius is formed through patience, listening and faithfulness to a teacher. Thomas, who would become a master himself, first agreed to be a disciple for years.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for those who have taught me. Bless teachers and educators.

Today: Thank a teacher who made a difference in your life.

Day 5: Faith and reason

For Thomas, reason is a gift from God, and faith does not ask it to be silent. Each sheds light on the other. Faith gives reason a wider horizon, and reason helps faith to understand what it believes.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, enlighten my mind and strengthen my faith. May I be afraid of no honest question.

Today: Read a serious page on a question of faith that troubles you.

Day 6: Respecting the opponent

Every article of the *Summa* begins with the objections, fairly stated. Thomas was looking for truth, not victory, and he gave his opponents the courtesy of presenting their arguments at their strongest.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to truly listen to those who think differently from me, and to answer them with justice.

Today: In a discussion, restate the other person's view accurately before you answer.



Praying with Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Day 7: Studying in prayer

It is said that Thomas prayed before each piece of work and went to the church whenever a difficulty stopped him. For him, study became a form of adoration, and the chapel was as much his workplace as his desk.

Prayer: Lord, may my work today be offered for your glory. Be with me in every effort.

Today: Begin your workday with the prayer "Ineffable Creator."

Day 8: Adoring the Eucharist

Thomas sang of the Eucharist in the *Pange lingua* and the *Adoro te* attributed to him. The scholar who explained so much falls silent before the mystery of the Host, and simply adores.

Prayer: Jesus, hidden under the appearance of bread, I adore you. Increase in me faith, hope and love.

Today: Spend some time in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.

Day 9: All is straw

After an experience of God, Thomas said that everything he had written seemed to him like straw. This was not contempt for his work: it was the recognition that God surpasses everything we can say about him. The greatest theologian ends in silent wonder.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I entrust my intention to you. Through the intercession of Saint Thomas Aquinas, grant that I may seek you all my life and one day see you face to face. Amen.

Today: Stay silent before God for five minutes, without asking him for anything.

Closing prayer

Saint Thomas Aquinas, at the end of these nine days, I place in your hands the intention I have entrusted to you. Pray for those who study, teach and search. Obtain for me an open mind, a humble heart and a love of truth. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Thomas Aquinas and pray his prayer before study, "Ineffable Creator."

PILGRIMAGE

Couvent des Jacobins in Toulouse, Tomb of Saint Thomas Aquinas

The Couvent des Jacobins, in the heart of Toulouse, has housed the relics of Saint Thomas Aquinas since 1369. Its brick church, a masterpiece of southern French Gothic, is one of the most remarkable monuments in the city. It is the main pilgrimage site dedicated to the Angelic Doctor, in the very city where Saint Dominic had gathered his first brothers.

Toulouse, Cradle of the Friars Preachers

It was in Toulouse that Saint Dominic gathered in 1215 the first community of what would become the Order of Preachers. The friars, called "Jacobins" in Paris after their convent on the Rue Saint-Jacques, settled in Toulouse on the present site around 1230. The church was built and enlarged over more than a century and a half, into the 14th century, with its octagonal bell tower and its two naves separated by a row of columns.



The Couvent des Jacobins in Toulouse, tomb of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

The Palm Tree of the Jacobins

The choir of the church is famous for its "palm tree": a single column from which twenty-two ribs spring to carry the fan vault, nearly a hundred feet high. The sun filtering through the colored stained glass gives the whole a warm light that strikes every visitor. The neighboring cloister, with its gardens, the chapter house and the Chapel of Saint Antoninus, decorated with 14th-century murals, completes the visit.

The Arrival of the Relics in 1369

Thomas Aquinas had died in 1274 at the Cistercian Abbey of Fossanova, in Italy, where his body was kept. In 1368, Pope Urban V decided to entrust his remains to the Dominicans of Toulouse. They were solemnly received there on January 28, 1369, the date the Church has chosen for his feast. At the

Revolution, the convent was confiscated and the relics were moved to the Basilica of Saint-Sernin. The church of the Jacobins, long used as a barracks, was then patiently restored. The relics returned there in 1974, for the seven hundredth anniversary of the saint's death, and have rested since in a shrine placed beneath the altar.

Praying at the Jacobins

Before your visit, you might reread the life of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Once there, a time of silence before the shrine allows you to entrust to him your studies, your work or a search for truth. Students gladly come here before an exam to say the prayer before study, "Ineffable Creator". Since the church is also a heavily visited monument, respect the quiet of those who are praying. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia for a personal visit.



The Couvent des Jacobins in Toulouse, tomb of Saint Thomas Aquinas, interior.

Other Places Associated with Saint Thomas Aquinas

- **Fossanova** (Lazio): the Cistercian abbey where he died on March 7, 1274.
- **Roccasecca** and **Aquino** (Lazio): his native land, at the foot of Monte Cassino.
- **Monte Cassino**: the Abbey of Monte Cassino, where he was an oblate as a child.
- **Naples**: the Basilica of San Domenico Maggiore, where his cell and the crucifix that, according to tradition, spoke to him are shown.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Santa Sabina, on the Aventine Hill, where he taught beginning in 1265.

Practical Information

The Couvent des Jacobins is in the historic center of Toulouse, a few minutes' walk from the Place du Capitole. It belongs to the city, which keeps it open to the public; access to the cloister may require an admission fee. Around January 28, celebrations in honor of Saint Thomas are held. Check opening and service times before you come.

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