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A Tale of Two Wonderworkers: St. Nicholas of Myra in the Writings and Life of St. Thomas Aquinas¹

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"The theology of St. Thomas is easily distorted," Père Garrigou-Lagrange once wrote, "if we misplace the emphasis on what is secondary and material, thus explaining in a banal manner and without due proportion what is formal and principal in it. By so doing we fail to see the glowing summit that should illumine all the rest."² What is this "glowing summit"? As a mountain face or a building's façade can look quite different at different hours of the day, from dawn to noontide to gloaming – an effect brilliantly conveyed in Monet's successive paintings of the façade of Rouen Cathedral – so, too, does the landscape of Aquinas's theology offer many different views of its elevations to those who gaze out over it. To one, the summit that stands out is the metaphysics of *esse* inspired by the God who declared *Ego sum qui sum*; to another, it is the primacy of charity or of the common good; to yet another, the mystery of the Incarnation, with its crowning events in the Paschal Triduum and their perpetual presence in the Mystical Body. Speaking of St. Thomas's doctrine, all of these statements have their truth. Speaking of St. Thomas's *life*, however, surely the glowing summit was the overwhelming vision granted him near the end of his earthly pilgrimage, on the Feast of St. Nicholas in the year 1273, an ineffable "suffering of divine things" that can be taken as the symbol, summit, and completion of his life's labors.³

In an earlier article, I tried to show the biographical and theological significance of this mystical experience.⁴ Here, I shall argue that there is more than a passing connection between the divine crowning of St. Thomas's life and the devotional cultus

¹ This article was developed from a lecture given at the International Theological Institute on December 6, 2002. I thank Jeremy Holmes and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on an earlier draft. Translations from St. Thomas are my own.

² R. GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE, OP, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*. Trans. M. T. Doyle, OP. St. Louis, Herder, 1949, 50-51.

³ We cannot prove beyond doubt that the experience we know to have occurred in December 1273 occurred precisely on the *sixth* day of that month. However, since the earliest sources speak of this date and all later biographers gravitate toward it, there is what one might call "hagiographical unanimity," and that is sufficient for my purposes.

⁴ P. KWASNIEWSKI, "Golden Straw: St. Thomas and the Ecstatic Practice of Theology," in: *Nova et Vetera* [Eng. ed.] 2 (2004), 61-89.

of St. Nicholas. I will examine texts of Aquinas in which Nicholas is explicitly mentioned, giving special attention to a sermon preached by the former in honor of the latter – a most unusual and precious document whose very existence has only been known to a few specialists, since the text itself has never been published.⁵ The Leonine critical edition of the sermons is nearing completion, but meanwhile, and for the purposes of a better diffusion, a translation of the sermon in question has been appended.⁶ Having reviewed the documentary evidence, I shall then devote the remainder of the article to building up a plausible case for discerning, with the eyes of faith, the marks of the holy bishop's decisive intervention in the event that led to the silence of St. Thomas. In accord with a Thomist whom I admire, it seems to me worthwhile "to enliven dogmatic and pastoral theology with an infusion of hagiography and iconography."⁷ While there is no question that copious legends of yore should be approached with intelligent discrimination, it is in many ways worse if one loses the childlike capacity to accept the miraculous, revere the heroic, laugh at the comical, feed on the wisdom and follow the examples lovingly preserved in the accounts of God's ambassadors, His holy fools.⁸

I. The life of St. Nicholas in broad strokes

Unlike his present European status as a white-haired fairytale figure, benign and vaguely Christian, who presides once a year over the delightful day that begins with the discovery of trinkets in one's shoes, in the Middle Ages Nicholas stood in the front rank of saints universally venerated and loved by the Christian peoples of Europe.⁹ In

⁵ The best current text of fourteen of St. Thomas's authentic university sermons may be found in R. BUSA, SJ, ed., *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Opera omnia ut sunt in Indice Thomistico*. Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1980, 6:33-48. Other sermons printed in the same volume (pp. 581-84) are spurious. However, several additional authentic individual sermons have been discovered, which are not printed in the Busa volume – the sermon in praise of St. Nicholas among them.

⁶ The sermon was translated by Athanasius Sulavik, OP, from the provisional Leonine text edited by Louis-Jacques Bataillon, OP. I wish to express my thanks to the generous help of both.

⁷ J. SAWARD, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty*. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1997, 24. In defense of a positive attitude toward fanciful elements of hagiography, see H. BELLOC, *Essays of a Catholic*. New York, Macmillan, 1931, 161-74. Having defined legend as "a story told about some real person, real virtue, or real spiritual experience, and of such a quality that it illuminates and satisfies the recipient while it amplifies and gives further substance to the matter to which it is attached" (161), Belloc argues that legend is an indispensable vehicle for keeping alive basic truths and transmitting them from generation to generation.

⁸ For a sympathetic effort to arrive at the vital truth behind so many apparently bizarre stories of the saints, see J. SAWARD, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980; repr. 2000.

⁹ The red-garbed jolly old man of no particular religious affiliation distributing gifts to good children at Christmastide appears to be a Protestant reconfiguration, with Victorian touches, of the original Catholic saint famed for giving gold to the three maidens (note the derivation of *Santa Klaus* from, ultimately, *Sanctus Nicolaus*).

England alone, there were over four hundred churches dedicated to him, and Russia took him as patron alongside Andrew the Apostle.¹⁰ It has been estimated that in French- and German-speaking lands during the High Middle Ages, at least 2000 churches dedicated to St. Nicholas could be found.¹¹ "The heterogeneity of his competencies as patron saint is unrivalled: there is hardly another saint to whom the protection of such a large number of towns and countries – stretching from the Atlantic coasts to orthodox Russia – was entrusted."¹² His relics, which were safely landed at Bari, Italy on May 9, 1087 after being rescued from Saracen-dominated Myra, attracted a vast number of pilgrims from all over Europe during the centuries that followed, many of whom were eager to take back home some of the sweet-smelling, health-giving myrrh that flowed from his mortal remains.¹³ His life was depicted in song and sculpture, stained glass and altar paintings; it is even claimed that he was represented in art more frequently than any saint except the Virgin Mary.¹⁴ A manuscript in Fleury, France contains four distinct liturgical dramas dedicated to St. Nicholas. His reputation spread as far as medieval Iceland, where an epic poem, the *Nikolassaga Biskupa*, was composed in his honor.¹⁵

What do we know for certain of the life of Nicholas? By modern critical standards, practically nothing other than his existence as a fourth-century bishop of Myra reputed for great holiness. If we broaden our sources to include the best hagiographical literature of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, a more detailed portrait emerges. There is no need to recount the prodigious array of miracles; it is enough to mention the elements common to the *vitae Nicolai Episcopi* in every land and tongue.¹⁶ For having rescued sailors off the coast of Lycia, Nicholas is honored as

¹⁰ A. BUTLER, *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, ed. and rev. Herbert J. Thurston, SJ, and Donald Attwater, 4 vols. Westminster, Maryland, Christian Classics, 1990, 4:505-6.

¹¹ *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, Città del Vaticano, 1952, s.v. 'Nicola di Mira'.

¹² E. DE'MIRCOVICH, liner notes to *La Nuit de Saint Nicholas*, Arcana A72, 15-16.

¹³ *Butler's Lives*, 4:505. This oil is referred to as the "manna of St. Nicholas"; a treatise in its defense was composed as recently as 1925. Among the earliest visitors of his relics in Italy was Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury.

¹⁴ *Butler's Lives*, 4:505-6.

¹⁵ E. DE'MIRCOVICH, *La Nuit de Saint Nicholas*, 15.

¹⁶ For a brief modern account of the life of Nicholas, see *Butler's Lives*, 4:503-6. For a popular medieval account – and a good indication of what a thirteenth-century friar is likely to have had in mind when preaching on the saint or invoking his help – see JACOBUS DE VORAGINE, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. W. G. Ryan, 2 vols. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, 1:21-27. Jacobus, an Italian Dominican who eventually held high offices in the Order as teacher and administrator and became archbishop of Genoa in 1292, wrote the *Legenda Aurea* around 1260. As Ryan notes in his introduction, "the popularity of the *Legend* was such that some one thousand manuscripts have survived, and, with the advent of printing in the 1450s, editions both in the original Latin and in every Western European language multiplied into the hundreds" (1:xiii). See L.-J. BATAILLON, OP, "Iacopo da Varazze e Thommaso d'Aquino," in: *Sapienza* 32/1 [Naples] (1979), 22-29.

patron of seafarers; for having appeared in dreams to Constantine and a prefect named Ablavius on behalf of three unjustly-convicted prisoners, he is honored as patron of captives.¹⁷ Later, students and scholars were added to his patronal competency, giving him a foothold at the burgeoning medieval universities. While the old Roman Collect emphasizes his miracles ("Deus, qui beatum Nicolaum Pontificem innumeris decorasti miraculis") and the Greeks refer to him as "the Wonderworker," his fame in the Middle Ages rested less on a miracle than on a gift of alms to a family in his native town of Patera, prior to his election as bishop of Myra. In order to rescue three unwed girls from the prostitution their impoverished father was planning for them, Nicholas, who had inherited wealth from his parents, went under cover of darkness to the man's house and threw a bag of gold into the window as a dowry, doing this three times, until all the daughters were married off.¹⁸ As a bishop, Nicholas was celebrated for his generosity toward the poor and his uncompromising defense of Christian orthodoxy. "Thanks to his teaching," we read in the *Chronicles* of Methodius, "the metropolis of Myra alone was untouched by the filth of the Arian heresy, which it firmly rejected as death-dealing poison."¹⁹ Tradition relates that Nicholas participated in the Council of Nicaea, and was so incensed by the pride of Arius that he slapped him in the face.²⁰ His legendary zeal for the orthodox faith may partially explain the Epistle traditionally appointed for his feast, a reading from the last chapter of Hebrews in the course of which come these words: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings; for it is well that the heart be strengthened by grace, not by foods which have not benefited their adherents... Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God" (Heb. 13:8-9; 15). Verse 17 brings to mind again the charity of Nicholas: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."²¹ The intimate link between Christian orthodoxy and Christian charity finds an apt expression in Nicholas, "one of the first people to be venerated as a saint without having been a martyr," observes Cardinal Ratzinger.²²

¹⁷ *Butler's Lives*, 4:505-6; *Golden Legend*, 1:22-24. The Vatican Pinacoteca contains several exceptional paintings of the life and miracles of Nicholas. Deserving of special mention are the Quaratesi Altarpiece (1425) by Gentile da Fabriano and *The Story of St. Nicholas* (1437) by Fra Angelico.

¹⁸ *Butler's Lives*, 4:504; *Golden Legend*, 1:21-22.

¹⁹ *Butler's Lives*, 4:504. This Methodius was a Patriarch of Constantinople in the ninth century.

²⁰ *Butler's Lives*, 4:503-4; *Golden Legend*, 1:22.

²¹ In the Vulgate: "Beneficentiae autem, et communionis nolite oblivisci: talibus enim hostiis promeretur Deus."

²² J. RATZINGER, "Reflections at Advent," in *Seek That Which Is Above: Meditations Through the Year*. Trans. G. Harrison. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986, 21.

Another of the legends [surrounding Nicholas] expresses it very beautifully in this way: Whereas all the other miracles could be performed by magicians and demons, and thus were ambivalent, one miracle was absolutely transparent and could not involve any deception, namely, that of living out the faith in everyday life for an entire lifetime and maintaining charity. People in the fourth century experienced this miracle in the life of Nicholas, and all the miracle stories which accrued subsequently to the legend are only variations on this one, fundamental miracle, which Nicholas' contemporaries compared, with wonder and gratitude, to the morning star reflecting the radiance of the light of Christ. In this man they understood what faith in God's Incarnation means; in him the dogma of Nicaea had been translated into tangible terms.²³

II. St. Nicholas in the writings of St. Thomas

Early Dominican history displays more than a passing connection with the *cultus* of St. Nicholas. Two illustrations may be given. The Order's second and permanent priory in Bologna was located at the church of San Nicolò delle Vigne, where the Basilica di San Domenico now stands, enshrining the relics of the Order's founder.²⁴ It was in this church that Diana d'Andalo, through whose good offices the property at the vineyards had been donated to the Friars, made her profession, at the high altar

²³ RATZINGER, "Advent," 21-22 (in this paragraph, "all the other miracles" must be referring to ambiguous external phenomena, since a genuine miracle can only be done by divine power). The following coincidence deserves notice. An ancient Byzantine biographer of St. Nicholas described the Bishop as one who "received his dignity from Christ's own sublime nature just as the morning star receives its brilliance from the rising sun" (cf. RATZINGER, "Advent," 20). In the famous letter of mourning of 3 May 1274 sent by the Faculty of Arts in the University of Paris to the General Chapter of the Order of Preachers meeting at Lyons, we read: "[T]his news which wrings a cry from our lips though we know not what to cry (love, indeed, would choose to stay silent, but so great a sorrow clamours for expression), is that the venerated Master, brother Thomas of Aquino, has been called for ever out of this world. Who could have expected that divine Providence would permit it - that this morning star which shone on the world, that the light and glory of our time, this 'greater light which rules the day', should already be withdrawn from us? Truly it is as though the sun had withdrawn its splendour or suffered the overshadowing of an untimely eclipse, now that this light of the Church is put out." A translation of the letter may be found in K. FOSTER, OP, *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents*. Baltimore, Helicon Press, 1959, 153-55. Though I have not yet learned how it came about that St. Nicholas, to whom so many patronages already belonged, acquired his further role as patron of students, it seems oddly fitting in light of that role that the Church would later solemnly proclaim St. Thomas patron of all Catholic schools and scholars.

²⁴ The sarcophagus was carved by Nicola Pisano in 1265-67; the ornate upper section was added by Nicolò dell'Arca in 1469-73.

of St. Nicholas.²⁵ When Dominic decided shortly thereafter to go ahead with the founding of a convent of nuns in Bologna, he entrusted the affair to four brethren, one of whom was Master Paul of Hungary. A lecturer in canon law who later established a missionary province of the Order in Hungary, Paul wrote a manual for confessors, the *Summa de penitentia*, which he expressly dedicated *ad honorem Dei sanctique Nicholae*.²⁶ Needless to say, tracing all the special links between the Order of Preachers and the well-loved bishop would require a separate study. It is enough to know that the Dominicans – in this respect no different from the generality of believers from one end of Christendom to the other – showed a regular, strong, public devotion to St. Nicholas. Thus one may reasonably assume that, in company with everyone from pope to peasant, St. Thomas would have been acquainted with the received *vita Nicolai*, and there can be little doubt he celebrated his feast and called upon his intercession with that habitual fervor of spirit to which all the early witnesses testify. It would not matter which liturgical books Thomas was accustomed to reading, as there was no missal or breviary of the period that could have lacked prayers and propers for the feast of St. Nicholas, a feast of ancient provenance and universal diffusion. The Dominican Missal, definitively established by Bd. Humbert of Romans in 1255/56 and papally approved in 1267, mandates, as do Western rites in general, the celebration of the feast of St. Nicholas on December 6. The Epistle and Gospel appointed for the day are the same in the Dominican Missal as in the *Missale Romanum*: Hebrews 13:7-17 and Matthew 25:14-23.²⁷

This prominent shepherd of the early Church is mentioned several times in St. Thomas's writings, and it may not be without significance that all mentions but one appear in works composed in the last seven years or so of his career.²⁸

(1) *Summa theologiae*, II-II. A touching remark comes in a discussion of whether a benefactor is permitted to hide his benefaction, even though doing so will make it

²⁵ See the account from the *Chronicle* of St. Agnes' Monastery in S. TUGWELL, OP, trans., *Early Dominicans*. Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1982, 395.

²⁶ I have this detail from Mark Johnson, who is working on a critical edition of Paul's *Summa*. On Paul of Hungary, see TUGWELL, *Early Dominicans*, 396, 426.

²⁷ The Introit (*Statuit ei Dominus testamentum pacis*), Collect (*Deus, qui beatum Nicolaum Pontificem*), Secret (*Sanctifica, quaesumus Domine Deus, haec munera*), and Postcommunion (*Sacrificia, quae sumpsimus, Domine*) also concur, but the Gradual, Alleluia, Offertory antiphon, and Communion antiphon differ. The Roman Missal has for its Gradual, *Inveni David*; for the Alleluia, *Justus ut palma*; for the Offertory, *Veritas mea*; for the Communion, *Semel juravi*. The Dominican Missal, on the other hand, has for its Gradual, *Ecce sacerdos magnus*; for the Alleluia, *Justus germinabit*; for the Offertory, *Justus ut palma*; for the Communion, *Beatus servus*. All eight of these chants are very ancient and appear frequently in the common Masses for martyrs, bishops, confessors, and doctors. I am indebted to Fr. Giles Dimock, OP, for conveying to me the Propers from the Dominican Missal.

²⁸ I do not review these texts in their probable chronological order, but according to a natural concatenation of ideas.

impossible for the recipient to show his gratitude, and hence leave him no choice, as it seems, but to be ungrateful. Thomas responds to the objection:

He that is unaware of a favor conferred on him is not ungrateful if he fails to repay it, as long as he is ready to repay it should he come to know it. Nevertheless, it is sometimes praiseworthy that the recipient of a favor should remain in ignorance of it, both in order to avoid vainglory, as when blessed Nicholas threw gold into a house secretly, wishing to avoid human applause; and because the favor is all the more ample when the benefactor takes into account the shame of him who receives the favor.²⁹

(2) *Conferences on the Angelic Salutation*. Thomas has in mind the same deed of almsgiving when he notes that the Mother of God "exercised the works of *all* the virtues, whereas the saints were conspicuous in the exercise of specific virtues: one was especially humble, another chaste, another merciful, and so in them is given a model of that specific virtue, as for instance blessed Nicholas as a model of mercy."³⁰

²⁹ *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 107, a. 3, ad 4: "Ad quantum dicendum quod ille qui ignorat beneficium non est ingratus si beneficium non recompenset, dummodo sit paratus recompensare si nosset. Est autem laudabile quandoque ut ille cui providetur beneficium ignoret: tum propter inanis gloriae vitiationem, sicut beatus Nicolaus, aurum furtim in domum proiciens, vitare voluit humanum favorem; tum etiam quia in hoc ipso amplius beneficium facit quod consulit verecundiae eius qui beneficium accipit." The editors of the one-volume Editions Paulinae *Summa theologiae* (Milan, 1988) cite three sources here: Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*; Mombritius, *Sanctuarium*, Vita B. Nicolai Episcopi; the Dominican Breviary, fourth reading for the Matins of December 6. Sources agree in specifying a bag of gold for each of the pitiful maidens. Would it be fanciful to see here, too, a connection with Thomas's last great enterprise of intellectual mercy, the *Summa theologiae*? As Nicholas anonymously threw three bags of gold into the poor man's house, so Thomas throws three bags into our house – the *Prima Pars*, the *Secunda Pars*, and the *Tertia Pars* – anonymously, a humble conveyor of "golden straw" whose only errand is to give it freely to the poor, not drawing our attention away from the treasure of sacred doctrine by obtruding his individual personality.

³⁰ *In salutationem angelicam expositio*, art. 1, n. 1116: "Ipsa etiam omnium virtutum opera exercuit, alii autem sancti specialia quaedam: quia alius humilis, alius castus, alius misericors; et ideo ipsi dantur in exemplum specialium virtutum, sicut beatus Nicolaus in exemplum misericordiae etc.," in *Opuscula theologica* (Marietti ed., 2:240). It is interesting to note the close parallels between this text and a passage in Bd. Humbert of Romans' treatise *On the Formation of Preachers*, written sometime shortly after 1263. According to Humbert, there are three reasons why we celebrate saints' days: to give honor to the saints, "to provide us with an example, and this is why there should be a sermon making known the saint's life," and to win the saint's help. "Now among the saints, the highest reverence is due to the blessed Virgin," who is holiest, highest in rank, and most powerful. "Also there is no better model for us among all the holy men and women. Some among them possessed some good qualities, but they also possessed some bad qualities. But she is not like that. She is a model with no blemishes at all... And there have been many holy men who had real virtues, but imperfectly. But her virtues were absolutely perfect... Also there are many holy people in whom an example can be found of many virtues, but not of all virtues. But she offers an example of all virtues... This shows what an outstanding model she is for us, because she was pure and perfect and complete" (TUGWELL, *Early Dominicans*, 355-7).

(3) *Commentary on John*. Meditating on the mystery of predestination in his comments on John 5:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father, who sent me, draws him," Thomas underlines that *all* blessings we receive originate simply in God's will. To illustrate the point, he mentions three saints and their God-given roles:

The reason why in His Church he made some apostles, some confessors, and others martyrs, is for the beauty and completion of the Church. But why He made Peter an apostle, Stephen a martyr, and Nicholas a confessor, there is no reason other than His will. In this way is laid bare the weakness of our human powers and the assistance granted us by divine help.³¹

(4) *Commentary on the Sentences*. The most astonishing instance of God's help aiding our weakness is baptism, which transforms a child of wrath into an adopted child of the Father. At one point in the *Scriptum super Sententiis*, Thomas, using the Greek baptismal formula as an objection against the Latin, has to think up a sample name for his argument. "The Greeks have this form of baptizing: 'The servant of Christ, Nicholas, is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'"³² The hypothetical name is not mentioned again in the context; one may wonder why it occurred to Thomas to choose it in the first place. He might, of course, have read the example in another text and just reproduced it without further thought. But if it was his own choice, the possibilities are more intriguing. Did he associate the name in a special way with the Greeks, the Eastern Church? Did he have a reason for associating this Christian name with the sacrament of baptism? Could it simply be that he had St. Nicholas in the back of his mind, or in his heart, and so the name emerged spontaneously when he reached for an example?

(5) *Commentary on First Timothy*. On the passage where the Apostle is exhorting Timothy to cherish the grace of his calling (1 Tim. 4:14), Thomas comments that "in the primitive Church, where elections [of bishops] took place for God's sake and without corruption, no one was drawn up to the episcopal rank except by a divine election,

³¹ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, cap. 6, lec. 5, n. 938: "Similiter etiam quare in ecclesia aliquos fecit apostolos, alios confessores, alios martyres, ratio est propter ecclesiae decorem et complementum. Sed quare Petrum fecit apostolum, Stephanum martyrem et Nicolaum confessorem, non est alia ratio nisi voluntas sua. Sic ergo patet humanae facultatis defectus, et auxilii divini subsidium" (Marietti ed., 177).

³² *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* [=Sent.] IV, d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, qa. 2, arg. 1: "Graeci enim hanc formam baptizandi a sanctis Patribus habent: «Baptizetur servus Christi Nicolaus in nomine Patris etc.» Sed apud omnes est unum baptismum. Ergo et noster similiter baptismus fieri posset" (Moos ed., 118). Citations of the *Scriptum* are from the Mandonnet-Moos edition in four vols. (Paris, Lethielleux, 1929-1947), except for *Sent.* IV, d. 23 et seq., where the text is from the Busa edition.

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as Ambrose and Nicholas were elected."³³ The story of the miraculous elevation of Nicholas was widely known, though tellings differ in matters of detail. The elderly bishop of Myra had died, and no one could agree on who the new bishop should be. Several priests had the same dream: they were to select as bishop the first man who walked through the cathedral doors for morning prayer the next day. This man turned out to be Nicholas, already a priest, but still young and a stranger in Myra. He was more than a little surprised when informed of his impending consecration, and though he resisted at first, he recognized in the dreams a divine decision, and submitted.

(6) *Commentary on Hebrews*. Thomas alludes to the same incident in support of his contention that God may be trusted to single out worthy candidates.

It is contrary to nature that something lead itself to a state higher than its own nature, just as air does not make itself fire, but this is done by something higher than it. Hence, he does not have the discipline of God who takes to himself any honor by way of favor, money, or power. "In our strength we have taken up our horns" (Amos 6:14); "They have reigned, but not from me" (Hos. 8:4). He ought rather to be called by God, as was Aaron: "Take unto thee Aaron" (Ex. 28:1). And therefore the Lord confirmed Aaron's priesthood by the rod which blossomed, as is clear from Numbers 17:5. Such therefore ought to be taken up [into the priesthood or episcopate], who do not thrust themselves forward. Whence in former times such men were pointed out by a visible sign, as occurred with blessed Nicholas and many others.³⁴

The Lord's choice falls on those who do not thrust themselves forward, but who remain humble, totally focused on Him. He confirms the office of the ones He loves. Eventually, He gives a sign of His favor: there is a "blossoming rod" in the life of every saint. In the legend of the betrothal of Joseph and Mary, the Lord signifies his choice of Joseph as the worthy spouse by causing his staff to sprout lilies.³⁵ Again, the Christ-

³³ *Super I ad Timotheum* 4, lec. 3, n. 173: "Nam in primitiva ecclesia, ubi pure et propter Deum electiones fiebant, nullus assumebatur ad episcopatum nisi per electionem divinam, sicut electus est Ambrosius et Nicolaus" (in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura* [Marietti ed., 2:245]).

³⁴ *Super ad Hebraeos* 5, lec. 1, n. 249: "Hoc est enim contra naturam, quod aliquid perducatur se ad statum altioiorem sua natura, sicut aër non facit seipsum ignem, sed fit a superiore. Unde disciplina Dei non habet, quod quisquam sibi sumat honorem favore, pecunia, potentia. Am. 6:14: «In fortitudine enim nostra assumpsimus nobis cornua». Os. 8:4: «Ipsi regnaverunt, et non ex me». Sed debet vocari a Deo sicut Aaron. Ex. 38:1: «Applica ad te Aaron». Et ideo Dominus confirmavit sacerdotium eius, sicut patet Num. 17:5 ss., per virgam quae floruit. Tales ergo debent assumi, qui non se ingerunt. Unde antiquitus signo visibili ostendebantur, sicut patet de beato Nicolao, et multis aliis" (Marietti ed., 2:390).

³⁵ Cf. *Golden Legend*, 1:197 and 2:153; *Butler's Lives*, 1:631.

Child, having been borne over the raging river on the giant shoulders of Christopher, commands him to plant his great staff in the sand. The next day, it is found blooming with flowers and dates.³⁶

III. Aquinas's sermon in honor of St. Nicholas

The texts we have considered so far are parenthetical asides, calling to the reader's mind a well-known model of virtue – quiet beneficence, mercy, faithfulness, humility. And in truth, we find little more from St. Thomas's pen when it comes to most of the saints, apart from the Mother of God or the Apostles. Typically, Thomas will appeal to the example of a saint or saints when he wishes to illustrate a moral or spiritual point; they are, as it were, the embodiment of abstract truth. He has "favorite saints" for this purpose, including Lawrence, Stephen, Vincent, Martin, and Agnes. Surprisingly, the twin luminaries of mendicant life, Dominic and Francis, receive scarcely any mention in his entire corpus, a fact that witnesses perhaps to Thomas's preference for grounding arguments and exhortations either in scriptural citations or in philosophical axioms.³⁷ Thomas's near-silence stands in contrast to the volubility of his contemporary Bonaventure, who prepared a detailed life of Francis, the *Legenda Maior*. One should not, however, make too much of this contrast. Bonaventure became Master General of his order at a time when the discord and bitterness of rival factions threatened its very existence. In 1260 Bonaventure was *asked* by his confreres to provide an authoritative account of the founder that could serve as an instrument of reconciliation and focus of unity. The circumstances surrounding the *Legenda's* composition had no analogue in the life of Thomas, who forswore offices in his order or in the Church, and whose own order enjoyed (comparative) peace and stability. It seems to be more in keeping with the "timeless" quality of his predominantly speculative work that the historical illustrations Aquinas does offer tend to be drawn from a venerable common heritage – that which has been known "since time immemorial." Holy men and women such as Stephen, Lawrence, Nicholas, Agnes, Cecilia, have a massive facticity, a universal familiarity, about them: they are the ones commemorated in the liturgy, celebrated in verse, chiseled into stone, depicted in glass; it is their intercession Chris-

³⁶ Cf. *Golden Legend*, 2:12.

³⁷ In his sermon on the text *Homo quidam erat dives*, "There was a rich man who had a steward" (Lk. 16:1), he says: "[The Lord] raised up glorious ministers, namely blessed Dominic and blessed Francis, who acted as ministers of salvation to men; and to achieve this goal, they undertook with zeal the work of leading men to salvation. And all the saints have sought to be ministers of salvation to men, and glorious is the fruit of these good labors" ("Item suscitavit gloriosos ministros, scilicet beatos Dominicum et Franciscum qui administrarunt salutem hominum, et ad hoc fuit ipsorum spirituale studium ut homines inducerent ad salutem, et omnes sancti quaeiverunt administrare salutem hominum, et bonorum laborum gloriosus est fructus" [Busa, 6:38a]). See L.-J. BATAILLON, OP, "Les stigmates de Saint François vus par Thomas d'Aquin et quelques autres prédicateurs Dominicains," in: *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 90 (1997), 341-47.

tendom daily invokes. They have, in a sense, merged into the Tradition that stands alongside Scripture as a font of Church teaching.

Nevertheless, we cannot guard too carefully against premature conclusions regarding the mention of individual saints. We know, for example, that Thomas had a lively personal devotion to St. Agnes, a relic of whom he wore about his neck (indeed, it was through the devout use of this relic that Thomas obtained healing for a desperately ill Reginald of Piperno³⁸) – yet in the course of thousands of pages, Agnes is mentioned a mere half-dozen times, about the same number of mentions Nicholas has received in the passages reviewed thus far.

Given these facts, it is all the more remarkable that among those rare echoes transmitted to us of Master Thomas the university preacher, we should find an entire sermon devoted to the praise of St. Nicholas.³⁹ An offhand reference to the crowded “Little Bridge” over the Seine places the sermon in Paris. Thomas is likely to have preached it there during his second period as Regent Master – that is, on the sixth of December in 1269, 1270, or 1271⁴⁰ – before returning to Naples where he was to suffer a shattering ecstasy on the same date in 1273. The fact that Nicholas, though beloved to all, was invoked also as a special patron of scholars suggests an added importance his feastday may have enjoyed in Paris. It bears noting, too, that many of Thomas’s students, the “cream of the crop” among clerics, were destined for high office in the Church, often episcopal honors.⁴¹ This would make the example of the holy Bishop of Myra all the more relevant to a Parisian audience – a point not lost on Thomas, who, using the second person singular, forcefully warns his listeners: “If

³⁸ See J.-P. TORRELL, OP, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*. Trans. R. Royal. Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 1996, 271 and 283, with note 77.

³⁹ A translation of this sermon in its entirety is appended to this article. Although the sermon in question, «Inueni Daud», is not listed in G. Emery’s “Brief Catalogue of the Works of Saint Thomas Aquinas” (in TORRELL, *Thomas Aquinas*, 330-61; cf. 358-59), Bataillon in his unpublished preface supports the authenticity of this sermon on the basis of external and internal criteria. The research of Fr. Torrell and Fr. Bataillon has greatly enriched our knowledge of Thomas the preacher. For an overview of the subject, see TORRELL’S *Saint Thomas*, 1:69-74, and for a detailed treatment, IDEM, “La pratique pastorale d’un théologien du XIII^e siècle, Thomas d’Aquin prédicateur,” in: *Revue thomiste* 82 (1982), 213-45, reprinted in *Recherches thomasiennes*, Paris, J. Vrin, 2000, 282-312. Relevant studies by BATAILLON include “Les sermons attribués à saint Thomas: Questions d’authenticité” in *Thomas von Aquin*, ed. Albert Zimmermann, *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 19. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1988, 325-41; “Un sermon de saint Thomas d’Aquin sur la parabole du festin,” in: *RSPT* 58 (1974), 451-56; “Le sermon inédit de saint Thomas, *Homo quidam fecit cenam magnam*: Introduction et édition,” in: *RSPT* 67 (1983), 353-68; “Béatitudes et types de sainteté,” in: *Revue Mabillon* n.s. 7 [68] (1996), 79-104.

⁴⁰ In 1271, the feast of St. Nicholas fell on a Sunday, and hence if Thomas preached the university sermon at Saint Jacques on that day he could reasonably have taken Nicholas as his theme. However, St. Thomas also makes reference to the stigmata of St. Francis, suggesting that it might have been a weekday sermon delivered to the Franciscans.

⁴¹ I owe this insight into the composition of Thomas’s audience to Fr. Sulavik, as well as the references to Schneyer’s *Repertorium* in the following notes.

you are doing good in order to get prebends, you are serving yourself, not God. A good bishop ought not to be like these sorts of people, but rather he ought to be upright [*innocens*] in his own person, devout before God, merciful to his neighbor, faithful in all things in respect to everyone."⁴²

The sermon is structured around two verses applied to sainted bishops and therefore regularly preached upon: "I have discovered David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him; my hand will help him, and my arm will strengthen him" (Ps. 88:21-22). Many Parisian preachers took this text for their sermons in honor of Nicholas on December 6. With the aid of Johannes Baptist Schneyer's *Repertorium*,⁴³ a fair number can be identified, with the probable year of delivery stated when known: Guidardus de Laon (Master and canon at Paris, *cancellarius* in 1236) between 1226 and 1229,⁴⁴ Jacobus de Vitry,⁴⁵ Nicholaus de Aquaevilla,⁴⁶ Odo de Châteauroux (Paris Master) in 1228,⁴⁷ Petrus Aureoli (Paris Master) between 1318 and 1320.⁴⁸ The text is particularly well-suited for the feast of St. Nicholas, since, as noted earlier, his body was known to exude a sweet-smelling oil possessed of healing power, a fact to which Thomas refers near the end of his sermon. After his introductory remarks (which include the statement: "we are not able to scrutinize these wonders that God accomplishes in his saints unless he who searches the mind and heart should instruct us"), the Angelic Doctor divides his sermon into four parts, the "four commendable things about this holy bishop: first, his wondrous election; second, his singular consecration; third, his effective execution of office; and fourth, his unshakable and steadfast stability."⁴⁹

One cannot do justice to this admirable sermon without going through it line by line, but for our purposes it will be enough to consider a few lines that, while paying homage to the saint of the day, make transparent the hidden, interior life of

⁴² Since the Latin text I am working from is not yet approved for publication, I will not quote from it at length in the notes.

⁴³ J. B. SCHNEYER, *Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones des Mittelalters für die Zeit von 1150-1350* [RLSM], Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, vol. 43.1-11. Münster, Aschendorff, 1969-1990.

⁴⁴ RLSM 2:266-67, nn. 192, 195-197, 199.

⁴⁵ RLSM 3:205, n. 287.

⁴⁶ RLSM 4:195, n. 63.

⁴⁷ RLSM 4:436, n. 525.

⁴⁸ RLSM 4:588, n. 74. This same incipit was also used in sermons for the feast of St. Martin of Tours by the Paris Masters Bartholomaeus de Tours, OP, between 1258 and 1259 (cf. RLSM 1:438, n. 26) and Bartholomaeus de Bonnia, OM (cf. RLSM 1:388, n. 17).

⁴⁹ The fourth part is lacking in the manuscripts. In his unpublished preface, Fr. Bataillon offers three possible explanations: the original auditor or copyist grew weary and failed to write it down or copy it; Thomas announced four parts but ended the sermon after part three, evidently a common enough occurrence in medieval sermons; the fourth part was delivered separately as an evening *colatio*, again a common practice, and has not come down to us.

the preacher who was soon to join him in heaven. The Lord, says Thomas, discovers in Nicholas "something very rare, namely, virtue in the prime of his youth"; "he was not subject to vanity" and had "preserved his holiness from childhood... Fish and fruit in season are very much desired; so, too, very desirable to God is the man who carries the Lord's yoke from his youth." The preacher asks: "What does the Lord seek?," and answers:

Surely, he seeks a faithful soul, hence [we read] in John (4:24): *God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.* And why does God seek out the man with a faithful soul? I say: whoever takes delight in dwelling with another person seeks out that person. So it is with God, because it gives Him delight to dwell with a faithful soul. Hence he says: *My delights are to be with the children of men* (Prov. 8:31). And God discovered in blessed Nicholas a faithful soul, because he was frequently in church, faithfully at his prayers; so, what is said in Hosea (12:4) is suitably said of him: *He wept and made supplication to him...*

Shortly thereafter Thomas poses another question: "What makes a person stand out? I say that nothing makes a person so outstanding as piety and a ready will to do good for others." As in the contemporaneous *Secunda secundae*, the example cited is that of Nicholas's gift of gold to relieve the poverty of the virgins. "A servant is one who carries out his lord's work; and the principal work of the Lord is mercy." Then, concerning Nicholas's faithfulness, Thomas makes a remark that could be taken as a theologian's fundamental rule of life no less than a bishop's: "A faithful man must be a servant, so that he refers all that is his to God" (or "offers everything of his own back to God"): *fidelis debet esse seruus ut omnia sua in Deum referat.* We are told how oil in its varied uses can serve as metaphor of spiritual realities: oil heals wounds, as does healing grace; it fuels light, symbol of the desire for wisdom; it flavors food, as spiritual joy seasons good works; it softens, "and this signifies mercy and kindness of heart, both of which blessed Nicholas possessed, since he was utterly filled with mercy and devotion." (At this point Thomas gives a twist to the familiar Neoplatonic axiom *bonum est diffusivum sui*: "Oil is diffusive of itself; mercy is the same way.") A few lines later he asserts that the glorified bodies of the saints will bear the evidence of their due rewards, "and even in this life the signs of their affection appear": thus the body of blessed Francis showed "the signs of the passion of Christ, so vehemently was he affected" by this Passion.⁵⁰ It is at this point that Thomas mentions how the tomb of

⁵⁰ See BATAILLON, "Les stigmates de Saint François vus par Thomas d'Aquin."

Nicholas sweats oil, "indicating that he was a man of great mercy." As with question 21 of the *Prima Pars*, so here, too, one cannot help noticing the tremendous weight Thomas gives to the theme of *misericordia*; in this short sermon, the word or one of its variants is used fifteen times, and the notion is hinted at in a dozen other ways.⁵¹

At the sermon's close, Friar Thomas lauds Nicholas as "filled with the power to perform miracles" wrought by the hand of the Lord.

Who is there that has ever sought the glory of the world and obtained it as did blessed Nicholas, who was but a poor bishop in Greece? The Lord adorned him with miracles because he showed the greatest mercy. *Know that the Lord has made wonderful his holy one* (Ps. 4:4). It was mercy that made blessed Nicholas an extraordinary man, and the Lord [Jesus Christ] strengthened him even unto everlasting life. May He lead us there, who lives [and reigns] with the Father and the Holy Spirit, [God, for ever and ever, Amen.]

All the virtues, all the good works of Nicholas that Thomas had praised briefly and singly in earlier writings, he here combines and amplifies in a discourse whose plain language, heartfelt appeals to listeners, and evident spirit of devotion give us a vivid glimpse of daily university life in medieval Paris, as well as a window into the personality of Friar Thomas.⁵²

IV. The Feast of St. Nicholas, 1273

The story of St. Thomas's decisive mystical experience at the close of his life has been told by all his biographers with varying shades of detail and diverse touches of art.⁵³ In keeping with my focus on St. Nicholas, I will take this opportunity to

⁵¹ See J. SAWARD, "Love's Second Name': Saint Thomas on Mercy," in: *The Canadian Catholic Review* 8.3 (1990), 87-97. As a modern biographer reminds us: "Thomas was no 'disembodied intellect.' Rather, he was a man of tender compassion, of affection for friends and family, of composure and mildness, of endless accommodation to others" (C. RENGERS, OFM Cap., *The Thirty-Three Doctors of the Church*. Rockford, TAN Books, 2000, 376). In all these ways the preacher of *Inueni David* was like the saint he extolled, however different were the ages in which they lived, the circumstances of their lives, and the work they undertook.

⁵² "It must not be thought that St. Thomas was forever abstracted and absent-minded. His writing shows much insight into the feelings and thoughts of others. As a preacher, he could move people to tears. The second part of the *Summa*, on morals, shows a masterful knowledge of human behavior and psychology, an awareness of circumstances and problems that affect responsibility. St. Thomas could be genial and a welcome guest to people interested in mundane affairs, who were completely out of the range of his own metaphysical thinking... His reputation was that of one who was kindly and lovable" (RENGERS, *Thirty-Three Doctors*, 378-79). Cf. TORRELL, *Thomas Aquinas*, 278-89.

⁵³ A closer narrative of the events surrounding December 6 and a discussion of their significance may be found in the article mentioned in note 4.

highlight a number of details that taken together yield a whole greater than the mere sum of its parts.

First, for the sake of background, it bears mentioning that the priory of San Domenico in Naples held a unique place in Thomas's life and, undoubtedly, in his affections. Having left Montecassino, Thomas enrolled in the fall of 1239 at the newly-created *studium generale* in Naples; he was then a youth of some 15 years. It was at this time that he first encountered the "preaching brethren" in the persons of John of San Giuliano and Thomas of Lentini, the only friars who had been allowed to stay at the priory church after Frederick II's expulsion of mendicants from his kingdom. It was at this Dominican priory that Thomas of Aquino received the habit from Thomas of Lentini no later than April 1244.⁵⁴ After his first Parisian regency (1252-1256) it is likely that Thomas returned to his home priory of Naples, from 1259 to 1261, before transferring to the priory in Orvieto.⁵⁵ And it was again to Naples that Thomas would return after his second Parisian regency (1268-1272).⁵⁶ Thus, it would not be surprising had a special bond formed between Thomas and the community and church of San Domenico: it was there that the seed of his lifelong vocation was planted, there that he was clothed as a mendicant preacher, there that he returned after two demanding periods of teaching in the busy and seldom placid university milieu of Paris.

In his final period in Naples, mid-1272 to early 1273, Thomas chose for his special place of prayer a chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas in the church of San Domenico, where he celebrated his morning Mass and spent time in meditation prior to Matins.⁵⁷ We know of a layman who attended Thomas's daily Mass – a man by the name of Nicholas Fricia.⁵⁸ The experience of December 1273 took place in this par-

⁵⁴ TORRELL, *Thomas Aquinas*, 4-12.

⁵⁵ TORRELL, *Thomas Aquinas*, 96-101; 118.

⁵⁶ TORRELL, *Thomas Aquinas*, 247-49.

⁵⁷ See TORRELL, *Thomas Aquinas*, 285; FOSTER, *Life of Aquinas*, 42, 107, 109; J. A. WEISHEIPL, OP, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works*, with corrigenda and addenda. Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 1983, 315, 320-21. For a detailed description of the Cappella di S. Nicola di Bari, see R. M. VALLE and B. MINICHINI, *Descrizione storica, artistica, letteraria della chiesa, del convento e de' religiosi illustri di s. Domenico Maggiore di Napoli dal 1216 al 1854*. Naples, Vaglio, 1854, 400-414. The original location of the chapel of St. Nicholas within the church differed from its present location, which dates from the rebuilding and reconfiguration of the church in 1283. Hence, the memorial tablet that announces "Sacellum hoc in quo D. Thomas Aquinas responsum a Cristo Domino audire meruit" etc., does not actually specify the correct location, although it has a kind of appropriateness given the continuity of patronage between the old chapel and the new (see VALLE and MINICHINI, 401-2).

⁵⁸ As reported by Bartholomew of Capua (cf. note 60): "... a domino Nicolao Fricia, qui intrabat scholas dicti fratris Thome et omni die ibat ad audiendum missam in dicto loco fratrum Predicatorum, quod idem frater Thomas, omni die, summo diluculo, celebrabat missam in capella sancti Nicolai..." A. FERRUA, OP, ed., *Thomae Aquinatis vitae fontes praecipue*. Alba, Edizioni Domenicane, 1968, 315.

ticular chapel, where the colloquy with the Crucified had taken place a few months earlier.⁵⁹ It is therefore beyond doubt that Thomas, while living in Naples, had a decided preference for praying in *this* chapel, to which he repaired twice a day. Whether this preference may be taken to indicate a personal devotion to St. Nicholas or resulted, rather, from other circumstances – that the chapel happened to be a convenient or well-appointed or out-of-the-way place, that Thomas favored its altarpiece or crucifix, or some such thing – cannot, of course, be settled on the basis of the available evidence. The most valuable piece of evidence, as earlier implied, is the frequency with which Thomas speaks of Nicholas in comparison to other saints of the same rank, which may well reveal to us an aspect of the friar's devotional life.

I turn now to the experience of 6 December. "While brother Thomas was saying his Mass one morning, in the chapel of St. Nicholas at Naples, something happened which profoundly affected and altered him. After Mass he refused to write or dictate; indeed he put away all his writing materials," testified Bartholomew of Capua in the canonization inquiry.⁶⁰ His *socius* Reginald was anxious and alarmed; he wanted to see the *Summa* finished, and kept pressing his master to tell him what had happened, what was going on. Had his master lost his mind from too much study?⁶¹ He must somehow be persuaded to carry on with his work! "Reginald, I cannot. All that I have written seems to me straw in comparison to the things I have seen, the things that have been unveiled to me."⁶² What was the meaning of this paradoxical event, which both crowned and crushed the saint? In the eloquent words of David Berger:

It seems likely that this silence, induced during that Holy Mass, was a mystical dumbness, which was the saint's answer to the

⁵⁹ A sacristan at San Domenico, Dominic of Caserta, bore witness that, on one occasion during these last months of 1273, he saw Friar Thomas rapt in prayer before the chapel's crucifix, which spoke to him in a clear voice: "You have written well of me, Thomas; what do you desire as a reward for your labors?" The friar replied: "Yourself alone, Lord." See G. K. CHESTERTON'S perceptive remarks on this reply: *St. Thomas Aquinas*, in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. 2. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986, 505-6.

⁶⁰ FOSTER, *Life of Aquinas*, 109. "[C]um dictus frater Thomas celebraret missam in dicta capella sancti Nicolai Neapoli, fuit mira mutatione commotus, et post ipsam missam nunquam scripsit neque dicavit aliquid, immo suspendit organa scriptionis in tertia parte Summe, in tractatu de Penitentia" (FERRUA, *Fontes praecipuae*, 318). "He 'hung up his writing instruments,' an obvious echo of Psalm 137.2: 'On the willows nearby, we hung up our harps'" (E. A. SYNAN, "Saint Thomas Aquinas: His Good Life and Hard Times," in L. A. KENNEDY, CSB, ed., *Thomistic Papers III*. Houston, Center for Thomistic Studies, 1987, 46). On the crucial place of Bartholomew of Capua as a source for the life of Aquinas, see TORRELL, *Thomas Aquinas*, 270-71, and L. H. PETITOT, OP, *The Life and Spirit of Thomas Aquinas*. Trans. C. Burke, OP. Chicago, The Priory Press, 1966, 153-54.

⁶¹ This is just the phrase we read in the account: "timens ne propter multum studium aliquam incurisset amentiam" (FERRUA, *Fontes praecipuae*, 319).

⁶² "Raynalde, non possum. Omnia que scripsi videntur michi palee respectu eorum que vidi et revelata sunt michi" (FERRUA, *Fontes praecipuae*, 319; cf. FOSTER, *Life of Aquinas*, 110).

ecstatic vision God had infused in him. Having once been blessed with this infused vision, which is but the last step to the beatific vision (*visio beata*) – so very close to that non-created, absolute, plain light of the divine existence, that light in which all divine perfections, the mildest of mercy, the most uncompromising justice and absolute freedom are wonderfully united in their one and only source – Thomas finds himself incapable of returning to the entangled, interwoven, and multifarious conclusions of the scholastic method, of returning to created theology. No longer is his eye that of the night bird, whose realm is the discursive darkness of temporality, but that of the eagle, who has risen high into the skies and who circles the sun in such fashion that he seems to stand still in all eternity and no longer wishes to divert his gaze from the inexhaustible abundance of the divine light.⁶³

“Good King Wenceslaus looked out on the feast of Stephen,” begins a much-loved Christmas carol. If one might paraphrase, why was it that “Good Saint Thomas looked up on the feast of Nicholas”? Seeing that the experience occurred not only on the feast of Nicholas, as is probable, but also in the very chapel dedicated to him, as is certain, we have more than enough reason to wonder why divine Providence linked the destiny of Thomas to the patronage of Nicholas. “With God in charge, there is no such thing as chance,” Padre Pio was in the habit of saying – whether aware or unaware that he was repeating an oft-stated view of Aquinas’s.⁶⁴ Even if our attempts to read God’s handwriting in history can meet with only partial success, our devotion to the Doctor of the *argumentum ex convenientia* impels us to make a suitable effort.⁶⁵

While all the saints lived heroically the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, each embodies them in a distinctive way; the virtues and gifts enter into fusion with, and are stamped by, personality and mission. Let us consider the kind of saint this bishop’s life and works portray. He is patron of sailors, captives, and poor brides. Nicholas is a saint of faith, interceding for those who embark upon treacherous voyages trusting in God’s help. He is a saint of hope, helping those who long to be delivered from prison. He is a saint of charity, giving of his substance to ensure that the bride may be presented to her spouse “in splendor... holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). The old Roman antiphon at Communion compares him to the sun,

⁶³ D. BERGER, *Thomas Aquinas and the Liturgy*. Trans. C. Grosz. Naples, Florida, Sapientia Press, 2004, 16.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., *ST I*, q. 22, a. 2; q. 103, a. 5 and a. 7, ad 2; q. 116, a. 1; *Summa contra gentiles* III.92.

⁶⁵ For an appreciation of the centrality and weight of the argument from fittingness in St. Thomas’s theology, see G. NARCISSE, OP, *Les Raisons de Dieu, Argument de convenance et esthétique théologique selon St. Thomas et Balthasar*. Fribourg, Editions Universitaires, 1997.

the moon, and the rainbow – the sun which from afar gives light to this lower world (*fides*), the moon which reflects the light of the sun of glory and anticipates it (*spes*), the rainbow which, joining earth and heaven, stands as symbol of the covenant between man and God (*caritas*).⁶⁶ The Dominican antiphon at Communion calls him the servant who is blessed to be found vigilant when his Master comes: watching in faith, sustained by hope, his heart occupied with the one thing needful.⁶⁷

How fitting that the spirit of *this* saint should have intervened so dramatically in the life of Friar Thomas! There is no voyage more perilous than launching into the depths of God. Searching for what the Fathers have said about the sovereign name "He who is," Thomas seizes upon the striking phrase of St. John Damascene: "comprehending all in itself, it contains being itself *as if an open sea of substance*, boundless, indeterminate" – a text Thomas quotes on four occasions, from the *Sentences* to the *Summa*.⁶⁸ Not God alone, but the works of Christ, too, are named a sea: "Mark how great a multitude of persons healed the Evangelists pass quickly over, not mentioning them one by one, but in one word traversing an unspeakable sea of miracles."⁶⁹ One is reminded of the saying of St. Athanasius: "such and so many are the Saviour's achievements that follow from His Incarnation, that to try to number them is like gazing at the open sea and trying to count the waves."⁷⁰ And while Thomas is

⁶⁶ The text of the antiphon: "Semel juravi in sancto meo: semen ejus in aeternum manebit: et sedes ejus sicut sol in conspectu meo: et sicut luna perfecta in aeternum: et testis in coelo fidelis" (Ps. 88:36-38). I interpret the last phrase, "witness in the skies," as a reference to the covenant made with Noah after the flood and symbolized by the "bow in the clouds" (Gen. 9).

⁶⁷ See note 27 on the Roman and Dominican propers for the feast of St. Nicholas.

⁶⁸ The first text (*Sent.* I, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1, ad 4) is also one of the most well-known of Aquinas's apophatic confessions: "dicit Damascenus, quod non significat quid est Deus, sed significat quoddam pelagus substantiae infinitum, quasi non determinatum. Unde quando in Deum procedimus per viam remotiois, primo negamus ab eo corporalia; et secundo etiam intellectualia, secundum quodveniuntur in creaturis, ut bonitas et sapientia; et tunc remanet tantum in intellectu nostro, quia est, et nihil amplius: unde est sicut in quadam confusione. Ad ultimum autem etiam hoc ipsum esse, secundum quod est in creaturis, ab ipso removemus; et tunc remanet in quadam tenebra ignorantiae, secundum quam ignorantiam, quantum ad statum viae pertinet, optime Deo jungimur, ut dicit Dionysius, et haec est quaedam caligo, in qua Deus habitare dicitur" (Mandonnet ed., 196-7). Other occurrences: *De potentia* q. 7, a. 5 (*Quaestiones Disputatae*, Marietti ed., 2:199); *De potentia* q. 10, a. 1, ad 9 (Marietti ed., 2:256); *ST I*, q. 13, a. 11. For commentary, see C. JOURNET, *The Dark Knowledge of God [Connaissance et inconnaissance de Dieu]*. Trans. J. F. Anderson. London, Sheed & Ward, 1948. At one point Dionysius himself calls God "a boundless ocean of light" (*CH* 9.3.261); see F. O'ROURKE, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*. Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1992, 218.

⁶⁹ *ST III*, q. 43, a. 4, quoting John Chrysostom: "Unde super illud Matth. 8:16, «Eiiciebat spiritus verbo, et omnes male habentes curavit», dicit Chrysostomus: «Intende quantam multitudinem curatam transcurrunt Evangelistae, non unumquemque curatum enarrantes, sed uno verbo pelagus ineffabile miraculorum inducentes»." The quotation appears also in the parallel passage of the *Catena aurea* on Matthew.

⁷⁰ ATHANASIUS, *On the Incarnation*. Trans. a Religious of C.S.M.V. Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993, n. 54, p. 93.

no Platonist who scorns the body as if it could only be a prison, he also makes his own the cry of the languishing lover held back from the full enjoyment of his beloved: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain... I long to be dissolved and to be with Christ" (Phil. 1:21, 23),⁷¹ "Who will free me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24) – the pilgrim whose heart aches with hope of safe haven, stung with remembrance of his true *patria* by the God-reflecting beauty of this world.⁷²

As much as his master St. Paul, this religious metaphysician is a captive and slave of Christ, in whose body "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead." Thomas was a slave of love, and what he loved he in part saw, but that vision drew him on to the limits of his strength and even beyond. And so he wrote the *Summa*, but could not, to his eternal honour, complete it; and perhaps the best comment on the great silence that envelops the last months of St. Thomas's life will again be found in words of St. Paul: "Not that I have already attained to it, that already I am perfect; but I press on to make it my own, as Christ Jesus has made me his own."⁷³

The traditional Epistle and Gospel for the Feast of Nicholas stress the theme of passing over from this life into the next. "We have not here a lasting city, but we seek one that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Mt. 25:21).⁷⁴ The body as such is no prison, but this mortal life is truly something to be delivered from. "Through such conceptions of ours God Himself is not seen as He really is, but is understood to be beyond understanding"; "while on pilgrimage our intellect does not attain to the very essence of his goodness," writes Thomas the young

⁷¹ Thomas calls this attitude of Phil. 1:23 the highest degree of charity, its peak intensity: see *ST II-II*, q. 24, a. 9.

⁷² Cf. *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus*, cap. 4, lec. 5, n. 337: "pulchritudo enim creaturae nihil est aliud quam similitudo divinae pulchritudinis in rebus participata" (Marietti ed., 113); *Sent. I*, d. 27, q. 2, a. 2, qa. 2, ad 3: "creatura non potest dici proprie verbum, sed magis vox verbi; sicut enim vox manifestat verbum, ita et creatura manifestat divinam artem; et ideo dicunt sancti, quod uno verbo Deus dixit omnem creaturam; unde creaturae sunt quasi voces exprimentes unum verbum divinum" (Mandonnet ed., 662).

⁷³ FOSTER, Introduction to *Life of Aquinas*, 22-23, citing Col. 2:9 and Phil. 3:12-13.

⁷⁴ Gerald Vann writes at the conclusion of his book on the life and work of St. Thomas, possibly without realizing the liturgical connection he thereby makes: "St. Thomas's first recorded question was 'What is God?' and it was when he had found the answer with a fullness not given to most men that he spoke of his writings as straw. It was time for him to go – to find that joy of which it is written, in contrast with all other joy, 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.' To that joy, all the volumes of his works are an introduction. And it is because of that, because they are solely concerned to give testimony, not to Thomas, but to the Light, that one finds in them a reflection of the glory of the Light." G. VANN, OP, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, reprinted as *The Aquinas Prescription*. Manchester, New Hampshire, Sophia Institute Press, 1999, 176-77.

baccalarius.⁷⁵ "God cannot be seen in his essence by a mere man unless he be separated from this mortal life," repeats the older *magister* in his last great work.⁷⁶ Although the believer is "liberated by the simple truth which always abides in the same way," and like a ship gliding over calm waters is "not tossed about by the unstable and changeable winds of diverse errors,"⁷⁷ the state of pilgrimage keeps the intellect plunged in the darkness of faith, restless to see the One in whom it believes. But faith and hope are nothing, all gifts and trials nothing, unless they are quickened by charity. Charity turns the soul to her Lord, the bride toward the bridegroom, and unites their wills in friendship – preparation in the realm of time for the soul's eternal embrace of her spouse, when at last it can be said unconditionally, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (Song 6:2).⁷⁸ The lover of God longs to lose himself in that "open sea" which, when seen, is no formless, dizzying expanse, but a face and a heart, the Face of the Lord, the Heart of Jesus.

Regarded with eyes of simple faith, there is every reason then to believe that Friar Thomas received his vision during Mass on the morning of December 6, 1273, through the intercession of St. Nicholas, who rescues the seafarer, frees the captive,

⁷⁵ *Sent. I, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, ad 2*: "per hujusmodi conceptiones nostras non videtur ipse Deus secundum quod in se est, sed intelligitur esse supra intellectum" (Mandonnet ed., 71); *Sent. IV, d. 48, q. 1, a. 3*: "in via... intellectus non attingit ad ipsam essentiam bonitatis ejus."

⁷⁶ *ST-I, q. 12, a. 11*: "ab homine puro Deus videri per essentiam non potest, nisi ab hac vita mortali separetur." It is like a refrain in questions 12 and 13 of the *Prima Pars*: "Deus in hac vita non potest a nobis videri per suam essentiam; sed cognoscitur a nobis ex creaturis" (13.1); "essentiam Dei in hac vita cognoscere non possumus secundum quod in se est: sed cognoscimus eam secundum quod repraesentatur in perfectionibus creaturarum" (13.2 ad 3); etc. Other texts that make the same point include *Summa contra gentiles* I.30 and III.49; *In Boetium De Trinitate expositio* 1.2; *In Post. analyt. 2, lec. 1*.

⁷⁷ See *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus* cap. 7, lec. 5, n. 739: "Ille enim qui veritati per fidem unitus est, bene cognoscit quam bene sit ei, sic veritati fidei adhaerendo; quamvis multi reprehendant ipsum sicut extasim passum, idest sicut fatuum et a se alienatum; etenim latet ipsos reprehendentes ex eorum errore, quod ipse sine dubio per veram fidem est passus extasim veritatis, quasi extra omnem sensum positus et veritati supernaturali coniunctus, quia ipse credens novit de seipso quod non est furens, ut ipsi dicunt, sed est liberatus per veritatem simplicem et semper eodem modo se habentem, ne circumferatur per instabiles et variables ventos diversorum errorum" (Marietti ed., 278).

⁷⁸ Though not as prominent in his theology of charity as the notion of *amicitia* adapted from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the language of "bridal mysticism" so familiar in monastic spirituality is by no means rejected by St. Thomas, but contributes an essential dimension to that theology. Examples of this language include *Super Ioan.* 12, lec. 5, n. 1673 (Marietti ed., 313); *ST II-II, q. 19, a. 2, ad 3*; *De virtutibus* q. 2, a. 12, obj. 24 and *Sent. IV, d. 31, q. 1, a. 2, obj. 2* (as undisputed premises in both places); *Sent. IV, d. 26, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3*. The following argument may also be advanced. Charity is best understood as a perfect friendship (cf. *ST I-II, q. 65, a. 5*; *II-II, q. 23, a. 1*). The most perfect friendship is, in principle, that between husband and wife (*SCG III, 123*: "Inter virum autem et uxorem maxima amicitia esse videtur," etc.). Therefore the best created or natural model of charity is the sacramental friendship of husband and wife, bridegroom and bride. However, discussion of the vast array of questions conjured up by these statements must await another occasion.

dowers the bride. Celebrating the sacred mysteries in honor of the great bishop, the Angelic Doctor was borne out of himself in an ecstasy of love that crowned his life of faith, suffering with such intensity the divine things about which he had preached and written, that he could barely speak, let alone write. This foretaste of glory is a fitting sequel to the tribute "You have written well of me, Thomas": the writings are given for no other purpose than to lead us to this glory. "In enticing us into knowledge of God, in drawing us onto the ground of *sacra doctrina*," Robert Barron aptly remarks, "Thomas Aquinas is offering us, not clear and distinct ideas, but rather a loving participation in God, a foretaste of heaven. He presumes that the one touched by this 'knowledge of God' will be seared and shaped and overwhelmed by the contact."⁷⁹

That these earlier words of praise had been projected *from a crucifix* in the chapel of St. Nicholas is significant in many ways. One stands out in connection with December 6. It was on the cross that our Lord's divinity was most of all hidden to the world, his wisdom most of all foolish.⁸⁰ There could be no moment in the life of Christ more favorable to the rationalism of Arius, who revered Christ as "a son of God," a creature uniquely favored and full of grace, martyred on Calvary as a model of unselfish love. But Nicholas, who "so far forgot himself as to give the heresiarch Arius a slap in the face,"⁸¹ rightly rejected this "death-dealing poison." If there is one truth around which Thomas centered his life, it was this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (Jn. 1:1, 1:14).⁸² "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Jacques Maritain appositely remarks:

The peculiar task of St. Thomas, the undertaking to which he was appointed by the Lord, was to bring the proudest and most intractable (because the most spiritual) of powers – I mean the mind, in all its apparel of riches and majesty, armed with all its

⁷⁹ R. BARRON, *Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master*. New York, Crossroad, 1996, 37; cf. 172-74. Barron describes sound theology as "mystical, prayerful, and transformative"; "its final purpose is to 'know' God, that is to say, to be one with God in intimate communion" (29).

⁸⁰ Cf. 1 Cor. 1:17-31; 2:7-8. In human judgment, the "hour" of the crucifixion is the antithesis of glory; in the Lord's purpose, it is the revelation of glory (cf. Jn. 17:1, 21:19).

⁸¹ *Butler's Lives*, 4:504.

⁸² "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30); "He that sees me sees the Father also" (Jn. 14:9). Cf. Mk. 14:61-62, Lk. 4:41, Jn. 17:5 and 17:24, 1 Cor. 1:24, 2 Cor. 1:19, Col. 1:13-20. That Peter and Paul appeared in a vision to Thomas when he was wrestling with the meaning of Isaiah is easily believed, for the theologian who, at the end of his life, tasted something of the rapture of Paul and heard an echo of the same *arcana verba* (2 Cor. 12:4) had throughout his life humbly made his own the confession of Peter: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16:16). Cf. Jn. 6:70, 11:27, and 20:31; Acts 8:37. Concerning this vision, see FOSTER, *Life of Aquinas*, 39.

speculative energies, all its logic and science and art, all the harshness of its fierce virtues which are rooted in being itself – to bring the mind (by compelling it to sobriety but never to abdication) whole and entire into the holy light of Christ, to the service of the Child-God lying in the manger between the ox and the ass. He has all the Magi behind him for the rest of time.⁸³

It would be difficult to imagine a more zealous lover of the full theandric reality of Jesus Christ than St. Thomas, who bows his head and bends his knee at the Name of Jesus, before applying his intellect to expounding the mystery of the Word Incarnate. As a boy Thomas is said to have refused to let go of a piece of paper on which the words AVE MARIA were written; as a dying man, he spoke to Cistercian monks of the Song of Songs, the epithalamium of Christ and the Church.⁸⁴ From start to finish, the Incarnation – in its historical reality, in its Eucharistic and ecclesial continuation, in its eternal truth – was the source and summit of his life, his prayer, his thinking. There is no disciple of Aquinas's work who does not sooner or later discern the gentle presence of Jesus as master and friend wherever the bread of sacred doctrine is broken and handed out. "The image of Christ pervades the entire edifice that is his philosophical, theological, and scriptural work... All that Thomas wrote is in service of the salvation offered in Jesus Christ."⁸⁵ For him as for all the Fathers of the Church, theology is inseparable from a richly sacramental Christology – "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus" (2 Cor. 2:14), "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3), "the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints" (Col. 1:26), "the living bread which came down from heaven... for the life of the world" (Jn. 6:51). St. Thomas's response to the Crucified, "Nothing but yourself, O Lord," and his deathbed confession before the saving Victim, "for love of whom I have studied and toiled and kept vigil," throw into bold relief the inner character of both the man and his work. With magnificent insight Maritain draws together these different threads. By being not only "the prince of metaphysics and sacred learning" but also "the doctor of the Blessed Sacrament," St. Thomas

⁸³ J. MARITAIN, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Angel of the Schools*. Trans. J. F. Scanlan. London, Sheed & Ward, 1942, 99-100.

⁸⁴ As recounted in the *Vita* of Bernard Gui (cf. FOSTER, *Life of Aquinas*, 55). Incidentally, among the monks crowded into the dying friar's room, mention must be made of three Nicholases who later participated in the canonization process: Nicholas, future abbot of Fossanova, Nicholas of Fresolino, and Nicholas of Piperno. See TORRELL, *Thomas Aquinas*, 269 and 291; FOSTER, *Life of Aquinas*, 84-86. For a comment on the story of the AVE MARIA parchment, to which there corresponds a similar story in a medieval *vita* of St. Nicholas, see TORRELL, *Thomas Aquinas*, 283, note 79.

⁸⁵ BARRON, *Spiritual Master*, 13, 15; cf. 25ff. See IDEM, "Thomas Aquinas' Theological Method and the Icon of Jesus Christ," in: *Doctor Communis* 49 (1996), 103-25.

thus achieves and consummates his function of servant of the eternal Word, the Word which enlightens the mind, the Word which is the archetype of all splendour, the Word which became incarnate and is hidden in our midst under the whiteness of bread... It is the same Truth which is eager to give itself to us all in light and in substance in the beatific vision and which meanwhile gives itself in light through doctrine and contemplation, in substance through the Eucharist... And was it not with one same love that Thomas preserves its integrity in doctrine, which is the created participation of primary Truth, and adored its presence in the Sacrament, the personification of primary Truth?⁸⁶

V. Theology is child's play⁸⁷

A final question. Why did Thomas experience the fulfillment of his theological aspirations on the feast of the saint under whose patronage gifts are given to little children each winter?⁸⁸ The question's anachronism is considerably lessened by the fact that God, the giver of every good gift (cf. Jas. 1:17), stands utterly outside of time. An answer is implicit in the accounts of Thomas's last days, which, remarks Seward, "are truly moving to read."

The big, heavy man, as silent and still as a babe asleep; the scholar at last without his pen. We can see Thomas and Reginald together, the friend anxious but finally accepting, the saint lost in contemplation of the divine beauty. By the "faithful testimony" of Reginald we are told that the last confession of Thomas was like that of a "five year old boy", suggesting not only the purity of infancy but also that childlike trustfulness commended by the Lord, who reveals his mysteries not to the clever but to babies.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ MARITAIN, *Angel of the Schools*, 118.

⁸⁷ For St. Thomas's understanding of God's creative playfulness and man's playful response, see the fascinating sketch by L. J. LAUAND, "Ludus in the Fundamentals of Aquinas's World-View," available at: www.hottopos.com/harvard2/ludus.htm. A passage from the proëmium of *In Boethii De ebdomadibus* captures this note: "sapientiae contemplatio convenienter ludo comparatur, propter duo quae est in ludo invenire. Primo quidem, quia ludus delectabilis est, et contemplatio sapientiae maximam delectationem habet: unde Eccli. XXIV, dicitur ex ore sapientiae: «spiritus meus super mel dulcis». Secundo, quia operationes ludi non ordinantur ad aliud, sed propter se quaeruntur. Et hoc idem competit in delectationibus sapientiae." The entire proëmium deserves close attention.

⁸⁸ True, it is only by a bizarre coincidence that he became associated with children – namely, the misinterpretation of the bags of gold as the severed heads of infants to whom Nicholas restored life (cf. *Butler's Lives* 4:504; 506).

⁸⁹ SEWARD, *Perfect Fools*, 83-84.

In the winter of this life's pilgrimage, the wintry dark from which the eternal summer of heaven seems impossibly distant, God comes with light and warmth to men and women who are, in their hearts, little children, relying upon Him and trusting in Him no matter what the season's weather may bring.⁹⁰ God pours out the riches of His fatherly love most abundantly on the most childlike, who attract His gaze by their open-eyed wonder, their confident trust, their never-ending flood of questions, their innocent joy.⁹¹ "In the exercise of his science, as in the conduct of his life, the theologian must convert and become like a child, recovering and preserving a sense of astonishment at the grandeur of what God has revealed in His Son."⁹² The Savior seals His nuptial covenant with the pure of heart who seek the one thing necessary. To be a theologian is to be in love with the truth of God, to give oneself confidently and humbly to that truth which anticipates us at every step. "The Word and the Spirit of Love are sent to us, and all the words of the science of faith and all affections within divine friendship are so many echoes and refractions of their presence."⁹³ The exemplar and fulfillment of theology is the beatific vision – a vision of the infinitely great by the infinitely small, the Creator who is Father by the creature who is His child, the Savior who is bridegroom by the saint who is His bride.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ For an exceptional treatment of the link between spiritual childhood and theology, see J. SAWARD, *The Way of the Lamb*. London, T&T Clark, 2000.

⁹¹ St. Thomas "moves from question to question with a breathtaking eagerness. He is always asking 'Why?' or 'What?' One might even say that Aquinas's whole system rests on a question... God, for him, is an answer to puzzlement (*admiratio*), an answer which leaves us with yet more questions" (B. DAVIES, OP, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, 15). What is more typical of a normal child than a stream of questions that only runs dry when adults grow impatient or cannot think of what to say? The model of the trusting, inquisitive child who "asks, seeks, knocks" is both point of departure and point of arrival in the overview of Aquinas given by M. DAUPHINAIS and M. LEVERING, *Knowing the Love of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2002, 1-2; 129-30.

⁹² J. SAWARD, *Cradle of Redeeming Love: The Theology of the Christmas Mystery*. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2002, 49.

⁹³ T. GILBY, OP, "The Dialectic of Love in the *Summa*," Appendix 10 in vol. 1 of the Blackfriars *Summa Theologiae*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964, 126.

⁹⁴ Cf. *ST I-II*, q. 4, a. 3, on the concurrence in beatitude of three things: beholding, embracing, and delighting, the resting of lover in beloved. Emboldened by the teaching of St. Thomas, Grabmann attempts to put this ultimate theology of the blessed into words: "Their total knowledge and love are uninterruptedly ordered in one continuous act toward God, the unveiled divine Love, whom they contemplate face to face. Their whole activity and life are an eternal, ineffably brilliant, glowing, and blessed ecstasy of love in this vision, enjoyment, and embrace of the infinite triune God." M. GRABMANN, *The Interior Life of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Trans. N. Ashenbrenner, OP. Milwaukee, Bruce, 1951, 36-37. On the comparison of metaphysics, earthly theology, and heavenly beatitude, see *ibid.*, *Interior Life*, 28. "This God-formed... knowledge of divine things will be possible and complete only in heaven, in the eternal unveiled vision of God. The present supernatural theology is merely a participation of the celestial theology, similar to the knowledge of God Himself in so far as through infused faith it adheres to God, the First Truth, on account of Himself" (*ibid.*). Cf. MARITAIN, *Angel of the Schools*, 66-67.

In his sermons on the Apostles' Creed, Thomas defines eternal life as the definitive union of man with God, which means seeing God face to face, giving Him perfect praise, enjoying the superabundant fulfillment of all desire and an inconceivable delight, "knowing all natures of all things, and all truth, and whatsoever we wish to know, as well as possessing whatsoever we desire to possess." It brings with it perfect security, without sorrow, toil, or fear, and the pleasant fellowship of all the blessed, magnifying the joy of each into the joy of all.⁹⁵ This is the paradise Nicholas won by practicing the mercy, humility, and faithfulness God had poured into his heart; this is the paradise Thomas won by living the same virtues. Each in due course became a great saint and preacher of wisdom by turning to become a little child and a fool for Christ. May we, by doing the same here and now, join these two merry men in their eternal rejoicing.

Abstract

As biographers of St. Thomas have often observed, the personality and interior life of the Angelic Doctor must be judged by signs, stories, and silences, since he himself left us no Confessions, no Apologia Pro Vita Sua. Yet, as recent authors like Jean-Pierre Torrell have demonstrated, a patient search uncovers many clues in the saint's writings, clues that offer valuable insights into his life and work. One subject that has never been closely investigated is the saint's relationship to another famous saint, Nicholas of Myra, on whose feast in 1273 Thomas experienced the mystical vision that led to the definitive cessation of his writings. In this article I argue that the date of the vision was no mere coincidence: a closer look hints at deep connections between the medieval mendicant and the beloved bishop. One fascinating piece of evidence is a Parisian university sermon preached in honor of St. Nicholas by Friar Thomas during his second regency (so, on December 6, 1269, 1270, or 1271) – a sermon that has only recently been discovered. This sermon is given to the public for the first time, in the form of a translation made from the provisional critical edition and appended to this article.

⁹⁵ *In symbolum apostolorum*, art. 12, nn. 1011-15, in *Opuscula theologica* (Marietti ed., 2:216-17).

Sermon on the Feast of Saint Nicholas¹

St. Thomas Aquinas

*I have discovered David my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him; my hand will help him, and my arm will strengthen him (Ps. 88:21-22).*²

The wonders of God are inscrutable to man, hence Job (5:9): *He does wondrous things and unsearchable*. Among these are the wonders God accomplishes in His saints, about which Augustine says: It is a greater thing to justify man than to create him,³ since creation passes away but justification endures. Hence, *God is wonderful in His saints* (Ps. 67:36).⁴ We are not able to scrutinize these wonders that God accomplishes in His saints unless He who searches the mind and heart⁵ should instruct us. Let us, therefore, hasten back to Him through prayer and ask him at the outset to grant me something to say, etc.⁶

I have discovered David my servant, etc. From these words we are able to learn four commendable things about this holy bishop: first, his wondrous election; second, his singular consecration; third, his effective execution of office; and fourth, his unshakable and

¹ Translated by Athanasius Sulavik, OP, from the provisional critical edition of the Leonine Commission. The translator is thankful to Louis-Jacques Bataillon, OP, for providing this text. All of the references to Thomas's sources, and most of the references to *loci paralleli*, are the work of Fr. Bataillon; remaining notes are the work of A. Sulavik and P. Kwasniewski. Thomas's quotations of Scripture are translated directly from his own words; chapter and verse are those of the Vulgate. Where modern editions differ in the numbering of chapter and verse, or where the RSV translation is importantly different, this will be noted for the sake of comparison. Thomas refers to the book after Wisdom as Ecclesiasticus; to avoid confusion with Ecclesiastes (Eccles.), we have substituted 'Sirach' ('Sir.') for 'Ecclesiasticus'. In Fr. Bataillon's judgment this sermon is most likely to have been preached in Paris on the sixth of December in 1269, 1270, or 1271.

² Ps. 89:20-21 (RSV): "I have found David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him; so that my hand shall ever abide with him, my arm also shall strengthen him." For a different application of these verses, cf. Thomas's prologue to his *Commentary on Ephesians*: "*Confirmavi ne a fide vacillarent, sicut artifex confirmat aedificium, ne cadat. Unde dictum est Petro Lc. xxii, 32: «Et tu aliquando conversus confirma fratres tuos,» quod fecit Paulus. Unde ei competit illud Iob iv, 4: «Vacillantes confirmaverunt sermones tui.» Confirmavit item ne pseudo timerent, sicut episcopus confirmat puerum ad robur contra pusillanimitatem, unde dictum est de David in Ps. lxxxviii, 21: «Inveni David servum meum, oleo sancto meo unxi eum; manus enim mea auxiliabitur ei, et brachium meum confortabit eum, nihil proficiet inimicus in eo,» etc."*

³ AUGUSTINE, *Tractatus in Iohannem*, tr. 72.13 on Jn. 14:12 (CCSL 36:508.1-4, 509.14-15; PL 35:1823): "*Judicat qui potest, utrum maius sit iustos creare quam impios iustificare.*" Cf. *Catena aurea in Ioh. 14:12*. St. Thomas often mentions this truth in the form of the phrase "*maius est iustificare impium quam creare mundum (uel celum et terram)*": cf. *Sent. I, d. 5, q. 1, a. 2, sc. 2; De veritate q. 27, a. 3, sc. 4; De potentia q. 3, a. 4, obj. 8; ST I-II, q. 113, a. 9; ST III, q. 43, a. 4, ad 2.*

⁴ Cp. Ps. 68:35 (RSV): "Terrible is God in his sanctuary..."

⁵ *cordium et renum*. Cf. Ps. 7:10; Jer. 17:10; Rev. 2:23.

⁶ As was customary in medieval writing, phrases whose natural completion would have been evident to the speaker or reader are often replaced with a curt "etc."; the same can be seen at the very end of this sermon, where a traditional doxology is expected.

steadfast stability.⁷ His wondrous election is pointed out in these words: *I have discovered David my servant*; his particular consecration is pointed out in these words: *with my holy oil I have anointed him*; his effective execution of office is pointed out in these words: *for my hand shall help him*; and his abiding steadfastness is pointed out in these words: *and my arm shall strengthen him*.

[His wondrous election]

Let us then look at what it [the text] says: *I have discovered David my servant*; and here we can consider four ways of understanding a discovery. A discovery implies rarity, investigation, disclosure, and conviction from experience.⁸

First, I say that a discovery implies rarity, because rare things are said to be discovered. It would be laughable to say: "I discovered people on the Little Bridge."⁹ But what is rare is said to be discovered, as we see in Proverbs (31:10) where it is asked: *Who shall discover a strong woman?* as if to say, only with difficulty is a strong woman to be found because a woman is naturally delicate and frail.

Secondly, things sought for are said to be discovered, as it says in Proverbs (2:4): *If you will seek for it as [other men seek for] money, you will find it*, namely divine knowledge.¹⁰ Moreover, the Gospel speaks about a woman searching for a lost coin, *until she finds it* (Lk. 15:8).

Thirdly, a discovery implies disclosure, as we read in the Gospel: *The kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household searching for a treasure hidden in a field; when he finds it, he goes and sells all that he has*, etc. (Mt. 13:44). When a treasure is brought forth from the earth and shown to others, then it is said to have been discovered.

Fourthly, a discovery implies conviction from experience. When a person doubts something and afterwards comes to know it with certainty, he declares: "I have discovered this to be so." And in just this way Solomon declares: *I have discovered that a woman is more bitter than death* (Eccles. 7:22).¹¹

The Lord *discovered* blessed Nicholas in these ways.

First, He discovered in him something very rare, namely, virtue in the prime of his

⁷ This fourfold division of Ps. 88:21-22 structures the remainder of the sermon. St. Thomas omits to discuss the fourth division, viz., the "abiding steadfastness" signified by "my arm shall strengthen him"; for three possible explanations of this omission, see P. KWASNIEWSKI, "Two Wonderworkers," note 49.

⁸ *raritatem, inquisitionem, apparitionem et experimentalem probationem*

⁹ A clear reference to the Little Bridge, located on the Seine in Paris, upon which classes were taught at the University of Paris. Thomas's reference to it establishes both the audience and place of this sermon, namely clerical students at Paris.

¹⁰ Prov. 2:4-5 (RSV): "[I]f you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God."

¹¹ Eccles. 7:26 (RSV): "I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters; he who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her."

youth, which is rare among youths¹²; hence it says in Proverbs: *Youth and pleasure are vain*.¹³ This is a *rara avis*,¹⁴ namely, that as a youth he was not subject to vanity; and because blessed Nicholas preserved his holiness from childhood, he is said to have been *discovered*. For he himself "while still a little boy used to afflict his body with much fasting."¹⁵ Also the saying in Hosea (9:10) [comes to mind]: *I discovered Israel like grapes in the desert, I discovered the sons of Israel as first fruits of the fig tree*.¹⁶ The fig ripens later than other fruits, but if it ripens in prime season it is said to be "discovered."¹⁷ Likewise, children who preserve their holiness from childhood are called the first fruits of a fig tree and are said to be discovered, and this is pleasing to God; thus in Micah [we read] (7:1): *My soul desired the first ripe figs*.¹⁸ Fish and fruit in season are very much desired; so, too, very desirable to God is the man who carries the Lord's yoke from his youth, as is said in Lamentations (3:27): *It will be good for a man, when he has borne the Lord's yoke from his youth*,¹⁹ because *a young man shall walk according to his way, even when he is old he will not depart from it* (Prov. 22:6).²⁰ At the same time, if such as these should depart from the path of holiness, they return to it more easily.²¹

Secondly, the Lord discovers in blessed Nicholas what He seeks. And what does the Lord seek? Surely, He seeks a faithful soul,²² hence [we read] in John (4:24): *God is spirit*,

¹² *scilicet tempestivam uirtutem que rara est in iuuenibus*. "Tempestivam" carries the note, first, of seasonable, opportune, timely; it then comes to have the sense of in one's prime, ripe, ready, mature. It can at times mean early.

¹³ In fact, Eccles. 11:10 (RSV): "Remove vexation from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity."

¹⁴ *rara avis*: cf. PERSIUS, *Sat.* 146; JUVENAL, *Sat.* 6.165; cf. also HORACE, *Sat.* II.2.26.

¹⁵ *Adhuc... corpus*: cf. *Officium S. Nicolai*, First Antiphon at Lauds. Rome, Santa Sabina, AGOP XIV-L-1, f. 275va.

¹⁶ The Vulgate reads: "I have found Israel like grapes in the desert, I saw their fathers like the firstfruits of the figtree in the top thereof..."

¹⁷ The point again seems to be that if one were to find fruits on a fruit tree before the usual season for it, one would go to one's companions with surprise and say: "I discovered fruit on that tree!" Later, when the fruits are expected, it would be strange to say that one had *discovered* them; it's common knowledge, the fruits are plain to see.

¹⁸ Mic. 7:1 (RSV): "Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the vintage has been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig which my soul desires."

¹⁹ Lam. 3:27 (RSV): "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth."

²⁰ Prov. 22:6 (RSV): "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

²¹ Here, we find an example where Thomas's preaching is influenced by his biblical exegesis. He appropriates the same insight he made as a *cursor biblicus* in his *Postill* (commentary) on *Lamentations* III, where he says, "Hic ostendit divinam misericordiam ex expectatione futurorum... bonum est viro cum portaverit jugum, timoris domini et amoris, ab adolescentia, ut fervens aetas deprimatur, et facilis ad bona assuescat. Prov. 22: adolescens juxta viam suam, etiam cum senuerit, non recedet ab ea." On the relationship between Aquinas's preaching and biblical exegesis, see L.-J. BATAILLON, OP, "Les sermons de saint Thomas et la *Catena aurea*," in *St. Thomas Aquinas, 1274-1974, Commemorative Studies*, ed. A. MAURER et al. Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974, 1:67-75.

²² *mentem deuotam*, and slightly below, *cum mente deuota*, etc.

and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. And why does God seek out the man with a faithful soul? I say: whoever takes delight in dwelling with another person seeks out that person. So it is with God, because it gives Him delight to dwell with a faithful soul. Hence He says: *My delights are to be with the children of men* (Prov. 8:31).²³ And God discovered in blessed Nicholas a faithful soul, because he was frequently in church, faithfully at his prayers²⁴; so, what is said in Hosea (12:4) is suitably said of him: *He wept and made supplication to Him, and He discovered him in Bethel*.²⁵ Bethel means "the house of God."²⁶ Notice how rightly it is said that *He discovered David*, for David possessed great virtues from his youth: he slew a bear and a lion,²⁷ he was preferred over all his brothers,²⁸ and he was also most devout. The Psalmist says: *As with the marrow and fat*, that is, of devotion,²⁹ *let my soul be filled* (Ps. 62:6)³⁰; and Sirach (47:1): *As the fat taken away from the flesh, thus was David separated from among the children of Israel*.³¹ And blessed Nicholas was eminently holy.

Thirdly, the Lord discovered in blessed Nicholas something outstanding,³² namely a pious affection. What makes a person stand out? I say that nothing makes a person so outstanding as piety and a ready will to do good for others.³³ God is hidden in Himself, yet He is revealed to us through the benefits He grants. So, in Sirach it is said about those who show pity toward others³⁴: *These were men of mercy, whose pious deeds have not failed* (44:10), and *the church declares their praise* (44:15).³⁵ And in another place it says: *The lips of many will praise him who gives freely of his bread* (Sir. 31:28).³⁶ Blessed Nicholas was especially

²³ Cp. Prov. 8:30b-31 (RSV): "I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world, and delighting in the sons of men."

²⁴ *assiduus fuit in ecclesia et deuota oratione*

²⁵ Cp. Hos. 12:4 (RSV): "He strove with the angel and prevailed, he wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with him..."

²⁶ JEROME, *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum*, Gen. B (CCSL 72:62, line 18; PL 23:775-76).

²⁷ Cf. 1 Kings 17:36 (Vulg.) or 1 Sam. 17:37 (RSV): "And David said, 'The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.'"

²⁸ Cf. 1 Kings 16 (Vulg.) or 1 Sam. 16, esp. verse 13a (RSV): "Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward."

²⁹ Cf. *ST I-II*, q. 82, a. 2, arg. 2: "devotio vero per pinguedinem"; *ibid.*, ad 2.

³⁰ Cp. Ps. 63:5 (RSV): "My soul is feasted as with marrow and fat, and my mouth praises thee with joyful lips..."

³¹ Sir. 47:2 (RSV): "As the fat is selected from the peace offering, so David was selected from the sons of Israel."

³² *apparens*, and in the next sentence, *apparere*

³³ *nihil reddit hominem ita clarum sicut pietas et benignitas ad alios*

³⁴ *pietatem exercent ad alios*. See note 64.

³⁵ Sir. 44:10, 15 (RSV): "But these were men of mercy, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten... Peoples will declare their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise."

³⁶ Sir. 31:23 (RSV): "Men will praise the one who is liberal with food..."

"sympathizing with and showing pity from his heart toward the afflicted,"³⁷ and indeed having given them gold, he relieved the poverty of virgins.³⁸ Thus, what Hosea (14:9) says can be applied to him: *From me is his fruit discovered.*³⁹ And this is why the Lord says rightly: *I discovered David, my servant.* A servant is one who carries out his lord's work; and the principal work of the Lord is mercy, as the Psalmist says: *And His tender mercies are over all His works* (Ps. 144:9).⁴⁰ Therefore, the Lord's servant is the one who exercises mercy toward the poor. As the Apostle says: *We are servants for Jesus' sake* (2 Cor. 4:5).

Fourthly, the Lord discovered in blessed Nicholas something tested by experience, namely faithfulness,⁴¹ which is greatly sought after; thus the Apostle says: *Now what is sought after in stewards, except that a man be found faithful?* (1 Cor. 4:2); and the Book of Wisdom (3:5) says: *He tested them, and found them worthy of Himself.* A faithful man must be a servant, so that he refers all that is his to God.⁴² You pray, you perform works of mercy, whatever kind of good you do, it is necessary that you should refer it to God. Hence it is said: *He has been tested in this, and was found perfect* (Sir. 31:10).⁴³ Blessed Nicholas is such a man, and for that reason he is called *my servant* (Ps. 88:21). Many people, on the other hand, do not serve the Lord but themselves; as the Apostle puts it: *They that are such serve not Christ but their own belly* (Rom. 16:18). If you are doing good in order to get prebends,⁴⁴ you are serving yourself, not God.

A good bishop ought not to be like these sorts of people, but rather he ought to be upright [*innocens*] in his own person, devout before God, merciful to his neighbor, faithful in all things in respect to everyone.

[His singular consecration]

We move on now to his consecration, which is indicated by these words: *with my*

³⁷ *compatiens et super afflictos pia gestans uiscera: Officium S. Nicolai*, First Responory at Matins. Roma, Santa Sabina, AGOP XIV-L-1, f. 274va.

³⁸ Cf. JACOBUS DE VORAGINE, *The Golden Legend*. Trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, 1:21-22.

³⁹ Cp. Hos. 14:8b (RSV): "I am like an evergreen cypress, from me comes your fruit."

⁴⁰ Cp. Ps. 145:9 (RSV): "The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made."

⁴¹ *aliquid experimentaliter probatum, scilicet fidelitatem*

⁴² or "offers everything of his own back to God": *Fidelis debet esse seruius ut omnia sua in Deum referat.*

⁴³ The full context: "Blessed is the rich man who is found blameless, and who does not go after gold. Who is he? And we will call him blessed, for he has done wonderful things among his people. Who has been tested by it and been found perfect? Let it be for him a ground for boasting. Who has had the power to transgress, and did not transgress, and to do evil and did not do it? His prosperity will be established, and the assembly will relate his acts of charity" (Sir. 31:8-11, RSV).

⁴⁴ Thomas was openly critical of the clerical abuses of his own day. One of the more reprehensible abuses involved certain clerics enrolled at the University of Paris who accepted one or more prebends or ecclesiastical benefices without providing pastoral care to their churches, enabling them to remain in studies for great lengths of time. See also *Quodlibet* V, q. 11, a. 3; *Quodlibet* I, q. 7, a. 1; *Quodlibet* VI, q. 5, aa. 2-4.

holy oil I have anointed him (Ps. 88:21). It should be noted that the consecration⁴⁵ of bishops and of certain others is done with oil; there is hardly any consecration for which we do not use oil. To show the power of oil, note that we use it for four reasons: namely, to heal a wound, to fuel light, to give flavor to food, and to soften.⁴⁶

First, I say that we use oil to heal. Thus in Isaiah we read (1:6): *Bruises and sores and bleeding wounds are not bound up, nor dressed nor softened with oil.*

Secondly, we use oil to fuel light, hence in Exodus (25:6) a precept was given to the sons of Israel that they offer *oil for making ready the lamps.*⁴⁷

Thirdly, we use oil to give flavor to food,⁴⁸ therefore we read that King Solomon sent Hiram oil as food.⁴⁹

Fourthly, we use oil to soften, thus it is said: *His words are smoother than oil* (Ps. 54:22).⁵⁰

First, I say that we use oil to heal a wound, through which [image] we understand healing grace. Thus we read in Luke (10:34) that the Samaritan who wanted to take care of a wounded man poured [on his wounds] *wine and oil*. The sick are anointed with oil, as James [instructs] (5:14): *Is any man sick among you? Let him bring in the presbyters of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil.*⁵¹ And since blessed Nicholas was anointed with the oil of healing grace, because he had full soundness of [spiritual] health and was equipped to anoint others, we are told that *wine and oil* were poured – that is to say, the wine of stern correction and the oil of mercy and comfort.

Secondly, we use oil to prepare lamps, and this signifies the studious quest for wisdom.⁵² It is said about this oil: *Let not oil be lacking from your head* (Eccles. 9:8), and in Zechariah (4:14): *These are two sons of glistening oil.*⁵³ Since oil functions as fuel for light, therefore the prophets were anointed with oil.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ In this sentence, *sanctificatio*; in the preceding sentence, *consecratio*.

⁴⁶ St. Thomas encountered these four reasons in a definition from Papias Vocabulista transcribed by William Brito in the *Summa Britonis*. "To fuel light" renders *ad fomentum luminis*; "to give flavor to food" renders *ad condimentum saporis*.

⁴⁷ Cf. also Ex. 27:20: "'And you shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may be set up to burn continually."

⁴⁸ *ad condimentum cibi*. Cf. Ex. 29:2, which speaks of "unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers spread with oil."

⁴⁹ Cf. 3 Kings 5:11 (Vulg.) or 1 Kings 5:11 (RSV): "while Solomon gave Hiram twenty thousand cors of wheat as food for his household, and twenty thousand cors of beaten oil. Solomon gave this to Hiram year by year."

⁵⁰ Ps. 55:21 (RSV): "His speech was smoother than butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords."

⁵¹ Thomas always interprets this verse as an explicit reference to the sacrament of extreme unction.

⁵² *sapientie studium*

⁵³ The Vulgate reads: "These are two sons of oil." Cp. Zech. 4:14 (RSV): "Then he [the angel] said, 'These are the two anointed who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.'"

⁵⁴ Cf. 3 Kings 19:16 (Vulg.) or 1 Kings 19:16 (RSV), the LORD speaking to Elijah: "and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place."

Thirdly, we use oil to give flavor to food, and this signifies spiritual joy. Just as seasonings make food tasty,⁵⁵ so also spiritual joy makes good works easy. When we are sad, even a small task seems difficult; but when we are joyful, even a difficult task seems easy. So, we find in the Psalms: *That He may make your face cheerful with oil* (Ps. 103:15).⁵⁶ *God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions* (Ps. 44:8).⁵⁷ And in Isaiah (61:3): *The oil of joy, in place of mourning*.⁵⁸ Therefore priests are anointed with oil, that is to say with the oil of gladness. From all this we see that spiritual gladness belongs to those who are surrendered over to divine worship⁵⁹; *Let your priests be clothed with joy*, etc. (Ps. 131:9)⁶⁰

Fourthly, we use oil to soften, and this signifies mercy and kindness of heart, both of which blessed Nicholas possessed, since he was utterly filled with mercy and devotion.⁶¹ It is said in Deuteronomy (33:24): *Let him be pleasing to his brothers, and let him dip his foot in oil*. Oil is diffusive of itself; mercy is the same way.⁶² Just as oil spreads over things, mercy spreads over every good work.⁶³ Therefore, unless you have mercy, your labors are nothing; hence the Apostle says: *Pity avails for everything* (1 Tim. 4:8).⁶⁴ You ought to consider that in the future, according to the merits of graces the evidence of rewards will

⁵⁵ *condimenta enim reddunt cibaria sapida*

⁵⁶ Cf. Ps. 104:14-15 (RSV): "Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart."

⁵⁷ Ps. 45:7 (RSV).

⁵⁸ Part of the prophecy of the Messianic good tidings: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, *the oil of gladness instead of mourning*, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified" (Is. 61:1-3, RSV).

⁵⁹ *ad illos qui sunt diuino cultui mancipati*. Cf. R. J. DEFERRARI, *A Latin-English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Boston, Daughters of St. Paul, 1986. S.v. *mancipo*: "to devote or consecrate to... to make subject to, enslave; to bind over, to give the right to another."

⁶⁰ The Vulgate reads: "sacerdotes tui induentur iustitia et sancti tui exultabunt." Cf. Ps. 132:9-10 (RSV): "Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness, and let thy saints shout for joy. For thy servant David's sake do not turn away the face of thy anointed one."

⁶¹ "Kindness of heart" renders *benignitas cordis*, a hearty will to do good for others; "devotion" renders *pietate*, which here carries also the connotation of 'pity'. Following Bede and Alcuin, St. Thomas discusses oil as a symbol of mercy in several places; cf. *Catena aurea in Ioh.* 8:1; *Lectura in Ioh.* 8:1; *Super Psalmos* 44:5; *Sermo Osanna Filio Dauid*.

⁶² *Oleum est sui diffusiuum, similiter misericordia* – reminiscent of the Neoplatonic axiom *bonum est diffusivum sui*.

⁶³ "spreads over": *superenatat*.

⁶⁴ A difficult verse to translate: *Pietas ad omnia ualet*. Older English translations rendered *pietas* with "godliness." St. Thomas often interprets the word to mean what we would call 'works of mercy' (compare the English derivative 'pity'), e.g., "pro eleemosynarum largitione" (*Sent.* IV, d. 15, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 3, arg. 1); "Glossa dicit, 1 Timoth., 4, super illud: «Pietas ad omnia ualet»: «Omnis summa

appear in the glorified bodies of the saints, and that even in this life the signs of their affection appear [in their earthly bodies].⁶⁵ This is evident in the case of blessed Francis, where the signs of the passion of Christ became visible, so vehemently was he affected by the passion of Christ.⁶⁶ In blessed Nicholas's case, signs of mercy appeared when "his tomb sweated oil,"⁶⁷ thus indicating that he was a man of great mercy. In Deuteronomy (32:13) we find: *So that he might suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the hardest stone.* This pertains to a king.⁶⁸

[His effective execution of office]

Next comes the way in which he carried out his office, when it says: *My hand shall help him* (Ps. 88:22), etc. God does not have a bodily hand, but His strength is called His

disciplinae christianae est in misericordia et pietate.» Sed in illo consistit summa rei quod est in re praecipuum. Ergo praecipuum inter alia satisfactionis opera est eleemosyna" (*Sent. IV, d. 15, q. 2, a. 2, qa. 2, sed contra 1*; the Gloss is St. Ambrose's). In *ST II-II, q. 30, a. 4*, an objection starts from 1 Tim. 4:8 and concludes that *miseriordia* is the highest of all virtues. The response: "Summa religionis christianae in misericordia consistit quantum ad exteriora opera. Interior tamen affectio caritatis, qua coniungimur Deo, praeponderat et dilectioni et misericordiae in proximos." (Similarly, at *ST I-II, q. 68, a. 7*, St. Thomas explains that when St. Paul says "*pietas* is useful in everything," he is not suggesting that *pietas* is the greatest of God's gifts, but rather contrasting it with bodily exercise, which "profits little.") In an article on the gift of counsel, Thomas expressly equates the *pietas* of 1 Tim. 4:8 with *miseriordia* (*ST II-II, q. 52, a. 4*). In his own commentary on the verse, Thomas recognizes a double meaning: "Cum ergo dicit «exerce teipsum ad pietatem,» potest accipi secundum quod pertinet ad cultum Dei, et ad opera misericordiae exhibenda. Glossa: «ad pietatem, id est, ad cultum omnipotentis Dei, et opera misericordiae»" (*Super I Tim. cap. 4, lec. 2*).

⁶⁵ "evidence" and "signs" translate *indicia*. Thomas's assertion may be phrased: After the resurrection, the bodies of the saints will bear indications of the good works they have done owing to the grace of God, and even now, in this world, the great love of some saints is given a bodily expression (the example of the stigmata implying that such an expression, too, like the charity it symbolizes, is a gift from God, and not the result of natural causes).

⁶⁶ The Latin reads *sicut patet quod in beato Francisco fuerunt indicia passionis Christi quia uehementer affliciebatur circa passionem Christi*. If one were to render the *quia* "because," it would sound like an assertion of efficient causality, as if to say: it was the intensity of St. Francis's affections that caused the signs to appear, his immense charity and inner likeness to the Crucified spilling over, as it were, into his body so that body could mirror soul. Clearly Thomas is asserting *some* causal connection, which I believe is this: it was *due* to Francis being the sort of saint he was that God fittingly bestowed this gratuitous grace on him – bearing in mind, of course, that he owed his sanctity as well as its mode or "mission" also primarily to God's grace. On this interesting reference to St. Francis, see cf. L.-J. BATAILLON, OP, "Les stigmates de Saint François vus par Thomas d'Aquin et quelques autres prédicateurs Dominicains," in: *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 90 (1997), 341-47.

⁶⁷ *Officium S. Nicolai*, Ninth Responsory at Matins. Rome, Santa Sabina. AGOP XIV-L-1, f. 275rb.

⁶⁸ What Thomas means by this brief statement is a bit obscure. Perhaps he is saying that the noble words applied to the people of Israel in the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:8-14) are fitting for a kingly people or a kingly person; or he may be saying that only a great king could be so strong and wise as to "suck honey out of the rock and oil from hardest stone." Thus, so great was the mercy of St. Nicholas that he was a king in the Lord's spiritual kingdom, as verified in the miraculous flowing of oil from hardest stone.

hand. Now see the four ways by which the hand of God helped Nicholas: by drawing him to Himself and snatching him from evil; by guiding him; by strengthening him⁶⁹; and by working miracles through him.

First, I say: the hand of the Lord, that is to say His strength, helped blessed Nicholas by drawing him to Himself and delivering him from evil. We read in the Psalms: *Stretch forth your hand from on high, rescue me and deliver me from the many waters and from the hand of strange children* (Ps. 143:7).⁷⁰

Secondly, the hand of God helped blessed Nicholas by guiding him. Just as we normally use our hands to guide others, so the Lord uses His power to guide the just. Again the Psalmist says: *The wickedness of sinners will be brought to an end, but the Lord will guide the just* (Ps. 7:10).⁷¹ Isaiah (8:11) speaks in a similar way: *He has taught me by His strong hand, that I should not walk in the way of this people.*⁷²

Thirdly, the hand of the Lord, that is to say His power, helped blessed Nicholas by giving him strength, hence in Ezekiel (3:14): *And the hand of the Lord was with me to strengthen me.*⁷³ And he was greatly strengthened.⁷⁴

Fourthly, the hand of the Lord, that is to say His power, helped blessed Nicholas by working miracles⁷⁵ through him, hence in Acts (4:30): *You will stretch out your hand [to heal], and signs and wonders are performed in the name of your Son.*⁷⁶ Blessed Nicholas was filled with the power to work miracles.⁷⁷ Who is there that has ever sought the glory of the world and obtained it as did blessed Nicholas, who was but a poor bishop in Greece? The Lord adorned him with miracles because he showed the greatest mercy. *Know that the Lord has made his holy one wonderful* (Ps. 4:4).⁷⁸ It was mercy that made blessed Nicholas an extraordinary man, and the Lord [Jesus Christ] strengthened him even unto everlasting

⁶⁹ *ipsum confortando* could also be rendered "by comforting him."

⁷⁰ Ps. 144:7 (RSV).

⁷¹ Cp. Ps. 7:9 (RSV): "O let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish thou the righteous, thou who triest the minds and hearts, thou righteous God."

⁷² Cp. Is. 8:11 (RSV): "For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people..."

⁷³ Cp. Ez. 3:14 (RSV): "The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the LORD being strong upon me..."

⁷⁴ *bene confortatus*

⁷⁵ In a translation of this paragraph, it is impossible to convey the subtle interplay of "wonder" words: the Lord works miracles (*miracula*) through Nicholas, who was full of [the power of] the miraculous (*plenus miraculis*); the Psalmist says "Know that the Lord has made wonderful [*mirificavit*] his saint"; "it was mercy that made Nicholas an extraordinary man [*mirabilem*]." The "signs and wonders" of Acts 4:30 is *signa et prodigia*.

⁷⁶ Acts 4:29-30 (RSV): "And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant [or: child] Jesus."

⁷⁷ *Beatus Nicholas plenus fuit miraculis*

⁷⁸ Cp. Ps. 4:3 (RSV): "But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself..."

ing life. May He lead us there, who lives [and reigns] with the Father and the Holy Spirit, [God, for ever and ever, Amen.]⁷⁹

⁷⁹ In place of the bracketed phrases the text has "etc." (see note 6). For Fr. Bataillon's three possible explanations of the sermon's abrupt ending and its lack of the fourth part of the exposition announced near the beginning ("and his abiding steadfastness is pointed out in these words: *and my arm shall strengthen him*"), see P. KWASNIEWSKI, "Two Wonderworkers," note 49.