

Prologue

Although we come to St. Thomas because we are interested in his thought and writings, his life was not wholly uneventful. It was judged by his contemporaries to be remarkable enough to be recorded by three biographers within living memory of him. Dating the events of his life and his works continues to be almost a subject in itself today. Here, however, I shall sketch it as simply as possible, in order not to present a mass of facts and details at the very beginning. St. Thomas's life was marked by several long journeys, accomplished on foot, from southern to northern Europe and back, in between the main periods of his teaching and writing: from Naples to Paris, from Paris to Cologne and back, back to Italy, and once again to Paris and back to Naples in his last years. These journeys are not without their significance for St. Thomas's view of our life, which he often describes as one of *viatores* (travelers) on their way to their heavenly homeland. In the next life, he says, we shall be *comprehensores* (those who understand and behold what we have only dimly discerned by faith in this life).

St. Thomas was born in 1225, just one-quarter into the thirteenth century.¹ He came of noble stock, for his father, Landulf, was descended from the counts of Aquino, in the region north of Naples now known as the Campania. His mother's name was Theodora. Three events occurred at the beginning of the

thirteenth century that were to influence the course of St. Thomas's life. First, the rise of the new universities in western Europe: Paris, Naples, Bologna, Oxford, and elsewhere. The last university had been closed by the Emperor Justinian at Athens in 529. This was a time, then, of great intellectual reawakening. Second, the whole corpus of the works of Aristotle became known in the West for the first time through Latin translations of the Arabic versions brought by Arab scholars into Spain via Northern Africa. Hitherto, Aristotle had almost only been known in the West for his works on logic through the commentaries of Boethius (ca. 480–524). Third, within the space of very few years, the beginning of this century gave birth to two quite new apostolic religious orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans, founded in 1209 and 1215, respectively. These two orders marked a new departure in the life of the Church because they were apostolic orders of friars who went out to preach and take the gospel into the cities, in contrast with the older monastic orders of monks whose lives were centered on their monasteries, often in the country. The friars also thought that they should be teaching at the heart of the centers of learning, in the secular universities.

This transition from the old to the new was also reflected in the life of St. Thomas, as he was to receive his first education at the hands of the Benedictine monks at Montecassino—where he was sent to school at the age of five or six, in 1231, before he attended university. When the presence of the emperor, Fredrick II, and his troops, made the area around Montecassino unsafe, St. Thomas was removed by his family in 1239 and sent for safety to Naples. At the university in Naples, St. Thomas had Peter of Ireland, who introduced him to the philosophy of Aristotle, as one of his lecturers. In Naples, he also met for the first time the newly founded order of St. Dominic, which he entered in 1244 against the wishes of his family, who had hoped that he would one day become the abbot of Montecassino and thus rule over widespread lands to the advantage of his family. When St. Thomas's prior decided to send him to Paris out of the reach of his family, his brothers intercepted him at the command of their

mother near Orvieto, and he was imprisoned in the family castle at Roccasecca for over a year. But the young friar's resolve could not be broken, and he was allowed to continue on his way in the summer of 1245 to Paris, where he found St. Albert the Great already lecturing on Aristotle and using his thought in theology. Up to this time the chief philosophical influence on the thought of the Fathers and teachers of the Church had come from the side of Plato. In the West this was largely due to St. Augustine, who had been the dominant theologian in the Western Church for almost eight hundred years since his death in AD 430.

When St. Albert left Paris in 1248 and moved to Cologne to found a house of studies there, St. Thomas accompanied him. The relation between St. Albert and St. Thomas may be compared with the one between Haydn and Mozart. In both cases the pupil eclipsed his master in fame, but the master outlived his more brilliant student. In Cologne, St. Thomas heard St. Albert's lectures on *The Divine Names* by Pseudo-Dionysius. This author is so called because he was for a long time believed to be the Dionysius converted by St. Paul on the Areopagus in Athens,² but is now recognized to be someone writing in Syria in the first decade of the sixth century, around 510. With St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great, Pseudo-Dionysius is one of the three Christian writers most quoted by St. Thomas.

In 1252 after four years in Cologne, St. Thomas returned to Paris and began his own teaching career. From 1252 to 1256 he wrote his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (ca. 1100–1150). This was the standard textbook of theology at the time and was commented on by all St. Thomas's great contemporaries in Paris: St. Albert and the two Franciscans Alexander of Hales and St. Bonaventure. The *Sentences* displays the distinctive character of the scholastic method, which is to assemble the various opinions (*sententiae*) of the Fathers of the Church about any one question in theology, for instance whether God created the angels before or at the same time as the world, and to come to a reasoned conclusion about which opinion is to be preferred. St. Thomas was considered to be quite young for becoming a master

of theology when he was just over thirty in 1256. For the text of his inaugural lecture he chose Psalm 103: 13, "You water the tops of the mountains from your dwelling place above." The mountains, he says, are the teachers and the water from above is the wisdom that God gives. The duty of the teacher is to pass on the wisdom he has received from above, but as no one is adequate to hand on divine wisdom by himself, he (or she) has to ask God for it in prayer. From 1256 to 1259, St. Thomas wrote his first major set of disputed questions, on truth (*De Veritate*). Before he left Paris in 1259, he had begun his first *Summa*, known as the *Contra Gentiles*, in which he sets out to demonstrate the reasonableness of the Christian faith. St. Thomas spent the next ten years in Italy, first at the papal court of Urban IV in Orvieto from 1261 to 1265, and then in Rome from 1265 to 1268 in order to set up a Dominican house of studies at the church of Santa Sabina. In Orvieto, he completed the *Summa contra Gentiles* and, at the request of the pope, compiled the *Catena Aurea*, a commentary on the four gospels consisting entirely of the texts taken from the Fathers of the Church. He also composed the hymns, responsories, and antiphons for the feast of Corpus Christi, which Urban IV instituted in 1264. During the three following years in Rome, he wrote the disputed questions on power (*De Potentia*), (1265–66), his commentaries on the *Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius and on the *De Anima* of Aristotle (1267–68), his commentary on the epistles of St. Paul from chapter eleven of 1 Corinthians to Hebrews, and the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, which henceforth will be called the *Summa* as distinct from the *Contra Gentiles*. When we compare the *Summa* with the commentaries on the *Sentences*, we see how St. Thomas brought a simpler order and new clarity into theology, as it is altogether easier to find a reference in the *Summa*. The First Part of the *Summa* is on God and his creation.

In the summer of 1268, St. Thomas was recalled to Paris to combat the rising tide of students in the faculty of arts, who were following Averroes's interpretations of Aristotle with a disregard for their incompatibility with the Christian faith. Averroes (1126–98) held that when Aristotle calls the intellect

separate, he means that there is a universal mind existing outside of us and in which we all share. This view can still be found today, for example, in the scientist Erwin Schrödinger (d. 1961), who believed that we all have one consciousness. It clearly undermines the belief of Christians in the immortality of the individual soul because, if my mind is not really my own but an external one thinking in me, I am not responsible for my actions and so all meaning of reward or punishment in the next life for what I do in this life is removed.

St. Thomas also had to return to a fresh attack on the new religious orders by the secular masters in Paris, who were envious of the friars when they took the chairs of theology. One criticism made by the secular clergy was that religious poverty is against mercy and charity because, by giving up all their possessions, the religious make themselves unable to help the poor. St. Thomas replied that as society needs members who are devoted to study and contemplation, because the highest end of human life is to know the truth, the religious dispossess themselves for a higher end than helping the poor by material means. The whole of society benefits from the spiritual good that a few of its members are able to gain by their way of life. St. Thomas points out that part of friendship is to assist one another in spiritual as well as worldly duties; indeed the former is more necessary for attaining our main end—beatitude in heaven.³ Although the background of St. Thomas's life was not as calm and peaceful as the even and unimpassioned tenor of his works may suggest, it is possible to overemphasize the part played by controversy in his writing, since most of his third visit to Paris was taken up with the day-to-day teaching of the regular courses in scripture and theology.⁴ The time when St. Thomas was most engaged in controversy was also the time of his greatest literary activity. Within the space of three years, 1269–72, he wrote the Second Part of the *Summa*, on moral theology, which takes up over one-half of the whole work; his commentaries on the gospels of St. Matthew (1269–70) and St. John (1270–72), the disputed questions on evil (*De Malo*, 1270); and his massive commentaries on the *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle.

For commenting on the works of Aristotle, he had a fresh translation made directly from the original Greek by a Flemish Dominican, William Moerbeke. St. Thomas also set theology on a new footing in several ways. He made greater use than hitherto in the West of the acts of the first seven ecumenical councils, which for a long time remained in Greek and had recently become available in Latin. This brought a new dimension to his Christology—for example, in the questions on the union of the two natures in Christ and on his two wills, human and divine. St. Thomas's theology may be called truly ecumenical in that he frequently quotes the fathers of the Eastern Church—Athanasius, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, and John Chrysostom—whom he primarily knew through the *De Fide Orthodoxa* by St. John Damascene (ca. 655–750), itself a kind of summa of Eastern theology. By the time he left Paris, after Easter 1272, in order to return to Naples, he had already written the first twenty-five questions of the Third Part of the *Summa*, on Christ and our salvation.

Once back in Naples, he worked on his commentary on Romans and continued the Third Part of the *Summa*, with the questions on the mysteries of Christ's life and the sacraments. But he was never to finish it, for on the feast of St. Nicholas in December 1273 he had a vision in which, as he expressed it, "All that I have written seems like straw compared with what I have seen." After that, he wrote no more. Early in the following year, he set out for the Council of Lyon, which Gregory X had summoned to discuss reunion with the Eastern Church. But not long into his journey he fell ill and, seeing that his end was near, had himself removed from his sister's house to the Cistercians at Fossanova, where he died on March 7, 1274. Thus, his life came full circle, and when he left Paris, in 1272, to return to Naples, it was really a homecoming, as he was to die near where he was born. After several great journeys in his life, and worn out by almost continuous teaching and writing, he who had been a traveler now entered the life of plain vision and comprehension of all that he had labored to put into words. He was canonized by Pope John XXII in 1323. His achievements as a writer and

thinker, however, make us forget that he was also a saint. For it was from his daily life as a religious that his writings flowed: his humble obedience to his brethren; his devotion to Christ, always his first master; and his frequent recourse to prayer, from which he said he learned even more than he did from books.