



THOMAS  
AQUINAS  
101

WORD  
on FIRE

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

# THOMAS AQUINAS

## IOI

*by Bishop Robert Barron*

My whole life changed when I discovered St. Thomas Aquinas at age 15. A Dominican friar introduced him in high school during a lecture on the arguments for God's existence. That encounter helped me fall in love with the things of God and ultimately led me to the priesthood.

St. Thomas Aquinas's influence on the Church and Western culture has been so massive that it's difficult even to get a grip on it. When I discovered him I was overwhelmed by his teachings, which I barely understood. But I remember being drawn into the complexity and wonder of his work.

I want you and others to share the same experience. That's why Brandon Vogt and I recently devoted an episode of our podcast, "The Word on Fire Show," to St. Thomas Aquinas, introducing his life and the best ways to start reading his work. Below you'll find an edited transcript of the episode.

My hope is that by reading Thomas, you come to know the genius and spiritual lessons of this marvelous saint. Enjoy!

Peace,

+ Robert Barron

THOMAS AQUINAS  
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*Bishop Robert Barron*

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**QUESTION:** In a few months, you'll be releasing *CATHOLICISM: The Pivotal Players*, which is your big follow-up to the *CATHOLICISM* series. Thomas Aquinas is one of the featured figures in the new series. There's a whole hour-long episode devoted to his life, but perhaps here you can give us just a brief sketch of who Thomas Aquinas was.

**BISHOP BARRON:** Thomas was a 13th-century Dominican friar who emerged as the greatest of the Scholastic philosophers and theologians. To understand Thomas, go back to this kind of golden age of Catholic culture and thought. He was the champion of this golden age when the Church was in a very vibrant dialogue with the culture, to use our language today. Thomas was accessing the complexity of the great Catholic tradition but also, in at least some of his major works, the ideas of Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, which were coming into vogue in the West for the first time.

Thomas was affecting this extremely creative and fecund union of biblical Catholicism with Aristotelianism, and it had (and still has) a revolutionary impact on the way the Church understands both its doctrine and its relation to the culture. I think the timeless influence his writing has on issues concerning doctrine and the culture is why he remains of such central significance today.

**QUESTION:** Many Catholics have probably heard the name of Thomas Aquinas and many have probably even heard of his major work, the *Summa Theologiae*, but that book can be a little intimidating to dive into. So let's first explore some of his other writings. We'll come back to the *Summa* in a moment, but give us a brief overview of some of his other major works.

**BISHOP BARRON:** Thomas wrote a number of *summae* (we would call them “summaries”) of theology when he was a young man—we'd say like a doctoral candidate. He wrote about the same thing everyone in the middle ages up until Luther's time would have written about, namely,

the *Book of Sentences* by Peter Lombard. These young academics cut their teeth on Lombard's *Sentences*. Lombard's book was really a collection of commentaries on the Church fathers done by a famous Bishop of Paris, and they became the standard text for young medieval theologians to study and reflect upon. So the young Thomas wrote a very lengthy and elaborate commentary on the *Sentences*, and it kind of became his first *summa*, or summary of theology.

His second *summa* was called the *Summa Contra* (*Summary Against the Gentiles*). Some speculate it was written for Christian missionaries in Muslim lands. It was a highly philosophical summary of Christianity.

Then the final great *summa*, his *Summa Theologiae*, is Thomas sort of summing up his life's work.

However, he also wrote a number of biblical commentaries, many of which have not been translated into English. He also wrote a whole slew of commentaries on Aristotle's writings.

We also have a compilation of his work called, *Disputed Questions*. These are literary accounts of what were very lively events where a medieval master, like Thomas, would entertain objections and questions about a major theme in theology. These were later written up as literary artifacts and given the title, *Disputed Questions*.

He also wrote things that are called the *Quodlibetal Questions*. “Quodlibetal” in Latin means “whatever you want” and so the quodlibetal were events where a medieval Master would come into the room and entertain “whatever you want”—any kind of question from the floor. By all accounts Thomas was the master of the *quodlibetal questions*, so you can find that too as part of his work.

They’re all complex works; it’s not easy reading. Thomas never wrote a book called “Thomas for Beginners”. Almost everything he wrote is at a fairly high level of sophistication, but there are a number of commentators who, over the years into the present day, offer an easier way in.

**QUESTION:** Who would some of those commentators be?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Well, think of Peter Kreeft. He writes a great book called *The Summa of The Summa*, which I think is a very helpful way to get sort of an overview. Think of the great F.C. Copleston, one of the really significant historians of philosophy in the twentieth century. Read his great sweeping *A History of Philosophy*, which has a large section on Thomas, but also a separate book of his, which is simply called *Aquinas*. I'd read anything by Etienne Gilson, the great French Thomist scholar. And then of course the great G.K. Chesterton writes a book on Thomas Aquinas that Gilson, by the way, said, "I consider it as being without possible comparison the best book ever written on St. Thomas. Nothing short of genius can account for such an achievement... [T]he few readers who have spent twenty or thirty years in studying St. Thomas Aquinas, and who, perhaps, have themselves published two or three volumes on the subject, cannot fail to perceive

that the so-called ‘wit’ of Chesterton has put their scholarship to shame.” So these authors provide a number of ways to get into his life, his spirit, and an overview of his thought.

**QUESTION:** I love the story that’s told of Chesterton writing his book on Aquinas. They say he just asked his secretary to run off to the library and grab some books on Aquinas and she brought close to a dozen. And he kind of just flipped through them, scanning here and there, and closed all the books and simply dictated his book on Thomas Aquinas, which the brilliant Gilson, as you say, says is the best book ever written on Aquinas.

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yeah it’s quasi-miraculous how Chesterton just knew how to cut to the heart of the matter, and that’s obviously part of his genius. He was not a technical scholar by any means, not a philosopher by training. He was a journalist, an artist, really, by training—a literary figure. Yet he was able to see some really central themes in Aquinas.

One that I always go back to is Chesterton's insight that Aquinas should be called "Thomas of the Creator." There's something really right about that, about how creation is a dominant motif in all of Thomas. That's why some years ago, when I was a doctoral student in Paris contemplating my doctoral thesis, I decided to write on Aquinas and precisely on the issue of creation. I think in my mind, or in the back of my mind anyway, was Chesterton. He's a way to get into the whole of Thomas Aquinas.

**QUESTION:** Lets talk about Thomas's style. You mentioned the *Disputed Questions*, or in Latin the *disputatio*. This is the structure of *Summa*, where he puts forth the best objections to a particular question and then offers his response. One of the things I've always admired about his work is that he doesn't just put forth straw men. He puts forth the best objections and sometimes even ratchets them up. He makes the objections even harder to answer, and then he responds to them brilliantly. Talk about why that's such a great approach for apologetics or evangelization.

**BISHOP BARRON:** That’s quite right, and go back again to the actual events called the Disputed Questions. Remember, these were not just writings, they were public events. A master teacher like Thomas, a *magister* as he was called—our words “maestro” and “master” come from that—would announce a dispute, a question. Let’s say for instance it was going to be on the Incarnation, the Trinity, or the origin of God. People would then come in great in numbers to listen to this dispute. The master would preside but usually they would call a *baccalaureus*—what we might call a doctoral student—to actually run the conversation. The *baccalaureus* would then entertain all kinds of objections from the floor.

For example someone might say, “God can’t be Trinity, because you claim God is one.” And someone else would raise another objection and say, “Yeah, but Aristotle says this...” Or another person might add, “It says in the Old Testament...” or, “The Book of Job says...” So the *baccalaureus* would take in all of these objections respond

as best he could, but all the time the *magister*, Thomas, would be taking it all in quietly.

Then he would go back and think it through on his own and come up with what they call the *respondio*, which in Latin just means “I respond.” Essentially, he puts forth his resolution of the matter, and typically he would take what he thought were the five or six best objections and then he’d answer those. So when you’d return the next day for round two of the Disputed Questions, that’s what you’d hear, you’d hear the *respondio*, which is the *magister’s* answer to the initial question and his response to the best objections.

When you read Aquinas’ *Summa*, it may seem like a really dry text, but I encourage you to see behind that text to this very lively public dispute where you’ve got this brilliant *magister* who is not only resolving a question but answering five really good objections. And that’s why you rightly say that they aren’t straw men at all. Maybe there were, in fact, a lot of silly comments made or some stupid objections, but the five or six really good

ones Thomas would remember, and that's what we find in the *Summa*.

So as you suggest, it's a really good model for apologetics, because it's respectful to the opponent by not just running roughshod over any objection. Rather, it's taking very seriously people's objections and treating them in a respectful way. I think it's a good model for anyone doing apologetics today.

**QUESTION:** How do you think Thomas would engage, if he would, the so-called New Atheists today? If Thomas Aquinas had a YouTube account do you think he'd jump in the comment boxes?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yeah, I do. I think that the Internet forums today are not all that dissimilar from a disputed question in the Middle Ages. We're hearing from the floor, which now means anyone who can jump on YouTube. So that's not dissimilar to the medieval *disputatio*.

In my own way I'm responding to the objections

online. Let's say the articles I write or a YouTube video might be like a *respondio*, a more encompassing answer and response to the objections that I've heard. I like it, and I think there's something very Catholic about it. The very lively conversation, the exchange of ideas, the willingness to dialogue with the culture—you can trace all of that back to the Platonic dialogues. This concept is something which has been alive in the West for a long time, the idea that the best way to get to the truth is through a sort of structured conversation, and that was imminently true in the Middle Ages.

Keep something in mind: what we know today as the university lecture is something that came really out of Friedrich Schleiermacher's University of Berlin in the mid-19th century. The idea of the master coming out and giving a lengthy lecture while the students take notes in their seats is a relatively recent form. Go back to the Oxford style, which still perdures today. In fact, C.S. Lewis practiced it. It's not a lecture so much but rather a lively dialogue with your tutor. You read a book together and then Q&A and then maybe

you'd write a paper, which maybe he'd respond to and critique.

Now go back to the Middle Ages, you didn't have so much lecture as you had these *questiones disputate*. Go back all the way to the beginning, to Plato or to Aristotle and the peripatetic school, wherein the teacher walked around dialoguing with his students. Those are much older and more classical forms of knowing and learning, and they are very much on display in Aquinas.

**QUESTION:** Before we get into how to read the *Summa*, let me ask a simple question: why is it worth reading Thomas Aquinas?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Because he's one of the most brilliant people that's ever emerged in the West. I'd rank him with Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Wittgenstein. He is probably one of the five or six most brilliant people that the West has ever produced. Simply put, if you're interested in philosophy at the highest level, you read Thomas.

Secondly as a theologian he's called the "*Doctor Communis*" or the Common Doctor. There's something about Thomas that's just a touchstone for all of Catholic theologizing. He summed up all that came before him and set a template that has been largely followed ever since. Of course, he's not the only theologian that you ever read, but Aquinas has a touchstone quality to his work.

I find that he reminds me of people like Chesterton or Lewis in that just you keep finding so many true things in his writings. As you read other books on a particular question, you think, "Yeah, yeah, that's ok." And other times you think, "No, that's not right," or, "Yeah, that's got something to it." But then you read Thomas and you exclaim, "Yes, yes that's it! That's the best way to resolve this thing." I've had that experience a lot with him. I had it when I was 15 years old, and I've studied him all my life. So I'd say read Thomas because he's right about an awful lot of things.

**QUESTION:** So that's why to read Thomas Aquinas, let's get into the how question. A lot

of people who first discover the Bible for the first time attempt to read it beginning with the first page of Genesis, straight through to Revelation, but they usually get lost somewhere around Leviticus. Would you recommend somebody breaking into the Summa in the same way, beginning with the first question, or is there a better path to reading it?

**BISHOP BARRON:** We mentioned the commentaries, and I think that's a wise course. Read some commentaries. Get Copleston's little book, which can be read in a few sittings, for the overview. Read Chesterton for more kind of lyrical, poetic introduction. Then get Kreeft's *Summa of the Summa*, which would take you through it in a more organized way.

Also I'd say this about Thomas, there's kind of an encyclopedic quality to him. So you don't really pick up the encyclopedia and just start reading it. What you do is you say, "I'm interested in this issue so let me look that up in the *Summa*." There might be a particular issue in theology that

interests you, and when it does, go to that section of the *Summa* and find that question.

Here's something else I recommend that I heard many years ago from a wise Thomist: if you want to plow through the *Summa* and not lose the forest for the trees, don't read the objections and the answers—just read the *respondios*. Now a lot is happening in the objections and the responses, don't get me wrong. Often the coolest, most interesting stuff is there, but to get a sense of the whole thing and the rhythm of it, just read the *respondios* as you go through.

Another route to start the *Summa* is to read the first thirteen questions, which have to do with God and God's attributes. Why is there a God? Why is God one? Why is God immaterial? Why is God eternal? That would be good way to get into Aquinas.

Or if you're into Christology, skip to the third part of the *Summa*. Read the first 12 or so questions of the third part and you get all this technical discussion about the person of Jesus Christ.

**QUESTION:** Give us a sense of the landscape of *Summa*. There are multiple parts. It's very orderly, isn't it?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Keep in mind that the medieval people, who were immersed in Trinitarian theology, often thought in terms of threes. Dante's a good example: look at the three major sections of the *Divine Comedy*. Each one is divided into thirty-three cantos, and each canto is divided into little stanzas of *terza rima* where the third line rhymes. You keep seeing three, three, three. Also look at a gothic cathedral where there are three elevations and usually three aisles. Three is a big number in the medieval world, and so it is in Thomas. The *Summa Theologiae* has three major parts. The first one, *Prima Pars*, has to do with God and creation. The *Secunda Pars* (second part) is divided into two: what they call the *Prima Secundae*, which means the first of the second, and the *Secunda Secundae*, which means the second of the second. So *Secunda Pars* deals with the human being and human acts and the journey back to God. If the *Prima Pars* deals with God and what

comes out from God (i.e., Creation), the *Secunda Pars* concerns the journey back to God through virtue and the good life.

Finally, the *Tertia Pars* (third part) has to do with *the Way* in the full sense of the term, namely, Jesus, who said, “I’m the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” So the *Tertia Pars* is all about Jesus—his life, death and resurrection—and the sacraments that now bring his life to bear on us.

Thomas never finished the third part. He died right after he finished the section on penance. He got through Jesus’ story and four of the sacraments, and then he died. But that’s the most general overview: first part is God and creation, second part is humanity and the human act, third part is Jesus and sacraments.

**QUESTION:** Let me ask one final question. Thomas is sometimes depicted as this super-rational, egghead philosopher/theologian, but when you wrote your book on Thomas Aquinas you subtitled it, *Spiritual Master*. Is this attribute

sometimes overlooked? Do people tend to forget that Thomas was not just a brilliant mind, but a spiritual master as well?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yes, absolutely. You know it's a complicated thing, because Thomas was trying to write theology in a very rational, Aristotelian scientific way. When they used the word "science" they were thinking of the Aristotelian science of the Four Causes. Thomas was trying to write in this hyper-disciplined way, so it's not like the church fathers. Thomas's writing was significantly different. Compare Thomas to any of the Church fathers including Augustine, and you'll see how Thomas is different. Thomas offers his own style, this hyper-rationalized very Scholastic academic approach. I wouldn't want to gainsay any of that. However, you can miss the heart of Thomas if you look simply at the hyper-rational method.

First and foremost Thomas was a Dominican friar, which means he was a preacher. Well, if you're a preacher, you have to be a Bible commentator,

because the Holy Bible is the soul of preaching. And Thomas indeed did a lot of Bible commentary. If you're a Bible commentator, you're going to face anomalies. You will have to come to terms with questions and puzzles like, "How do I interpret this scripture against that scripture?" What happens then is "disputed questions" arise, right? If you bring all your disputed questions together into one great summary statement, you get a *Summa*. My point here is for us to understand the downward correlation between the *Summa*, the *Disputed Questions*, Bible commentary, and preaching—ultimately the whole enterprise is in service of preaching! And what's preaching all about? Transformation, which is what we today call "spirituality".

If you had asked Thomas to distinguish his spirituality from his theology, he wouldn't have understood the request. Those terms would not have made sense to him. His theology is his spirituality. I would say that his theology informs his work both as a preacher and someone who shapes preachers.

Remember now, he's the founder of what they called *studiums*. A *studium* was a Dominican house—today we call them a “house of studies.” What happened at a *studium*? Well, young Dominicans were formed in order to be preachers. That is a key to understanding Thomas: his life's work centered on the sacred practice of preaching, with the ultimate goal of leading people to spiritual transformation.

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