Aquinas’s Sermon for the Feast of Pentecost:  
A Rare Glimpse of Thomas the Preaching Friar

Peter A. Kwasniewski and Jeremy Holmes

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(1) INTRODUCTION

Friar Thomas of the Order of Preachers

For seven centuries St. Thomas Aquinas has been revered as the Church’s supreme dogmatic or speculative theologian. In the course of this long history, he has also, though perhaps less widely, been recognized as a scriptural exegete of considerable subtlety and insight.2 It is fair to say, however, that he is rarely thought of as a preacher. Indeed, the conventional image of him—that of an abstracted, solitary genius, aloof from the cares of the world, pacing the halls in pursuit of an argument, plunged into a literary apostolate of staggering dimensions—seems to exclude preaching from the round of activities in which he could have been realistically engaged. His popular nickname, the Angelic Doctor, though very well suited to the loftiness of his thought and the purity of his person, might convey the impression that Thomas, like Moses during the revelation of the Law, spent his days at the summit of God’s mountain, unseen by the people.3

Yet those who know more about the saint and his times have good reason for calling into question the fidelity of such a portrait to its flesh-and-blood original.4 Thomas gave himself heart and soul to a new religious community whose very identity was bound up with the mission of public preaching: the Dominicans, or more properly, the Ordo Fratrum Praedicatorum, the order of preaching brethren. He pursued this specific vocation in the face of considerable—by legend, violent and vulgar—opposition from members of his family.5 At the University of Paris, he undertook the three traditional duties of a “master of the sacred page,” magister in sacra pagina: lecturing on the Bible, holding public disputations, and preaching.

Beginning in the following September [of 1256] he had to perform the three functions of the master in theology. These were announced at the end of the twelfth century by Peter Cantor and later confirmed in the statutes of the theol-
ogy faculty: legere, disputare, praedicare. Thomas was completely aware of this, and an entire passage in his Principium [inaugural lecture] explains the qualities that the doctors in Sacred Scripture (doctores sacrae scripturae, the title should be noted) must possess in order to carry out their triple function. They must be “elevated” (alti) by the eminence of their lives to be able to preach effectively; “enlightened” (illuminati) in order to teach in an appropriate way; and “fortified” (muniti) to refute errors in disputation.6

In short, by his Dominican vocation as by his academic position, Thomas was a man who should have been much involved in preaching the word of God from the pulpit. And in point of fact, he was.7 As Ignatius Eschmann, OP, summarizes: “St. Thomas preached assiduously, as may be expected from a Friar Preacher and, more especially still, a mediaeval Master of Theology whose statutory obligations included preaching just as attendance at University sermons was obligatory for the students.”8 A number of his sermons have come down to us—several sets of collationes (“conferences,” as one could call them) and twenty-one “university sermons” that are either certainly by Aquinas or attributable to him with a high degree of probability.9

The tendency to overlook Thomas the preacher is easily explained. For one thing, of the great many sermons he must have preached, relatively few are extant.10 Nor is this dearth peculiar to the Dumb Ox. Most medieval sermons, in this respect no different from sermons of any period, were not written as polished literary products for the instruction of posterity, but were pièces d’occasion, delivered from notes or outlines likely to be subsequently lost. In some instances we have found outlines, but from such documents a full-scale sermon cannot really be extrapolated. It complicates matters, too, that while these notes or outlines are often in Latin, the sermons based on them were just as often preached in the vernacular. (The moment a scribe enters the picture, he will probably write down a summary in Latin, the academic’s native tongue and the language he is accustomed to abbreviating.) Moreover, in contrast to later ages when more convenient and more durable means of recording and publishing were developed, a vast number of records from the Middle Ages have been lost over the centuries due to natural decay, fire and flood, war, reformatory purges, recycling, and so on—though enough manuscripts sur-
vive to keep scholars busy indefinitely. If a particular sermon was lucky enough to survive the
day of its delivery, this was owing either to the good offices of a scribe with nimble quill catching
the words as they came forth from the pulpit, or to a deliberate plan on the part of the preacher. In part, too, Thomas was not, you might say, a “preacher’s preacher”; his chief occupation, and
one suspects preoccupation, was different: elaborate disputed questions, compendia of doctrine,
commentaries, apologetic and polemical treaties, and the like—which are still definitely forms of
preaching, as the Dominicans have always seen it, but of a more rarefied kind, aimed at imparting
the science of sacred doctrine.

When we turn to a homily by Aquinas, what do we find? Thomas’s preaching, remarks
L. H. Petitot, OP, “ordinarily reproduced or prolonged his doctrinal teaching in more accessible
and edifying forms.” The same biographer offers an excellent summary of this aspect of the
friar’s life and work:

The sermons of St. Thomas manifest the depth of his ascetic and mystical life. Although the orator in him was sacrificed to favor his development as a theologian and teacher, Thomas preached quite frequently. In fact, he enjoyed great renown as a preacher. He delivered his sermons at Saint-Jacques in Paris, before the Religious, the faithful, and members of the University. In Italy he preached to the Roman Court. At Naples, he spoke each night during Lent. He evoked such emotion when speaking of the Passion that he had to stop while the people wept. . . . His commanding presence, the aura of learning and simplicity which surrounded him, must have fascinated and charmed his listeners. William of Tocco tells us that, because of his constant abstraction of mind, Thomas could speak no other vernacular language besides his native dialect. At Naples, he used the language of the province. The biographer adds that he put aside his theological erudition and scholastic subtleties, and produced the fruits of conversion in the hearts of the people.

The Neapolitan sermons mentioned here were preached during the Lent of 1273, the last
of the saint’s life, and had for their subject the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. Many who had heard Thomas in the pulpit or knew others who had heard him testified during the canonization
process that people were deeply moved by his words. Readers today tend to find the saint’s “conferences” intellectually nourishing but not especially moving, and so are puzzled when they hear
reports of the congregation’s emotional response. Obviously, much of the effect of a sermon depends on the actual delivery. The voice, the gestures, the timing, the grace of the Holy Spirit at work on a receptive soul—these factors should not be overlooked. Speaking from personal experience, I have at times been powerfully moved by a sermon, only to find, when I looked over the notes kindly given to me by the priest later on, that it seemed rather sparse. This is no fault of the preacher’s, but a fault of the written medium, which does poor justice to the spoken word. One should bear this in mind all the more for medieval sermons, which were often written out, or copied down, in a kind of scholastic shorthand. For instance, Aquinas may have produced Latin outlines for his sermons on the Apostles’ Creed, but the full-fledged version he delivered in the Neapolitan dialect is something we cannot reproduce; the Latin reportatio of Reginald of Piperno is trustworthy as to content, but is more a doctrinal summary than a word-for-word copy. The results on paper can thus seem clipped in style, compressed in thought, not very promising materials for public delivery. But if to such a dry outline one could “just add water”—the water of fluent speech and, especially, the tears of fervor shed so often by the great saints—it would spring into bloom like a desert flower rejoicing in the rain.

As Petitot reminded us, Thomas was preaching in Naples in his childhood mother-tongue, not in the Latin of the schools. We are, needless to say, grateful for the Latin summaries (reportationes) made by Reginald of Piperno and Peter d’Andria, but these do not reproduce the exact tenor of the original. “Of St. Thomas’s sermon,” wrote Hyacinthe Dondaine, “we hear in truth only the echo transmitted by the reporter.”

The Pentecost sermon

Among the authentic sermons of Aquinas are several so recently discovered that they have not yet been published in any form, whether in Latin or in translation. Here, we are pleased to be able to offer a translation of one such sermon (or, more precisely, two-part sermon), preached by Thomas on the Feast of Pentecost, in all probability during his second term in Paris as regent master of
It was customary at this time to divide a sermon on a major feast into two parts, called the sermon and the collatio, which were delivered separately—one early in the day, the other in the evening. Fittingly, the celebration of a great feast went from morning to night, with solemn choral prayer and Mass, processions, a banquet, and so on. Torrell notes, apropos the sermon at hand: “This text, preached on a Pentecost, is a precious witness of the rare cases in which, besides the morning preaching, we have the second part, given at Vespers; which is to say that it gives us a rather full account.”

Although Fr. Bataillon has prepared a critical edition from the three manuscripts in which it has been preserved (Salamanca, Univ. 2187, f. 184ra-188va; Sevilla, Cabildo, 83.2.5, f. 136ra-140vb; and Erlangen, Univ. 322, f. 83va-86ra), it is uncertain when the Latin text of this sermon (and of all the others) will be released to the public in a volume of the editio Leonina. The present translation will therefore prove useful to all students of St. Thomas, both for those who do not read Latin, and for those who do, but have, as yet, no published Latin text to consult.

Fr. Torrell appears to be the first commentator who has been able to incorporate into his analysis of St. Thomas’s rich theology of the Holy Spirit a reference to the content of the Pentecost sermon, having learned of its existence from his intimate involvement with the Leonine Commission:

Although it is already perfectly accessible, this teaching [just summarized] on the Holy Spirit was not a mere theological thesis topic; Thomas speaks about it quite volubly in his preaching. We already used in passing his homilies on the Credo. But to better grasp the concrete form that this could take, we also have a beautiful sermon that gives a more precise echo. Torrell limits himself to a brief summary of the content, pointing out the extent to which Thomas accentuates the omnipresence of the Spirit in Christian life. The sermon itself is straightforward in approach, with a fourfold structure highly favored by the saint. The text preached on is a verse from Psalm 104 [103] that appears in the liturgy of Pentecost (and also, more familiarly, as part of a much-loved prayer, the Veni sancte Spiritus): “Send forth Thy Spirit and they shall be cre-
ated, and Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.” (Hence, one may refer to this sermon simply by its opening phrase or incipit, *Emittte Spiritum.*) Thomas points out that this verse identifies four things: the nature of the Spirit, the purpose of His activity, the working that accomplishes this purpose, and the object of His working, or in short, who He is, why He acts, His acting, and what He acts upon. Readers familiar with Aristotle will recognize here the four causes: formal, final, efficient, and material. The *sermo* (the morning’s homily) takes up the first two points, while the *collatio* (the evening’s homily) takes up the last two points. Some features characteristic of Thomas’s homilies in general and this one in particular include the pointed use of the second person, calling each listener to attention; a rhetorical use of questions in order to bring home truths more memorably; the use of many concrete illustrations to which everyone can relate, along with some gentle but firm words of remonstration; a high density and diversity of Scriptural citations ranging over both Testaments; an “economic” and “cosmic” perspective that embraces the whole history of salvation and, while emphasizing man, takes the whole universe into its purview; a pronounced affective dimension, stressing the personal and intimate friendship between God and man, and charity toward one’s neighbors; a number of ideas borrowed from the liturgy or liturgical customs. One feature of Aquinas’s sermons that will surprise nobody is their resolute engagement with doctrinal questions. Despite its comparative simplicity, a homily by Thomas stretches the listener’s powers of understanding. It goes without saying that he wants people to be moved to a greater love of God, but he wants people above all to *think* about the mysteries of faith—to think clearly and deeply, so as to arrive at a better grasp of the *meaning* of the feast at hand, or of a scriptural passage under consideration. Of course, Thomas was often preaching to theology students, so he could afford to tax his congregation’s powers more than a parish priest might find it wise to attempt on a typical Sunday. Still, this characteristic is true of his Neapolitan homilies, too: they are not pious fluff to make people feel good (or feel bad); they aim at a real understanding and, through this, a contemplation of mystery. All the same, a sermon has to be relatively brief and straightforward, otherwise it will fail in its pastoral function. Thomas
never forgets this practical side of things, making his points swiftly and clearly, and covering a lot of ground in a short time. He never wanders.

I will not burden the introduction with a detailed analysis of the sermon, much less a comparison of its contents to the teaching contained in other works of St. Thomas. The subject of Aquinas’s pneumatology has drawn the attention and exercised the talents of generations of commentators, from classic exponents such as Cajetan, John of St. Thomas, and the Carmelites of Salamanca down to eminent Thomists of the last century such as Garrigou-Lagrange, Maritain, and Journet. The secondary literature in this area is quite ample. Deserving of special mention are the penetrating studies of Thomas’s Trinitarian doctrine by Bertrand de Margerie, SJ, and Gilles Emery, OP. As regards the Church’s Magisterium, the Roman Pontiffs have embraced and proposed Aquinas’s teaching on the Holy Spirit with the same conviction with which they have adopted other central aspects of his theology, as evidenced by Leo XIII’s encyclical on the Holy Spirit, Divinum Illud Munus (May 9, 1897) and John Paul II’s encyclical Dominum et Vivificantem (May 5, 1986). In fact, Leo XIII’s encyclical has been described as D. J. Kennedy as “largely drawn from St. Thomas,” making it an ideal introduction to this area of the Angelic Doctor’s theology.

NOTES ON THE INTRODUCTION

1 P. Kwasniewski and J. Holmes collaborated in making the translation; the former wrote the introduction and notes. Thanks are due to Randall Smith for his comments on an earlier draft. Two different orthographies for medieval Latin have been widely employed in printed editions. This article follows the modern convention (qua, vivit, operatio, etc.) except when citing a critical text that uses the medieval convention (que, uit, operacio, etc.).


Torrell, Person and Work, 54. It is noteworthy, too, for our portrait of Thomas that he readily connects Christ and other biblical personages with the theme of preaching as an exemplary spiritual work of mercy. See Torrell, “Le Semeur est sorti pour semer: L’image du Christ prêcheur chez frère Thomas d’Aquin” and “Jean-Baptiste figure du prêcheur chez Thomas d’Aquin,” in idem, Recherches thomasiennes (Paris: J. Vrin, 2000), 336–56 and 357–66.


Cited in Fr. Ayo’s introduction to Sermon-Conferences on the Creed, p. 1; see note 13.

A large number of sermons and sermon notes were once attributed to Aquinas and published in opera omnia editions, but these have long been known to be spurious; famous authors tend to act as magnets for the attribution of such works. For a list of the sermons that can be confidently attributed to Thomas, see Torrell, Person and Work, 357–59; for a more detailed discussion, see Bataillon, “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. The best current text of fourteen of the university sermons may be found in Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Opera omnia ut sunt in Indice Thomisticо, ed. Roberto Busa, si (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980), vol. 6, pp. 33–48. Of the five sermons listed in Torrell (Person and Work, 358–59) but not found in Busa’s edition, one has been published by Bataillon: “Le sermon inédit de saint Thomas Homo quidam fecit cenam magnam. Introduction et édition,” RSPT 67 (1983): 353–68; the other four have been edited by Bataillon, but not yet published. Finally, there are two additional sermons not listed in Torrell (ibid.), which are likely to be included in the Leonine edition: their incipits are Inueni Davit et Pettie et accipientis.

Fewer still of the individual “university sermons” have been translated into English. One may hope that this situation will soon change. Meanwhile, apart from the sermon presented in this article (Emite Spiritum), two nicely-translated sermons—one in honor of St. Martin (Beatus uit), the other in honor of the Solemniety of All Saints (Beata gens)—are available in a somewhat obscure collection: Thomas Aquinas, Selected Writings, ed. M. C. D’Arcy, in the Everyman’s Library series (London: J. M. Dent; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1939), 1–23. The third sermon contained in this collection is the florid Corpus Christi address Hodierneae festivitatis, which is now known to be spurious but makes for enjoyable reading nonetheless, followed by the Office for Corpus Christi, which is almost certainly authentic (the translation of this Office is found on pp. 30–50). A translation by Athanasius Sulavik of Thomas’s sermon in honor of St. Nicholas, Inueni Davit, accompanied by my study “A Tale of Two Wonderworkers: St. Nicholas of Myra in the Writings and Life of St. Thomas Aquinas,” is published in Angelicum 82 (2005): 19–53. The “conferences” or sets of sermons have fared better in terms of translations; see note 13.
This we find with, for example, St. Bonaventure or St. Anthony of Padua, both of whom planned and published well-ordered sequences of sermons on the feasts of the liturgical year.


Most biographers of St. Thomas have believed that his sermons on the Apostles’ Creed and on the Ten Commandments were also given during this Lent, but the evidence for this view is slim; in reality, we know too little to give a definite place and date for any of these thematic sets. See Torrell, Person and Work, 72, 266, and 358. Mandonnet is the spokesman for the older position: “Le Carême de saint Thomas d’Aquin à Naples (1273),” in San Tommaso d’Aquino O.P., Miscellanea storico-artistica (Rome, 1924), 195–212.

That they are intellectually nourishing, and not lightweight advertisements for the “serious theology” of the dogmatic treatises, can be seen from a recent study devoted to plumbing the depths of a single homily from the series on the Apostles’ Creed: Herwi Rikhof, “Thomas on the Church: Reflections on a Sermon,” in Weinandy et al., Aquinas on Doctrine, 199–224.

All the eyewitness accounts of Thomas, as of his spiritual father, Dominic, speak frequently of profuse tears—in the case of the theologian, while he was offering of Holy Mass; in the case of the founder, usually while he was praying for sinners or preaching to the people.

Quoted in Ayo, Sermon-Conferences, 4.

Spiritual Master, 173. For simplicity’s sake, the word “sermon” will be henceforth used to refer to the sermon and collatio taken as one whole.


Spiritual Master, 173–74.

I am not referring to the Sequence Veni sancte Spiritus Et emitte coelitus etc., but the prayer that begins Veni sancte Spiritus, reple tuorum corda fidelium, et tu amoris in eis ignem accende (“Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful, and enkindle in them the fire of Thy love”).


A recent article that draws heavily upon Thomas’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit is Daniel A. Keating’s “Justification, Sanctification and Divinization in Thomas Aquinas,” in Weinandy et al., Aquinas on Doctrine, 139–58.


Seven studies are collected in the volume Trinity in Aquinas, trans. Teresa Bede, Matthew Levering, et alia (Ypsilanti, Mich.: Sapientia Press, 2003); St. Thomas’s theology of the Holy Spirit is dis-

26 In John Paul II’s encyclical, Thomas is cited at notes 38, 96, 139, 183, 200, 254, and 255.