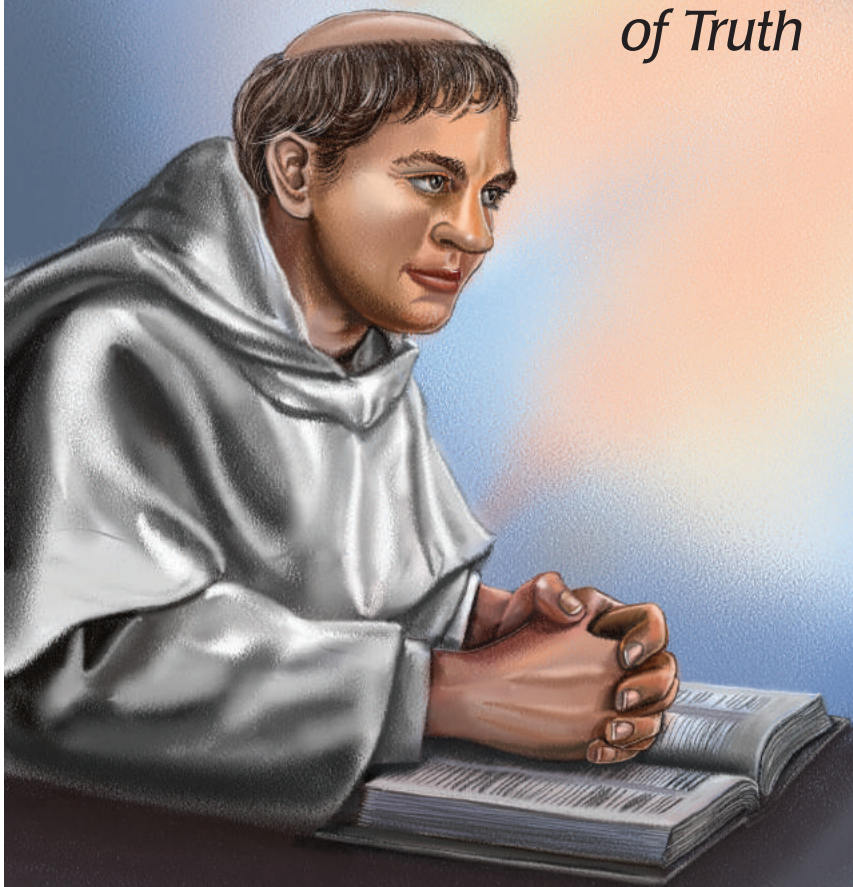


Saint Thomas Aquinas

*Missionary
of Truth*



by Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, FSP

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A STORMY NIGHT

Thunder boomed as dark clouds rolled over the Italian hills, casting a shadow on the gray stone walls of a castle in Roccasecca (ROH-ka-sek-ka). Located high on a hill, the castle was home to the Aquinas (uh-KWI-nuss) family.

Inside, three-year-old Thomas put down his toy and rubbed his drooping eyes. "It's nap time for little Thomas and the baby," his mother, Theodora, said to the nanny.

"I hope they can sleep with all the thunder," the nanny replied as she got up to put them down to rest. Soon Thomas and his baby sister had fallen asleep. The nanny sat quietly in a corner keeping an eye on the children as she did some sewing.

Boom! Boom! The thunder grew louder and lightning began to flash across the sky. Then crack! A bolt of lightning came through the nursery window. The nanny shrieked, "Help! Help! Lightning has struck the baby!"



*Mama Theodora scooped Thomas up,
“Something terrible . . . has happened. Your
baby sister was struck by the lightning,
and . . . she’s gone.”*

Mama Theodora rushed in and ran straight for the cradle. “No!” Mama Theodora wailed. Her baby girl was not breathing!

A frightened Thomas jumped out of bed and ran to his mother. “Mama, what’s happening?” he asked.

Looking at her youngest son, Mama Theodora scooped Thomas up and held him tight. As she carried him out of the nursery and walked to her room, she responded, “Something terrible . . . has happened. Your baby sister was struck by the lightning, and . . . she’s gone.”

Thomas gazed at his sobbing mother and asked, “Where did she go, Mama?”

Overcome with sadness, Mama Theodora drew a shaky breath and tried to explain, “Your sister went to be with God.”

“What does that mean, Mama?” Thomas asked.

Hugging Thomas, Mama Theodora struggled to answer her inquisitive little boy, “It means that your baby sister has died and gone to heaven.”

“What’s heaven, Mama?”

“Heaven is where God is. When we die—if we have lived as God wants us to live—we go to heaven. There we’ll see God and be happy with him forever.” With that Mama

Theodora sat and rocked Thomas while tears of grief for her little girl ran down her cheeks.

Thomas heard his mother praying quietly, but, even though he was only three, he couldn't help but wonder, *What will heaven be like? Will I see my baby sister? What is God like?* Thomas wondered about God from that day on.

A LOVE FOR LEARNING

Life at Roccasecca in 1231 was far from boring. Mama Theodora and her husband, Landolfo, now had eight energetic children. The death of his sister three years earlier had left a mark on Thomas: he was terrified of thunder storms. Like his seven siblings, Thomas—who was prone to introspection and quiet reflection—was taught how to be a proper noble. Their parents made sure to instill in them the behaviors and attitudes that a member of a prestigious family should have. But the Aquinas children also spent a lot of time playing games and having fun. One of Thomas' favorite things to do was to look out at the countryside from the top of the castle and wonder about the world beyond his home.

One day six-year-old Thomas asked his father, "What lies beyond the big woods, Papa?"

"Well, Thomas, that's north. The big city of Rome is north of us," Papa Landolfo answered.

“Is Rome important?” Thomas asked.

“It’s filled with many buildings and it’s where the Pope lives.”

“Who is the Pope, Papa?”

“Pope Gregory IX is our Holy Father, our Pope. Thomas, you’ve seen how shepherds guide their flock of sheep. The Pope is like a shepherd, but instead of guiding sheep he guides the whole Church.”

“Can we go to Rome and meet the Pope?” Thomas asked excitedly.

“Maybe when you get older you’ll meet the Pope. But I want to talk to you about something else.”

“What’s that, Papa?” Thomas asked.

“Thomas, your mother and I are thinking of sending you to a special school. Going to school is a privilege. Not everyone can go. Most families need their children to help work the farm. Our family is blessed and can afford to hire workers for our fields. Your mother and I believe it’s important that you study and learn.”

Thomas’ eyes widened. “Really, Papa? I’d love that! I want to learn more about the world and God. But where would I go?”

Papa Landolfo smiled at his son’s eagerness and said, “The abbey at Monte Cassino (MOHN-tay ka-SEE-noh) is not too far away.

The Benedictine monks who live there teach boys. But you would have to live there with the other boys while you learn."

"You mean I couldn't live here with you and Mama anymore?" Thomas asked with a frown.

"No, Thomas. There are no schools near us. You would live there but we will see each other. We'll come visit you and you'll come home for vacations," Papa Landolfo assured. Putting an arm around Thomas, his father continued, "God has given you a mind that is eager to learn. We want to help you do that, but the only way is to send you away to school."

Leaning closer to his father, Thomas looked up and asked, "What kinds of things will I learn?"

Papa Landolfo stroked his beard and answered, "First the monks will teach you how to read and write. Then they'll teach you math, science, and religion."

"So I'll learn more about God?" Thomas asked smiling.

"Yes, Thomas," he replied. "You'll learn a lot about God! Some of the boys who will be at school with you want to grow up to be monks who pray and work the way Saint Benedict did. Would *you* like that, Thomas?"

Thomas' smile grew wider, "Yes, Papa, I want to know everything about God!"

"I thought you might," added Papa. "Maybe you'll become a monk someday, Thomas. Pray often and ask God to help you know what to do when you grow up. If you did become a monk, then you could maybe even become a great abbot!"

Thomas nodded. But he thought, *Who cares about being an abbot? If I become a monk, I'll know everything about God.*

Later that evening Papa Landolfo spoke to the other children.

"Your mother and I have something important to tell you. Thomas will soon be going to the abbey at Monte Cassino. There, he'll study and perhaps one day become the abbot of the monastery!"

The oldest boy in the family, Aimo, said, "Well, I'm glad Thomas is going and not me! I want to be a soldier when I grow up!"

"Me too," chimed in Thomas' two other brothers, Rinaldo and Landolfo.

But Marotta, the oldest girl, said, "I'm so happy for you, Thomas! I'm sure you'll like it there, but I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too, Marotta! I'm going to miss everyone," Thomas said quickly, looking down as he wiped his eyes.

“And everyone is going to miss you, Thomas,” added Mama Theodora, with tears welling up in her eyes.

“No use getting sad now. Thomas will be with us for a few more weeks,” Papa Landolfo said. “We need a little time to get everything ready.”



A few weeks later, Thomas rose early, stretched and said to himself, *Today I leave for the abbey! What if no one there likes me? Will I like it there?* Thomas was both nervous and excited.

“The time has come to say good-bye to Thomas,” Mama Theodora announced after breakfast. “Your father will take him to Monte Cassino and make sure everything is set before he returns home.”

While Papa Landolfo got the horses ready, Thomas hugged his siblings and then his mother. Then he confessed to her, “Mama, I want to go to school. But I’m scared about leaving home. I’m going to miss you, and Papa, and all my brothers and sisters.” A tear rolled down his cheek.

“This is a big step for you and us.” As she wiped the tears falling from Thomas’ eyes

Mama Theodora continued, "I'm going to miss you so much, my brave and smart little boy. But I know God will take care of you and you'll be happy at school. You'll make friends and learn everything there is to learn." Then she hugged him and gave him a big kiss.

"Mama, what should I do if I get scared?" Thomas asked.

"Do you remember what to do when there are thunderstorms?" his mother asked in return.

"Yes. When that happens, I pray and ask God to watch over me so I won't be so scared."

"Exactly, Thomas. Whenever you feel scared about anything, say a prayer and trust God."

Then, holding Mama Theodora's hand, Thomas walked out of the only home he had known. With one more look at his brothers and sisters who stood there waving, Thomas climbed up into the cart.

"Thomas, we'll pray for you; pray for us, too!" cried Mama Theodora as the cart started to move. As they began the ride to the abbey Papa Landolfo put his arm around Thomas and said, "I'm sure you'll like Monte

Cassino. But if you don't want to stay there, I'll come and bring you home."

"I am a little scared, Papa. But God will help me. I really do want to go to school!"

They went up and down many hills. After what seemed like hours to Thomas, Papa Landolfo called out, "There it is!" Papa Landolfo was pointing at a large abbey built of stone. The cart they were in still had to climb a very high, rocky hill. Papa Landolfo explained that the abbey had been built by Saint Benedict in the sixth century.

Thomas and his father made their way up the steep hill. As they got closer, Thomas could see the abbey better. It was shaped like a rectangle and had a big bell tower. Thomas could see some monks dressed in long black robes in the fields around the abbey. "Papa, what are they doing?" he asked.

Papa Landolfo replied, "The monks divide their day with work, study, and prayer—that's the way Saint Benedict wanted it from the start. The ones we see are working in the gardens. That's where the monks grow their food."

Finally Thomas and his father arrived at the large wooden door of the abbey and Papa Landolfo pulled on a thick rope. On

the other side of the door Thomas could hear the bell and then the quick shuffling of steps. His heart pounded as he wondered, *What will this new place be like?* Then the door began to creak open.