

COLUMNISTS

Aquinas grasped essence of Catholicism

This week, on Jan. 28, Catholics celebrate the feast of one of the greatest and most influential theologians in church history: St. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-74), also known as the "Angelic Doctor."

There are, of course, other towering theological figures: St. Athanasius (ca. 296-373), the architect of the Council of Nicaea's teaching on the divinity of Christ in 325; St. Basil the Great (ca. 330-79) and St. Gregory Nazianzen (329-89), who helped formulate church teaching on the Trinity; and St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), whose writings, like those of St. Thomas, brilliantly covered the whole spectrum of Christian doctrine.

But none of these outstanding theologians captured the essence and inner dynamic of Catholic thought more cogently than Aquinas himself.

For him, creation is a theater of grace, embodying and mediating the presence and saving activity of God on our behalf. It is the stage on which the drama of salvation continuously unfolds.

Indeed, history is in constant movement, energized and transformed by the incarnation of the Word at Christmas, renewed and re-created by the resurrection and glorification of the crucified Lord at Easter and the Ascension, and moving now inexorably toward its ulti-



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

mate fulfillment when Christ hands over his kingdom to the Father.

Like his mentor and fellow Dominican, St. Albert the Great (1200-80), Thomas saw no opposition between the order of nature and the order of grace, or between reason and revelation. For him, there is a radical continuity between and among them because each comes from the creative hand of God, and each has the same final destiny.

Aquinas's mind was quintessentially Catholic, that is, thoroughly sacramental in outlook and carefully balanced (catholic, with a small "c"). For Thomas, even if the world and human nature are fallen in sin, they remain essentially good because they were created by the Father, redeemed in the death and resurrection of the Son, and sanctified and destined

for eternal glory through the power of the Holy Spirit.

For Aquinas, grace builds on nature. It does not replace nature, much less destroy it. Grace sanctifies, elevates, and renews nature.

Grace also works through nature. We are not only temples of the Holy Spirit, but instruments as well. While God is the First Cause of all that is, we are secondary causes, collaborating with God in extending the boundaries of God's reign of justice, love, and peace.

The un-Catholic mind sees it differently. Nature is to be controlled, suppressed, even abused (under the guise of self-mortification). Mired in sin, nature can produce nothing that is good. Grace simply covers the corruption of nature; it does not transform it from within. We are justified, but not sanctified.

God alone accomplishes what is good. We must place our trust in God hoping to be part of the divine plan of salvation. Many, perhaps most, will be lost through sin. God will save the few to manifest the divine glory, mercy and justice.

The safest course is to stand clear of the world. Seek refuge in the enclave of righteousness, which is the church. Have no dialogue with the world and make no attempt to change it. The one who sups

with the Devil must have a long spoon.

This same un-Catholic attitude prevails regarding reason and revelation. Reason, like nature, is fallen in sin. We can know nothing of God apart from what God has revealed to us, whether in the Bible or in church teachings.

For Thomas Aquinas, our reason can apprehend the truth because reason, like nature, is elevated by grace. It is not a matter of nature or grace, but of nature and grace. Nor is it a matter of reason or revelation, but of reason and revelation.

Thomas Aquinas was named a doctor of the church in 1567. In 1879 Pope Leo XIII commended Thomas' thought to all students of theology in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* and, in 1880, named him patron of Catholic universities.

In his own time, however, Thomas did not escape the critical gaze or censorious arm of the hierarchy, including those of the bishop of Paris, who, three years after Aquinas's death when he could no longer defend himself, condemned 21 propositions attributed to his thought.

On the other hand, who remembers the name of that bishop today?

So it was; so it has ever been.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Do we fully accept Jesus?

Fourth Sunday of the Year (Jan. 30):
(R3) Mark 1:21-28.

(R1) Deuteronomy 18:15-20. (R2) 1
Corinthians 7:32-35.

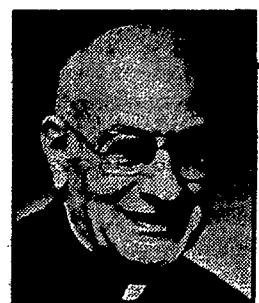
Mark in the first chapter of his Gospel emphasizes Jesus' acts without details about the content of his teaching. He simply says that the teaching is authoritative.

Secondly, Mark uses healing stories, not for the sake of the healings, but to touch upon God's will and intervention, which everyone present perceives.

There is an urgency about the Gospel of St. Mark. The plot and action move swiftly, and Mark is anxious for us to catch the sense of immediacy. The kingdom of God — his powerful presence — is breaking into our ordinary world. How will we respond? Will the divine intervention make a difference in our lives?

On a Sabbath Jesus began to teach in the synagogue in Capernaum. The people were spellbound by the teaching, which was authoritative and not like that of the scribes. There appeared in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit who shrieked out, "What do you want of us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

Mark makes it clear in the first day of



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

Our Lord's public life that he and the demons are engaged in a cosmic battle in the middle of people like you and me. "Have you come to destroy us?" the demon shrieked. The answer is a clarion-voiced, Yes! Yes! Christ has come to free us from the demons of hell and the sins they peddle like pride and prejudice, greed and immorality.

The scene between Jesus and the possessed man is no polite conversation. The demon shrieks and Jesus rebukes him sharply. Jesus orders him out of the man, and out he goes.

Everybody is amazed. "He gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey him." A new teaching, indeed. Jesus Christ is the very incarnation of God and God's purpose for mankind is to set man

free from the powers of hell.

What shall we do with Jesus? Shall we continue to ignore his claim on our lives? Shall we live as if he had never entered our world? Shall we continue to substitute cultural tradition for conscious discipleship? Or shall we recognize what even the demons acknowledged — that Jesus Christ is Lord of all life?

In the book, *Finding Hope Again*, Roy Fairchild tells about coming to Vienna, Austria, after a two-week illness in a small Austrian village. He had spent most of his money on medical costs and his last cent to take a trip to Vienna to try and find his friends he had been traveling with. As he was standing in a street-car station, tired, hungry and discouraged, a little old wrinkled lady, whose job was to sweep out the station, came to him and asked him if he were hungry.

She took her own lunch from a brown paper bag and offered him half of it. He said he was so moved by her action that he has never forgotten her face or the sparkle in her eye. They talked for more than an hour about her life. She was raised in the country on a farm knowing only hard work. She had lost her husband and two sons in the Resistance. Only her daughter had survived, but she

was very thankful for many things. She said, "Jesu ist mein Herr. Gott ist gut" (Jesus is my Lord. God is good).

Is Jesus our Lord? Once we see him as he really is, we will either hate everything he stands for or we will be willing to give our life for all he stands for. Jesus brought out the best and the worst in people. What does he do to us?

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, January 31

2 Samuel 15:13-14, 30, 16:5-13;
Mark 5:1-20

Tuesday, February 1

2 Samuel 18:9-10, 14, 24-25, 30-
19:3; Mark 5:21-43

Wednesday, February 2

Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18;
Luke 2:22-40 or 2:22-32

Thursday, February 3

1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12; Mark 6:7-13

Friday, February 4

Sirach 47:2-11; Mark 6:14-29

Saturday, February 5

1 Kings 3:4-13; Mark 6:30-34

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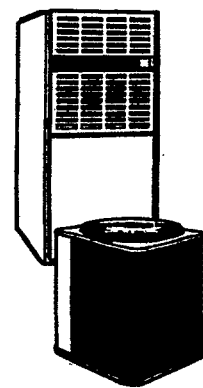
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