New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Thomas Aquinas and his family*

Great thinkers had family, as most of us have. In *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude 1872–1921* (Free Press 1996) Ray Monk unfolds a grim picture of his subject's lonely upbringing among lunacy-haunted aristocrats. Alexander Waugh, in *The House of Wittgenstein: A Family at War* (Bloomsbury 2008), describes an even more dysfunctional family, without casting much light on how the youngest child became a great philosopher. One of his sisters seems to have understood, though in his earliest years the family regarded Ludwig as the stupid one.

Perhaps family seldom understands and never accounts for genius. All his life Thomas Aquinas remained close to his family. None of them had — could have had — much understanding of his work. His father and brothers were military men. As the youngest son he was sent by his parents (with a servant), soon after his fifth birthday, as an oblate, to the nearby abbey of Monte Cassino. They probably expected him to become abbot one day. Perhaps as down payment his father Landolfo financed the repair of two grain mills on the estate, the profits of which were to fund an annual 'grand banquet' for the monks. Ten years later, when the abbey had fallen into the hands of the Holy Roman Emperor and most of the monks were expelled, Landolfo, an ally or vassal of the Emperor in his wars with the papacy, sent Thomas down the road to Naples, to the Emperor's new university, the first to be founded independently of papal authority — of course not anticipating that Thomas would meet the works of Aristotle and then, to the dismay of the family, the Dominican friars.

Aimo, Thomas's eldest brother, went on crusade with the Emperor to the Holy Land in 1228/1229. Kidnapped on the way home by a Christian warlord in Cyprus, he was ransomed by Pope Gregory IX and changed allegiance from Emperor to Pope. Thomas was still in the abbey school. Rinaldo, nearer Thomas's age, also in the Emperor's service, also changed sides, but he was captured and executed for treason. By this time Thomas was in Paris. The family regarded Rinaldo as a martyr. He was probably the family member involved in Thomas's abduction in 1244, when the family tried to get him back from the Dominicans. According to his first biographer, Thomas believed that his third brother, Landolfo, had to spend time in purgatory — nothing unusual in that, of course, one might think, it's just odd that he ever mentioned it.

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One sister died in infancy, struck by lightning, while young Thomas slept nearby. Marotta, the eldest, became a nun, allegedly persuaded to do so by Thomas during the months he was held prisoner by the family. She ended as abbess of her community. Thomas remained close to his sister Theodora. It was to her home — a small castle in the neighbourhood — that he went to recuperate after the vision which decided him to stop writing the *Summa Theologiae* (or more likely, by that stage, dictating). In 1272 Thomas was executor of his sister Adelasia's husband's will, in the event quite an onerous task.

On what turned out his final journey, summoned by the Pope to attend the forthcoming Council of the Church, Thomas felt unwell and stopped off at the castle of Maenza where his niece Francesca lived. This is where he and she and a handful of visiting Cistercian monks and Franciscan friars allegedly ate the fresh herrings that he wanted and were found fortuitously in the basket of a passing fish merchant. After a few weeks, if that long, Thomas concluded that he was dying and had himself moved to Fossanova, the nearby Cistercian abbey. He died within a week or ten days, on 7 March 1274.

Francesca came to the funeral. Women were not allowed to enter the cloister where the ceremony took place but the bier was brought to the monastery gate so that she could see her uncle's body, before it was taken back into the church and interred in front of the high altar. Many lay people, relatives, and friends of the Aquino family attended the funeral ceremonies. None of the Dominican authorities came either from Naples or from Rome, presumably because the funeral was held too soon for them to get there or perhaps even for them to be told of Thomas's death.

His sister Theodora reappears in the story. What happened to Thomas's bones is black comedy. The Cistercians were determined to keep his body. However, in 1288, they opened the tomb to allow Theodora to have his right hand (which she eventually gave to the Dominicans). By the time that the canonization process was coming to a climax, the monks had boiled off the flesh so that they could keep the bones 'in a small place' — in a casket in the sacristy. Many years later, in 1369, after much manoeuvring between the Cistercians and the Dominicans, the Pope ordered the remains to be taken to the Dominican priory in Toulouse. (Thomas probably never set foot there but it is the cradle of the Dominican Order.) In 1791, during the Revolution, the relics were transferred to a more secure church, where they remained until 1974 when they were returned to the restored Dominican church, where they may be venerated, though it is now a State-owned museum.

Thomas was not the solitary dreamer or remote academic that some of the stories about him might suggest. He was often called on by the Order for tasks that put him in the public eye, some involving a good deal of administration. He was commissioned to set up at Santa

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Sabina in Rome what was probably an elite study house for young Dominicans, whom he was authorized to send back to their original communities if he judged them not up to it. But it is his lifelong engagement in family matters that bears witness to his reputation for sound judgment and his practical bent.

It remains, of course, that, like many another genius, his achievements as thinker and scholar, teacher and writer, were probably little appreciated by his kinsfolk — at least not by the men folk, though perhaps his sisters and nieces had an inkling. In July 1323, at the papal court in Avignon, when Thomas was canonized as a saint, the festivities for the whole city were paid for by his nephew Thomas of San Severino, his sister Theodora's son. By then, obviously, the family knew he was special.

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