

SAINT THOMAS' CHRISTMAS GIFT

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“O Lord, Lord, Almighty King, all things are in Thy power, and there is none that can resist Thy will, if Thou determine to save Israel.”

(Esther, 13:9)



THE CASTLE OF MOLARIA stands below the Colle Iano, to the west of Frascati, on the southern slope of the Alban hills. In 1254 Cardinal Richard degli Annibaldi came into possession of this and other properties previously belonging to the courts of Tusculum. The good Cardinal had, in 1265, asked a number of his friends to spend the blessed and happy season of Christmas with him at Molaria. Among his distinguished guests was the saintly Master, Father Thomas d'Aquino of the Order of Preachers, who had come from Rome with his faithful and devoted companion Father Reginald of Piperno. Now the Cardinal had also invited two prominent Jews, “very rich”, the chronicle says, and “friends of the aforesaid Cardinal.” The Prelate requested Master Thomas to speak with these learned rabbis about the Christian Faith, for he was well aware of the Dominican's superlative powers of exposition and persuasion, and sincerely anxious for the conversion of his Jewish friends.

Thomas replied that he would be delighted to say anything he could, if the Jews were willing to listen. The renowned Dominican, now in his fortieth year, tall and powerfully built, was a man whose personal affability and politeness were equal to his intellectual brilliance and apostolic zeal. He accepted the Cardinal's invitation, looking forward to a few days of well-earned rest and recreation during the holidays. But here were two benighted souls, strangers to Christ and His holy Faith, and Thomas d'Aquino was certainly never “on vacation” when there were present souls to be won for Christ. He was eager to begin, and therefore, in order to talk with the Jews more freely, away from the other guests and the busy household activities in preparation for the approaching feast, the three of

them withdrew to the chapel and entered at once into discussion.

These Jews were not heathens or pagans; but God-fearing men, pious sons of the Law, who served with a full heart the God of their fathers and waited longingly for the coming of the promised Savior. Thomas was aware of this, and so he started at once to "search the Scriptures," seeking therein the chief Messianic texts. With profound penetration and reverence the Friar cited text after text, pointing out the fulfillment of each prophecy, the consummation of every hope, the answer to every prayer of Israel in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. To be sure, God chose Abraham to be the father of a chosen people; He raised up Moses and through him led this people into a Land of Promise. When the nation fell away and turned to false gods, to forbidden entanglements and even gross wickedness, He recalled them back from the threat of spiritual ruin, to respect their sacred alliance and to maintain the precious deposit of divine revelation. For many centuries Israel, alone in the world, remained the faithful bearer of the message of God, the "Faithful city" of Isaias (1:21,26). Alone in the world the Israelites awaited the Redeemer and were confident that they would recognize Him when He came. Thus they had a prompt answer to Herod's inquiry "where Christ should be born." (*Matt. 2:4*)

The revelation to the Jewish people, and the long course of their history under divine guidance and protection was a preparation for the Christ Who would be sent. Now Christ has come, St. Thomas told his two listeners; mankind has been redeemed by His Passion and Death, and the Kingdom of God on earth has been established. This is the burden of the Christian Gospel, the good news to all men. The very Scriptures of Israel foretold and foreshadowed the New Covenant, the new union of man with God in this Mystical Body of Christ which is the Church. What then had the Jews to say?

The two rabbis made earnest inquiry concerning this and that point of doctrine in the Christian faith; but Thomas was able completely to settle their doubts and solve their difficulties. He had made a very favorable impression on these two Masters of Israel, and seeing that they were for the moment satisfied with what he had said, he broke off, at just the right moment. The Friar told them to ponder well what he had told them and return on the morrow to inquire concerning any other doubts they might have. They had talked and argued for a long time and it was now close to evening. The Jews arose and departed, leaving Thomas alone in the

fast darkening chapel. But he was not alone; he turned toward the altar and fell to his knees.

The seed had been planted; planted solidly and firmly in the keen minds and honest hearts of the two Israelites. Thomas had done all that he could for the present; now he must wait—and pray—while the seed germinated. There is no snow in southern Italy even at this time of year, but outside the darkened castle a bitter wind whipped and raged, and the numbing winter cold seeped through the cracks in the thick stone walls and settled over the vast, bare walls. Thomas' heart was on fire with hope and love: with hope in the unfailing mercy of God and confidence in His almighty power; with an intense love for these two groping Jews, whose very redemption the Son of God had already purchased by His blood. "To Abraham were the promises made, and to his seed." Here, here, Lord, is the seed of Abraham: they are true seed of the great father of many nations, and through my poor efforts, You have brought them to the threshold of the Faith. Will You then, leave them there forever, outside the fold, in darkness, apart from Christ? No, Thomas was certain that on the following day the rabbis would be won for the Faith; they had sought the King of Israel and they would find Him.

His confidence was increased by the fact that the Birthday of the King, the Son of David, was so near. The next day would be the Vigil of Christmas, and so the holy Doctor begged the Divine Child to take these two souls unto Himself, on this, the anniversary of His birth. He was born, as He tells us, to save sinners; and He was not sent except to the lost sheep of Israel. Israel was called by its Messiah to enter into the kingdom, but Israel turned a deaf ear and a hard heart to that gracious call, and chose instead the terrible course of infidelity and apostasy. This was the ultimate madness, the rankest ingratitude in the history of a long-ungrateful race. The human nature assumed by the Word was a Jewish human nature; the Pharisees themselves declared that the whole world had gone after Him. Had not Zacharias forseen: "In those days ten men of all languages of the Gentiles shall take hold and shall hold fast the skirt of one that is a Jew saying: 'We will go with you for we have heard that God is with you' "(Zach. 8:23) In God's name, could Israel refuse this infinite compliment? It could and thus far has refused. But: "God is with you"—with us: Emmanuel. Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and loose the bonds of Israel! Reginald noticed this absorbed expression on his Master's face as the latter

entered his guest-room for the night. He knew that Thomas would pray a long while yet before giving himself to the sweet and blessed repose of sleep.

Th next morning, December twenty-fourth, dawned cold and clear. A bright sun rose high over the gentle Alban hills to the west; and to the north, beyond the bleak range of fields and vineyards, the roofs and steeples of the city of Rome stood etched against a hard gray sky. Preparations for the imminent feast got under way at an early hour; and Brother Thomas remained in the chapel after finishing his Mass to await the arrival of the two Jews. They entered finally, and again a discussion was begun. With secret joy, Thomas could see that these were different men from those he had conversed with on the previous afternoon! As one of the early biographers so delicately put it: “. . . *in eorum cordibus jam vere lucis exorto sydere*”—the daystar of Faith had indeed dawned in their hearts; they humbly admitted that they could not reply to the Friar’s arguments, and asked him to explain still further the beautiful mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. There was a long conversation, when suddenly there came forth from the chapel the voices of Brother Thomas and his companions, singing the *Te Deum*. The triumphant strains of this jubilant hymn filled the castle’s walls, echoing above the din and cry of holiday activity.

In his own chapel, unvesting after a late Mass, the Cardinal heard the singing, and the rush of footsteps toward the castle chapel. Now the good prelate was unable to walk, because, they tell us, he had the gout; and so he had himself carried into the chapel. All his clergy and members of his household also hurried to the same place, in time to join in the conclusion of the aforesaid canticle. Cardinal Richard’s old eyes filled with tears of happiness and thanksgiving, as he beheld his two Jewish friends, with hands clasped, kneeling before the altar. They arose as he approached and assured him of their conversion. At once, the sacred waters of Baptism must flow over their souls, flooding them with a heavenly light and filling them with the abundant graces of regeneration. The two Jews (whose names, alas, we do not know) asked for Baptism and were at once prepared for this sacrament. Thomas himself, their pedagogue unto Christ, administered the sacrament, with the Cardinal’s permission, and in the presence of his entire household.

Now no longer lost sheep, no longer outside the fold, but at last *true* sons of Abraham, these two are part of that small “remnant” which survived Israel’s national disaster. Many centuries earlier,

Jahweh had sworn woe upon woe for Israel: "I will show you what I will do to my vineyard . . . I will break down the wall thereof and it shall be trodden down and I will make it desolate. . . . The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel." (*Is.* 5:5-7) But is not Israel in the forefront of God's care? The prophets themselves have resolved for us a seeming contradiction: it is the providential survival of a few chosen souls, the "remnant" which recurs time and time again in the prophetic writings. A mere fraction; for centuries after the rejection of the Divine Messias, not more than a handful. St. Paul himself spoke of this when he wrote to the Roman Christians: "At this present time also there is a remnant saved according to the election of grace." (11:5) The "elect"—"chosen remnant" in Knox's version: three thousand on Pentecost Day, a stream quietly dying to a trickle, and all but dry in our own times. Why this tragedy? "I will judge every one of you according to his ways, O house of Israel." (*Ezech.* 33:20) Someone has said that there is no treachery but to God, nor, we may add, any tragedy save in the loss of God. Thomas Aquinas was God's instrument in averting these two Jews from their infidelity and bringing them safely home to Him, within the one fold of Christ.

There was here great cause for rejoicing, and rejoice these medieval folk did. On Christmas Day, there was a great dinner, to which Cardinal Richard invited his distinguished relatives and neighbors, and at which the two recent converts were guests of honor. Thomas was there too, beaming no doubt in silent happiness at these, his children in the Lord. At the celebration both Jews (for they had not ceased to be Jews, nor were they less Jews, but more, for their conversion!) declared that from the moment they met Thomas they felt themselves interiorly changed and ready to embrace the Christian Faith. This Dominican Master had in all truth opened their eyes and enlarged their hearts, preparatory to the infusion of life-giving Faith and grace by the Holy Spirit. Christmas, then, the Feast of the Nativity of the Savior of the world, was blessed that year by the gladsome praise and thanksgiving of these two kinsmen of the Lord according to the flesh. That afternoon, before the early winter twilight set in, Thomas d'Aquino and his faithful companion, Reginald, took leave of their eminent host, and bade farewell, too, to the earnest converts who stayed on at the castle. Off down the road swung the two Friars, hastening to reach the near-by convent of the Preachers at Rome. The peace of the new-born Babe was theirs, and the memory, cherished ever afterwards, of that holy season, when Thomas presented two precious souls to Christ for His birthday.

EPILOGUE

That all nations praise the Lord, that all people hallow His name, is the prayer of all true Christians, marked by a concern for the salvation of all men. The Christmas liturgy—more particularly, the distinctive chant of the Dominican liturgy for Christmas—is a keen reminder, one Christians need, of the origin and destiny of the kingdom Christ dwelt among us to found. “Salvation,” He said, “is of the Jews.” His most ardent apostle, Paul of Tarsus, predicted unimaginable glory what time the ancient stock, the parent tree so sublimely planted and so tenderly nourished, burst into blossom and fruit with the Faith which alone brings salvation. Mindful at this holy season, more perhaps than at any other time during the year, of the ways of God, merciful and “Condescending,” as the Church Fathers loved to recall, we remember gladly that God made Man is also the Son of Abraham, the Heir of David. Whoever recalls reverently that the flesh He assumed for our salvation was flesh of Israel, cannot help wishing that the body of Israel acknowledge the Glory of Christ. Emmanuel has come: He dwells forever with us, the Tabernacle of God with men.

O seed of Abraham, O Son of David, O Adonai and leader of the House of Israel, who didst appear to Moses in the burning bush, and didst on Mount Sinai deliver to him Thy law; O Key of David, and sceptre of the House of Israel, who openest and no one shutteth who shuttest and no one openeth . . . touch their hearts and give them true faith and repentance. Have mercy, O Jesus, on Thy own brethren—have mercy on the countrymen of Thy Mother, of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David. O Lord hear: O Lord, be appeased: O Lord, hearken and do (*Dan. 9:19*): Delay not for Thine own sake, O my God, for Thy Name was once named upon the city of Jerusalem and Thy people.¹

Note: The story of the conversion of the two Jews and St. Thomas' rôle in the conversion is not pious fiction but indisputable historical fact. Some three centuries later another Dominican, now Pope Pius V, played a similar role in the conversion of the head of the Roman synagogue. In fact, the Order of Preachers has been outstanding in the history of the apostolate to Israel.

¹ J. H. Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*, (New York, Longmans, Green and Co., 1903), pp. 177-8.