



GUERCINO - ST PETER WEEPING BEFORE THE VIRGIN

## GESTA DOCTRINAMQUE

*Let the brothers reflect on and make known the teaching and achievements (gesta doctrinamque) of those in the family of St. Dominic who have gone before them, while not forgetting to pray for them. (Cf. LCO 16).*

### THE TEARS OF BROTHER THOMAS

*André Duval, O.P.*

It happened rather frequently that Brother Thomas would cry while at prayer," some of his first biographers loved to repeat.<sup>1</sup> Was this merely the banal observation of a mediaeval hagiographer? No, for an eyewitness gave a specific account of the event, reporting that one could see tears streaming down Brother Thomas' cheeks at Compline during Lent when the responsory of the *Media vita in morte sumus* was chanted: "In the midst of life, we are in death."<sup>2</sup> But we still wonder why.

When he speaks of religious emotion, St. Thomas does not dismiss the possibility of a certain tenderness of the heart that is capable of provoking tears. There aren't only tears of sadness, he observes; there are those tears of joy that parents and friends pour forth when they meet again after a prolonged and painful separation.<sup>3</sup> Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. Was this not due to his human condition?<sup>4</sup> And in his own agony, did Jesus not exploit the language of tears?<sup>5</sup>

But why did he—Brother Thomas—weep at Compline during Lent?

In the Dominican liturgy, up until recently, during the third and fourth week of Lent the *Media vita* was chanted at Compline before and after the *Nunc dimittis* according to a Gregorian melody.<sup>6</sup> The responsory, which combines a verse of Psalm 70 (71) with the triple adoration of the Seraphim in the vision of the prophet Isaiah (Cf. Is.

6:3) as a refrain, could be translated in the following way:

(Choir) <i>Media vita in morte sumus: Quem quærimus adiutorem nisi te, Domine, qui pro peccatis nostris iuste irascaris?</i>	(Choir) In the midst of life we are in death. To whom do we look for help but to you, Lord, whose anger, with good reason, is enkindled because of our sins?
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* Sancte Deus, sancte fortis, sancte et misericors Salvator, amaræ morti ne tradas nos.	* Holy God, holy Mighty One, holy and merciful Savior, give us not over to bitter death!
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(Cantor) Ne proicias nos in tempore senectutis: cum defecerit virtus nostra, ne derelinquas nos, Domine.	(Cantor) Do not reject us now that we are old; when our strength fails do not forsake us, Lord.
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(Choir) Sancte Deus, &c.	(Choir) Holy God, etc.
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Let us imagine the Dominican liturgy of Compline on a Lenten Evening at Saint Jacques in Paris, Viterbo, or Naples. All of the brothers of the priory are gathered in the chapel, including all those who, like Brother Thomas, were not able to take part in the other liturgical celebrations of the day because they were busy teaching or preaching. They are together as if at a celebration, religiously inaugurating the silence of the night with one last goodbye to Our Lady.

The brothers had gone to the Refectory beforehand to have some very light nourishment, as it is Lent, and to listen to a reading from the Church Fathers. Brother Thomas appreciated the reading of the *Conferences* of Cassian that Saint Dominic, too, was familiar with, and from which he learned the ways of the purification of the heart.

Now, in the main Church, Psalm 90 (91) is chanted: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High and abides in the shade of the Almighty says to the Lord: ‘My refuge, my stronghold, my God in whom I trust!’” Next, there is a verse from the Prophet Jeremiah, the last words of which already announce the theme of the *Media vita*: “Do not forsake us, O Lord” (Cf. Jer. 14:9). Then a brief response:

“Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit,” or, depending on the day, “In peace I will lie down and sleep comes at once.” Each is free to sing this in his own voice, or to hear these words on the lips of Christ on the Cross.

The hymn that follows here, which was proper to the Dominican liturgy and to certain Parisian churches, evokes Christ in the enveloping melody of the phrase, “O Christ, you are the light and day.” Thus, the whole movement of Compline ascends towards Christ, all the way to the Canticle of Simeon: “Lord, now you let your servant go in peace, your word has been fulfilled.” And then comes the singing of the *Media vita*.

To those who were looking at him, Brother Thomas seemed like he wasn’t even there, but rather absorbed, as if in a rapture, with tears flowing down his cheeks. This great scholar, whose constant labor we know, whose erudition and even more whose rightness of judgment we admire, whose absent-mindedness and naivety we recount with a smile—we watch weeping!

Why did he weep? By what contrast of sadness and joy, by what deep feeling of consolation was he moved to tears?

The chant was certainly not the direct cause of this emotion; nevertheless, it wasn’t irrelevant. What Brother Thomas had written about was borne out here in his personal experience: the chant carried, extended, and enriched in him the intimate reverberation of the words.<sup>7</sup> Which words so touched his heart? Without ceding to unfounded hypotheses, it suffices to ask Thomas himself in his own writings. God knows that Saint Thomas shows the utmost discretion when it comes to revealing personal information. Nevertheless, here or there, he gives himself away, suggesting to us what moved him especially in the *Media vita*.

His reaction does not proceed simply from the instinctive recoil of man confronting death, or of the disquiet of an old age that always comes too soon. It’s the reaction of a Christian formed in the school of Saint Augustine, aware of his sinful condition, who beseeches the grace of God. Without divine help, the sinner is incapable of not sinning again. This is why we say *et ne nos inducas in tentationem*

(and lead is not into temptation), and why, as Saint Thomas adds when commenting on this last petition of the *Our Father*, we chant: “Do not reject us now that we are old; when our strength fails do not forsake us, Lord.”<sup>8</sup>

But was there something to weep about? Was Brother Thomas tormented by the conviction of his sins—but what sins?—to the point of trembling at the thought of being forever abandoned to an irreversible decay? Such is not his humility.

He is so moved only because he knows he is already forgiven—saved; that is the unimaginable way in which the divine mercy that moved him so deeply is manifested. “To whom do we look for help but to you, Lord, whose anger, with good reason, is enkindled because of our sins?” But already he is no longer preoccupied with himself, captivated as he is by the image of the Crucified One whom he adores while chanting: “Holy God, holy Mighty One, holy and merciful Savior...”

The words of the *Media vita* express the petitions of the human race that are realized in the promises of salvation. They summon Thomas who, as a theologian and a disciple of Saint Augustine, is especially attentive to recognizing in the Psalms the prophetic formulation of the state of Christ’s soul in his passion. When this supplication of the sinner is sung, asking the Lord not to *abandon* him, what St. Thomas hears is the cry of agony of Him who became sin for us: “My God, my God, why have you *abandoned* me?”

Commenting on the twenty-seventh chapter of Saint Matthew, where the verse of Psalm 21 (22) is placed on the lips of Jesus on the Cross, and meditating with Origen on this cry—the *voce magna*—where all the mysteries are found enshrouded, Brother Thomas intends to recall in the memory of his heart the words and the chant of the *Media vita*: “Holy God, holy Mighty One, holy and merciful Savior...” He immediately transcribes in his commentary, at this very spot, the verse of Isaiah expressing the adoration of the Seraphim (Cf. Is. 6:3).

Thus, according to his own writings, this is what moved Brother Thomas to tears during the singing of the responsory. He could say

here that verse from Deuteronomy which he takes up in his Office of the Blessed Sacrament: “Is there any Nation under heaven whose God is so close to his people?” (Cf. Deut 4:7). He weeps because he is overwhelmed by the inconceivable tenderness of God for man!

“What is God,” he used to ask when, yet a child, he would question the monks of Monte Cassino who were his teachers. What vigils, lectures, analyses, and commentaries did he not later devote to probing the mystery of mysteries, to finally confess that, on his own, man can only say what God is not?

But God has *spoken*! The Word was made flesh, and now Brother Thomas adores the singing of the *responsory*. This Man who, at the peak of his life, grappling with death because he had taken upon himself the sin of the world, shouts his agony to Him who alone can deliver him from this death—this Man is his God, the One who emptied Himself, but was exalted, and received the name that is above all names.

These are the mixed emotions of sadness and joy that the singing of the *Media vita* gave birth to deep within the religious soul of Brother Thomas Aquinas, to the point of provoking his tears: disquiet in the face of death, compassion in the face of the sorrowful passion of Jesus, and very sweet joy because it is through the Savior’s cry of anguish that the reconciliation of humanity with God our Father is accomplished; it is there that we can adore “the appearance of the goodness of God our Savior and his love for men” (Titus 3:4).

“No other help but You, no other Savior but You, Lord: *nisi Te, Domine*.” While at the Naples priory he wrote the articles of the *Summa theologiae* on the Passion and the Resurrection. There, in front of an image of the Crucified, Brother Thomas declared: “For me, there is no other reward but You, Lord, *nisi Te, Domine*.”

Long labors and a somewhat favored knowledge are necessary for anyone who wants to take Saint Thomas Aquinas as a guide for his reflection on the faith, but everyone can join him in the innermost intimacy of his prayer, in the secret of his tears. At the heart of all of our distress, whatever it may be, in these diverse forms of confrontation with death through which we must pass, Saint Thomas invites

us to cry out to the Lord, to find the echo of our own sufferings in the saving cry of Jesus Crucified; he proposes that we search for peace in the adoration of him who became sin for us.

Holy God, holy Mighty One, holy and merciful Savior,  
give us not over to bitter death,  
*You who will one day be our complete happiness.*

(Tr. Cassian Derbes, O.P.)

*Fr. André Duval (1912-2005) was a Dominican friar of the Province of France. This essay first appeared in French as «Les Larmes de Frère Thomas», La Vie Spirituelle, vol. 147, n ° 707 (11/1993) 721-725. It is translated here with the gracious permission of the editors of La Vie Spirituelle.*

*Cassian Derbes entered the Order of Preachers in 2009.*

## ENDNOTES

1. Peter Calo, *Vita S. Thomae Aquinatis*, nn. 10, 13, 16, 17, 18, 28. (D. Prümmer, *Fontes vitae S. Thomae Aquinatis*, Toulouse, s.d., p. 29, 32, 35, 37, 38, 48).

2. William de Tocco, *Vita S. Thomae Aquinatis*, XXIX (D. Prümmer, op. cit., p. 103-104).

3. *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 82, a. 4, ad 3.

4. In *Ioann. Evangelium*, XI, Lect. 5, nn. 7-8.

5. In *Epist. Ad Haebreos*, V, 7-8.

6. *Editor's note*: In the medieval form of the Dominican Rite, the *Media vita* is sung as an antiphon to the *Nunc dimittis* in the form of a responsory, an uncommon phenomenon characteristic of certain medieval rites. Before the *Nunc dimittis* canticle, only the incipit

*Media vita* is sung; after the canticle, the full text of the *Media vita* antiphon is sung, followed by the verse *Ne proicias*, and concluded by a repetition of the respond *Sancte Deus*. In the Ordinary Form of the Dominican liturgy, as provided for by the *Proprium Officiorum Ordinis Praedicatorum* (Rome: Santa Sabina, 1982), the *Media vita* is sung as a responsory on Saturdays, Sundays, Solemnities and Feasts during Lent and throughout Holy Week.

7. See ST II-II, q. 91, a. 2, ad 5.

8. *Collatio in orationem dominicam*, petitio 6a.