Homily Given at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, D.C., on the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, January 27, 2011

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IN HIS premiere biography of St. Thomas, Gugliemo di Tocco wrote of the saint that "he celebrated Mass every day, his health permitting, and afterward attended a second Mass celebrated by one of the friars or some other priest, and very often served at the altar. Frequently during the Mass, he was literally overcome by an emotion so powerful that he was reduced to tears, for he was consumed by the holy mysteries of this great sacrament and strengthened by their offering."

"Consumed by the holy mysteries of this great sacrament." The Italian term here is divorato—devoured, eaten up, consumed—by the mysteries.

Surely Tocco's vivid description of Aquinas's devotion at Mass stops us dead in our tracks—we, whose celebration of or participation in the Holy Mass is frequently distracted or routinized or just bored. We're tempted to excuse ourselves with observations like "well, of course, Aquinas was a saint, and this is typically saintly behavior," or "as a very smart theologian, Aquinas had a more penetrating grasp of things than we do." But instead of these evasions, what we should do is ask ourselves: what I am missing?

Rare indeed are the mysteries that consume or devour our jaded sensibilities. Perhaps a really good thriller might do so on occasion. But we assume that holy mysteries will be something very different from murder mysteries or natural mysteries.

But we shouldn't exaggerate the contrast between holy mysteries and other sorts of mysteries. In ordinary usage, the word "mystery" refers to something that remains as yet unexplained or something that is basically inexplicable. We expect the mystery to be resolved in the final pages of a

thriller, but at the same time scientists speak of the enduring mysteries of the universe. These kinds of mysteries are not unlike holy mysteries in that, in both cases, our capacity to understand or penetrate a particular reality is challenged in a significant way.

The crucial difference between the Catholic and common uses of the word "mystery" lies here. When the term is applied to divine realities, the mystery involved is by definition without end. This is not to say (as nominalists, in contrast to Aquinas, seemed to want to say) that the things of God are permanently or radically incomprehensible and ineffable, but that they are endlessly comprehensible and expressible. Not darkness, but too much light is what we encounter here. That irritating conversation stopper, "it's a mystery," doesn't mean that we have nothing further to say but that we can't say enough about the matter in hand. The mysteries of faith are so far-reaching in their meaning and so breathtaking in their beauty that they possess a limitless—that is to say, literally an unending and inexhaustible—power to attract and transform the minds and hearts, the individual and communal lives, in which they are pondered, digested, and, ultimately, loved and adored.

Not for nothing can we use the word in the singular and in the plural, mystery and mysteries. The all-encompassing mystery—in the singular—is nothing less than and nothing else but God Himself, and the mysteries—plural—are its many facets as we come to know them.

St. Thomas insistently taught that the mystery of faith is radically singular because the triune God who is at its center is one in being and in activity, and comprehends in one act of omniscience the fullness of his truth and wisdom. Through the infused gift of faith—thus called a theological virtue—the believer is rendered capable of a participation in this divine vision, but always and only according to human ways of knowing. We truly know God, but not in the way that He knows Himself. According to Aquinas, the human comprehension of the singular mystery of divine truth is necessarily plural in its structure.

In this sense, we can speak both of the mystery of faith—referring to the reality of the one triune God who is known through the act of faith—and of the mysteries of faith—referring to our way of knowing in the Church the various elements of the singular mystery of God. All the mysteries of our faith point us to the single mystery at their center, nothing else but God Himself, one and three.

Coming to the center of this mystery, we affirm with astonished delight the divine desire to share the communion of Trinitarian life with human beings, with us. No one has ever desired anything more. God Himself has revealed to us (how else could we have known it?) that this divine desire—properly speaking, intention and plan—is at the basis of

everything else: creation itself, the incarnation of the Word, our redemption through the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, our sanctification and glory through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus St. Paul speaks to us today of the grace he received precisely "to bring to light for all what is the plan of the mystery hidden from ages past in God who created all things, so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the Church" (Eph 3:9–10).

Amazingly, then, it turns out that the divine mystery is the key to all other mysteries. Far from being opaque, it throws light on everything else. To see everything with the eyes of faith—to adopt, as it were, a "God's eye view"—is to see and to understand everything in the light of this divine plan, "to bring to light for all what is the plan of the mystery."

Glory, bliss, beatitude—these wonderful terms refer to the consummation of our participation in the communion of Trinitarian life already begun in Baptism, nothing less than seeing God face to face. At the heart of the mystery and the mysteries, finally, is the mystery of divine love. The Catholic tradition has not hesitated to call this participation in the divine life a true friendship with God.

Given all this, was it not fitting that God should be moved to send His own Son into the world and, in the exquisite divine condescension of the Incarnation, to take on a human nature so that He could be known and loved by us as Jesus of Nazareth, Christ and Lord? Was it not fitting that the Son of Man should offer His life to the Father on the Cross in a sacrifice of love for our reconciliation? Was it not fitting that Christ should remain with us in the Eucharist?

Aquinas teaches us to regard these mysteries in the light of the overarching mystery of the divine love. This is very clear in what he wrote about the final question: "It is a law of friendship that friends should want to be together. . . . Christ does not leave us without His physical presence on our pilgrimage, but He unites us to Himself in the sacrament in the reality of His body and His blood" (*ST* III, q. 75, a. 1).

At the start we asked ourselves: what are we missing? what does it mean to be "consumed by the holy mysteries of this great sacrament"? The answer is really very simple. It means: to be consumed by the love they embody and reveal. Is it any wonder that Aquinas wept in the contemplation of these holy mysteries?

May this great saint, who experienced such rapture whenever he celebrated the Eucharist, help us not to miss being consumed by the love of our divine friends who give themselves to us in this great sacrament, to their eternal glory and to our unending benefit, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. NV

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