



St. Thomas Aquinas: "The Dumb Ox"

G. K. Chesterton

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It is known that when the great Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton began his book on Saint Thomas Aquinas (who is, quite possibly, the most influential of all Christian theologians), "his research for the project consisted of a very casual perusal of a few books on his subject." To say that Chesterton was no authority is an understatement. To say further that he has written a masterpiece of elucidation may also be an understatement. Etienne Gilson, the chief scholar of Aquinas in the 20th century, said flatly "I consider it as being without possible comparison the best book ever written on St. Thomas. Nothing short of genius can account for such an achievement.... Chesterton was one of the deepest thinkers who ever existed; he was deep because he was right; and he could not help being right; but he could not either help being modest and charitable, so he left it to those who could understand him to know that he was right, and deep." So how has he accomplished this feat? By simplifying, as his editor says, without oversimplifying. He turns his own lack of intimate knowledge to his advantage by concentrating on the core elements of Aquinas' thinking: his affirmation of the goodness of creation; his defense of common sense; and "the primacy of the doctrine of being." In this way he grasps--and helps us grasp--the importance of Aquinas for us today. As Raymond Dennehy has written, it's as if Chesterton is saying to us "the truths [Aquinas] was getting at--the basic principles of reality and reason--are in themselves really quite simple. Your basic intuitions were right all along."

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