

---

## *Humbly I Adore Thee, With Thomas Aquinas*

**An Evensong meditation by the Very Rev. Sam Candler  
Observing the Feast of Thomas Aquinas**

The Episcopal Church, actually remembers the brilliant Roman Catholic theologian and philosopher, Thomas Aquinas. When Aquinas lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Episcopal Church (as the Church of England) was still a part of the Western Catholic Church centered in Rome. His feast day is on January 28, and we observe it in today's Evensong.

I actually like philosophy. In particular, I like the particulars of philosophy. I like the philosophers who focus on particulars. So, I begin with that famous American philosopher, Charles Schultz! You remember him as the creator and illustrator of the cartoon strip, "Peanuts." In one strip, he places these words into the mouth of Lucy, who fancies herself a doctor; she says, "I love humankind! It's people I can't stand."

Thus, I remember today an old philosophical conversation between universals and particulars. One classical branch of philosophy starts its study with "Universals;" another branch starts its study with "Particulars." A person who studies "Universals" studies the properties of things, common characteristics of individual things, classes of things. For them, these "Universals" are real. On the other hand, a person who studies "Particulars" starts with the thing itself, giving the object – or subject—its own attention before assigning it to some category. For them, only "Particulars" are truly real, not "Universals."

That is a simplification, of course. My apologies to philosophers. But the complicated difference plays a large role in the history of Western philosophy and theology. Plato started with universals. Aristotle started with particulars. For a thousand years, the Christian Church used the work of Plato to form its theology. Saint Augustine was good at it.

It was today's saint, Thomas Aquinas, who brought Aristotle back to the attention of philosophy and theology. Aquinas taught us to pay attention to particulars again. Of course, he did much more. He was the great synthesizer, able to interpret both Plato and Aristotle together, able to combine faith and reason in edifying, wholesome ways.

He developed, even more, the definitions of the existence of God as First Mover. There is a God, he claimed, because something must have begun this energy, this motion, in the world. Aquinas focused on being itself, too. We are contingent beings, he said, implying that there has to have been a Being before us.

Today, however, I simply point out his attention to real and physical things, the particulars in life, not the lofty universals that escape us. Aquinas brought philosophical attention back to flesh itself. Like Aristotle did. Like a good scientist does.

I give you a simplistic example of music. A person who starts with universals says something like, "I like music." A person who starts with particulars says, "I like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony." Aquinas taught us to pay attention to particulars; it is through particulars that we might grasp something universal.

Amidst the profound theology of Thomas, he also wrote texts for hymns. He wrote two famous texts for the Feast of Corpus Christi (the Body of Christ). One of them, "Sing my tongue the glorious battle," we will sing later in this service. The other text is the hymn we often sing at communion, "Humbly I Adore Thee."

I close by reciting that text, or, at least, the four stanzas of it that we sing as a hymn. What a beautiful opening

stanza, translated as, "Humbly I adore thee, verity unseen/ Whom thy glory hidest, 'neath these shadows mean." A "particular" shows us a "universal"! ("People" instead of "humankind.") This text reminds us of what good Anglo-Catholics know: that eucharistic devotion pays attention to particulars.

In these four stanzas, listen to how Thomas focuses his adoration on the Eucharist itself, the living bread. For him, it is a "particular" that opens his spirit to the life of God.

Humbly I adore thee, Verity unseen,  
Who thy glory hidest 'neath these shadows mean;  
Lo, to thee surrendered, my whole heart is bowed,  
Tranced as it beholds thee, shrined within the cloud.

Taste and touch and vision to discern thee fail;  
Faith, that comes by hearing, pierces through the veil.  
I believe whate'er the Son of God hath told;  
What the Truth hath spoken, that for truth I hold.

O memorial wondrous of the Lord's own death;  
Living Bread that givest all thy creatures breath,  
Grant my spirit ever by thy life may live,  
To my taste thy sweetness never-failing give.

Jesus, whom now hidden, I by faith behold,  
What my soul doth long for, that thy word foretold:  
Face to face thy splendor, I at last shall see,  
In the glorious vision, blessed Lord, of thee.

Thank you, Saint Thomas Aquinas.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip