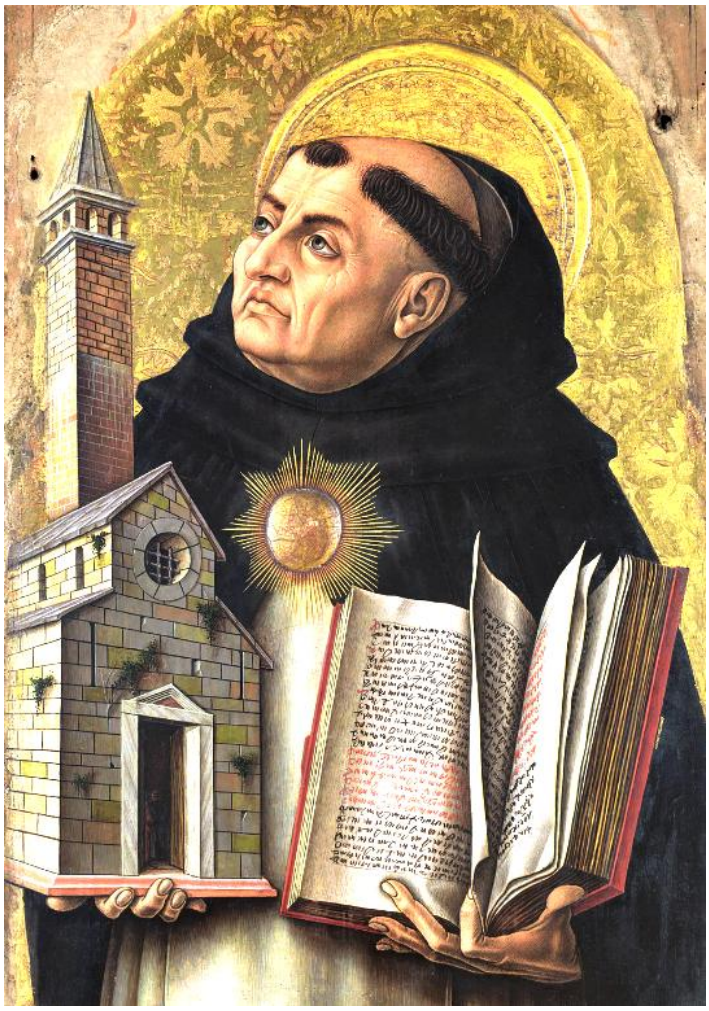


The Sword of Gideon and Finger of Thomas in the House of St. James

THOMISM, LITURGICAL COMBAT, AND THE APOSTOLIC ROOTS OF THE JACOBIN IDENTITY

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Abstract

This study explores the liturgical, artistic, and hagiographical construction of Thomas Aquinas as the divinely appointed "Light of the Church" within the Dominican tradition. Centered on the fourteenth-century Matins hymn Thomas insignis genere, the analysis demonstrates how the Order of Preachers ritualized Aquinas's intellect as a militant weapon—the metaphorical "Sword of Gideon"—deployed to dispel doctrinal darkness during the night of spiritual combat. This liturgical theology finds visual expression in the frescoes of Santa Maria Novella, where the Domini-canes (Hounds of the Lord) and the solar emblem upon Aquinas's breast visualize his role as the supreme defender of orthodoxy.

The paper further traces the consolidation of this identity through the Order's historical association with St. James ("Les Jacobins") in Paris and the translation of Aquinas's relics to Toulouse, establishing a sacred geography that linked apostolic mission with Thomistic doctrine. Finally, the study examines William of Tocco's pivotal hagiographical argument in the Vita Sancti Thomae Aquinatis. Tocco reinterprets the biblical typology of St. Thomas the Apostle, presenting Aquinas as the "perfected" Thomas who, possessing the "finger of understanding" (intelligentiae digito), bypassed apostolic doubt. Tocco argues that Aquinas used this intellectual finger not merely to verify truth for himself, but to indicate it to the Church (indicaret). By framing theological study as a tactile, mystical encounter equivalent to touching Christ's wounds, Tocco validated the sanctity of the scholar and cemented Aquinas's legacy as the Doctor Communis.

Thomas Insignis Genere



Thomas, distinguished by lineage,
Tracing a bright and noble origin,
At a tender age he entered
The Order of Preachers.

He bore the likeness of the Light-Bearer,
Shining amid the assembly of clouds;
More than other teachers,
He purified the doctrine of the nations.

Searching the depths of the rivers,
He brings hidden things into the light;
That which lies beyond human sense
He makes intelligible to the mind.

He becomes a river of paradise,
Flowing forth in fourfold course;
He becomes the Sword of Gideon,
The trumpet, the radiance of the lamp.

Praise be to the Father and the Son,
And likewise to the Holy Spirit,
Who through the merit of Saint Thomas
May join us to the company of heaven.

Amen.

Liturgical Combat: The Matins Hymn and the Light of Thomas

Within the Dominican tradition, Thomas Aquinas was understood not simply as a great theologian of the past, but as a divinely appointed bearer of intellectual light, raised up by God to confront and dispel doctrinal darkness on behalf of the Church. This conviction was not left at the level of abstraction. It was enacted ritually, renewed annually in song, and fixed permanently in image. Its most concentrated expression is the Matins hymn ***Thomas insignis genere***, composed following Aquinas's canonization in 1323 and recited each year thereafter on the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, the patron of the Thomists, at the precise hour when the friar rises from sleep into darkness.

Matins is prayed in the early morning hours, while night still holds and before sunrise. It is the first prayer of the day, offered before study, preaching, or disputation begin. As such, it is not a prayer of thanksgiving after victory, but a prayer of preparation—the moment when the Thomist arms his intellect for the struggle ahead. The world remains dark, error has not yet been scattered, and it is precisely here that the Order sings Thomas as light.

The Sword of Gideon: A Scriptural Metaphor for Truth

The imagery of *Thomas insignis genere* is explicitly militant, situating Aquinas squarely within the vocation of the Church Militant. Thomas is praised as one who "bore the type of the light-bearer," who shines amid obscurity, draws hidden truths into the open, and purifies doctrine of error—acts understood not as contemplation alone, but as weapons deployed in spiritual combat. The hymn culminates in the imagery of the metaphorical Sword of Gideon: the trumpet and the lamp. In Judges 7, Gideon's victory is achieved not through brute force, but through illumination revealed in darkness—jars shattered to expose light, trumpets sounding confusion, and the enemy collapsing into flight. The army's cry, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon," names this triumph as divine judgment enacted through revelation, a pattern the hymn applies directly to Thomas's intellectual mission on behalf of the Church Militant.

The Painted Defense: The Frescoes of Santa Maria Novella

This liturgical vision finds a precise visual counterpart in the Dominican fresco cycle of the Chapter House of Santa Maria Novella (Figure 1). On one wall, the Church Militant is depicted as a fortified ecclesial body in the guise of Florence, guarded by black-and-white collared dogs—the *Domini-canes*, unmistakably mirroring the colors of the Dominican habit—driving away brown-grey wolves, the traditional symbol of heretics and false teachers (Figure 2). The wolves' coloration closely recalls the brown-grey habit of the Franciscan Order, a visual cue that would not have been lost on a contemporary Dominican audience. Within the Church's walls, Dominican friars preach and teach, their weapons not swords of steel but the disciplined proclamation of truth, wielded in defense of orthodoxy.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Directly opposite this scene, completing and interpreting it, is the Triumph of Thomas Aquinas, where Thomas is enthroned in radiant illumination among the authors of Sacred Scripture—Moses, the prophets, and the evangelists—presented as the supreme minister of intellectual light (Figure 3). From him, doctrine radiates in ordered clarity, while heretics lie subdued beneath his feet, visually confirming his role as the Church's authoritative defender against error. The spatial dialogue between these two frescoes makes explicit what the Matins hymn proclaims: that the Church Militant is defended not by force, but by light of revelation, the metaphorical Sword of Gideon, and that Thomas Aquinas stands at the center of this defense as God's chosen instrument for exposing error and safeguarding orthodoxy.



Figure 3

Domini-canes: The Vigilant Hounds and the Sun of Aquinas

The Dominican depiction as collared dogs gains further coherence when read against the biblical typology of Gideon's chosen army. In Judges 7, the three hundred men are selected by a striking and deliberate sign: they lap water like dogs, a detail the scriptural narrative itself underscores. Patristic and medieval commentators did not overlook this feature. The army entrusted with the *Sword of the Lord* is characterized not by number or social rank, but by vigilance, instinct, and disciplined readiness. It is, in effect, an army marked by canine traits. Within the Dominican imagination, this typology resonated with particular force. The Order came to be known—both polemically and with proud self-identification—as the *Domini-canes*, the "Hounds of the Lord," released to guard the Church, expose false teaching, and drive heresy from the fold through watchfulness, obedience, and the relentless pursuit of truth.

The Matins hymn thus operates on multiple, tightly coordinated levels. Thomas is the lamp revealed in the night; his doctrine is the Sword of the Lord; and the Thomists who rise in darkness to sing his praise are aligned with Gideon's chosen band—few in number, disciplined, and vigilant. The hymn is sung during the battle, not after it. Only later does

Lauds arrive, when daylight breaks and victory is assumed. Matins belongs to the struggle of the Church Militant itself; Lauds to the peace that follows.

As intimated above in the frescoes of Santa Maria Novella, this liturgical theology finds its precise visual counterpart in Aquinas's iconography from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Thomas is repeatedly shown with a radiant sun or luminous disk upon his breast, an emblem placed with deliberate exactness (Figure 4). The light does not descend upon him externally; it emanates from within, from the seat of intellect and understanding. The image proclaims what the Matins hymn declares: Thomas is not merely enlightened—he illuminates. His doctrine, figured as the *Sword of the Lord*, shines outward, scattering error as light scatters darkness.



Figure 4

What the Dominicans sing annually at Matins, while the world still lies in darkness, they render permanent in paint and sculpture. The radiant sun upon Thomas's breast is Matins made visible: a declaration that God has entrusted the Church with a light capable of overcoming heresy before dawn breaks. Thomas himself—and the body of teaching transmitted with painstaking fidelity by the Thomists who followed him—thus stands as the Church's sword against error, a weapon of illumination wielded in the night of doctrinal conflict. It is precisely this understanding of Aquinas as the Church's divinely appointed light that shaped the geography, memory, and identity of the Dominican Order from its earliest decades after Dominic.

From Dominic to "Les Jacobins": Paris, Toulouse, and the Birth of Thomist Dominican Identity (1215–1475)

The Dominican Order, formally known as the Order of Preachers (*Ordo Praedicatorum*), was founded in the early thirteenth century by Dominic de Guzmán amid the doctrinal crisis of Catharism in southern France. In 1215, Dominic gathered a small community of priest-preachers in Toulouse, then a major center of heretical teaching, with the explicit mission of converting error through learned preaching and exemplary life. This humble beginning is traditionally regarded as the birth of the Order. In December 1216, Pope Honorius III formally confirmed the Order of Preachers, granting Dominic and his

companions papal authorization to expand their ministry. From the outset, the Dominicans were conceived not as a contemplative retreat from the world, but as an intellectually militant body charged with confronting heresy through illumination.

To fulfill this mission, Dominic quickly recognized the necessity of embedding the Order within the great centers of learning. One of his most consequential decisions was to send friars to Paris, the intellectual capital of Europe. By 1217, Dominicans had established a foothold there, and in 1218 they received a permanent residence through the donation of a house and chapel by Jean Barastre (Jean de Saint-Quentin). Crucially, this chapel was dedicated to Saint James the Great (*Sanctus Iacobus*), the apostle associated with pilgrimage, evangelization, and apostolic zeal. Located along what became the Rue Saint-Jacques, a major pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, the convent's association with St. James quickly marked the Order in the popular imagination. The friars came to be known as the Friars of Saint-Jacques, or Jacobins, a name that would adhere to the Dominicans throughout France and beyond.

It was within this Parisian Jacobin milieu that Thomas Aquinas received his decisive formation and achieved lasting renown. Having joined the Order in the 1240s, Thomas studied and later taught in Paris, where he held the prestigious title of Master of Theology at the University of Paris—twice, in fact, during two separate regencies. It was here, at the Dominican convent of Saint-Jacques, that Aquinas composed major portions of his theological corpus, engaged in public disputations, and established himself as the Church's preeminent intellectual authority. Paris was the forge in which Thomas's reputation was formed, and the Jacobin convent was the institutional setting in which his doctrine took authoritative shape.

Thus, long before Aquinas's relics were translated to Toulouse, the Jacobin identity was already inseparable from his intellectual legacy. The Order that bore the name of St. James had, in Paris, produced the theologian who would come to be celebrated as the Church's supreme bearer of light. When, in 1369, Aquinas's relics were solemnly transferred to the Church of the Jacobins in Toulouse—the Order's birthplace—the symbolic circuit was completed (Figure 5). Toulouse, Paris, St. James, and Thomas Aquinas were bound together in a single Dominican geography of origin, authority, and illumination. For fifteenth-century Thomists, Les Jacobins would thus stand not merely as a historical convent, but as a spiritual mother: the place where the Order's mission, name, and greatest light converged into a single, enduring identity.



Figure 5

Toulouse: "Les Jacobins" as a Mother House of the Dominicans

Even as the Parisian *Couvent Saint-Jacques* flourished as a center of study (eventually giving rise to the Dominican Collège of Saint-Jacques at the University of Paris), the city of Toulouse remained proud of its role in the Order's genesis. Toulouse was where Dominic first gathered his preachers and where the Dominicans built one of their earliest churches. Construction of the Couvent des Jacobins in Toulouse began in 1230, and over the next century it grew into a vast Gothic complex, famed for its soaring vaults and the graceful "Palm Tree" column supporting its roof. Because Toulouse was the cradle of the order (the *Maison Seilhan* in Toulouse housed the first community), the Jacobins convent in Toulouse came to be regarded as a kind of *maternal* church for the Dominicans. Later Dominican tradition sometimes referred to it as the "mother church" of the order – even though it wasn't literally the first physical convent, it was the spiritual heartland of the Order of Preachers in France. This honorary status was shared (and amicably disputed) with other early Dominican sites like the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome, but the Toulouse Jacobins held a special eminence in the Order's collective memory. By the 14th–

15th centuries, the friars of Toulouse and beyond looked to *Les Jacobins* of Toulouse as a centerpiece of Dominican heritage – the place where St. Dominic's mission truly took root, and thus a "mother" community in the psyche of the Order.

The Relics of St. Thomas Aquinas: Toulouse as a Dominican "Mecca"

Another pivotal event deepened Toulouse's significance for the Dominicans: the translation of Thomas' relics long after he died in Italy in 1274. After his canonization in 1323, the Dominican Order ardently desired to bring his remains into a Dominican church. In 1368, Pope Urban V – a French pope with Cistercian roots – issued a decree that Aquinas's remains be transferred from Italy to the Church of the Jacobins in Toulouse, explicitly recognizing it as "the mother church of the order". The following year, 1369, the precious relics of the *Angelic Doctor* arrived in Toulouse and were solemnly installed in a stone reliquary near the high altar. The translation was a momentous occasion: according to chronicles, over 50,000 faithful with lighted candles and torches poured into the streets to escort St. Thomas's relics into the city. Even royalty took part – the Duke of Anjou (brother to the King of France) helped carry the canopy over the saint's remains. This spectacular reception gives an idea of how *Toulouse* had become a spiritual *magnet* for the Dominicans. With Aquinas's tomb enshrined at the Jacobins, Toulouse effectively became a pilgrimage center – a kind of Dominican "*Mecca*" – for friars and scholars devoted to Aquinas's theology. Throughout the 15th century, Dominican monks (especially those of a Thomistic bent) would travel to Toulouse to venerate the relics of their intellectual patron. They regarded the Jacobins' convent as holy ground, a source of inspiration and identity. In symbolic terms, the order's "heart" now beat where the relics of St. Thomas lay – reinforcing the sense that Toulouse's Jacobins was the motherhouse of Dominican spiritual life in that era.

By the mid-15th century, Thomism – the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas – enjoyed a robust revival within the Dominican Order. Leading scholars like Antoninus of Florence, Vincenzo Bandello, and John Capreolus of the Toulouse province (1380–1444), dubbed the *"Prince of the Thomists,"* passionately defended and expounded Aquinas's teachings. This Thomistic renewal further heightened Dominican reverence for Aquinas and, by extension, for the Toulouse shrine housing his relics. In the collective psyche of 15th-century Thomist, Toulouse was more than just an old convent; it was a place of intellectual heritage and sacred connection – a true *omphalos* of the Order. Even though the moniker never stuck south of the alps, the French Dominicans proudly bore the nickname "Jacobins", conscious that their identity was intertwined with St. James: the very name reminded them that their founding community in Paris and Toulouse had roots in France. Some friars likely saw Providence in the fact that their *birthplace* in Paris was under the patronage of the great Apostle James, one of Christ's closest disciples and a zealous evangelizer. The Dominicans, as an order of itinerant preachers spreading the

Gospel far and wide, could easily identify with St. James the Great – traditionally revered as a missionary to distant lands (Spain) and the patron saint of pilgrims.

The Dominicans and St. James the Great: A Shared Vocation of Light and Combat

Through these intertwined historical developments, the Dominicans came to understand themselves as bound to St. James the Great not merely by accident of location, but by vocation and identity. The designation *Friars of St. James* was never a neutral geographic label. From the moment the Order established itself at the Saint-Jacques hospice in Paris, the Jacobin name stamped the Dominicans with the apostolic legacy of James: itinerancy, missionary zeal, and militant fidelity to Christ. In medieval symbolic thought, to bear the name of an apostle was to inherit his mission. St. James—preacher, pilgrim, and warrior witness—thus became an implicit patron of the Order's evangelical combat.

This Jacobin identity acquired its full intellectual and theological force through Thomas Aquinas. It was at the Parisian convent of Saint-Jacques that Aquinas received his formation, taught as Master of Theology, and forged the doctrinal synthesis that would arm the Church against error. If St. James supplied the Dominican Order with its apostolic name and outward missionary charge, Aquinas supplied it with its intellectual weapon. His theology became the Order's light in darkness, the Sword of the Lord wielded not by force but by illumination, precision, and truth.

The convergence of these two figures was sealed in the later Middle Ages when the relics of Aquinas were translated to the Couvent des Jacobins in Toulouse—the Order's birthplace and a house explicitly bearing the name of St. James. There, within a church of the Jacobins, the body of the Church's greatest intellectual defender rested under the apostolic patronage of the saint whose name the Order bore. For fifteenth-century Thomists, this was no coincidence. Toulouse became a sacred center where apostolic mission and intellectual illumination were joined: James the Great as patron of the road, Aquinas as master of doctrine.

The circle closed even more tightly when Dominicans recalled that St. James was revered as the evangelizer of Spain, the very land from which their founder Dominic de Guzmán himself had come. In this light, the Order could see its own origins as unfolding along a providential arc: from James's apostolic mission in Spain, to Dominic's birth and calling there, to Aquinas's doctrine forged in Paris and enshrined at the Jacobins of Toulouse. To venerate Thomas Aquinas at the Church of Saint James was thus to affirm a unified Dominican vocation—an order born under the sign of St. James, formed by the intellect of Thomas, and sent into the world as pilgrims of truth, armed with light to confront heresy wherever it appeared.

The Finger That Points: How Tocco Redefined Sanctity via the *Intelligentiae Digito*

When William of Tocco composed the *Vita Sancti Thomae Aquinatis* around 1323 to support the canonization of Thomas Aquinas, he faced a significant hagiographical hurdle. Aquinas was not a martyr, nor was he defined by the charismatic poverty of St. Francis. He was a university Master, a man whose life was spent in silence, dictation, and the lecture halls of Paris. To further justify the sanctity of this scholar by more than proof of a tangible miracle, Tocco had to demonstrate that Thomas' intellectual act was not merely academic, but a form of mystical contact. He achieved this by constructing a profound typological link between the Dominican friar and his biblical namesake, St. Thomas the Apostle.

The Typology of the "Two Thomases

The narrative of St. Thomas the Apostle is governed by a movement between two states: the skepticism of the "Didymus" (the Twin/Doubter) who demands empirical proof, and the subsequent certainty of the believer who touches Christ's wounds. Tocco argues that Aquinas represents a perfected evolution of this apostolic archetype. In the *Vita*, he explicitly strips Aquinas of the Apostle's initial flaw, describing him as "quasi ille Thomas non dubius" (like that Thomas *not* doubting). Tocco asserts that Aquinas possessed a natural certainty regarding divine things, bypassing the Apostle's crisis of faith entirely.

The Abyss and the Touch

However, Tocco preserves the Apostle's defining moment—the entry into Christ's side—and transforms it into a metaphor for intellectual penetration. Tocco describes Aquinas as an "abyss" of genius who is invited to enter the "abyss" of Christ's side (*qui abyssum id est in Christi latus invitatus ingreditur*). The comparison hinges on the mechanism of this entry. The Apostle required a physical finger to bridge the gap between doubt and belief. Aquinas, conversely, bridged the gap between mystery and knowledge using the "intelligentiae digito"—the finger of understanding.

The genius of Tocco's argument lies not just in the "finger," but in what that finger *does*. Tocco writes that Aquinas described divine secrets in his books:

"...quasi manu ipsa contingeret, quae intelligentiae digito indicaret." ("...as if he touched with his own hand what he pointed out with the finger of understanding.").

The use of the verb *'indicaret'* (to point out, to indicate, to show) is the key to understanding Aquinas's legacy. St. Thomas the Apostle touched Christ's wounds primarily for his own verification; his touch resolved his personal doubt. But Aquinas's "finger of understanding" was not used merely to verify truth for himself—it was used to indicate it to others, just as John the Baptist used his own finger to point out Christ to the world. The verb *indicaret* implies a public, pedagogical act. By "pointing out" the truth

with his intellect, Aquinas transformed his private contemplation into a public map for the Church.

Tocco is arguing that Aquinas's writings (*Summa Theologiae*, *Summa Contra Gentiles*) are the result of this "indicating." Aquinas touches the divine reality with his mind and then points to it, saying to the reader, "Look here." This elevates the role of the theologian from a mere student to a guide who directs the gaze of the faithful toward the "abyss" of God.

Canonization and Legacy

This formulation was decisive for Aquinas's canonization in 1323. Tocco successfully argued that for Aquinas, study was a form of "touching God," and teaching was a form of miracle-working. By emphasizing that Aquinas *indicaret* (pointed out) the truth, Tocco aligned Aquinas perfectly with the Dominican motto: *Contemplata aliis tradere* (to hand on to others the fruits of contemplation).

The image of the *intelligentiae digito* cemented Aquinas's status not just as a saint, but as the *Doctor Communis*. It suggested that when we read Aquinas, we are following his "finger" as it points toward the divine mysteries—mysteries he knew with such intimacy that Tocco claims he wrote of them "as if he had them before his very eyes" (*quasi ipsa haberet prae oculis*). In the history of the Church, Tocco's biography established the precedent that the sanctity of the mind is as powerful as the sanctity of the heart.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the convergence of liturgy, art, geography, and hagiography reveals that for the Order of Preachers, Thomas Aquinas was never merely a historical figure or an academic master. He was constructed, celebrated, and ritualized as a theological event—a divine intervention of light into the darkness of a fallen world. The Matins hymn *Thomas insignis genere* serves as the heartbeat of this identity, reminding the friars annually that their vocation is exercised not in the peace of day, but in the combat of night, where Aquinas functions as the "Sword of Gideon," shattering the vessels of ignorance to reveal the torch of truth.

This militant imagery finds its structural grounding in the sacred geography of the Order. From the apostolic foundations of "Les Jacobins" in Paris to the maternal shrine in Toulouse, the Dominicans wove a narrative that bound their missionary zeal to the intellectual rigor of Aquinas. By housing the relics of the Angelic Doctor within a church dedicated to St. James the Great, the Order physically united the itinerant preacher's staff with the theologian's pen, affirming that the journey of faith requires the roadmap of doctrine.

Yet, it is William of Tocco's hagiographical insight that provides the spiritual keystone for this entire edifice. By reimagining the "Doubting Thomas" archetype, Tocco offered the

Church a revolutionary definition of sanctity. In designating Aquinas as the one who possessed the *intelligentiae digito*—the "finger of understanding"—Tocco successfully argued that the mind is a sensory organ capable of touching God. The crucial verb *indicaret* transforms this private touch into a public duty. Unlike the mystic who retreats into silence, Aquinas points. His theology serves as a permanent index finger directed at the divine abyss, guiding the Church through the centuries.

Ultimately, this unified vision vindicates the Dominican life itself. It asserts that study is not a dry academic exercise, but a mystical participation in the "Second Thomas's" certainty. For the Thomist, to open the *Summa* is to stand where Aquinas stood: at the edge of the abyss, touching the wounds of Christ with the intellect, and turning back to the world to indicate, with absolute clarity, the path to salvation. Thus, the "Sun of Aquinas" depicted in art is not just a halo of personal holiness, but a beacon for the entire Church Militant, ensuring that as long as this light is lifted up, the darkness shall not overcome it.

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