

Homily, 28 January 2008
Archbishop Vigneron

“God gave [Thomas Aquinas] surpassing wisdom which he taught without deceit and shared freely with others.” (“Magnificat Antiphon, 28 January, Memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas)

Later tonight, at Vespers for the Memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Church will use these words to “magnify her Lord,” and rightly so, for the Lord’s gift of “surpassing wisdom” to St. Thomas is surely one of the “great things” God has done for his people (cf. Lk. 1: 46, 49). Throughout the Sacred Liturgy today, not only in the Divine Office but also in the Mass for this Memorial, the Church never tires of repeating her thanks for the gift her Lord has bestowed on her in her son, Thomas, who is justly claimed as the “*Doctor communis*” (“Everybody’s Teacher”) and fittingly praised as the “*Doctor angelicus*.”

In reflecting on the graces which filled the life and ministry of St. Thomas, the Church recognizes that the encomium to wisdom we heard in the first reading set the heart of Aquinas on fire and shaped every day of his life. St. Thomas “pleaded and the spirit of wisdom came to [him].... Beyond health and comeliness [he] loved her, and [he] chose to have her rather than the light, because the splendor of her never yields to sleep” (Wis., 7: 7, 10). He worked day and night, often to the point of exhaustion, to make his own what God in Jesus Christ revealed as the deepest and most penetrating insight about what is first and most important and about how these insights should direct all our thoughts and actions.

Because St. Thomas made this prayer from the Old Testament his own, and because God granted what he asked, in churches and chapels throughout the world, the Church, today, gives thanks to God, just as we are doing here in this Metropolitan Cathedral. But our memorial of St. Thomas has a peculiar character, one not shared with any other congregation. In this Liturgy I have taken the place which our Holy Father Pope Benedict has assigned to me on the *cathedra*, and I am preaching my first sermon and offering my first Mass as your Archbishop.

In my homily for our celebration today, I would like to help us understand the complementarity of these two liturgical actions: thanking God for bestowing

wisdom on the Church through the ministry of St. Thomas and my being installed as the tenth bishop of Detroit.

The installation of a new bishop is always an occasion for him to be renewed in his identity and mission. But it is this graced moment not just for him, but for his Particular Church and for all her members as well. That Providence has made my installation coincide with the Feast of St. Thomas is a reminder that part of the Church's identity is to be the repository on earth of her Lord's own wisdom and that it is essential to her mission for all of us to share this wisdom. Or, as Jesus told us before his Ascension, "to make disciples of all nations, . . . teaching them to observe all things that [he] commanded" (Mt. 28: 19-20).

It is because our forbearers zealously obeyed this great commission that here in the Archdiocese of Detroit we are blessed to find this divine wisdom expressed in the rich diversity of languages and cultures of the communities which make up our one communion of faith.

St. Paul and St. John, in the portions of their writings read to us today, help us greatly to accept the renewal of our identity and mission as servants of God's own wisdom by delineating the basic profile of that wisdom.

In the Gospel, St. John reports to us what Jesus himself said is the essence of life's wisdom: it is to love. This is wisdom: "to love one another as [he has] loved [us]" (cf. Jn. 15: 12). And this wisdom is not something only of this world, only human. It is supernatural; it is divine. It is **as he has loved us**, that we are to love. And how has he loved us? He tells us: "**as the Father has loved him**" (cf. Jn. 15: 9, emphasis added).

This love of the Father for his only-begotten Son is a love beyond all measure. The Father gives all that he is to the Son; he pours his very being into the Son. The Father's love is the total gift of himself to the Son. Having "learned" this wisdom about the deepest meaning of existence, "to be" [*esse*], the Son, when he came to us in the flesh, loved us in the same measure, with the same total gift of himself, loving us "to the end" (cf. Jn. 13: 1). And we, in our turn, if we would be wise about what is first and most important, will understand that this is the truth of who we are: we are framed and shaped to make a total gift of self. The truly wise thing is to commit one's self to loving to the end. This wisdom is the measures of all our thinking and acting which aspires to be truly wise.

St. Paul in today's Epistle gives us wise teaching about love in the context of this fallen world, scarred as it is by that refusal to love which is sin – the originating sin of Adam and Eve and every other sin, which ratifies that first sin. St. Paul tells us that the total gift of self is signed with the cross. It was on the cross that Christ “loved us to the end,” loved us with the love he learned from his being loved by the Father. And we, if we love, must share in the cross. Here below the gift of self will always be a death to self.

That is why the wisdom of divine love in this world will, as St. Paul says, appear to be foolishness to those who do not have faith. For those who do not recognize that Christ crucified is the ultimate manifestation of divine love, his death cannot but seem to be an absurdity. However, those who think like God, those who, by the light of the Holy Spirit, understand God the way he understands himself, recognize that the impotence of Christ, freely willed for love of us, is the act of the wisest man, for it is the act of divine wisdom itself.

In every age the wisdom of this crucified love has been mistaken as foolishness by many, and is often for them a stumbling block along the way of Christ. It is certainly so in our own time, with our ethic of radical autonomy, which, in exalting the rights of the individual, sees no sense in sacrificing one self and one's comfort and convenience for the love of others.

There are many ways in which this conflict between the true wisdom of the gift of self and the pseudo-wisdom of self-sovereignty are exemplified in our society. I will mention three of those that seem to me among the most lamentable. First, there is the conflict between those who base their decision about a state in life or their selection of a profession on discerning the will of God and those who make these choices on the basis of gaining wealth or security or the world's esteem. Second, there is the conflict between those judge it wise always to protect the right to life of others, even at a cost to themselves, and those who would be willing to violate that right, if that is the price to be paid to keep control of the circumstances and conditions in which they have decided to live. Third, there is frequently in our society a conflict between those who make the well-being of their spouses or children the first priority in their lives and those who are convinced that their families exist to bring them self-gratification.

The sorts of conflicts I have sketched out and which we all feel so deeply form the context in which we are called today at this Installation Liturgy to renew our

commitment to our identity and mission as apostles of the wisdom of God, after the example of St. Thomas Aquinas.

I, on this first day of my service as the principle pastor of the Church of Detroit, renew my resolve, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to preach and to teach and, above all, to live this wisdom, the revealed wisdom of Christ crucified, entrusted to the Church and handed on to us by the Apostles and their successors.

I invite my brother bishops and priests and our deacons, especially the priests and deacons of the Archdiocese, to join me in renewing this commitment. The world's hostility to the wisdom that we preach often brings us trials, and so we need the mutual support and encouragement that come from our fraternal communion in our pastoral ministry.

I invite those who have vowed themselves to the consecrated life to find in today a providential moment, a *kairos*, to respond anew to their vocation to live in this present age the life of the world to come, so that our world will see for themselves that the really wisest course is to "lose one's life in order to gain it" (cf. Mt. 16: 25).

And today is just the right day for all the faithful of the Archdiocese to embrace again the wisdom of the Gospel and to promise again what was promised at their Baptism: that they renounce the empty show that passes as wisdom in the world and that they will place all their hope for real happiness in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the life of the world to come which is already lived in the communion of the Church.

This wisdom of total abandonment to God and his will for us does not direct us to turn our backs on the events and circumstances of this age. Rather, it teaches us to see that the trials and triumphs of our times are guided by our Heavenly Father's loving Providence, and that they are opportunities to grow in love by responding to these events with the love that is born of complete trust in God. This wise love is our main source of strength in these challenging economic times.

And those of you who are parents, please teach this wisdom to your children by what you say, and most of all by the way you live. This wisdom of the cross is the greatest gift you can give those whom you love so dearly.

I particularly want to voice to young Christians – adolescents and young adults – the invitation which the Holy Spirit makes today: that we be renewed in our taking hold of the wisdom of crucified love. You are at a moment in your own life’s journey when each day you are becoming ever more powerfully aware of your capacity to give and receive love. There are many voices that seek to shape your talent for love according to their own vision and their own purposes. Let Christ’s wisdom about love direct and form this talent which is blossoming in your hearts and mind, for God is the author of your wanting love, and his wisdom is the only plan for truly fulfilling that desire.

As I move to conclude my preaching, I wish to acknowledge two bishops who in their priestly ministry have given exemplary service to the wisdom of crucified love. The first is our Holy Father Pope Benedict. My taking up the leadership of the Archdiocese of Detroit today is an act of profound ecclesial communion with him and, through him, with the whole Episcopal College and therefore with all the People of God. Archbishop Sambini, we are particularly grateful for your presence today, since you, as the Holy Father’s representative, give us a visible expression of this communion. Today, as we do every day, but today especially we pray that the Lord who called him to the Chair of Peter will continue to strengthen him, so that he may always be able to “strengthen his brothers and sisters” (Lk. 22: 32). Let us continue to cherish his fatherly love and care for us, and love him in return.

Second, I wish to acknowledge Cardinal Maida, who for close to nineteen years has, like his predecessor Cardinal Szoka before him, guided this Archdiocese in the ways of Christ’s wisdom. To him, on behalf of us all, I offer heartfelt thanks for his ministry and promise our continued prayers and our enduring affection.

Now there remains nothing for us but to remember the death and resurrection of the Lord in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. According to the Father’s plan, it was not enough to show us divine love itself in the Son’s Pasch, but he has willed to make the Paschal Mystery present to us through sensible signs and, even more wondrously, to make him our food and drink in this Most Blessed Sacrament. As the Holy Spirit, through my ministry – unworthy though I be – pours into our hearts and minds the wisdom of crucified love, let us, like St. Thomas Aquinas, open ourselves to this grace, so that we become in our own day worthy students and effective apostles of this truth.

Summary (to be translated and delivered in Spanish)

The installation of a bishop is a time for him and his flock to be renewed in their identity and mission. Celebrating my installation as Archbishop on the memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas helps us understand that an essential dimension of our identity and mission is to hold and teach the wisdom of Christ. St. John teaches us that at the heart of this wisdom is loving Christ and one another as Christ has loved us. St. Paul reminds us that in this fallen world such love will always involve sharing in the cross of Christ. At this Mass let us commit ourselves anew to be apostles of the wisdom of Christ, and let us receive from Christ in the Holy Eucharist the power to live lives that are truly wise, that is, the power to love.