

SAINT THOMAS AND ALBERT THE GREAT

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PART from the perennial interest in the philosophic system of St. Thomas Aquinas on account of its unique and intrinsic excellence, there is at present a well defined trend toward the genetic and historical study of Thomism. From this point of view, the chief problems lie in the uncovering of the sources of St. Thomas' thought, and in examining the relations of his works to those of preceding and contemporary Scholastics. In various libraries of Europe, there has been unearthed a vast number of important manuscripts, hitherto unknown, and their interpretation in the critical light of paleography has given a new impetus and orientation to the history of Medieval Philosophy in general and of Thomism in particular. As the knowledge and appreciation of these new sources have increased, new light has been thrown on the historical components as well as on the genesis and evolution of St. Thomas' philosophy, and it has become more and more evident, that, in the phrase of a recent biographer, "St. Thomas was not a philosophic Melchisedech, without intellectual ancestry."¹ He was the heir of a magnificent tradition, the depositary of the accumulated wisdom of the centuries, the living crucible in which that wisdom was to be tried, refined, enriched and finally cast into a luminous form, a mirror of truth, as nearly free from spot or blemish as human mind could fashion it.

The transcendent value of the Thomistic synthesis has resulted, almost inevitably, in a lack of full appreciation of the real and powerful influence of his immediate predecessors. Particularly has this been true in the case of Albert the Great. The incomparable writings of the Angelic Doctor, unquestionably of greater importance than those left by Albert, have tended to obscure not only Albert's writings, but also his unwritten work, of which Thomas himself is truly the masterpiece. This inadvertent neglect of Albert is an error and a grave injustice. Denifle,

¹ M. C. D'Arcy, S.J., *Thomas Aquinas*, (Boston, 1930,) p. 9.

a prince among historians, does not hesitate to say that, "For Thomas, Albert the Great was the Elias to whose mantle he continually clung. Without Albert, Thomas would not have become what he actually is, the prince and king of Theologians. "Albert prepared him for this. Bramante's mighty pillars support Michelangelo's cupola of St. Peter's; Albert's oral teaching and written works laid the foundations for the Theological Summa of St. Thomas."² Happily, we are witnessing at the present time a remarkable revival of interest in Albert the Great. Petitions have been presented to the Holy See from academic bodies in all parts of the world, begging the early completion of his cause for canonization and for the title of Doctor of the Church.

For these several reasons, a consideration of the relations between Thomas and Albert the Great is most timely and opportune. There is no more interesting chapter in all the history of philosophy. Sixteen centuries before there had been a comparable situation when Aristotle sat at the feet of Plato to serve a most fruitful apprenticeship, but between the two Friars, confreres of the same Order, and both passionately devoted to the service of Truth, there was a nobler, deeper bond, an intimate friendship, cemented and consecrated by a common profession and life.

In the year 1245, the Dominican Master General, John the Teuton, brought to the lectures of Master Albert at Cologne a young Italian Friar, Brother Thomas of Aquin, fresh from the novitiate at Naples. Albert had at that time been teaching in the Order for nearly twenty years, and had already begun the bold innovations in science, philosophy and theology that were to bring down on his head such epithets as sorcerer, profaner of the sacred sciences, and ape of Aristotle. For twenty years he had fought almost alone against misunderstanding and prejudice, while his strong heart cried out for a worthy companion in arms. How he discovered him in Thomas Aquinas is related in a simple story by the old biographers.

It happened that Albert, one day, called for a written solution of a knotty philosophical problem. When the manuscripts were presented, the unusual quality of Thomas' work was so startling to the teacher that, as a further test, he ordered Thomas to prepare himself for a solemn disputation on the following day.

² Grabmann-Zybura *The Theological Summa of St. Thomas*, (St. Louis, 1930), quoted on page 153.

Thomas obeyed and the result surpassed Albert's fondest hopes. The subject under discussion was treated with such clarity and was developed with such order and lucidity that the audience listened in wonder to this remarkable student. On these occasions, it was customary for the Master to offer objections, and at the end to present the final resolution of the question. But when Thomas had finished, Albert realized that there was nothing more to be said, that any attempt at further clarification would be an anticlimax. In a tone of apparent reproach he said, "Brother Thomas, you appear to perform less the part of respondent than that of Master." "Master," replied Thomas modestly, "I know not how to treat the question otherwise." Albert then offered a series of difficult and involved objections, but far from confusing the student, they served only to demonstrate more clearly his complete grasp of the subject and his mastery of decisive expression. No longer able to restrain his admiration, Albert exclaimed, in the words known to every follower of the Angelic Doctor, "You call this young man a dumb ox, but I declare to you that so loud will be his bellowing in doctrine that it will resound throughout the world." The words were prophetic.

From that moment, when Albert first fully appreciated the budding genius of Aquinas, he gave himself heart and soul to the task of developing and directing the magnificent mind that had been confided to his care. He procured for Thomas a cell near his own, making him his constant companion and the sharer of his labors, thereby laying the foundations of the friendship that was to last through life. Here was inaugurated the fruitful partnership that graven their names in gold on the portals of the temple of wisdom. In order to grasp the significance of all their subsequent relations, it is most important to understand clearly the nature of this bond that united them. Their friendship grew out of devotion to a common task, that same task to which Albert had been devoting himself singly for twenty years. The aim of the work which bound these two men together was nothing less than the creation of a new method of study, the imparting of a new direction to all the knowledge of the past and of their time. Leaving aside for the moment detailed consideration of all that this implied, we are interested here only in the significant personal relations that grew out of the ideal they held in common.

Late in 1245, Albert was sent to Paris to occupy one of the Dominican chairs in the faculty of theology; Thomas accompanied him as a student. Both returned to Cologne in 1248 where Albert became Regent of Studies at the newly formed Studium Generale and Thomas began to teach as his assistant. Yet it was always clear to Albert that Cologne was not the ideal vantage point from which their influence could be extended. Paris was the center of the intellectual world. Paris alone was the rostrum from which their novel conceptions could gain the attention he was certain they deserved.

The opportunity came in 1252. A new Dominican professor was needed at Paris. John the Teuton, the Dominican Master General, asked Albert to propose a suitable Friar. Albert replied immediately that Thomas Aquinas was the man, fully competent in knowledge and in life. The objection was raised that the position was most conspicuous, while Thomas was young and scarcely known. But Albert, in spite of serious opposition, insisted on the wisdom of his choice and won the point. Thomas was made Bachelor of Theology and began at Paris the teaching that was to work a revolution in Christian philosophy and theology. The appointment was due to the vision of Albert the Great and his personal regard for St. Thomas.

Although the old biographers have left us sufficient material for an insight into the personal relations of Albert and Thomas, they make practically no attempts to analyze the nature and extent of the academic influence of Albert, the teacher, on Thomas, the pupil. It is our task to discover this in the recorded facts. A simple and common explanation is that Albert, the Doctor Universalis, to whom it had been said, "Scisti omne scibile," gathered and prepared the materials out of which Aquinas was to fashion his perfectly ordered synthesis. In a word, Albert was the encyclopedia of all knowledge, Thomas the acme of selective research. Though this estimate contains an element of truth, it is far too simple and superficial, while its very character as a generalisation demands that it be carefully modified. We believe that there were four chief ways in which Albert, as a teacher, profoundly influenced St. Thomas, and we propose to consider each in turn.

The thirteenth century witnessed a crisis in human thought, a period of difficulty and suspense, which very naturally produced its most disturbing effects in the two principal branches of knowledge, philosophy and theology. In philosophy, the problem

arose exteriorly from the inroads of perverted Arabian Peripateticism; in theology, the difficulty was inherent in the disorganized and incoherent condition of that Queen of the sciences. Albert fully grasped both the peril and the possibilities of the situation, and with unerring instinct launched himself into it with the very weapons that threatened the disruption of the traditional Christian system, namely the use of Aristotle in philosophy, and the use of philosophy in explaining revelation. In both fields, he was a pioneer, opening a new path. His influence on Thomas consisted in preparing him to appreciate and equipping him to grapple with the two great problems. To the first, Thomas' answer was the Christian Peripateticism that rightly bears his name; in the face of the second, he wrote the *Summa Theologica*.

Another important quality in which Thomas shows the influence of his great teacher, is his breadth of vision. When the youthful Friar first sat at the feet of Albert, the older man was in the prime of life and the full vigor of his mental powers. He had taught theology and philosophy at most of the important schools of France, Germany and Italy, yet during this time had found the means to increase his proficiency in the natural sciences, to such an extent that he was acknowledged as supreme in the field. Widely travelled, there was no place in the then-known world in which he was not interested, nor any branch of knowledge which did not command his attention. This was so sufficiently acknowledged as to earn for him the title Universal Doctor. It is impossible to believe that Thomas could be in daily contact with such a spirit without learning to share his teacher's almost unrestricted breadth of vision. If there was one quality which the two men, in many respects so profoundly different, possessed in common, it was this world-wide sympathy, and we can attribute its presence in Aquinas mainly to the influence of his master.

This helps to explain how Aquinas, theologian par excellence, whose chief aim in life was to answer the question, "What is God?" could write an economic treatise for the Duchess of Brabant or could send to the King of Cyprus a work that is a masterpiece of political theory. This supreme metaphysician could be the author of "De Ente et Essentia," yet could write a treatise on aqueducts. He could be so absorbed in a speculative problem as not to realize that he was the dinner guest of the King of France, yet could be of eminently practical assistance, not only in the government of his own Order, but as adviser to

the Pope. No phase of human activity was foreign to him, nothing that the human mind could grasp was outside his scope. This catholicity of interest is perhaps the trait in which Thomas shows most strongly the influence of Albert the Great, and its importance lies in this, that it served effectually to prevent Aquinas from limiting his magnificent ability completely to the study of theology, his supreme interest. Such a restriction would have been as disadvantageous to theology as to every other field on which he brought his intelligence to bear.

Of hardly less importance was Albert's influence in focusing Thomas' attention on the philosophic significance of Aristotle, and the possible use of the principles and method of the Stagyrte in the service of Christianity. Albert was really the first Christian philosopher who glimpsed the true position of Aristotle in the philosophical world. Knowledge of the Greek master had never completely died out; in fact his treatise on logic had long been accepted and used as the classical presentation of that fundamental science. But corrupt translations, coupled with Jewish and Arabian accretions that perverted Aristotle's thought, prevented the use of his superb metaphysics by the Christian schools. It is to Albert's everlasting credit that he boldly proclaimed the eternal truth to be found in the works of Aristotle, and insisted that the keen edge of Greek sanity was a worthy weapon to turn to the service of truth. In his early student days, Thomas had studied the logic of Aristotle. Under Albert's direction he made the acquaintance of the substantive philosophy of the Greek thinker who was henceforth to be for him "The Philosopher." The Aristotelian influence permeates his entire philosophy, and in all his writings can be seen the coloring of Aristotle's principles and method. So true was this that Albert in his own lifetime was called the "ape of Aristotle," while Thomas has regularly been charged with an absolute lack of originality. Both these accusations are wide of the mark, for neither Albert nor Thomas was a slavish imitator. What they accepted from Aristotle was accepted not because it was Aristotle's but because it was true, nor was there any hesitation to correct, or to reject entirely, anything in Aristotle that could not bear the impartial light of truth. Albert's daring bore rich fruit in the Christian Peripateticism of Aquinas, in some ways as independent of Albert, as Aristotle was of his own master, Plato.

Albert's influence on the character and writings of St. Thomas is easily discernible also in the definite empiric trend of

the Angelic Doctor. There is a whole literature against the authoritarian and aprioristic attitude that is assumed to be the chief characteristic of all Scholastic philosophers. It is, nevertheless, absolutely true and easily shown that St. Thomas firmly rooted his philosophy in observation and experiment. His theory of knowledge, his views on the nature and processes of emotional life, his entire cosmology, even the highly metaphysical principles of actuality and potentiality are firmly tied to the realities of experience. When these facts, so patent to those familiar with his works, are seen in the light of his intimate association with Albert, the greatest scientist of his day, the connection of St. Thomas with empiric science is clear. Scarcely a page of his enormous literary output can be perused without concrete evidence of Albert's profound influence, under which was nurtured Thomas' assiduous reliance on experimental knowledge as the starting point of every rational process. To insist on this fact is very different from making the claim that Aquinas was an important figure in the world of natural science, or that he can solve all the problems which hold the highest interest of modern scientists. This is an error as unfounded as the prejudice mentioned previously. The truth lies in between, and is excellently summed up by Dr. Grabmann: "In his research Thomas admirably combined observation and speculation, analysis and synthesis. He strikes a middle course between a one-sided emphasis on the factual at the expense of the ideal truth, and a one-sided emphasis of the ideal at the expense of the factual—between a positivistic empiricism and an exaggerated idealism."³

Scholars who are entranced by the personal and academic harmony of Albert and Thomas are frequently surprised to discover that the two men differ widely on doctrines of importance. It is not our purpose now to detail these divergences, doctrine for doctrine. This will be done in the future. But accepting the fact that there are divergences, it is interesting to know that they did not rupture an inspiring friendship. At bottom, we may say that the difference in doctrine between Albert and Thomas resolves itself into a difference in genius and temperament. Albert was the encyclopedist, Thomas the organizer; Albert the compiler, Thomas the sober and dispassionate critic. "Albert's influence and glory consist not so much in the construction of an original system of philosophy as in the wisdom and effort he displayed in bringing to the knowledge of the lettered class of

³ Dr. Martin Grabmann, *Thomas Aquinas*, (New York, 1928), p. 37.

the Middle Ages a summary of the knowledge so far acquired, in the creation of a new and powerful intellectual movement in his century, and in definitely winning over to Aristotle the best minds of the Middle Ages."⁴

We have presented the noble friendship of Albert and Thomas and its vital bearing on St. Thomas' career; we have glimpsed briefly Albert's fourfold influence, first in preparing Aquinas to appreciate and to grapple with the mighty problems of his day; secondly in communicating to Aquinas his own unlimited breadth of vision; then, in focusing his attention upon Aristotle; and finally in giving him a definite empiric trend. As a man, as a religious, as a saint, Albert left a permanent impress on the character of the Angelic Doctor, and guided Thomas to the Holy of Holies in the temple of wisdom.

⁴ Mandonnet, Article in *Dict. Theol. Cath.*, I, col. 672.

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