

SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT—PREACHER

MAURICE O'LEARY, O.P.



T. DOMINIC'S realization of the power of the spoken word, particularly in teaching divine truth, inspired him to found a religious organization dedicated to preaching. Thus St. Albert's choice of a religious order is a strong indication that he was a preaching-minded young man. It is expressly stated in the lectures of Peter of Prussia: "Albert spent many most fruitful years in teaching and preaching;" but details of this preaching career are lacking. In their enthusiastic desire to preserve for posterity the extraordinary features of their subject's life, St. Albert's biographers apparently forgot to record his ordinary pursuits; but where biographers fail, Albert's seventy-eight Sermons of the Year, fifty-nine prayers on the Sunday Gospels, thirty-two sermons on the Eucharist and the *Mariale* contain principles and ideals of preaching in ample measure to warrant an estimate of him as a preacher.

In the Preface to his *Sermon of the Year* Albert writes: "Since according to the testimony of Eternal Truth the unprofitable servant who hides his Master's talent in the earth instead of turning it to account is adjudged guilty, deprived of his talent, and cast into the exterior darkness, where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, I fear lest I should incur the punishment of the wicked and slothful servant, if I did not employ the modest talent which the Lord has entrusted to me." Hence, "I offer these sermons to the people." Albert keenly felt the obligation of preaching.

In the first part of his sermon on the twenty-third Sunday after Trinity, he discourses on the term "Master" which is applied to Our Divine Lord in the Gospel. Taking this term in its signification of "teacher," Albert gives four reasons why it is especially applicable to Christ. Our Divine Lord, Albert tells us, teaches us first, through Himself, that is, through internal inspiration; secondly, through His Angels, for they are often agents in the manifestation of the Divine Will; thirdly, through men, that is, through preachers and priests and all who by word or example point the way to salvation; fourthly,

Jesus teaches us through His creatures, as revealed in *Job*: "But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee: and the birds of the air, and they shall tell thee."¹ In the development of the third point, which interests us particularly, St. Albert calls preachers "*praecones vitae aeternae*" and says, "when these heralds are spurned, Christ considers Himself rejected." What passage could better expose his concept of the dignity of preaching!

In simple and unaffected language the sermons themselves unfold the deepest mysteries of Faith and the Christian life. A rapid analysis of their plan shows that they embody a short paraphrase of the Gospel text, followed by an allegory with a beautiful application from Scripture and the Fathers. It might be said of Albert that he explained the Word of God by the Word of God. Albert built his sermons on carefully divided logical outlines. Consequently, there is seldom an instance of one point over-lapping another. Humble as he was, he was aware of his own great reputation among his fellow men and he was quick to turn their interest in him to the good of souls. Thus he did not hesitate to weave threads of human knowledge derived from his intensive explorations in the field of science and from his travels on the Continent into the pattern of the divine message he preached. In modern parlance, he was an expert in the psychology of preaching. As a result of his ability to catch the popular fancy, many of his sermon thoughts have come down to us in the form of proverbs such as:

"To pardon those who have harmed us in body, goods, or name is a much more meritorious act than to cross the ocean and cast ourselves into the Holy Sepulchre."

"Just as the priest receives Christ corporeally at the altar, so man receives Him spiritually in the soul every time he abstains, for love of Him, from some fault, be it only an idle word or a vagrant glance."

Many contemporaries and all of Albert's early biographers assert that his favorite preaching topics were the Holy Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Rudolph of Nijmegen, a Dominican biographer, commenting upon Albert's writings and sermons on the Holy Eucharist says: ". . . he might be likened to the beloved disciple reposing on the breast of Jesus and contemplating at leisure those awful mysteries." In regard to Albert's devotion to the Blessed Mother, Peter of Prussia writes: "Albert surpassed all who have ever written of her; . . . they know not how to convince the mind of the auditor as our venerable Master does when he speaks of Mary

¹ *Job* xii, 7.

in his sermons." Albert would be great had he written only one of these two groups of masterful sermons. He writes of the Eucharist as one inspired. He appears as a servant overwhelmed by love betraying the secrets of his Master. Hardly a question which could arise in connection either with the dogmatic or liturgical aspect of the Sacrament is not found in Albert's exhaustive Eucharistic tract. The *Mariale*, or the compendium of his theologic writings on the Blessed Virgin Mary, again manifests a profundity of knowledge and keenness of penetration tempered by a sweet love springing up from a heart free from attachment to material things. His position on the pinnacle of contemporary thought is more easily seen in the light of his intimacy with Jesus, our Eucharistic King, and His Virgin Mother.

We are told that St. Albert preached in German, but according to thirteenth century custom he probably composed his sermons in Latin and delivered them in the language of his auditors. Before an audience of princes, prelates, and men drawn from all parts of Europe, or when, as Master of the Sacred Palace, he lectured in the presence of the Pontiff and the Papal Court, no doubt Albert spoke Latin. Before the clergy it was not thought complimentary to do otherwise. However, to read Albert's Latin sermons intelligently one must frequently refer to a glossary of medieval Latin, for Albert supplemented the Latin tongue with many literary forms of his own device.

Albert's sermons were timely. In them he depicts the evils of the day: "particularly dancings, theatres, luxury, debauchery, the shameful superstitions of women and the sloth and indolence of clerics." In his sermon on the Third Sunday of Advent he uses strong language in denouncing the use of rouge and gaudy jewels by women and curling-irons by men to enhance their beauty. But Albert was too practical to let destructive criticism stand alone. Rarely does he mention any vice without suggesting means of cultivating its opposite virtue. These characteristics alone make Albert's sermons worthy of study; but other qualities also recommend him as a model for the modern preacher.

Competent as he was to discuss any branch of learning, when he rose to preach his subject was always the Gospel of Jesus Christ and he spoke in the language of the poor. Sublime speech may fascinate the few but like a veil hides the truth it conveys from many. The language of the poor can be understood by all. Albert often stressed this point. In the Preface to his *Mariale* he writes: "God forbid

. . . that we should use emphatic language to speak new and abstruse things to the educated, and to seek thereby, not the glory of the incomparable Queen of Heaven, but our own gratification. We are desirous only to render ourselves useful, . . . to simple and untaught people like ourselves." Humility, purity of motive and generosity of mind are essential requisites for preaching. Albert possessed these virtues in a high degree. A study of his methods and a devotion to his ideals will insure success in the quest for souls for his brother preachers of the twentieth century.

In conclusion, we give a portion of one of Albert's short sermons on the Purification of the Blessed Virgin.

"Therefore she brought her Son in poverty with the offering of the poor,—'a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.' This was the tribute of people too poor to afford a lamb. Hence these were offered for the Pauper, Christ, that in all things His poverty might appear: for those who were truly paupers offered this oblation. Observe that on this day the faithful carry candles, which are made of wax and tow. These candles are lighted. In fire the Divinity, in wax the Humanity, in tow the sufferings of Our Lord in the Passion are signified.

"The Blessed Virgin today brought her Son of God and offered Him in the temple; imitating her, the faithful on this day bring and offer lighted candles which signify three things, namely, in the candle-flame, the fire of contrition purging of every stain of vice; in wax, the confession of sins: "As wax melteth before the fire."² Thus the warmth of contrition first stimulates confession, then tears. Finally, the tow symbolizes the pain of satisfaction. In these three is Jesus All-Deliverance and Salvation. . . .

"We beseech Thee therefore, O Virgin chosen to be the Mother of God, to purify us from the blood of sins, to make us to bring fire radiating contrition in the wax of confession and the tow of satisfaction by which we shall merit to come into the light of celestial glory, where, standing over all, is He Whom you brought to the temple this day. . . ."

² Ps. lxxvii, 3.

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