

SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT—TEACHER

JOHN McLARNEY, O.P.



HE age-long persistence of the title "Albert the Great," inseparably from the name of its bearer, argues that in the minds of men there is a superlative place for him, for no other man of his calling has been accorded a similar honor. Why do men call him "the Great?" It is no easy task to distinguish the particular field in which Albert surpassed his brilliant contemporaries. Learning's knight-errant was he, and as the companies of civilization moved forward to the dashing *tempo* of the Thirteenth Century, there was a place held for Albert in the vanguard of each marching column. Some have magnified him as a theologian, others have claimed that he dominated the stage in the role of philosopher and others have hailed him as the sturdy pioneer in the dawning day of scientific research—as the botanist, zoologist or physicist, as the explorer who, with eyes sharp for fact and heart courageous for experimental wayfaring, drove deep his spade in nature's interminable field, seeking hidden treasure.

However great Albert may be in these many fields, he does not reign indisputably supreme; nor did he labor alone. Aquinas is not for a moment hidden from the scene; Bonaventure fills no lowly place; the contributions of Bacon and Beauvais cannot be denied a reckoning. The historic mind will concede, therefore, that his supremacy dwells uncontested not in any one of these avenues, for each row is filled with lofty houses and honorable names. Is it, then, because his universal thirst for truth led him to taste and drink of every considerable spring? Is versatility the promontory on which his fame shall stand? The question probes closer, but it does not discover the whole truth. The wide embrace of his intellect does, indeed, furnish the basis of his greatness, but it is not entirely the wealth of his trove nor even its unprecedented variety of content which shrines him high in history's memory. Rather is that largesse, that enthusiasm with which he shared his goods, the formal constitutive of his greatness in the memories of men. He kept no dim and

moulding store of things but brought his possessions, damp with the freshness of discovery, to market-places where men, to be enriched, needed but to ask.

Albert was "the Great" in nearly every pursuit to which he set himself. He is still "the Great" in the minds of men, not so much by reason of what he knew, as for his diffusion of the knowledge which was his. There is here no apophysis intended to cast shadow upon the splendor of his achievements or to dispute the claims of his specified admirers, for, in truth, he was a *magnifico* in every department of intellectual building. But insistence is placed here on the fact that while one's magnificence dwells in the eyes of men, one's liberality lingers in their hearts. And Albert was, indeed, the learned liberal, not with the liberality of unhampered freedom of conduct, but with the liberality of unfathomable charity. He gained that he might give; he studied that he might teach. Albert, purveyor of knowledge *par excellence*, "in the labour of purveyorship . . . overtopped the rest, the giant of them all."¹ The knowing Albert lived in the cloistered cell. The teaching Albert worked among men, the same men who called him great.

He was not a schoolmaster in the meager, modern sense of that term. He was a teacher. In him the vocation of the teacher was the vocation of the Apostle. It is significant that teaching was given him as a life's work shortly after his ordination to the priesthood.² Although he taught at Cologne, Freiburg, Strasburg, Ratisbon, Paris³ and was recalled again to Cologne to found a general studium,⁴ although he filled the professor's chair in the papal court itself,⁵ the classroom walls could not confine his pedagogical energy. To teach meant more to him than the acts befitting the master's dignity, more than the superintendence of the lecturers, more than the guidance of professional students. "*Signum scientis*," he wrote,⁶ "*est posse docere.*" *Posse docere!* The wise man will wield the teaching power not only in the schools, but on the world's highways, from the episcopal throne, from the writer's desk, in the pulpit, wherever there are ears to hear, eyes to see and intellects to understand, wherever there

¹ Taylor, H.O., *The Mediaeval Mind*, Vol. II, p. 421. Macmillan, 1911.

² Schwertner, T. M., O.P., *Saint Albert the Great*, Chap. III, Bruce, 1932.

³ *Ibid.* l. c.

⁴ *S. Rituum Cong. "Positio pro Canonizatione B. Alberti Magni," Sectio: "De Inquisitione de Vita B. Alberti,"* p. 12, sq. Rome, 1931.

⁵ Schwertner, *op. cit.* Chap. VII.

⁶ *Ethic*, Lib. VI, Tract. II, Cap. III. "The ability to teach is the earmark of the learned man."

are little ones of Christ, "*quia omnis scientia docibilis videtur esse, et omne scibile et discibile est.*"⁷

Albert has given a definition of teaching: "*est causam assignare per quam res, et quod sit et quid sit, docetur.*"⁸ To learn, he continues, "*est per talem causam scibile accipere.*"⁹ Calling Aristotle to witness that all learning is acquired from things previously known, he proceeds to indicate the fundamental instrument of the teacher: the syllogism which alone, properly speaking, teaches. "*Scientia est habitus demonstrativus, qui est acceptio conclusionis per syllogismum demonstrativum.*"¹⁰

Assign the cause: that is, propose the universal, the starting point of deduction; cite the example, the fuel of induction. These are the bed-rock principles of Albert's philosophy of teaching. He opposes the Averroistic and Platonic theories and falls into line with Aristotle and Aquinas, the latter of whom in the ultimate refinement of the dictum, proves that a master teaches by a process which consists in the reduction of the pupil's mind from potency to act.¹¹ On such principles may we stand who behold the grievous errors begotten by a world-wide experiment in mass education, the synthetic, informational systems which overburden the memory and imagination and fail to educe the full exercise of mental potencies which is the art of thinking.

Omne scibile et discibile est. Thus sounds the keynote of the preparation which Albert brought to the task of the magistrery. His was a ceaseless journey through the kingdom of human knowledge, from the eternal hills of revelation to the *minutiae* of the mineral world, from the Milky Way to the fishes and the deep, from the things of mysticism under God's high gate to the practical problems of morality at the threshold of the sinner. "Let us draw from the ancients whatever has been well expressed by them."¹² Accordingly he gathered up the fragments of olden lore and fixed them with tireless pen into his many books. Seeking quality as well as quantity, he chose Peter Lombard as guide in theology, Aristotle in philosophy,

⁷ *Ibid.*, l. c. ". . . because all knowledge may be taught, and everything known may be learned."

⁸ *Ibid.* l. c. "It is to assign the cause whereby is imparted the general and specific natures of anything."

⁹ *Ibid.* l. c. "It is to apprehend the knowable by means of such a cause."

¹⁰ *Ibid.* l. c. "Science is a demonstrative habit which is the acceptance of a conclusion by means of a demonstrative syllogism."

¹¹ *Summa Theol.* I, q. 117, a. 1, c.

¹² *De Causis et Processu Universitatis*, Lib. II, Tract. I, Cap. I.

while in each Augustine serves him. The colossal bulk of the experimental knowledge of his predecessors, Dioscoris, Hippocrates, Pliny, Galen, Euclid,¹³ prepared with his own meticulous and far-reaching observations in the physical sciences,¹⁴ furnished forth the banquet board whereon he feasted the hungry scholars of his time.

Among the many gifts which Albert bestowed upon the schools, two are eminently valuable. First, it was his doctrinal mission to found and propagate Christian Aristotelianism. Augustine had given form to Christian Neo-Platonism by adding to the body of Christian truth many doctrinal elements from the purified Neo-Platonic synthesis. Albert applied himself to accomplish the union of Augustine and Aristotle.¹⁵ Such was his zeal in the task that he was accused of a servile devotion to the Stagirite. His candid reply is characteristic: "Whoever believes that Aristotle was God, ought necessarily to believe that he could not have erred; if however, one believe him to have been mere man, without doubt he could have erred even as we do."¹⁶ Pundit of the times, he entertained illusions neither of Aristotle's infallibility nor of his own. The student of philosophy and its history can decide the immense importance of Albert's chief philosophical work, the introduction of Aristotle to the schools.

His second gift of major importance was the firm establishment of experimentation, against which the ancient orthodoxy frequently thundered. His thorough, painstaking methods disarmed conservative caution. "It is necessary," he wrote, "to prove the experiment, not in one way, but as all circumstances demand, in order that the principle of the operation be certain and correct."¹⁷ He was successful in keeping the truant empiricism under the wing of thought, in converting science into the household servant of reason and Faith, an achievement which cannot be over-estimated in its value to scientific progress.

Omnis doctrina docibilis videtur esse. The magnanimity of the Christian master shines forth in that sweeping line and there is made manifest to us the great purpose of Albert to pursue learning down every bypath and to return with it to men, not only in the lecture halls, but wherever minds could understand. As provincial of his

¹³ *Positio*. I. Informatio Causae Advocati, Sectio C, p. 45.

¹⁴ Drane, A. T., *Christian Schools and Scholars*, pp. 417 sq., Burns, Oates, 1881.

¹⁵ *Positio*, l. c., p. 31.

¹⁶ *Physic.* Lib. VIII, Tract. 14.

¹⁷ *Ethic.* Lib. VI, Tract. II, Cap. XXV.

Order, as pastor of souls, as statesman, as missionary, he broke the bread of truth. He learned all things because he heard a Voice saying, "Going therefore *teach*. . . ." ¹⁸ He learned all things that he might teach all things.

His power was recognized by Alexander IV when that pontiff appointed him to the see of Ratisbon that he might teach the faithful the ways of peace and wisdom; ¹⁹ by Humbert de Romanis, the Dominican Master-General, who begged him to decline the miter that his glorious teaching career might not be abruptly ended by such an elevation; ²⁰ by his brethren of the Order of Preachers who elected him head of a commission whose duty it became to formulate the Dominican *ratio studiorum*. ²¹ Through the centuries, Popes, thinkers, scholars, teachers, scientists, all have joined in praise of his gigantic testament of learning. The list is long. Siger of Brabant, Thomas of Cantimpre, Roger Bacon, Saint Mechtilde, Ozanam, Humboldt, Jessen, Ritter, Regnon, Ehrle, Gilson, de Wulf, Von Pastor and scores of others unite in history's paeon to him, the teacher of scholarship, of sanctity, of the great way to Wisdom. ²²

Aptly the title, distinct among the illustrious and saintly teachers of Christendom, tells his story: *Doctor Universalis*. Aptly Holy Writ discloses the reason for his recent elevation to the altars of Mother Church: "*He that shall do and teach, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*" ²³

¹⁸ *Matt.*, xxvii, 19.

¹⁹ *Positio*, "*De Laudibus*," p. 7.

²⁰ *Ibid. l. c.*, p. 11.

²¹ Reichert, *Acta Capitulum Generalium S. O. P.* Vol. I, pp. 94, 99, sq. Rome, 1898.

²² *Positio. l. c.*, pp. 13, sq., 91-122, *passim*.

²³ *Matt. v*, 19.