

SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT—THEOLOGIAN

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POPE PIUS XI, in elevating St. Albert to the altars of the Church, has signed with infallible approval the sanctity of Albert the man. By proclaiming Albert a Doctor of the Church, His Holiness pays glowing tribute to the talents, ability and scholastic achievements of Albert the scholar and particularly of Albert the theologian.

In the decretal letter of canonization, the Vicar of Christ calls special attention to the lofty niche which Albert has merited among the great lights of the divine sciences. The Holy Father writes that with few exceptions no Doctor can compare with Albert in Sacred Scripture, theology or philosophy. Splendid tribute this; and yet it is a strange fact that Albert's theology has been overshadowed not only by his own scientific achievements, but also by the theological accomplishments of his pupil, Thomas Aquinas. Nevertheless, the labors of Albert in theology offer a strong claim to greatness. It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to indicate this claim.

The key principle of the historic method would have us, in judging the value, place and influence of any historical figure, take into consideration the temper of the times, the part our subject elects to enact, and his personal qualifications effecting a successful performance in the role of his choice. Without subscribing to the a priori implications advanced by this norm, we may nevertheless use it to localize Albert in the sun of theology.

Albert lived in an age of faith. He was a child of a century characterized by the learned scholar, James J. Walsh as "the greatest of centuries." It was an age whose theocentricity was frozen in the towering spires of Gothic architecture, limned in the radiant colors of the masters, etched in the sublime reasoning of the *Summae*. It was an age when Cathedral and University, school and chapel, merged into unity; when every scholar was something of a theologian. Albert, drinking deeply of the spring of Wisdom, was also a wearer of the white wool of Dominic. As such, his obligation of contemplating

and disseminating Divine Truth was solemnized by vow. It was inevitable then that he become a theologian.

One of Albert's principal claims to theological greatness is his introduction of Aristotle as the vehicle of theological exposition. Albert's work in popularizing Aristotle may seem to pertain to him in the role of a philosopher, but it is so intimately bound up with his theology that it can hardly be passed over.

Theologians of the time were hesitant about introducing the Aristotelian principles of psychology and metaphysics in the defense and exposition of the deposit of Faith. Perhaps the ribbed hulks of David of Dinant's materialistic pantheism and Amaury's panpsychistic rhapsodizings, whitening on the shoals of heresy, did much to frighten them away from Aristotle.

Albert, however, saw in the genuine Aristotle an ideal medium for the exposition and defense of traditional wisdom. He recognized in the Aristotelian philosophy a system combining in itself the scientific, psychic and metaphysical interests, tireless in its search of fact, true in its evaluation of reality. In Albert's estimation the clarity, sanity, clearness of vision and hostility to confusion of every sort ably qualified the philosophical system of the Greek to formulate and present an articulate objective expression and defense of the deposit of Faith.

It was a herculean task, this Christianizing of Aristotle, but in view of Albert's exceptional qualifications not presumptuous. Albert approached the task with a mind enriched with the ever accumulating treasures of observation and fully cognizant of the value of fact; with an intellect sharpened and disciplined by prayer and contemplation. Blessed with that noble humility which never hesitates to elicit a *Credo* before the absolute incomprehensibility of Divine Mystery, Albert's soul could attain its highest stature humbly prostrate before the truths that are eternal.

Albert did not reach the zenith of perfection in introducing the system of the Stagirite as the handmaiden of theology. His theology, from a peripatetic standpoint, is far from perfect. Some of the false Aristotle found its way into his writings, some of the genuine was rejected. This is not hard to understand. His was the role of a pioneer, a pathfinder. The work of a pioneer is seldom a finished product. Thomas Aquinas completed and crowned the task begun by Albert.

Albert's theological writings embrace an immense amount of material. He began his dogmatic works between 1240 and 1250 with

a complete commentary on all the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius. A commentary on each of the four books of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* belongs to this earlier stage of Albert's dogmatic career. He also composed a work entitled *Summa de Creaturis* in which he runs the gamut of created nature, appearing successively as scientist, philosopher and theologian. It is a work which embodies a strange mixture of Aristotelian, Arabian and Neo-Platonic principles. Embracing the reasoning of Aristotle, yet reluctant to part company with the Platonism of Augustine, he attempted a compromise, with the result that many of his explanations and doctrines defy classification and are at odds with the genuine principles of the Stagirite.

Late in life Albert composed a *Summa Theologica* of which only the first and second parts were completed. Albert, like his glorious pupil, Thomas, was summoned by his God while in the midst of the work. Besides, Albert composed several books of an ethical nature, a commentary on each of the four Gospels and covered nearly the entire field of the Prophetic books. Numerous homiletic and ascetic treatises complete the list of his works.

It must be remembered that no medieval theologian laid down any hard and fast lines of demarcation dividing theology as we know it today. There was no clear cut distinction between Dogmatic, Moral, Pastoral and Ascetical Theology. Thus we find moral reflections and exhortations appearing in all portions of Albert's theology. The explanation may lie in the fact that Albert considered moral, ascetical and pastoral problems to be so intimately linked to the dogmas on which they rested that they could not be separated.

Albert's clear and orderly treatment of the relations of faith and reason is worthy of special commendation. This great problem had agitated the scholars of the ages from the days of Augustine down to Albert's own time. It had been stated and restated by theologians and philosophers alike. The solution had touched the extreme theosophism of Erigena and the antipodal rationalism of Abelard. The Arabian Averroes offered the theory of twofold contradictory truth. Albert, utilizing Aristotle's specification of sciences according to their respective formal objects and their method of attaining their objects, established the border lines of reason and faith. Flaying the Islamic theory, Albert pointed out that faith need never fear the findings of science nor the conclusions of philosophy, for truth can never become the antithesis of truth. Thomas Aquinas sealed the alliance between theology and her handmaiden, philosophy. Albert made of them neighbors, Thomas, allies.

In his treatise on the existence and essence of God, Albert reflects substantially the material and topical treatment of Peter Lombard and Alexander of Hales. In demonstrating the existence of God Albert places the most stress on the cosmological argument. Considering the creative act, Albert rejects the Aristotelian tenet of the eternity of the world and of matter. He indicates, however, that Aristotle's principle of the priority of actuality, if carried to its logical conclusion, would lead to creation.

Albert reaches the heights of theological genius in his tract on the Trinity. His teaching on the trinity of Persons, the generation of the Son, the procession of the Holy Spirit, and the nature of the Divine Hypostases as subsisting relations, have, in the estimation of many scholars, never been surpassed, not even by St. Thomas himself. This is particularly true of the Albertine discussion on the act of spiration in the procession of the Holy Ghost.

Albert developed to a considerable extent the Patristic teaching on the angel world. In his discussion of the Sacraments he is clear, orderly and profound. The thoroughness with which he handles this topic serves to place him on an equal footing with Thomas Aquinas and Alexander of Hales. His treatment of the Eucharist in eighty-four articles gives us a good idea of his love and devotion toward the Blessed Sacrament. In his Christology, Soteriology and Eschatology, Albert adds much to the dogmatic speculations of his predecessors—additions in which one can readily detect the gleam of personal genius.

The moral theology of Albert is scattered throughout his works. Father Schwertner, O.P., writing of Albert as a moralist, says: "He may justly be looked upon as an innovator in the method of teaching moral theology, not indeed as an independent ecclesiastical science, but as a department of clerical knowledge which could give a rational account of its own measures and prescriptions."¹ Albert's teaching on usury is an interesting and scholarly treatment of one of the most important issues of the day. His approach to the successful handling of the diminution of voluntariness was facilitated by his appreciation of the influence of the body on the soul. His amazing fund of medical and physiological knowledge rendered him invaluable service in the application of abstract principles to concrete cases.

Albert's mystical theology is to be found chiefly in his commentary on the *Sentences* and on the works of the Pseudo-Dionysius. In his

¹ *St. Albert the Great*, p. 288.

Marian writings Albert eulogizes every privilege and prerogative of the Blessed Mother.

There is one glaring defect in Albert's works as a whole—the absence of orderliness. The very copiousness of his theology militates against order and consequently against clarity and precision. There are some tracts which evidence concise and orderly arrangement of matter, but they are few. This defect is particularly noticeable when one compares his works to those of Thomas Aquinas. However, without this preliminary work of Albert there could not have been any *Summa* of Aquinas.

The gold of Albert's theological speculation, refined in the white-hot flame of Thomistic genius, forms a part of the priceless treasury of Catholic theology, the *Summa* of Aquinas. Close to the towering figure of Thomas, standing guard over this treasure can be discerned the form of Albert. Pupil and master exercise a joint vigilance over the inestimable heritage they have bequeathed to succeeding generations.

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