

A PERFECT FRIENDSHIP

There are few things more beautiful than friendship. Man by nature is inclined to be social. He requires the communion of his fellow-beings to fill the void placed within his heart, and to expend the fruitful streams of his own affections. Since then, friendship is, as it were, a spiritual chain ordained by the Author of all being to bind together the souls of men, how exquisite must it not be if properly made use of by the superior faculties of the will and intellect.

To realize this truth more fully, we need but direct the eyes of our soul inward, and behold there those charming creations of beauty and light, produced by our personal relations with others of noble character. How barren indeed would our hearts be, were there no fraternal charity to sweeten the soil, so liable to be bitter with the selfishness of primal corruption. Or if it so please us, let us merely glance at the chronicles of time, be it even from the dawn of history, to perceive what manner and number of deeds have been performed in the name of friendship; deeds which very often ended only with the consummation of all sacrifice, the yielding of life itself, as a sweet holocaust, upon her sacred altars.

Though the virtue of friendship is ever laudable, yet we may safely say, that to any one carefully considering it in its true meaning, and as revealed in concrete form upon the stage of human affairs, the truth must come with unmistakable clearness, that of all the relations existing between men, the one founded on the doctrines of Christ is by far the most noble and inspiring. If logical, he must also conclude, that this in turn finds its most perfect expression among the saints, those glorious stars of God, whose shining, though it lighten up the lives of others, who gaze upon them from afar, yet is for Him alone, from whom they gather their radiance as the moon gathers its beams from the sun.

This becomes still more patent, if we proceed somewhat deeper into the nature of friendship, and scrutinize the various elements, that go to make up the fullness of its perfection. These for convenience sake, we may enumerate as four, namely, the friends as viewed in themselves, the purpose or aim of the friendship, the manner of its being, and its ultimate fruits. For the more finely formed the characters of the persons, the higher

the end in view, the purer the kind, and consequently the richer the results, so in a like degree, the more elevated will be the friendship, and the more laudable before the eyes of God and man.

It may be of interest, to illustrate these truths by a practical example, and since no friendship found among the saints is better fitted for consideration, and further reaching in its almost incomparable effects, we may with a secure sense of gain, take as our model the friendship that so intimately bound Blessed Albert the Great and his disciple, St. Thomas, the gentle Angel of the Schools. The interwoven glory of these two celestial souls must ever be as a living tapestry, wherein the world may see and admire the wondrous designs of the Almighty worked out in a divinely provident manner.

Let us then in imagination, transport ourselves back through the centuries to Cologne and to the classroom of Blessed Albert, that we may the more easily apply our principles, and with clearer vision see how deep and elevated the tender relationship of the masters must have been.

The scene presented us is striking. Albert is discoursing on the divine attributes of God, and nothing is heard but the smooth flow of his golden eloquence. He is, as it were, wafted away on the soaring wings of his own spirit, and half in ecstasy, pours forth the flood of his vast treasure of knowledge in the rich German accents of his period. This is he, the universal doctor, so named by the world because of his almost superhuman grasp of all knowable things, whether of the arts or sciences. But greater than all this, the tenderness that now lights up his calm and majestic features, grave with the delicate lines of thought, and crowned by the silver of his years, betrays in a touching degree the beauty of the inner man, that so sweetly honeys his tongue with the words of God. Truly the heart speaks through the mouth, and the heart of Albert, that daily with the rising sun sang the psalmody of David to the Lord, and with tears offered on high the divine sacrifice of love, was aglow with a celestial flame, that could not but with peculiar effect, enkindle the hearts of his student hearers.

Among his many disciples gathered from all parts of Europe let us single out one, not because he at first impresses us as having transcendent intelligence, but rather because of the rapt attention which he pays to the master's words. He is of giant

stature, with a broad placid brow and deep dark eyes, that at times burn with a sparkling light, and at others are dimmed with tears. When some particular point is being elucidated, bearing more directly upon the nature of God, he bends slightly forward with half parted lips and a sudden flush upon his cheeks. At such moments his soul seems to shine through his countenance, and involuntarily we are drawn to him, as if in recognition of some quality not within the realm of ordinary men. This friar is none other than Thomas, the former prince of Aquino, who for the sake of following the counsels of Christ, laid down his high titles and honors to adopt the simple white habit of St. Dominic. In order to learn more of the wondrous Being, that had smitten his heart so long before, and even as a mere child caused him to question, what God might be, he had come by foot the immense distance of fifteen hundred miles, that lay between his home in Italy, and the university of Cologne on the Rhine. He had climbed the cold heights of the Alps, that he might ascend the glowing mountains of truth, and for his guide, he chose Albert, as best fitted to conduct him across the chasms of error and doubt, and bring him along the paths of knowledge, that lead to the bosom of the Creator Himself, where he was to remain in ever deepening love and contemplation.

And now he was learning those truths for which his very being thirsted, and he imbibed them with a joy and tender solicitude unknown to mortals of lesser mold. He revolved them in his mind, and let them sink into the pure depths of his soul. Could we have seen the workings of his marvelous intellect, how startled we very likely would have been, and how we would have glorified God for the rare qualities He had deigned to bestow upon his creatures. Yet because of his profound humility, these inner gifts were so perfectly concealed, that not even Albert with his keen penetration, could at the beginning discover them.

And so in this manner, he continued to go on, content to pray and listen, and seeking not the plaudits of men, but the accomplishment of the Will of God. However, quite accidentally one day, a paper he had written concerning a difficult question fell into the master's hands, who perceiving the brilliancy of its author, requested Thomas on the following day to defend in public debate a subtle thesis taken from the Sentences. The students gathered in the class-room, expecting a scene of laughter at the expense of the dumb ox, as Thomas was called. But

it was as though a thunderbolt suddenly struck them, when the proposed argument was so clearly and adroitly put, that even Albert, with all his finest distinctions and cunning, could not make him hesitate, but was answered in turn with a dialectic skill equal if not superior to his own. It was then, that the amazed master rising from his chair unable longer to restrain his admiration, turned to the students and cried aloud: "You call him a dumb ox, but I declare before you, that he will yet bellow so loud, that his voice will resound throughout the whole world!"

From now on conditions changed. Thomas became known as one having almost unlimited powers of intellect, and no longer were his simplicity and humility regarded as evidences of ignorance, but justly as the ornaments of a high moral perfection.

Albert, most of all, viewed him in a far different light, and there sprang up between them that exquisite relationship, which can be experienced only by souls lost entirely in the love of God. Each saw in the other a clear reflection of the supreme Goodness and Intelligence, and the purity of their hearts drew them with almost irresistible persuasion to the love of that resplendent image, so manifest within themselves. Thomas more and more, made Albert his model, both intellectual and spiritual, while the admiring master realizing with remarkable humility and self-abasement the stupendous powers of his protégé, sought at all times to direct and train him in the ways of true perfection. In fact, this became the ruling passion of his remaining life, for he partially understood what the results would be for mankind, and for the Church, and God.

He commanded that Thomas' cell be placed next his own, in order that his disciple might the more easily have access to him, when he desired to discuss some question or have difficulties solved. Nor did this material help in such matters end here, for even in after years at Paris, Cologne, Rome and elsewhere, these two masters of thought, then both mature in years and wisdom, met again and again, to advise and direct in the most important events of the period, their mutual labor in Christ being carried on with the utmost simplicity and good will. Albert also at this time began to take Thomas with him on his daily walks, and each with rare delicacy, though quite unconscious of the fact, revealed by word and gesture the sublimity and elevated character of his being. And thus the happy days under Albert passed

quickly for Thomas, until he too stepped forth from the studium upon the arena of life, to enrich the world with the treasures, which he had gathered up so carefully in the store-house of his mind.

The parting of the master and his disciple was not wholly without sadness, for even though friendship be highly spiritual, and illuminated by the hope of eternal felicity, yet separation, one of the evil fruits of man's first fall, must ever be bitter and full of pain. And thus it may be easily understood, how this earlier and temporary parting was but a mere prefigurement of that final and more enduring one, which as subsequent events proved, was to weigh so heavily upon the spirit of Albert. For one day, many years later, while he was conversing with his superior at Cologne, he suddenly burst into tears, and announced that God had made known to him, that Thomas, his dear son, had just departed this life to enter into the joys of Paradise. Nor could he ever after that, it is said, hear the name of his former disciple mentioned, unless the sensibilities of his soul were so touched, that they sent the measure of their sorrow in large drops down his withered cheeks, so exquisite had his finer qualities become under the gentle influence of religious training.

And now, we may finally ask, what the results of so fruitful a friendship were, and indeed, so well known are they, that we hardly need tell them again, yet since the lives of the saints only grow the sweeter with repetition, for this reason, we may justly do so. The writings that flowed from the pen of St. Thomas, and which many claim could never have been without an Albert, are truly incomparable in their grandeur and profundity. Albert himself, hailing them as the consummation of all religious science, claimed that they made all preceding and succeeding doctors superfluous. It was a most touching incident, when these teachings were maligned by unscrupulous masters at Paris, to behold Albert, now an old man of eighty, traverse by foot the long and painful way from Cologne to the French capital, to defend them from the unjust attack of evil tongues. What emotions must have passed over the learned audience, when they saw the trembling old man, though bowed down by the weight of years, yet with a superb burst of eloquence, challenge and triumphantly overcome the enemies of his dead son. And not only this, he did more, for he clearly established his former claim that the writings of Thomas would be as an endless font, from which

all posterity would draw and find satiety for its needs. It is unnecessary for us to relate, how time has fulfilled this prophecy.

Returning to his convent at Cologne, Albert not long after passed away to receive the crown of his earthly labors, which he so well deserved. Surely we need not fear to say, that in his final moments, he was joyfully conscious of the fact, that soon he would be reunited to his beloved son in God, Thomas. O the incomprehensible beauties of that Faith, which enabled him to know that Christian friendship, even though it may take root in earthly soil, yet has its real blossoming only in the life to come, where joined in a most intimate union, the souls now divinely effulgent, may sing throughout eternity before the throne of the Crucified, and gaze with endless delight upon the ravishing beauty of the Lamb; upon the splendor of that eternal God-head, of Whom he and Thomas had written so well, and Whom in their earthly pilgrimage, by thought, word and deed, they had unceasingly praised and glorified.

—Bro. Gregory Herold, O. P.