

ALBERTUS MAGNUS, THE SAINT

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S a cause is known by its effect, as a tree is known by its fruit, so are men known by their works. Men are placed in this profession or that according as their works proclaim them. So Socrates and Aristotle are called philosophers; Fra Angelico and Rembrandt, artists; Michelangelo, the architect; St. Thomas Aquinas, the theologian. We call a man rich who possesses great wealth; holy, if he has great virtue; but a man must have many, many accomplishments to be designated "Great."

In the Thirteenth Century—in the midst of such men as St. Dominic, St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Innocent III, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, Alexander Hales, Henry of Ghent, Duns Scotus, Petrus Hispanus, Roger Bacon and others,—Albert of Cologne, Bishop of Ratisbon, merited the title of "Great." Although not least among these saints and scholars, the sanctity of the Master, Albert, is very often eclipsed and lost sight of in the brilliance of his pupil, Thomas.

Few are aware of details of his spiritual life, yet it was intimately bound-up with his everyday manner of doing things. Every conscious act of his, and even his sleep, was offered up to God, to His love and greater glory. His was a belated vocation to the order of Preachers, it is true, but his youth was not spent in vain; the study and physical development of his youth served him well in the white habit of St. Dominic which he assumed after his thirty-sixth birthday.¹ That this man of God is worthy of canonization is attested by men of his own time and by students of his work ever since his death. A recent publication² contains documents, testifying to his holiness of life, and petitions for his canonization from Bishops, Archbishops, Abbots, Superiors of Religious Orders and Congregations, Univer-

¹ The time generally given for his entrance into the Order of Preachers, 1229.

² *Esposizione e documentazione storica del culto tributato lungo il corso dei secoli al B. Alberto Magno Vescovo e Confessore dell'Ordine Domenicano*, Vol. I, 1930, Vol. II, 1931 (Rome).

sities and Colleges. They date from the time of his death up to the present day.

Albert recognized his incapability of accomplishing anything of himself from the very start. He prayed for help from Heaven. That this help came is only too clear from the number and quality of his works. It is told that he was discouraged when he entered the Order of Preachers by the brilliance of his companions. He prayed to Mary, the Mother of God, for her intercession. The Lessons in the Breviary for Blessed Albert's feast go on to relate that this prayer was not long in being answered. In a very short time he became so proficient in the science of Philosophy that he was commonly called "The Philosopher." He was not presumptuous to think that the pursuit of natural science would bring him happiness. That was only a remote means to happiness, the eternal happiness for which his soul yearned. So he prayed that his faith would not be weakened by the sophisms and ungodly reasoning he must meet in his studies. These prayers were heard and answered by the Blessed Virgin, in a vision, who told Albert that his faith would not leave him, but, as a sign of his approaching death, he would lose the art of argumentation in a public lecture toward the end of his life. This actually took place, and Blessed Albert, recognizing the sign, repaired to a convent in Cologne to prepare for death.

With these celestial assurances Albert applied himself even more seriously to the task of learning all things possible about God and His creatures. This was his life's work. His native inquisitiveness was never entirely satisfied on this earth, but it served him well, inspiring him to delve into almost unknown sciences. His theological, philosophical and scientific works sprang from a desire to please God, and man for the love of God. Albert seemed never to lose sight of the commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with thy whole heart, with thy whole soul, with thy whole mind, and with thy whole strength; and thy neighbor as thyself."³ In the Preface to his commentary on the philosophy of Aristotle⁴ he explains his purpose in undertaking such a task. It appears to be the sole motive for his ceaseless labors as a student and professor. He says, "It is our intention to satisfy those brothers of our Order who have sought our aid; so we have written this book, from experiences of many years, in which a full course of natural science may be found, and through which the works of Aristotle may be understood. . . . Although

³ St. Mark, xii, 30.

⁴ *Opera Omnia*, B. Alberti, Vives Edition, Vol. III.

realizing our incapability for such an enterprise we could not resist their entreaties. . . . We have undertaken this work above all for the glory of the Omnipotent God, Who is the Font of Wisdom, the Creator, Preserver and King of nature, and also for the benefit of our brothers and all those who desire to learn of natural science in these pages." It was the force of this motive that spurred Albert to apparent excesses in mental activity, and this has already canonized him in the hearts of every true student, whether he study natural or supernatural science.

The works of Blessed Albert have always been the subject of much discussion. The custom of the Middle Ages to attach the name of an illustrious person to any work to give it prestige has darkened, in the eyes of some, the fair name of Albert. To him have been attributed works of base intention. Magic was called the Albertine science, because works of magic and the arts of the devil bore his name. Discriminating scholars, however, have given us a very nearly accurate list of his works and from these we conclude that the Bishop of Ratisbon was no less a saint than a scholar.

Blessed Albert's treatise on the Eucharist has been compared for its sublimity of doctrine with the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, who is known under the title of "Eucharistic Doctor." It was due to their intimacy that these two learned men wrote along the same lines about the Sacrament of the Altar. Thomas doubtless was influenced by the teaching and early writing of Albert, and Albert must have read the later works of St. Thomas on the Eucharist. One historian,⁵ at least, is of the opinion that Albert composed an Office of the Holy Eucharist, which was either eclipsed by Thomas' or not preserved from the first. Albert's love for the Holy Eucharist is mentioned by all his early biographers. He would often be seen in tears while celebrating Mass, and would spend hours before the tabernacle-wrapt in prayer and contemplation. Although we know that this love could not be surpassed by any other affection we must aver that Albert's devotion to Mary is more appealing than any other instance of his whole life.

In his work on "The Praises of Mary"⁶ as well as in his "Mariale"⁷ Albert discloses a love for the Mother of God that is equaled by few and surpassed by none. It is as simple as the praise of a child for its mother and at the same time as sublime as the "Can-

⁵ Rodolphus de Novimagio.

⁶ Vives Edition, Vol. XXXVI.

⁷ Op. cit. Vol. XXXVII.

ticle of Canticles." He appended to all his works a nosegay of praise to his beloved Lady, or closed his study hours with a song in her honor. Walking in the convent garden he delighted in chanting her praises. His devotion would burst into song and his song would be interrupted with tears. "What a touching sight to witness the greatest scholar of the Middle Ages, who combined in himself every species of science, walking alone in the garden of the Cologne Convent, and singing with tears the praises of Mary his queen!"⁸ Another historian⁹ is carried away by Albert's devotion to the Mother of God. To him he is "Mary's secretary," who surpassed all who have written about her virtues and grace. He says, "The Jeromes, the Ambroses, the Augustines, the Bernards, the Anselms, the John Damascenes have extolled her in rapturous language and with all the charms the most fragrant devotion could inspire; they have shown with a brilliant and beautiful style how powerful, full of merit, rich in virtue, in short, how good and compassionate she is; but, despite their reasoning which amounts even to evidence, they know not how to convince the mind of the auditor as our venerable Master, Albert, does when he speaks of Mary in his sermons." Albert shows us, in a prayer he composed, the great confidence he had in the intercession of the Queen of heaven and earth. "Holy Mary," he prays, "luminary of heaven and earth, as your name implies; of this earth which you have enlightened on the mysteries of your Son, the Word of the Eternal Father, mysteries hidden in God from the beginning; you have illumined the brightness of the angels themselves. Enlighten my understanding, give me a right conception, a vigorous mind, true knowledge, a firm faith with corresponding speech, speech which will convey grace to my hearers; speech which will serve the establishment of the Faith, the edification of the holy Church, and the honor of the sacred Name of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ; speech which will not cease to proclaim your praises and to declare your mercies. May this speech, O Mary, tell again and again, that you cease not to heap with graces, with gifts of your mercy an unworthy sinner like myself and to manifest through his mouth the prodigies of your all powerful intercession."¹⁰ We cannot doubt the efficacy of this prayer since the works of Albert are almost beyond the natural powers of man, both physical and intellectual. Even though he was of robust physical condition the demands which these works

⁸ Sighart, p. 323.

⁹ Peter of Prussia, quoted by Sighart, p. 323.

¹⁰ Quoted by Sighart, p. 325.

made upon his constitution would have exhausted him without grace and consolation from above. The previous inclination for learning mounted to a passion for science. And after that first reluctance to embrace a life of study, which was cleared up by a special confidence in the Mother of God, he never shrank from an intellectual task, accepting the most humble as well as the most involved.

These stupendous works of piety and study might lead one to imagine Albert a recluse, a friar who never left his cell. But we are not surprised, in the light of his great charity, to find him in the most active roles of arbitrator, professor, preacher, bishop of one of the principal dioceses of Germany, and Master of the Papal Palace in Anagni. In all these duties Albert kept his motive well in view. He occupied the chair of theology in Paris "for the honor and glory of the Omnipotent God—and for the benefit of the brethren" just as much as when he ascended the episcopal throne in the Cathedral of Ratisbon, or when he was preaching the Crusade.

The first time Albert left his post as professor it was to fill the office of Provincial of the German Province of Dominicans. In this capacity by word and by example he urged his subjects to a strict observance of the Rule and Constitutions of the Order. He found favor among his brethren there and was elected to a second term. They were edified by his example of poverty for he journeyed only on foot, as was the rule, and took no provisions, begging his meals if necessary. This was the most active period of his long life, and while he never cherished this traveling around, he realized it was his duty to visit the convents under his charge, and his youthful military training along with his saintly life gave him courage never to flinch when it was a question of duty.

In the meantime trouble had arisen at Cologne between the ecclesiastical powers and the civil subjects, and Albert was called to act as judge. With several others he weighed the evidence for both parties, receiving implicitly their confidence, and soon peace was restored. Again at Würzburg he assumed the role of peacemaker. It was another instance of strife between the ruling powers, both ecclesiastical and civil, and the subjects. The people had even engaged in acts of open hostility. With the brilliant and saintly judge handling the matter, friendly relations were again established between the princes and the people, and the hand that had threatened the Church was now lifted only to praise. Albert was also called upon to decide a difference which had arisen there at Würzburg between the Chapter of the Church of St. John of Haug and the Count Hohen-

lohe. Würzburg was the bench, it seems, from which Albert, as arbitrator, passed most of his judgments in settling disputes. Most of his time there was devoted to making peace, and the people and clergy in praise of him echoed the words of Christ, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."¹¹

A sorrow had come to Ratisbon, in the meantime, and Albert was sent to heal the wounded feelings of the Church there. The bishop had become lax and worldly and had been deposed. It took a solemn command of the Holy Father to convince Albert that he should accept the dignity and office of the bishopric. His belief of what a bishop should be was so exalted, and his humility was so deeply rooted he could not reconcile the apparent conflict. When it became clear to him that any further resistance would be opposing the Will of God he complied with the wishes of the Holy Father and assumed the mitre. Albert went to Ratisbon on foot and entered the city under cover of night. The first night he spent with his brethren in the Convent of the Dominicans there and on the following day was officially enthroned in the Cathedral as head of the Church in Ratisbon. Immediately Albert set to work. There was much room for improvement in the morals of his people and the discipline of the clergy. Human respect was farthest from his mind when he began his reform. By severity he must be kind. He had to bring about the peace of God by the strictest measures in his power, and even public penances were resorted to in reparation for offences against God and God's creatures, men. These were the days of strong faith and no one took exception to such display of religion; that was the order of the day. In a very short time, however, as soon as the good effects of his reform were being seen, Albert resigned his see. Enemies had made a longer stay there seem unprofitable. Following the example of his Master Who hid Himself in the temple, Albert begged to be released from his office. He would not antagonize his enemies by his presence. The Holy Father did not take this resignation as final, but after pleading long and fervently, saying that he could be of more service to his brethren and to the Church if he were relieved of this honor and duty, Albert was allowed to return to the simple life of a Religious. The profound impression which Albert made in Ratisbon lived after him. Although he had been dispensed from the religious vow of poverty he followed a life of austerity and even want. The neighboring bishops thought him a man of little or no administrative ability and out of compassion sent him gifts for his

¹¹ St. Matthew, v, 9.

personal use. These gifts were either given to the poor or used in clearing up the debts of the diocese.

Historians call attention to the fact that Albert in his old age was sent to preach the Crusade in Germany and Bohemia. The Turks were besieging Acre, in 1265, the last bulwark of Christianity in Palestine. Albert was a bishop and had the right, *ex-officio*, to preach. He could not content himself with an empty title, so with the enthusiasm of youth he accepted this mission of proclaiming the power of the Cross and assuring the people of Germany and Bohemia that in that sign would they conquer. Like another St. Bernard he preached the cause of Christianity and his voice, trembling perhaps with age and sincerity, was heeded. The people flocked to hear him and many performed the things enjoined to gain the indulgences of the Crusade.

From his very entrance into the Order of Preachers, Albert had preached a crusade, a holy war against intellectual darkness and error. Before he became a religious he had spent ten years at Padua studying the profane sciences, all of which came under the title of "Philosophy." This was to his great advantage when he was sent into the different cities to preach and teach. Cologne was honored first by his presence as professor. There he met his most illustrious pupil, Thomas of Aquin. When Albert assumed the chair of theology at Paris, Thomas accompanied him there and sat at his feet drinking in the sweet wine of supernatural truths expounded by Albert. Daily Thomas grew in the affection of the master and in the science of God, so that Albert humbly watched his pupil surpass him in learning and sanctity. Thomas' star was rising and Albert was the human power behind it. Far from selfishly discouraging Thomas that his own learning might be praised, Albert took a special interest in his pupil and gave him every opportunity to advance. He recognized the genius of his pupil one day in class, the story of which is well known to all. It happened that Albert called for a written solution of an involved philosophical problem. When the work was submitted the clarity and exactness of Thomas' solution was so amazing to the professor that, as a further test, a solemn disputation was arranged for the following day when Thomas would expound the doctrine in question. The result was beyond Albert's fondest fancy. Already the synthesis and logical order known to us in the *Summa* were well handled by Thomas. When Thomas finished, there was nothing more to be said. He had anticipated and answered the objections which Albert had planned to propose. In affected indignation Albert re-

proached Thomas, saying, "Brother Thomas, you appear to perform less the part of the respondent than that of master." "Master," Thomas replied, "I know not how to answer the question otherwise." After a further discussion on the subject at hand between professor and student, wherein Thomas solved every question, Albert burst into exclamations of admiration for Thomas. Then it was that he uttered the memorable expression, "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."

Were this merely the exclamation of an admiring master for his brilliant pupil we could pass it over in a few words, but it was more than that. It was prophetic; and even more than prophetic. It displays the humility of him who is called "The Great." There was never such a glowing example of pupil surpassing master, yet Albert was always on hand with encouragement for that pupil who would one day threaten to obscure in posterity the memory of the master. Albert arranged to have Thomas' cell near his own where two souls drawn together in a common cause might further that cause by frequent collaboration. For twenty years Albert fought prejudice and misunderstanding. His innovations in science and christianizing of Aristotle had called down upon him the maledictions of the intelligentsia of his day. Some called him "heretic." Others refused him cooperation in his professorial duties at Paris and Cologne. In Paris especially trouble had arisen. William of Saint-Amour, a secular professor at the University, launched an attack upon the Religious there. In a pamphlet he asserted that they were not equipped to teach the sciences, either natural or supernatural. It was calumnious enough to attack the teaching of the Religious, but Saint-Amour declared that their mode of life was not in conformity with the teachings of Christ. Christ had been active, while they were given over to study and prayer. It is clear that William of Saint-Amour did not understand the motto of the Dominican Order, *Contemplata aliis tradere*.¹² Just as Christ had His Hidden Life, so the Religious by prayer and study prepare to feed those hungering for truth.

Blessed Albert and St. Thomas refuted this pamphlet in a work which has been attributed to Thomas, but which must have been influenced in no small measure by Albert, for it would seem unlikely that Thomas would take the first rebuttal in the presence of his master Albert. Some salient points are: "The cloister life enables man in a higher degree to preach the Gospel in as much as being

¹² To give to others the fruits of contemplation.

freed by his vows from the care of temporal affairs, he can apply himself more steadily to study and contemplation. . . . That a Monk ought absolutely to live by the labor of his hands is likewise an error, for mental occupation as well as a care for the salvation of souls is meritorious for the monk. We have the example of Jesus Christ, the Apostles and many saints inspiring us to renounce exterior goods through Christian charity."¹³ Convinced of the truth of his contention Albert delivered these arguments with a wholehearted eloquence that won the decision of the judges on this question and the reinstatement of the Religious at the University.

All this was inspired, we think, by a foresight Albert had in the learned accomplishments of his pupil. Paris was the vantage point from which he must work. It was the intellectual center of the civilized world. There must Thomas be, and there must he teach the fruit of their combined labors which was indissolubly wedded to eternal truth. So to Paris Thomas went, and from Paris went forth that bellowing in doctrine which was heard throughout the world.

Albert the Great, next to God, was the greatest influence upon Thomas Aquinas. To this influence we owe the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas, and it is to Albert's teaching, to his encyclopedic knowledge and his scientific training that we give praise when we exalt the *Summa*. Thomas took the facts gathered by Albert's prodigious study and experience and arranged them into a gigantic synthesis. Denifle, an authority in historical research and especially in Thomistic history, says, "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."¹⁴ Albert was wont to take a truth piecemeal in the usual analytic method. But Thomas could grasp a whole truth in a single glance, his intellect resembling more the angelic, being able to see in a single principle many conclusions. Albert realized his own intellectual attainments, and he must have realized that his writings were of very great value, but he continued to help

¹³ The original title of this work was "Perfection of the Religious State against its Detractors." In three other writings St. Thomas has treated of this matter, and in the *Summa*, IIa, IIae, q. 186-189.

¹⁴ Grabmann-Zybura, *The Theological Summa of St. Thomas*, (St. Louis, 1930) quoted on page 153.

Thomas surpass him and eclipse his own star by the brilliance of what has since become known as "Thomistic doctrine."

The affection Albert had for Thomas was as strong as natural love could be. It is to this affection that many marvelous things have been attributed. When Thomas died, Albert announced his death, though they were many miles apart. Albert in Cologne saw Thomas depart this world in Italy. So great was his love for his devoted pupil that at the very mention of his name Albert would weep. It was this fraternal love, coupled with a conviction that Thomas' work was based on and inspired by Eternal Truth, that prompted Albert to defend Thomas after his death. We can imagine the emotions that surged in Albert's noble breast when he heard that Thomas' teachings were being anathematized in Paris. Albert, an old man, broken from constant labor and austerities, made the journey on foot to Paris to defend what he knew was true against the dissenting voices which branded Thomistic doctrine as unorthodox and smacking too much of the pagan philosopher's thought. At Paris Albert heaped praises and blessings upon his pupil, in defence of him, praised his intellectual and spiritual qualities to the total exclusion of his own extraordinary accomplishments. Even many Dominicans doubted the worth of Thomas' work. They could not understand it. It seemed in league with the Aristotle they knew, the Averoists' Aristotle. It was through Albert, however, that the Dominicans and many seculars were won over. And at the time of Albert's death,¹⁵ six years after that of Thomas, every member of their Order was behind Thomas' thought. This is what we mean when we say that Albert the Great was responsible for the Theological Summa of St. Thomas. He not only was instrumental in the production but a great influence in maintaining it in existence. We might say that the Summa of St. Thomas was Albert's greatest work. And by these fruits we recognize a tree transplanted from the Garden of Paradise, a branch taken from the Tree of Wisdom itself.

If one were to sum up the life of Albert the Great, he might say in the words of one of his biographers, "His intellectual development and aptitude for work through his whole life were prodigies in themselves. His erudition, his prolific genius as a writer in every branch of natural knowledge, his marvelous labors as a professor, as a superior of his Order, as a bishop, his high moral perfection, his austerities, his humility, the simplicity of his faith, the generosity of his love for God and neighbor: all these seem inexplicable by mere

¹⁵ 1280.

natural means."¹⁶ Or we might put the words of Saint Paul into the mouth of Albert and have him say, "I became all things to all men that I might save all."¹⁷

Indeed thus have men ever since his death thought. Popes and Cardinals, Bishops and Priests, Princes and people, scholars and colleges of students have declared his sanctity. Petitions, basing their authority on the cures and miracles attributed to Albert's intercession, have poured into Rome for the past six hundred and fifty years. We join the thousands who send their prayers heavenward that Albertus Magnus, blessed scholar and bishop, will soon be officially declared among the saints in heaven and also receive the title of "Doctor of the Church."

¹⁶ Sighart, p. 421.

¹⁷ I Cor., ix, 22.

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