

## ALBERT THE GREAT . . . SAINT AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH

---

ROBERT SLAVIN, O.P.

*"They that are learned shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that instruct many to justice, as stars for all eternity."—Daniel, xii, 3.*



ALBERT OF COLOGNE was called great even by his contemporaries. Posterity has examined his credentials and he is *Albertus Magnus* to this day. For six and a half centuries his memory was held in benediction and the faithful called him blessed. On the 16th of December, 1931, the Church of God proclaimed him Saint and Doctor.

Albert's *natural* gifts entitled him to be called *great* by mankind. But the God-Man has pointed out the path all men must travel if they would come to true greatness—over and above the natural endowments there must be the life of charity, the life of the virtues; in short, the supernatural life. What is this life and why is it a condition for greatness? The supernatural life on earth is a preparation for the soul's entrance into life everlasting—its gaze is riveted not on life before the grave but on life after the grave. The perfect ordination of all our vital activities to this definite end is its purpose in this world. St. Thomas teaches the greatness of this life of grace when he says: "The good of grace in one is greater than the good of nature in the whole universe."<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Cajetan, commenting on these golden words of Aquinas, exclaims with truth: "Keep this teaching before your eyes day and night, for the supernatural gift of grace even if it had been given to only one individual would surpass the natural gifts of the whole universe, as well as all the benefits of human intelligence."<sup>2</sup> Our Holy Father, Pope Pius XI, truly appreciated the power of greatness, for, although he marvelled at the "gigantic" figure of Albert as a philosopher, a theologian, a scientist, a teacher and a preacher, he proclaimed

<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theol.* I-II q. 113, a. 9. ad. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Commentary of Cajetan on q. 113, a. 9.* (Leonine edition)

his true greatness in the eyes of the Catholic world by inscribing his name on the catalogue of the Saints, thus throwing into bold relief the immortal quality the Creator of all demands for greatness—profound sanctity. Albert's brow has been encircled with the halo of the Doctor, for "he wished, and understanding was given him: he called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came upon him."<sup>3</sup>

St. Albert knew that love of God and love of neighbor inculcated here on earth will not be lost after entry into heaven, for as St. Paul says: "Charity never falleth away."<sup>4</sup> We can trace throughout his entire life these glowings of love. He was born toward the end of the 12th century at Lauingen, on the Danube, in Bavarian Swabia. After his early training at home, he went into Italy to the University of Padua. It was during these student days that he came into contact with Blessed Jordan of Saxony, the successor of Saint Dominic as Master General of the Order of Preachers. Captivated by Jordan's power and eloquence, Albert sought and obtained admission into the Friars Preachers. After completing his graduate studies at Cologne he was sent to lecture on theology at the convents of the Order in Hildesheim, Freiburg, Ratisbon and Strasbourg. For the next twenty-six years Albert was engaged in active teaching—from 1234-1243 at Dominican convents; 1243-1248 at the University of Paris; 1248-1254 at Cologne; the years of 1256-1257 at the papal university of that city; from 1257 until March of 1260 at Cologne. Historians are unanimous in attributing to Albert the opening of a new era in ecclesiastical learning. Students from all Europe flocked to his lectures. We get a glimpse of the mental giant he must have been when we realize that this period of Albert's life was one that produced great intellectual figures, most of whom, so we are told, had Albert for their teacher at one time or another.

The scope of Albert's influence on souls broadened in 1254 with his election as Provincial of the German Province of his Order. For the great work he did throughout Germany consult *Saint Albert the Great* by the Reverend Thomas M. Schwertner, O.P. In 1256 Albert was sent to Anagni to defend the rights of the Mendicant Orders against the vicious attacks of William of St. Amour. The miter and crozier of Ratisbon came to him in

---

<sup>3</sup> *Wisdom*, vii, 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> *I Cor.*, xiii, 8.

1260. The Pope, conscious of Albert's zeal for souls, insisted that he accept the office, for the See of St. Wolfgang was in sad plight. Sixty-seven years of age, yet Albert carried on the work of the episcopacy with unremitting zeal! After he accomplished his purpose he resigned the See and resided at the Papal court, again an active teacher, until 1263, when ordered to preach the Crusade in Bohemia and Germany. The 14th Ecumenical Council of the Church held at Lyons in 1274 found him present at the request of Pope Gregory X. On the 15th of November, 1280, when over eighty years of age, Albertus Magnus—*lucerna ardens*—had finished his preparation for life eternal and was called to begin this new life at the throne of God. The torch of love which burned during his earthly life flared with a new brilliance in the life without end.

As has been said, St. Albert's title to greatness comes from the sanctity of his life. Upon a mere consideration of his writings, Pius XI exclaims: "Without a single doubt we know that a Saint wrote these holy things."<sup>5</sup> Albert ardently cultivated the twofold devotion which is the inestimable inheritance of every Friar Preacher, namely, the love of God in the Blessed Sacrament, and devotion to the Mother of God. In his tract on the Mystery of the Mass it was evident to his contemporaries that he was filled with deep knowledge and insight into the mysteries of our redemption. And, since love follows knowledge, he urged men to greater love and devotion, thus exemplifying his own sincerity of faith, his ardent hope and fervent charity. From his youngest years Albert confided in the Mother of God whom he entrusted with the care of his salvation and his holy vocation. In all his work his eyes are always on Mary. From his vivid imagination, invocations, prayers and aspirations flow freely. He points out infinite mysteries of grace, beauty and glory in her life. Two hundred and thirty questions deal with Mary as the pivotal point. His biographers refer to him as "the secretary and panegyrist of the Blessed Virgin."<sup>6</sup>

Father Contenson reminds us that the first and last grade for solid piety, the foundation and root of sanctity, the basis of all virtue, is humility. In Albert's life this virtue is constantly present and ever linked with great purity of soul. In him we find "humility commending virginity and virginity crowning hu-

<sup>5</sup> Bull of Canonization—"In thesauris sapientiae."

<sup>6</sup> Rudolph of Nijmegen.

mility."<sup>7</sup> At the end of one of his spiritual treatises he remarks with characteristic humility: "Whatever the reader finds displeasing to him in my writings, let him attribute it to my ignorance." To be humble in abjection is good; but to be humble in the face of praise, success and reputation, as was Albert, is to be *great*.

To the scholar, the life of St. Albert teaches what books cannot teach, for all intellectual discipline is sanctified in him by the presence of the gifts of the Holy Ghost. "Whosoever has charity has all the gifts."<sup>8</sup> But Pope Pius XI perceived one particular gift radiating throughout Albert's life, for he wrote in the Bull of Canonization: "In the treasures of his wisdom was *Understanding*."<sup>9</sup> St. Thomas teaches that the gift of Understanding penetrates the hidden meaning beneath the mere letter and causes the hidden thought to gush forth.<sup>10</sup> This gift enables one to penetrate deeper into the knowledge of the mysteries of faith.<sup>11</sup> Thus we can understand Albert's sanctity, for he drank deep of the waters of knowledge and was given understanding of the mysteries of faith; nay, more, for "cleanness of the eye disposes one to see clearly,"<sup>12</sup> and to the gift of Understanding we have the beatitude which Thomas places as its correlative: "Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God."<sup>13</sup> So it was that Albert saw God in this life as a foretaste of the complete and perfect beatific vision that was to be his in the life to come.

In his spiritual works St. Albert manifested the sublimity of his love for God, the breadth and extent of his love of neighbor, and the depth of his own humility. The following principles, taken from his works, again verify this:

"That charity by which one clings to God is the end and corner-stone of Christian perfection."

"Let every one earnestly strive to arrive at a deeper knowledge of the divinity of Christ by contemplating the wounds of His humanity."

"Whosoever relies on God, walks in the light; but he who relies on the world is in darkness."

"Daily ask God for perpetual cleanness of heart and purity of mind."

<sup>7</sup> Contenson—*Theologiae mentis et cordis*—Vol. III Dissert. VI—*Morologia*.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theol.* I-II q. 68, a. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Dec. 16th, 1931. "*In thesauris Sapientiae*."

<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theol.* II-II q. 8, a. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Summa Theol.* I-II q. 69, a. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Summa Theol.* II-II q. 8, a. 7.

"To love your neighbor as yourself means to love him in God, on account of what he means to God and for the sake of God. True charity is found in loving one's enemy. To love those who love us is easy and is but natural; but to love those who dislike or even hate us, ah, that is charity, and demands the presence of grace in our souls."

"A man who truly loves humility must plant the roots of this virtue deep within his own heart; that is, he must recognize his own weakness and always fear lest some honor or glory be shown to him."

Thoughts of this nature were the oil of knowledge in the lamp of Albert's life, which fed the flame of divine love in his heart, enkindling in him an all-consuming desire to lead souls to God.

Never was the splendor of Albert's life lost to the world. After his death he was honored by a constant and perpetual cult, both ecclesiastical and civil. Innocent VIII, Gregory XV, Urban VIII, Alexander VII, Clement X, Pius IX, and Leo XIII, all attested his holiness of life. Pius XI believes that by a providential decree the canonization of Saints corresponds to the actual needs of the time. He recognized the need for justice and charity in the world. He looked back throughout the ages and the justice and charity of Albert the Great shone forth. Here was an example whom all could follow with great benefit. The words of Daniel the prophet rang in his ears: "They that are learned shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that instruct many to justice, as stars for all eternity." And thus it was that Albertus Magnus was declared a Saint and Doctor—the Universal Doctor—of the Church.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- St. Thomas—*Summa Theologica*.  
 St. Albert—*Paradisus animae*.  
 St. Albert—*De sacrificio Missae*.  
 St. Albert—*De Annunciatione*.  
 Pius XI—*In thesauris sapientiae*.  
 H. Scheeben—*Albertus Magnus*.  
 Père Mandonnet—*La date de naissance d'Albert le Grand*.  
 Angelus Walz, O.P.—*The Cult of Albert*.  
 Père Simonin—*Albert and the Love of God*.  
 J. Sighart—*The Life of Albert the Great* (English translation by T. A. Dixon, O.P.)  
 V. Contenson, O.P.—*Theologia mentis et cordis*.  
 Card. Ehrle, S.J. *Positio pro canonizatione*.