

THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN ST. THOMAS AND ST. ALBERT

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EVER since that memorable day in the garden of Paradise when the Divine Architect breathed into the slime of the earth the soul of Adam, it has not been good for man to be alone. Down through the ages man searching within the spacious chambers of his heart has found loneliness and insufficiency and a yearning to associate with other beings like himself.

Union with other men requires some unitive force, some bond, and this bond we call love. This love which unites one man with another is commonly known as friendship. Real friendship, then, is mutual love. Not any kind of love, but a benevolent, unselfish love by which we wish good to another in such a way that we see in a friend another self; his will is our will; his good is our good; his happiness is our happiness.

Let us consider the Angelic Doctor whose life and works reflect not only an appreciative but also an intensive love of God and neighbor. St. Thomas was not a hermit, nor was he an anchorite. Rather, he was a member of that unique Order which made the peaceful and contemplative solitude of the monastery the sole business of life, the spiritual dynamo of the active and apostolic life of preaching and the salvation of souls.

Because of the apostolic character of the Dominican Order, Thomas made many friends. The greatest of his friendships, however, was that between himself and his renowned preceptor, St. Albert the Great. It is a sign of friendship, according to Aristotle, when two people walked together on the same common ground. From their childhood the love of each was fast-knit in Christ. As young men both wanted to be priests, both wanted to be mediators between God and men in a very special way. They ardently desired to penetrate the depths of sacred doctrine by assiduous study, to break the wholesome bread of truth for other children of God. That is why Divine Providence pointed out to them the Dominican way in which the foremost means for attaining God is the serious study of sacred sciences.

As we go back in memory to witness the original setting for this friendship, we find ourselves in the winter of 1245 in the lecture hall of the Dominican Studium in Cologne. Albert, the Regent of

Studies, in his usual *peripatetic* manner is forming the minds of the young friars with theological science. Among the students there is a young Neapolitan; to us he is Thomas of Aquino; to the other students he is known as "the dumb ox." For six months Albert has watched the humble and holy manner of Thomas' life. Then one day this "dumb ox" speaks with such ease and erudition that the cloud of humanity which has veiled his genius vanishes and a flood of clear and steady light pours forth from him filling the master and the students alike with admiration. Albert, with unrestrained joy recognizes immediately that here is a disciple of noble disposition who has an almost infinite capacity to drink in that wisdom which is preferred to kingdoms and thrones, which esteems riches as nothing, which is loved above health and beauty and is an infinite treasure which they that use become the friends of God.

Since friendship depends on communication, Albert not only procured Thomas a cell next to his own, but allowed the young friar to share the results of his laborious researches, and chose him as his companion on his daily walks. It was during these daily contacts that Albert gave Thomas his appreciation of Aristotelian principles and pointed out to him the power of these pagan weapons in the hands of a Christian Aristotle. Thus in this friendship we perceive the first roots of the Thomist system.

During his student days Thomas saw in Albert's simple methods the humility of true genius. To him Albert was not only a man of profound learning but also a man of great sanctity. Thomas clearly beheld his teacher participating in the perfections of the most loveable of all objects, God Himself. Thomas knew his teacher was very close to God and that is precisely why he esteemed and cherished Albert's friendship.

On March 7, 1274, at the very moment Thomas was passing from this world of darkness at Fossa Nuova in Italy, Albert who was seated at table in the far distant convent at Cologne began to weep. On being asked the cause of his sorrow, Albert exclaimed: "Thomas, my son in Christ, the bright luminary of the Church, passes at this very moment from this world to his Lord." This prophetic insight was truly a favor from God. Almighty God was pleased to make known to Albert the entrance of his friend Thomas into glory and to afford Albert an assurance that, having been illumined with the same light and filled with the same love, they should likewise enjoy in heaven an equal degree of the Beatific Vision. When we consider the intimate union that existed between these two Dominicans, one complementing and reflecting the other; the disciple drink-

ing from the source of his master's deep knowledge and multiplying a hundred-fold the wisdom he drew therefrom, we can easily conceive that the death of one would be the cause of great sorrow to the other.

The proof of love is sacrifice. By it we judge the depth and value of friendship. Soon after Thomas' death a furious attack was directed at the Thomist doctrine in Paris. The human heart of Albert could not stand by unmoved and see love put to death either by narrowness, selfishness or hate. This at the age of eighty-one, Albert journeyed on foot from Cologne to Paris to defend the orthodoxy and sanctity of Thomas. Ascending the Dominican chair at Paris, Albert opened his remarkable defense with the words: "What a glory it is for one who is living to be praised by the dead." Albert pictured his deceased friend Thomas as alone endowed with life and all the others present, including himself, as covered with the shadows of death.

Invariably, friendship brings out the best in a man by making him forget himself. So strong was Albert's affection for the memory of his noble disciple that in his defense at Paris he forgot the value and merits of his own works and extolled Thomas as having "discovered all truth and solved every problem." So zealous was Albert to keep the memory of his angelic friend alive and unblemished that he had the prophetic daring to tell that distinguished audience that this humble friar from Aquin had, by his works, labored for all men, for all time, and that henceforth all others would in a sense work in vain.

The name of Albert is not mentioned explicitly in the *Summa* of Thomas, probably because beneficence is an effect of friendship. For when a man through love gives his friend something he would ordinarily like to keep for himself, this giving does not detract from the friendship, but proves rather the perfection of the friendship. The bond of friendship between Thomas and Albert was so intimate that the labors of master and pupil were performed magnanimously for the glory of God in the name of their union of benevolent love. Albert always beheld the splendor that encircled his pupil's brow with the same humble sentiments of his first Precursor: "He must increase, I must decrease."¹

As we soar heavenward with Dante in his poem *Paradiso* and pass in review the Doctors of the Church, we hear the voice of one say: "I was a sheep of the sacred Flock which Dominic leads through

¹ John III, 30.

fair pastures, wherein he who turns not aside finds abundant food. He who stands at my right hand nearest me was my brother and Master, he is Albert of Cologne and I am Thomas of Aquin." Thus one hundred years later did the Prince of Christian poets immortalize the close union between St. Thomas and St. Albert.

Truly today when the tendency towards Thomism is gaining great momentum and theological and philosophical studies are once again assuming their proper and fitting places in human life through the fulfillment of the solicitous desire of Holy Mother Church that these disciplines be treated according to the mind of St. Thomas, we can envisage, as did Dante, the Angelic Doctor witnessing the effects of his ceaseless labors and turning to Albert the Universal Doctor on his right hand with that joy and peace of true friendship and saying: "Behold the fruit of our mutual love."