

GERMANY'S GREATEST SCHOLAR — BLESSED ALBERT THE GREAT

Ever since Leo XIII began the movement which has seen a revival among Catholic scholars of the pure doctrines of Scholasticism as they were taught by the renowned Masters of the thirteenth century, the greatness of St. Thomas Aquinas has received worthy recognition. But there is another learned and saintly Dominican whose fame has not spread to the limits it deserves. This is Blessed Albert—the great scientist, the great philosopher, the great theologian, who was the forerunner and teacher of the Angel of the Schools. It was his destiny to collect the enormous mass of material out of which the genius of St. Thomas, nursed and guided by the Sacramental God, built that peerless system of philosophy and theology to which, ultimately, the world must look for the solution of the evils that afflict society in the present day. Albert outlived his illustrious pupil and proclaimed the excellence of his works, as being an advance over all previous attempts to arrive at basic principles and to correlate the diverse elements of knowledge, and to reconcile truths acquired by reason and those held by faith; declaring at the same time that they were endowed with such perfection that they would endure unrivaled to the end of time.

The date generally given for the birth of Blessed Albert is 1193, although some recent students of history give 1206. The noble family from which he sprang had long inhabited the castle of Bollstadt, but shortly before his birth took up its residence in Lauingen, a quaint old city in Swabia. Few details of his childhood have been preserved. A solid education, in which religion was the principal element, prepared his soul and vigorous chivalric exercises gave strength of body for a life it would be hard to duplicate for incessant and fruitful activity. It would have been natural for him to follow his ancestors in a military career, but a deep thirst for knowledge that had taken possession of his soul drew him to halls of study. At the University of Padua, famous in those days, especially for the cultivation of natural science, the eager youth under the tutelage of able instructors covered the whole field of study embraced in the Liberal Arts—

grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, music, geometry, arithmetic and astronomy. He then applied himself to master the works of Aristotle, the prince of the pagan philosophers, and to the pursuit of independent research in all branches of natural science, "his eye ever open on the sublime book of nature." Before long the breadth of his knowledge fairly stupefied both professors and students. They called him "the Philosopher," the title of "Great" was reserved to posterity.

With all the wonderful progress he made in learning the care of his soul was not in the least neglected. And one day, while reflecting with unusual seriousness on the end of man's existence, he turned into the church of the Friars Preachers and began to pour out his heart in prayer before the image of the Blessed Virgin. It was thereupon revealed to him that it was God's will that he join the Dominican Order. Many obstacles stood in his way. He even promised his uncle, who lived in Padua, that he would not take the step without first taking plenty of time to think the matter over. Only a few days passed, however, when a man came to the city who more than any other is considered the propagator of the Order of Preachers. Blessed Jordan was said to wield such a magic power in drawing young men to the Order that superiors of convents, when they heard he was coming, used to get habits ready, for a goodly number were sure to be won over by his exhortations. Thus, when Albert heard all the vain fears which before had given him trouble put to naught by the irresistible eloquence of Jordan he came to him after the sermon and from his hands received the habit. This was in 1223, when Albert was thirty years of age.

Once inside the monastic walls he applied himself zealously to guarding the purity of his soul and cultivating sacred studies, advancing the while from virtue to virtue. The Friars, recognizing his remarkable talents, were not slow to give him every opportunity for their development. He was sent to Cologne, where he founded a school which quickly drew a large body of students, many of whom attained a high degree of eminence. After some years of teaching he was called to other posts of duty. As soon as a new foundation was begun in Germany, Albert was sent to it for the purpose of assuring its success. In 1243, while director of the conventual school at Cologne, St. Thomas was confided to his care, and at that early date he noted the genius in whose development he was to play so important a part. At this

school his office of teacher was fulfilled in the main by explaining the books of Dennis the Areopagite. The lessons written by his own hand or dictated to a copyist exist to this day. While there, too, he wrote the great commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, which fill three folio volumes.

Not far from the cathedral of Notre Dame in paris is a place known as "La Place Maubert." The name to an ordinary passer-by means little or nothing, yet it recalls the glorious days when the University of Paris was the foremost institution of learning in the world. "Maubert" is a corruption of "Maitre Albert," and marks the spot where Blessed Albert was wont to deliver his lectures in the open, for the largset hall could not accommodate the vast throngs that came to listen to his words of wisdom. From 1245 to 1248, while occupying a chair of philosophy at the university, Albert acquitted himself with a success that has rarely been equalled. It was during these years that his fame as a Master of Theology reached its height. So great, indeed, was the renown of his name that his opinion even on matters of a public nature was considered decisive.

From the time of this first sojourn at the French capital date those voluminous writings which have merited the eulogy that posterity has a thousand times confirmed: "You have outshone all others; your writings have made you famous; you have illuminated the world, because you knew all that could possibly be known." It has already been said that the works of Aristotle, embracing the entire field of natural learning, had been profoundly studied by him in youth. Now, the tremendous project he conceived and brought to completion was to correct the errors and fill in the gaps found in these works—to create among the lettered men of his time a new method in study based upon Aristotle. He organized a general plan in which he incorporated texts of Aristotle, commentaries on these texts, and the results of his own investigations. There were some defects in his method, and he could not entirely break away from traditional influences that were irreconcilable with the new point of view. It took a St. Thomas to correct these mistakes in arrangement. However, without in any way derogating from the fame of the Angelic Doctor—which can never be extravagant—it has recently come to light that more than one doctrine hitherto attributed exclusively to him really belonged to Albert.

Every one who has anything at all to say about Blessed Albert mentions the vast field covered by his writings. His erudition was, indeed, prodigious. Besides Aristotle, he knew more of Jewish and Arabic philosophy than any other of the Scholastics, and so enormous was his output that we can scarcely believe it to be the work of a single man. There are treatises on zoology, botany, geography, astronomy, mineralogy, chemistry and medicine, besides others on subjects outside the domain of science. One modern author, not content with calling the works of Albert encyclopedic, says they form a veritable library. An edition of them published at Paris in 1899 contains thirty-eight quarto volumes. Furthermore, he is considered one of the most remarkable men of science of his time. Numerous and grotesque are the legends which had their origin in his experiments. Legendary fantasy is not all fiction, but is based on fact. Accomplishments of modern times only go to show that it would have been possible for a man of Albert's scientific knowledge to construct mechanical devices for the reproduction of human sounds and to grow plants of a freakish nature. Thus the discoveries of Edison and Burbank may have been anticipated in some degree by this extraordinary man of the twelfth century. Much credit is due him also for his insistent championship of the rights of private investigation, giving the lie to the controversialists who hold that the Church is opposed to the progress of science; and at the same time he indicates the bounds beyond which reason cannot safely go without the guiding hand of faith.

In order the better to set off the astounding accomplishments of this great scholar let us follow him into the busy occupations of his life. Having received the Doctorate in 1248, he assumed direction of the House of Studies at Cologne, with St. Thomas as his assistant. One of his pupils at this school—which threw open its doors to clerics and laymen alike—tells us that in addition to instilling in the students a love for work he also gave them an example of a holy life. Every day he recited the Psalter, and, his classes over, it was his custom to spend some time in meditation and spiritual reading. He found time also to compose many inspiring sermons. For him contemplation, prayer and preaching were the most engrossing activities. But a very real interruption in his studies occurred in 1254 when he became Provincial of the German Province. Here was a change of life that involved a host of sacrifices: but the Divine will was made manifest, so he

accepted the office. In spite of his age he outdid his younger brethren in the rigorous observance of the vows and the constitutions of his Order. His visitations to the different convents of the Province, which included Holland and Austria, were made on foot, trusting to charity for the maintenance of his body. During his regime the Province developed internally by the strict observance of regular life and externally by the rapid increase of foundations.

Affairs outside his Order also absorbed his attention. He was sent on an apostolic mission to Poland, where certain horrible abuses, relics of paganism, were interfering greatly with the progress of religion, and by his intervention the savage customs were wiped out. At Cologne he was the peace-maker between bishop and people. When a violent storm broke out in Paris, and libellous charges were made against religious Orders, Albert was chosen to undertake their defence before the Papal assembly at Anagni. He answered all the objections of his adversaries with such convincing eloquence that the mendicant Orders were completely vindicated and left free to continue their teaching and ministry. So profound a knowledge of the sacred sciences did Albert display on this occasion that he was commissioned by Innocent IV to give lessons at the Pontifical court. This was to assume the office of Master of the Sacred Palace, inaugurated by St. Dominic and held by a Dominican uninterruptedly ever since. By the Chapter General held at Valenciennes in 1259 he was commissioned, together with St. Thomas and two other Friars, to draw up a rule of studies for the religious of the Order. Then, after many pressing solicitations, he obtained release from the task of superior and resumed his favorite studies. From that period dates his commentary on St. Matthew, a precious document carefully preserved as it was written by the author.

Albert the Great had attained his sixtieth year and thought only of preparing himself for death by prayer and study. But God had yet other work for him. The Pope looked upon him as the one man in Germany best suited to fill the vacant see of Ratisbon, and all his protests were unavailing. After his consecration, discarding pomp and ostentation, he proceeded to his episcopal city and ascended the throne March 30, 1260. By the wisdom, punctuality and zeal he displayed on all occasions he proved himself a bishop in the truest sense of the word. Owing to the mal-

administration of his immediate predecessors the diocese was in a deplorable state. But without losing heart he set to work. His house was regulated like the strictest monastery, and he commenced the reform of his flock by undertaking to sanctify the clergy. By his own preaching many who had gone astray were brought back to walk in the way of salvation. The manner in which he presided over the solemn services in the cathedral was a source of edification to all. In temporal affairs he was a perfect administrator. The numerous debts that burdened his see upon his accession were discharged, the episcopal revenues were augmented, and that without any diminution in the distribution of alms to the poor.

The position of a German bishop of those times was one that did not fit in with the ideals of a religious and scholar. Being a temporal prince as well as a pastor of souls, he was expected to be present at all sorts of public demonstrations, and this was something Albert could not tolerate. And when he became the butt of most unjustifiable animosities because of the merciless war he waged against sin, being unable to rid himself of the idea that he could be of much more service to the Church by devoting himself to his writings and study, he petitioned to be loosed from the chains which fettered his highest talents. The many requests sent Alexander IV were unsuccessful; but Urban IV, conquered by his prayers, allowed him to withdraw. This was in 1262.

His hopes for quiet and study, however, were not to be realized at once. The Pope ordered him to travel throughout Germany and Bohemia preaching the Crusade. Although seventy-seven years of age he undertook the work with the enthusiasm of youth and excited an overwhelming ardor wherever his voice was heard. When this was over he returned to the cloister, happy now to practice obedience after having been so long in authority. He spent some months at Wurtzburg and after a while was reinstated at Cologne. Still he continued to preach, to teach and to write; his spiritual advice and his opinion on all kinds of questions were constantly being sought. To these latter years of his life belong the commentary on St. Mark, the explanation of the thirty-fifth chapter of the Book of Proverbs on the Valiant Woman, the prophetic type of the Church, his works on the Psalms, the Prophets, and the Apocalypse.

We must not overlook the luminous writings that were inspired by his intense love for the Blessed Sacrament; a book on

the Mass, another on the Mystery of the Eucharist, and thirty-two sermons on the same subject. After the Eucharist, the Blessed Mother of God was the constant object of his meditation and love. Something in her honor is added to all his works, and he was accustomed to close his studies with a hymn to her glory. In a prayer that he has left us he shows the extraordinary confidence he had in her intercession. An imperishable monument to his love for the Holy Virgin is a work entitled "Mariale," in which he proposes two hundred and thirty questions bearing upon the mystery of the Annunciation, discusses them and gives his answers. It is a universal book on the glories of Mary—a poetic production in which all creation joins in praising the Mother of God. Some authors attribute to him a "Bible of Mary," containing a brief explanation of every passage, both in the Old and New Testaments, having reference to the Mother of God.

The last ten years of the holy man's life were not spent wholly within the cloister. Superiors of the Order confided to him the visitation of convents; bishops summoned him to exercise pastoral functions. At Strasburg, where he was greatly venerated, he ordained a hundred and fifteen priests. He consecrated churches in six different cities. Not only were numerous altars belonging to Dominican foundations consecrated by him, but the chapels of Franciscans and Augustinians received a like honor. The construction of the beautiful choir of the Dominican church at Cologne proceeded under his direction. Whenever the man of God appeared at solemn functions, crowds collected about him, eager to see the great scholar and to listen to his words.

At the epoch we have now reached Gregory X summoned all the prelates and the most celebrated Doctors of the Christian world to the twelfth General Council, which met at Lyons. St. Thomas was among the number called; and it was while making the journey that death overtook him. At the very hour of his death Albert, seated at table with his brethren, began to weep, and when asked the cause of his grief replied: "Thomas, my son in Christ, the shining light of the Church, has gone to the Lord." No sooner had news of the Angelic Doctor's death reached Paris when a violent opposition to his doctrines was launched. On hearing this, in spite of his eighty-four years, Blessed Albert hastened to the capital of France, ascended the steps of his former chair, and with dauntless ardor and an authority no one could

challenge proved the falsity of the accusations brought against his illustrious disciple and won over his listeners to the approval of the writings of the holy Doctor. Then he continued on his way to the Council, where he took a conspicuous part in learned controversies and refuted with invincible arguments the errors of the Greeks. After the closing of the Council we find him in Cologne, hard at work putting the finishing touches to his *Summa of Theology*. He composed the "Paradise of the Soul"—which, however, some deny—a spiritual treatise often reedited for the benefit of pious souls, and, lastly, his little work on "Union with God"—a charming mystical flower by whose fragrance he wished to fortify himself against the approach of death.

Three years before the end he lost his memory, and thenceforward gave himself up entirely to spiritual exercises. Each day he visited the tomb that had been prepared for him in the conventual church and recited for himself the Vigils of the dead. At last the supreme hour came. Having received the sacraments of the Church with great devotion, the good and faithful servant responded to the call of the Master. He expired in his cell, seated on a rude chair, surrounded by his weeping brethren. This was November 15, 1280. Albert had reached the age of eighty-seven.

Heaven did not delay in declaring Albert's sanctity, for this was revealed both to his confessor and the abbess of a German monastery, who was greatly indebted to him for the spiritual progress of her community. The body of the illustrious deceased, clothed in pontifical ornaments, was placed in a wooden sarcophagus, and after being exposed according to custom, was laid to rest temporarily in the choir of the claustral church before the main altar. The archbishop and clergy of the city, members of religious Orders, nobles, and common people assisted at the funeral.

When the new choir of the church was finished the holy relics received a more honorable sepulture, and thus they remained in the sanctuary for over two hundred years, the object of ever-increasing admiration and of pious pilgrimages. In the fifteenth century the University of Cologne, whose origin can be traced back to the famous school of Albert, replaced the modest tomb by a mausoleum more worthy of the Great Master. Painters, sculptors and poets, including Dante, have celebrated his memory. But the Church has given him a nobler immortality by placing on his brow the aureole of Blessed.

In more recent times new honors have been shown him. In 1859 the Archbishop of Cologne conducted a solemn translation of his relics; and divers colleges chose him as their patron. In September, 1872, the German bishops addressed a petition to the Holy See for the resumption of his cause. And thus the day may not be far distant when Germany will pray to St. Albert to guide the progress of her future civilization.

—Bro. Urban Cahill, O. P.

OUR HUMBLE KING

Ring out, ye bells, from far and near,
Ring unto all the faithful here
And tell them of the Infant born
In Bethlehem that Christmas morn.

No regal splendor did He seek;
His parentage was poor and meek;
His Mother was an humble maid,
And Joseph plied a lowly trade.

He came to us in poverty,
Abounding love and charity;
A stable was His place of birth,
Yet He the Lord of heaven and earth!

No earthly mansions did He claim
But spurned all wealth and worldly fame,
To teach mankind's corrupted race
And guide it in the path of grace.

He taught the vanity of praise,
He showed how earthly joy decays.
Tho born a king no royal lyre
Proclaimed His birth, save angels' choir.

So from our new-born Saviour we
May learn the wealth of poverty,
And thus life's gilded cup reject
To take our place with the elect.

—Bro. Raymond Grace, O. P.