

## BLESSED ALBERT THE GREAT

### *The Master of St. Thomas Aquinas*

ALBERT the Great is chiefly entitled to fame as having been for seven years the teacher of St. Thomas Aquinas, and to the end of his life the devoted admirer of his pupil and staunch defender of his doctrine.

To say this is not to belittle Albert personally; it is to place him very high indeed in the hierarchy of great men.

The excellences by which St. Thomas was most distinguished were not mere reproductions of the greatness that was his master's; they were either peculiar to St. Thomas himself, or possibly, in some points at least, derived from other masters who influenced St. Thomas before he first came under Albert's notice. Albert's principal title to greatness is the detachment with which he enabled Thomas to develop seeds of greatness independent of anything he had to give, and to advance to heights that he himself could never reach.

In his Treatise *De Veritate*<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas explains to us the ideal relation which ought to exist between a master and a pupil. A pupil, he says, attains to wisdom by means of two things: invention and discipline. By discipline he understands with all the Middle Ages that tradition of civilization which is handed down generation after generation by mature minds to minds that are just opening into independent life. Until the Renaissance, and its philosophical justification attempted by Descartes, it was never suggested that a man or a community of men could begin an independent intel-

<sup>1</sup>Q. II. a. I.

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lectual life without submitting themselves to the intellectual traditions into which they were born. Though the philosophy of our day has followed Descartes and developed his foolishness into the absurdities of extreme evolutionist theories, it is still our experience that no child begins to exercise its intelligence until stimulated by the example of others who are already thinking, speaking, and behaving intelligently. Children are still, from time to time, suckled by beasts; but when rescued from such foster-parents they are invariably found without any accomplishments other than those of which they have had experience. Their cries are mere animal cries, and all their habits mere animal habits.

The intellectual discipline of the Middle Ages was the Seven Liberal Arts. The masters who handed down this tradition from classical times were the 'Scholastics,' properly so called. St. Thomas had begun his education in the Arts, under very capable masters, long before he came under the influence of Blessed Albert. One of these was in all probability Erasmus of Montecassino, who has left us, amongst other writings, an able treatise, *De Subjecto Theologiae*.<sup>2</sup> When St. Thomas left the school of Blessed Albert at Cologne to become in his turn the master of other pupils, this question of the subject of Theology was the very first to which he put his hand.<sup>3</sup> Here immediately, and many years later in that Introduction to the *Summa Theologica* where the foundations of all that is to follow are securely laid, though he closely

<sup>2</sup> A facsimile from Cod. Miscell. 44 in the Library of Montecassino, has been published by Abbot Amelli in the *Corpus Extravagantium Codicum*, Rome, 1922, seq. Dr. Grabmann, who has examined this MS., hints, but without saying so explicitly, that it anticipates St. Thomas's teaching in the *Summa*, Pars. I, Qu. 1, a. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Comm. on Sentences, ad init.*

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follows much that his master Albert has already said on this subject of theology, St. Thomas treats the problem with a directness and a profundity which leave Albert's treatment of it very far behind. It has been hinted, on very good authority,<sup>4</sup> that he is here profiting by the example of Erasmus. Even if this is not so, he is, at any rate, showing a complete independence of his latest teacher.

It has been further maintained by others, who are not at all disposed to minimize the influence of Blessed Albert over St. Thomas, that when the latter was first sent to Paris by his Order, he had already taken up an attitude towards Aristotle very different from that already adopted by Albert, and that this difference between the two remained marked until the end of their respective careers. At Naples St. Thomas had studied the Quadrivium under Peter of Ireland. Already in France in the twelfth century the Quadrivium meant a course of philosophy, as ambitious as was then possible. In Naples early in the thirteenth century, philosophy meant the study of Aristotle, either directly, through such translations from the Greek as were already available, or indirectly through translations of Arabian versions or commentaries. About 1260 Peter of Ireland presided at a disputation in Naples before Manfred the King of the Sicilies. We still possess the treatise in which he authoritatively summed up the debate. He shows himself to be profoundly versed in the metaphysics of Aristotle, and pronounces with ease upon the relation between a final end and necessity in nature, excluding determinism and intelligently applying the teleological doctrine of the Greek Philosopher.<sup>5</sup> He also shows that he follows Averrhoes

<sup>4</sup> Grabmann, *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben*, p. 252 (Munich, 1926).

<sup>5</sup> Physics, Lib. 2, Cap. viii.

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rather than Avicenna as an exponent of Aristotelianism. When St. Thomas arrived in Paris, he found Blessed Albert more enthusiastic for Avicenna than for Averrhoes, but he himself all his life continued to show more respect for the latter even when attacking the fundamental errors of his doctrine.\*

Even if these proofs be considered open to question there are abundant others to show that St. Thomas's conception of the ideal relation between a Master and his pupil was, at least, not contradicted by his experience of Blessed Albert as a teacher. The function of the master, he says, is discipline; that is, to provide the student with materials and a method. Beyond this his task is simply to encourage in the student an inventiveness or initiative which will tend more and more to make him independent of his master, and without which the master can never properly be said to have educated him. Blessed Albert was certainly not the type of master who considers that the best teacher is he who can reproduce his own image and likeness in his pupils and contemplate in them a pale reflection of his own majestic greatness. Evidently his theory and practice of teaching aimed at making pupils independent of their master and ultimately, if they have it in them, greater than he himself ever was. If St. Thomas is the model for all Christian scholars, Blessed Albert is the model for all Christian teachers. That is very high praise indeed. True scholarship is impossible without very high virtue. A perfect

\* C. Baeumker, *Petrus de Hibernia der Jugendlehrer des Thomas von Aquino*. Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie, p. 39 (1920). Baeumker's thesis is not strengthened by subsequent research. It has recently been pointed out by M. M. Gorce, O.P. (*Bulletin Thomiste*, Nov., 1930, p. 183), that in the *Commentary on the Sentences* St. Thomas has a predilection for Avicenna, who, however, has lost favour and 'is always censured in the *Contra Gentiles*.'

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teacher must have virtues which at least approximate to heroism.

That there were heroic qualities in Albert's relations with St. Thomas is a well-attested historical fact : one of the best authenticated facts, indeed, in all mediaeval history. At the age of thirty-nine, when Albert was already recognised in his own Order and beyond it as an intellectual giant, he was entrusted by his superiors with the training of the young Neapolitan, then a youth barely twenty years old. Thirty-two years later St. Thomas was dead, and his had become the greatest name in the Order after that of the Founder himself. So untroubled was Albert by jealousy, that now, though his own brain was beginning to fail, he exerted himself by an almost superhuman effort, and with many tears, to save his disciple's reputation, which was in some jeopardy at the Paris schools. Scorning the advice of those who feared he would ruin his own reputation by his pathetic efforts, he travelled from Cologne to the French capital and there, by what must to many have seemed his folly, vindicated the wisdom of his pupil.

The story of this heroism is well known ; but in these days when the question of Blessed Albert's sanctity is under debate, it well bears being retold.

In the process preceding the canonisation of St. Thomas Aquinas one of the witnesses was the knight, Bartholomew of Capua. This man in his youth had known St. Thomas in Naples, and since the death of the latter had risen to high rank as treasurer, proto-notary and logotheta (auditor and expositor of pleas reserved to the King's judgment) in the Kingdom of the Sicilies. He had also enjoyed the friendship of many other eminent Dominicans, including Hugh of Lucca, the Provincial of the Roman Province, who had been a student at Cologne during Albert's last years there. Testifying on oath to the sanctity of St.

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Thomas, Bartholomew relates on the authority of Hugh how devoted was Albert to the memory of his greatest pupil :

When Brother Thomas was dead, Brother Albert, who had been his teacher, hearing of his death, wept copiously then ; and afterwards, whenever he heard him remembered, he used to weep, saying he had been the flower and glory of the world ; so much so that the brethren used to grieve about this weeping, fearful lest the tears came from lightness of head, for Blessed Albert was well advanced in years. Afterwards the rumour was heard that the writings of Brother Thomas were being attacked in Paris.<sup>7</sup> Wherefore Brother Albert said that he wished to go there to defend those writings. But the Friars Preachers, fearing the decrepitude of his age and the long journey, dissuaded him for some time, for this reason especially : as Brother Albert was a man of great reputation and authority in Paris, they feared lest because of his age he might lose the public esteem of those who remembered him (from his early brilliant days). Finally, however, Brother Albert, who had been Bishop of Ratisbon, insisted that he wished by all means to go to Paris to defend the honour of the writings in question. And to Paris he went. And in his company went the aforesaid Brother Hugo, as he himself told this witness personally.

Now when Albert was in Paris, while a convocation of the University was assembled, he mounted the pulpit<sup>8</sup> of the Friars Preachers there, taking the text, 'What praise is it for one living if he be praised by the dead?' And treating the said Brother Thomas as alive and everybody else as dead, and the praises of Brother Thomas as glorious and exalted,<sup>9</sup> he said that

<sup>7</sup> On March 7th, 1277, Stephen Tempier condemned 219 propositions, including three from the writings of St. Thomas.

<sup>8</sup> Probably one of the University Chairs occupied by the Dominicans.

<sup>9</sup> The text reads *gloriosas et excelsas*, and in this passage shows signs of being corrupt. Possibly there is some play on *Gloria in Excelsis*. Albert's point seems to be that Thomas is alive in heaven where he is meriting the only praise that is worthy of him. Compared with him, all those present are no better than dead; therefore, whether they praise him or not matters nothing. Whether this is what he preached or not,

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he was ready, in an examination by learned men, to defend the writings of Brother Thomas as radiant with truth and sanctity. And after speaking and learning<sup>10</sup> much to the honour of God and approbation of those writings, Brother Albert returned to Cologne, the said Brother Hugo with him, as he himself told the witness. And after their return, Brother Albert desired to have all the writings of Brother Thomas read to him in a prescribed order; and at a solemn gathering (of the Brethren) assembled by himself, he extolled the merits of Brother Thomas as outstanding, glorious and exalted. And finally he concluded that Brother Thomas had put an end to all the workers until the end of the world, and that all henceforth would labour in vain. And as the same Brother Hugo related to the witness, Brother Thomas was never named but he (Albert) would burst into tears. (Bollandus: *Acta Sanctorum*; ed. 1865; vii Martii Processus, § 82, p. 712.)

With devotion and detachment like this, Albert might have been a very great schoolmaster and the inspiration of very great pupils without being himself a very great man. But in himself, and apart from all he helped others to become, he was very great indeed. In an age of great philosophers and theologians, he was by far the greatest until St. Thomas took philosophy and theology for his own special field and left the rest of the world many leagues behind. Blessed Albert distinguished himself in many fields into which St. Thomas never allowed himself to be distracted. As Provincial of the German Dominican Province and as Bishop of Ratisbon, Albert proved himself a very able and energetic administrator. And all his life long he

his defence seems to have been principally responsible for the widespread enthusiasm for St. Thomas which quickly followed, especially in his own Order where he still had some opponents.

<sup>10</sup> ' *Post multa dicta et collecta.*' *Collecta* may refer to the *lectiones* which masters gave to their pupils. (Cf. Tocco, Cap. III, § 13 *ad fin.*) But more probably the meaning here is that in the course of his conversations Albert 'picked up' much edifying information about divine favours granted to Thomas while writing.

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was being called upon to act as a mediator between the new democracy that was arising everywhere in the towns, and the old feudal aristocracy to which he himself belonged by birth, and with which the dignitaries of the Church were still generally identified.

Albert's father, the Count of Bollstadt, was the head of a powerful Swabian family wholly devoted, like the family of St. Thomas, to the cause of the Emperor Frederick II. Albert was born in 1206 at Lauingen on the Danube. While his father was with the Imperial troops in Lombardy, the son was sent to be educated in the Liberal Arts at the University of Bologna.<sup>11</sup> He must have arrived there about the time that St. Dominic died in that city, or very shortly afterwards. While there, he became very dangerously sick, and at the point of death was shriven and houseled by one of the Friars Preachers. This zealous man advised him to make a bargain with the Blessed Mother of God; promising her that if she restored him to health he would dedicate his life to her service in the new Preaching Order which she had taken under her special protection. Albert made a vow to this effect, and recovered from his illness. This was in 1222.

This same year Bologna, making common cause with the cities of Lombardy which had leagued themselves together and allied themselves with the Papacy to resist the Emperor, closed its gates against the imperial troops. By way of reprisals for this, Frederick II conceived his plan of establishing a rival university at Naples. In the troubles that followed

<sup>11</sup> The inference that Albert studied first at Bologna, then at Padua, is based on the Brief of Honorius III referred to below and other indirect evidence. The conclusion cannot be regarded as certain, but it is very highly probable. It is possible, though very improbable, that the sick youth who vowed at Bologna to become a Dominican, and was later dispensed by Honorius, was not Albert at all.



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immediately, most of the teachers and students at Bologna transferred themselves to Padua.

Here Albert was under the eye of an uncle. Hearing of the vow his nephew had made and of the eagerness of the Friars to hold him to it, the uncle began to exert himself to avert the disgrace into which his family would be considered to have fallen if one of its members should become a mendicant. He forbade Albert to visit the Dominican convent for a period prescribed by himself. During this period Pope Honorius III received an appeal for a dispensation from the vow which Albert had made at Bologna. It was worded as coming from Albert himself; it is impossible, however, to suppose that anyone but the uncle was the author. The Pope is informed that when Albert, about his sixteenth year, was studying the Arts at Bologna, he was, during a very grave illness, 'circumvented by the persuasion' of a Friar Preacher to take the habit of his Order. But as he was suffering very great pain at the time, and was of tender years (he is now scarcely a year older), he did not know what he was doing. It certainly was not his intention to bind himself to the observances of the Order, for of these he then knew nothing. Although he does not even remember having made the vow, the Friars are attempting to keep him to it by threats of excommunication. In a brief dated from the Lateran, April 3rd, 1223, Honorius grants the desired dispensation.<sup>12</sup>

There was no longer any reason why Albert should abstain from visiting the Friars, especially as he himself was wavering in his vocation. He was the type of undergraduate we all know and love: exceedingly handsome, innocent, brilliantly gifted, and tormented with a lively imagination and quick reactions of fear

<sup>12</sup> The text of the brief is given by Mandonnet, *Revue Thomiste*, p. 254, T. XIV, No. 65, Mars-Avril, 1931.

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and hope to its phantasies. The beauty of Dominican life evidently fascinated him, but he was tortured by the fear that he would never persevere in it. One morning he awoke out of a dream which seemed to have settled all his doubts. He had dreamt that he had entered the Order and after a short time left it again. 'Now I see,' he said, 'that what I feared would happen to me if ever I were to enter.' The same day he went to the Dominican Church and heard a sermon by Blessed Jordan of Saxony, who was rapidly recruiting the Order by an energetic apostolate in the universities. At this time, as Jordan himself writes in a letter to Blessed Diana of Andalo,<sup>13</sup> he had been preaching for a long time to the students at Padua without any result, and, growing weary, was thinking of going back to Bologna. His sermon dealt with the temptations used by the devil to deceive good people. 'There are some,' he said, 'who propose to leave the world and enter religion; but in their dreams the devil suggests to them that they have entered and then left, and they find themselves on horseback, or clad in crimson, alone, or with their companions. All this is a ruse of the devil to make them afraid of entering religion, as though they could not persevere.' Needless to say, Albert was very much struck by what he heard, and sought out the preacher. Jordan, though he was Master General of an Order to which Pope Honorius was more than partial, evidently stood very much in awe of Albert's uncle and his Papal brief: but now 'becoming confident that God was with him, in many ways comforted the young man against temptations of this kind.'<sup>14</sup> In the letter to Blessed Diana, written in the July of this year (1223), he says that the Lord has suddenly deigned to move many hearts. Ten

<sup>13</sup> Mandonnet, *loc. cit.*, p. 254.

<sup>14</sup> *Vitae Fratrum*, cf. Mandonnet, *ibid.*, p. 255.

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have just entered the Order, two of them sons of two great German nobles.<sup>15</sup>

After completing his studies Albert was appointed to lecture on the Sentences of Peter Lombard at Cologne. In this city he now spent two years, and later he again returned to it for long periods; indeed, so much of his life was spent there that *Coloniensis* was one of the many titles by which he was known to his contemporaries.<sup>16</sup> Before 1245, he had taught for varying periods in Hildesheim, Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Ratisbon, and Strassburg. It was in the year last named that he and the young Thomas Aquinas were both sent to Paris. Albert was there made Master in Sacred Theology, and given one of the two chairs which the Dominicans had held in the University since 1231. Now began the period of his greatest literary activity and his European fame as a philosopher. In 1248 the Order of Preachers added to its schools in Paris the four *Studia generalia* of Oxford, Cologne, Montpellier and Bologna. Albert was sent to be regent at Cologne, and was accompanied by St. Thomas, who continued to be his pupil there until 1252.

We possess interesting proofs of the harmony with which these two great scholars worked together during these years. It was at this time that Albert commented on the neo-Platonist writings of the pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle. Later St. Thomas followed his example in respect of both these works, and actually collected and edited Albert's notes on the Ethics, probably while still with him at Cologne. This work, still unprinted, has the distinction not merely of coming from master and pupil in collaboration, but also of

<sup>15</sup> Mandonnet, *loc. cit.*, p. 254.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Dante, *Paradiso*, x, 97-99.

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creating a precedent for the method to be followed in future commentaries of this kind.<sup>17</sup>

Already while he still had Thomas amongst his pupils, Albert began to be distracted from his lecturing and writing by many public duties. The first of these came in the form of an appeal on May 7th, 1249, to arbitrate between the citizens of Cologne and their Archbishop. His mediation was obviously satisfactory to both parties, for again many times between 1252 and 1272 he was called upon by them for the same service.

It fell to Albert as Regent at Cologne to make application to the Master General of the Order, John the Teutonic, to have Thomas sent to Paris for the degrees of Bachelor and Master in Theology. Contrary to the custom of our own days, Albert and his fellow Masters had no power to promote Thomas at their *studium generale* in Cologne, since the Order only recognised degrees granted in Paris. In 1254, Albert was elected Provincial of the German Province and for the next three years was kept very busy with administrative duties. He visited the convents under his jurisdiction, and attended the General Chapters of Milan (1255) and Paris (1256). In the October of the latter year, he was summoned by the Pope to Anagni to defend the Mendicants against the attacks of William of St. Amour, with whom St. Thomas was already dealing effectively in Paris.

In spite of these many occupations, Albert's pen was kept continually busy with scholastic work of the highest importance. His treatise against the Averroist doctrine that all mankind has but one intellect was written at the Papal Court; and at the same time he

<sup>17</sup> *Revue Neo-Scholastique* Août-Sept. 1922; and de Wulf, *History of Medieval Philosophy*, Eng. Trans. 1926, Vol. I, p. 396.

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wrote a considerable part of his commentaries on the New Testament. Probably these commentaries are the record of Conferences addressed to the Papal household. Many biographers infer from this, unwarrantably, that Blessed Albert was for a time the successor of St. Dominic as Master of the Sacred Palace. The official title of Albert, and later of St. Thomas, at the Papal Court, was *Lector Curiae*.

Having served his term of three years as Provincial Albert resumed his lectures at Cologne. At the General Chapter of 1259, he was appointed, with others, including Thomas Aquinas and Peter of Tarantaise (who afterwards became Pope Innocent V), to revise the system of studies hitherto in use in the Order. In 1260 Alexander appointed him Bishop of Ratisbon, in which diocese there were great disorders. The Dean and Chapter were enjoined by the Pope to receive him as their lawful pastor. On this occasion, Humbert de Romanis, the Master General, wrote to Albert to dissuade him from accepting an offer which would have the effect of separating him from the common life of his brethren. Humbert's letter reveals the fact that at this moment the Order was encountering serious difficulties, some of which apparently came from within. Amongst these domestic troubles was certainly a division of sympathy in the more learned circles: some favoured the Aristotelian movement with which Albert and Thomas had identified themselves; others, and these often highly placed, resisted it bitterly. It can only be to such troubles that Humbert refers when he assumes that the offer of a Bishopric must be to Albert a temptation to desert his Order. The Order, he says, 'loves every one (of its sons) without exception and glories in the Lord because of you especially. If our troubles were heavier now than they ever were before, or will ever be again, though others should be cast down by them, you in your prudence must know how

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much your gigantic shoulders ought joyfully to bear.'<sup>18</sup>

The wishes of the Pope prevailed with Albert until he took possession of the See of Ratisbon. He devoted himself with all his tremendous energy to the reform of his diocese. Its archives have preserved abundant proofs of his zeal as a mediator in quarrels and a promoter of Christian discipline. But the material business attaching to his office was distasteful to him, and seems to have impaired his health. After two years he besought the Pope to allow him to resign his pastoral charge. His request was granted, and for the next five years he was employed in various ecclesiastical missions, including the preaching of a crusade which took him into all parts of the German-speaking countries. In 1267 he begged his Order to receive him back as a teacher, a petition which was gladly welcomed. His old chair at Paris was offered to him, but he preferred Cologne, where he taught for the next ten years. Like most of his brethren, however, he still made frequent journeys to distant parts. He was much sought after by the religious orders in Germany to assist them in his episcopal capacity, consecrating their Churches and ordaining their candidates for the priesthood. In 1274, he was present at the Council of Lyons; and in 1277 he undertook the memorable journey to Paris, of which mention was made above. Throughout all these years he had never ceased to write, and now, at the end of his life, he busied himself with a *Summa Theologica* conceived on a different plan and for a different purpose from that of St. Thomas. But his labours came to an end in 1278, when he lost his memory and his overwrought brain gradually began to fail. He died in 1280 at the age of 74.

*(To be concluded.)*

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<sup>18</sup> Mandonnet, *ibid.*, p. 256.