

MAGNI NOMINIS UMBRA*

Every scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like to a man that is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure new things and old. (Matt. xiii, 52).

MY text is one of those which we are accustomed to carry in our heads without remembering the occasion upon which the utterance was made, and, partly for that reason, to hesitate about the precise meaning we should attach to it. It comes, actually, at the end of that great chapter, his thirteenth, in which St. Matthew has collected for us seven of our Lord's parables, six of which, if not all seven, deal with the growth of his kingdom, the Church; the Sower, the cockle among the wheat, the mustard seed, the leaven, the hidden treasure, the merchant seeking pearls, the net cast into the sea. And four are particularly concerned to point out to our Lord's hearers that his kingdom was not, as some of them imagined, to be a clean sweep of all that went before it, a complete break-away from all human experience. It was not to be a millennium, in which all sin and suffering would have disappeared; those who were partakers of it would not be all perfect souls, already confirmed in goodness and destined for eternal life. No, the new kingdom or *ecclesia* of Christ was to be in some ways like the old *ecclesia*, the old congregation of the Jews. There would still be tares among the wheat, worthless fish among the catch, side by side with the others. Our Lord, therefore, is not exactly creating a new thing in the world when he lays the foundations of his Church; in a sense he is only reconstituting, on a new

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basis and with more extended possibilities, the old *ecclesia* of the Jews which he called to himself so long ago. Do the apostles understand that? They do? Good, then they are scribes instructed in the kingdom of heaven; they see that every new thing in human history is built against the background of some older thing which went before it. As the picture gallery of some great house preserves the memory of its ancestry, tracing down to the latest instance the persistence of the same characteristics, and linking up the present with the past; so the greatest institutions of the world are those which combine something ancient with something new. And among these, even the Catholic Church.

It is a human weakness of ours, to be always crying out for complete novelty, an entire dis severance from our past. Our old traditions have become so dusty with neglect, so rusted with abuse, that we are for casting them on the scrap-heap and forgetting that they ever existed. The Church conserves; she bears traces still of the Jewish atmosphere in which she was cradled, traces, too, of the old heathen civilisation which she conquered. And in her own history it is the same; nothing is altogether forgotten; every age of Christianity recalls the lineaments of an earlier time. People think of her as if she kept a lumber-room; it is not so; hers is a treasure-house from which she can bring forth when they are needed things old as well as new.

It is not difficult to see how all this applies to the history of the thirteenth century, and the reinstatement of Aristotle's philosophy by Saint Albert and St. Thomas. The first instinct of Christendom had been to neglect and to disparage the pagan authors, whose works were so saturated with allusions to an idolatrous worship. Saint Jerome was afraid of being too good a Ciceronian to be a Christian; and St. Augustine was

ashamed of having been moved to tears by the story of the Aeneid. Buried away in libraries, the works of the ancients slept on; there is no clear proof that the great library of Alexandria, for instance, suffered much from Christian hands. But the libraries had been collected in the East, and when the East passed under the dominion of Islam, Islam became, for better or worse, the world's librarian. So it was that when Aristotle returned to Europe he returned in Oriental guise, translated and interpreted by the sectaries of the False Prophet. His works were not only dusty with the neglect of centuries, they were corroded with the rust of heretical contamination. Is it wonderful that the Christian world mistrusted their influence? You have to imagine, if you seek for a modern parallel, a situation in which all the available scientific literature of the world should be in the hands of Soviet Russia, and accessible only in the form of editions scrawled over with Bolshevist comment. It was a heroic adventure, only made possible through the guidance of the Holy Spirit whom we invoke at this season, when the theologians of a new Order, which still had its reputation for orthodoxy to establish, took upon themselves to make a niche for Aristotle in the ante-chambers of Christian thought. The old weapon, soiled and rusty, useless, you would have thought—but there were men ready to scour and polish it, and make use of it, an instrument as keen as ever, for the confuting of false doctrine and the systematization of knowledge.

New things and old—Saint Albert, as a scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven, realised perhaps more than most men of his day that the secular sciences had great advances still to make, and that there must be room for new discoveries in any philosophy which was to express fully the thought of mankind. It was an age unfriendly to research, for many reasons. The best brains were either devoted to prac-

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tical administration in the world, or to theological studies in the cloister; the tools of science, though they had already been dreamt of, had not yet been forged; above all, printing had not yet appeared, with all its opportunities for garnering the fruit of human speculation. And the men of to-day will speak in contemptuous terms of the medieval world, as one in which research made no progress; they forget the difficulties which I have just mentioned; they forget also that St. Albert was characteristic of his period no less than St. Thomas. And St. Albert certainly had the build of mind which goes to make the research worker. If he had enjoyed more leisure from controversy and from the cares of administration, he would be remembered, as Roger Bacon is remembered, as part of that false dawn of Science which went before the Renaissance; and he would be honoured to-day for activities which he himself would have been the last to think important. But they are important, for this reason if for no other—they prove that the Middle Ages, in taking over Aristotle as their master, did not suppose he had said the last word on every possible subject of discussion. St. Albert was too good an Aristotelian to think that Aristotle must always be right; he would imitate his master, not merely by borrowing opinions from him, but by instituting original research as he did.

To-day, perhaps more than ever before, the world is eager to make a clean sweep of its past. The war has driven a deep furrow across human experience, separating all that went before it from all that has come and that is to come after it, hardly with less decisiveness than the Flood in earlier civilizations, than the Christian era in later times. Because we are in a mess with our economics, because Russia has shewn the way to infidelity, because Europe is feeling after a new solidarity, this post-war world feels a different world to us elder people, and our juniors are not slow

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to rub it in. They talk, they write, as if the world of Einstein and Jeans and Rutherford and Eddington were a world re-born; as if every earlier guess after the truth were now superseded or exploded; as if, for the first time, we had begun to know. In such ears, what use to celebrate the praises of St. Albert? The very name sounds worse than medieval; it sounds Victorian.

That is the secret of the modern world's antipathy towards the Christian religion, and towards the Catholic Church in particular. They hate it not because it is something arrogant, not because it is something uncomfortable, not because it is something foreign, but because it is something out of date. They know that it will always bring new things and old out of its treasure-house, will not consent to the modern worship of the modern. And they know that there is strength in this deeply-rooted tradition which can yet absorb, as it has absorbed all through the ages, lessons that are new. *Stat magni nominis umbra*: they feel, when they meet us, that though they may have heard the last of Albert the Good, they have not heard the last of Albert the Great. A hundred years back, they hoped to dispose of the Church by disposing of the Bible; now their tactics have grown more subtle. They hope to dispose of the Church by disposing of Aristotle. It has become the fashion to gird at us because our whole thought is built up round a philosophical system which was fifteen hundred years old when we assimilated it, and has now ceased to hold the speculative allegiance of mankind. Only the other day I read a book by a populariser of science, well known in the broadcasting world, whose whole thesis was that Einstein has shown up Euclid, and if we are not going to believe in Euclid it would be absurd to believe in Aristotle, and if we no longer believe in Aristotle, then Christianity has ceased to count.

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It is with happy omen, then, if we may dare to criticize the solemn actions of the Church in terms of human congruity, that the Holy Father has just raised St. Albert to the altars of the Church, and numbered him among her doctors. Not in the sense that the Church is concerned to applaud the physical speculations of the great philosopher, or to regard them as final, when St. Albert himself was not content to regard them as final. Nor even in the sense that Aristotle's metaphysics are the only possible framework of thought in which the Christian world-idea can be stated. Rather because, in the speculative confusion of our time, when men talk as if the theories advanced by natural science were inconsistent with the doctrines of our faith, it is good to look back on a time when Aristotle himself seemed to be an anti-Christian writer, and the attempt to rehabilitate him was regarded with deep suspicion by the old-fashioned. Rather because, when the cry is all for novelty, for further discoveries which shall sweep us away, more and more, from our intellectual bearings, it is well to be reminded that sooner or later human thought always turns back on itself, and the system which was once discredited creeps back into favour again. The modern world lives on its intellectual capital, exploits the prevalent doctrine of the moment in the interest of its heresies; floodlights the universe with a gleam of partial illumination, or darkens the skies with doubt; the Church, who is wiser and older, stores new things and old alike in her treasure-house, and brings them out in their due relation to enrich, permanently, the experience of mankind.

May we go further, and admire the Providence which has left it for a Pope, pre-eminently a man of thought as well as a man of action, to canonize a Saint who was pre-eminently a man of action as well as a man of thought? For, after all, the really surprising

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thing about St. Albert is not so much the enormous range of learning which won him his title of the Universal Doctor, as the fact that the life which included so much reading and writing, in days when reading and writing were difficult, included also a vast amount of administrative activity; he was not a mere lecturer or regent of studies; he was Provincial of his order in Germany, and for three years a bishop. Well might a contemporary describe him as 'the astonishment and miracle of our times.' How did he manage it at all? The secret is out at last; he was a Saint. The tradition of him preserved in his own order and in his own country has been ratified by the solemn judgment of the Church. Too long we have thought of him as merely reflecting the rays of St. Thomas' beatitude; we know now that those who were so intimately associated in their lives, and not divided in their loyalty by their death, were not divided, save by a few years, in their entry into a blessed eternity. Master and pupil, they could share with our Blessed Lord and our Blessed Lady the joys of an everlasting reunion.

May Saint Albert's prayers bring peace to a distracted Europe; may they enlighten, as he himself enlightened in his time, the darkness of human thought. And may your own order, Reverend Fathers, be worthy of its saintly heritage, and prove ever fertile of scribes instructed in the kingdom of heaven, to bring out of your treasure-house new things and old.

RONALD KNOX.