

SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT

THE works attributed to Albert the Great make a very long and imposing list.¹ Some of his authentic writings have never yet been printed. His printed works fill twenty-one folio volumes in the 1651 Lyons edition; thirty-eight quarto volumes in the Paris edition of 1890. They include amongst the theological works, scriptural commentaries, sermons, a commentary on the Sentences and on the semi-mystical works of the Pseudo-Dionysius. But his scientific and philosophical writings represent his greatest achievement. When he began his career as a teacher, the works of Aristotle were still suspect in the ecclesiastical world, for they were as yet only known through the translations and commentaries of Arabs who had interpolated and coloured them with neoplatonism, Mahomedanism, and other oriental admixtures. Moreover, the parts best known (excepting the *Organon* with which, thanks to Boethius, the West had always been in some degree familiar) were the *Physics*, which were read in the first instance by laymen interested in Arabian medicine, alchemy, and astronomy.

The appearance of learned laymen in Western Europe was one of the concomitants of the democratic movement of the twelfth century which the monks and higher clergy, because of their attachment to the aristocratic feudal system, were slow to understand and encourage. The first signs of contact between the higher clergy and Aristotelian metaphysics occur in the twelfth century, and they are often amusing. For instance, Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, and a great and worthy man, was afflicted with

¹ H. Ch. Scheeben: *Les Ecrits d'Albert d'après les Catalogues* in *Revue Thomiste*, Mars-Avril 1931.

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catarrh, and at the same time was bound by his rule to submit to periodical blood-letting. When he kept the rule, the catarrh became so bad that he lost his voice and was unable to discharge his duties. Having spent much substance on the physicians of France and being nothing the better, he turned his thoughts to Italy, where in the Greek-speaking southerly districts there was a good tradition of Greek and Arabian medicine. We possess a letter which he wrote to a certain Master Bartholomew, who conducted a hospital renowned throughout the world. The Abbot begs the physician to come to his aid, or at least to send him one of his competent assistants. Bartholomew sends a Master Bernard with a letter of reply and a prescription. In the letter Bartholomew, who is not a homoeopath, explains that Peter must not be surprised to find a moist remedy prescribed for catarrh, which, as everybody knows, is a moist complaint. His medicine, he continues in medical terms, is *actualiter humidum, potentialiter siccum*. But as this is the language of Aristotle, and of the metaphysics of Aristotle, he takes it for granted that even so eminent a man as Peter will not be able to understand it; so he paraphrases it—‘*ut evidentius dicam*’—into the ecclesiastical Latin of the day.²

For reasons such as these, the Masters of Arts in the University of Paris, which from the beginning of the thirteenth century included many exponents of the Art of Medicine, were forbidden to use the current translations of Aristotle’s works in lecturing to their students. Albert overcame this difficulty by re-writing the entire philosophy of Aristotle for Christian readers. He has not mastered the grandeur or sounded the depths of Aristotelian thought as his more brilliant pupil St. Thomas was later to do, thanks to greater

² H. Quentin, in *Studi e Testi*, No. 37, Rome, 1924. (Miscellanea Fr. Ehrle, Vol. I), p. 86.

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genius, better texts, Papal patronage, and, last but not least, Albert's generous encouragement. St. Thomas's works taken together form a well-digested synthesis of philosophy and theology. Blessed Albert's works have rather the character of an encyclopedia. Though they are by no means lacking in order, or in the harmony which we naturally expect in the thought of a distinguished logician—which is what Albert was first and foremost in the domain of philosophy—they are an amalgamation of elements from sources widely different.

An interesting problem is raised by his *Summa Theologica* which was interrupted at the end of the second book when Albert's mind failed him.³ Though it was written later than the *Summa* of St. Thomas, and though Albert himself held that those labour in vain who labour to improve his great pupil, his own last work shows very little sign of being influenced by him in any way. Nor can this be explained by the failure of his mental powers. As a philosopher and theologian he is a giant still. Père Gorce has suggested that he is deliberately writing a different kind of work from the *Summa* of St. Thomas. The latter work, he points out, is a condensed synopsis intended for beginners. Albert's work, on the other hand, is rather a collection of materials for mature scholars to systematize. This suggestion is far from contradicted by a comparison of the *Commentaries on the Sentences* by Albert and St. Thomas and the respective *Summae* of each.

But, external to the works of both, there is a simpler and more authoritative explanation of the fact that in his latest work Albert has not yet become a disciple of his own pupil. 'For Albert,' as Père Gorce puts it, 'Thomas remains a disciple.' There

³ *Le problème des trois Sommes*. M. M. Gorce, O.P., *Revue Thomiste*, Mars-Avril, 1931 (Paris), p. 293 *seq.*

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would seem to be more truth in this statement than its author intends.

In the extract from the process of St. Thomas's canonization quoted above* we have it stated on very high authority that in 1277, after defending his pupil's reputation in Paris, Albert returned home and had his pupil's works read to him in order; and that after that reading his conclusion was that they made all further work in the same field superfluous. This evidence suggests two things: first, that after this careful and orderly study of St. Thomas's collected work, Albert understood them better and appreciated them more than he had hitherto done; and, secondly, that he himself made no further attempt to complete his own *Summa Theologica*.

It does not necessarily follow that this study marks the point at which he ceased writing his *Summa*; but the only alternative to this conclusion is that Albert had already laid down his pen for ever—and this has never been, and is not likely to be, suggested by anybody. Neither does it necessarily follow that before this reading Albert was only imperfectly acquainted with what his disciple had written; but when other circumstances are taken into account this is a conclusion which can scarcely be avoided.

The first circumstance to be considered is human nature itself, even as it is found in the saints. What is the human attitude of a brilliant schoolmaster to the writings of his brilliant pupils? If he is a man of mean character he may possibly read them all with the closest attention, but this either to pick holes in them and keep his pupils in their place, or else to brag about them as mere echoes of his own genius. If he is a man of high character, as Albert was, he may, in his eagerness to learn from every possible source, read every

*BLACKFRIARS, January, 1932, p.29.

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line his pupils write in the hope of learning something from them; or he may in their early days have been so sure what they were going to say before they said it, that later it is enough for him to know in a general way what they are writing about, and to infer the rest. In this latter case the best of masters may be outdistanced by the best of his pupils long before he awakes to the fact.

In all Albert's writings there is no evidence that he ever turned to the works of Thomas to learn anything from them.⁴ Wherever we read him it is evident that he considered himself the 'Master' of his time, the 'Universal Doctor' who is leading the way for all his contemporaries. Nor is this anything to his discredit. He cannot have had any personal ambition for this rank and title, and the popular favour which conferred it upon him was very embarrassing to his Order. His prestige in Paris aroused the jealousy of the secular Masters there, and made it impossible for St. Thomas to obtain his degree until it was four years overdue. In 1256, the year in which it was granted, Albert was

⁴ There is much evidence the other way. For instance, in his *Summa Theologica* Albert shows clearly that he has not read St. Thomas's Commentary on the *Liber de Causis* written in 1269. St. Thomas shows that this work is a digest, with some important changes, from a work by Proclus, and that the digest was originally written in Arabic, not Greek. Throughout his *Summa Theologica* Albert variously attributes the *Liber de Causis* to 'the Philosopher,' 'to Aristotle,' and to 'Hermes Trismegistos.' These variations support the contention of Père Gorce and others that Albert in the composition of his *Summa* made a free and not very discriminating use of scissors and paste. But his excerpts can only have been from his own previous works. The last attribution of the *Liber de Causis* shows that he has recognized it to be Neoplatonist, not Aristotelian, in origin. He also seems to know of the translation of Proclus by William of Moerbeke. But there is no sign of his being indebted for any of this information to St. Thomas's public writings.

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present as Provincial at the General Chapter in Paris which decreed that Friars teaching in the University should be called, not Masters or Doctors, but by their proper names; and that all the brethren should be called Friars Preachers, and nothing else.⁵ His eminence within the Order and outside it would have made such an enactment inconceivable had he shown the least sign of considering it a personal slight. What his contemporaries thought of the prohibition is plain. Even Roger Bacon went on to call him an *Auctor*,⁶ that is, an authority, and his works *originalia*. No more emphatic acknowledgement of his intellectual leadership could possibly have been made. St. Thomas insists that even Hugh of St. Victor cannot be considered an 'authority,' but merely a Master.⁷ In that age when tradition meant so much, and when the name of one dead man was worth more than the names of a hundred still living, the 'Authors' were the fountain-heads of secular and religious culture: in the humanities Virgil and his compeers, in philosophy Aristotle and Plato, in theology the Fathers of the Church.⁸ Only the works of such teachers were called *originalia*. Albert accepted a position of authority equal to them because his age gave him no choice in the matter. As a theologian representing the tradition of the Fathers he was obliged to set himself above Aristotle as men then knew him, to baptise his philosophy, and oftentimes to correct it. To discharge his duty properly it was urgent that he should bring his pupils to attend rather to what Albert said than to what Aristotle said. In this way the ecclesiastical world was led to accept Aristotle on the authority of Albert. And in this same

⁵ B. M. Reichert, O.P. *Act. Cap. Gen.*, Vol. I, p. 81.

⁶ E. Gilson: *La Philosophie au Moyen Age*, pp. 165-6.

⁷ *Summa Theol.*, II, II, 5, 1, ad 1 m.

⁸ C. H. Haskins. *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, p. 98.

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way St. Thomas was led to ascertain what Aristotle had actually said, and to penetrate his meaning more thoroughly than Albert himself had done. Thus even when he had outdistanced his master, St. Thomas was still in a very real sense working under his authority and leadership.

Albert could not but be conscious of his leadership; but there is no reason for, and there are many reasons against, the supposition that when he went to Paris to defend his beloved pupil he realized how very far he had led him. What he defended there was, according to Bartholomew of Capua, the younger man's 'noble writings' in general, and not his particular doctrines in detail.

The points of Thomist doctrine impugned in the condemnation⁹ were all contained, implicitly at least, in Albert's own teaching.¹⁰ His whole behaviour in

⁹ According to Grabmann (in *Angelicum*, 1929, p. 350), there were nine such points condemned, not three as stated above on the authority of De Wulf. The point on which St. Thomas most conspicuously parted company from Albert—the unity of substantial form in man—was not amongst them.

¹⁰ Père Gorce suggests (*Rev. Thomiste*, *loc. cit.*) that in his *Summa Theologica* Albert, in deference to a condemnation by the University of Paris in 1270, retreated from a position which he had formerly held, and which, St. Thomas never having abandoned it, was again proscribed in 1277: namely, that in the angels there cannot possibly be matter. But Albert does not in the least retreat from this position. It is true he distinguishes *materia* from *materiale*, attributing the latter to the *intellectus possibilis*, and (by implication) to the *potentia* in angels. But this is perfectly consistent with his position in the *Summa de Creaturis* (*Tract IV*, Q. xxi, a. 1, ad 5m); in both places he stoutly denies that there is matter in the angels. The language of the *Summa Theologica* of Albert can be paralleled in many passages where St. Thomas calls *potentia* in all its senses (except in God) 'quasi materia.' The comparison of the *intellectus possibilis* to *materia prima* as being pure potency in the spiritual order, is frequently used both by St. Thomas and Albert, and is taken direct from the *De Anima* of Aristotle.

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Paris suggests that he was defending St. Thomas, not as differing from everybody else, and least of all as differing from his master, but as representing a school—and that the school of Albert. The defence is clearly an act of faith. Albert has a perfect faith in his disciple's loyalty to his own teaching. The doctrine he wishes to defend is his own doctrine. This is clear from his challenge to the University to examine him on it personally. He is defending Thomas, not yet as an original and perfect teacher on whose work no one, not even he himself, can improve, but as his own faithful and reliable pupil.

It would seem that in Paris in 1277 Albert learned much that was new to him about the details of St. Thomas's distinctive teaching. Only new interest thus awakened, and not mere devotion to writings he already knew by heart, explains his systematic study of all his pupil's works, as soon as he returned to Cologne. It is small wonder that his devotion to his pupil was so intensified by what he read, and that to the end of his life he could not hear Thomas named without bursting into tears. Tears of genuine affection are tears of humility and self-surrender. It is not difficult to see what humbled and ravished the heart of the great master when he submitted his mind to the teaching of his still greater disciple. He was still in the presence of his own doctrine, but simplified and transfigured.

One brief example out of many more important shows in what precise way he must have been moved. Early in his *Summa Theologica* St. Thomas is approaching the problem of pantheism. He raises the question whether God enters into his creatures as a constituent element.¹¹ Amongst those who have erred in this matter he names David of Dinant, 'who most

¹¹ *Summa Theol.* I, iii, 8.

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stupidly held that God is primary matter.' David was almost his contemporary. When St. Thomas mentions a contemporary error he always conceals the name of those who have erred, except here, where he cites David of Dinant, and the Amalricians,¹² or adherents of Amaury of Béné. As his courtesy is unailing, it is all the more surprising that he should here drag in the name of one not long dead to brand his doctrine as 'most stupid.' We are naturally puzzled by his departure in this instance from his general rule; especially as we know that St. Thomas never does anything without a good reason.

Albert knew the reason, and his own *Summa Theologica* reveals it to us.¹³ He is treating of the errors of which Greek philosophy has to be expurgated before it can be allowed to stand as an independent witness to the truth 'of Catholic faith.' He pays particular attention to the 'ancient error of Anaximenes which has been recently revived by a certain David of Dinant who said that God and primary matter are identical.' He enumerates David's arguments, and in stating the last strikes a personal note that is as characteristic of him as it is foreign to the temper of St. Thomas. 'One of his (David's) disciples, a certain Baldwin by name, in a discussion with me personally, brought forward this contemptible argument: Things that are, and are in no way different, are the same. God and primary matter and " nous " are, and do not differ by anything. Now " nous " in Greek means the same as " mens " (mind) in Latin. And he would not have it that " mind " stands in the same relation to intellect and intelligibles as primary matter to sensible forms. That they are in no way different he tried to

¹² In all printed texts of the *Summa* this word is mis-spelt, and apparently misunderstood in some as an Arabian school of philosophy.

¹³ Pars II, Tract I, Q. iv, Memb. iii.

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prove as follows : Things which have no principle of differentiation are in no way different; for Aristotle says that identity is that from which a difference does not differ. Now primary simple things have no principle of differentiation, for if they had they would be composite. God, primary matter and mind are primary simple things. Therefore, they have no differentiating principle. Therefore, they do not differ in any way. Hence, consequently, they are identical. And this is what he has proposed to prove. These are the strongest arguments in favour of this error that have come my way.'

Albert replies : 'It is not true that primary simple things which have no differentating principle as one of their constituents are in no way different. They are as different as can be, because they differ by what they are in themselves; as a man and an ass differ by rationality and irrationality. How do rationality and irrationality differ. We must say that they differ by what they are in themselves. Otherwise we should have to say that in assigning differences we must proceed *ad infinitum*.'

St. Thomas reproduces this argument thus : 'Things which are, and differ in no way, are identical. God and primary matter are, and differ in no way. Therefore they are wholly identical. Proof of the minor premiss : Things that differ, differ by some principles of difference, and so must be composite. But God and primary matter are altogether simple; therefore, they differ in no way.'

Here St. Thomas makes no mention of names, neither David's, nor Baldwin's, nor Albert's. How far he has forgotten the last is clear from his answer to the argument : 'Simple things do not differ by any principles of difference other than themselves; for this is true only of composite things. A man and a horse differ by the differences, rational and irrational,

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These differences do not differ again from one another by other differences. Therefore, if there is any force in words they are not strictly said to *differ*, but to be *diverse*.'

It is thus that Albert finds his own lessons coming back to him: simplified, illuminated, and sobered to suit the dignity of eternal truth. Thomas's quiet preference of a horse to an ass as an example of the difference between a man and a beast is a good illustration of the gentle rebukes administered by the dead disciple to his lively master throughout his work. But his strong clear approval of his master rings out in his endorsement of his mind when it is dealing with eternal verities; and still more in the denunciation of the error with which his master had been personally confronted as 'most stupid.'

Throughout Albert's writings there are frequent signs that his whole life was one of remarkable holiness, but there are also signs that as long as he wielded a pen he fell short of the saintly suppression of self that distinguished St. Thomas. It is not until Albert has laid aside his pen, and taken to expressing his profoundest thought in tears that we feel ourselves in the presence of a candidate for canonization. Had Albert been indisposed to become a saint, he had many excuses for telling himself in his old age that he was still the 'Universal Doctor' and the 'Master' by excellence of all his contemporaries.¹⁴

¹⁴ Dr. Grabmann entitles the article above quoted, *Die wissenschaftliche Mission Alberts des Grossen* (in *Angelicum*, 1929, Fasc. III, p. 325), and explains it as 'the great providential mission of Albert in the creation of Christian Aristotelianism.' With his usual profound and accurate scholarship, Dr. Grabmann paints a most impressive picture of Albert's colossal achievement in the splendid but perilous development of philosophy and theology that shook Christian society to its foundations in the thirteenth century. One of Dr. Grabmann's observations, for which he acknowledges himself partially in-

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That he was at least disposed to become a saint cannot be doubted. His decision that the deep wisdom of St. Thomas must henceforth take precedence of his own wider learning must be considered his last will and testament. It has been so honoured by posterity that the question arises whether Albert was not compensated for his declining natural powers by a gift of prophecy.¹⁵

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debted to H. Ch. Scheeben, deserved to be gratefully summarised here: When opposition to Neoplatonism threatened to discredit the early Church, St. Augustine incorporated its best elements in Christian civilization. When the Albigensian and Waldensian heresies were shaking Christendom, St. Dominic transplanted all that was good in them into the life of the Church. When Aristotelian, Arabian and Jewish philosophies were seducing many learned men from their faith, and hardening the orthodox into a contempt of all philosophy, Albert the Great united and organised these systems within the framework of Christian thought (pp. 343-4).

A fine tribute, this, to a Friar preacher who in the beginning of his vocation wavered, fearing he should not persevere!

¹⁵ This article was in print before the publication of the Decretal Letter in which Pope Pius XI. declared Albert the Great a Doctor of the Church, and so, equivalently, a Saint.