

The Paradise of the Soul

The Paradise of the Soul

Forty-Two Virtues
to Reach Heaven

SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT

Translated by
Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

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“Albert the Great was a man who knew all that could be known, who lacked knowledge of no field of learning.”

—Pope Pius II

“Albert the Great is such a saint as our own age, which seeks peace and promises marvels to itself from the sciences, is able to gaze upon with intent eyes, and to derive great benefit from his example.”

—Pope Pius XI

Contents

<i>Translator's Note</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>The Life of Saint Albert the Great</i>	<i>xv</i>
Saint Albert's Prologue	1
1. Love.....	5
2. Humility.....	13
3. Obedience	19
4. Patience	27
5. Poverty of Spirit.....	33
6. Chastity	39
7. Abstinence	47
8. Prudence.....	55
9. Fortitude.....	61
10. Justice.....	67
11. Temperance	73
12. Compassion	79
13. Peacefulness.....	85
14. Mercy.....	91
15. Concord.....	97

16. Constancy	103
17. Generosity.....	109
18. Truthfulness	115
19. Gentleness.....	121
20. Faith.....	125
21. Hope.....	129
22. Holy Fear	135
23. Spiritual Joy	141
24. Holy Sadness.....	147
25. Gratitude.....	153
26. Zeal for Souls	159
27. Liberty	165
28. Spiritual Living.....	171
29. Gravity.....	179
30. Simplicity.....	185
31. Holy Silence.....	191
32. Solitude.....	199
33. Contemplation.....	205
34. Discretion	215
35. Sharing Joy.....	223
36. Confidence.....	227
37. Disdain for Worldly Things.....	237
38. Mortification of the Flesh.....	241

39. Contrition.....	247
40. Honest Confession.....	253
41. Penance.....	257
42. Perseverance.....	263
Saint Albert's Epilogue.....	267

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The flourishing of virtues is the surest and most reliable sign of a sound spiritual life. Hence there is no more effective way of attaining spiritual progress than by the conscious cultivation of the virtues. It is this goal—the cultivation of the virtues—which is the theme of this fascinating work.

The word “virtue” is a translation of the Latin term *virtus*, which is etymologically related to both the words *vis* (strength) and *vir* (man). Each of the virtues is therefore something which reflects and promotes “strength of character.” These virtues (or strengths) stand in opposition to the vices (in Latin *vitia*, meaning “weaknesses”). By cultivating the virtues, an individual becomes stronger, more fulfilled, closer to God, more authentically human, and ultimately happier. This happiness can be experienced during the present life, but it reaches its supreme perfection only in the kingdom of heaven. The virtues serve as reliable guideposts to the soul as it makes its way to this realm of eternal bliss, where, freed from all sinfulness and sorrow, it will enjoy forever the glorious presence of God Himself.

The author of this work, Saint Albert the Great (c.1200–80), was eminently qualified to address the topic of the virtues. He was a Dominican friar who served as archbishop of the German city of Regensburg. Reputed to be the most learned man of his time, one of Albert's greatest distinctions is that he was the principal teacher of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor. Albert's corpus of writings is vast and all-encompassing. A true polymath, he was an expert not only on theology, philosophy, and Sacred Scripture but also on chemistry, medicine, botany, zoology, and astronomy. It is very appropriate, therefore, that he is known by the appellation of *Doctor Universalis*, or Universal Doctor.

His treatise on the virtues, entitled *Paradisus Animae* ("The Paradise of the Soul") reflects his systematic and analytical approach. His comprehensive knowledge of Church doctrine, Scripture, and the writings of the Church Fathers is supported by his own remarkably perceptive and subtle insights into human behavior and psychology.

In preparing this translation, an effort has been made to convey Albert's intended meanings as faithfully as possible, but in a way that will be readily understood by contemporary readers. Footnotes have been added to elucidate passages and points which may not be entirely clear. Text in square brackets [] indicates insertions by the translator to complete or clarify the sense of the original.

One of Albert's most striking ideas, articulated in his prologue, is that each of the virtues stands in a direct relation to a particular vice. Thus if any virtue is taken to an extreme, it ceases to be a virtue and becomes a vice. For example, if a sense of justice is carried too far, it may become severity or harshness. On the other hand, if mercy or tolerance is taken too far, it may degenerate into permissiveness or laxity. For Albert, like Aristotle, true virtue is to be found in the golden mean, between two possible and antithetical extremes.

In this magisterial treatise, Albert devotes a chapter to forty-two different virtues. Each of these is followed by a short prayer to God for the acquirement of that particular virtue, taken from (or based upon) those in the 1595 Prague edition of the work.

As the teacher of Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great is certainly a mentor of proven capacity and effectiveness. In reading and reflecting upon his wonderful and profound thoughts in this present volume, the modern reader is sure to make progress in those virtues which lead both to tranquility and confidence in this present life and to eternal happiness in the next.

Sancte Alberte Magne, duc nos, doce nos, et ora pro nobis!

Saint Albert the Great, lead us, teach us, and pray for us!



B ALBERTVS
D ALEMANIA

MAGNVS

THE LIFE OF SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT

From the *Proprium Festorum Diœcesis Spirensis*, 1860.

Albert was born in the venerable town of Lauingen in the province of Swabia [in Germany] to parents of noble and knightly rank. From his early youth, he entered upon the way of the Lord. While still an adolescent, he was sent to Padua, that noble city in Lombardy, where he acquired a firm basis for both the virtues and learning.

One day, he entered the basilica in that city and was meditating ardently upon how he could pursue a life of greater sanctity and devotion. As he deliberated thus, he commended himself in prayer to the Virgin Mary. And, behold, the Mother of all graces suddenly appeared to him! She urged him to enter the Order of Preachers, which at the time was still a newly founded institution, yet one which was flourishing in a marvelous fashion. The Queen of Heaven also confided to him that if he did so, he would be enriched with all the treasures of celestial wisdom and would illuminate the entire Christian world. Albert took

prompt and enthusiastic heed of the Mother of God's counsels and immediately sought admission to the Order of Preachers. He very soon received the habit of the Dominicans from Blessed Jordan of Saxony, the superior general of the order at the time.

Having accepted the habit of pious conversion, he devoted himself totally to sacred studies. And such was his industry and intelligence that he soon came to be considered a font of all knowledge, overflowing with true wisdom. Such was his brilliance that he shed glorious luster upon many of the most noble academic seats in Germany—namely Cologne, Hildesheim, Strasburg, Freiburg, and Regensburg. His most penetrating interpretations of the holy writings, the fame of his sanctity and wondrous learning, and the immaculate example of his life soon became known throughout the entire Catholic world. By defeating heresies and refuting errors, he saved countless souls from damnation.

Hence it was that the supreme pontiff, Pope Alexander IV, with the support of the whole college of cardinals, chose Albert as bishop of the church of Regensburg. Albert himself was reluctant to accept this high dignity on account of his humility and his devotion to austerity of life, but in obedience to the pope, he agreed. He was received as bishop with the greatest joy and jubilation from all the clergy and people of the city.

Having been consecrated as bishop and while occupying the episcopal throne, he never ceased to remember the humility, poverty, and disciplines of religious life to which he had committed himself in his vows. The episcopal residence, known as Thumstauf, located about one mile away from the city, became a place of peaceful refuge for his devotions and meditations. At Thumstauf, he wrote his great commentary on the Gospel of Luke.

After he had served as bishop for a few short years in a most praiseworthy manner, he sought to return to his own Dominican Order and to the academic life. Thus, in the year 1262, with the consent of Pope Urban IV, he handed over his episcopal responsibilities to Leo, a most creditable man. Albert himself, greatly refreshed in his spirit, returned to Cologne and resumed his academic post.

The remarkable sanctity and wisdom which Albert possessed is shown by the fact that the Angelic Doctor, Saint Thomas Aquinas, was one of his students.

It was the reasoning and eloquence of Albert that persuaded the Holy See to grant confirmation to the election of Rudolf of Hapsburg as the Holy Roman emperor. By virtue of his diplomacy and prudence as a negotiator, he was able to restore peace between Wilhelm, the count of Jülichgau, and the city of Cologne.

At last, having reached his eightieth year and full of days, and yearning for the promised land of the eternal kingdom,

Albert passed over to the Lord on November 15, 1280, in the seventh year of the reign of the emperor Rudolf. The body of the saint was laid to rest in the Church of the Holy Cross, which he himself had erected, in the presence of Siegfried, the archbishop of Cologne. At the request of Albert IV, the bishop of Regensburg, Pope Gregory XV established the annual observance of a feast in veneration of Albert the Great.

SAINT ALBERT'S PROLOGUE

There are certain vices which frequently assume the appearance of the virtues. And thus, though they are actually vices, they are wrongly believed to be virtues. For example, severity can seem like justice. Cynicism can seem like maturity. Loquaciousness is sometimes believed to be affability. A dissolute person can be seen to be filled with a spirit of joy.

Often sloth or self-indulgent melancholy can seem to be commendable gravity and seriousness. A lack of enthusiasm or inertia can seem like discretion. Excessive and vain fastidiousness can seem like commendable cleanliness. Gluttony may be mistaken for a healthy appetite. Wastefulness can look like generosity, and miserliness is sometimes perceived as wise frugality.

Stubbornness may be seen as constancy;
dishonesty may be seen as discretion;
hypocrisy may be seen as sanctity;

carelessness and negligence may be seen as mild
tolerance;
curiosity may be seen as circumspection;
vainglory may be seen as straightforward
self-esteem;
presumption may be seen as optimism;
carnal affection may be seen as charity;
arrogant and tyrannical correction of others may be
seen as love of justice;
timidity may be seen as mercy, kindness or
peacefulness;
and so on, for many others.

These vices that look like virtues may be compared to counterfeit coins, which are very easily mistaken for the genuine currency of true virtue. But, while the “counterfeit coins” of these false virtues may readily deceive human beings, they are not able to purchase one’s entrance into the kingdom of heaven!

Certain virtues are natural, arising spontaneously from our human nature. Thus humility, kindness, modesty, generosity, mercy, and patience are often born in our hearts without any training or effort. But these virtues, which are simply part of the nature of some people, are not sufficient in themselves to merit an eternal reward or the kingdom of God, since they do not take any effort or resolution to acquire. Rather, our

virtues must be developed beyond our purely natural characteristics, as a result of effort, intention, goodwill, and training, in order to possess true merit in the sight of God.

Now, just as certain vices are sometimes mistakenly judged to be virtues, so certain virtues can often appear to be vices. For example, justice may seem like severity, or maturity may seem like cynicism. Careful providence may seem like stinginess, and constancy may seem like stubbornness. Indeed, all the examples given earlier may be reversed in this way.

Occasionally, genuinely humble people are even accused of acting humbly as a result of some underlying vainglory. Sometimes, when people are genuinely holy, they may be seen as hypocrites by others. And sometimes something which is done out of the purest charity may even be attributed to motives of hatred or vindictiveness.

Thus it is very difficult to discern accurately between the vices and the virtues. Furthermore, each virtue has different degrees and grades. The first step in each virtue always comes solely through a gift or grace from God. But each of these virtues infused into us by divine grace ought to be increased and developed by human effort. For it is only when the virtues have reached their perfection in us that we have arrived at the destination and goal which God intends for us.

We shall start our discussion of the virtues with love, the mother and adornment of all the other virtues.

LOVE

LOVE OF GOD

The love of God is perfect when the soul offers itself up to God ardently and completely, and seeks from God no transitory comfort, nor even any eternal reward in return. Rather, it loves God not for the sake of any recompense but solely on account of the goodness, sanctity, and perfection which is inherent in His divine nature. Indeed, the sensitive and holy soul is repelled by the very idea of loving God with any ulterior or mercenary motive, such as gaining some comfort or reward from Him.

For God loves us freely, and pours out His strength into our souls. He does not do this because He hopes to receive anything useful from us in return, but rather He desires only to share with us His own natural and infinite beatitude and blessedness. The person who loves God solely because of His goodness and blessedness, and from an earnest

desire to participate in the same goodness and blessedness of God, may be said to love God perfectly.

True knowledge of God leads the soul to this perfect love. For in the essence of God, all that is worthy of love is to be found—nobility, sanctity, power, wisdom, kindness, beauty, providence, and so forth. Similarly, the love that God has for us is eternal and boundless, not passing and contingent. A true perception of the nature of God's love for us leads the soul to love God with a similar type of love.

In the Gospel of John, God gives us a reliable indication of true love for Him, when He says, "The one who loves me keeps my commandments."¹ Saint Augustine echoes the same thought when he says, "We truly love God only to the extent that we keep His commandments." Keeping vows that we have made in the presence of God may also be seen as keeping His commandments, since we are bound to obey such vows just as much as we are bound to obey the divine mandates.

Saint Gregory the Great admonishes us, "Reflect carefully upon yourselves! And enquire diligently if you truly love God above all else." And no one should believe themselves to love God above all else if their actions do not bear this out. For perfect love of the Creator requires the testimony not only of our words, or even of our hearts, but also of our whole lives. The love of God is never inactive; rather, it

¹ John 14:21.

always manifests itself in works. If love does not show itself in action, then it is not really love at all.

Our obedience to the commandments and our performance of good works should be entirely pure in their intention. They should be done neither out of fear of punishment nor desire for any reward, as Saint Augustine testified. The one who loves God perfectly fulfills His commandments not out of dread of punishment or ambition to attain rewards. But rather, he obeys God because he knows that everything which God commands is perfect and good.

There are two reliable signs of true love towards God. The first is when a person rejoices in God in all things, regardless of what happens (whether it seems good or bad), in all times and all places. A purely natural love of God [that is, loving God when He sends obvious blessings and good fortune] does not merit any praise or credit from God. For such a love is motivated by self-interest and seeks only what is good for itself. Rather, it is only the free love of God—that is, loving God for His own goodness and not for the sake of oneself—which is truly perfect.

The second sign of true love for God is when a person is genuinely saddened by all things that displease God, whenever and wherever they occur, regardless of whether or not they affect him personally.

LOVE OF ONE'S NEIGHBOR

True love of one's neighbor is to love him just as one loves oneself, regardless of whether he is a friend or a foe. As Saint Augustine says, "To love one's neighbor as oneself means to love him in God and for the sake of God."

By loving him thus in God and for God, one does indeed truly love one's neighbor as oneself. For each person naturally desires good for himself and seeks to avoid what is bad. This same desire should extend equally to others. Each human being naturally seeks the well-being of his body and soul, and each human being naturally flees from whatever is detrimental to such well-being. And in the same manner should each Christian desire the good of others and seek to avert whatever is harmful to their well-being. This applies equally whether they are a friend or an enemy.

And while the commandment to love our neighbor requires us to love them in the same *way* that we love ourselves (that is, by desiring the good for them and wishing to minimize whatever is bad), it does not, of course, demand that we feel the same degree of ardor or expend the same level of effort in this love.

The natural affection for one's friends does not amount to true charity. For, as the Gospel declares, "even the pagans love those who love them." But to love one's enemies is *always* true charity, since it is never the result of natural

affections. To love those who love you is merely the work of nature, but to confer benefits on those who do *not* love you is a characteristic of perfect charity. Although, as has been noted, the commandment does not require us to love others with equal fervor or effort, nevertheless to love one's enemies and one's friends with equal intensity is a wonderful sign of perfect charity. This means exhibiting equal kindness to those who correct and reprimand as to those who praise and bless, and to show equal kindness to those who vituperate you as to those who applaud you.

For, as Saint John Chrysostom testifies, there is nothing which makes us so like God as treating those who are hostile to us and those who love us with equal kindness. Indeed, we certainly attain to greater grace and glory through sustaining persecution than we do by enjoying favor, provided we respond with charity and patience. Thus it was that the enemies of the martyrs contributed more to their glory than did their friends.

Nature itself ought to lead us to love our neighbor, for all creatures love those who are similar to themselves. Thus it is that all human beings owe each other a debt of love—for each of them similarly bears the image of God, as Scripture testifies.

Proof of true charity is to feel compassion for your enemies, and not only your friends, in times of adversity. It is also to feel truly happy for the sake of your enemy

whenever prosperity befalls him. This is indeed a very rare thing in this world!

In contrast, there are other feelings which are evidence of true hatred, which is the antithesis of love. This includes being struck with sadness and dejection whenever we see a certain person's face, or being filled with bitterness and gall whenever we hear him speak or even hear his name mentioned. To seek to impede whatever might bring him prosperity is similarly a sign of hatred, as is the disparagement and detraction of whatever good qualities he may possess.

Our Lord Jesus Christ exhibited none of these things in His treatment of Judas, even though He knew that he was to betray Him. On the contrary, He broke bread for him at the Last Supper, treating him in exactly the same manner as He treated all the other apostles. Even at the time of His betrayal, Christ did not deny a kiss to the traitor Judas but greeted Him with all kindness and civility. As Saint Jerome comments, Christ felt more sadness for the tragedy and shame that was about to strike Judas than He did for His own impending death.

For many people, it seems enough that they hope for their enemies' eternal salvation without wishing for their good or happiness in this present world. But eternal salvation is something which they are neither able to give them nor to take away from them! They seem to wish to forget that when Christ laid down His life for His enemies, He bound us not only to love our enemies but also to be ready

to make a sacrifice of our own resources and our own selves for the well-being of our brothers and sisters in times of need. This obligation applies above all to those charged with the pastoral care of souls.

Two things particularly help to nourish the virtue of love. Our love for God is nourished by carefully observing His commandments, as is stated in the verse: "If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love, just as I keep the commandments of My Father, and remain in His love."² Our love for our neighbor is nourished by cultivating feelings of compassion towards him and sincere sympathy for his sufferings, as is stated in Ecclesiasticus: "Do not withhold your compassion from those who weep, and walk with those who mourn. Do not disdain to visit the sick. Through these actions, you shall be confirmed in your love."³

PRAYER TO GOD FOR LOVE

O eternal Love and infinite goodness, in whom all the causes for all holy loves are contained! Through that immense and incomprehensible love by which You have bound Yourself to me, I beseech You to pour forth into my soul something of that same love. By means of this love, I pray that I may seek nothing of my own comfort or convenience but rather

² John 15:10.

³ Ecclesiasticus 7:38–39.

love all other things, even myself, in absolute purity and for Your sake alone.

O Lord, make me imitate Your superabundant and inestimable charity, which infinitely exceeds the brilliance of the sun! For just as the sun sends it rays freely without expecting to gain any benefit for itself in return, even so does Your love radiate forth to all the universe. Lord, make me obey Your most just and holy commandments with all reverence and solicitude; for to do so is a clear indication of Your grace and of love of You. May my soul rejoice and give thanks to You for all things which are pleasing to You, O Lord, and be saddened only by those things which offend You.

May I love my neighbor in You and for Your sake. Teach me to seek those things which I should desire, and to flee from those things which I should avoid. May I wish good things to those who wish bad things for me, for to do so is pleasing to You. May I overcome my enemies by no other means than kindness and goodwill!

May I accept adversity with patience, for it is often the source of greater spiritual benefits than prosperity. May I suffer with those who suffer, and rejoice with those who rejoice. For each of my neighbors has the same human nature as I do, and each bears Your image and likeness. For You confer immortal glory upon those who imitate Your divine love, and thus show themselves to be true sons and daughters of You, our heavenly Father. Amen.