

ON UNION WITH GOD

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ON UNION WITH GOD

St. Albert the Great, O.P.

With Notes by Rev. P.J. Berthier, O.P.

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“It is good for me to adhere to my God.”

*“Be you therefore perfect,
as also your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

PREFACE

Surely the most deeply-rooted need of the human soul, its purest aspiration, is for the closest possible union with God. As one turns over the pages of this little work, written by Blessed Albert the Great¹ towards the end of his life, when that great soul had ripened and matured, one feels that here indeed is the ideal of one's hopes.

Simply and clearly the great principles are laid down, the way is made plain which leads to the highest spiritual life. It seems as though, while one reads, the mists of earth vanish and the snowy summits appear of the mountains of God. We breathe only the pure atmosphere of prayer, peace, and love, and the one

1 Following the general tradition, we attribute this work to Albert the Great, but not all critics are agreed as to its authenticity.

great fact of the universe, the Divine Presence, is felt and realized without effort.

But is such a life possible amid the whirl of the twentieth century? To faith and love all things are possible, and our author shows us the loving Father, ever ready to give as much and more than we can ask. The spirit of such a work is ever true; the application may vary with circumstances, but the guidance of the Holy Spirit will never be wanting to those souls who crave for closer union with their Divine Master.

This little treatise has been very aptly called the "Metaphysics of the Imitation," and it is in the hope that it may be of use to souls that it has been translated into English.

Blessed Albert the Great is too well known for it to be necessary for us to give more than the briefest outline of his life.

The eldest son of the Count of Bollstädt, he was born at Lauingen in Swabia in 1205 or 1206, though some historians give it as 1193. As a youth he was sent to the University of Padua, where he had special facilities for the study of the liberal arts.

Drawn by the persuasive teaching of Blessed Jordan of Saxony, he joined the Order of St. Dominic in 1223,

and after completing his studies, received the Doctor's degree at the University of Paris.

His brilliant genius quickly brought him into the most prominent positions. Far-famed for his learning, he attracted scholars from all parts of Europe to Paris, Cologne, Ratisbon, etc., where he successively taught. It was during his years of teaching at Paris and Cologne that he counted among his disciples St. Thomas Aquinas, the greatness of whose future he foretold, and whose lifelong friendship with him then began.

In 1254 Albert was elected Provincial of his Order in Germany. In 1260 he was appointed Bishop of Ratisbon, but resigned his see in 1262. He then continued unweariedly until a few years before his death, when his great powers, especially his memory, failed him, but the fervour of his soul remained ever the same. In 1280, at Cologne, he sank, at last worn out by his manifold labours.

“Whether we consider him as a theologian or as a philosopher, Albert was undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary men of his age; I might say, one of the most wonderful men of genius who appeared in past times” (Jourdain).

Very grateful thanks are due to Rev. P. J. Berthier, O.P., for his kind permission to append to this edition a translation of his excellent notes (from the French edition, entitled “De l’Union avec Dieu”).

CHAPTER I

Of the Highest Perfection Which Man Can Attain Unto in This Life

I have felt moved to write a few last thoughts describing, as far as one may in this waiting-time of our exile and pilgrimage, the entire separation of the soul from all earthly things and its close, unfettered union with God.

I have been the more urged to this, because Christian perfection has no other end but charity, which unites us to God.²

This union of charity is essential for salvation, since it consists in the practice of the precepts and in conformity to the Divine will. Hence it separates us from whatever would war against the essence and habit of charity, such as mortal sin.³

2 Albert the Great is speaking here in a special manner of religious perfection, although what he says is also true of Christian perfection in general.

3 He speaks here of the obligation laid upon all Christians.

But religious, the more easily to attain to God, their last end, have gone beyond this, and have bound themselves by vow to evangelical perfection, to that which is voluntary and of counsel.⁴ With the help of these vows they cut off all that might impede the fervour of their love or hinder them in their flight to God. They have, therefore, by the vow of their religious profession, renounced all things, whether pertaining to soul or body.⁵ God is in truth a Spirit, and “they that adore Him must adore Him in spirit and in truth,”⁶ that is, with a knowledge and love, an intelligence and will purified from every phantom of earth.

Hence it is written: “When thou shalt pray, enter into thy chamber”—i.e., into the inmost abode of thy heart—and, “having shut the door” of thy senses, with a pure heart, a free conscience and an unfeigned

4 Religious bind themselves to observe as a duty that which was only of counsel. To them, therefore, the practice of the counsels becomes an obligation.

5 The vows of religion have as their immediate object the removal of obstacles to perfection, but they do not in themselves constitute perfection. Perfection consists in charity. Albert the Great speaks of only one vow, because in his day the formulas of religious profession mentioned only the vow of obedience, which includes the other two vows.

6 John iv. 24.

faith, “pray to thy Father” in spirit and in truth, in the “secret” of thy soul.⁷

Then only will a man attain to this ideal, when he has despoiled and stripped himself of all else; when, wholly recollected within himself, he has hidden from and forgotten the whole world, that he may abide in silence in the presence of Jesus Christ. There, in solitude of soul, with loving confidence he makes known his desires to God. With all the intensity of his love he pours forth his heart before Him, in sincerity and truth, until he loses himself in God. Then is his heart enlarged, inflamed, and melted in him, yea, even in its inmost depths.

7 Matt. vi. 6.