

Homily for November 15, 2016

Memorial of St. Albert the Great

Albert the Great was a 13th-century German Dominican who decisively influenced the Church's stance toward Aristotelian philosophy brought to Europe by the spread of Islam.

Students of philosophy know him as the master of Thomas Aquinas. Albert's attempt to understand Aristotle's writings established the climate in which Thomas Aquinas developed his synthesis of Greek wisdom and Christian theology. But Albert deserves recognition on his own merits as a curious, honest, and diligent scholar.

He was the eldest son of a powerful and wealthy German lord of military rank. He was educated in the liberal arts. Despite fierce family opposition, he entered the Dominican novitiate.

His boundless interests prompted him to write a compendium of all knowledge: natural science, logic, rhetoric, mathematics, astronomy, ethics, economics, politics, and metaphysics. His explanation of learning took 20 years to complete.

He achieved his goal while serving as an educator at Paris and Cologne, as Dominican provincial, and even as bishop of Regensburg for a short time. He defended the mendicant orders and preached the Crusade in Germany and Bohemia.

Albert, a Doctor of the Church, is the patron of scientists and philosophers.

In thinking about Albert the Great I was reminded of another theologian named Joseph Ratzinger. Back in 1968 as a young theology professor at the University of Tübingen he formulated a neat argument for God's existence that owed a good deal to Thomas Aquinas and by extension to Albert the Great. He also drew on more contemporary sources. Ratzinger commences with the observation that finite being, as we experience it, is marked, through and through, by intelligibility, that is to say, by a formal structure that makes it understandable to an inquiring mind. In point of fact, all of the sciences— physics, chemistry, psychology, astronomy, biology, and so forth— rest on the assumption that at all levels, microscopic and macrocosmic, being can be known.

Ratzinger – who became Benedict XVI - argues that the only finally satisfying explanation for this universal objective intelligibility is a great Intelligence who has thought the universe into being. Our language provides an intriguing clue in this regard, for we speak of our acts of knowledge as moments of "recognition," literally a re-cognition, a thinking again what has already been thought. Ratzinger cites Einstein in support of this connection: "in the laws of nature, a mind so superior is revealed that in comparison, our minds are as something worthless." The prologue to the Gospel of John states, "In the beginning was the Word," and

specifies that all things came to be through this divine Logos, implying thereby that the being of the universe is not dumbly there, but rather intelligently there, imbued by a creative mind with intelligible structure. The argument presented by Joseph Ratzinger is but a specification of that great revelation.¹

One of the particular strengths of this argument is that it shows the deep compatibility between religion and science, two disciplines that so often today are seen as implacable enemies. Back in the 13th Century Albert the Great had also made this connection. We are thankful that a Catholic world view celebrates how science and theology are truly compatible and work complimentary so as to enhance our understanding of the intelligible and intelligent universe that points the intelligible God ,”the Father, Creator of heaven and earth”.

¹ Father Barron, Robert. Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith (p. 68). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.