



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square*  
*Wednesday, 24 March 2010*

[\[Video\]](#)

### ***Saint Albert the Great***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

One of the great masters of medieval theology is St Albert the Great. The title "Great", (*Magnus*), with which he has passed into history indicates the vastness and depth of his teaching, which he combined with holiness of life. However, his contemporaries did not hesitate to attribute to him titles of excellence even then. One of his disciples, Ulric of Strasbourg, called him the "wonder and miracle of our epoch".

He was born in Germany at the beginning of the 13th century. When he was still young he went to Italy, to Padua, the seat of one of the most famous medieval universities. He devoted himself to the study of the so-called "liberal arts": grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music, that is, to culture in general, demonstrating that characteristic interest in the natural sciences which was soon to become the favourite field for his specialization. During his stay in Padua he attended the Church of the Dominicans, whom he then joined with the profession of the religious vows. Hagiographic sources suggest that Albert came to this decision gradually. His intense relationship with God, the Dominican Friars' example of holiness, hearing the sermons of Blessed Jordan of Saxony, St Dominic's successor at the Master General of the Order of Preachers, were the decisive factors that helped him to overcome every doubt and even to surmount his family's resistance. God often speaks to us in the years of our youth and points out

to us the project of our life. As it was for Albert, so also for all of us, personal prayer, nourished by the Lord's word, frequent reception of the Sacraments and the spiritual guidance of enlightened people are the means to discover and follow God's voice. He received the religious habit from Bl. Jordan of Saxony.

After his ordination to the priesthood, his superiors sent him to teach at various theological study centres annexed to the convents of the Dominican Fathers. His brilliant intellectual qualities enabled him to perfect his theological studies at the most famous university in that period, the University of Paris. From that time on St Albert began his extraordinary activity as a writer that he was to pursue throughout his life.

Prestigious tasks were assigned to him. In 1248 he was charged with opening a theological studium at Cologne, one of the most important regional capitals of Germany, where he lived at different times and which became his adopted city. He brought with him from Paris an exceptional student, Thomas Aquinas. The sole merit of having been St Thomas' teacher would suffice to elicit profound admiration for St Albert. A relationship of mutual esteem and friendship developed between these two great theologians, human attitudes that were very helpful in the development of this branch of knowledge. In 1254, Albert was elected Provincial of the Dominican Fathers' "Provincia Teutoniae" Teutonic Province which included communities scattered over a vast territory in Central and Northern Europe. He distinguished himself for the zeal with which he exercised this ministry, visiting the communities and constantly recalling his confreres to fidelity, to the teaching and example of St Dominic.

His gifts did not escape the attention of the Pope of that time, Alexander iv, who wanted Albert with him for a certain time at Anagni where the Popes went frequently in Rome itself and at Viterbo, in order to avail himself of Albert's theological advice. The same Supreme Pontiff appointed Albert Bishop of Regensburg, a large and celebrated diocese, but which was going through a difficult period. From 1260 to 1262, Albert exercised this ministry with unflinching dedication, succeeding in restoring peace and harmony to the city, in reorganizing parishes and convents and in giving a new impetus to charitable activities.

In the year 1263-1264, Albert preached in Germany and in Bohemia, at the request of Pope Urban iv. He later returned to Cologne and took up his role as lecturer, scholar and writer. As a man of prayer, science and charity, his authoritative intervention in various events of the Church and of the society of the time were acclaimed: above all, he was a man of reconciliation and peace in Cologne, where the Archbishop had run seriously foul of the city's institutions; he did his utmost during the Second Council of Lyons, in 1274, summoned by Pope Gregory X, to encourage union between the Latin and Greek Churches after the separation of the great schism with the East in 1054. He also explained the thought of Thomas Aquinas which had been the subject of objections and even quite unjustified condemnations.

He died in his cell at the convent of the Holy Cross, Cologne, in 1280, and was very soon venerated by his confreres. The Church proposed him for the worship of the faithful with his beatification in 1622 and with his canonization in 1931, when Pope [Pius XI](#) proclaimed him Doctor of the Church. This was certainly an appropriate recognition of this great man of God and outstanding scholar, not only of the truths of the faith but of a great many other branches of knowledge; indeed, with a glance at the titles of his very numerous works, we realize that there was something miraculous about his culture and that his encyclopedic interests led him not only to concern himself with philosophy and theology, like other contemporaries of his, but also with every other discipline then known, from physics to chemistry, from astronomy to mineralogy, from botany to zoology. For this reason Pope [Pius XII](#) named him Patron of enthusiasts of the natural sciences and also called him "Doctor universalis" precisely because of the vastness of his interests and knowledge.

Of course, the scientific methods that St Albert the Great used were not those that came to be established in the following centuries. His method consisted simply in the observation, description and classification of the phenomena he had studied, but it was in this way that he opened the door for future research.

He still has a lot to teach us. Above all, St Albert shows that there is no opposition between faith and science, despite certain episodes of misunderstanding that have been recorded in history. A man of faith and prayer, as was St Albert the Great, can serenely foster the study of the natural sciences and progress in knowledge of the micro- and macrocosm, discovering the laws proper to the subject, since all this contributes to fostering thirst for and love of God. The Bible speaks to us of creation as of the first language through which God who is supreme intelligence, who is the Logos reveals to us something of himself. The Book of Wisdom, for example, says that the phenomena of nature, endowed with greatness and beauty, is like the works of an artist through which, by analogy, we may know the Author of creation (cf. Wis 13: 5). With a classical similitude in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance one can compare the natural world to a book written by God that we read according to the different approaches of the sciences (cf. [\*Address to the participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 31 October 2008\*](#); *L'Osservatore Romano English edition*, 5 November 2008, p. 6). How many scientists, in fact, in the wake of St Albert the Great, have carried on their research inspired by wonder at and gratitude for a world which, to their eyes as scholars and believers, appeared and appears as the good work of a wise and loving Creator! Scientific study is then transformed into a hymn of praise. Enrico Medi, a great astrophysicist of our time, whose cause of beatification has been introduced, wrote: "O you mysterious galaxies... I see you, I calculate you, I understand you, I study you and I discover you, I penetrate you and I gather you. From you I take light and make it knowledge, I take movement and make it wisdom, I take sparkling colours and make them poetry; I take you stars in my hands and, trembling in the oneness of my being, I raise you above yourselves and offer you in prayer to the Creator, that through me alone you stars can worship" (*Le Opere. Inno alla creazione*).

St Albert the Great reminds us that there is friendship between science and faith and that through their vocation to the study of nature, scientists can take an authentic and fascinating path of holiness.

His extraordinary openmindedness is also revealed in a cultural feat which he carried out successfully, that is, the acceptance and appreciation of Aristotle's thought. In St Albert's time, in fact, knowledge was spreading of numerous works by this great Greek philosopher, who lived a quarter of a century before Christ, especially in the sphere of ethics and metaphysics. They showed the power of reason, explained lucidly and clearly the meaning and structure of reality, its intelligibility and the value and purpose of human actions. St Albert the Great opened the door to the complete acceptance in medieval philosophy and theology of Aristotle's philosophy, which was subsequently given a definitive form by St Thomas. This reception of a pagan pre-Christian philosophy, let us say, was an authentic cultural revolution in that epoch. Yet many Christian thinkers feared Aristotle's philosophy, a non-Christian philosophy, especially because, presented by his Arab commentators, it had been interpreted in such a way, at least in certain points, as to appear completely irreconcilable with the Christian faith. Hence a dilemma arose: are faith and reason in conflict with each other or not?

This is one of the great merits of St Albert: with scientific rigour he studied Aristotle's works, convinced that all that is truly rational is compatible with the faith revealed in the Sacred Scriptures. In other words, St Albert the Great thus contributed to the formation of an autonomous philosophy, distinct from theology and united with it only by the unity of the truth. So it was that in the 13th century a clear distinction came into being between these two branches of knowledge, philosophy and theology, which, in conversing with each other, cooperate harmoniously in the discovery of the authentic vocation of man, thirsting for truth and happiness: and it is above all theology, that St Albert defined as "emotional knowledge", which points out to human beings their vocation to eternal joy, a joy that flows from full adherence to the truth.

St Albert the Great was capable of communicating these concepts in a simple and understandable way. An authentic son of St Dominic, he willingly preached to the People of God, who were won over by his words and by the example of his life.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us pray the Lord that learned theologians will never be lacking in holy Church, wise and devout like St Albert the Great, and that he may help each one of us to make our own the "formula of holiness" that he followed in his life: "to desire all that I desire for the glory of God, as God desires for his glory all that he desires", in other words always to be conformed to God's will, in order to desire and to do everything only and always for his glory.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I welcome all the English-speaking visitors, especially a group of priests, Religious and seminarians visiting from the Philippines. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and your families, I invoke God's abundant Blessings. Lastly, I greet the young people, the sick, and the newlyweds. May the Solemnity of the Annunciation, which we shall be celebrating tomorrow be an invitation to all to follow the example of Mary Most Holy: for you, dear young people, may it be expressed in prompt availability to the Father's call, so that you may be Gospel leaven in society; for you, dear sick people, may it be an incentive to renew the serene and confident acceptance of the divine will and to transform your suffering into a means of redemption for the whole of humanity. May Mary's "yes" awaken in you, dear newlyweds, an ever more generous commitment to building a family based on reciprocal love and on the perennial Christian values.

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In our catechesis on the Christian culture of the Middle Ages, we now turn to Saint Albert, better known as *Albertus Magnus*, Albert the Great. A universal genius whose interests ranged from the natural sciences to philosophy and theology, Albert entered the Dominicans and, after studies in Paris, taught in Cologne. Elected provincial of the Teutonic province, he served as bishop of Regensburg for four years and then returned to teaching and writing. He played an important part in the Council of Lyons, and he worked to clarify and defend the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas, his most brilliant student. Albert was canonized and declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius XI, and Pope Pius XII named him the patron of the natural sciences. Saint Albert shows us that faith is not opposed to reason, and that the created world can be seen as a "book" written by God and capable of being "read" in its own way by the various sciences. His study of Aristotle also brought out the difference between the sciences of philosophy and theology, while insisting that both cooperate in enabling us to discover our vocation to truth and happiness, a vocation which finds its fulfilment in eternal life.

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