

ON UNION WITH GOD

BY

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WITH NOTES BY

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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 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.

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

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 1

**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.¹

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.²

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.³ With the help of these vows they cut off all that might impede the fervour of their love or hinder them

¹ 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.

² He speaks here of the obligation laid upon all Christians.

³ 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.

in their flight to God. They have, therefore, by the vow of their religious profession, renounced all things, whether pertaining to soul or body.⁴ God is in truth a Spirit, and “they that adore Him must adore Him in spirit and in truth,”⁵ 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 faith, “pray to thy Father” in spirit and in truth, in the “secret” of thy soul.⁶

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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ John 4:24

⁶ Matt. 6:6

Chapter 2

**HOW A MAN MAY DESPISE ALL THINGS
AND CLEAVE TO CHRIST ALONE**

Whosoever thou art who longest to enter upon this happy state or seekest to direct thither thy steps, thus it behoveth thee to act.

First, close, as it were, thine eyes, and bar the doors of thy senses. Suffer not anything to entangle thy soul, nor permit any care or trouble to penetrate within it.

Shake off all earthly things, counting them useless, noxious, and hurtful to thee.¹

When thou hast done this, enter wholly within thyself, and fix thy gaze upon thy wounded Jesus, and upon Him alone. Strive with all thy powers, unwearingly, to reach God through Himself, that is, through God made Man, that thou mayest attain to the knowledge of His Divinity through the wounds of His Sacred Humanity.

In all simplicity and confidence abandon thyself and whatever concerns thee without reserve to God's unfailing Providence, according to the teaching of St. Peter: "Casting

¹ When Albert the Great and the other mystics warn us against solicitude with regard to creatures, they refer to that solicitude which is felt for creatures in themselves; they do not mean that we ought not to occupy ourselves with them in any way for God's sake. The great doctor explains his meaning in clear terms later on in this work.

all your care upon Him,”² Who can do all things. And again it is written: “Be nothing solicitous”;³ “Cast thy care upon the Lord and He shall sustain thee”;⁴ “It is good for me to adhere to my God”;⁵ “I set the Lord always in my sight”;⁶ “I found Him Whom my soul loveth”;⁷ and “Now all good things came to me”⁸ together with Him. This is the hidden and heavenly treasure, the precious pearl, which is to be preferred before all. This it is that we must seek with humble confidence and untiring effort, yet in silence and peace.

It must be sought with a brave heart, even though its price be the loss of bodily comfort, of esteem, and of honour.

Lacking this, what doth it profit a religious if he “gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?”⁹ Of what value are the religious state, the holiness of our profession, the shaven head, the outward signs of a life of abnegation, if we lack the spirit of humility and truth, in which Christ dwells by faith and love? St. Luke says: “The kingdom of God,” that is, Christ, “is within you.”¹⁰

² 1 Pet. 5:7

³ Phil. 4:6

⁴ Ps. 54:23

⁵ Ps. 72:28

⁶ Ps. 15:8

⁷ Cant. 3:4

⁸ Wis. 7:11

⁹ Matt. 16:26

¹⁰ Luke 17:21

Chapter 3

THE LAW OF MAN'S PERFECTION IN THIS LIFE

In proportion as the mind is absorbed in the thought and care of the things of this world do we lose the fervour of our devotion, and drift away from the things of Heaven.

The greater, on the other hand, our diligence in withdrawing our powers from the memory, love and thought of that which is inferior in order to fix them upon that which is above, the more perfect will be our prayer, the purer our contemplation. The soul cannot give itself perfectly at the same time to two objects as contrary one to another as light to darkness;¹ for he who lives united to God dwells in the light, he who clings to this world lives in darkness.

The highest perfection, therefore, of man in this life lies in this: that he is so united to God that his soul with all its powers and faculties becomes recollected in Him and is one spirit with Him.² Then it remembers naught save God, nor does it relish or understand anything but Him. Then all its affections, united in the delights of love, repose sweetly in the enjoyment of their Creator.

¹ Albert the Great supposes here that we give ourselves equally to God and to creatures, which would be wrong, and not that creatures are subordinated to God, which would be a virtue.

² This must be understood to mean that God is the principal and supreme end of all created activities.

The image of God which is imprinted upon the soul is found in the three powers of the reason, memory, and will. But since these do not perfectly bear the Divine likeness, they have not the same resemblance to God as in the first days of man's creation.³

God is the "form" of the soul upon which He must impress His own image, as the seal on the wax or the stamp on the object it marks.⁴

This can only be fully accomplished when the reason is wholly illuminated according to its capacity, by the knowledge of God, the Sovereign Truth; the will entirely devoted to the love of the Supreme Good; the memory absorbed in the contemplation and enjoyment of eternal felicity, and in the sweet repose of so great a happiness.

As the perfect possession of this state constitutes the glory of the Blessed in Heaven, it is clear that in its commencement consists the perfection of this life.

³ The perfect image of God in man does not consist merely in the possession of those faculties by which we resemble Him, but rather in performing by faith and love, as far as is in our power, acts like those which He performs, in knowing Him as He knows Himself, in loving Him as He loves Himself.

⁴ In scholastic theology the term "form" is used of that which gives to anything its accidental or substantial being. God is the "accidental form" of the soul, because in giving it its activity He bestows upon it something of His own activity, by means of sanctifying grace. Yet more truly may it be said that God is also the "form" of the soul in the sense that it is destined by the ordinary workings of Providence to participate by sanctifying grace in the Being of God, enjoying thus a participation real, though created, in the Divine nature.

Chapter 4

**THAT OUR LABOUR MUST BE WITH THE
UNDERSTANDING AND NOT WITH THE SENSES**

Blessed is he who by continually cleansing his soul from the images and phantoms of earth draws its powers inward, and thence lifts them up to God.

At length he in a manner forgets all images, and by a simple and direct act of pure intellect and will contemplates God, Who is absolutely simple.

Cast from thee, therefore, all phantoms, images, and forms, and whatsoever is not God,¹ that all thy intercourse with Him may proceed from an understanding, affection, and will, alike purified. This is, in truth, the end of all thy labours, that thou mayest draw nigh unto God and repose in Him within thy soul, solely by thy understanding and by a fervent love, free from entanglement or earthly image.

Not by his bodily organs or outward senses does a man attain to this, but by the intelligence and will, which constitute him man.² So long as he lingers, trifling with the objects of the imagination and senses, he has not yet passed beyond the

¹ We must avoid these things in so far as they separate us from God, but they may also serve to draw us nearer to Him if we regard them in God and for God.

² It is by the intelligence and will that man actually attains to this, but the use of the sensitive faculties is presupposed.

limits and instincts of his animal nature, which he possesses in common with the brute beasts. They know and feel through images and by their senses, nor can it be otherwise, for they have no higher powers. Not so is it with man, who, by his intelligence, affections, and will, is created in the image and likeness of God. Hence it is by these powers that he ought, without intermediary, purely and directly to commune with God, be united to Him, and cleave to Him.³

The Devil does his very utmost to hinder us from this exercise, for he beholds in it a beginning and a foretaste of eternal life, and he is envious of man. Therefore he strives, now by one temptation or passion, now by another, to turn away our thoughts from God.

At one time he assails us by arousing in us unnecessary anxiety, foolish cares or troubles, or by drawing us to irregular conversations and vain curiosity. At another he ensnares us by subtle books, by the words of others, by rumours and novelties. Then, again, he has recourse to trials, contradictions, etc.

Although these things may sometimes seem but very trifling faults, if faults at all, yet do they greatly hinder our progress in this holy exercise. Therefore, whether great or small, they must be resisted and driven from us as evil and harmful, though they may seem useful and even necessary. It is of great importance that what we have heard, or seen, or done, or said, should not leave their traces or fill our imagination.

³ The sensitive faculties, if used as a means, often help us to draw near to God, but when used as an end, their activity becomes an obstacle.

Neither before nor after, nor at the time, should we foster these memories or allow their images to be formed. For when the mind is free from these thoughts, we are not hindered in our prayer, in meditation, or the psalmody, or in any other of our spiritual exercises, nor do these distractions return to trouble us.

Then shouldst thou readily and trustfully commit thyself and all that concerns thee to the unfailing and most sure Providence of God, in silence and peace. He Himself will fight for thee, and will grant thee a liberty and consolation better, nobler, and sweeter than would be possible if thou gavest thyself up day and night to thy fancies, to vain and wandering thoughts, which hold captive the mind, as they toss it hither and thither, wearying soul and body, and wasting uselessly alike thy time and strength.⁴

Accept all things, whatsoever their cause, silently and with a tranquil mind, as coming to thee from the fatherly hand of Divine Providence.

Free thyself, therefore, from all the impressions of earthly things, in so far as thy state and profession require, so that with a purified mind and sincere affection thou mayest cleave to Him to Whom thou hast so often and so entirely vowed thyself.

Let nothing remain which could come between thy soul and God, that so thou mayest be able to pass surely and

⁴ This teaching is the Christian rendering of the axiom formulated by the Philosopher: “Homo sedendo fit sapiens”—“It is in quiet that man gains wisdom.”

directly from the wounds of the Sacred Humanity to the brightness of the Divinity.

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