

**St. Albert the Great (c.1193-1280)**  
*Doctor Universalis*, the “teacher of everything”  
Patron Saint of natural scientists

### **The Early Dominicans**

1. St. Dominic (1170–1221)
2. Bl. Giordano (Jordan) of Saxony (c.1190-1237)
3. St. Albert (c.1193-1280)
4. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

### **His Life**

Albert was **born in southern Bavaria (Germany) around the year 1193**. As a young man, he entered the University of Padua in Italy, which was one of the most famous universities of the Middle Ages, where he studied the traditional 7 liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. During his stay in Padua, he **frequented the nearby Dominican church, where he heard the sermons of Blessed Giordano of Saxony**. Giordano was the successor of St. Dominic in the leadership of the Order of Preachers, which makes Albert a third generation Dominican. Albert entered the Dominican order in Padua in 1223.

After his priestly ordination, Albert **taught in a number of Dominican schools in Germany (1228-1245), then at Paris (1245-1248) and in Cologne (1248-1255)**, where he opened a new center for theological study that today exists as Germany’s oldest university. The Dominicans employed Albert to expand the Order’s mission beyond their monasteries to include faculty within universities and adjacent houses and institutes of intellectual study.

At the University of Paris, Albert held the University Chair of Theology, and this is where **Thomas Aquinas became one of his students in 1245**. When Albert was sent by the Dominicans to Cologne to found a new house of study, Aquinas followed. The Dominican Order established similar houses of study at Oxford, Bologna and Montpellier.

In 1254, Albert was **elected Dominican Provincial of a Central and Northern European Province**. In 1259, Albert and Thomas Aquinas were part of a small group of Dominicans who **established a curriculum of study for the whole Dominican Order**. This curriculum introduced the importance of philosophy instruction and study not only for the formation of Dominicans, but also in ordinary priories **“lest the brethren become lazy.”**

Several **Popes also regularly called upon Albert for theological counsel**, and Albert participated in the Second Council of Lyon in 1274, which was convoked to foster a reunion of the Latin and Greek Churches after the Great Schism of 1054.

At the age of 67, Albert was **appointed Bishop of Regensburg**. **After 3 years, Albert was allowed to resign**, and he returned to teaching, study, and writing.

### **Death, Veneration and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Canonization and Elevation to Doctor of the Church**

Albert died in Cologne in 1280, and was venerated by his fellow Dominicans. The Church beatified Albert in 1622, but **Albert was not canonized until 1931, when Pope Pius XI proclaimed him Doctor of the Church**. Ten years later, in 1941, Pope Pius XII named him patron of scientists, calling him the "Doctor universalis" because he was said to be the “teach of everything there is to know.”

The elevation of Albert to Doctor of the Church 650 years after his death points us to two things: the needs of the modern Church for a new saintly example and the corpus of Albert’s writings and activities.

### **Writings**

Albert’s writings fill **38 volumes**. The last critical edition was completed in 1899. Almost none of his works have been translated into English.

Albert was referred to by his contemporaries as Albert Magnus (Albert the Great) because of the breadth of his knowledge and written works. This moniker seems to have annoyed the English Franciscan polymath Roger Bacon!

In addition to various Biblical and theological commentaries, Albert **wrote numerous commentaries on the works of Aristotle, which recently had been translated and reintroduced into Western Europe.** Aristotle's canon included a wide variety of ancient learning that ranged from poetics to logic, politics and physics.

Albert was one the **first to integrate the works of Aristotle into the Dominican theological curriculum.** He first did this with commentaries on Aristotle's *Ethics* and then Aristotle's *Physics*. **The goal, he explained, was not to stop with these works, but to explain all of human learning** in the natural sciences, logic, rhetoric, mathematics, astronomy, ethics, economics, politics and metaphysics.

Albert's study of Aristotle also brought him into contact with Muslim interpretations of Aristotle and significant Jewish thinkers like Maimonides. The result of **Albert's engagement with Aristotle and these other traditions was a distinctly Christian way of synthesizing of the truths of philosophy (reason) and human experience and the truths of Revelation and faith.**

In short, Albert's engagement with the works of Aristotle established several important ideas, which St. Thomas Aquinas and others developed more fully:

- 1) the **natural sciences were a distinct and autonomous way of knowing through our faculties of reason**; following Aristotle, Albert argued that "in matters that can be naturally known a philosopher should not hold an opinion which he is not prepared to defend by reason"
- 2) the **limits of human reason and its tendencies for error**, which can be exposed through logic and experimental investigation. Unlike Aquinas, Albert wrote a book on the errors of Aristotle.
- 3) According to Albert, "the **divine truth lies beyond our reason** we are not able by ourselves to discover it, unless it condescends to infuse itself; for as Augustine says, it is an inner teacher, without whom an external teacher labors aimlessly."
- 4) One Truth: **things known by reason cannot contradict truth of Revelation.**
- 5) Although Albert promotes human investigation of the truths of the natural world, ultimately **all truths are illuminated in our intellects through an infusion Divine light.** From a Christian perspective, all natural, created things reflect and are charged with the truth of their Divine source. This means that **every intellectual pursuit of the truths of the world is worthy because it is an effort to prepare our minds to receive some form of Divine truth.**

### **Albert and the Experimental sciences**

*Treatise on Minerals (De mineralibus)*: "The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements [narrata] of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature" (De Miner., lib. II, tr. ii, i)

*Treatise on Plants (De vegetabilibus)*: "Experiment is the only safe guide in such investigations." (De Veg., VI, tr. ii, i).

*Treatise on Animals (De animalibus)*: Albert organized a kind of dictionary of animals based on their various species, listed in alphabetical order as he had done in the other special sciences.

*Commentary on Aristotle's On the Heavens and Earth (De Coelo et Mundo)*: "In studying nature we have not to inquire how God the Creator may, as He freely wills, use His creatures to work miracles and thereby show forth His power: **we have rather to inquire what Nature with its immanent causes can naturally bring to pass.**"

In addition, Albertus studied many other natural phenomena, including the nature of light, which he proposed traveled at a finite speed. He was fascinated by optics as well as the formation of rainbows, comets, the moon's surface, and other astronomical events.

### **Sources:**

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