

St. Albert the Great

St. Mark's College

17 November 2017

Dear Father Rob, brothers and sisters in Christ:

Introduction

It really is a great pleasure to be able to offer this Holy Mass with you, especially with those associated with the Society of Catholic Scientists, which exists to “witness to the harmony between the vocation of scientist and the life of faith.” The Gold Mass follows in the tradition of special Masses for members of a particular profession. Our Catholic Physicians’ Guild sponsors a White Mass for healthcare professionals in the fall, around the time of the feast of their patron, St. Luke, on October 18. And, in recent years, we have revived the Red Mass for those in the judiciary and law profession, which is sponsored by the St. Thomas More Guild.

The patron saint of scientists is St. Albert the Great, about whom I shall say more in moment. His feast was on Wednesday, November 15, but we are celebrating a votive Mass today to commemorate him. We refer to today’s Eucharist as the “Gold Mass” because the colour of the hoods worn by those graduating with a doctorate in science is gold.

I am very grateful to the organizers of today’s event, and pray that the Society of Catholic Scientists will grow in the coming years. It offers its members opportunities to share, to learn together and to offer the support of friendship to one another. It also helps to reinforce the

conviction that the profession of Catholic scientists builds up of the Body of Christ (cf. Eph 4:12) through its research and discoveries at the service of the common good.

I have three brief reflections to share with you. First, something about St. Albert, whom we are honouring today. Second, an expression of the Church's appreciation for the contributions made by scientists. And third, a word about this afternoon's Gospel's admonition to build the house of our life upon rock.

1. St. Albert the Great

We rightly call Albert "Great," Albertus Magnus, to indicate the vastness and depth of his teaching, which he combined with holiness of life.

Born in Germany at the beginning of the 13th century, he studied at Padua, showing a great interest in the natural sciences. During his stay there he attended the Church of the Dominicans, a newly-founded monastic community, which he then joined. After his ordination to the priesthood, he taught at various theological study centres attached to Dominican convents. His intellectual brilliance enabled him to perfect his theological studies at the most famous university in that period, the University of Paris.

In 1248 he was charged with opening a theological studium at Cologne, which became his adopted city. Most significantly, he brought

with him from Paris an exceptional student, Thomas Aquinas. At this time, Albert was opening the door in medieval philosophy and theology to Aristotle. With scientific rigour he studied the philosopher's works, convinced that all that is truly rational is compatible with the faith revealed in Sacred Scripture.

Just a glance at the titles of his numerous works tells us that he was a man of extraordinary cultural depth. His encyclopedic interests led him to concern himself not only with philosophy and theology, but also with every other discipline then known, from physics to chemistry, from astronomy to minerology, 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.

He still has a lot to teach us. Above all, St. Albert shows that faith and science are not opposed to each other, a truth we cannot repeat often enough. Like him, men and women of faith can serenely study the natural sciences. In the wake of St. Albert the Great, innumerable Christian scientists have carried on their research inspired by wonder at and gratitude for a world which reveals the good work of a wise and loving Creator.

Benedict XVI sums up the best reason why St. Albert the Great is your patron. The Saint "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.”¹

2. Science and Faith

My second point has already been made in describing the life of St. Albert, but it deserves to be made again. Contrary to myths spread in the media, and even recently by the highest level of government, Catholics do not in any way think that the rigorous pursuit of the natural sciences compromises their faith. Scientists who are believers are convinced that there is one Truth which governs the world and guides the lives of all men and women. Scientific truth is itself a participation in divine Truth.²

Our Christian faith, then, does not posit an inevitable conflict between supernatural faith and scientific progress. The very starting-point of Biblical revelation is the affirmation that God created human beings, endowed them with reason, and set them over all the creatures of the earth. In this way, the human person has become the steward of creation and God’s “helper.” There is no conflict between God’s providence and scientific achievements.³

¹ Benedict XVI, General Audience (24 March 2010).

² Cf. St. John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (10 November 2003).

³ Cf. Benedict XVI, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (6 November

Faith, for its part, is able to integrate and assimilate scientific research, for all such research, aimed at a deeper understanding of created reality in all its specificity, gives us the possibility of discovering the Creator, source and goal of all things.⁴

“Galileo declared explicitly that the two truths, of faith and of science, can never contradict each other, ‘Sacred Scripture and the natural world proceeding equally from the divine Word, the first as dictated by the Holy Spirit, the second as a very faithful executor of the commands of God,’ as he wrote in his letter to Father Benedetto Castelli on 21 December 1613. The Second Vatican Council says the same thing, even adopting similar language in its teaching: ‘Methodical research, in all realms of knowledge, if it respects . . . moral norms, will never be genuinely opposed to faith: the reality of the world and of faith have their origin in the same God’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 36).”⁵

The Church, therefore, has the greatest esteem for scientific research, since it “‘is a significant expression of man’s dominion over creation’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2293) and a service to

2006).

⁴ Cf. St. John Paul II, Homily, Jubilee for Scientists (25 May 2000), 3.

⁵ St. John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (10 November 1979).

truth, goodness and beauty. From Copernicus to Mendel, from Albert the Great to Pascal, from Galileo to Marconi, the history of the Church and the history of the sciences clearly show us that there is a scientific culture rooted in Christianity.”⁶

3. The Gospel

From today’s well-known Gospel I now wish to take only one thought, applicable to scientists and non-scientists alike.

In Jesus’ telling the parable about the contrast in results when building on rock or on sand, he is not concerned about good engineering and house construction but about the spiritual foundations on which we are to build our lives.

The wise person builds on a rock-solid foundation, free from whatever forces might come our way to dislodge us. The proverbial flood, the sudden rising of waters will not disturb the well-constructed “house” of a person who has built on rock; that is, on God, whom the Bible refers to frequently as a “Rock.” He is the invisible but real foundation, which keeps the house from falling in the torrential storm.

To build *on* Christ and *with* Christ means to build with Someone who knows us better than we know ourselves. It means to build with Someone who is always faithful.

⁶ St. John Paul II, Homily, Jubilee for Scientists (25 May 2000), 4.

Building on the rock also means building on Someone who was rejected. St. Peter writes of Christ as a “living stone rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious” (1 Pet 2:4). There are many ways of rejecting Christ. Often, Jesus is ignored; he is mocked; and he is declared a man of the past who is not for today and certainly not for tomorrow.⁷

Building on the rock also means being aware that we will face misfortunes even when we are tethered to Jesus. It ought not to surprise or scandalize us that “The rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon the house” (Mt 7:25). Do not be surprised, therefore, by misfortunes in your professional or personal life. As long as the Lord Jesus is by your side, you will withstand all assaults.

Conclusion

Allow me to conclude now with words from the homily delivered by St. John Paul II for the Jubilee for Scientists in the Year 2000:

I turn with trust to you, men and women in the trenches of research and progress! In constantly exploring the world’s mysteries, let your minds be open to the horizons that faith discloses to you. Firmly anchored to the fundamental principles and values of your journey as people of knowledge

⁷ Cf. Benedict XVI, Meeting with Young People (27 May 2006).

and faith, you can also engage in a useful and constructive dialogue with those who are far from Christ and his Church. Therefore, first be passionate seekers of the invisible God, who alone can satisfy the deep yearning of your lives and fill you with his grace.⁸

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⁸ St. John Paul II, Homily, Jubilee for Scientists (25 May 2000), 5.