

Dominican Spiritual Mastership

By BRO. ALBERT DREXELIUS, O. P.



THE entire history of the Church's mission to teach truth and lead men to salvation shows that her Divine Founder has ever raised up forces to combat every opposition or bolster up waning fervor. The parting testament, "Behold, I am with you . . ." needs no other manifestation than in the dauntless leaders and all embracing institutions of Christ's Church, such as the great religious orders and their sainted patriarchs. Just as in the providential Love of God for men they arose to offset the evils of critical times, so in subsequent times they became instruments in the Hand of God, for the simplification and direction of man's union with his Creator. It is our purpose only to single out some of the outstanding achievements in spiritual direction of the Order of Preachers, from which it will be evident how completely the spirit and zeal of St. Dominic has been perpetuated in the person of his sons, the friar preachers.

Only the master mind, conscious by God's grace of an end subordinating all else, dares to break with century-tried traditions, to draw all after it in a new ideal. Such was St. Dominic in his foundation of the Order of Preachers. The patriarch of a new form of religious life achieved a synthesis of elements seemingly inconsonant with religious perfection until his time. He saw a new formula, contemplation and action, or better action through contemplation, that would not supplant the higher monastic form of absolute contemplation, but would combine with the first element of Divine charity, the second, and this through apostolic activity. It was this very combination, the Dominican ideal, that produced a mastership of spirituality in the truest sense of the term. Mastership consists in two elements, self-proficiency and the power to lead. St. Dominic conceived of holy contemplation in his followers as a means to the active guidance of souls fettered with worldly cares and activity, yet seeking a life closer to God.

The Dominican ideal could no better be expressed than in the device by which St. Thomas summed up the spirit end of the Order's varied activities, "to contemplate and to transmit to others the fruits of this contemplation." This device portrays the one permanent and ruling element of Dominican spirituality, to unite all in the love of God, as well as the calibre of Domin-

icans themselves, who from the days of Dominic down through seven centuries were masters in the way of perfection. The spirit that prompted St. Dominic to quit the holy peace of the Cathedral Chapter of Osma was the same spirit that animated his followers for those seven centuries of their activity, be it preaching, teaching or laboring among souls darkened by ignorance or error. The Dominican sees his labors in the varied field of Christendom through the only paraphrase of this favored device, union with God—the contemplation of Eternal Truth and the direction of others to that union—the diffusion of truth.

To understand the vocation and the fruitful work of any of the Church's great Orders is, to know first of all, the personality of its holy founder, and then, the correspondence of his followers with his ideals. St. Dominic was by divine vocation a master of spirituality. His whole character was the embodiment of that spiritual ideal expressed in the device of his order, "to contemplate and to transmit to others the fruits of this contemplation." He has always been recognized as a man of God, the contemplative so united to his Master, that Bl. Jordan, his earliest biographer tells us, "he spoke only of God or with God." The recollected and studious life of youth in Calareuga or Palencia, and the hidden, mortified life in the Chapter of Osma were periods, during which was being constructed within his soul a superior edifice of spiritual life. The beauty and strength of this temple of loving union with God is portrayed in the "hallowed wrestler" who gave his nights to conversation with God, and his days to the delivery of God's message to thirsting souls. Prostrate before the Tabernacle, he drew from his intimate communion with his Eucharistic God, refreshment and strength for his labors, and a peace of soul that reflected heaven's glory.

It is nevertheless in the apostolic activity of St. Dominic that we find the fruition of true spiritual mastership. This was not the "genius of government" and organization that Cardinal Newman saw in the saint, but the psychologist, whose end was to bring all to Christ, not by any one spiritual mould, but by the easier way of cultivating in each soul the seeds that God planted therein. This end was his only permanent guide and purpose, the only fixed spirituality at which he aimed. As Osma was to Dominic the school of Divine Love, his apostolate was the outlet and the nurture for his adeptness in that love. As St. Gregory said, "love of God is understood and nourished in the love of neighbor." It was truly this love of God and neighbor that made St. Dominic like St. Paul "all things to all men," to transmit to them the fruit of his contemplation.

We have studied the conceiver of a new ideal of spirituality, the pioneer of a new era in the history of religious perfection, that divided its benefits and provided an apostolate for a trial laden people. But in the realization of St. Dominic's ideal we detect even more the keen insight, the careful preparation, and the skilful stroke of a master mind forming a body of spiritual men, to be the enduring exemplars of that ideal, and incidentally, testimonials to his spiritual enterprise. No scientific works proclaim the eminence of St. Dominic's spiritual mastery, but each generation of his sons is an added chapter of that era, commenced in the saint's own application of its essential fundament of contemplation, when he founded the contemplative nuns of Prouille. Indeed the impress of this spirit is the significant note of the scientific work and practical direction of his followers in the spiritual life even to the present day.

How remarkable is this succession of St. Dominic's spirit and ideal through the generations that came after him, and their excelling mastery of it, is portrayed in the lives of the men succeeding the holy patriarch in the Order's government. At first, temporal trials of an infant organization confronted them, but like the sharers of a precious secret, they guarded the inheritance of their founder, and without deviating from this paternal responsibility over spiritually minded men, they stressed the essential principle of contemplation. Bl. Jordan was the great propagator of the Order, yet it was only by his deeply rooted spirituality that he drew nearly a thousand novices to its ranks, and sponsored the spiritual progress of Bl. Diana and her companions. St. Raymond of Pennafort was indeed Doctor of the University of Paris, and the renowned compiler of the Decretals of Gregory IX, but it was his spirituality that reinforced his science in law for the development of the inner life of the Order. To Humbert de Romanis is due the definite organization which seemed to be only the pronouncement of his genius of spiritual directorship. His works concerning the "Regular Life" contain many practical treatises, and principally the beautiful exposition of St. Augustine's Rule, of the Vows and Virtues, and of Prayer. This work receives first place among the spiritual writings of the Order. Bl. Raymond of Capua, 23rd Master General of the Order, spent his life in calling back to the spirit of St. Dominic his charges, whom the Western Schism threw into confusion. To him was entrusted the direction of the delicate soul of St. Catherine of Sienna. Divine favor commended his holy zeal and prudent direction, while the church likewise acknowledged her debt to him.

The thirteenth century was great for the world and for the Church, but it was indeed great for the Order of St. Dominic. It gave the friar preachers a clear definition of their work, and a way of life that mirrored precisely the spirit and ideal of their founder. To speak of spiritual masters of this time is one with speaking of the minds that were examples of Dominican benefaction to society, for these men were most of all spiritual men. Those who enjoyed the distinction of being the foremost scholars of Europe were characterizations of intense activity, which found its only source in a more intense love of God.

Perhaps no Dominican has left greater impressions of his life and labors upon the secular world than Albert the Great. This pillar of intellectual Europe penetrated all branches of human science, prepared for the purification and Christian development of pagan philosophy, and profoundly influenced the entire thought of his age; yet all this he accomplished in constant subjection to a humble faith in God and His Church. To the world Albert Bollstadt was "the great," one of the most active personages of his time and in the Church he is "Blessed," a contemplative, and a master of Perfection in the truest sense. His labors were but his key to heavenly union. We are told by his biographers, that while exposing the "Sentences" of the Lombard, the only systematic theology of his time, or commenting on the Gospels, he was wont to turn each part into a soulful prayer of praise.

To Albert is attributed a work on the virtues called "Paradise of the Soul," as well as a mystical treatise "On Union with God," in which he unfolds the traditional Dominican teaching of the Mystical State, as "life eternal commenced" through contemplation. While Bishop of Ratisbon, Albert manifested himself a true shepherd, conscientious and untiring in his directive zeal. His sermons bear traces of this character in their simple, instructive nature and prayerful tone. He was counselor of prince and peasant, but above all his charges, was that precious responsibility of the direction of his disciple and the future light of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas. If Albert deserves credit for nothing else, his mastership over that soul of divine choice proclaims him "Great," "Blessed."

Known to all is St. Thomas Aquinas the saint, the vessel of God's election, adorned with a vast richness of nature and of grace, charged with the monumental work of teaching, clarifying and summarizing all of Catholic doctrine. We know the theologian, preacher, counsellor, author and even the saint, but preeminently was St. Thomas a master of Christian spirituality. His great profundity, clearness and beauty of expression, the

methods making him supreme among scholars, were but the outpourings of a generous soul, steeped in Divine Love, the result of constant converse with God. His intensive penetrations into the Mysteries of our Faith were but beams of Divine Light reflected from Eternal Wisdom, for Thomas, in true humility, attributed all to its proper source. Inspired by prayer, strengthened by continuous communion with God, and perfected with His loving union, his work advanced to such a summit of Divine favor, that he despaired of the capability of human words to express his mind.

St. Thomas wrote extensively on the Spiritual Life, considering every state from its lowest ascetical efforts, to the highest grace of mystic union, but withal, he left us no separate and systematic treatment. This aspect of his doctrinal study must be gleaned from his many writings. That he mastered this special side of doctrine is evident. It was not only as a religious hastening to defend his Order and religious in general, that St. Thomas disputed with William of St. Amour, or wrote his thesis against the revilers of religious principles, but it was because he was himself a master of the basic principles of religious Perfection that he took upon himself the task, and was assured of his triumph. His treatment of religious life amongst his voluminous works has left no phase unconsidered, and is truly a master work leaving nothing further to be said on this question.

The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas may be looked upon as a handbook of Perfection, and, without a doubt, many spiritual works have found therein their chief source for principles of doctrine and order. Its order alone stresses the nature and position of spiritual life in man. The prominent note throughout is the glorification of the order of grace. He begins at the lowest stage of the natural order, showing that perfection even in this order postulates a certain grace. He names this a healing grace (*gratia sanantis*), that is, grace especially remedial to fallen nature. (1a2ae. Q. CIX, A. 1 & 2). He insists upon the perfection of nature and the natural faculties, with the restraint only of those things that are perverse. Here he applies his well known dictum, that "grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it." As in the animating spirit and ideal of all his work, St. Thomas, here too, shows himself true son and follower of St. Dominic. But he realizes the bow cannot be stretched beyond its limit, something must augment nature, and replace it at its limitation. This is, to him, the supernatural aid of grace, and the supernatural order into which man must pass, in order to make even the least progress toward God.

In sketching all the details of this wonderful supernatural framework of God's design, the Angelic Doctor, indeed, uses all the divine materials, with the artful touch of a master, and with his great soul and profound endowments embellishes and orders them, into one solid progression toward God. He takes in the whole divine economy. His treatment of the Mysteries of the Trinity, Creation, and Redemption, so profound, yet so inspiringly beautiful in their place in the plan, draw one to the goodness of God. The virtues are made real and active. Above all, grace is shown as the helping hand of God, filling every human want, proving God's nearness, and losing us in the Eternal Omnipotence. Here indeed the Angelic Doctor outdoes himself, and is rightly called the "Doctor of grace." He draws its line direct to the highest point of union with God, and there shows it just the normal development of the soul in its progress toward its Maker.

To record, or even examine, the activities of Dominican friars in spiritual direction after St. Thomas' time, is a work that would require years of study. Men of varied character and endowments have displayed the enduring spirit and ideal of St. Dominic, even to the present. Missionaries in foreign lands have offered their lives to push that ideal into heathen conversions. Every province of the Order has raised up messengers of the Divine Word, who were men of singular holiness. Just as Osma was the school of Divine Love for St. Dominic, the religious observance of the Order has been the same for a host of saintly men.

St. Vincent Ferrer, indefatigable angel of the judgment, wrote a treatise on "the Spiritual Life"; St. Louis Bertrand, on the other hand, was charged with the spiritual formation of novices and still yearned to labor in a foreign land among those who lingered in the darkness of ignorance. Nor should we forget that school of Divine Lovers, the German Dominican Mystics, who gave us a Henry Suso, who though zealous preacher of the Holy Name in Germany, left us a proof of his nearness to God in the sweet and enlightened "Eternal Wisdom." No less is Ven. John Tauler, most polished preacher of the Rhineland, a master of the whole spiritual life from conversion to Loving Union.

The force of this ideal and liberal spirit, that made St. Dominic preeminently a master of spirituality, has not waned in the centuries that followed. The friar preacher of today is the friar preacher of yesterday. There is no Albigensian heresy, no Cuman Tartars, no neglected body of the faithful, yearning for instruction in the Truth of Christ. But there is still error rampant, heathen souls who must be sought out, and there are, as there always have been, souls to be led to a closer union with

God. In this work of the Church, the sons of St. Dominic still occupy their place and leadership.

Dominican spiritual mastership has ever impressed its character of inborn genius. This has been manifest from the Chair of Peter, where Dominican Pontiffs, by their saintly lives, have cemented the bonds of faith, and Church discipline. Dominicans likewise, in the Sacred College, have, by their sound spiritual characters, stood forth as the dependable support of the Holy See, particularly in troublous times. Countless have been the Dominican bishops, theologians and spiritual guides of prince and peasant, who have lent, the brilliance of their learning and character, to every part of the world.

History is witness, that any emergency, great or small, in the spiritual or intellectual life of the world and a vigorous re-incarnation of St. Dominic's spirit and ideal in his order, stand in relation of cause and effect. "Their sound went forth through the whole earth" Ps. 18. Their mission, through seven centuries of intense activity, has been to illuminate the souls of men who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. They have ever striven to fulfill the prophetic words of Innocent III, "you shall be the defenders of the faith and the true lights of the world."

