

SAINT ANTONINUS IN THE SCHOOL OF BLESSED JOHN DOMINICI

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MBLAZONED upon the honor list of the Church can be found the name of Saint Antoninus of the Order of Friar Preachers. To see his name enrolled among the Doctors of the Church is the object of a movement which, though recently begun, has been enthusiastically acclaimed. Consequently it seems fitting that some attention should be paid to the early influences which had such an important part in moulding his career.

Saint Antoninus was the spiritual son of Blessed John Dominici, and his successor in the work of reform. At an age when impressions are the most lasting, the youth was drawn to the man, and the effects of that association were to colour his entire life.

At the beginning of the Lenten season of 1404, Dominici was the most famous man in Florence, the recipient of signal honours from the Seigniory and from the people. In June of the previous year Collucio Salutati, Chancellor of Florence, had written a letter to the Master-General of the Order of Preachers, in which the latter was besought to use his authority to enjoin obedience upon Dominici to remain in Florence during the next three years, and to command that under no pretext was he to leave the city without the permission of the Seigniory and the university. On February 23, 1404, a similar letter was sent to Pope Boniface IX. In this it is set forth that the continued residence of Dominici at Florence is imperative if the authorities are to be able to fulfill their official duty in safeguarding public morals, and they humbly beseech His Holiness to confirm the choice of the officers of the Studium and to command that Dominici be not removed from Florence under any pretext or by any authority whatsoever without the express permission of the Holy See.¹

During this Lenten season he spoke in the cathedral of Florence, explaining the legal norms contained in the sixth book of the Dec-

¹ For text of these letters see Salvi, D., *Regola del Governo di Cura Familiare dal B. Giovanni Dominici*, Florence, 1860, p. 237-238.

retals: "he spoke twice each day, morning and evening, before a great crowd. He took his subject from the Epistle or Gospel of the day, and developed it in an admirable fashion. . . ."² The grave and majestic eloquence of the preacher, his learning, his facility in interpreting the Scriptures, his ability, even while instructing, to soften the most hardened hearts, produced a remarkable impression upon young Antonino Pierozzi. Years later he recorded, "It was these sermons of Dominici that led me to the religious life."³

One day at the convent of Santa Maria Novella, Dominici met the fifteen year old son of the notary Pierozzi. The character of the great preacher, fully as much as his sermons, had aroused in this grave, silent youth an ambition to be a member of the same Order. The Dominican reformer looked at the frail youth who asked to receive the white habit of Saint Dominic. Better than any other he knew what a serious thing it was to accept a novice, what infinite precautions had to be taken, what had to be guarded against lest the laxity which he had striven all his life to combat should continue.

The Church in general, and the religious orders in particular, were suffering evil days. The Great Western Schism was dividing the Church, terrible plagues were sweeping across Europe, and everywhere there was a general revolt against authority, and a corresponding laxity in all things. To restore the numbers they had lost through the ravages of the plagues, religious superiors accepted all who asked for admittance. To encourage applicants, the rules were made less rigorous, fasts were forgotten, and poverty existed in name only.

Gradually, however, a spirit of reform made itself felt throughout Italy. In 1390, Blessed Raymond of Capua had been elected to lead that portion of the Order which paid allegiance to the Roman Pope, and under his leadership, some earnest friars strove to bring back the pristine observance. And one of the most ardent workers in this cause was John Dominici. Soon however he realized that it was well-nigh impossible to change the easy-going friars of his day. He would have to build in the future, to train the young aspirants of the Order according to the true spirit and ideals of Saint Dominic. For this there was needed robust youths, whose health would not be impaired by the austereities of the religious life.

Dominici questioned the lad and found that he was well-gifted intellectually, was possessed of an excellent religious training and an edifying piety, but he doubted whether the young Florentine would

² *Chronicon* iii, tit. xxiii, ch. xi, 3.

³ *ibid.*

be able to withstand the rigors of the cloister. As he gazed at the youth before him, did he have any premonition of the future greatness of the lad, any sign to show him that here stood the one who was to be his greatest aid in the work of reform? Who can tell?

His questioning had revealed that the Decretals of Gratian—the nearest approach to a code of canon law at that time—were a particular delight to the notary's son. Not wishing to discourage the youth entirely in the pursuit of his vocation, the great reformer said, "When you have committed these Decretals to memory, return, and I will give you the habit of the Order." In imposing this task, Dominici thought that the time requisite for its fulfillment would be sufficient to enable the youth to develop physically. Often Dominici had said, "Many preachers preach well; but how few there are who sow good seed!" This time however the great preacher had sown well.

Within a year, Antonino returned to Dominici, his task accomplished. Gifted with a prodigious memory, similar to that of his master, who was capable of understanding whatever he read and never forgot what he once learned, the future saint showed a special aptitude for the juridical science which characterized him all during his life. His feat was "a kind of miracle" says the redactor of the Process of Canonization; "not without God's special light" echoes the Papal Bull.⁴

About this time, Dominici, after overcoming many obstacles had succeeded in obtaining the necessary permissions to establish a convent of strict observance near Florence. The proposed convent was to be erected at Fiesole, and Cortona was to serve as the place of novitiate. Antonino, according to the Chronicle of Fiesole, was accepted as the first son of the new convent, and as such, went to Cortona to begin his novitiate about the twelfth of February, 1405.

Cortona was the second house of the Roman province into which Dominici had introduced his reform. Situated at the extreme point of the Tuscan Appenines, Cortona was an admirable location for the first observantine novitiate. Its elevation protected it from chance visitors; it lay midway between Siena and Assisi, hallowed spots, the birth-places of Saint Catherine and Saint Francis.

To Cortona then came the young Florentine to begin his novitiate "of silence, work and prayer" according to the primitive rule and traditions of the Dominican Order. The practices which Saint Catherine had denounced so severely in her *Dialogues* were to have no

⁴ Bede Jarrett, O.P. *San Antonino and Mediaeval Economics*, St. Louis, 1914, p. 24.

place in his life. In the novitiate, Antonino followed the usual routine. He learned to sing and chant the Divine Office, and perfected his knowledge of Latin and other subjects under the guidance of the novice-master. The latter also directed him in his spiritual life, with an infinite patience, "for a novice, like a newly-budded plant needs watchful care." In the morning he arose, saying the Ave Maria, and then recited the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. He remained silent, eyes cast down; he spoke when the rule permitted, but then he was careful "never to speak of any absent one if he could not say something good of him. . . . He submitted joyfully to the austerities and the painful disciplines, and humbly accepted the penances imposed for his innocent transgressions of the rule."⁵

Here Antonino laid the foundations for his future greatness. He acquired the habits of self-knowledge and self-discipline, so that he might be able to know and direct the consciences of others. He meditated that he might be able to fulfill the watch-word of the Order, "to give to others the fruits of his contemplation."

During this formative period, the young Florentine had as his novice-master the Blessed Lorenzo di Rippafratta. The part that he played in the spiritual training of the young novice was an important one. More than a half-century later, when archbishop of Florence, upon hearing of the death of his saintly mentor, he wrote a letter to the Dominicans of Pistoia, which gives us an admirable portrait of the man.

"From his youth to his old age, Lorenzo di Rippafratta courageously walked in the way of the Lord, supporting innumerable fatigues for the love of our Saviour with joy and eagerness. If the kingdom of God shall be given to the poor, who was poorer in spirit and in reality than the blessed Lorenzo? Who was more humble than he?"⁶ His love of poverty, purity and mortification are noted as well as "his fidelity to the long fasts, vigils and the other austerities of the Order, and the horror which all sensuality inspired him." He meditated upon the Scriptures and sought their meaning. He heard confessions constantly, and many in their hours of anguish or weak-

⁵ Henry Cochin, *Le Bienheureux Fra Giovanni Angelico*, Paris, 1906, p. 74. No biographer of our saint has given us an account of his novitiate days. It is necessary then to use only generalities in speaking of them. However M. Cochin in his work minutely describes the career of Fra Angelico, and states that "Saint Antonino appears at each step in the history of Fra Angelico. Just as he preceded him during life, so he preceded him to the religious life. (Fra Angelico came to Cortona in 1407). He was at the same time, his companion and master, his patron and his friend, his father and his brother."

⁶ Mortier, *Histoire des Maîtres Généraux*, Paris, 1909, Vol. 4, p. 19.

ness availed themselves of his counsels. A man of prayer and study, a director of souls, he gave to the young novice a wonderful example of a true Dominican.

The year of novitiate ended during the first days of February, 1406, and Antonino was admitted to profession of his vows. He remained at Cortona however, until the feast of Pentecost of that year, and then accompanied by three other newly-professed brethren, returned to Fiesole. The new convent was not yet ready for occupancy, the first stone having been placed only on March 1, 1406, "in the name of God and under the protection of Saint Dominic." So for many weeks, the religious enjoyed the hospitality of the Hermits of Saint Jerome whose superior Carlo di Monte Granello had most probably been inspired to attempt a reform in his order by Dominici.

Finally on the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, they took possession of their convent, but it was only possible to live there during the day, the nights were passed in the neighboring abbey of San Bartolomeo. Three weeks later however each religious had his own cell, and the conventional life was formally established in all its rigor on the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel.

The enthusiasm and zeal of Dominici during this period had a profound influence upon all his associates especially upon the younger religious. The six months that Dominici and Antonino lived together in Fiesole were a most decisive factor in the life of the future saint. Thrown into daily contact with the man who had influenced him in the choice of his vocation, he received the necessary training for the work for which Providence had destined him; the reformer of the morrow prepared himself in the school of the reformer of the day.

During this period Dominici often gave his young disciples long discourses on such varied subjects as the danger of the immoderate use of the pagan authors, the education of children,⁷ or the misfortunes that the Church was then suffering. He strove to inculcate in his followers a sympathetic appreciation for those things which he himself had so ardently championed during his life. One writer has noted, "Dominici combined the highest ideals in religion with the most perfect common sense." At this time, he was deeply engaged in a controversy with Salutati, the learned chancellor of Florence, and an ardent protagonist of Humanism. In response to the appeal of one of his brethren, Dominici had entered the lists with the *Lucula*

⁷ One of the most scientific treatises on education, even for modern times, is the *Regola del Governo di Cura Familiare* of Blessed John Dominic. It has been translated into English by Rev. A. B. Cote, O.P., Ph. D., Washington, 1927.

Noctis, a vigorous polemic addressed to Salutati, protesting against the immoderate use of the pagan classics by scholars to the detriment of Christian morality. And in the *Chronicles* of Saint Antoninus written years later we find an echo of those days at Fiesole. But where the master was apt to be brusque, aggressive, perhaps even harsh in his judgments, especially whenever a question of the faith or morals of the people was involved, his pupil, while sacrificing nothing in the principles of Truth, tempered zeal with moderation, justice with mercy, seeking by means of a conciliatory attitude to accomplish his purpose. This however they had in common, neither would "sin against the light." Cost what it might their deeds all through their lives were characterized by an honest intention, an absence of private ends, a temper of obedience, a willingness to be corrected, a dread of error, and a desire to serve the Church faithfully and well.

The even tranquillity of these happy days was soon to be disturbed. Pope Innocent VII of the Roman line of Pontiffs died on November 6th, 1406, and Florence, seeing an opportunity to end the Schism, summoned Dominici from his retirement to protest against the election of a new Pope. Obedient to the call of his natal city, Dominici left Fiesole for Rome. Upon his arrival in the Eternal City, he found the cardinals already gathered in conclave; and then the newly-elected Pontiff Gregory XII commanded the friar to remain by his side. The little community of Fiesole was to see him no more, for as Bishop of Ragusa, and later as cardinal, he was to share with Gregory XII, the responsibilities and tribulations of the Papacy.

In Fiesole, the little band felt keenly the loss of their beloved master. But though deprived of his personal direction and guidance, they remained constant to the spirit which had animated him, the spirit of the Dominican reform.

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