

## FATHER TOM BURKE, O.P.

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*GERALD JOYCE, O.P.*



OR seven centuries illustrious and saintly men clothed in the white habit of Saint Dominic, have carried the torch of Truth to every nation. These loyal Dominicans preached whenever and wherever an audience could be assembled. In great cathedrals, small churches, universities and even along the country roadside were to be found these zealous men, preaching truth and dispelling error. Humbert of the Romans, the fifth Master General of the Order recommended the brethren to adapt their sermons to all classes. "Furthermore," he says, "of all the works undertaken by the Friars, preaching is the most important, since it is the most fruitful, and especially because it dominates all the rest as the end dominates the means."

Since its foundation, the Dominican Order has produced many eloquent preachers; St. Peter Martyr, the great apostle of the Italian Peninsula; St. Hyacinth, the "Apostle of the North"; St. Vincent Ferrer, the "Angel of the Last Judgment." Among the celebrated pulpit orators of the nineteenth century, were Lacordaire, Monsabre, Pere Didon, and the renowned Father Tom Burke, whose memory is still cherished throughout Europe and America. It is the glorious career of this eminent Dominican to which we shall devote the following pages.

Nicholas Burke (the future Fr. Tom Burke) was born in County Galway, Ireland, September 8, 1830. His parents, who were of moderate circumstances, gave him a good education. His father was a baker by trade—"the Master of the Rolls"—as his son used wittily to call him. His mother was a serious and pious woman.

It was at the impressionable age of seventeen that Nicholas witnessed the dreadful destruction in his native country, caused by the "Great Famine." Many years later (Sept. 5, 1880) while preaching at Saint Joseph's Church, Liverpool, he said, "If I were to live a thousand years, never could I banish from my memory, or shut out from my eyes, the terrible sights which I then beheld." The special knowledge which he acquired at that time by personal observation of

the suffering of God's poor, gave him an enormous vantage ground in the many sermons that he was later to preach in the cause of mercy and charity.

The gruesome scenes had had a sobering effect upon him while a student. His nature was such that no sorrow affected him for any length of time, but with his vigorous philosophy of mind and the hearty buoyancy of his nature, he rose superior to such influences. It was at this time that he felt the promptings of a religious vocation; and, due to his long familiarity with the Irish Dominicans, and his love and admiration for their holy founder, St. Dominic, he made application to be received among them. Accepted as a postulant, he was sent to Perugia in Italy in the winter of 1847, there to begin his novitiate and in due course to receive the habit of St. Dominic. In religion he was known as Thomas Aquinas. Later he pursued his studies in the convents of the Minerva and Santa Sabina in Rome.

On account of his great zeal, regular observance, constant cheerfulness, his superiors entrusted him, while still a student, with the responsible position of Novice-Master. He fulfilled this appointment at Woodchester, the novitiate of the resuscitated English province, where he was ordained March 26, 1853. On August 3, 1854, he publicly defended the thesis "In Universa Theologia," receiving the Dominican degree of Lector of Sacred Theology. Early in the following year, Fr. Burke was recalled to Ireland to found the novitiate of the Irish province at Tallaght, near Dublin.

While in Dublin, his preaching began to attract much attention. In September, 1859, Father Burke preached his first notable sermon on "Music in Catholic Worship." The occasion was the installation of an organ in the Star-of-the-Sea Church, Sandymont. In this sermon, Father Burke clearly explained the reason for the external grandeur in the ceremonies of the Catholic Church. During the course of the sermon he said, "The lights and ornaments of the altar, the vestments of the priests, the smoke of incense, the pealing notes of the organ, the lofty dome, the graceful arch, the picture and the statues—all these things are intended by the Church as means whereby to reach the hearts and souls of its children, by instructing, ennobling, touching and captivating their senses. Now, the mission of the Church in this world is to lead man to God; in order to do this she must take him as he is, and treat him according to his nature, leading him up from natural things to supernatural—from sensible things to spiritual—from the things that are made to the invisible things of God, and to a knowledge of His eternal power and divinity."

She must turn to God all the powers of man's soul, all the affections of his heart; and therefore she seizes upon all that is beautiful in this world and makes it subservient to this great end. Hence the fine arts have always found their most generous protection as they found their highest inspiration in the Catholic Church."

After describing the origin of the organ and its place in the Catholic Church, he continued, "And surely the soul of man, as it came first from the hand of God, resembles a beautiful musical instrument upon which God Himself breathed, that it might return to Him here a continual hymn of praise, until its voice should be united in heaven to that of the angels; for the Scriptures and the holy Fathers love to describe the Kingdom of Heaven as the mansion of everlasting harmony and song of joy; and where from the throne of God, proceed ravishing sounds, and the very atmosphere is music."

Father Burke went to Rome in 1864 as Rector to the Dominican Convent of San Clemente. He attracted great attention in the Eternal City by his preaching, so much so that during the years of his residence there the English-speaking visitors considered it an intellectual treat to hear this Friar Preacher.

It was but a short time after he returned to Ireland (May, 1869) that the remains of Daniel O'Connell were removed to the crypt beneath the tower of Glasnevin. Now at the zenith of his fame, he delivered the oration on the occasion, in the presence of fifty thousand auditors. The address which occupied two hours in delivery was a truly eloquent eulogy on the life and the labors of the Liberator. In the assembly were many bishops, a host of clergy and distinguished laymen. The following extract from this oration enables one to understand his masterly and persuasive manner of expression.

"O'Connell's love for religion and country was as the breath of his nostrils, the blood of his veins; and when he brought to the service of both the strength of his faith and the power of his genius, with the instinct of a true Irishman, his first thought was to lift up the nation by striking the chains off the national church. The battle-field lay before him, on which he could 'fight the good fight' and vindicate all the rights of his religion and his country. The armory which he used was furnished him by the inspired Apostle when he said, 'Brethren, our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers. . . . Therefore take unto you the armor of God' O'Connell knew well that such weapons in such a hand as his were irresistible—that, girt round with the truth and justice of his cause, he was clad in the armor of the eternal God;

that, with words of peace and order on his lips, with the strong shield of Faith before him, and the sword of eloquent speech in his hand, with the warcry of obedience, principle and law, no power on earth could resist him. . . . At the sound of his mighty voice, which spoke in the name of a united people, 'the lentils of the doors were moved,' and the gates were opened which three hundred years of prejudice and pride had closed and barred against our people. The first decree of our liberation went forth; on April 13, 1829, Catholic Emancipation was proclaimed and seven million Catholic Irishmen entered the nation's legislature in the person of O'Connell."

The visit of the celebrated Dominican to America, 1872, was to constitute the busiest and the most remarkable period of his life. Sent by his superiors as Visitator to the convents of America, he expected to be away only a short while, but the demands of the American audiences were such that he found it necessary to remain here eighteen months. His fame and reputation as a great orator had preceded him, and, consequently he was besieged with invitations to preach and lecture.

Father Burke gave three lectures and preached the lenten course at the Church of St. Paul, New York, where the church was filled hours before he appeared. In the Cooper Institute in that city, he delivered his notable lecture on "The Story of Ireland as told in her ruins" before a vast audience. In every church and hall where he preached the audiences were so large that these places were quite inadequate to accommodate them. He addressed an assemblage of forty thousand people in Boston in September of that same year, where he was privileged to speak before the largest gathering ever congregated in the states. He also visited St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia and many other large cities. Everywhere Father Burke was received with unbounded enthusiasm.

The work which the Friar Preacher performed in America will go on record as one of the most wonderful achievements of our times in the field of ecclesiastical endeavour. In eighteen months he gave four hundred lectures, exclusive of sermons, the proceeds amounting to nearly four hundred thousand dollars. Father Burke contributed much to Catholic charities and to the material interests of the Church in the United States.

His subsequent career in America, brief though it was, forms one of the brightest pages in the history of the young American Church. The event which brought Father Burke very prominently before the general public in America was his memorable debate with the English

historian, James Anthony Froude. Mr. Froude had but recently arrived in America to give the lectures embodied in his work "The English in Ireland," and to appeal to an American jury for a verdict of justification of England's occupation of Ireland and of her administration of the country. Froude had already acquired a prominent position in English literature and to refute him was no easy task. He possessed a facile pen, a graceful style, a fertile imagination, all of which played no little part in the preparation and success of his lectures. Father Burke was well equipped for an encounter with this English historian and was well qualified to expose his misrepresentations and misstatements.

When prominent Irishmen, both lay and clerical, besought him to answer Froude, an opportunity which he welcomed gladly, public interest was at once excited. Never was an audience raised to a higher pitch of enthusiasm than that manifested by his hearers on the occasion of those memorable and masterly orations. In five lectures this eminent Dominican ably and courteously refuted the historian and vindicated Ireland's claim to the sympathy of all lovers of freedom. The defeat of the English historian at the hands of the Friar was overwhelming. When Father Burke returned to Ireland in 1873, the Irish people greeted and hailed him with gratitude for the great victory he had won in their behalf. It was at this time that His Holiness, Pope Pius IX, in recognition of the Dominican's great powers of eloquence, aptly styled him "prince of preachers." During the next ten years he was busily engaged conducting retreats, preaching charity sermons, delivering lectures in various parts of England, Ireland and Scotland.

Father Tom Burke was universally known as a pulpit orator, a profound theologian, a brilliant controversialist. He possessed all the qualities of a successful public speaker,—a fine presence, a rich melodious voice, a prodigious memory, a vivid imagination, a vast and varied store of knowledge at his instant command. When to these was added a keen and profound intellect, trained in the best traditions of scholastic philosophy and Thomistic theology, there is indeed no wonder concerning his oratorical successes.

A saintly and humble priest, a true religious, he possessed a pure and noble spirit and was at all times cheerful. He was held in veneration as a confessor and spiritual director. His love for Ireland of which he was intensely proud inspired his eloquence to a great degree. Because he knew her history and sorrows well, his brilliant lectures mirrored the life and the soul of her people. The national music and

poetry of Ireland not infrequently found place in his sermons and lectures.

Popular everywhere, he was hailed with acclamation in Ireland and America, in Rome as well as in London. Men found it difficult to understand how one whose life seemed one continual course of sermons, who seemed to live amidst the adulation and praise of his fellow men, could remain so humble and unaffected. Prayer was the source of his strength. One of his brethren tells us that after his orations he retired to that quiet spot whose only ornaments were a crucifix, a few sacred pictures, and a few books, and that the routine of his secluded life was made up of meditation, psalmody and prayers. He spent hours upon his knees before the Blessed Sacrament; and who can doubt that this was the source of his power. He set out early in life to attain the virtue of humility, pondering well the words of Saint Augustine, "Descend that you may ascend." No one appreciated more fully than he the force of the words of Saint Paul, "What have you that you have not received?" and the words of Our Lord, "Without Me you can do nothing."

The last sermon delivered by Father Burke was in Saint Francis Xavier Church, Dublin, on behalf of five thousand starving children in Donegal. He was in a weakened condition before he entered the pulpit, but his undaunted spirit would not allow him to give up. After this sermon he was confined to his bed, where he lingered for many days. The end came at length, when to use his own words, "Faith was lost in vision, and Hope was absorbed in fruition." Father Burke died on the morning of July 2, 1893, at Tallaght. He was buried there in a church now a memorial to him.

Perhaps the greatest testimony that can be tendered to the eloquence of this saintly priest is contained in the tribute paid to his memory by Cardinal Manning, "We shall no more hear that eloquent voice, eloquent because so simple for in all he spoke for God; He remembered God and forgot himself; it was the eloquence not of study nor self-manifestation, but of the great soul speaking with God and for God. The whole man spoke, and yet, in the pathos and beauty and light of what he spoke we never remembered the speaker."

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