

SAINT DOMINIC AND THE CUMANS

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CONSTANCY of purpose has often proved to be the crowning jewel in the spiritual structure of many illustrious children of the Church. Through the exercise of that noble quality, Christ's kingdom has been extended to the four corners of the earth by men and women who possessed it in its fulness. For some it has been the means of obtaining stupendous success in the harvest of souls, for others it has served as an inspiration to accept the yoke of the Lord and to work out their eternal salvation in spreading the Gospel of Christ. Dominic de Guzman, the perfect gentle knight of Christ, was a man in whom constancy of purpose was ever a predominant characteristic. It marked his success in life, it was the golden quality which inspired thousands of his spiritual children to follow in his footsteps and to complete the work which he had so nobly begun.

In the course of the venerable Friar's life, two laudable ambitions stand forth to magnify the generosity of his soul and to demonstrate most strongly his fervent devotion to Christ, namely, the conversion of the pagan Cumans and the consummation of his mission labors in the glory of a martyr's death. Dominic himself was never to realize the fulfillment of either of these desires, but the story of his determined efforts to make such a noble sacrifice is indeed worthy of his great calling in life.

The life of Dominic Guzman is one that contains every element necessary to make up a veritable romance. Born into the ranks of nobility in the age of men like Richard the Lion-Hearted and his valiant Crusaders, it would seem that the young heir of Calaroga might have desired to follow the road so often traversed by his warring ancestors. God in His Wisdom chose the youth for the accomplishment of more nobler things in life. Dominic never calloused his hands with wielding the broadsword or lance. His was a warrior's path to be sure, but his lance was a staff to guide him to lands afar and he was to don no armor



. . . . Dominic thought of instituting a society of companions who, as auxiliary and movable bands of soldiers, could, in time and efficaciously, go wherever danger menaced the Church. Therefore, overcoming many difficulties he founded the Order of Preachers which Honorius III took under his own special care and patronage and almost with intuition called the members 'true lights of the world' and 'champions of the Faith.'

Pius XI in Apostolic Letter Inclitama ac Perillustrem.

Amongst these heroic personages was Dominic of Guzman who, having left Spain for France, courageously opposed the heresy of the Albigenses. In fact he, by the preaching of the mysteries of Christ, by fervent prayer to God, by scorn of human things, recalled very many of those who had gone astray from the Church, to the primitive faith.

*Pius XI in Apostolic Letter
Inclitum ac Perillustrem.*

save the familiar "white wool," so emblematic of his chaste, gentle nature. Dominic counted as his victories those won in the conquest of men's hearts for Christ, and not in those bloody conquests, so frequent in his own day, which sought for the material advancement of men.

The Saint's enviable career is but a tribute to the zeal and to the energy he expended in his labors for the faith which he loved. His success as a preacher, apologist, scholar and organizer was to acclaim for him the title of "Christ's Hallow'd Wrestler." He preached the word of God wherever he went. Along the highways of Europe, in town and city, even in the busy marts of men he raised his voice to speak only of the things of God. No less an apologist, he met the challenges of the Albigenses and was instrumental in leading thousands of those embittered heretics back to the fold of Christ. Foremost in the ranks of scholars, Dominic drank deep of the cup of learning and imbued his disciples with the spirit of study. He made the pursuit of learning the great end of his Order. His remarkable foresight and spirit of democracy is to be found in the form of government which he bequeathed to his Order. When we reflect on this wondrous recital of Dominic's works which were so varied, so engaging and so fruitful, we wonder that the Saint of Calaroga could devote so much of his heart to a savage race which threatened the realms of eastern Europe. We wonder also that in the midst of his innumerable accomplishments the heart of a martyr could beat so constantly.

Dominic's years as a Canon Regular in the cloister of Osma was truly a preparation for the enterprise in which he longed to be engaged. We read that it was at this period of his life that he conceived the project of going one day to preach the faith to the Cumans and to offer his life's blood in imitation of the "Perfect Martyr," Christ. In these early years of study and prayer, prior to his active ministry, he resembled his Master who lived the hidden life of Nazareth in preparation for his public life. Dominic was always eager to labor for the salvation of souls, and Theoderic of Apoldia in describing his master at this time, says, "His zeal for perishing souls was a continual and painful wound in his heart, for God had given to him the gift of a perfect charity."

While yet a Canon at Osma, Dominic fulfilled the office of Subprior. His devotion and gentleness of manner attracted the attention of Bishop Diego who chose Dominic for a companion

on his trip to the north country called the Marches. This territory is believed by many to correspond to the present day country of Denmark. King Alphonsus of Castile appointed Diego ambassador for the purpose of completing negotiations for a marriage between his son and the princess of that northern realm. The first journey proved successful for the Bishop and his companion, but when they arrived after a second trip to the north country to escort the young maiden back to Spain, they were informed that her death had occurred shortly before their appearance. Although the purpose of these lengthy journeys proved unsuccessful, nevertheless we are inclined to believe that they provided Dominic with some information regarding the Cumans from the peoples they met along that northern route.

We do know that Diego, on his second return from the Marches, was fired with the zeal of the Dominican Friar and desired to accompany him in that great adventure to the country of the pagan Cumans. When they arrived in Rome, they begged the Holy Father, Pope Innocent III, to permit them to embark on that hazardous mission. Innocent deemed it of more importance to place these zealous men in the work of the home missions which were under the blight of the Albigenian heresy. This was to be Dominic's first disappointment in his plans to carry out his cherished dreams. Ever an obedient son, he entered upon his newly assigned task and labored valiantly for nine years among the heretics of Languedoc.

In the course of these trying years, Dominic never once lost the hope of being a martyr for the cause of Christ. It was his holy desire to die among the hostile Cumans, but since his plans had been thwarted he would make the same offering in the country of the heretics. Dominic's holy determination to sacrifice his life is evidenced in his reply to the heretics who planned to assassinate him but who were cowed by his unshaken constancy. In reply to their challenge he said, "I would have prayed you not to have taken my life at a single blow, but little by little, cutting off each member of my body, one by one; and when you had done that, you should have plucked out my eyes, and then have left me so, to prolong my torments, and gain me a richer crown."

Following the venerable Friar's sojourn in the missions of Languedoc, he was successful in securing approbation for his newly founded Order. As time went on, the desire to enter upon the mission of preaching the faith to the Cumans possessed him

with all its former appeal. It was during the first General Chapter held in the year 1221 that Saint Dominic besought his disciples to select a substitute for the office of Master General which had been formerly conferred upon him. It was his desire to relinquish this holy office in order that he might be free to follow the path of Christ into the land of the Cumans. Those of his first disciples who had flocked to his banner of "Truth" and had surrendered to the charm of his saintliness, knew the necessity of keeping Dominic within their midst. Thus again, the venerable Patriarch felt the yoke of submission which was but another obstacle placed by divine providence to prevent his acquisition of a martyr's crown.

The closing years of Dominic's life offered no more opportunities for him to realize his cherished dream. That noble work which he had so many times set his heart to accomplish was not to be left undone. The early disciples who shared in the ideals of their holy Founder were men who eagerly sought to carry out the designs of their leader. Alike in spirit, they rallied to the call of their beloved Saint and were impatient to enter upon the arduous mission like soldiers harangued by a favorite chieftain on the field of battle. During the first General Chapter the Province of Hungary was established and Dominic appointed Father Paul, a noted canonist, as its first Provincial. Associated with this staunch pioneer of the Cuman missions were Blessed Sadoc, Father Berengarius and two other confreres whose names have not been preserved. This vanguard of Dominican missionaries, which was to be reinforced by other worthy recruits as they trudged across Europe, lost no time in establishing their outposts along the Hungarian border.

The area assigned as the habitation of those wild tribes known as Cumans included the northern section of Roumania, the greater part of the eastern boundary of Hungary and adjacent parts of Russia. We know little about their origin for the Cumans were nomadic in their habits and possibly can not be singled out as a distinct race of people due to their intermingling with other nations in that section of Europe. The Cumans are more completely described for us in the records of their fierce encounters with the Christian inhabitants of those eastern realms. Wherever their path led, no eye remained open to weep for the dead. Of merciless temperament, and claiming no vestige of civilization, they destroyed all that lay before them like winter winds that are wont to make barren nature's fruit-

fulness. Churches were always singled out as the prize of their marauding expeditions for they knew that these sacred edifices sheltered treasures that would appease their savage desire for booty. Like a raging torrent they closed in upon the eastern frontier of Europe and daily threatened to control that vast stretch of country. No armed force was available to check them as they progressed with their terrible carnage. The first encounter of the little band of Dominicans with these savage horsemen resulted in the martyrdom of two priests while others were cast in chains to await a similar death. Forced to withdraw before such cruelty, the missionaries abandoned their task for nearly a year before they attempted another encounter. The loss of men suffered in the first missionary enterprise must have been keenly felt by the remainder of the little band, but it did not dishearten or discourage them from carrying out the wishes of Dominic. The lesson of constancy was ever before them, and the desires of their beloved master were not to be forsaken.

The Cumans, being a strange mixture of Oriental blood, were professed enemies to the basic principles of Christianity. Their intense hatred for Christian peoples was increased whenever they were aware of the presence of priests in the midst of their victims. The little party of Dominicans felt the lash of their cruel nature when the Cumans discovered the particular aims of the missionaries. Aversion to the doctrines of Christianity was most pronounced when Paul and his associates approached them for the second time. In spite of the bitterness with which they looked upon the missionaries, they were forced to admire the courage and bravery of that little handful of men who dared to approach them in the face of such odds. These children of the plains could respect courage in others for they were given to praise that noble virtue in their own leaders. It was this striking example of Dominican fortitude which finally won for the Dominicans the opportunity they had long been waiting for. Quick to sense the admiration manifested by the Cumans, the missionaries lost no time in quieting their suspicious minds in preparation for the fulfillment of their holy mission. The gospel stories of Christ and the purpose of His death upon the cross of Calvary descended upon eager and curious minds. Through the efforts of the tireless missionaries, the grace of God soon found its way into the untamed hearts of those pagan hordes and paved the way for a remarkable harvest of souls.

As it is common for barbarous tribes to respond to the example offered them by their chieftains, the Dominicans were fortunate to receive two such distinguished leaders whose baptism was to be the signal for a similar move by their countless followers. We are told that after Duke Borics and another leader of equal prestige named Membrok were received into the fold of Christ, together with their families and servants, the numbers of converts swelled into the thousands. The phenomenal success of the Dominicans in this eastern apostolate is acclaimed in some of the documents of Pope Gregory IX, one of which bears the following encomium: "We rejoice in the Lord that God has given your efforts the reward which you desired—namely, the conversion of no small number of the Cumans. . . ." The marked success of this mission may well be attributed to the blood of the early martyrs for it was to provide the seed from whence blossomed the flower of faith in that hitherto barren country. Theoderic of Apoldia, who had been appointed the first bishop of the Cumans at the suggestion of Father Paul, was devoted to the ideals inspired by his first superior, Saint Dominic. Under his guiding hand and aided by the incessant labors of Paul, religion continued to spread rapidly among these newly adopted children. The years of their sacrifice were blessed when they could look to the conversion of that vast number of Cumans. It is sad to relate that the years following their fruitful apostolate were to witness the undoing of their labors at the hands of Mongolian Tartars. The year 1241 bears witness to the devastation wrought by the fleet horsemen who made up the cohorts of that historic character, Jenghiz Khan. The advent of this new menace into the Dominican mission fields added many brave martyrs to the list of Dominic's first disciples. Among them were Father Paul and some ninety or a hundred Friars Preachers apparently in Hungary and Cumania alone who met death by sword and fire. The tide of events in this barbarous country did not end with the death of those missionaries whom we have already mentioned. There were countless hundreds of stalwart Dominicans who gained the martyr's crown before the Tartar hosts completed their pillaging and devastation. The martyrdom of Blessed Sadoc and his forty-eight brother religious, together with seventy or more of the disciples of Saint Hyacinth, were to make this epoch of Dominican history a glorious chapter for the martyrology of the Order of Friars Preachers.

Man proposes and God disposes. This axiom may well explain that noble chapter of Dominic's life which witnessed the designs of God in using the venerable Saint as the guide and leader of his white clad followers. Dominic's mission to the Cumans was fulfilled by men who modeled their lives after the example of their Founder. Just as the venerable Patriarch had striven to enter upon this mission alone, so did his followers swell the ranks to carry on his noble ambition. Nor was Dominic singular in his desire for martyrdom, for the children of his Order gained that noble crown and emblazoned on the shield of the Friars Preachers the escutcheon of martyrs, the very imprint of Dominic's own heart.

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