

BLESSED SIMON BALLACHI, O. P

St. Archangel, a village in the northern part of Italy, about three miles distant from Rimini, was the birthplace of Blessed Simon Ballachi, lay-brother of the Order of St. Dominic.

The Bellachi family was distinguished in both Church and State. Two of Simon's uncles were successively Bishop of Rimini. One of these, at least, Lawrence Ballachi, who died in 1302, was a Friar Preacher. One of Blessed Simon's brothers, moreover, was a priest. Simon came of a family of lords, to whose care had been entrusted the protection and welfare of the little village in which they lived. Simon, it seems, was to carry on the family name and honor. Since his was to be a life in the world, and therefore more active than contemplative, in accordance with the custom of the times, Blessed Simon received little, if any, knowledge of letters. His early youth was spent in the camp acquiring the tactics of military discipline and the training that made for the successful soldier and knight.

At the age of twenty-seven he decided to leave the world and seek admission into some religious order, saying with the Psalmist, "I have chosen to be an abject in my Father's house, rather than to dwell in the tabernacle of sinners." Accordingly, he presented himself to the prior of the Dominican Convent of Rimini and humbly asked to be admitted as a lay-brother. His request met with favor. Once clothed in the habit of St. Dominic, Blessed Simon never looked back, but gave himself unreservedly to the service of the King of kings. In the cloister his aim was perfection. He hoped to gain this state by a faithful observance of his Rule and Constitutions. The guides that had directed so many before him, even in the first century of the Order, could not lead him astray. In the following brief account of his life and labors we read the story of a man of God, animated by the love of Jesus Christ and striving to conform his life in all things to that of his Divine Model.

Realizing that anything resembling sloth is incompatible with the religious life, Blessed Simon waged incessant warfare against this root of all vices. He strove to be constantly employed. His superiors appointed him overseer of the convent gardens, but Simon was far from content with a position of mere direction. He labored with his own hands, and strove to bring each flower

and plant to perfection according to its kind. The good Brother knew no rest. When his own work was finished, or the weather prevented him from working in the garden, it was his custom to take upon himself the duties of the other brothers. This he did from a spirit of humility, because he considered himself the least of all and the servant of all. Each week he swept the entire convent. With Blessed Simon, to work was to pray. He sanctified even the most lowly occupations by doing everything for the honor and glory of God, remembering the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians, "Therefore, whether you eat, or drink, or whatsoever else you do, do all to the glory of God." (I Cor. x, 31.)

With all his labors, Blessed Simon did not neglect the primary object of his vocation, the cultivation of the virtues. Just as he labored in the garden to bring perfection among the plants and flowers, so in the garden of his heart he sowed the seeds of perfection and labored to bring each to maturity.

His penances for this purpose were severe and continual. Five entire Lents he fasted on bread and water. Frequently he passed two whole days without taking even this slight nourishment. His fastings were so excessive that soon he began to weaken, and it was necessary for his superiors to mitigate the severity of his penances. For twenty years he wore an iron chain that must have caused him great suffering during his labors in the garden.

Nor was he less faithful in the spirit of prayer. The day may have been excessively fatiguing by reason of constant and unremitting labor, yet Blessed Simon never absented himself from the nightly Office. His exactitude in every detail of the religious life was most edifying. As his labors in the daytime shortened his time for prayer, he was accustomed to curtail his sleep, that he might find time to converse with his heavenly Father. True son of St. Dominic, he disciplined himself regularly for his own faults, those of his neighbor, and for the conversion of the infidel. In his humble position of lay-brother he strove by his prayers and penances to assist the Fathers in their work of saving souls.

As is ever the case, the enemy of men's salvation could not endure such heroic sanctity. Again and again he tempted the good friar. When cunning failed, and sweet words had no avail, the demon resorted to violence. He tripped up the holy man as he walked through the fields, or threw him violently against

sharp rocks. While at prayer, Satan never failed to annoy him, that he might divide his attention or force from him some expression of impatience. All the attacks of hell, however, proved unavailing to disturb the tranquillity of the servant of God. Like another Tobias, God tried the faithfulness of his servant by many and severe afflictions. At the age of fifty-seven he became blind. Little by little the severity of his life undermined his strength till finally his infirmities became so great that he was forced to remain on a couch in a reclining position. To many this would have been a hard lot, but not so with Blessed Simon. He made use even of his infirmities to merit grace and honor God. Our Blessed was frequently favored with a heavenly visitation. An angel came to console him, and assure him that God was mindful of his sufferings, and would make him victorious over all the attacks of hell. At times his couch was seen surrounded by a bright light and a voice was heard, saying, "Fear not, Simon, for thou hast found favor before God."

Blessed Simon had a special devotion to St. Catherine of Alexandria. On one occasion when he was suffering from a severe headache the saint appeared to him and cured him. Nor were these the only favors granted to this humble lay-brother. He was the recipient of many and signal blessings. Among the various visions with which he was favored was one of Our Lord. Our Blessed Mother, St. Dominic and St. Peter Martyr appeared to him at different times to console and assist him in the struggle against the enemy of his soul.

Blessed Simon's reputation for sanctity was widespread. November 3, 1319, this faithful servant of the Lord was called to his reward. The people came in such crowds to honor the holy man, and to carry away some relic or article that had touched his body, that two days hardly sufficed to accomodate those who would honor him. His habit was literally cut to pieces, so that it was necessary to clothe him anew before burial.

Devotion to our Blessed has not waned for many centuries. His body was frequently moved from place to place, but finally on the demand of the people of St. Archangel it was laid to rest in the Collegiate Church of that place, where it lies today.

In the year 1817 Pius VII confirmed by Bull the cult in honor of Blessed Simon, and placed this humble lay-brother of the Order of Friars Preachers on the altar of holy mother the Church.

—Paul Curran, O. P.