

## HAPPY SAXON

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HOSE who think enough about sanctity to make excuses for their own non-attainment of that high state often object that the life of a saint is the life of a kill-joy. A saint, according to them, is one who never smiles, one for whom laughter is a sin. These people think of saints solely in images of long drawn faces, cast down eyelids, and emaciated frames.

To such pessimists the Church's sole response has been the canonization of some of the happiest, wittiest and most lovable and entertaining men and women of all time. Such characters as Philip Neri, "the funniest man in Rome," or that amiable, vital Carmelite mystic, Teresa of Avila, or the much misunderstood troubador, Dominic de Guzman, who walked and sang his way through all of Europe—these are flat contradictions to the claims of those who would make out the saints to be—for want of a more expressive term—a collection of Gloomy Gusses. Even today the Church continues to canonize those who have laughed, as witness Saint Thomas More. This famous Chancellor of England has been rather exclusively called "the saint who could enjoy a joke," instead of *one of the saints* who could enjoy a joke. Then, too, in 1935, the Church raised to her altars one Don Bosco, acrobat, tight-rope walker, and entertainer extraordinary. Because he could, and often did, tell a story, crack a joke, walk a rope or climb a steeple in order to gain a soul, or at least a hearing for Christ, Don Bosco can now number sanctity among his varied accomplishments.

Among this happy number, who were not less happy because more holy, can be placed the Dominican, Blessed Jordan of Saxony. Not as spectacular as some of his fellow saints, he is, nevertheless, their equal in joyousness and loveableness. Although possessed of the gift of tears, he could ring gales of laughter from a group of hungry, travelling Friars even though they had nothing to eat for supper.

Most German authors and historians agree that Jordan was born in Westphalia, a part of old Saxony, Paderborn being his native diocese. The date of his birth is uncertain, but very probably he was

born in 1190. According to many competent historians he belonged to the noble German family of the Counts of Eberstein.

Jordan's education was begun in his native land, but it was not long before his extraordinary talent and industry singled him out as a student possessing great possibilities and therefore deserving of the best schooling that could be obtained. Accordingly it was decided to send him to the University of Paris, there to round out his studies under some of the most famous masters in Christendom.

So off to the French capital went the young Saxon. He was in his late teens and life with all its beauty, gaiety, and romance was beginning to unfold itself to him. Being a level-headed boy, however, Jordan did not allow himself to be swept off his feet by the whirl of university life. Unlike the average student of that day he took no part in the current town-gown battles nor in the wild revelings of the University. His habits of study and his sturdy German piety, combined with an uncommon amount of common sense, aided him in avoiding these pitfalls.

But his veins did not run with milk and water. His nature, always affectionate, craved companionship, friendship, love. It was during these first years at the University that Jordan met Henry of Utrecht, sometimes called Henry of Cologne. Between them there grew up a friendship which was to be carried over into eternity. In later years Jordan declared that as far as he knew he never loved any man as much as this friend. The two were much alike: both had charm, grace, tactfulness, an amazing faculty for winning others, and above all, the inestimable gift of personal happiness. It is said of Henry of Cologne that no one ever saw him out of humor.

In the spring of 1219 a Saint came to Paris. He was Dominic de Guzman. Jordan, who had already completed ten years of intensive study and who had attained considerable intellectual and spiritual renown, hastened to hear the celebrated founder of the preaching Friars. He was evidently greatly impressed by what he heard and saw for he approached the saint in confession. Dominic, learning that Jordan was already in sub-deacon's orders, advised him to take the diaconate immediately. However, it was not until the fall that the German youth, after listening to a sermon by the beloved Friar Preacher, Reginald of Orleans, determined to join the Dominicans.

After prayer and consultation, Jordan made a promise to Reginald that he would enter the Order. Then he was off to persuade Henry of Cologne and another friend named Leo, both of whom were thinking quite seriously of their vocations, to join the Friars. After some difficulty, especially with Henry, Jordan's charm and powers

of persuasion won out. Many other youths were to fall under the spell of the Saxon's eloquence and renounce all to follow the Divine Master, but this first conversion is remarkable in that Jordan himself had not formally entered the Order when he made his first conquest. All three friends received the habit of Dominic on Ash Wednesday, February 12, 1220, from the hands of the well known Father Matthew of France.

Jordan's rise in the Order was phenomenal. Two months after his reception, by virtue of an extraordinary privilege, he left to attend the first General Chapter of the Order to be held in Bologna in the following May. Then followed a year's teaching and preaching at Paris, and so popular did he become that the young Dominican found the entire French capital at his feet. The second General Chapter, which assembled in Bologna in May, 1221, appointed him Provincial of Lombardy, although it does not appear that Jordan himself was in attendance at this convocation. Undoubtedly the report of his great influence in Paris had reached the ears of Saint Dominic and the capitular fathers.

But this was only the beginning. Dominic died early in August, 1221. The elective chapter, meeting ten months later, unanimously chose Jordan of Saxony as their second Master General and the successor of the sainted Spaniard.

Events had happened almost too rapidly for Jordan. Named Provincial fifteen months after receiving the habit, only a year later he was elected Master General. The swift advancement was bewildering for one whose ideas of his own capabilities certainly did not warrant such a post of responsibility and trust. However, the Provincials and other representatives of the provinces seem to have been well informed as to Jordan's talents. As one historian, commenting on this phase of his life, has written: "Possibly the only person surprised at the choice was Jordan himself."<sup>1</sup>

The task of Master General, then as now, was not an easy one. To begin with, Jordan was successor to a Saint, and his fellow religious were naturally inclined to compare the new General and his ways with those of the beloved Dominic. Yet one may be pardoned the supposition that the very reason for Jordan's election was that he had already been favorably compared with the holy founder. On the other hand, Jordan could not have been more than thirty-two years of age, yet under him were men much older and far more experienced. They were from the higher walks of life, scholars with

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<sup>1</sup> O'Daniel, V. F., O.P. *The First Disciples of St. Dominic* p. 403.

international reputations, preachers whose voices had been heard in many of the Cathedrals in Christendom. In short, Jordan had been put at the head of what was perhaps the most talented group of men in all Europe. Moreover the various communities of nuns, so dear to the heart of Saint Dominic, looked to his successor for the same help and encouragement which they had received from their Father.

For fifteen years Jordan ruled the Order, and his success was truly remarkable. All loved him, came to him. He was never too busy for anyone, always in good humor, often positively jovial. The old French saying, "a saint who is sad is indeed a sad sort of saint" certainly found no application in his life. Like Saint Dominic's friend, the Poor Man of Assisi, Jordan left "sadness to the devil." While he had an unquestioned genius for organization, the real secret of his success seems to have been his personal tact, understanding, and considerateness in the handling of individuals. As Father Mortier writes in his *Histoire des Maîtres Généraux*. "Jordan was a charmer of men." He held his subjects completely under his spell and, what is more, they loved it.

Even more than Dominic before him, Jordan wielded a tremendous influence over the young. From town and country and university they came to hear him preach. Listening to his silvery eloquence, they forgot all else and stayed behind begging the white wool and black mantle of the Friars Preachers. During his Generalship Jordan admitted to the Order more than one thousand young men.

On one occasion, early in 1234, a young German lad came to Jordan seeking admission. Now the General had a reputation for giving the habit to what some of the older and more conservative fathers, in disapproval, probably called "babies." However this particular individual must have been a mere child; for we find the General telling him, because of his extreme youth, to wait a while longer. That year at St. James' in Paris, twenty candidates were to be admitted and accordingly twenty habits were ordered and made ready for reception day. Jordan presided at the ceremony and when he had clothed the twenty young men he noticed there was still one waiting. That there had been twenty applicants he was sure. That twenty habits had been made he was equally certain. What then could be the explanation? How account for this forlorn and embarrassed candidate waiting to be clothed in a habit which was not forthcoming? Looking over the band of newly clothed Dominicans the explanation was soon discovered. Standing in line, trembling, yet radiant in his new white habit and black cappa, was the little German lad who had been refused admittance. Jordan rose to the occasion in magnificent

style. "One of you," he said, addressing the little band of novices with a gentle smile, "stole the habit from me." That was all there was to it. The persistent little German remained and became a Dominican of note.

And so, year after year, under the leadership of this man from the North, the Order founded by the man from the South thrived and increased. Provinces were created, houses opened, chairs obtained in the best universities; and all the while the ranks of the Order were being swelled by some of the noblest and most learned men of Europe. God undoubtedly was with these "watchdogs of the Lord," for their spiritual advance far outstripped their material and numerical growth.

Blessed Jordan of Saxony has not suffered as much at the hands of well meaning hagiographers as have many of his contemporaries. His biographers have recorded many human and lovable traits—traits too conspicuously absent from the biographies of many of his age. We know not only that Jordan was gentle, patient, affable, and well liked by everyone, but also that he had reputation for wit. It was probably because of this that members of the hierarchy and of other Orders, with whom Jordan frequently came into contact, used to ply him with teasing questions. Holy men, then as now, were not averse to a good joke and Jordan could hold his own with the wittiest of them.

On one occasion some members of the hierarchy were attempting to engage Jordan in repartee. Someone wished to know why it was that not all of the Bishops taken from his Order and that of St. Francis had proved quite as exemplary as had been expected. "You should be able to answer better than I can," the Friar replied, "since the decrease in fervor has always come after they have passed to your society. In the Order their faults were corrected."

To one who inquired why more masters in the arts than theologians entered the Order Jordan replied with a wit which revealed no little appreciation of human nature. "Peasants," he said, "because wont to drink water, more readily become intoxicated on good wine, when they get it, than the wealthy, who are accustomed to it. So masters in the arts, imbibing only the philosophy of Plato or Aristotle through the week are easily taken by the word of God which they hear on Sundays and feast days. To theologians sermon matter is not new, for they have often heard and studied such truths. They are like sacristans, whose familiarity with the church causes them to forget to genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament."

Shortly after the General Chapter held at Paris in 1236, Jordan determined to visit the new Dominican missions in the Holy Land.

So ill had he been during the Chapter that, to the great disappointment of the assembled Friars, he was unable to deliver his customary address. Despite his illness Jordan determined to visit his missionary sons in the Holy Land, since he appears to have had a premonition that this would be his last opportunity. Accordingly, at the end of the Chapter he set out for Palestine.

We know very little of this journey except that he and his two companions visited the Convents at Ptolemais, Damascus, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. The rest is not hard to imagine. For a man of Jordan's deep faith and piety a visit to any place sanctified by the footsteps of the Master could not help but prove happy as well as holy. As one writer sums up this journey: "It must have been the spiritual feast of his life."<sup>2</sup>

Death overtook Jordan suddenly and from an unexpected quarter. Sailing from Ptolemais for Naples on February 13, 1237, the vessel bearing the General and his two companions encountered a terrific storm and was wrecked. Along with ninety-nine others, and while still almost in sight of land, they were drowned. After the storm the bodies of the three Dominicans were washed ashore. Every night until they were brought in, God in His Providence permitted bright lights in the form of crosses to shine over their bodies.

Miracles followed immediately and continued for many years. The sanctity of some men, like that of the beggar St. Benedict Joseph Labre, remains completely hidden until after death; that of others shines forth almost from the day of their birth. Jordan's sanctity was of the latter kind. His death and the loss it occasioned only accentuated what had always been known. In life he was popularly recognized as a saint; in death he was even more popularly venerated. But it was not until many centuries later that the Friars Preachers received permission to say Mass and recite the Divine Office in Jordan's honor. Leo XII, after a thorough investigation of the immemorial veneration paid to Jordan, confirmed his cult in 1826.

This present year 1937 marks the seventh centenary of the passing of Jordan of Saxony. Like so many other Dominican saints and saintly Dominicans he is today neither popular nor unpopular. Outside the Dominican Order he is little known; within the Order much of his loveliness is little known. It seems especially fitting that during this year Dominicans the world over should strive to bring the example of Jordan of Saxony's happy life to an unhappy

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<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 429.

world. He is a brother and second father to all Dominicans, a man who was one of the most joyous of the saints as well as one of the most saintly of the joyous.

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### DISTANCE

CAMILLUS LILLIE, O.P.

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You piled the mountains till I cannot see;  
 You dug the chasms deep, I cannot cross;  
 You spread the trackless plain so far between,  
 You muffled all my cries, and teared my loss.  
 You robbed me of my freedom, tongue, and sight,  
 To leave me bound in solitude and night.