

CENTENARY OF THE DOMINICAN RESTORATION IN FRANCE (1839-1939)

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THE French Revolution which completely overturned the previously existing social order in France swept like a storm over her religious institutes. The religious orders were despoiled and abolished, their members persecuted, exiled, martyred. Then, little by little, because they can never be annihilated, they began to return and grow strong again, standing witnesses to the truth of Lacordaire's famous phrase: "Oaks and monks are immortal." This is a phrase we often hear and love to repeat. Yet—as Father H. D. Noble, that eminent writer about Lacordaire, warns us—there is danger that in taking it from its context we deprive it of much of its original vigor and leave only the vague sense of a romantic phrase. It was in his *Memorial to the French People* for the re-establishment of the Friars Preachers in France that Lacordaire first wrote it, and there it possesses a singular force. He sets out to prove that the monastic life can never die because it belongs to the very essence of human liberty and human society. Whoever attempts to suppress its vitality and destroy its germ will labor in vain. "For," he continues, "nature and society have an incorruptible sap and they will always laugh at those speculators who think they can change the nature of things and kill by a law oaks and monks: oaks and monks are immortal."

Among the Orders abolished by the Revolution was that of St. Dominic. For half a century, in the land that had once nourished and sheltered its first wearers, the white and black habit of the Friars was not to be seen—neither in the convents, the pulpits, nor on the roads and streets of France. But, when in the spring of 1839 Père Lacordaire's *Memorial* appeared, and when in April of that same year with his French confreres he received the Dominican habit at the convent of the Minerva in Rome, the first steps in the Dominican restoration had been taken. "We may be asked," he said, "why we have preferred reviving an old Order to founding a new one; we have two things to put forward in reply: first, the grace of founding a new order is one of the rarest conferred by God upon His Saints. We have it not. In the second place, were God to give us the power of creating a religious order, we feel sure that, after all due reflection,

we could discover nothing newer, nothing better adapted to our own time and our own wants than the rule of St. Dominic. It is ancient, not antiquated, and we cannot see the necessity of placing our ingenuity upon the rack for the sole pleasure of dating from yesterday."¹

Just one hundred years have passed since Lacordaire penned his famed *Memorial*. To commemorate this glorious centenary two booklets have been published at Paris during the past year. One, *Un Centenaire 1839-1939 Le P. Lacordaire Ressuscite en France L'Ordre de S. Dominique*,² by Father H. D. Noble, O.P., concerns itself precisely with the work of re-establishment. With newly discovered documents and letters to supplement already known facts, Father Noble retraces the main steps in Lacordaire's procedure. The re-establishment of the Friars Preachers in France is shown to be a long and complex undertaking lasting in its crucial phase from 1838 to 1844. It was the period that marked the crisis of Lacordaire's life. The labor it involved and the difficulties it entailed tasked to the utmost all his resources, his admirable human qualities, and his supernatural spirit. Apparently insuperable barriers met him at every turn. There were first the interior difficulties with regard to his vocation. His new mode of life made severe demands upon his proud, independent nature. It required a change that cost him dearly. He tells us himself that the mere thought of sacrificing his liberty to a rule and superiors terrified him. In the end, however, the call of grace triumphed over the weakness of his nature and, once decided, he went forward courageously to meet the trials that awaited him. Then there were the external obstacles arising from the unsettled condition of society and government at this period in French history. He had to win over public opinion, placate certain hostile political parties, persuade an antagonistic government of the justice of his cause.

Step by step Lacordaire surmounted all these barriers, never turning aside until he had realized his aims completely—"until in all the pulpits and in all the streets of France the religious habit had regained the freedom of citizenship that it lost in 1790."³ Indeed, it can be said in all truth, as Father Noble points out, that what Lacordaire accomplished belongs not merely to Dominican history but to the history of all the religious institutes of his time in France. The Christian Brothers, Jesuits, Trappists, Friars Minor, not to mention various societies of laymen, had already reconstituted themselves there. But the publicity which Lacordaire gave to his enterprise, the

¹ Lacordaire, *A Memorial to the French People* (New York, 1869), p. 71.

² Lethieulleux, Paris, 1938.

³ Noble, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

the victory that it gained, thanks to his courage and popularity, contributed to consolidate the establishment of the Orders already returned and to open to others the gates of liberty.

A man and his work can scarce be separated. Our knowledge of the Dominican restoration in France would still be incomplete, if we stopped only at Lacordaire's actual accomplishments. After all, what he was has as much importance for us as what he did. As his biographer, Père Chocarne, puts it: "His religious life speaks to us more eloquently than his oratory." And so it is that *Le P. Lacordaire dans l'Intimité du Monastère*,⁴ by Canon Gellon, provides an opportune and welcome complement to Father Noble's booklet mentioned above. In the first we have seen Lacordaire in action. Now it is the contemplative side of his life that appears in the foreground, as we see him in the cloistered silence of the convent at Chalais. It is remarkable how closely the character of this restorer of the Dominican Order in France blends with that of his father, St. Dominic. In both the figure of the apostle is happily balanced with that of the contemplative. We can see reflected in Lacordaire the following description of his Order's founder: "That which especially characterizes him is the concord, the harmonious synthesis of virtues, apparently the most contrary: gentleness with energy, love of study with love of action, genius for contemplation with the spirit of organization . . . a frank intelligence, an affectionate heart ,an intense energy. He never superabounded in a single aptitude but always preserved a perfect balance and always knew how to still unjust curiosities, undue tendernesses and temerarious boldness."⁵

In the convent of Chalais Lacordaire often rested from his apostolic labors. Originally a Benedictine abbey, then a Carthusian convent, it had been seized by the government in 1793 and sold as national property. Lacordaire bought it in 1844 for fifty thousand francs, payable in thirty years, and made it the first regular convent with novitiate for the newly restored Order in France. Lost in the secluded quiet of the mountains, surrounded on all sides by the beauties of nature, Chalais was his favorite spot. He enjoyed its solitude and its loveliness, the charity and peace that thrived there. Here he kept the rule in all its austerity, prayed and studied—the Scriptures and the *Summa* especially—recreated with his brothers, and at Compline in the evening sang with them that hymn so dear to all Dominicans, the *Salve Regina*. "You would not believe," he wrote, "the

⁴ Lethielleux, Paris, 1939.

⁵ Petitot, Hyacinth, O.P., "St. Dominic—His Physical and Moral Physiognomy," *Dominican Spirituality*, (Milwaukee, 1934), pp. 34-35.

happiness a poor religious experiences when with his own: it surpasses all imagining. I am more and more content with my state and thankful to God who has called me to it. Chalais is the center of my whole life.”⁶

The statement so often made by Lacordaire that France might have more able sons than he but none more devoted was admirably proved by his life. He dedicated his talents and energies to preserve her spirit of Catholicity and her passion for liberty and justice. It was on these characteristic qualities of the French people that he rested his cause when he appealed for the return of the Order of Preachers. “France,” he declared, “is Catholic by the triple virtue of her history, her spirit of devotedness, and the lustre of her genius. Her Catholicity shall cease only in her tomb. But, at the same time, France is a land of liberty. . . . What are we to infer from these two fundamental principles of French nationality? What, but that they ought to combine and perfect each other? What farther infer, but that their obstinate conflict strikes at the very existence of the country?”⁷ This was a challenge France could not refuse. To her everlasting credit and her immense advantage she did not.

The thing that mattered most to Lacordaire was realized. Generous French blood flowed once more under the habit of St. Dominic. His children were carrying on the glorious tradition of the Order. By teaching, preaching, writing, ministering, they were bringing God closer to the people of France and the people of France closer to God. The small group that came from Bosco to Chalais grew rapidly. In 1853 there was held the first provincial chapter of the restored French Province. Then in 1858 the Province of Lyons was established and in 1865 that of Toulouse. In 1923 the Third Order Congregation for the education of youth, organized by Lacordaire, passed over into the First Order. The combined membership of all these French Provinces in 1931 numbered 814.

Today Lacordaire’s brethren, filled with the true spirit of St. Dominic, pursue their holy Patriarch’s ceaseless quest for souls. *Contemplata aliis tradere!* Their life consists in contemplating the truth themselves and in passing on the fruit of that contemplation to others. A century ago that great ideal of St. Dominic was extinct in France. But God raised up Père Lacordaire to make it live again. A hundred years of growth and expansion, of spiritual conquest and fruitful activity have set the seal upon his work—the work of one who believed that monks are immortal like oaks, and dedicated his life to manifesting their imperishable vitality.

⁶ Gellon, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

⁷ Lacordaire, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

