

THE TESTIMONY OF VENTURA OF VERONA

RAPHAEL GALLAGHER, O.P.



THE nine witnesses to the life, conversation and passing of St. Dominic heard by the Inquisitors at Bologna, in 1233, Ventura of Verona was the first. This friar had been admitted to the Order by our Holy Founder himself early in 1220.¹ At the general chapter of the following year, he was made prior of the convent of St. Nicholas at Bologna.² His position placed him in such intimate contact with the Saint during Dominic's final year on earth that his testimony is invaluable. Ventura was one of the last with whom Dominic discussed the affairs of the Order. Moreover, he had the great privilege of imparting final absolution to his dying father. His testimony, as here recorded, is translated from the Acts of the Canonization of St. Dominic prepared by Father Angelus Walz, O.P.³

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On the sixth of August Brother Ventura of Verona, a priest and prior of the Dominican convent at Bologna, was sworn as the first witness. He testified that he entered the Order of Preachers more than thirteen years before at the urging and counsel of the blessed brother Dominic, founder and first master of the Order, received the habit from him and made profession into his hands. At that time Dominic himself, under the Pope, had full power as to the regulation, management and discipline of the entire Order. In the same year the witness himself was present in Bologna at the first general chapter. At that time Dominic desired that diffinitors, who would have full power over the whole Order and above the master and the diffinitors individually, should be appointed in the chapter. They would have the capacity to legislate, regulate, assign and punish, with due respect for the authority of the general. The wit-

¹ Taurisano, I., O.P., *Fontes Selecti Vitae S. Dominici de Gusman* (Rome), p. 9, n. (d).

² *Analecta Ordinis Praedicatorum*, IV, (Rome, 1899-1900), p. 164.

³ *Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica*, XVI, (Rome, 1935), p. 123-132.

ness accompanied brother Dominic in the city of Bologna and was also with him in his travels outside the city through the province of Lombardy, being his intimate companion in journeying, at table and at prayer.

Ventura likewise said that in going along the road Dominic wished that the word of God be proposed by himself or others to nearly all who accompanied him. This is known because the witness frequently saw it happen. Moreover, Dominic always wished to dispute, talk or read of God or to pray while journeying. When travelling he celebrated Mass almost every day if he found a church. When he sang Mass, he shed many tears. If there was a church at the lodging, he always went to pray there. Almost always when he was outside the convent, when he heard the first call for matins from a monastery, he arose, aroused the brothers and with great devotion recited the entire diurnal and nocturnal office in proper order so that nothing was omitted. When travelling after compline, he himself kept silence and made his companions be silent as if they were in a convent. Also, as they went along in the morning, the brethren had to observe silence to the hour of tierce. And while journeying, he took his rest as he walked during the day, clothed and shod, but, as the witness believed, with his hose removed.

He also declared that in going along the way the founder of the Order observed a continual fast from the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross to the feast of the Resurrection, and kept also all fasts determined by the Church for the summer and Fridays. On his journeys he uncomplainingly ate what was given to him, with the exception that he did not knowingly partake of meat or other food prepared with meat. If at any time on these journeys food and drink were poorly provided for, he then seemed to rejoice. This is known from the actual experience of the witness. Moreover, when he came to a place where the brothers had a convent, having gathered them together, he preached, explained the word of God and offered great consolation to them.

Ventura continued on to say that when friar Dominic was in a convent where a stop was made, he conformed to the custom of the monastery in food and at table and observed the rule wholly and fully and labored to the extent of his ability that his brothers should follow it. This is also known from actual observation. There was no recollection that he had seen or heard him doing or saying anything to the contrary. Nor

had the witness ever heard or seen that he said a harmful word or that he detracted from anyone. Ventura also said that the same holy brother Dominic was wise, prudent, patient, benign, plenteous in mercy, friendly; in the whole course of his own life he did not believe that he had seen any man, all things considered, who flourished more in virtue, although he had known and seen many good and religious men in various parts of the world. He also stated that he heard his general confession, concerning all his acts, in the presence of many priests and others, in the illness which sent him to God. Because of this general confession he believed that he never sinned mortally and that he preserved virginity. Afterward Dominic said to the witness in secret: "Brother, I have sinned in publicly speaking of my virginity before my brethren. I ought not to have mentioned this."

The witness further stated that, when he was on the road, he visited the religious places, no matter of what order they happened to be, preached to the community and encouraged them to good. He himself frequently saw this. If any of the brothers of his own or another order suffered temptation or trouble and went to Dominic to speak about this, he greatly encouraged them so that almost all were deeply consoled when they left him. Ventura often saw this throughout the province of Lombardy; namely, at Milan, at the monastery of Columba, and in many other places. He also said that, unless impeded by great necessity, he gathered the brothers and preached to them almost every day. The holy man wept much and brought them to tears. Moreover, he was an ardent lover of the rule and rigorously punished the faults of the brothers; but he imposed the penalties with such sweetness and kind words that the brethren patiently sustained them. He was also assiduous at office. The prior of Bologna testified that Dominic passed the greater part and frequently the whole of the night in prayer while weeping freely. When asked how he knew this, the witness answered that he very often found him in the church weeping and praying, and sometimes dozing after having been overcome by sleepiness. On account of the many vigils he often nodded at table.

The one giving testimony believed that he (Dominic) returned around the end of July from the curia of the Lord Ugolino, at the time bishop of Ostia and apostolic legate to

Venice.⁴ Ventura was certain that Venice was the place. And brother Dominic came back greatly fatigued because of the excessive heat. Although he was very tired, he spoke with the witness, who was then a new prior, and brother Rodulfo for a great part of the night concerning affairs of the Order. Since the prior wished that he sleep, he asked brother Dominic to go and rest and not rise for matins during the night. The holy man did not acquiesce to the suggestion but entered the church and prayed throughout the night. Nevertheless, he was present at matins. Ventura heard this from the brethren and from Dominic himself. After office the prior learned from the brothers that the master's head ached. He then began obviously to weaken in the illness which sent him to the Lord. Ventura went on to declare that when Dominic fell sick he did not wish to lie on a couch but on a woolen sack. He had the novices called to him and with the sweetest words and a lively zeal encouraged and exhorted them to good. He so patiently sustained this illness and others that he always seemed to be cheerful and agreeable.

While Dominic was seriously ill they carried him to a healthier place, St. Mary of the Hills. When he believed he was dying, he called the prior and brothers. About twenty brothers went there with Ventura. After they assembled about him, lying at full length, he began to preach and delivered a very good and moving sermon. He believed that they then anointed him. Dominic then heard from some that the monk-rector of the Church said that if Dominic died there the monk-rector would not permit him to be carried away but would have him buried in the same church. When the witness himself reported that to the holy founder, Dominic replied: "Forbid that I be buried except under the feet of my brethren. Carry me outside to die on the road so that you may bury me in our own church." Then he was taken up and carried back to the church of St. Nicholas in Bologna, although it was feared that he might die on the way. After an hour there, he had this witness called and said to him: "Prepare yourselves." And when the prior and the other brothers had solemnly prepared themselves for the commendation of a soul and had gathered about him, Dominic

⁴Ugolino Conti became Pope Gregory IX and "on July 13, 1234, solemnly gave his personal testimony to his (Dominic's) sanctity, and enjoined the universal Church to honour him as a saint." cf. Mann; H. K.; *The Lives of the Popes in the Middle Ages* (London, 1925), XIII, p. 200.

said to the prior and brothers: "Wait a little while." While waiting, the prior said to him: "Father, you know how you leave us desolate and sad. Remember to pray for us to God." The blessed friar Dominic, with hands raised to heaven, prayed: "Holy Father, Thou knowest I have freely remained steadfast in Thy Will, and have guarded and kept those whom Thou hast given me. I recommend them to Thee. Keep and guard them." And Ventura said that he had heard from the brothers that when they asked him concerning himself, he answered them: "I will be more useful and fruitful to you after death than I was in life." Then, after a short interval, Dominic commanded the prior and brothers: "Begin." And they solemnly began the office for the commendation of a soul. The witness believed that the dying man himself said the office with them because he moved his lips. While the office was being said, he gave up the ghost. They firmly believed that the spirit left him when these words were said: *Subvenite sancti Dei, occurrere angeli Domini, suscipientes animam eius et offerentes eam in conspectu altissimi.*⁵ Ventura believed that it was part of the benignity and providence of God that the lord Ugolino, bishop of Ostia, now the Pope, and the lord patriarch of Aquileia and many venerable bishops and abbots were present at his burial. The bishop of Ostia himself, the now reigning pontiff, celebrated the Mass, commended the soul and performed the exequies. Dominic departed to God twelve years ago from the last feast of St. Sixtus.

In the winter of the same year in which he died, a strong odor was perceived in the old church in which he was buried, through the entire church and especially about the sepulchre. The witness himself smelled it. Moreover, he heard many brothers, still living, of the convent, say they perceived it. This lasted for many days, but they, although firmly believing that it came from the tomb, did not know what scent it was. He also said that he heard and firmly believed that God worked many miracles through the blessed Dominic in his death and after his demise in this and following years. He believed and said this because many men and women came to the sepulchre with candles, images and votive offerings, saying that God had performed miracles for them or theirs through the merits of the holy Dominic. Some wished to close the tomb of our

⁵ "Come to his assistance, ye Saints of God, come forth to meet him, ye Angels of the Lord: Receiving his soul: Offering it in the sight of the Most High."

brother and father and to cover it with silk cloths, but the fearful brethren forbade this so that the Order might not be troubled by the multitude and lest some might say that the friars did this or permitted it to be done because of cupidity or ostentation.

The prior gave further testimony that when the body had to be transferred from the place where it was to the place where it now is, by command of the ruler of Bologna, many honored citizens, fearing lest it be secretly taken away from them guarded the coffin for many days. Hence, when the brothers came at night to open the casket in the presence of the ruler, many citizens of Bologna, other honored men, religious, bishops and laics, they found the sepulchre tightly closed and the cement so hard and strong that they could scarcely lift the top stone. When this stone had been removed, a very sweet and wonderful aroma came forth. It was unfamiliar to all who were there and of such a nature that it seemed to surpass all odors while not having the scent of any human thing. After lifting the rock, they found a wooden chest, tightly closed and fastened with iron bolts. The body of brother Dominic rested in this. The brethren likewise opened the casket and immediately noticed a much greater fragrance. The bones of the body which were in the old chest, were placed in a new one well locked with a key, which the ruler always held and holds. Later, at break of day, on the arrival of the archbishop and many bishops, it was opened and gave forth the same smell. The chest with the bones was interred in a new sepulchre by the archbishop and other bishops. The same sepulchre was opened on the eighth day in the presence of the ruler of Bologna, many other citizens, master Jordan, the prior provincial, and many other priors and brothers. Then master Jordan held in his hands the head of the saintly Dominic as three hundred brethren of the Order of Preachers and others kissed it. Moreover, they all sensed the same indescribable scent. This wonderful aroma surpassing description remained on the hands of master Jordan and the witness and all who touched the bones.

Asked how he knew all these things, Ventura replied that he was present at the events related above. He noticed the odor not only on the bones, vestments, casket and dust but also on his own hands and those of the other friars who touched any of the above-mentioned. He also said that often to the present day he smells this unknown aroma.

The prior testified further that Dominic was so zealous for souls that he extended his charity and compassion not only to the faithful but also to infidels and gentiles and the damned in hell. He wept freely for them and was very fervent in preaching and in sending preachers, so much so that he desired to go and preach to the gentiles. Again asked how he knew this, Ventura replied that he heard it from him and from other brothers. In such occupations and disputations the witness frequently was with Dominic.