

ST. DOMINIC AND A MODERN MAN

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LIVING by the past is not living in the past. It is taking fruit of seed long since sown and strengthening oneself by its nourishment. Many today would scoff at the Rule of St. Dominic. They would have no doubt of its being an out-moded tradition. But one very recent and most modern man took up that "relic" of a Rule and showed the power latent in it. He was no reactionary; rather he belonged to that select coterie who are far ahead of their time. His life showed how many of us have faltered behind under the guise of advancement. From Anglicanism he had made the long journey to Rome, but he didn't stop there. As far as weak man can judge, he continued on an even more arduous journey to heaven. His name was Eric Gill, the English author and artist.

On his thirty-first birthday, in 1913, Eric Gill and his wife were baptized and embraced the Faith of Roman Catholicism. A week later three little daughters followed in their parents' footsteps. Of his final decision to enter within the fold of Catholicism he writes these words in his "Autobiography": "Religion was the first necessity, and that meant the rule of God. If then there be a God, it is obviously foolish to go against His rule. If there be God, the whole world must be ruled in His name. If there be a religion it must be a world religion, a catholicism. In so far as my religion were true it must be catholic. In so far as the Catholic religion were catholic it must be true!"¹ Thus he found "the way, and the truth, and the life."²

Convinced that "the binding truth" for modern man was "the way that leads to life," Eric Gill discovered that the Church of Rome was not dead but very much alive. Contrary to the opinion of his contemporaries, firm roots and fruit there were in plenty, and very good fruit, though apparently fruit of the past. He could not believe that the way of life and work represented by modern Europe was mainly a product of the influence of the Catholic Church, that the way of life and work was Christian, normal or human. His observation was that the life and work in the world of modern times was neither human nor normal nor Christian, and thus modern times

¹ Gill, *Autobiography*, p. 173, Devin-Adair Co., N. Y., 1941.

² John 14: 6.

were not a product of Christianity or Catholicism. The modern way had come into existence subsequently to the decay of the power of the Church in molding men's minds, so that the modern way flourished in inverse proportion to the degree of Catholic influence.

After his conversion to the true Faith Eric Gill became a member of an Order within the Church, one of the living "branches," whose motto is "Truth." He, too, was to be strengthened by the nourishment of seed long since sown and declared dead, but in reality very much alive. The particular vocation of the Order of St. Dominic, the very reason of its being, its devotion to Truth, prompted him to become a Dominican Tertiary: "And on the other hand no sooner was I born into the company of the children of God, as a parallel necessity, I was compelled to consider the nature and conditions of the good life. Thus it was that we became Tertiaries of the Order of St. Dominic."³

Eric Gill's interpretation of "the good life" as a Tertiary of the "Order of Truth" was to receive a definite form. He and two associates, Desmonde Shute and Hilary Pepler, were determined to carry out their own design of Christian family life under the Rule of St. Dominic. Liturgical prayer, mortification and charitable and apostolic works for the Faith and the Church would dominate the spirit of a proposed guild of Christian and Catholic craftsmen. The founders of this proposed guild firmly believed "that a good life and a good civilization must necessarily be founded upon religious affirmations and therefore that such affirmations and a determination to live in accordance therewith, were the first necessity, for individuals, for societies and for nations."⁴ They believed a "return to the land" was a necessity, so it was in the country districts that they found a site for their guild.

Established in the country, the Guild of St. Joseph and St. Dominic at Ditchling gained a wide reputation as a fine spectacle of Christian family life. In the course of time a small chapel and a group of workshops were built, and there was an integrated life of work and prayer. Though the Guild was not a complete success chiefly because of financial reasons, Eric Gill was convinced that this mode of life, if properly supported, would save present-day society from the impending disaster being caused by the evils of industrial capitalism. In his opinion, we must return to the land as quickly as possible. Though he did not advocate that all Christian men and women engage themselves to live according to one or another of the

³ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Religious Rules, he believed that in order to counteract the "beastly spirit" of modern times, as many as possible should enroll themselves under the disciplines offered by religion in the special sense of the Religious Orders.

While the Rule of the Third Order was not written for such circumstances as those undertaken by the Guild of St. Joseph and St. Dominic, it was found to be adaptable with the proper authority to this form of life. The Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary was recited daily with its beautiful compilation of psalms and prayers and readings. Small acts of mortification were performed as means of discipline and training to attain the end of the Rule itself, Christian perfection. In the charitable and apostolic works which were carried on, "the chief influence at this time was our daily life as brethren of our guild." While Eric Gill admitted that he and his associates were over-ambitious and that their aims were not understood by their fellow Catholics, he found it impossible to think they were unsuccessful.

From Ditchling, Eric Gill and his family along with three other families went to Capel-y-ffin, on the borders of Brecon and Monmouth in Wales. The same work was continued here. A priest who lived nearby acted as chaplain and celebrated Mass each morning. A life "of quasi-religious regularity" was carried on. "Our working days may be likened to a box filled up, and crammed full too, with a variety of visible and tangible objects—the things we do and which all our companions know we do and see us doing. . . . Perhaps, if that has been the plan we have made for ourselves, we go to Holy Mass before breakfast (and this was our general rule and practice at Capel-y-ffin) and at intervals during the day we meet, at least some of us do, to say or sing some prayers and psalms. Thus, or in such a way, is the box of our day's doings filled up."⁵ After four years at Capel, the Gill family moved again, this time to Pigotts in Kilburn.

For the next three years repairs were made at their new abode in the Chiltern Hills. A chapel was made, blessed and approved and the first Mass at Pigotts was said by Father John O'Connor on June 7th, 1929. Father O'Connor, incidentally, and Father Vincent McNabb, O.P., were Eric Gill's most influential friends. ". . . Vincent McNabb and John O'Connor are in the very first rank of noble minds, and what I learned from them was as from the very fountains of the universal wisdom."⁶ The establishment of the chapel at

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 231, 232.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Pigotts Gill describes as "the Consummation of things." "Our earthly life is symbolized by the bread and wine. Under the appearance of bread and wine God gives Himself to us. Thus we are made sharers of His Divinity who saw fit to share our humanity. Thus man who was made in the beginning with the dignity of God's image, is yet more wonderfully renewed. I am saying these things by way of confession. I would not have anyone think that I became a catholic because I was 'convinced' of the truth, though I 'was' convinced of the truth. I became a catholic because I fell 'in love' with the truth. And love is an experience. I saw. I heard. I felt. I tasted. I touched. And that is what lovers do."

Some considered Eric Gill's life that of a dreamer but he was the most realistic of all. Not distracted by the nebulous things of this world, he kept his eyes on the eternal verities. Being human, he was not infallible, but in his apostolic life—his lettering, sculpturing, and his books he drew beauty from truth. Many modern minds will reject his ideas, but they may some day come to realize that he was not completely wrong, rather he was more nearly completely right. His mind was Dominican in its inspiration, for when St. Dominic founded the Order of Friars Preachers and established his Rule, he set before himself and his brethren the ideal of truth. Their life was to be one of heroic action in combatting the evils of the time. The dominant consideration of St. Dominic when he was planning his Order was the formation of a spiritual corporation in which some members of the immense society which is the Church are drawn together into a more intimate community with various branches of the Order supplementing one another. Father Joret, O.P., in his excellent book *Dominican Life* writes: "Because the Middle Ages were truly Christian, as well as profoundly human, the social spirit was then universally cultivated. In civil life it found expression in the guilds and corporations which, as we well know, were then so flourishing. It was cultivated from the religious point of view, and the Order of St. Dominic was one of the noblest outcomes of that movement."⁸ History gives testimony of the immediate success of the Order of St. Dominic in completely destroying the anti-religious force which appeared in the thirteenth century.

In the twentieth century, Eric Gill was witnessing the scourge of another heresy which was threatening the very life of society. He knew that the Rule of St. Dominic, enforcing as it did a Christian way of life, could help immeasurably in overcoming the onslaughts

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

⁸ Joret, O.P., *Dominican Life*, p. 54, Sands & Co., London, 1937.

of paganism. He longed for a return to the social spirit of the Catholic Middle Ages and for the guilds of the medieval towns. Huge cities and gigantic towns only caused him to shudder . . . "the salvation of England cannot be brought about by town improvements; it can only come by the land. The town, the holy city, is nourished upon elements drawn from the soil. The modern towns of our industrial England have no such nourishment. They draw their galvanic twitchings and palpitations (for you can hardly call it life) from machines. The modern town is a warren of business men. And though it is still dependent upon the country, it does not desire to be so; for it is slowly but surely turning agriculture into a mechanical or even a merely chemical industry. It will therefore not die only of mass murder (such as is going on this very day as I write—in London and Berlin . . .) and barrenness but also of poisoning."⁹ When Eric Gill spoke longingly of towns, he did not refer to those smaller replicas of the cities he feared. He meant little towns whose center was the Church, which drew nourishment from the soil, and which provided both a marketplace and a place of rest for those who came to it.

Some may think it strange that a man who was so deeply interested in the difficulties of present day life should turn to a centuries' old Rule for his own norm of life. For him, and he was absolutely right, the age-old Rule of St. Dominic was ageless. That Rule was his own personal guide to heaven, and the spirit of that Rule filled him with an intense yearning for company on the journey to God. A true radical, and every true Dominican is that, he tried to get to the roots of current evils and destroy their sources. The chief hope of his life was the very Dominican ambition of "re-integrating bed and board, the small farm and the workshop, the home and the school, earth and heaven."¹⁰ For nearly a quarter century he wrote and executed works of art, prayed, and lived for that end. When he died on November 17, 1940 what he accomplished did not fade into nothingness. In the words of the Editor of *Blackfriars*: "His art, his writing and speaking, his mode of living, were all marked with the one great quality of fearless and absorbing sincerity. His inspired chisel, his vigorous pen and his gentle but persuasive voice have gone; but his sculpture, his books, his teaching, the truth that for him was life, these will remain."¹¹ A modern man had met St. Dominic and found his answer to the needs of this our time.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 249, 250.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

¹¹ *Blackfriars Monthly*, Dec., 1940.