

LETTER OF THE MOST REVEREND FATHER MASTER GENERAL
ON THE OCCASION OF THE SEVENTH CENTENARY OF
THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. PETER OF VERONA

TO OUR BELOVED SONS IN CHRIST
PRIORS PROVINCIAL AND CONVENTUAL
MASTERS IN SACRED THEOLOGY
EX-PROVINCIALS, PREACHERS GENERAL
AND TO ALL THE FATHERS, BROTHERS, AND SISTERS
OF THE ORDER OF PREACHERS
WE

FR. EMMANUEL SUAREZ

PROFESSOR OF SACRED THEOLOGY
AND HUMBLE MASTER GENERAL AND SERVANT
OF THE ORDER

Health and an increase in the virtue of faith



WITH THE APPROACH of the seventh centenary of the glorious martyrdom of St. Peter of Verona, beloved Fathers and Brothers and dear Sisters, we commend to you most gladly the example of this great champion of the faith, so that more and more there may always flourish in our Order a zeal for the glory of God and a desire for the salvation of souls, wherewith the family of Dominic, even from its very foundation, has never ceased to display wonderful models of heroic fortitude in the exercise of the sacred ministry.

Our blessed Patriarch himself, a few months before he passed on to heaven, bestowed the habit of religion on Peter, upon whom his spirit seems to have rested. Born at Verona, in northern Italy, in the year of the Lord 1203, of parents who were infested with the Manichean heresy, Peter, though scarcely seven years old, firmly embraced the true Christian faith, the creed of which he had learned in school, and he could not be

persuaded in any way, by the blandishments and threats of his father and uncle, to deny that God is the Creator of heaven and earth. And afterwards, at the age of eighteen, while he was diligently studying the arts and sciences in the University of Bologna, he expressed a desire to be admitted to the Order of Friars Preachers, that he might apply himself entirely to the services of God in a religious institute, whose observance of regular discipline blended most harmoniously with the apostolic and teaching ministry. For the period of thirty years in this militia of Christ he fought strenuously as a courageous athlete, and by chastising the flesh with fasts and vigils, exercising his mind in the contemplation of divine things, caring constantly for the salvation of souls, supported by a troop of virtues, he devoted himself to the defense of the Catholic faith, with intrepid soul and fervent spirit, against its dangerous enemies, especially when the prosecution of the work of the Holy Inquisition in the confines of Milan was entrusted to him by the Apostolic See. By the gift of a special grace, he zealously refuted the heretics, many of whom were converted to penance; and a countless multitude of men flocked to hear him, for he was also obliged to preach to the people in the more ample areas of the cities, and gathered rich fruits in teaching the faithful and receiving their sacramental confessions. He was indeed, as we read in the Bull "Magnis et crebris," wherein Innocent IV on March 25, 1253, added St. Peter Martyr to the blessed, "pleasing in devotion, gentle in humility, sweet in kindness, compassionate in piety, constant in patience excelling in charity, composed in the perfection of character in all respects, and attracted others by the profuse aroma of his virtues."

The zealous and indefatigable preacher of the Gospel visited many cities, especially Cesena, Ravenna, Venice, Mantua and Milan, with signs and wonders being wrought by God in confirmation of his life and preaching; and he also exercised the office of Prior in the convents of Piacenza, Asti, and Como. While dwelling in Florence, he was instrumental in the seven men of conspicuous holiness founding a regular order under the title of the Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary; he also gathered the laity into a special militia, which he named the Society of the Blessed Mary, to resist bravely the armed attacks of the heretics, and, should the need arise, strenuously defend the faith, even to the shedding of their blood. At Milan likewise he later organized a society of men provided with weapons—and this

society after his death was called the Society of St. Peter Martyr—so that its members might repel with force the force of the heretics, if there were need.

But he himself desired to suffer death for the faith, and with earnest supplications he prayed for it as a sign of supreme favor; and in fact God graciously deigned to grant it to him. Hence it was that the heretics inflicted the death, which he himself had predicted a short while before in his public preaching, on April 29, 1252. For on the day mentioned, which was Saturday of Easter Week, while journeying from the city of Como to Milan, a vicious assassin attacked him near the village called Barlassina, assailing his holy head cruelly with a sword, and, after imposing grievous wounds on him, put to death the glorious martyr of Christ, who ceased not to be the preacher of the faith even in the final crisis of his life: for he began to recite the creed of the Apostles, which as a child he had confessed with manly courage.

Thus, then, beloved Brethren, was Peter of Verona the first of the innumerable throng of the sons of our Holy Father Dominic, who in the course of seven centuries gladly and unflinchingly suffered death in witness of the faith; nor was it without cause that, by the gracious concession of the Supreme Pontiff, Pius XII, in the year just passed, the solemnities of the beatification of the venerable martyrs Joseph Diaz Sanjurjo and Melchior Garcia Sampedro and many other members of the First and Third Order of Preachers, were celebrated on the very day whereon the Protomartyr of the Dominican family "washed his robe in the blood of the Lamb." The cause of the martyrdom of many of our brethren has been introduced before the Sacred Congregation of Rites, and that of many others could be introduced, for even in our own days there are not a few Brothers and Sisters of the Order of Preachers who in some regions are suffering persecution for the sake of Christ, and are tortured in chains, and are punished with death. And we wish to assure them that we are paternally touched by their sufferings and ill-treatment, and we desire at the same time to encourage them to persevere in the profession of the faith, rejoicing that they are "accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus:" since indeed their example should be a great incentive both to all the members of our Order and to all the faithful the world over to battle strenuously lest the hatred of wicked men for God and the Church of Christ should bring about graver

injuries through a fear of the tribulations whereby the good are beaten down by the wicked. And regarding this matter, it is helpful to insert here some words from the apostolic letter, wherein Innocent IV, on May 15, 1252, sought to comfort our Brethren, assembled at Bologna for the General Chapter a few days after the martyrdom of St. Peter and his companion Brother Dominic: "This event should not disturb you, as though something terrible had befallen you, but rather should you draw much fruit from your trial for this reason chiefly that the Lord God, in the assertion of His truth—which the ever-growing opposition of clamorous men is attacking, especially now when times are perilous—seems to have brought forth from your ranks loyal testimonials of the unfailing light. . . . O how great is the strength of the Christian faith! O how much the magnitude of virtue has expended the confidence of authority on the ministers of the evangelical preaching, whereby the testimonials of Catholic truth have become illustrious in the consummate fortitude of the men spoken of above. For the rest, my sons, no one will allege that you, without a desire of suffering for the truth which you have learned from the Lord and teach, exhort others to suffer bodily the remains of Christ's Passion, when we know that the whole body of your company has suffered in this slaying of your members, who are enjoying true life more intimately in the Supreme Head to whom they are united by His presence, to which life an equal desire for it has sustained you after them as regards the tedious pilgrimage of the present exile. Hence it is that we intently implore, advise and exhort your company, for the remission of your sins and the accumulation of merits, uniting after the example of the preceding Fathers and blessed Brothers already mentioned, who have left behind them the cherished tokens of a persevering patience 'for the edifying of the Body of Christ, to whose submission many in this evil age are opposed, that you furnish the virtue of your faith, whereby the Word of God may be glorified and move freely, and that you be zealous without tiring in continuing, through a love for the promised reward, the struggle of our labor against the perfidious calumniators of the Gospel, who by the leaven of heretical perversity, cease not to corrupt the sincere mass of the faithful, and against the poisonous foxes who in pilfered bits are demolishing the vineyard of the Lord, pursuing manfully the business of the Catholic Faith, so that, by merit of your solicitude and praiseworthy ministry, the Church

of God, through the beauty of her own integrity, may be transformed, and hence the grace of merits may be augmented for you in the present life and a fuller glory of reward be prepared in the future."

It has pleased us, beloved Brothers and dear Sisters, to set these things briefly before you, being assured that whatever will be done solemnly by the written or spoken word, and likewise in the sacred three-day festivities in every convent of our Order throughout the world, during the course of this year, or the year immediately following, to celebrate the seven hundredth anniversary of the martyrdom or canonization of the most glorious St. Peter of Verona, will be exceedingly profitable to all the members of the Dominican family, especially to the younger members, so that as far as possible they may hold fixed in their heart the most diligent care to conform themselves always to his example, that they may live holily and perform effectively the works of the apostolate.

Farewell, and while imparting our Paternal Blessing to you from a full heart, we earnestly ask that in your prayers you fervently commend us and our Socii to God, to the most blessed Virgin Mary, to our Holy Father Dominic, and to St. Peter Martyr.

Given at Rome on the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, March 7, 1952.

FR. EMMANUEL SUAREZ, O.P.
Master General.