

THE FRIARS PREACHERS IN ARMENIA

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TO PREACH the Gospel to the infidels of Asia was one of St. Dominic's lifelong dreams. So great was his thirst for souls that he longed to make the vast journey to convert the Cuman Tartars who roamed the Russian Steppes in the region of the Dnieper and the Volga, those savage hordes whose barbaric invasions of eastern Europe made them the scourge of Christian civilization.

But this was a dream which in his lifetime he never saw fulfilled. When he and Diego d'Azevedo, the Bishop of Osma, laid their request before Innocent III, the Pope refused to allow Diego to resign his bishopric in order to undertake a missionary journey to Asia. The two disappointed apostles set out again for their native Spain, and on the way they met the Cistercian Papal Legates who were struggling unsuccessfully to win back to the Faith the Albigensian heretics of southern France. In that momentous meeting God showed that He had other plans for Dominic which would more than equal his zeal for preaching the Gospel.

Blessed Jordan of Saxony recounts what happened to the Bishop when confronted with the task of converting the heretics: "Then the Spirit of God came upon him: he called together his people, and sent them all back to Spain with his equipage and his baggage. Retaining only a few clerics with him, he announced his intention of remaining in the country as a missionary of the Faith. Among others, he kept with him the Subprior Dominic, whom he held in great esteem and loved with a peculiar affection."¹ Thus St. Dominic's missionary labors began, not in the far-flung reaches of pagan Asia, but in the heart of Christendom which was rotting with heresy. But throughout his life the cherished desire to preach the Gospel in distant faithless lands never left him, although his work with the Albigensians and the affairs of the Order he had founded kept him at home.

But St. Dominic's dream came to glorious life through his sons. Within a decade of his death the Preaching Friars had swarmed Europe breathing new life into the sickly frame of thirteenth-century Catholicism. And soon they were evangelizing the massive continent

¹ *Liber Principii Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, n. 12.

of Asia. "Far and wide have they spread their apostolate through every region of the world. Asia became the great battle-field of the Dominicans against error. The province of the Holy Land formed in 1228 extended over Egypt and Ethiopia and the whole of Asia. The Master General, Blessed Jordan of Saxony, sailed with many of his brethren for Palestine in 1237, but just as he was in sight of shore a storm arose and all perished by shipwreck off the city of Acre. The province of the Holy Land was governed for some time by Friar Ivo, a very holy English Dominican who lived about 1234."²

ARMENIA

It was an English friar, William Frenay, who first entered the country of Armenia and began one of the most extraordinary chapters of Dominican history. Armenia is a mountainous district of western Asia occupying a somewhat indefinite area southeast of the Black Sea just north of Persia. Not determined by permanent natural boundaries, the territory covered by Armenia has varied at different epochs of world history, and even as early as the time of the ancient Romans there was recognized a lesser as well as a greater Armenia. Lesser Armenia, also known as Cilicia, is in Asia Minor north of the island of Cyprus. In medieval times the schismatic Armenian Christians were, in fact, scattered over a bigger area than that of the two Armenias. At this time we find them also in Crimea and in Azerbaijan (northern Persia). Greater Armenia today is part of the Soviet Union.

According to ancient Armenian legends, Christianity was first brought to the country by the Apostles themselves, and tradition has it that Saints Simon and Jude were martyred in Armenia. But for all practical purposes, the Armenian Church was founded by St. Gregory the Illuminator in the latter half of the third century. Weakened by jurisdictional dissensions, the infant church soon became the prey of the Nestorian and Monophysite heresies. In 527, the Synod of Dovin officially adopted Monophysism, and from that time the Church of Armenia has been the most national and isolated church in Christendom. Reunion with Rome, a by-product of the Crusades, was proclaimed solemnly in 1198, but it was never complete and collapsed altogether in 1375.

Political transitions have exercised the maximum influence upon Armenian Christianity. Only at rare periods in history has Armenia been an autonomous nation. At times the country came under Persian

² *Life of Cardinal Howard*. Raymund Palmer, O.P. p. 24.

or Byzantine control, and then it fell under the conquering Arab Moslems. Later, internally enfeebled, it was subdued by the Seldjukid Turks. Hostile to the Turks and unfriendly to the Greeks, the Armenians joined forces with the Crusades as soon as the European armies reached Asia Minor. The Crusaders established the kingdom of Lesser Armenia in 1097, and it was during this period that the Church of Armenia maintained close relations with the Holy See. But in 1375 this tenuous union with Rome came to an end when the Mamelukes of Egypt destroyed the kingdom which had been under the patronage of the West. Although the greatest part of the Armenian Church has remained in schism until our own day, there has always been a small minority of steadfast Armenian Catholics who have remained loyally united with Rome, and it is with this Catholic segment of Armenia that our story chiefly deals.

WILLIAM FRENAY: THE FIRST DOMINICAN IN ARMENIA

In 1254, St. Louis IX of France asked Pope Innocent IV to send missionaries into the more distant parts of Asia Minor, but not until 1263 was any action taken to fulfill the King's request. In that year Pope Urban IV, who had been Patriarch of Jerusalem when elected to the papacy, consecrated the English Dominican, William Frenay, as Bishop of Rages in Armenia, the same place which is mentioned in the first chapter of the Book of Tobias and is commonly known as Edessa.³ Today it is a town in southeastern Turkey called Urfa.

Edessa is most familiar from its connection with the Crusaders; the Armenian territory established by the Crusaders was known as the Kingdom of Edessa. During the first Crusade, Baldwin of Boulogne, who was later to become King of Jerusalem, took the town under his protection at the time of his daring march through Asia Minor. During his reign, all of Cilician Armenia was made subject to the authority of Edessa. After this first incursion into the Eastern kingdoms the Armenians began to respect the influence of the West, and they looked to these Frenchmen as their leaders after the subjugation of the Turkish garrisons, as Belloc writes, ". . . the Armenian mountain chiefs, and still more the Armenian town merchants, recognized them as their leaders."⁴ No doubt this was one of the main factors which disposed them favorably a century and a half later for the appointment of this Latin archbishop where the eastern rite prevailed.

³ *Archivum Frat. Praed.*, XIX, p. 256.

⁴ *The Crusades*, Belloc. p. 92.

It was this task of William Frenay to prepare the Armenians for union with Rome and to clear the path for the coming of his brethren of the Order of Preachers. This Friar Preacher, bishop of the vast territory of the Rages diocese, must have been another Tobias in that he brought about warm feelings where hostility used to exist. Formerly, councils had failed and papal delegates had been coolly received; but in 1266 the General Chapter of the Dominican Order considered a request from the King of Armenia that a convent be founded in his country. In 1273 Pope Gregory X invited the Armenian Catholics to the Second Council of Lyons and union of some with the true fold was once more established. Father Richard, in his life of William Frenay, says that he is to be inscribed at the head of the missionary bishops of the Orient, the precursor of the bishops and archbishops in the lands from Armenia to the Yellow Sea in the fourteenth century.⁵ He was back in England in 1278 since he is recorded as being present at the dedication of Norwich Cathedral, and he was still living in 1286. "It is probable that he was buried at the Dominican convent of Rhyddlan in Flintshire, as his tombstone is now found built into the wall of a barn near the site of that house. The stone bears the figure of an archbishop in full pontificals, with the inscription: . . . PVR LALME FRERE WILLIAM FRENEY ERCHVESKE DE RAGES."⁶

Although there were other Dominican bishops who succeeded William Frenay, it seems that a full scale Dominican missionary effort developed only in the third decade of the fourteenth century. "The Dominicans and Franciscans divided Asia between them: to the latter were given China and the eastern parts. The Dominicans spread over the land from the Black Sea to Coromandel and Malacca; from the confines of Egypt to Siberia. As they went eastward from the Holy Land they rested amidst the ruins of mighty Babylon or crossed the mounded site of unremembered Nineve: types of the evil power they sped to overthrow. Their voice was heard by the Brahmins and Pariahs on the banks of the Ganges, and the Tartar chiefs and their slaves by the streams of northern and central Asia, by the Arabs in their tents and the Persians in their cities and vast treeless plains and deserts. Worshippers of Budha and of Brahma, followers of Zoraster, of Confucius, and of Mohamet, and schismatical Christians listened to their words and yielded to their wondrous teaching. Countless multitudes were converted to the Faith, and in Armenia the Greek schism was almost rooted out. The mission of Armenia became one of

⁵ *Archivum Frat. Praed.*, XIX, p. 259.

⁶ *Life of Cardinal Howard*. Raymund Palmer, O.P. p. 24.

the most flourishing in the East. In 1318 an archbishopric with six suffragan bishoprics was set up, all in the hands of the Dominicans, taking in the whole of the countries from Coulan in the south of Hindoostan to Caffa in the Crimea. The metropolitan see was fixed at Soutlaniye or Sultania in Persia, near the Caspian Sea, because that city was on the route of the caravans for central Tartary and Kara-Koroum in the country of the Kerites; it had on the N. and N.W. Armenia and Asia-Minor, and the cities of Tauris, Erivan, Teflis and Mosul. In all these cities the Dominicans had convents and large missions. In Sultania alone there were twenty-five Catholic churches, and that of the Dominicans was remarkable for its beauty."⁷

JOHN OF QRNAY AND THE FRATRES UNITORES

In Cilicia in the early part of the fourteenth century, there was talk of the whole Armenian Church coming back to the true fold of Catholicism. The initiator of the movement toward reunion was the Abbot John of the Monastery of St. Basil at Qrnay (also Kerni). In 1329 he journeyed to the nearest Latin bishop to fulfill his desire to learn Catholic doctrine. This was one of the suffragans of the See of Sultania, Friar Bartholomew of Bologna, surnamed the Little, who was Bishop of Maragha near the Lake of Urumeah..

After a year of learning Latin, studying the doctrines of the Roman Church, and teaching the Dominican bishop the Armenian language, John of Qrnay was convinced of the rectitude of the union movement. He returned to his native city of Qrnay in 1330, taking Bartholomew the Little with him. At once he set about organizing a meeting of the leading ecclesiastics of his region, inviting them to come to discuss the problem. Convinced of the truth of the Catholic Faith by these two men, many monks and learned doctors embraced Catholicism. In some cases whole monasteries entered the fold. At the end of the meeting John announced: "We begin to preach through all Armenia that union with the Holy Roman Church is necessary for salvation."⁸

Such was the case at Qrnay. The monastery was offered to the Order of Preachers and the monks petitioned to become Friars Preachers. It should be noted that this was not too unusual an occurrence during the early years of the Order, as Bernard Gui remarks in his list of the convents of the Roman Province. If they were to become Dominicans, the Basilian monks of Armenia were informed that they would have to adopt the Constitutions whole and entire;

⁷ *Life of Cardinal Howard*. Raymund Palmer, O.P. p. 24.

⁸ *Analecta*, O.P., 1920, p. 222.

there could be no dispensations. But the customs of their country prevented John and his fellow religious from being able to adopt two main rules: perpetual abstinence from meat, and the abandonment of all property, apart from the monastery.

Saddened by this turn of events, John and the monks of Qrnay were still determined to become Dominicans, so the plan was formed to model their own order after the Order of St. Dominic. The project was put into effect with the guidance of Bishop Bartholemew, who died shortly afterwards (1332), and a few Dominican missionaries. The monks studied Latin and the Friars learned Armenian; and in a short time with the help of more Dominicans,⁹ theological works, the liturgical books of the Order, and the Dominican Constitutions were translated into Armenian. James Thargman is considered the greatest of this group of translators, since his last name means translator. By 1337 even the Dominican breviary and missal were in Armenian.¹⁰

Since the one great aim of this congregation was the reconciliation of the schismatic church with the Church of Rome, the tract on the sacraments from the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas was translated as early as 1347, and a copy is still preserved today in the Vatican Library.¹¹ The theological doctrine of the Angelic Doctor was used especially in the controversies regarding Baptism and Holy Orders. Nothing is known for certain concerning translations of the First and Second Parts of the *Summa*, although Armenian theologians seem to have been familiar with them. Scholars are still trying to determine whether the *Summa Contra Gentes* and the works of St. Albert the Great were translated at this period, and there are grounds for believing that such was the case.

Not satisfied with reading matter alone, the Abbott John journeyed to southern France in order to study the spirit which St. Dominic had left as a heritage to his Order, and to see the Dominican way of life as lived in Europe. Once he had imbibed the true spirit of our Holy Patriarch, he returned to Asia Minor where he became engrossed in the task of "Dominicanizing" his monastery. He and his brethren began to live a life similar to that of the Friars Preachers, and about the year 1342, they made their religious profession into the hands of the Dominican Bishop Teflis, John of Florence.

For all the autonomous monasteries of that area, John substi-

⁹ The most noted of these were Peter of Aragon and John of Swineford.

¹⁰ The missal, breviary, diurnal, and psalter are still extant in Paris.

¹¹ *Archivum, O.P.*, vol. I, p. 287.

tuted a centralized congregation of Dominican Tertiaries, the *Fratres Unitores*.¹² The name aptly expressed the purpose of the brotherhood: to prepare for the union of the Armenian Church with the Holy See of Rome by means of preaching, teaching, and writing. Their habit was a white tunic and a black scapular. They were Dominicans not only by their habit, but by their liturgy and constitutions as well, and most important of all, by their submission to the jurisdiction of the Master General of the Order of Preachers. So desirous were they of being Dominican in every way that there was inserted in the documents of foundation a provision that each monastery should try to have a Dominican living in at all times. In 1356 Pope Innocent VI gave his official approval to this Dominican congregation. By this bull, the *Fratres Unitores* were closely tied to the First Order since the Pope decreed that the Master General should have the right of visitation, correction, and reform. This authority was exercised through a vicar general who belonged to another Dominican society working in the Near East, the *Fratres Peregrinantes*. In the latter part of the fourteenth century dissent arose because of the vicars' abuse of their power. During the generalship of Blessed Raymond of Capua, this congregation was treated as any other province in the Order. An attempt was made to correct the abuses during the reign of Pope Boniface IX: a personal vicar of the Master General was to make the visitation, and that only once a year. Finally, during the generalship of Cardinal Cajetan (c. 1510) the *Fratres Unitores* were given the power to choose their own vicar, and in the General Chapter of 1582 all trouble was terminated by receiving the Armenian Tertiaries into the First Order as the Province of Naxivan.

Tradition has it that in their first years of life the *Fratres Unitores* numbered seven hundred men and possessed fifty monasteries which were spread through five dioceses: Magagha, Naxivan, Maku, Georgia, and Caffa. Owing to opposition from the schismatic priests, after the year 1381 their number soon dwindled and never again did they equal the populous provinces of Spain, France, or Italy. The principal convents of Qrnay, Abaraner, Choscascen, Sahaban, and Naxivan perduced until the ferocity of the Moslems reached its height in the middle of the eighteenth century. Dominican influence in the Crimea was destroyed in 1475 when the Turks left the country in ruin. It was there in the city of Caffa that the central house of studies had been placed.

¹² Also called: *Ordo Armenorum*, *Ordo Sancti Augustini*, Order of St. Gregory the Illuminator. (*Archivum, O.P.*, vol. I, p. 267).

The Armenians are a great commercial people, and Armenian Friars were to be found not only in Asia Minor but in Europe as well. Their convents were in the great Italian sea ports which carried on business with the East. In a bull of 1398 Pope Boniface IX mentions Armenian Friars living in Pisa and also writes of the many other Armenian houses in Italy. From another bull presented in the *Bullarium O.P.* information is given concerning the Convent of the Holy Spirit near Bologna which these Dominicans occupied.¹³

THE CONVENT OF APARAN

To attempt to trace the history of these Friars through their many centuries of existence would be most difficult. But a single convent often reflects the general history of its province, and with this in mind, some chronological notes of one of the monasteries, that of Aparan in the diocese of Naxivan, is inserted here. This convent was first occupied by the Armenian Tertiaries near the end of the fourteenth century. In the early part of the fifteenth century there were approximately twelve brethren living in the convent. One was Archbishop of Sultania in 1425; another is recorded as receiving the degree of Master of Sacred Theology in 1431; still another is mentioned as studying at the house of studies in Caffa.

In 1545, Pope Paul III received a bishop-elect of Naxivan with his companions who were dressed in the traditional robes of their country and wore long beards. The Pope was so impressed by these Dominicans that he exclaimed: "Behold the Magi have come from the East." In 1560 Nicholas Friton, the last bishop from among the *Fratres Unitores*, became head of the See of Naxivan. It was he who sent a report to Rome which gives much information about the cruelties of the Mohammedans at this time. His successor, who was not a *Frater Unitor* but a Dominican of the First Order, reported to Rome about the convent of Aparan which consisted of sixty-five brethren at the time when he wrote. In 1575, the convent sent one of its members to take part in the Holy Year festivities in Rome. This is the last mention made of any of the *Fratres Unitores* in documents which are extant today.

During the period when the *Fratres Unitores* belonged to the First Order, this convent of Aparan held primacy over all the other houses. It became the much frequented resting place for European travelers, passing missionaries, and even ambassadors to the Persian court. The records show that a number of Jesuits, a Discalced Carme-

¹³ *Analecta, O.P.*, 1920, p. 231.

lite, and many Dominicans were visitors at the priory. Another bishop, Ogotinos Bajenc, consecrated about 1630 for the See of Naxivan, had been a world traveler before entering the Order. Because of his European training, he acted as ambassador for the Persian Shah to European princes, or vice versa, many times while he was bishop. One Jesuit, Father De Rhodes, visited Aparan in the seventeenth century and describes it as a community of twenty-two Friars; another document written by Father Matthias Moracca, O.P., about 1646, puts the number at twenty-four, which made it the largest convent at that period. In accordance with the prescriptions of the General Chapters, the more promising young students were sent to Europe for studies. Many Armenian Dominicans are known to have taken their philosophical and theological training there, especially in Italy. One of these European students, Dominicos Nazarean, is recorded as the founder of a regular college for Aparan students; it was he who wrote in 1667 that there were only ten brethren in their convent.

THE LAST YEARS

The eighteenth century showed a continual decline in the number of friars. In 1703 one member of this community died at Madras in India while collecting alms, and the last known superior of the convent ruled about 1724. Civil wars and the Persian armies forced the last provincial to flee to the coast. "His convents were destroyed by fire; many of the friars were killed by the Mohammedans, starved to death, or dispersed."¹⁴ Pope Benedict XIV wrote to the General Chapter of 1748 urging it to save the Armenian Province, but nothing could be done as war raged on. The remains of the whole province, about nineteen friars, were living in Smyrna on the western coast of Asia Minor in 1764, and from documents we learn that the last native superior seems to have ruled about 1782. The fire of Dominican life in Armenia slowly died down and the last spark went out when Father Tovmas, the last provincial and sole surviving Armenian Dominican, died as a refugee in the priory of Ancona, Italy, in 1794.

Although there was little left of anything Dominican in Armenia, there are signs that at least the rite was in use until late in the eighteenth century in the Armenian settlement in Transylvania. Archdale A. King wrote of this settlement that there were Latin furnishings in the churches, Latin vestments, and "strangest of all, the Dominican use translated into old Armenian! The missal is that published in Armenia in 1728 by the Fratres Unitores."¹⁵

¹⁴ *Archivum, O.P.*, I, p. 280.

¹⁵ *The Rites of Eastern Christendom*. Archdale A. King. Vol. 2, p. 553.

All hope is not lost that the Order of Preachers will flourish once more in Armenia as it did so gloriously in medieval times. There are signs of a reawakening which hold favorable promise of a bright future. One of the ancient sees has been re-established, Mosul, first founded in 1318. In 1750 Dominicans from the Province of France again began the apostolate in the Near East. In 1877, at Mosul, they founded a seminary for the Chaldean Rite which has about forty students at present. There are about twelve French and Irish Dominicans working in this field, one of whom has the task of directing the Third Order.¹⁶ Perhaps some day soon another John of Qrnay will come to them seeking knowledge of the true Faith, and the Dominicans will follow him again into Armenia to replant the field which bore such a rich harvest in centuries past.

¹⁶ *Catalogus Generalis S.O.P.*, 1949.