

BLACKFRIARS IN BOSTON

The New Priory of Saint Stephen, Dover, Massachusetts



TIME PLAYS STRANGE TRICKS. None could be stranger than the chronicle which leads from the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1620 to the arrival of the Dominicans at Dover in 1949.

The colonists at Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay came to New England to assure religious freedom for themselves, yet they would tolerate no religious faith except their own. Their concept of the freedom of religion was pointedly expressed by Nathaniel Ward who proclaimed that persons of other religious beliefs "shall have free liberty to keepe away from us."

None were so despised as the "Papists." As a result of the ferocity of anti-Catholicism among the Puritans, Catholics were practically non-existent in Massachusetts in colonial times. The historian Sanford Cobb reports that "under the general law, Roman Catholics were not suffered to live in the colony," and as late as 1775 John Adams wrote from his home in Braintree, "We have a few Jacobites and Roman Catholics in the town, but they dare not show themselves." After the Revolution, in 1784, when Bishop Carroll was making a visitation of American churches, he saw no need even to enter New England since there were practically no Catholics there.

But in the nineteenth century Massachusetts underwent a cataclysmic religious transformation. Immigrants poured into the state, Catholic immigrants, from Ireland, Canada, Italy. At first a scorned minority, Catholics gradually rose to prominence and power. The once impregnable Puritan stronghold crumbled steadily until now there are left only its historic and cultural relics. Massachusetts, once unrivaled as the most bitterly intolerant and anti-Catholic state in the nation, has become a veritable heart-land of Catholicism. From intransigent Puritanism to flourishing Catholicism—surely an ironic metamorphosis.

Yet, until four years ago, in this vast Catholic structure of the Archdiocese of Boston, the Sons of St. Dominic had no part. Dominicans have been in the United States for a century and a half, settling

Dominicana wishes to acknowledge its indebtedness to the Reverend M. S. Welsh, O.P., of St. Stephen's Priory, for his valuable assistance in the preparation of this article.

first in the Catholic rural areas of Kentucky and Ohio. After the Civil War, St. Joseph's Province moved steadily eastward, to New York in 1867, and then into New England, coming to New Haven in 1886, and to Providence in 1910. But it was not until 1949 that the first foundation was made in Massachusetts.

But during all these years Dominicans were no strangers in Boston. Our missionaries have preached countless sermons in Boston's churches, and the hundreds of vocations which have come to the Order from Massachusetts manifest the zeal and influence of their preaching. Throughout the past decade Bostonians have come to know the Dominicans as teachers, too, especially through the courses in theology for laymen which the Catholics of Boston have received with boundless enthusiasm.

Dominicans have long been working in Massachusetts; but now, with the gracious welcome of Archbishop Cushing, we shall live there. In 1949 St. Joseph's Province acquired the Dyer estate at Dover, a small suburban community in Norfolk County, some fifteen miles southwest of Boston. The estate purchased from Mr. William Dyer covers an area of seventy-eight acres, and includes a house, a handsome structure built of field stone found on the property. It was constructed about 1908 by Mrs. Arthur Davis, a member of the Cheney Family which had become immensely wealthy operating the "Pony Express" and other express companies which developed from it. The property was bought with the intention of establishing a novitiate for the training of young men in the fundamentals of religious life before they begin their formal studies for the priesthood. The quiet, secluded estate, located in a region of striking natural beauty, is ideally suited to this purpose.

During the summer of 1949, after Archbishop Cushing had authorized a Dominican foundation in the Archdiocese of Boston and the Provincial Council had approved the plan of erecting a new novitiate, the Dyer estate was purchased and occupied. The first Mass was offered in the new house on Rosary Sunday, October 2.

The official opening of the priory took place on October 22, 1949, with a distinguished group of Dominican prelates present for the occasion, including the Master General of the Order, the Most Reverend Emmanuel Suarez, O.P., S.T.M. From the beginning, the new novitiate has been an object of special interest and solicitude to Father Suarez. It was he who selected the name for the priory, placing it under the patronage of St. Stephen, the first martyr, in honor of the religious patron of the Provincial of St. Joseph's Province, the Very Reverend Terence Stephen McDermott, O.P., S.T.M., under whose

administration and guidance the new novitiate was founded. This singular tribute to Father McDermott by the highest superior of the Dominican Order has been recorded officially in the guest book of the priory.

During the winter of that year the house was renovated and converted for monastic use, and by August, 1950, it was ready to receive the class of postulants who would be the first to pass their year's novitiate at Dover. The novitiate for St. Joseph's Province had formerly been located at St. Rose Priory, Springfield, Kentucky, which is now in use as a house of philosophy. The Very Reverend John F. Monroe, O.P., was appointed the first prior of St. Stephen's. He continued in office until August, 1953, when he was succeeded by the Very Reverend Cyril W. Burke, O.P. Through the year 1950-51, the house functioned as a Dominican priory and novitiate for the first time, and on August 11, 1951, twenty-nine novices made their simple profession at the Dover priory.

In the course of the following year, a wing was added to one end of the house, matching the architectural features of the original building. Designed to serve the novitiate community, the wing includes two chapels—one for the priory and one for the use of the novices—the refectory and kitchen, the novices' recreation room, guest rooms, and accommodations for seventy novices. In addition to the main house and the novitiate wing, another house is also located on the property which serves as a convent for the Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine, Kentucky, who are in charge of the domestic department at the priory.

With solemn ceremonies on June 11, 1953, the cornerstone of the new priory and novitiate was laid, in the presence of an impressive gathering of clergy and laity. Among the many Dominicans present were the provincials of the three Dominican provinces in the United States, along with many priests of the Archdiocese of Boston. Also in attendance was a large group of laymen, including the Honorable Francis Kelly, former Attorney General of Massachusetts, who was of the greatest assistance to the Dominican Fathers in solving the legal difficulties which had arisen with the town of Dover.

On the lawn in front of the priory, a Solemn Mass was celebrated by the Most Reverend Emmanuel Suarez, O.P., S.T.M., Master General of the Order, assisted by the Most Reverend Paul A. Skehan, O.P., S.T.M., Procurator General of the Order, as deacon, and the Very Reverend Timothy M. Sparks, O.P., S.T.M., Socius to the Master General, as subdeacon. On the occasion of the dedication, the Master General brought from Spain a picture of the martyr-

dom of St. Stephen, which he presented to the priory. It is a copy, done by a noted Spanish artist, of a famous painting at St. Stephen's Convent, Salamanca, Spain. The picture now hangs in the chapel.

His Excellency, the Most Reverend Richard J. Cushing, D.D., Archbishop of Boston, presided at the ceremony, and delivered an address of welcome to the Dominicans as they took up residence in his archdiocese. He promised that there would be no restrictions to the good work which the Order might desire to accomplish. "We invite them," he said, "who belong to the illustrious Order of Preachers to spread the light of truth here among our people, the truth which they draw from the works of their great Luminary, St. Thomas Aquinas. They have already lectured with extraordinary success in our colleges for young women, and I myself have listened to those young Dominicans from Providence College and have had to admire them in their mastery of the subjects, as well as their excellent presentation."

The Blackfriars coming to Boston meet an unspoken challenge: Boston has done very well without the Dominicans. We are entering a region where Catholicism is highly organized, where the Church has been eminently successful, where the faith is vibrant and Catholics pulsing with life. What, one might think, can the Dominicans do which has not already been done?

We have a ready answer. It is precisely here, in such a fertile field, where Dominicans have a special contribution to make, a unique role to play, a definite gap to fill. What is this distinctive contribution? Call it "Truth," the single word emblazoned upon the shield of the Order. More exactly, it is the modality of truth.

Religious institutes are organizations of men, founded by men, governed by men, but their inspiration comes from God. Just as God infuses the human soul into the body, so He breathes spirit and character into an order. It is no mere accident of history that one religious group excels another in different characteristics; it is no mere accident of history that the Order of Preachers has been endowed with a quasi-infallible orthodoxy which has made it the central pillar of truth in the Church. This marvelous connection with truth is the result of something inward, some special characteristic with which the Holy Spirit has inspired the soul of the Order. Truth seems to be the substance of the Dominican soul, and all Dominican activity flowing from this vital principle is imbued with it. As Midas had the touch of gold, so Dominicans have the touch of truth. No matter what might be the kind of work, in the hands of Dominicans it has a modality of truth.

That this is no idle boast the pages of history demonstrate with startling plainness. An old scholastic axiom reads: "We know a thing from what it does." What the Order of Preachers has done through seven centuries proves quite clearly what it is. In every age down to our own day Dominicans have battled as "champions of the faith," and have shone as "true lights of the world." St. Dominic unquestionably founded his order for a doctrinal apostolate: his friars would be dedicated to the intellectual broadening of the Church, and to the solitary goal of truth. His order has never faltered in its dedication. As its perfect instrument in this work of wisdom, God gave the intellect of St. Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the greatest mind the Church has known. After him, Dominican history runs parallel with the history of Thomism. Just as the Church has confirmed in countless decrees and proclaimed in a multitude of official praises the peerless authority and soundness of Thomistic teaching, so also in necessary consequence does this certification of orthodoxy redound to the activity of the Order of Preachers, who boast an unblemished record of loyalty to St. Thomas. It is no mere coincidence that the Friars Preachers have had such success in the apostolate of truth.

It is the same Order of Preachers which has come to work in the Archdiocese of Boston, the same Sons of St. Dominic who have been the foremost teachers in the Church for seven centuries, spirited by the same soul for truth, moved to the same goal of wisdom, the brothers and heirs of Aquinas. Whatever work Dominicans will do, it will be done with the modality of truth. This will be the special Dominican contribution, something not quantitative but qualitative, something not easily analyzed or grasped, but clearly and unmistakably perceived. For those who have contact with Dominicans there should be a strengthening and a deepening, a growth in knowledge which must precede a growth in love.

The work of the Friars Preachers in the Archdiocese of Boston has begun under the patronage of St. Stephen the Protomartyr, who fell beneath the stones cast by outraged Jews outside the walls of Jerusalem. St. Stephen can be not only a patron who will help us by his intercession, but also a model, who will guide us by his example. The Acts of the Apostles recounts how "Stephen, full of grace and power, was working great signs and wonders among the people . . . and they were not able to withstand the wisdom and the Spirit who spoke." This, too, is the Dominican ideal, the working of signs and wonders among the people, the signs and wonders of wisdom prompted by the Spirit.