

DOMINIC'S DREAM

STEPHEN FITZHENRY, O.P.



PROUILLE shivered in the dawn of late April, 1207. Piercing winds bent both the trees and men of Southern France in "Gloria Patri," as if nature were mocking the cancer of Albigensian heresy which gnawed at the populace. The winds also whipped about a figure crouched in the hilly countryside overlooking the village. He too inclined in obeisance to the Trinity, but his submission was one which sprang from within, compelled only by his love. On his lips continuous prayers were being formed, prayers of special thanksgiving and petition. The man was St. Dominic.

Prompted by gratitude for his recent foundation of nuns here in the midst of the heresy, this beggar of material goods now besought God for His spiritual assistance in realizing another plan, a dream which he had been fostering for several years. An arsenal of prayer, which the holy women provided, was only the first step in Dominic's strategy for combating this pernicious spiritual enemy. Here in Prouille these consecrated "spouses of Christ" were once again sending up to God the Christian paeans which in time past had re-echoed throughout the surrounding hills. By their austere life, they might experience hardship, but they would help counteract the poison of Albigensianism by putting asceticism and the meaning of life in true perspective.

But *men* must also be sought for the front lines—men whose impeccable lives would be sermons in themselves—apostles, studied in truth, who could slay the demon of error by learned preaching. Not since the time of Christ and the Apostles had such a vocation been conceived. They were at the same time to be priests and beggars; to be preachers to the ignorant as well as being students of the schoolmasters; by their vocation both contemplatives¹ and missionaries.² This all-embracing ideal seemed theoretically perfect since it made them "all things to all men," but somehow it seemed impossible of practical attainment. Yet after its concrete realization some

¹ *Dominican Preaching at the Present Time*, by Martin Stanislaus Gillet, p. 21.

² *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, Aug.-Oct., 1933, Caput VII, No. 42.

nine years later, the seeming paradox thrived and developed as the Order of Preachers.

It was an ideal so complex, however, that the exact nature of the foundation was often confused in the past, and still is being misunderstood today. Whether it be the Cardinal, Newman at one time, or the Trappist, Merton in our own, men down through the centuries would look upon the Holy Patriarch's dream with an appreciable awe coupled with a decided skepticism. The establishment of just what Dominic's dream was, then, and the resolution of its seeming contradictions will be useful in discovering the nature of the vocation of a Friar Preacher.

Dominic was aware of two forms of the religious life flourishing in his lifetime: one contemplative, the other active. These appeared to be the only possible alternatives by which man could serve God in a life dedicated solely to Him. But the term *life* has a multiple signification. We use it generally to describe a being which is endowed with self-motion—plant, animal, or man. Other minds confronted with the word might connect it with pleasure. In this context what is meant by *life* is the operation upon which a man is chiefly intent.³ The contemplative life is "one in which the contemplation of truth is actually exercised as a man's rational activity."⁴ We understand, of course, that no one can encounter the problems of everyday living by relying on speculation alone and with no regard for practicalities. Even the most glassy-eyed philosopher must be able to use a knife and fork or turn a door-knob. Therefore in the religious life a contemplative monk is one who is chiefly, though not solely, occupied with mental activity—prayer or study. His chief objective is truth, and so his mind is bent on discovering every facet of that lustrous Diamond of all truth, God.

It was this type of vocation which abounded during Dominic's life in thriving religious communities such as the Benedictines, Carthusians and Cistercians. True, some of these men, like St. Bernard and the Irish missionaries, were the great preachers and apostles of their day; still such activity was purely accidental to the state to which they were vowed as religious. By profession they were cloistered lovers of truth, removed from the world in order to avoid those things which hindered contemplation.

In contrast, the active Orders were instituted for work in the world. The members of these groups intended to arrive at the throne

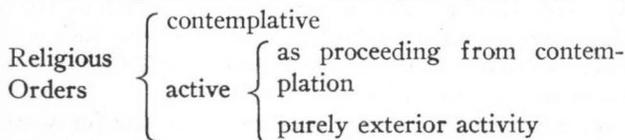
³ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 179, a. 1, c.

⁴ *The Superiority of Apostolic Religious Orders Derived From Their End*, by John F. Connell, O.P., p. 17.

of God by laboring for their neighbors. Although comparatively few in number in the 12th century, nevertheless, there were enough of such organizations for Dominic to investigate their suitability for his purposes. They were engaged in such occupations as the founding of hospices for travellers, redeeming captives, or performing one or other of the corporal works of mercy. Theirs was a vocation devoted to works of the hand, we might say, in contrast to that of the contemplatives who dwelt primarily in intellectual pursuits of prayer or study. Of course, this does not exclude the presence of contemplatives among the members of these Orders. Yet, exterior activity was what characterized their lives. For the active life is defined as "one in which exterior operations are actually exercised as man's rational activity principally intended."⁵ The contemplative and the active, then, were the two classes of religious Orders on which Dominic might model his own. Which did he choose? Neither, he founded a third!

Some have denied even the possibility of a third type of religious order. Their argument at first sounds cogent, but it is based upon a confusion of terms. On the premise that life can be only contemplative or active, they conclude that religious Orders must adhere to this division also. Surprisingly enough, we agree! The Apostolic Orders do fit into one of these distinctions in *life*, but that does not exclude the existence of a third possibility of religious *state*.

In human affairs *state* signifies an immovable condition in regard to factors which are internal, invariable, and personal. In the religious state there is an added note of permanence of personal obligation.⁶ Accordingly, one may determine by vow that he will be strictly contemplative, strictly active, or that at one time he will function as a contemplative and at another as active. This third and latter state gives rise to the *mean* or *mixed* state of which St. Augustine speaks.⁷ It is the goal or end to which religious Orders are ordained, then, which differentiates them. All of this is indicated by the division of religious Orders as developed by St. Thomas:⁸



⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶ *States of Life*, by John Fearon, O.P., The Thomist, Vol. XII, 1949, p. 5.

⁷ *City of God*, by St. Augustine, Bk. XIX, Q. 19.

⁸ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 188, a. 6, c.

Besides those purely contemplative and purely active states which conform to the corresponding divisions of life, a third possibility exists—the Apostolic; i.e., the mixed active and contemplative state. It was this which Dominic determined his disciples should embrace.

The title of this state, *Apostolic*, denotes the nature of an Order so designated. Its root meaning is "to be sent," which is a necessary requirement for a man to preach with authority. The Apostles were definitely sent, having been commissioned by their Master to spread the Gospel. They constantly spent themselves in furthering the message of Christ upon earth, whatever the cost to their material well-being. Their every action was motivated by a deep love for their Lord and for His doctrines. Although involved in a whirl of activity, they were by the *same token* men of the highest interior prayer.

How could they be otherwise? Had not Christ told them He would be with them? Not simply by a remembrance of them or by His blessings, but by an almost unbelievably intimate association:

"Yet not for these only do I pray, but for those also who through their word are to believe in me, that all may be one, even as thou, Father, in me and I in thee; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory that thou hast given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them and thou in me; that they may be perfected in unity, and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and that thou hast loved them even as thou hast loved me."⁹

No book nor outline, but Christ Himself was to be their source of sermon matter. Their devotion to their Master was of such a magnitude that nothing, absolutely nothing, could detract them from propagating the Faith which permeated their every move. Here were preachers moulded by the deft fingers of Divinity who breathed into them the soul of the apostolate.

So too, were the Friars Preachers. They were founded for preaching and for the salvation of souls. Other works evolved under the ambit of Dominic's sweeping plan also—teaching, writing and instruction of every type.¹⁰ But to lead men to the Font of life, to the Source of Truth, by the spoken word of the preacher was their specially constituted end. Apostolic preaching served both as a means to the salvation of others and the goal toward which all the Friars were to strive for a fruitful ministry. It is in the phrase "apostolic preaching" that is found the *raison d'être* of the Order, distinguishing

⁹ John, Chap. 17, vv. 20-23.

¹⁰ *Constitutiones S.O.P.*, Caput I, No. 2.

it from the contemplative and active Orders and making it superior to both.¹¹ To investigate this phrase is a necessity if we are to determine correctly what Dominic's dream was.

In general, preaching is an act of the ministry by which one duly sent announces publicly the truth of the faith in order that men might be moved to believe and do what is necessary to be saved.¹² To this definition everyone would certainly agree, even St. Dominic. Yet this is not precisely apostolic preaching, the type Dominic desired, for this definition stresses only one of the two requisites for preaching—the communication of truth to others. There is something prior to this and upon which apostolic preaching *depends*—contemplation. The words of St. Thomas make this point manifest:

The act of teaching has a two-fold object. For teaching is conveyed by speech, and speech is the audible sign of the interior concept. Accordingly one object of teaching is the matter or object of the interior concept; and as to this object, teaching belongs sometimes to the active, sometimes to the contemplative life. It belongs to the active life, when a man conceives a truth inwardly, so as to be directed thereby in his outward action; but it belongs to the contemplative life when a man conceives an intelligible truth, in the consideration and love whereof he delights.

The other object of teaching is on the part of the speech heard, and thus the object of teaching is the hearer. As to this object, all doctrine belongs to the active life to which external actions pertain.¹³

What is said here concerning teaching is readily adaptable to preaching, for every sermon necessarily has the elements of both. So we see that the teacher or preacher is principally ordained to contemplation and secondarily to the conveyance of that truth to others. This is the meaning of the Angelic Doctor's phrase "Contemplare et aliis contemplata tradere."¹⁴ It epitomizes the works of teaching and preaching; it distinguishes the apostolic life; and it is a motto of the Order of Preachers.

Contemplation therefore, was not to be sought because a sermon was to be given or a class prepared. On the contrary, it was out of the abundance of contemplation that these works of the active life were to be realized effortlessly. From that abun-

¹¹ A complete treatment of St. Thomas' doctrine on this point may be had from Fr. Connell's thesis mentioned in footnote No. 4.

¹² *Unless They Be Sent*, by Augustine Rock, O.P., p. 157.

¹³ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 181, a. 3.

¹⁴ "To contemplate and to give to others what has been contemplated." *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 188, a. 6, c.

dant spring of contemplation one might proceed assuredly in the footsteps of truth; lacking it, one was no longer a Dominican preacher or teacher. It is in this that the originality of the Order consists, that the contemplative life is so ordered that it unfolds into the active life.¹⁵ Contemplation for Dominic was the formalizing element, the soul of the preacher. It is the élan which distinguishes the apostolic orders from that of the active orders ordained to exterior works. It is also contemplation which engenders and orders preaching and teaching, thus setting up a dichotomy with the purely contemplative groups.

This stress on contemplation might give rise to the question, "Which is the greater in importance, contemplation or action?" Some argue in favor of contemplation: it is the bed-rock of action; moreover the means to attain the end of the Order of Preachers—monastic observances; the three vows; choral office; the study of sacred truth¹⁶—all have a decided contemplative bent. Others argue in favor of activity, formulating their opinion from the category in which the apostolic orders are placed, the active life. Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange inclines toward the former view:

Some unconsciously diminish the traditional teaching, saying that the apostolic life has apostolic action for its primary and principal end, but that it also tends toward a certain contemplation as a means requisite for action.¹⁷

and again:

It is apostolic action itself that is a means subordinated to the union with God to which the apostle wishes to lead souls, as he himself has been led thereto. Therefore we must say that the apostolic life tends principally to contemplation which fructifies in the apostolate.¹⁸

Harking back to the two-fold object of teaching, we see a parallel to the matter in question. Teaching and preaching are ordered principally to contemplation, and secondarily to action. By the word *principally*, understood as a precedence in time, contemplation assuredly has an importance over action. However, to say contemplation is of absolute importance would seem to be in

¹⁵ Gillet, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Constitutiones S.O.P.*, Caput I, No. 4.

¹⁷ *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, by Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, Vol. II, p. 491.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 492.

contradiction to the Constitutions of the Friars which provide for dispensation from the observance of contemplative life when the active ministry is impaired.¹⁹ And since contemplation as such could never be considered a means subordinate to action, the only alternative is an equality for both. The same celebrated theologian also seems to uphold this judgment when he states:

If one of these elements (action or contemplation) happens to prevail to the detriment of the other, the harmony of this apostolic life is compromised.²⁰

By granting this equality in importance, we can perceive the beautiful similarity which exists between the apostolic life and the life of Christ. In both, contemplation orders action and preaching. These two are perfectly co-ordinated. As in Christ there was no opposition between the two, so neither is there opposition between them in the Apostolic life. The flow of apostolic activity proceeds from a soul firm in grace, fired with love, and devoted to contemplation.

This then, was Dominic's dream—an Order of Preachers, men of the active life, because their work was to be consummated in an active ministry; yet men of the contemplative life, since their activity was to be done not by way of subtraction from the contemplative life but by addition. In a very real sense they were to be super-contemplatives, resembling in this their divine Master. He was to be their exemplar as He was for Dominic. Neither completely active nor solely contemplative, He co-ordinated the two into the Apostolic life. Observing the precepts of the law, a paragon of every virtue that the vows induce, continually united in prayer to the Beatific Vision from whence He derived divine truth—thus did Christ go about Galilee “teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every kind of disease and infirmity among the people.”²¹ This was Christ's life; this was Dominic's life; the life which he chose for his disciples, the Order of Preachers.

¹⁹ *Constitutiones S.O.P.*, No. 68.

²⁰ Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, p. 489.

²¹ Matthew, Chap. 9, v. 35.