

## THE HOLINESS OF ST. DOMINIC

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(Note: The first in a series of *Dominicana* articles incorporating the translation of the official process for the canonization of St. Dominic)



DOMINICANA here presents an authentic, eyewitness report of one of the most important men of the thirteenth century—St. Dominic, the founder of the Order of Preachers. The text translated below is taken from the official process of canonization, and is published because his importance is still relevant today; his influence continues to be vital and powerful. He lives in our age through his sons and daughters—the thousands who are the inheritors of his wisdom and sanctity.

Brother Dominic, as his friends called him, had a unique mission in history and the life of the Church. He infused a special ideal into Christendom, an ideal which sprang directly from his character. And the single most important factor in the formation of this character was his personal quality of *sanctity*. This quality molded the man, and then impressed its fiery image upon all his work. The accounts presented here are the chief sources of the world's knowledge of this man's holiness.

But certain principles and facts must be noted in order that a twentieth-century reader understand and appreciate what a thirteenth-century witness is relating. The chief principle to remember is that these people did not record their memories of Brother Dominic that someone might use the information to construct a biography. Their primary purpose was to present the remembered facts and experiences concerning Dominic which would establish proof of his sanctity. The depositions were presented upon their solemn oath before an ecclesiastical board of inquiry, somewhat similar to the modern grand jury. The board of commissioners heard them at Bologna, Italy, in August of 1233, exactly twelve years after Dominic's death.

The Bishop and Podesta (similar to a mayor) of Bologna had sent a delegation to Pope Gregory IX, asking him to institute

an investigation into the life of Brother Dominic to determine whether it was possible for the Church to canonize him.<sup>1</sup> In discussing the canonization with the cardinals, the Pope said that he no more doubted the sanctity of Dominic than he did that of SS. Peter and Paul.<sup>2</sup> Gregory had known Dominic well and (as Cardinal Ugolino) had presided at his funeral. At the request of the Bolognese, he appointed three commissioners to open and preside over the process of investigation. This mandate is the first document translated below.

In Bologna, the Dominicans appointed Philip of Vercelli<sup>3</sup> as the promoter of the cause. He assembled the witnesses who had known Master Dominic (as the founder was also called), and instructed them regarding the precise information the board required. To decide whether or not Dominic was a saint, the commissioners, the Pope and the Roman Curia needed to know whether he had given evidence in his life of heroic sanctity. The witnesses were to report the existence of the effects of great holiness—if they remembered having seen such effects. This determined the scope and character of their reports. Hence, the modern reader must not expect to find more “complete” information than such a special purpose demanded. The story begins, then, with the translation of the Pope’s order of inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

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#### The decree of Gregory IX, instituting the commission of inquiry.

Rome, July 13, 1233.

Gregory, bishop, servant of the servants of God, wishes to give his apostolic blessing and greeting to his dear sons Tancred, Archdeacon of Bologna, Thomas Ubaldino, Prior of St. Mary’s on the Reno,<sup>5</sup> and Brother Palmerio, Canon of the church of Campagnola, of the Order of St. Augustine, of the dioceses of Bologna and Reggio.

The Omnipotent and Eternal Creator of all things visible and invisible takes good care of the men whom He has created by the perpetual gift of manifold blessings. Yet He goes beyond this to offer man a new life by the successive creation of new gifts, which are the signs of his affection for his creatures and the effects of his love. This is shown by the welcome sight of recent flowerings and the free gift of new fruits.

Therefore, in order to show the faithful the way to everlast-

ing joys, to increase the faith, hope and love of all people, to direct into the way of peace and eternal light the feet of those standing in darkness and the shadow of death, the Wonderful Creator of the sun and moon, from his heavenly throne, produces other lights which shine in inextinguishable brilliance. These confer an infinite number of benefits and infuse a tremendous joy into devout hearts who seek the glorious mansions of ineffable light.

Now there are many people today who rejoice upon seeing even a single daystar, although they may remember seeing a great number of stars during the night. The Magi also used to enjoy examining the constellations of the stars, which the Wisdom of God had created from the beginning, yet when they saw a new star in the East, the harbinger of the King's birth, they were filled with an inexplicable joy. And although there already shines out in her firmament the splendor of the diverse glories of her saints, Holy Mother Church is most happy when a new star appears, clearly exhibiting a unique and excelling light. Through this light, the darkness of those who do not know the Lord is dissipated, the perverse teaching of heretics is confounded, the blessed belief of the faithful is made strong.

We rejoice in the belief that Brother Dominic, the founder and Master of the Order of Preachers, whom We knew well, has already been united to the assembly of the blessed by the divine mercy. Marvelous signs show that he has been given a glorious beatitude. For the truly Magnificent Lord has worked a great number of different miracles for many people around his tomb and in other places, through the invocation of his name in sincerely devout prayer. Therefore, the Celestial Spouse should certainly speak out and proclaim that he is numbered among the saints. This action is demanded because of the extraordinary virtues which We remember having seen variously exhibited in Brother Dominic's life, and because of the famous miracles reported to have illumined his holy tomb. But the truth of things is not immediately evident to doubtful minds, and the character of some does not easily exult over the sudden report of miracles; not all that glitters really deserves the name of gold, nor does every whiteness reveal true ivory.

A prudent foresight, then, which makes Us prompt to affirm certainties and slow to credit doubtful matters, urges Us to send these apostolic letters for your prudent action, which We fully trust in the Lord. We act according to the example of the True

Light of the Saints, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who strengthened the fearful hearts of his disciples by public signs and manifest wonders, thus illumining their dark minds so that they might possess the firm support of certitude in the wonderful glory of his Resurrection.

You are to examine the public and private life of this brother to learn if he is truly acceptable to God and men. Look into the miracles which have come from the sanctity of his body through the operation of God. Question the appropriate witnesses with cautious diligence and vigilant solicitude, keeping before your eyes reverence for the Divine Majesty alone. Draw up all the information in writing, carefully protect it with your seal, and then send it to Us after you have received our apostolic decree. This will be sent to you through reliable and official messengers. If all of you cannot participate together in this inquiry, then at least two of you should carry it through to a successful end.

Given at the Lateran, July 3, the seventh year of our pontificate.

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**These are the depositions that have been received concerning the public and private life and the death of Blessed Dominic, the founder of the Order of Preachers.**

By the authority of the Lord Pope, Gregory IX, through Master Tancred, Archdeacon of Bologna, Thomas, Prior of St. Mary's on the Reno, and Brother Palmerio of the church of Campagnola, of the dioceses of Bologna and Reggio, these witnesses have been heard concerning the public and private life and death of Brother Dominic, the creator, founder and first Master of the Order of Friars Preachers. They were introduced by Brother Philip of Vercelli, a canon of the same Order. He was appointed promoter of the cause by Brother Bonaventure,<sup>6</sup> Prior of the monastery and church of St. Nicholas of the Order of Friars Preachers in Bologna, and by the chapter of the same church, gathered in the accustomed manner in the chapter hall at the sound of the bell. The witnesses were also heard concerning the miracles which God has worked through the merits of Brother Dominic, both before and after his death. The testimony was given under oath in the presence of the three commissioners in the year of the Lord, 1233, in the sixth of the indiction.<sup>7</sup>

### The Testimony of Brother William of Montferrat.

*William first met St. Dominic at Rome in 1217, as he relates in his deposition. He received the habit from the founder at Paris two years later. In 1235 (there is some dispute as to the exact year), he was sent to the Near East by Gregory IX to convert the Saracens there. He died in that region.<sup>8</sup>*

On August the seventh, Brother William of Montferrat, a priest of the Order of Preachers, stated under oath that about sixteen years ago he went to Rome to be there for Lent. The Lord Pope, who was then Bishop of Ostia,<sup>9</sup> received him in his house. During that time, Brother Dominic, the originator and first Master of the Order of Preachers, was at the Roman Curia, and often came to the house of the Lord Bishop of Ostia. This is how the witness came to know him. He found the company of Brother Dominic congenial and began to like him very much. Many times they talked about the means of salvation—for themselves and for others. It seemed to the witness that Brother Dominic was much more of a religious than any man he had ever seen, although he had spoken with many; nor had he met anyone more filled with zeal for the salvation of all.

In the same year the witness went to Paris to study theology. But they first agreed and promised that after Brother William had studied theology for two years and Brother Dominic had organized his friars, they would go together to convert the pagans in the North.<sup>10</sup>

While the witness was studying at Paris, Brother Dominic arrived from Spain. At this time William entered the Order, receiving the habit of the Friars Preachers from Brother Dominic. From then on they lived together for long periods of time in various places. He accompanied Dominic to the Roman Curia and other places, traveling back and forth. He observed him while eating, drinking, sleeping and praying; he saw him both sick and well.

In all the time they were together, he saw that Brother Dominic observed the Rule and the regulations of the Friars Preachers with great strictness. Although he would easily give dispensations to his brothers, he would not dispense himself. He kept all the fasts prescribed in the Rule, both when he was well and sick. Once when they were going to Rome, he noticed that Brother Dominic was suffering from a serious attack of dysentery. Yet this did not cause him to break the fast, nor eat meat, nor order any specially prepared food, except for some occasional

fruit or vegetables. The witness knows this to be fact for he was always with him at meals. In all the other illnesses which he observed, Brother Dominic acted in the same way. When asked where else he saw him sick, the witness answered: at Viterbo—but he did not remember what the sickness was.

In all the time he was with Brother Dominic, it often happened that he was given poor food, bad service and inadequate sleeping accommodations. Yet he was never heard to complain about these matters, whether he was well or ill.

When it was time to go to bed, he first spent a long time in prayer, often accompanied with weeping and tears. Frequently he awakened the witness and the others with the noise of his sighs and groans. He firmly believes that Dominic spent more time in prayer than in sleep. All the time they were together he always slept clothed, keeping on his cloak, belt and shoes. He never slept on a featherbed, but on the ground, a bench, on some chaff or other straw.

He always observed silence at the accustomed and appointed times according to the regulations. He avoided useless conversation and always spoke either with or about God.

When asked how he knew all this, he answered that he was Brother Dominic's principal companion,<sup>11</sup> and so lived with him day and night, between trips and while traveling. He saw and heard all the above as it has been related.

He firmly believes that Brother Dominic always preserved his virginity. He thinks this true because of the good life he saw him living. He also heard this from many religious men and others deserving credence who had lived with him for a longer time. Asked who told him this, he answered: The Bishop of Osma, whose canon Brother Dominic was, the canons who lived with him in the world, and others whose names the witness did not remember.<sup>12</sup>

He was present at the translation of Brother Dominic, when his body was transferred from its first tomb to the church and put in the place where it is now. The Provincial Prior and the brethren of the church of St. Nicholas were afraid that there would be a stench in the tomb where the body lay, because it was a very low place and much rain water ran down into the grave. Because of this fear, they did not want any outsiders or laymen to be present when the tomb was opened, but they could not avoid it. The Podesta and twenty-four noble and respected citizens of Bologna were present at the opening of the tomb; some

of these had been guarding the grave for many nights before it was opened.

When they raised the stone which had been placed over the grave and saw the wooden coffin that contained the body of Brother Dominic, a pleasant and delightful aroma rose from the grave. The witness was never able to decide on the identity of this scent. He and all the others sensed the fragrance. He leaned over and kissed the coffin, and perceived the odor more strongly. The others who were there, both the brethren and laymen, did the same thing, sensed the same aroma, and wept much out of joy and devotion. Finally, the body was moved to the place where it now lies.

Afterwards he saw many people who related how they had suffered from different serious illnesses, and had been cured through the merits of Blessed Dominic; but he did not remember who they were or their names. He had not known them previously, because he was only there on official business of the Order<sup>13</sup> and could not delay.

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#### The Testimony of Brother Amizio of Milan.

*Amizio was received into the Order by Dominic when the latter stopped at Milan in 1219. He was a skillful lawyer and a notary of the Sacred Palace. Dominic chose him as a traveling companion, and he later served as prior at Milan and Padua.<sup>14</sup>*

On August the eighth, Brother Amizio of Milan, priest, Prior at Padua, stated under oath that Master Dominic was a humble and meek man, patient and kind, quiet, peaceful and modest. There was a solid maturity in all his actions and words; he was a sympathetic consoler of others, but especially of his own brethren. He was an ardent zealot for regular observance. His great love for poverty showed itself not only in his own food and clothing and that of the brethren of his Order, but even in the buildings and churches of the brethren, the liturgy and the ornamentation of ecclesiastical vestments. He was most diligent about this, and took great care all his life to prevent the brethren from using rich and silken vestments in the churches, either for themselves or for the altars. Except for the chalices, he allowed them to have no gold or silver utensils.

During the night, and whenever he was free in the day, he was unremitting in his prayer. Frequently he prayed all night, so

that he was found to be in bed little or not at all. He observed all his regulations in every matter and did not dispense himself in the slightest detail. He followed completely the common monastic observance in choir, in the refectory and in other places.

Zealous for souls and glowing with fervor in preaching, he urged his brethren to have the same ardor. He very much loved the religious life and praised religious Orders.

When asked how he knew all this, the witness answered that he had lived with him for a time. He had seen many of these things and so knew them from personal experience; many others had been told him and he firmly believed them to be true.

He heard and believed that Brother Dominic had preserved his virginity all his life. This was also the common opinion among all the brethren.

On a certain night shortly after the recent translation of Brother Dominic, in the presence of the Podesta of Bologna and many of his soldiers, the Master of the Order, the Provincial Prior and a great number of the brethren and priors (all of whom insisted on this), the coffin and reliquary were opened. The relics were then shown to the brethren, including the witness. When he saw and kissed the bones, he inhaled and sensed the sweetness of a powerful aroma. He never remembers having experienced this kind of fragrance.

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#### The Testimony of Brother Bonvisus.

*It is not certain whether Bonvisus, a doctor in law, received the habit of the Order from Reginald or from Dominic. He entered the Order at Bologna in 1219 and was the first one sent by Dominic to Piacenza in 1220. A man of great virtue, he preached and founded a monastery there.<sup>15</sup>*

On August the ninth, Brother Bonvisus, a priest of the Order of Preachers, stated under oath that he had entered the Order of Friars Preachers a little over fourteen years ago. He lived with the blessed Brother Dominic for about ten months in the monastery of St. Nicholas in Bologna; then at Rome and Milan. Together they traveled to Rome. He also took care of him when he was sick.

In order that he might pray after Compline, the blessed Brother Dominic had the custom of hiding himself in the church when his brethren had left to go to bed. Since the witness wanted



to know what the blessed Brother Dominic was doing in the church, he often hid himself there, and so heard him praying to the Lord with a great cry and tears, and with heavy sighing. When asked how he knew that it was the blessed Brother Dominic, he answered that he saw him, since there was a light in the church. He also recognized him by his voice and so is quite certain that it was Brother Dominic. That the blessed brother often devoted the entire night to prayer was a fact well-known to the brethren and firmly believed by the witness.

Although he wanted to know where he slept, he could not find that he had any place of his own, as had the other brothers. Sometimes he was found to have slept on a bench, sometimes on the ground, and sometimes on a chair or bed without any mattress. At night, he slept dressed just as he went about during the day. When asked how he knew all this, he answered that he saw it and it was common knowledge among the brethren.

In traveling to Rome, whenever they got outside any city, town or village, the blessed Brother Dominic would take off his shoes, throw them over his shoulder and walk barefoot. He would not let the witness carry them, although he wanted to do this. When they approached another city, town or village, he again put them on. On leaving, he took them off and thus walked barefoot until they reached their destination.

Once, when they got to a place where the stones were extremely sharp, he said to the witness: "What a wretch I am! Here I was once forced to put my shoes on." The witness asked why. Because it had rained, Master Dominic answered. The witness stated that he knew this because he was there and saw it.

Walking along the same route, they once got caught in a heavy rainstorm, a downpour. The streams and rivers were all swollen, but the blessed Brother Dominic, since he rejoiced in difficulties, praised and blessed God by singing the "Ave Maris Stella" in a strong voice. When he finished that hymn, he began another, the "Veni Creator Spiritus." He sang it all in a clear voice.

When they came to some flooded land, which had resulted from all the rain and drainage, the blessed Brother Dominic made the Sign of the Cross over the water and told the witness—who was very much afraid of water—that he should enter in the name of the Lord. Confiding in the Sign of the Cross made by Brother Dominic and secure in his obedience, he entered the water which seemed so perilous and got through safely.

Sometimes the witness served his Mass. He would then watch his expression, and he used to see so many tears running down his face that the drops ran in a stream. He saw the same thing happen in singing the Psalms.

When they had to stop for a meal or for the night, he did not insist on his will, but followed the wishes of his brothers who were with him. And if he were badly treated, he showed greater signs of joy than if he were served well. Asked how he knew this, the witness answered that he saw it since he was present.

Once in Milan, the blessed Brother Dominic was sick and the witness took care of him. When the violence of the fever attacked him, he did not complain about this illness; rather, it seemed that he was in prayer and contemplation. This seemed so from certain signs on his face, which the patient, when well, was accustomed to show whenever he was in prayer and contemplation—as the witness well knew. When the fever diminished, he spoke of God with the brethren, or read a book, or had someone read to him. Since his custom was always to rejoice in trials rather than in good fortune, he praised God and was happy about his sickness.

At one time the witness was procurator of the monastery at Bologna and so had to supply the refectory. On a certain fast day the bread in the refectory ran out. Brother Dominic then gave the signal that bread should be brought for the brethren. The witness told him that there was none left. With a cheerful look, Brother Dominic raised his hands, and praised and blessed the Lord. Immediately, two persons entered carrying baskets, one of bread and the other of dried figs, so that the brethren had plenty. The witness knows all this to be true, for he was there.

Brother Dominic was extremely humble, kind, pious, merciful, patient and sober. He embraced poverty, was zealous for souls and was friendly toward all religious Orders and their members. As regards himself, he observed the Rule rigidly. He never returned evil for evil, nor abuse for abuse, but blessed those who cursed him. Asked how he knew the things he related, the witness answered that he lived with him during journeys and rests, saw him well and sick, observed him eating and sleeping.

After the removal of blessed Brother Dominic's body from the first grave to its present tomb, the Master of the Order showed the relics to the brethren who were not present at the translation, because they were most anxious to see them. The

witness was there when the relics were displayed in the presence of the Podesta and certain other citizens of Bologna, the Provincial Prior and all the other brothers. He detected a remarkable and very sweet odor coming from the bones, but he could not identify it. It seemed to him that it exceeded every aromatic fragrance. He does not believe that so wonderful and striking a marvel could have been produced, if it were not due to a miracle from the Lord in heaven. The witness was not alone in clearly sensing this fragrance, for many others, even those standing at some distance, told him they perceived it.

When the witness was a novice and had no experience of preaching—he had not yet studied Sacred Scripture—Brother Dominic ordered him to leave Bologna and go to Piacenza to preach. He tried to excuse himself because of his inexperience. But with great gentleness, Brother Dominic convinced him he should go, and said to him: "Go confidently, for the Lord will be with you, and He will put the words in your mouth." The witness obeyed, went to Piacenza and preached there. God blessed his words with so much grace that three brothers entered the Order of Preachers when he spoke.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The actual document containing this request has been lost.

<sup>2</sup> *MOPH*, XXII, pp. 18-19. Jordan of Saxony reports that some of the brethren asked the Holy Father for permission to carry out a canonical translation of Brother Dominic's body from its original grave (this was prior to the request of the Bolognese). Gregory severely rebuked them for having neglected their Father so long, and said that there was no doubt that Dominic was in heaven. Cf. *MOPH*, XVI, pp. 84-85.

<sup>3</sup> Philip was later Provincial Prior in the Lombardy province three times. He has sometimes been confused with another Brother Philip, founder of the monastery at Rheims and Provincial of the Holy Land province. Cf. Altaner, p. 222; *MOPH*, II, pp. 89ff.

<sup>4</sup> More detailed information concerning the organization of the process may be found in Vicaire, pp. 195ff. Additional facts concerning the process and the history of the text are given in *MOPH*, XVI, pp. 91ff., and Taurisano, pp. 5ff. Our translation is based upon the text of the *MOPH*, XVI. The deposition of the first witness, Bonaventure of Verona, may be found in the March, 1940 issue of *Dominicana*, pp. 30ff. The remaining depositions and allied documents will be published in future issues of *Dominicana*. Information concerning St. Dominic's method of prayer may be found in the translation of a thirteenth-century document in the summer, 1956 issue of *Reality*, pp. 164ff.

<sup>5</sup> The name is taken from a small river near Bologna.

<sup>6</sup> In Latin, his name is often spelled *Ventura*. He was the first witness whom Philip presented to the board at Bologna.

<sup>7</sup> On explanation of this medieval method of indicating the year may be found in the article, "Chronology, General," of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Speaking in a somewhat similar manner, we would say: In the sixth year of the second decade.

<sup>8</sup> Altaner, pp. 25ff.; *AOP*, 1893, p. 72; 1894, p. 397; 1901, p. 185; Echard, I, pp. 48, 105.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory IX, who was then Cardinal Ugolino.

<sup>10</sup> Some authors, from an indication in one of the manuscripts, think that Northern Germany is meant. It is a disputed point, however.

<sup>11</sup> He was Dominic's *socius*, or official traveling companion. The friars never traveled alone, but always had another with them. Dominic chose various men, both clerics and lay brothers, to accompany him on his different journeys.

<sup>12</sup> William must have received his information indirectly from the Bishop, for the latter died in 1207, long before William knew Dominic.

<sup>13</sup> William was a *diffinitor*, that is, one of the friars concerned with framing the legislation at the General Chapter. The Dominican General Chapter is roughly similar to the meeting of Congress, except that it is in session only a few days. A *diffinitor* has duties somewhat like those of a Congressman.

<sup>14</sup> Altaner, pp. 26f; *AOP*, 1901, pp. 187-8; *AFP*, X, p. 320.

<sup>15</sup> Altaner, pp. 27 f; *AOP*, 1893, p. 72; 1894, p. 397; 1898, p. 607; 1901, p. 190; Echard, I, p. 49; Taurisano, p. 17.

### Bibliography

*AFP*: *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, Rome, 1931ff.

Altaner: Berthold, *Der hl. Dominikus*, Breslau, 1922.

*AOP*: *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, Rome, 1893ff.

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*MOPH*: *Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica*, Rome, 1896ff.

Taurisano: Innocentius, *Fontes Selecti Vitae S. Dominici de Guzman*, Rome, n.d.

Vicaire: M.H., *Saint Dominique de Caleruega*, Paris, 1955.

Complete bibliographies may be found in *MOPH*, XVI and Vicaire.

In a spirit of veneration, look to the holy men of past ages and of our own day as examples, for, uniting with the most priestly zeal the right kind of detachment from external goods and unlimited confidence in Divine Providence, they accomplished marvellous works, putting their trust in God, Who never refuses necessary help.

*Menti Nostrae*, Pius XII