

MASTER OF SAINTS

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UHAT A SHOCK! Looking back, he wondered why he had not seen the warning signs. They had approached him earlier on the matter and he had refused. He never gave it a second thought. Now it had come to this. He had refused the first time, he would refuse again. This was asking too much of him, placing too much on shoulders that already carried the burden of responsibility. He was not fit for this position, he knew that only too well. To lead a group of men was one thing; to lead a city and a diocese was another. Prior, theologian at Church Councils: these were offices he could fill, but this . . . it was beyond him. No, he would have to refuse. But then, there was *that* letter. He could picture the writer—it was just like him. Eloquent, beseeching, pointing to duty, duty which overshadowed personal likes and dislikes. How could he refuse when he thought of *that* letter? What would he say to him? What *could* he say? With *that* letter in mind, anything was possible; nothing was too great to bear—nothing! Reading it again, he could see wisdom, sanctity, the master teaching the student. Yes, how could he refuse? Thus, did Saint Antoninus become Archbishop of Florence. How important *that* letter was! The writer? *Blessed Lawrence of Ripafratta.*

A CASTLE AND A BIRTH

Pisa was a proud city—the “Rome of Tuscany.” Indeed, she had good reason to be. It was she who in the ninth-century provided wealth and security for the Marquis of Tuscany. She was the first

to take up arms against an invading Italian city. She had contributed much to the Crusades. It was she who drove the hated Saracens from Italy. Her great Navy ruled the Mediterranean. Now, in 1355, there was bloodshed in her streets and what was to follow was not at all in keeping with her illustrious past. For fourteen years, there had been tyranny in her government, trade and industry had fallen sharply and now, within her borders, discontent was everywhere.

But, Pisa was to have one more proud day, for, on the fourth of March in the year 1359, Lawrence of Ripafratta was born. How fitting that the future *Master* should see Pisa from the citadel which had so often defended her, Ripafratta, that majestic castle built on the summit of a hill at the foot of Mount Pisano; Ripafratta, sold to the Florentines in 1402 by a piece of treachery which brought about the end of a great empire in 1406. History tells us little of the parents of this future *Master of Saints* except that he belonged to the illustrious family of the Nobili which later produced the Ronciori whose descendants still exist in the city of Pisa.

Lawrence, desiring to prepare himself for the priesthood, studied at the University of Pisa which was founded under the direction of Count Bonifazio della Gherardesca in the year 1340.¹ No doubt it was here that he became attracted to the Dominican Order, for it is safe to assume that the Dominican Priory of St. Catherine supplied professors for the University. This Priory had a long and brilliant history. Learned and holy men filled its ranks. It is here that one finds such great names as Jordon of Rivalta, Hugh of San Concordio and Dominic Peccioli. The latter directed Blessed Clara of Pisa and at that time was the novice master at St. Catherine's. In 1379 Lawrence entered the Dominican Order at the age of 38. His novice master was this same Dominic Peccioli. Lawrence was on his way to becoming *Master of Saints*.

A PLAGUE . . .

A killer roamed Europe! A killer who was not satisfied with three years of death, but came back sixteen times before he was finally stopped. A killer who had no respect for person, age or condition. Words become useless when one tries to describe what this killer did to change the face of Europe. It was worse than any war! The killer was the dreaded Bubonic or Black Plague. What it did to a human being, the havoc it wrought on the body of man is difficult to put into appropriate words. Perhaps the best way to understand it is to give the classic symptoms of Bubonic Plague. The disease struck quickly. The victim first suffered chills. Then his tem-

perature rose swiftly and reached enormous heights. Fever was accompanied by a terrible thirst which could not be quenched. Convulsions and nausea set in and, as if this were not enough, the disease then attacked the skin! The body became hot and dry and the face of the victim bloated beyond recognition. It was at this point that the "black spots," from which the disease receives its name, appeared on the body. Today, medicine has provided a cure, but in fourteenth century Europe, the only cure was death.

Bubonic Plague was brought from China and India along the trade routes. It first struck Italy in early 1348 and, by the summer of that year, it had reached England.² However, one might call it a merciful killer for most of those whom it attacked were dead within hours; the others lasted for two or three days. But, what was most striking was the utter helplessness of these people. There was nothing anyone could do. Prayers for a quick and merciful death offered the only ray of hope. Naturally, an inevitable famine followed and many of those who lived through the Plague starved to death. Some historians point out that by the end of the third year, half of Europe's population was in the grave.

Statistics make for dull reading, but they do have a place here. Considering the death toll among religious alone will show us how unmerciful the killer was and will help us to understand later events. In Germany, 124,000 religious were struck down by the plague; 30,000 Franciscans in Italy; at Marseilles, all of the Franciscans were killed. The Dominican Order, like the rest of their religious brothers, lost a considerable number of men. At Florence, 80; Pisa, 40; Lucca, 29; Basel, 10.³ There wasn't a Dominican left at Marseilles after 1348; at Montpellier, only seven survived; at Provence, 378 Dominicans died.⁴ Many great Dominicans were taken from the Order in the prime of their apostolic life. Names like Robert Holcott, a renowned theologian, Elias de Ferrieres, John Libello and Hugh of Munch.

One incident will suffice to show the wonderful charity that was prevalent among religious in Europe at this time. William of Garric, Dominican Prior at Carcassone, went each evening with his entire community to care for the stricken members of the Franciscan Friary in that city. They cared for the sick and buried the dead. But, the plague became the final victor—not one survived! The Dominicans? Out of sixty-four members, only eighteen lived through the plague.

"The total effect of this sudden sweeping pestilence, that in a matter of less than two years destroyed some forty million people in western Europe, can hardly be exaggerated. . . . A student of

Church History will notice how, in many ways, it broke the spirit of the generation upon which it fell. The temptation to despair of the spiritual and to live only for what the day brings took hold, very generally, of the survivors."⁵ The plague thus set the stage for what was to show one of God's ways of bringing good out of evil. It prepared the way for the *Master of Saints*.

AND A SCHISM

"Elect an Italian or you die!" was the cry made by the people of Rome in 1378. It set off a chain reaction which strained that seamless garment—the Roman Catholic Church. For sixty-eight years, Avignon had been the scene of the Papacy, and indeed, it had not been a very bright scene! Now, thanks to St. Catherine of Siena, the Pope had returned to the See of Peter. She wrote: "Be valiant and not fearful; answer God who calls you to come and to fill and defend the place of the glorious pastor, St. Peter, whose successor you are. . . . By doing thus, you shall obtain the conversion of the pastors of the Church. . . . I tell you that ravening wolves will lay their heads in your lap like gentle lambs, and beseech you to have pity on them, O Father."⁶ And so the Pope came back to Rome. Gregory left Avignon on September 13th, 1376 and reached Rome on January 17th of the following year. He lived for only fourteen months more.

With the cry of the Roman people ringing in their ears, the frightened Cardinals elected an Italian Pope, the first in seventy-four years.⁷ Bartolomeo Pregnani, Archbishop of Bari, took the name of Urban VI. He was an austere man and immediately instituted a much needed reform. But to many, his seeming imprudence defeated his lofty purpose. One by one, the French Cardinals, thirteen of them, began to leave Rome. When Urban summoned them back, they brought up the question of his election. Was it valid? They had been forced into it, they said, and now they refused obedience. The idea began to spread and with it came courage. The thirteen French Cardinals met at Fondi and, with the backing and encouragement of King Charles V, elected Robert of Geneva who took the name of Clement VII.

The Church was divided into two camps. Even great Saints were not immune from taking sides. St. Catherine and St. Brigid were in favor of the Roman Pope. St. Vincent Ferrer and Blessed Peter of Luxemburg gave obedience to the French Pope. The situation grew progressively worse until, finally, both Urban and Clement took up arms to settle the question. In 1394, the University of

Paris suggested that both men resign and a new election be held. Clement refused! The only other solution would be the death of one of the incumbents. Urban was the first to die and the Cardinals of his obedience elected a new pope, Boniface IX. Meanwhile, Benedict XIII had succeeded Clement. The Conciliar Theory made its first appearance at this point. It had found many supporters at the University of Paris. Put into action, it solved nothing, but rather created a new problem, the Pisa Pope, John XXIII. Before the schism ended, Rome saw three Popes elected, the last being Gregory XII. The Council of Constance, held in 1415, finally solved the dilemma with the help of Pope John who resigned. This Council sat until 1417 when an election was held in Rome and Martin V became Pope.

Order was finally brought to this, one of the most chaotic periods in the history of the Church. But the damage had already been done. Either the plague or the schism would have been enough to disrupt the life and members of any religious order, but both together were a fatal combination. Even religious Orders were divided. For example, the Dominican Order had two Master Generals. Indeed, the stage was set for the *Master of Saints*.

LAWRENCE AND THE REFORM

The Plague and the Western Schism had wrought havoc in religious monasteries. The reason was simple enough. During the plague, as we have seen, the monasteries had been gravely affected and, in an effort to bolster the ranks, anyone and everyone with the slightest desire to serve God was now admitted. Backgrounds, moral character and intellectual ability were given little consideration. The schism divided this mass of unsuitable material into two, sometimes three groups, each going its own way and following no particular rule, no particular way of life. The evil of private life replaced the common life. It became something of a novelty to see the choir filled for the Divine Office. It is hard to imagine such a situation in this day and age, but it happened nevertheless.

Raymond of Capua, the spiritual director of Saint Catherine of Siena, instituted the reform that had to come. It was at the insistence of Catherine that he embarked on this monumental task. He had been made Master General and, in 1388, after making a visitation and finding that a good number of Dominicans still wanted to serve God and the Church by living strictly according to the Rule and Constitutions of the Order, Raymond began his work of reform.⁸ Naturally, there was much opposition on the part of some.

This necessitated dividing the Order into two groups and plac-

ing a Vicar-General over the Observants. Blessed John Dominici became Vicar in Italy and began his reform in the Priory of St. Dominic in Citta di Castello in Umbria. One member of that community, whose holiness was beyond question, attracted his attention. Lawrence was already manifesting the virtue that was later to place him in the Order's list of *Beati*.

To a life of angelic purity, Lawrence added a very rigid austerity, a burning zeal for the salvation of souls and an inviolable regularity and fidelity in observing the Rule of the Order. To all these virtues was joined so deep an acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures and so profound a perception of their meaning that he merited the name of "Ark of the New Testament."⁹ John Dominici realized almost at once that here was a rare personage. He realized, also, that in order to continue the reform he would have to have a good novitiate and, likewise, a capable novice master. He had chosen for this difficult position a Father Michael Tosi, a young Pisan whom he had converted from a life of licentiousness to the service of Christ, but the young priest had died, a martyr to charity as he nursed the brothers stricken with the plague. Blessed John then chose Lawrence for the office.

THE NOVITIATE AND THE MASTER

Cortona, a small village on the borders of Tuscany, became the site for the future hope of the Order in Italy. The place was perfect for what had to be done. Here, a man could lose himself from the world, learn the ways of the Order, capture the spirit that characterized its saints. The year was 1402 and Lawrence was to be novice master only until 1405. It is remarkable, when one considers the short time given him, how much he accomplished.

The Constitutions of the Sacred Order of Preachers state in extremely clear and precise language what qualities a novice master should possess and the way in which he should conduct the novitiate. The Constitutions state that this mold of men should be well versed in the laws and ceremonies of the Order, outstanding in the field of teaching and in his personal life, a lover of the Divine Office and prayer, excelling in prudence, charity and piety, combining a zeal for God with mildness and showing, in all that he does, an example of good work.¹⁰ It almost seems as if the writer of these words had Lawrence in mind.

In the direction of his novices, Lawrence showed marvellous prudence. He trained them in the path of mortification, a path filled with many dangerous pitfalls and had them avoid that excess of

sweetness and indulgence by which so many become lost on the way. At the same time, he restrained them from the fervid excitement which is so apt to deceive beginners in the paths of perfection and by which so many undermine their health and condemn themselves, by indiscreet penances, to a life of uselessness. Thus, although his own life was most penitential, he softened the austerities of the Rule as much as was necessary, without destroying discipline or departing from the spirit and aims of the Order. He was a true leader, not only instructing his novices in the way of perfection, but showing them by his own example. He himself lived the life he wanted them to live. Indeed, this is the mark of true leadership and the mark of a true novice master.

The life of a novice master is indeed a lonely one. He can not fraternize too much with the novices lest familiarity breed contempt. He must, at times, be stern, nor must he apologize for this strictness, lest, as St. Augustine says: "by an indiscreet exercise of humility, the authority of the superior should be weakened."¹¹ It is a position in which personalities are involved and this always requires much tact and prudence. He must know his novices; he must encourage this one, correct that one, he must be patient with all. He must be like a father to his novices, a father who can be approached on any matter where help, sympathy, and encouragement are needed. Lawrence was all of these things and more. Like St. Paul, he was "all things to all men."

The Constitutions tell us that the novice master should *show* the novice how to practice the religious vows and how to make his way to God.¹² Lawrence did exactly this: he showed his charges how to live the religious life by action and not only by word. Anything the novices were required to do, he first did himself. Indeed, he was a *Master*.

MASTER OF SAINTS

It is difficult to write about a man who spent his most important years in a hidden life and a hidden work. He was not a St. Vincent Ferrer, preaching and converting souls to God; he was not an Aquinas, writing, teaching and expounding truth; he was not a Peter Martyr, dying for the faith. Yet, in one sense he was all of these. He did preach; he did teach, and, indeed, he died in many ways for God.

During the first year of his office, a young man came to Cortona, highly recommended by John Dominici. Lawrence took this youth and made him a man of God. He later became Archbishop of Flor-

ence and, in 1523, became a Saint, Saint Antoninus. He was followed soon after by Peter Capucci who is known today as Blessed Peter of Tiferno. In 1407, two men from Mugello entered the novitiate. They were Fra Angelico and his brother, Fra Benedetto. Here were tangible results! And it is here that we can see how Lawrence, working with God, helped to forge future saints. He excelled in one quality that is worthy of the highest praise and which has brought great honor to the Dominican Order. It was the God-given Wisdom with which he understood and cherished the special vocation of each of his novices.

While he never allowed them to lose sight of the principal end of the Order, he nevertheless encouraged each one to fully develop his own peculiar talents. To Blessed Peter, whose inclinations sympathized with his own, he opened the ways of contemplation. For Saint Antoninus, he counselled the investigation of the field of science, both human and divine. He allowed Fra Angelico and Fra Benedetto to devote their talents to painting, but revealed to them heavenly models to guide their artistic inspirations. Listen to him as he speaks to these two artists: "I beseech you to whom God has not given the gift of knowledge, to follow the career of painting in which you will be none the less true Friar Preachers. For it is not only by words that we persuade men to love virtue and flee from vice, it is also by the example of a stainless life, and by the arts which are the outward expression of men's inward thoughts; sublime arts, among which music and painting hold the first place. . . . Words cannot reach those who are afar off, and the most eloquent voice cannot speak from the tomb to the sinner. But your heavenly pictures will have immortal influence, for centuries they will remain as efficacious preachers of religion and virtue."¹³

LAST YEARS

The great virtue of prudence which characterized Lawrence could not always remain buried in obscurity, if indeed it ever really was. In 1409, he was appointed Vicar General of the reformed Congregation he had so faithfully served. In this new sphere of usefulness, he manifested new gifts of prudence. It was here that he applied to the whole Order what he had formerly applied to his novices. He was still a Master, still trying to *show* how to live a life pleasing to God. He took up residence in the Priory of St. Dominic at Pistoria and now, as never before, he was free to attend to the ministry of souls. He preached continuously, and to many he seemed like a Saint Paul. He visited and consoled the sick, particu-

larly those stricken by the plague and abandoned by their relatives and friends. He was "all things to all men."

It was during this period too that we find *that* letter! Saint Antoninus was very unwilling to accept so exalted a dignity as the archbishopric, a dignity which brought with it such alarming responsibilities. Neither the supplications of the Magistrates of Florence, nor the well-known wishes of the Pope could persuade him to give consent. But, when he received *that* letter from his former Master, whom he had never ceased to consult on many matters, he withdrew all opposition and was consecrated Archbishop. Lawrence wrote frequent letters to his former novice, full of that wisdom characteristic of a Master, instructing him on the office and duties of a Christian Bishop. He even instructed him on the management of his episcopal palace and the like. He knew only too well that the households of the great are too frequently poorly regulated and advised him to watch over all under his care so that no scandal could arise. What St. Bernard did for Pope Eugenius III, Lawrence did for Saint Antoninus.

It was also during this period that Lawrence suffered much from an ulcer on his leg. Like most saints, he never complained and nothing was known about the condition until after his death. He was nearing his hundredth year. His life indeed had been a full one. Looking over the years, he found that they had not only been happy ones, but fruitful ones as well, but little did he know that three of his novices would be placed on our altars by the infallible voice of the Church. Many others who did not receive such recognition have left behind them eternal renown. He lived to see the reform of the Order blessed by God and extended to all parts of Italy and to the world.

His death was like his life. On his death bed, he received the sacraments with evident devotion and exhorted those who crowded around him to labor unceasingly for the salvation of souls, to keep the Dominican Rule faithfully and to become models of holiness in their own lives so that the people, seeing their holiness might be encouraged to walk in the paths of virtue. He died on September 28th, 1457 at the age of ninety-eight. It was not long before God made his sanctity apparent by many miracles at his tomb and in the year 1851, Pope Pius IX declared him *Blessed*.

PISTORIA—1957

In May of this year, the Dominican Fathers and Brothers of the Convent of St. Dominic in Pistoria (Pistoia) held a special cele-

bration in honor of the Fifth Centenary of the death of Blessed Lawrence. His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Lercaro, Archbishop of Bologna, many other bishops and the Master General of the Order were present for the festivities. On the 5th of May, at 8:30 in the morning, the Most Reverend Michael Browne, O.P., Master General, offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. This was followed by a Solemn Pontifical Mass offered by the Bishop of the Diocese at 10:00 A.M. At 5:30 that same afternoon, Cardinal Lercaro was present for a procession in honor of Blessed Lawrence and afterwards addressed the ecclesiastical and civil dignitaries and the crowds of the faithful who were present. The services were closed with Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament given by the Bishop of the diocese.¹⁴

Thus, new honors were shown to this humble Dominican priest whose love for God and the Order permeated everything he did in life. Let us ask his intercession today so that we, too, may become Saints in whatever vocation Almighty God has chosen for us.

Blessed Lawrence of Ripafratta

Master of Saints

Pray for us!

FOOTNOTES

¹ Murphy, Sister Mary Evelyn, O.P., *Blessed Clara Gambacorta* (Fribourg: 1928).

² Hughes, Philip, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday & Co.: 1954), p. 140.

³ *Cronaco del Convento di S. Caterina in Pisa*, p. 530. (Basel), Masetti, Monumenta, I, 287.

⁴ Rosler, A., *Cardinal Johannes Dominici* (Fribourg: 1893), p. 6n.

⁵ Hughes, Philip, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-41.

⁶ Poulet, Dom Charles, O.S.B., *A History of the Catholic Church* (St. Louis: B. Herder & Co.: 1954), Vol. I, p. 610.

⁷ Hughes, Philip, *op. cit.* p. 143.

⁸ Bl. Raymondi Capuani, O.P., *Opuscula et litterae* (Rome: 1899), pp. 53-55.

⁹ Dyson, T. A., *Stars in Saint Dominic's Crown* (New York: Sadlier & Co., 1890), pp. 149ss.

¹⁰ *Constitutiones Sacri Ordinis Praedicatorum* (Rome: 1932), Book II, chap. 3, art. 1, no. 115.

¹¹ *Rule of Saint Augustine* (Rome: 1932).

¹² *Constitutiones S.O.P. loc. cit.* art. 3, no. 155.

¹³ Dyson, T. A., *op. cit.*, pp. 155-56

¹⁴ *Analecta S.O.P.* Vol. XXXIII (April-June, 1957), p. 108.