

"BLESSED ISNARD"¹

A New Flower in the Dominican Garden

The beautiful Dominican garden, so resplendent with grace and beauty, which buds forth in the glory of its Saints and Blesseds, today is adorned and enriched with a new ornament, a flower cultivated by the hands of the Holy Patriarch, St. Dominic himself.

This flower, Blessed Isnard of Chiampo, redolent with the sweet odor of sanctity and highly tinged with a beautiful and indelible hue of perfection, has been transplanted from its terrestrial soil to blossom perpetually in fragrance and freshness amid the choicest flowers of Paradise.

What joy has filled our hearts in having another of the illustrious children of St. Dominic raised upon the altars of Holy Church! If this event is a cause of great joy to the faithful, in a more special manner is his beatification a source of exultation and blessedness to his Brothers and Sisters within the Order. It is indeed our happy privilege to sing the praises of this triumph of our Blessed Brother, and at the same time to raise our hearts and minds to God in thanksgiving for the signal favor bestowed upon His chosen one.

Chiampo, a picturesque little village in the province of Vicenza, Italy, is designated as the birthplace of Blessed Isnard, which event occurred at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Very little is known to us concerning his childhood; however, from certain incidents of his later life, and from the circumstance of his studying at Bologna, it can be inferred that he was born of well-to-do parents, and that, beyond doubt, his early years were spent in innocence, for among the magnificent tributes of praise attributed to him in the "Vitae Fratrum" of Gerard of Frachet, a near contemporary, we read "Fuit autem virgo, et carne et corde,"² "He was a virgin in soul and body." From this statement we can infer that his childhood was spent in the practice of all the virtues which perfect and render so attractive and charming those tender years. Isnard was docile to the promptings of grace and yielded unflinchingly to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Father D'Achilli, O. P., "Memorie Dominicane," 1919.

² "Vitae Fratrum," Chap. XXV.

Having outgrown his childhood, the youthful Isnard felt a keen desire to attain knowledge. The better to realize his ambition, he left his native home and, going to Bologna, became a student at the famous university of that city. Surely he could not have chosen a better place, for Bologna was recognized as the most celebrated educational center of the Middle Ages, and to it young men flocked in great numbers from all parts of the then known world. Indeed, the renown of this institution was universal, whence Bologna derived the appellation, "Dotta," that is "Learned."

How did Isnard, now absorbed by study and in daily contact with so many students of all classes and types, conduct himself? Amid the dangers and temptations of university life, did he guard and preserve that treasure of holy purity which he brought with him from his native town? His former habits of virtue served him well. They had so strengthened his faith in the practice of piety, that he was able to preserve his faith and his innocence amid the corrupting influences of his surroundings. His virtuous habits also aided him greatly in the acquiring of knowledge, so that soon he excelled his fellow-students and became a prominent scholar at the university.

We find the Dominicans well established in the learned city of Bologna at this period. Their convent, erected under the patronage of Santa Maria della Mascarella, was presided over by that zealous and apostolic superior, Blessed Reginald. Such was the fame of this convent, noted for its pious and learned religious, that it attracted many doctors and professors from the university to ask admission into the Order. Within a short time, the number of religious was so great that Blessed Reginald had to seek other quarters for his Brothers, and therefore established another house, known as the convent of San Niccolò delle Vigne. St. Dominic, the Holy Founder, on one of his journeys from Spain remained for a considerable time at Bologna, where his very presence exercised a beneficial influence upon the inhabitants of this noted city. Young Isnard had long felt the desire to embrace a life of sacrifice and immolation, and had already, secretly in his heart, made a vow to consecrate himself to God. Filled with these noble aspirations, he chanced one day to meet St. Dominic. He became so enraptured with his paternal and kindly demeanor that he decided on the spot to give himself up to the Holy Patriarch and to ask the Habit of a Friar Preacher.

This event, which decided Isnard's future career, took place in the year 1219. When at last he had attained to the cherished desire of his heart he found every opportunity to remain in constant communication with God, thus increasing the splendor of his virtues. How does our novice feel in the silence of the monastery? His lonely cell was for him an abode of peaceful happiness. By reason of the rigid monastic observances, moderated by a sweet spirit of fraternal love, and by the opportunities offered for the study of divine truths, and also by the pious and devout psalmodies offered to God, in which he was permitted to join, he became enamored with the beauty of the new institution. The years sped by fleetingly, and in the quiet atmosphere which accorded so well with his aspirations the youthful novice developed into a Dominican of the most perfect type.

In the year 1231 his apostolate began, and from thenceforth history throws a radiant light upon his career; now indeed, we can follow him in his labors and admire the tireless efforts of this zealous Friar-Preacher. He has now arrived at the fullness of manhood, and during his long preparation of eleven years has been transformed into the ideal Apostle, that is, one as Père Lacordaire says, "who knows and teaches not only by word but also inculcates the truths of the Christian religion by his example, and whose presence is as the apparition of Jesus Christ, Himself,"³ and therefore is able to communicate to his fellowman the fruits of his contemplation. Pavia, the field assigned to him by his superiors, became the scene of his life's labors. The soil allotted to him was indeed difficult to cultivate, because in this city the numerous and obstinate Ghibellines, opposed to the Roman Pontiff and to the Church, had been drawing countless souls away from God. Hence, there was no desire on the part of the people for things spiritual, and no care manifested for the interests of God and the salvation of their immortal souls. The corruption of morals was almost universal, due in large measure to the prosperity and luxury with which the city abounded, and also to the natural temperament of the inhabitants, who were much given to enmities and strife. Such were the prevailing conditions when Isnard arrived upon the scene of his future labors. One glance at that field, so deeply sunk in moral and political corruption, was sufficient to convince him that he must

³Père Lacordaire, O. P. "Life of St. Dominic," Chap. VII.

endure many hardships, make many sacrifices, and fight many battles, if he would convert this waste land into a fruit-bearing spot in the Vineyard of the Lord.

But frequently, when sanctity and eloquence do not suffice for the conversion of sinners, miracles are vouchsafed, and hence we find many prodigies and miracles in the life and Apostolate of Blessed Isnard. In Pavia there was a man possessed by the devil. He had lost all consciousness and was continually tormented by terrible convulsions. He was well known throughout the city and avoided by all with horror. The heretics made use of this unfortunate creature's infirmities to discredit the teaching of Isnard. They said: "The Friar is only good to say words and nothing more. If he were really a man sent by God, he should go to Martin and cure him. Then we would believe in his word." Isnard, seeing that the obstinacy of the heretics was a stumbling-block for the many souls who were otherwise ready to return to the true faith, accepted their challenge. Uttering a prayer to Almighty God that He would confirm the preaching of His servant by a miracle, he descended from the pulpit where he was preaching, approached the afflicted man, and after having in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ commanded the evil spirit to depart, embraced him and kissed his cheek. In the embrace of the holy man of God Martin felt that his members were liberated from the influence of the Evil One; and his countenance bore testimony to his inward happiness, for his eyes shone forth with the light of his regained life and upon his lips played a smile of sweet peace and happiness. The news of the prodigy spread rapidly throughout the city and the people flocked in great numbers to the Church of Santa Maria di Nazareth, there to see Martin, rapt in fervent prayer and thanksgiving for so signal a favor. The enemies of Isnard were greatly confounded by this miracle, and many souls, believing that he was a man sent to them by God, reformed their lives and did penance. Martin, full of gratitude for his liberation, and in testimony of the sanctity of Isnard, humbly asked for the habit of St. Dominic and lived for many years as a Dominican lay-brother in the convent attached to the church where he had been delivered from his tormentor.

On another occasion, when Isnard was preaching in one of the public squares, the church being too small to accommodate the enormous multitude that came to hear him, there happened to be present a certain heretic who derided the preacher, saying:

"Then only shall I believe in the sanctity of Isnard when the cask in that corner of the square, moving by itself, will come upon my leg and break it." Suddenly moving from its accustomed place, the cask was thrown violently upon the scoffer's limb, breaking it in several places. The effect of this miracle was stupendous and greatly increased the influence of the missionary; as a consequence, thousands flocked to him for instruction and guidance.

A glimpse into the saintly man's inner life indicates that he kept constantly before his mind the words of St. Paul: "I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection; lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway." (St. Paul, 1; Cor. 9:27.) He understood perfectly that in order to make his labors successful he himself must be sustained and nourished by the flame of divine love and the light of truth. So, even amidst his arduous labors for others, he did not neglect his own sanctification. He had already in the long preparation of the novitiate trained himself to the exercise of every virtue. There he had laid the foundation for the edifice of his sanctity; and now it had reached to a state of perfection like unto a magnificent day of May, which, beginning with a beautiful Aurora, gradually sends forth rays of light until the blaze of the sun fills the heavens with its midday splendor. Few are the words that history has handed down to us concerning the sanctity of Isnard; still in those few phrases which we have, we see a living figure of him: "There was in the convent of Pavia a Friar, a God-fearing man, a fervent and most eloquent preacher, through whom God performed many miracles."⁴ His life, indeed, is all harmony, a triumph of grace which displays the flowering of all virtues, resplendent among them being his great charity and profound humility, his unstained purity, and his zeal for the salvation of souls. Even his countenance beamed with the radiance of interior light. A very special characteristic was his intense devotion to Jesus Crucified. From the Crucified One he drew the vigor that nourished his apostolic life. This was the secret of his success. He would embrace the image of the Divine Martyr and kiss the sacred wounds with tender affection, and thus drawing strength and courage, would undertake cheerfully the hard-

⁴"Vitae Fratrum," Chap. XXV.

est austerities and religious mortifications in order that he might draw closer to the Ideal of all sanctity.

Isnard continued his labors at Pavia to the end of his life, and with ever-increasing ardor did he preach the truths of the Catholic faith. By his preaching he transformed the city, once barren of all spirituality, into an oasis of sanctity. Heresy was suppressed and dissipated, love of God flourished everywhere, and his beloved people were once again living piously in all the observances of the Christian religion. This accomplished, Isnard felt as though he were ready to chant his "Nunc Dimittis"; he longed to be dissolved and to be with Christ. And when at last the final summons came, the good and faithful servant, having received the sacraments of the Church with great devotion, responded cheerfully to the call of the Master. He expired in his own monastery, surrounded by his weeping brethren, on March 19, 1244, before he had reached the forty-fifth year of his age.

The sanctity of Isnard was attested by many miracles performed at his tomb. Still there was wanting the official beatification of the saintly man. The Church had not as yet sealed with her authority the constant and unanimous cult offered to the Holy Friar. Many requests had been made to Rome throughout the past centuries, but by reason of various circumstances the process of his beatification was deferred. Now, in our own day, January 23, 24 and 25 of the present year, the ardent wishes and desires of the people of Pavia and Vicenza, as well also as those of the entire Dominican Order, were realized by the formal declaration by ecclesiastical authority of his Beatification. To the imperishable crown of glory that God has bestowed upon him in heaven is added also a perpetual devotion here on earth, for from the shadows of the sepulchre Blessed Isnard has been raised to the splendors of the altar.

—Bro. Augustine Naselli, O. P.