

THE GENIUS OF SAINT DOMINIC*

The power of adaptability of an organism to its environment, Herbert Spencer somewhere says, sums up the problem of life. If this be true of all forms of life, it is especially so of human life. For according to a biological principle the formation and habits of man depend on the circumstances of his birth and on the environment by which he is throughout life affected. This truism applies with peculiar force to great personalities, the giant leaders of human destiny, among whom is the subject of our study, Saint Dominic de Guzman.

No consideration of the life of Saint Dominic, our holy and beloved Father, would be satisfying without some view of the influences of his times, as indicated by the dominant movements of the period through which he lived.

In a brief paper like the present one, we must for the sake of correct perspective accentuate the principal factors among the innumerable ones that must have struck out the sparks of Dominic's genius. We confine ourselves to two predominant influences that gave form and character to the religious family which perpetuates the name and spirit of the great medieval patriarch even here and now. The first influence was the intellectual movement, centered about the University of Paris; the second influence was that of the moral or religious movements represented by a host of popular penitential heresies, like the Albigenes, the Poor Men of Lyons, and the Waldensians. These two great upheavals united to beat fiercely with the vehemence of a turbulent tide against the old landmarks of civilization.

Europe had become inebriated with the new Arabian and Moorish translations of Aristotle. So great was the enthusiasm for the new wisdom that no longer the "sacerdotium" of Rome, nor the "imperium" of the Holy Roman Empire held the balance of power over public opinion. "The 'studium' of Paris held supreme sway; even kings and counts felt secure only in so far as they had its favor, and to this end, we read, they bestowed upon it rich gifts and privileges." Paris was the center from which radiated the homage to Aristotle given by the other universities of Europe. "This celebrated institution had been nurtured into

* Paper read St. Dominic's Day, 1920, at Ocean City, Md.

fame by a long line of distinguished masters, and on that account, no less than by its central position for the transalpine nations, it had absorbed to itself the most brilliant scholars of the period. At first, in the days of Abelard, an unordered assembly of individual schools, it had gradually developed into a comparatively organized guild, or corporation of Masters, arranged into faculties and nations. Under its rector, it was completely self-governing, continually suspicious of the presence of the episcopal chancellor, whose powers, however, had been reduced to a very shadowy right of supervision. Both Popes and kings had done their best to aid its growth and by varying privileges to win its good pleasure, for it was step by step clambering into position as the easiest observed witness of public opinion. Its advocacy or its condemnation was of as absolute a nature as would be to-day the combined judgment of press and congress.

“Now, this ‘studium’ had become extraordinarily democratic. Itself the result of fostering privilege, it waged war on every other exemption than its own, and grew restive under the attempt of Popes or kings to coerce, or even guide, its restless life. . . . Its philosophy generally had been enormously influenced by the subtle and delicate hardihood of the Jewish and Moorish doctors of Spain. The result was that the universities were being fed by a stream of waters poisoned at their source.”

Contemporary political events show the influence of its wild theories. The exaltation of reason against authority resolved itself into the bold defiance of Henry II of England against the Pope, which culminated in the martyrdom of Thomas a’Becket during the year of Saint Dominic’s birth. The University gave new impetus to the struggle over investiture between Frederick of the Red Beard and Alexander III, ringing the echo of the troubles of Hildebrand.

Saint Dominic came under this gigantic intellectual movement at Palencia, then a flourishing cathedral school, to become in 1212 the University of Palencia. Here he spent his ten most impressionable years, from 1184 to 1194; and we may be sure that during this period he perceived well the trend of the new thought, the good that it contained and the dangers it foreboded to the Catholic Faith. But having been solidly grounded in the traditional doctrines of the Church under the tutelage of his priest-uncle, he must have been quite capable of defending his faith when he met the Moorish logic-choppers at the schools.

No mere accident, then, determined Saint Dominic to send his first followers to Paris. He was fully alive to the force of the intellectual movement, and even before his death he could see that his own work had done much to win over its forces to the side of orthodoxy, a victory which was to be clinched by the "Summa Theologica" of his son, St. Thomas Aquinas. Saint Dominic's intellectual spirit, deriving its life and authority from Rome, restored the supremacy of intellectual power to the Church in the late Middle Ages. This was done by using the philosophy of Aristotle to defend the doctrines of Faith, and thus proving the reasonableness of Revelation. Saint Dominic broke down the prestige of the false adoration of philosophy, which before his time had raised the "studium" of Paris to a position detrimental to the "sacerdotium" of Rome.

Not until Dominic reached the prime of life was his attention directed to the great religio-moral movements of his times. This happened, as we all well know, when he came through Southern France in company with his bishop, who was sent by the Spanish king on a mission of state to the Marches.

With a view to form some conception of the condition of religion in Southern France at the period of which we are speaking, let us consider that these people were the same race which answered at Clermont Urban's fervent appeal for the crusades against the Turks with the great battle cry of two centuries, "God Wills It"; they were of the same fiery blood which leapt into throbbing devotion at Saint Bernard's eloquence for the love of the sweet Saviour of men; these people, most of them, had walked to the Holy Land and back again, and there had seen a new world of Eastern luxury; then they had returned to their farms weakened in morals whilst strengthened in faith; burning with great ideals of the Christian Faith lately rekindled at the Sepulchre of their Liege-Lord, so humble. Yet the fact is these Midi men and women contradicted their faith by an undisciplined morality, the outcome partly of the desultory habits contracted on the crusading journeys, partly of their contact with the looser standards of the East, and partly, again, from the worldliness of their native priests. From this condition came their superstitious reverence for austerity; it was what religion then meant to their every-day life. Hence came the popular esteem for the leaders of the heretical Poor Men of Lyons and the Albigensians. These heresiarchs practiced severe austerities and were looked

up to as the true exponents of the spirit of religion, to which the worldly lives of their easy-going priests offered a disgusting and deceptive contrast. They held the hearts of the simple folk who, unable to detect the errors of the doctrines taught by these false leaders, were poisoned in mind with heretical principles subversive of society as well as religion.

The heretical forces which Saint Dominic attacked were chiefly Albigensian. Briefly, their doctrines were these. The idea of one primal God was recognized. God had two sons by emanation, Satanael and Christ. Satanael was ruler of heaven until he tried in his pride to usurp his Father's authority, when he was chased out of heaven, and by his inherent creative power made earth. Companion spirits who revolted from God like himself were condemned to corruptible bodies which Satanael created. By Eve, Satanael became the father of Cain. God then proceeded to take away Satanael's power of creation, but left him ruler of the world, in the hope that mankind would escape his power, owing to the divine principle inherent in their souls cast down from heaven. The fulfilment of this hope being delayed, He sent Christ down to earth, under the appearance of a human body, to accomplish the work of redemption, whereby Satanael lost the government of the world, but preserves his power of harm. All spirits would eventually return to heaven. All love of creatures and all sensual inclinations were culpable "per se."

The Albigensians pretended to live the same as the primitive Christians. They considered the Church the harlot of the Apocalypse, and rejected all her sacramental system, especially marriage; for them the begetting of children was the most criminal act of man.

Three years before Saint Dominic's birth the Cathari, leaders of the Albigensians, had a council at St. Felix de Caraman, where they arranged their discipline and organization. The meeting was presided over by Nicetas, a heretic bishop of the East. The common people regarded him as their pope and corrupted the name into "Pape Niquinta."

At this assemblage, to which flocked "magna multitudo hominum et mulierum" from Toulouse and representatives from France, Lombardy and Spain, "Niquinta" proceeded to consecrate bishops for the Church of the Franks. Each bishop was an itinerant preacher, and was assisted by two deacons.

In searching the causes of the spread of this heresy we find that the abuses resulting from the practice of simony had led to the clergy being despised and their spiritual powers doubted, and it is a remarkable fact that the heretics of the twelfth century in the West of Europe were found precisely in those localities, Languedoc, Provence, Lombardy and the north of Spain, where Arianism had flourished longest, until rooted out by the Franks.

The facility of communication between the East and West established by the military system of the Byzantine Emperors, whose soldiers (recruited from the Paulicians) were constantly transferred to the Greek colonies in Italy and Sicily; frequent pilgrimages along the valley of the Danube, then the pilgrim track to Jerusalem; and the extension of commerce opened out by Venetian traders, led to the recrudescence of this Eastern heresy in Western Europe, where under new names, and with the tacit and sometimes open support of the lay powers, it caused so much trouble and disaster.

Although many crusades were waged against the Albigensians, the heresy seemed impregnable until Saint Dominic founded his monastery for women at Prouille, and his little band of Friar Preachers in a neighboring house. By a severe yet kindly asceticism, inculcated into all his immediate followers, Saint Dominic gave the death-blow to the forces of heresy. By his zeal and earnest preaching he combated the Albigensian errors more effectively than all the forces of secular power.

No greater eulogy could be made on the genius of Saint Dominic than the mere statement of the perfect response which the spirit of his Order made to the needs of the thirteenth century. Before the century closed Saint Dominic's sons were leaders at Paris, Cologne and Bologna, in the sphere of the universities; almost as soon the Albigensians melted away, and in their places rose up loyal children of God's Holy Church.

—Bro. Dominic Dolan, O. P.