



Blessed Jane of Aza and St. Dominic

ST. DOMINIC

For the many members of the family of St. Dominic it is unnecessary to give a detailed biography of the holy patriarch. With his life they are surely familiar. Yet it cannot be out of place to sketch briefly that splendid career, that we may readily call to mind its more salient features, and have at hand a sort of framework wherein to fit the details treated at greater length in the following articles.

At Calaroga, Spain, St. Dominic was born in the year 1170, of a family of Saints, in whose veins Arguleta assures us ran the blood of the reigning house of Castile. The youngest of three children, he had from birth every opportunity and incentive to dedicate his life to the things of the spirit. His mother, Jane of Aza, and his eldest brother Mannes have been judged worthy of a place on the altars of the Church. Of his father and his other brother, Anthony, we know little, save that they were deserving members of so illustrious a family, and Anthony, like his sainted brothers, spent his life in the priesthood of God.

During his early boyhood Dominic's education was entrusted to his mother, by whom he was deeply grounded in the spiritual life. At the age of seven he was transferred for further training to the care of his maternal grand-uncle, the arch-priest of Gumiel d'Isan, under whom he studied the classics, the rudiments of rhetoric, and probably the works of the early Fathers. When fourteen years old, and ready for more advanced teaching than the good priest could give him, he was sent, in 1184, to Palencia, where, though the famous university was not yet officially erected, the best school in Spain was already flourishing.

Here Dominic remained for ten years, the first six of which were engaged in the liberal arts while the last four were devoted to a thorough study of Theology and the kindred Sacred Sciences. During these years at Palencia the sound early training Dominic received from his mother and his grand-uncle bore abundant fruit. Surrounded by all the vices and temptations of school life he bore himself with such deep modesty and becoming gravity that he was soon pointed out as the model for all. That apostolic love of neighbor, too, so characteristic of the Saint, was flowering in his soul; and to obtain money for his unbounded charities, he even parted with his precious books,

laboriously annotated with his own hand. Not content with giving his possessions to the poor of Christ, he longed to give his very self; more than once offering his body unto slavery to redeem the wretched captives of the Moors. These heroic acts of charity give us deep insight into the character of the young student, and deserve to be kept in mind especially when we read the alleged cruelties attributed by prejudiced writers to this tender-hearted Saint.

Just when St. Dominic took Holy Orders we are unable to determine; but it was probably in the year 1194, when he had finished his course in theology at Palencia. About this time, too, he took his place among the Canons at the Cathedral of Osma, and probably he and Didacus d'Azevedo assisted the Bishop, Martin of Bazan, in his reform of the Chapter, when about the year 1195 he induced the Canons to adopt the Rule of St. Augustine. Immediately after this Dominic became Sub-prior of the Chapter, and in 1201 rose to the dignity of Prior. His friend Didacus succeeded Martin as Bishop.

For nine years Dominic remained in seclusion at Osma, rarely going beyond the precincts of his monastery. In the year 1203, however, he accompanied the Bishop when sent by Alphonso IX on a mission to the Lord of the Marches to request the hand of his daughter in marriage to Prince Ferdinand. The journey brought the embassy through Southern France, the stronghold of the Albigensian heresy. Heartsick at sight of the havoc wrought by this insidious sect on the faith and morals of the people, Dominic burned with zeal to reclaim them for Christ, and "from that time," says Bernard Guidonis, "he cherished the project of spending himself for the salvation of infidels, and of instituting to that end a preaching Order to be devoted to the evangelization of the nations." The first mission of the embassy for the King was successful, but when they went for a second time to escort the bride to Spain they found death had gone before them, and they arrived only in time to attend the young lady's obsequies. This unforeseen event released them from the royal service, and with the Bishop, Dominic went to Rome toward the end of 1204. Didacus asked leave to resign his bishopric and to spend his remaining days preaching the Gospel to the unbelievers of northeastern Europe. Innocent III, however, had work for him and Dominic nearer home; and without releasing Didacus from his episcopal duties, he commissioned the

two to join forces with the Cistercians who were combating the Albigensian heresy in Languedoc.

On their arrival at the scene of their new labors, Dominic saw at once that the failure of the Cistercians was due largely to the regal pomp with which they were attended; for this, contrasted with the rigid asceticism affected by the leaders of the Albigenses, compromised them sadly in the eyes of the people. In an impassioned outburst, the Saint gave expression to the guiding principle of his entire life: "Zeal," he said, "must be met by zeal, lowliness by lowliness, false sanctity by true sanctity, preaching lies by preaching truth." Didacus and Dominic set the example, stripping themselves of all but the barest necessities, and the others were not slow to follow. From this time the work among the heretics progressed more rapidly.

The Albigensian heresy had made specially heavy inroads on the faith of the women, among whom it numbered many of its most zealous propagators. The sect maintained several schools for girls and young women, and in the early training of the devotees Dominic perceived the secret of the peculiar success of the heretical faction. To counteract this powerful influence, and faithful to his principle of driving out nails with nails, he determined to found a convent to mould and protect the faith of the women converts God granted him to make. Thus at Prouille in the year 1206, aided by the generosity of Bishop Foulques, he established his first convent for women. The beginning was humble, for the sisters were but nine in number; but from this small band was to develop in after years the great Second Order. The holy founder himself directed their spiritual life for some time; when he left them he gave them for their guidance the Rule of St. Augustine.

But these quieter labors did not interrupt the missionary activities of the Saint. He still continued to traverse the country, though now without the aid of the pious Bishop Didacus, who had died in 1207. Gradually, however, Dominic's magnetic personality, so fiery, so impassioned, but withal so gentle and sweet, drew about him a small number of men, who threw themselves zealously into the work of the Saint. In this little band he saw the nucleus of the religious Order he had dreamed of founding to combat heresy and extend the empire of truth. In the year 1215, with the permission of Bishop Foulques, he organized his little band into a religious community, and in the fall of the same year

he set out for Rome to beg the Papal approbation of his infant Order. But his project met with unforeseen opposition. The Lateran Council then in session decided against the multiplication of religious rules, and the plan of St. Dominic in particular was too bold and novel not to arouse alarm. He would erect an Order of friars, independent to a great extent of local episcopal jurisdiction, and dedicated to the preaching of the Word, an office peculiarly belonging to the Bishops themselves. And so Dominic had to leave the Eternal City without the desired approbation of his cherished plan.

Innocent III had not, however, dismissed him empty-handed, but in a Bull dated October 8 had taken under protection the monastery of Prouille. On his return Dominic gathered the sixteen brethren about him and explained the difficulties that stood between them and their goal. As the Council was opposed to any new rules, he urged that they adopt as theirs the plastic Rule of St. Augustine. This, it seemed, would of all existing rules lend itself best to their purposes. To this the community agreed. This difficulty removed, Dominic repaired again to the Roman court in August, 1216, to lay his request at the feet of Honorius III, Innocent having died in the interim. This time he met with greater success, and at length on the twenty-second of December, 1216, the Pope, after mature deliberation issued a Bull in confirmation of the Order of Preachers. Dominic remained in Rome for the whole of the following Lent, preaching in the various churches of the city, and even before the papal court itself. According to an old tradition, it was on this occasion that the Saint was given the office of papal theologian, or Master of the Sacred Palace, an honor that has been granted to one of his sons uninterruptedly from that day to this.

During this third sojourn in Rome Dominic met for the second time St. Francis of Assisi, and between the two there sprung up an intimate friendship, which has been perpetuated in the lasting traditions of their respective Orders.

Returning to Toulouse in the late spring of 1217, Dominic continued for a short time to labor among the Albigenses, but in August of the same year he determined to scatter his little band broadcast over the face of Europe, "for he knew," adds Humbert de Romanis, "that all seed scattered abroad becomes fruitful, that heaped together it grows corrupt." With unfaltering confidence in God he carried out the dispersal, dividing the brethren

into groups of two and threes, and sending them to France and Spain. With one of the brothers as a companion Dominic himself set out for Rome, to establish in the Eternal City the headquarters of the Order.

It is to this early period of the Albigensian missions, and before the foundation of the Order, that tradition ascribes the institution of the Rosary devotion, revealed to St. Dominic by the Blessed Mother of God; and this devotion the children of the Saint have ever rightly cherished as one of their most precious heritages.

A busier period than the years of St. Dominic's life following the institution of the Order cannot easily be imagined, and it were hopeless to attempt to deal with its details in a mere sketch of the Saint's career. As Master General, to him was committed the care of the ever-growing Order. He brought about its introduction into all the great university centers of Europe, labored ceaselessly for suitable recruits, and traversed the land tirelessly in visiting and encouraging the constantly multiplying communities. Yet he did not cease his missionary activities, preaching everywhere as he went on his endless visitations. Nor did he neglect the nuns of the Second Order. In 1219 he brought to St. Sixtus a branch of the community of Prouille to assist him in reforming the sisterhoods of Rome, a task imposed on him by the Holy Father.

Not content with only the First and Second Orders, St. Dominic wished the lay-people also to share in his apostolic mission. Accordingly during his last mission to Lombardy he established there the Militia of Jesus Christ, better known now as the Third Order of St. Dominic. These members of his family were not called upon to leave the world, as were the others, but were to spread the true leaven of Christianity by living model lives under a definite rule in the very midst of secular affairs.

In the year 1220 Dominic convened the first General Chapter of his Order at Bologna, calling on the Brothers from all parts of Europe to attend. At the first session he begged to be allowed to lay down the reins of office, but was permitted to do so for the duration of the chapter only. According to Bernard Guidonis, at this chapter were drawn up most of the rules of the Order. Special stress was laid on studies, preaching, and, as from the very first in Languedoc, on evangelical poverty. Legislation for

the growing sisterhoods probably occupied part of the attention of the religious assembled.

The further organization of the Order was dealt with at the second General Chapter, held in Bologna early in the following year. A special feature of these sessions was the dividing of the frairs, now numbering, Lacordaire tells us, close unto five hundred, into eight provinces, viz., Spain, Provence, France, Lombardy, Rome, Germany, Hungary, and England.

The Order now being definitely organized, and its future existence assured, nothing remained to claim the presence of the saintly Founder on earth. Nor had he long to wait for his reward. In July, 1221, he was stricken with the fever that claimed him for victim on the sixth of the following August. The grief of the orphaned friars was intense; "but suddenly," says Lacordaire, "a song of triumph succeeded to the funeral lamentations, an immense joy fell on them from heaven." "I am going where I can serve you better than I can here," the Saint had said in his dying moments, and the brethren knew that their Father was now in heaven, and had already begun to fulfil his promise. And not the brethren only, but the Church, too, knew the heroic sanctity of Dominic. Thirteen years later this was officially recognized when a Bull of Gregory IX, dated July 13, 1234, raised to the altars of the Church this tireless "athlete of the Lord."

—Bro. Louis Clark, O. P.

