

BLESSED DOMINIC SPATAFORA

One of the characteristics of the Dominican Order is that of keeping private the eminent sanctity of its deceased members. The superiors of the Order were often criticized by the people and they were reproved by the Supreme Pontiff, Gregory IX, for not bringing St. Dominic's name before the Holy See for canonization. And as Mother Drane records in her works on St. Dominic, the answer of one of the friars, when questioned on the subject, may be taken as a sample of the spirit of the whole body. "What need for canonization?" he said; "the holiness of Master Dominic is known to God; it matters little if it be declared publicly by man." Thus it has always been; but God seems to delight in having His faithful servants held before the world as examples. Thus on January 14, 1921, the Sacred Congregation of Rites, acting under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, declared Dominic Spatafora, a Friar Preacher, blessed.

Dominic Spatafora was born at Messina in Sicily in the fifteenth century. This noble family, rich not only in earthly honors but also in Christian virtues, was originally of Constantinople. It derived its name from the fact that its chief, at the Byzantine court, bore an unsheathed sword before the Emperor in official ceremonies. Later the family left Constantinople to reside in Venice, and about the year 1272 took up its abode at Messina.

Although surrounded by wealth, Dominic was soon taught that all is vanity except to love and to serve God. Accordingly we find him when of age abandoning all, home and wealth, to enter the Dominican convent of Messina, where regular discipline was rigorously observed. He received the holy habit and entered upon his religious life with such zeal and courage that he was before long an example to the community. The year of probation quickly passed and with joy and heartfelt gratitude, he solemnly consecrated himself to God. He was sent to pursue his studies at Padua where he attracted much attention by his great spiritual progress and the success which he achieved in letters. Having finished his course and received his degree of doctor, he returned to his convent at Messina, where his brethren were again edified by the regular life and doctrine of this Friar. The Master General of the Order, Joachim Torriani, de-

sirous of a socius with Dominic's ability and sanctity, ordered him to Rome. Divine Providence decreed that his life was not to be spent in Rome but in the territory of Cerignone which belongs to the diocese of Monte-Feltro in the legation of Urbino.

In this beautiful country of Cerignone, there was a very modest chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Graces. This chapel had in its possession an ancient picture of Mary by the veneration of which many graces were granted. Because of the vast number and variety of favors obtained there, it was called "Lady of Graces." The people of Cerignone and their neighbors had a great love for the Mother of God. Prompted by an exceeding anxiety to increase the devotion rendered to Mary, they decided to invite the members of an Order especially devoted to the Blessed Virgin to direct them and they chose the Friars Preachers for this duty. For they thought, "Shall not we be the gainers, and greatly the gainers, thanks to the apostolic ministry exercised by these religious in every region." Accordingly, their petition was placed before the Dominican Master General at Rome. Nothing could have touched the heart of this Servant of God more and he was only too happy to please them. Father Spatafora was delegated to attend to this affair, and immediately he departed for Monte-Cerignone. Upon his arrival there, he prostrated himself before this ancient and venerable picture and was seized with such an extraordinary love for Mary that he resolved, if his superiors would permit him, to serve Our Lady of Graces in her own sanctuary. When all business was completed, he returned to Rome, laid the petition of these pious people before the Holy See and sought to be released from his duties as socius to the Master General. The Supreme Pontiff granted the necessary brief of foundation and the Very Reverend Father Torriani graciously favored Father Spatafora with his consent.

With these good tidings, Dominic hastened back to Monte-Cerignone and assembled all the notable personages of the vicinity and in their presence accepted their gift of a little chapel and the adjacent lands. Without delay, workmen were busy erecting a new, spacious church on the site of the old chapel. Because of their love for the Virgin Mother and in gratitude to the Order of Preachers for sending to them one of her most eminent sons, every one was desirous of contributing to

the building of this house of God. The work progressed very rapidly and soon there was consecrated to Our Lady of Graces a new temple. The consecration ceremonies, which took place on the third Sunday of July, 1493, were performed by Monsignor Marc Vigerio of Savona. Both the church and convent were dedicated to St. Mary of Graces.

Within this convent, Father Spatafora observed all the commands of his rule and constitutions rigorously. To the ordinary duties he added works of supererogation among which was an abstinence from all nourishment on Friday except a few morsels of bread and some water. Such was the power which he exercised by his words and by his example that many, who heard him preach, not only abandoned their evil ways but also received the holy habit from his hands. So great was his zeal for the salvation of souls that vice continually decreased while virtue flourished so that we may say, to hear Father Dominic preach was to become a child of Mary.

Having passed twenty-eight years in the service of his Master at Monte-Cerignone, spending his precious hours in silent study, earnest prayer, and zealous labor among the native peoples, it was revealed to him by God that he was to appear in heaven and receive his reward. On December 11th, 1521, according to the custom, the community had gathered in chapter and Dominic, as his saintly Father had done before him, exhorted them to observe with unshakable fidelity the rules of their Order. Then he humbly begged pardon for all his faults and gave them his blessing. "Today," he said, "I must leave this vale of tears and take the road that leads to the true paradise."

At these words their hearts were filled with sorrow and they cried, "Father, Father, your reward is assured. Rather have pity on us whom you are leaving orphans." But the holy Prior told them to have confidence in God, Who always hears the prayers of his children. Once more he gave them his blessing and as he had predicted his soul went forth to its reward.

Who can describe the grief of those whom he had served so long and so faithfully? All were present at the church to take a last look at the remains of their friend and to see them laid at rest on the Gospel side of the main altar. In 1545 enlargements of the chapel necessitated the opening of the tomb and to the joy of all the body was not as one buried for twenty-four years;

but it was as fresh and white as on the day of burial. A perfume of the most incomparable sweetness from the corpse filled the church. So great was the assemblage present for this ceremony and so desirous was every one for a relic of this pious man, that his habit was torn to shreds and he had to be reclothed. Many graces, some even of a miraculous nature were granted at his tomb but these only served to increase the devotion shown to him.

On January 14th, 1921, the fourth centenary year of his death, the Sacred Congregation of Rites confirmed this devotion rendered to Fr. Dominic and solemnly declared him "Blessed," appointing December 19th as the day on which to commemorate his pious death. On May 25th, 1921, the Holy Congregation approved the celebration of special festivities and tridua throughout the coming year, with the privileges of proper Masses and indulgences granted according to its instructions.

Whenever any one is beatified or canonized, he is considered worthy of imitation and the best way to honor such a one is by imitating him. In the life of this Blessed we do not find any extraordinary penances and mortifications but only that he performed his ordinary duties extraordinarily well. In this he has followed in the footsteps of his Divine Master and St. Dominic.

—Bro. Stephen Murray, O. P.

