

## PERE MONSABRE, O. P.

---

The history of the Dominican Order is a history of apostolic ministrations, a history of self-sacrifice and of devotion to duty, a history of sanctity and of zeal for souls; and in modern times, no less than in the thirteenth and succeeding centuries, the Church has found some of the most able expositors and defenders of her doctrine within the ranks of the Friars Preachers. Among those who in modern times sustained the preaching traditions of the Order, along with Krotz, Burke, and McKenna, was Jacques-Marie Monsabr , a faithful son of St. Dominic and a veritable modern apostle.

Monsabr  was born at Blois, in northwestern France, on December 10, 1827; receiving at baptism the name of Louis. His parents, of whom we have but meager accounts, were his first instructors and they instilled in his youthful mind the germs of that solid piety and sound religion so manifest in his later life. At an early age he was placed under the care of the Christian Brothers, later pursuing his studies at the cathedral school. It was probably during his course at the latter place that he decided to study for the priesthood, for after finishing the classics he entered the preparatory seminary. Upon completing his study of the humanities he was admitted to the diocesan seminary, where, after the usual course in philosophy and theology, he was ordained on June 15, 1851, being then in his twenty-fourth year.

The religious vocation of P re Monsabr  is said to date from the day after his ordination. Though it seems strange that he should wait so long before saying his first Mass, we are told it was celebrated on July 31 in honor of St. Ignatius Loyola, whose feast it was, for the intention of knowing what Order or Congregation of religious he should enter. Four days later, being still undecided, he again said Mass for this intention; this time in honor of St. Dominic, it being the feast of the Holy Patriarch. About noon of the same day, while reciting the Angelus, he seemed to understand suddenly, clearly and definitely that God called him to the life of a Friar Preacher.

Having reached this decision Monsabr  immediately applied to P re Lacordaire, the restorer of the Order in France, and, upon receiving a favorable reply, sought dimissorial letters from

Msgr. Pallu du Parc, Bishop of Blois. But this prelate, in virtue of an indult granted by the Holy See, retained the ardent young Levite under his jurisdiction for four years before releasing him. During this time Monsabré was variously occupied, but his resolution to become a religious was in no way weakened; and though he may have chafed at the delay caused by this unexpected turn of affairs, all his duties were thoroughly and cheerfully performed. The two years immediately following his ordination were given to parochial ministrations; first at Blois, and later at Mer, at which latter place his brother, Henry Monsabré, was pastor. From 1853 to 1855 Monsabré was engaged as a private tutor; and, finally, during May of the latter year, received his dimissorials. Soon after this he departed for Flavigny, at which place was located the Dominican Novitiate to which he had been directed; and on May 20 arrived at Laumes, the railway station nearest to his destination.

The prospects which greeted him when he reached this place were by no means bright,—it was rapidly growing dark; a cold, drizzling rain was falling; the remainder of his journey would have to be made by carriage; and the only available vehicle offered no protection whatever against the inclemency of the weather. Nevertheless, Monsabré set out resolutely and in due time reached the convent at Flavigny. Here he found everything in darkness and the Friars in well-earned repose. The porter refused to disturb the Prior, in whose cell the keys of the convent were kept, and Monsabré dejectedly made his way to a nearby inn where he sought and found shelter for the night. Disheartened by his non-admittance to the convent, he was inclined to consider the event as an indication that he had been wrong in his choice of a religious vocation. On the following morning Monsabré was making preparations to return to his diocese when one of the Fathers from the convent—who had learned from the porter of the previous evening's occurrence—came to the inn and succeeded in inducing him to reconsider his rather hasty decision. Together they returned to the convent. On the same day, May 21, 1855, Monsabré began his retreat in preparation for the reception of the habit and, ten days later, was invested. On May 31 of the following year he made his profession; and in the latter part of June was sent to the house of studies at Chalais, where he still further prepared himself for

the work of the active ministry. In later life Monsabré often spoke of these two years—1855 to 1857—as the happiest he had ever known, and his recollection of them was always accompanied by profound emotion.

It had been the ardent desire of the young Dominican to be assigned to the rural missions, so we may imagine his surprise when, in 1857, he was appointed to preach the Lenten sermons at the church of St. Nizier, Lyons. Upon the successful completion of this work he returned to Chalais, and in July was transferred to the convent of St. Thomas Aquinas at Paris. In the chapter-room of this convent, during the ensuing winter, Père Monsabré began his notable career as a preacher of conferences by expounding the articles of the Creed to a body of distinguished laymen, who had petitioned the Prior to inaugurate this course. This work progressed favorably for two years but was discontinued in 1859 by order of Père Lacordaire, who desired Monsabré to devote his talents to missions and retreats. These conferences were resumed in 1867—in compliance with the wishes of Père Saudreau, then Provincial—but this time they were given in the conventual church, so that all who desired might attend. From 1859 to 1867 Monsabré was constantly engaged in giving retreats, novenas and occasional sermons; his journeys taking him to nearly all the principal cities of France and Belgium and even to London.

Upon the conclusion of his conferences at the conventual church, Paris, in 1869, he was commissioned to preach during Advent at the cathedral of Notre Dame; and so great was his success in discharging this office that he was chosen to be the successor of the eminent Père Félix, S. J., who retired in 1870, after having most ably conducted the Lenten conferences at Notre Dame for many years.

The advance of the Prussian troops on Paris prevented Monsabré from beginning his new charge in 1871, so during the Lent of that year he preached at Metz, which had already capitulated. On Easter Sunday he terminated his discourse by an impassioned and over-zealous outburst of patriotism which made it necessary for him to leave the town immediately afterwards, in order to avoid being imprisoned by the Prussian Commander. Msgr. Duboy, the Archbishop of Paris, who had invited Monsabré to occupy the pulpit at Notre Dame, was assassinated dur-

ing the régime of the Communists; but his successor in the archiepiscopal see, Msgr. Guibert, likewise chose Monsabré for this important office. Accordingly, during the Lent of 1872 Père Monsabré inaugurated his Notre Dame conferences, which were continued in each succeeding year until 1890; at which time he successfully concluded the stupendous task to which he had set himself: namely, a complete exposition of the dogmatic teaching of the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> Truly this was a great undertaking; boldly conceived, and successfully executed. In soundness of doctrine, depth of thought, clarity of expression and beauty of diction it is unsurpassed. It remains today as one of the most perfect combinations of theological science and sacred eloquence that has ever been achieved. It was from the *Summa Theologica* that Monsabré drew his inspiration and his method, and never, we may venture to say, was the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas more brilliantly or more ably propounded.

Having terminated this magnificent course, Monsabré was asked to undertake an exposition of the Church's moral teachings. Being then in his sixty-fifth year he declined this honor, as he feared there was not sufficient strength left to him for so great a task.<sup>2</sup> His active life, however, was by no means at an end. During the Advent of 1890 he preached at St. Andrew's, Rome, and from 1891 to 1896 he again traversed the length and breadth of France discharging the duties of his calling. During this time he was offered two important public offices but, with characteristic humility and simplicity, declined both. It was at Rheims, in 1896, that he delivered his last great public discourse; the occasion being the Fourteenth Centenary of the Baptism of Clovis, King of the Franks. Soon after this he retired to the convent at Havre which had been his home for many years, and where he had been Prior from 1881 to 1884. Here, in 1901, he celebrated the golden jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood; and here, also, from 1897 to 1903 he delivered the discourses known as "Little Lents" in the conventual chapel.

In 1903 the French Government promulgated the odious laws providing for total separation of Church and State, the result being that all religious houses were suppressed and their

---

<sup>1</sup> These conferences, filling 18 volumes, are published by P. Lethielleux, Paris, under the title "L'exposition du Dogme Catholique."

<sup>2</sup> The exposition of Catholic Moral Theology at Notre Dame was begun in 1903 by Pere Janvier, O. P., the confrere and disciple of Monsabre.



inmates dispersed. The venerable Père Monsabré, then in his seventy-sixth year, retired to a small house not far from his former convent. In this little retreat he devoted himself to study and prayer, in preparation for the final summons which he felt would not be long deferred; and here, too, on May 31, 1906, he quietly and simply observed the fiftieth anniversary of his religious profession. His life had been one of ceaseless activity, but it was also a life of almost continual prayer; for he made his very work a prayer.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to his apostolic labors in the ministry of the word, Monsabré had filled positions of trust within the Order. In 1871 he had been a member of the General Chapter at Ghent, and was a definator of the chapter held at Avila in 1895. It was at this latter place that he was commissioned to prepare a book on preaching, embodying the experience he had gained by more than forty years in the active ministry; the result being his splendid work "Avant, Pendant, Après La Prédication." Many honors were showered upon Monsabré as a tribute to his wonderful abilities. His Order had bestowed on him the title of Master in Sacred Theology, and he had been made a Canon of Metz and Canon-of-honor at Notre Dame, Rouen, Grenoble, Carcassone and Blois; but by none of these dignities was his humility lessened, nor was the equanimity of his great soul in any way perturbed. He was to the very last moment of his life a true Dominican: a man of prayer, of study, of action. During the last year of his life he published a treatise on prayer, and was engaged on a continuation of this work when death overtook him.

After a long and painful illness, borne with heroic patience and fortitude, the end came peacefully. It was on February 22, 1907, while reciting the Rosary with those at his bedside, that Monsabré passed to his reward; and, indeed, it was fitting that he should terminate his earthly pilgrimage while thus engaged, for throughout his long life he had both preached and practiced a most tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to the Holy Name.

The funeral services of Père Monsabré were held in the Church of St. Michael, at Havre, on February 25. Archbishop

---

<sup>3</sup>In his numerous manuscripts the margin of nearly every page is inscribed with the simple ejaculation: Jesus!

Fuzet, the Metropolitan of Rouen, delivered the funeral oration and gave the final absolution; the Mass, as was fitting, being celebrated by the Dominicans, the religious confrères of the illustrious preacher. His mortal remains lie at rest in the cemetery of St. Mary, at Havre, but the spirit by which he was animated lives on in his works and in the Order of which he was such a faithful member; and though the influence for good which he exerted, and still exerts, cannot be fully known by finite minds, we may feel certain that it is looked upon with favor by Him for whom Monsabré lived and labored and endured—God.

---

References—L'Annee Dominicaine, May, 1906; April, July, 1907; July, 1908; Acta Cap. Gen. Ord. Praed., 1895, 1907; Rosary Magazine, May, 1907; Catholic Encyclopedia, "Monsabre."

—Bro. Justin Kennedy, O. P.

---

### A WISH

Sweet violets, you now have taught  
 A lesson, for I see  
 Where ne'er before I vainly thought  
 A living thing could be,  
 Upon the barren rocky wall  
 You came, and suddenly  
 Held all the woodland world athrall  
 With your dear witchery!

So too, though my own weary life  
 May seem a loveless task,  
 And fruitless all the constant strife,  
 And man a lying mask,  
 Perhaps a few stray golden deeds  
 May root, and blooming, bask  
 Within the smiles of sated needs:  
 Ah, more I do not ask!

—Bro. Gregory Herold, O. P.