

THE DOMINICAN ORDER AND ARCHITECTURE

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HE longevity and hardihood of a religious order is often influenced by the character of its founder. In this respect the Dominican Order was singularly blessed. St. Dominic, universal in his appeal, attracted all kinds and conditions of men to his banner—teachers, soldiers, statesmen, and artists. He was dominated by a single idea, the saving of souls by preaching the Truth, but he did not limit the means of spreading the Truth.

The latter part of the twelfth and the first half of the thirteenth centuries was a time of intellectual awakening and of radical changes in all branches of human knowledge and action. It was marked by a renewed interest in the study of law and jurisprudence, the beginning of vernacular literature, the growth of commerce and of civic life, the birth of physical science based on Aristotelian philosophy, and above all it was the Age of Faith. And intellectual development was the reward of this Faith. Naturally the center of activity was in the large cities, the seats of learning, and these cities were the chosen field of St. Dominic's labor. Here his sons gathered to imbibe the new learning, and from these centers they set out on their missionary journeys. The widespread interest in art and letters was in great part due to this diffusion of his Friars throughout the length and breadth of Europe. They but took the growing plants from the forcing beds, the university cities, and transplanted them until the Christian world bloomed with the new culture. Learning became as necessary as bread, art as common as churches.

The part played by the Order of Preachers in this great movement has been appreciated. St. Dominic, St. Thomas Aquinas, Blessed Albert have had many biographers. But Dominican artists, excepting Fra Angelico and his school, have been insufficiently recorded. This is especially true of Dominican architects, yet the first church of the Renaissance, "the truly magnificent and highly venerated edifice" of Vasari, "the gentle spouse" of Michelangelo, was the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, and Dominican churches lay over the face

of Europe like beads of a gigantic rosary, and were part of the genesis of Gothic architecture.

That the Friars should interest themselves in architecture is not so strange a phenomenon when we consider the bonds which united religion and art. In the early thirteenth century the artist was usually a cleric, and it was in the workshops of the Dominican convents that many of the famous lay artists received their inspiration. Many of these pupils donned the habit of the Order, and many more were attracted to an institute where they could find appreciation and an outlet for their genius. "In the first period of Dominican annals we find that all their principal churches and convents were either designed or completed, embellished or restored, by artists belonging to their own Order; and a certain superiority in artistic character, as in general taste, apparent in such of their Italian churches as have escaped modernization, still asserts the claims of the Dominicans, at least in this country."¹

Due in great extent to certain sumptuary laws in the early Constitutions, Dominican architects excluded from their buildings a great deal of unnecessary ornamentation; capitals were suppressed and single lines dominated. The naves were almost always capacious so as to accomodate the large crowds which gathered to hear the preaching. In the sense that the Friars took existing forms and modified them to suit the special aims of the Order, it may be said that they created special architectural forms. Thus by conforming to the code of St. Dominic they realized, centuries before the rule was formulated by Ruskin, that architecture is seldom beautiful unless it is also useful. This reliance on single lines explains why the Jacobin Church of Toulouse, despoiled and even mutilated, still remains a beautiful edifice.

Usually the churches of the Friars were Gothic in style, modified according to the time and place, but in the period of the Renaissance they adopted classical models. Some of the earliest conventual churches of the Order were Romanesque in style, but these for the most part were buildings not built by but given to the young Order. But indirectly, by his preaching and his zeal, St. Dominic influenced the building of the Romanesque churches of the Midi. Ernest H. Short, in *The House of God*, says of him, "The zeal which enabled Dominic to bring the Friars Preacher into being also showed itself in the Romanesque churches of the district." But the churches actually

¹ T. Francis Bumpus, *The Cathedrals and Churches of Rome and Southern Italy* (London, 1912).

planned and built by the Order, while they have many features in common, are always representative of the locality and an expression of the religious ideals of the people.

T. Francis Bumpus, in his *Cathedrals and Churches of Northern Italy*, gives this illuminating list. "The following are a few of the most remarkable churches built by the Dominican Order: St. Andrew's Hall, Norwich; Notre-Dame, Louvain; the Church of the Jacobins, Toulouse, remarkable for the manner in which it is divided by a row of columns down the middle into two parts which terminate in a common apse; churches at Erfurt, Ratisbon and Strasburg; SS. Giovanni e Paolo at Venice; Sta. Anastasia, Verona; Sta. Maria delle Grazie, Milan; St. Dominic, Prato; Sta. Katerina, Pisa; Sta. Maria Novella, Florence; and Sta. Maria sopra Minerva, Rome." Père Mandonnet, in his article on "The Order of Preachers" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, adds to the above list the churches of St. Nicholas, at Treviso; St. Dominic, Naples; St. Eustorgius, Milan; St. Dominic, Perugia; St. Jacques of Paris; St. Maximin in Provence; Notre-Dame de Confort at Lyons, St. Catherine at Barcelona; St. Thomas at Madrid; S. Esteban at Salamanca; S. Pablo and S. Gregorio at Valladolid; Santo Tomas at Avila; San Pablo at Seville and at Cordova; S. Crux at Granada; Santo Domingo at Valencia and Saragossa; and the Church and Convent of Batalha, in Portugal, "perhaps the most splendid ever dwelt in by the Order." And in later times, we should mention the churches of the Order in the New World—in Mexico, the West Indies, and the South American countries—and in the Philipines and in Tonkin.

The majority of these edifices were planned and actually erected by the Friars. The order furnished the architects, the stone masons, carpenters, painters, glassmakers, etc., very many of whom were lay-brothers. The first two Dominican architects mentioned by name were Fra Sisto and Fra Ristoro, lay-brothers of the convent of Sta. Maria Novella. Fra Sisto was a Florentine. Fra Ristoro was born at Campi a town about seven miles distant from Florence. Father Marchese calls them the preceptors of Arnolfo. These two friars were employed by the magistrates of the city to erect several public works, but their chief claim to fame lies in the conventual Church of Sta. Maria Novella.

The Dominicans appeared in Florence in 1217, seventeen years after the arrival of the little Franciscan company. Ruskin in his *Mornings in Florence*, tells us that "after they had stayed quietly in such lodgings as were given to them, preaching and teaching through

most of the country and had got Florence, as it were, heated through, she burst out into Christian poetry and architecture, of which you have heard much talk . . . Florence, then, thus heated through, first helped her teachers to build finer churches. The Dominicans, or White Friars,² the Teachers of Faith, began their church of St. Mary's in 1279. The Franciscans, or Black Friars, the Teachers of Works, laid the first stone of their church of the Holy Cross in 1294. The Dominicans designed their own building, but for the Franciscans and the town worked the first great master of Gothic art, Arnolfo." Fra Ristoro and Fra Sisto planned and superintended the beginnings of Sta. Maria Novella. Fra Dell' Ancisa was in charge until 1284; Fra Rainerio Gualterotti until 1317; Fra Jacopo Passavanti, who completed it about the year 1317. All of these men were renowned architects. A description of the church is impossible in an article of limited length, but that the designers were masters of the art of perspective is evident from the illusion of great length that they have given the church by the arrangement of the arches. Marchese is of the opinion that Fra Sisto and Fra Ristoro furnished the design and probably instituted the work on Sta. Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, the only church in Rome entirely in the pointed Gothic style, and which Bumpus says ranks "among the exquisite creations of Christian art-genius." Fra Sisto died at Rome in 1289, while carrying on works for the Dominican nuns of San Sisto. Fra Ristoro died at Florence in 1283. Cicognara, in his *History of Italian Sculpture*, writes: "It is strange that the names of Fra Sisto and Fra Ristoro, both Florentines, and builders of the principal bridges of the Arno, to say nothing of their other works in the city and in the Vatican, should be almost shrouded in oblivion. Why is it that no mention is made of Fra Jacopo Talenti da Nipossano, who, along with the aforesaid, raised so many edifices in Florence? These architects of the thirteenth century (Talentis belongs to the fourteenth), have an immense claim on our gratitude, for to them we owe the splendid revival of architecture. After the Pisan architects, and the builders of the Basilica at Venice, they deserve the highest place in Italy."

In Florence, too, there is the Church and Convent of San Marco, not distinguished for its architecture, but for its mural paintings. It is an example of the climatic effect on architecture. The northern genius exerted himself on decorating the openings necessary for light,

² A common mistake among non-Catholic writers. The Dominicans were known in England as the "Black Friars," the Franciscans as the "Grey Friars."

while the artists' skill, in the South, was used in obtaining polychromatic effects, since the Italian sun made fewer windows necessary. Of San Marco, Mrs. Oliphant writes in her book, *The Makers of Florence*. "Angelico, Antonino, Savonarola, Bartolommeo, a fair succession, had made it famous in art and good works, and placed its friars at the head of such a revolution and reformation as Italy has never seen. . . No other monastic institution has had such a double crown; and it is curious to find the home and center of the great mission of Savonarola—he who was the burner of vanities, and the enemy, as his enemies say, of the beautiful—thus nobly distinguished by art." It is enough to say that this convent was the home of Fra Angelico and Fra Bartolommeo. It is the Mecca of a pilgrimage of art.

These two Florentine churches, Sta. Maria Novella and San Marco, influenced art in Italy for over a century and a half. But they were not the only centers of the Friars' activities in Italy. Bologna contains a magnificent church of the Order, especially famous for its Ark of St. Dominic and the tomb of Guido Reni, while Sta. Anastasia in Verona is an excellent example of the type of church adopted by the Dominicans in Italy. Other examples are the churches of St. Lorenzo at Vincenza and SS. Giovanni e Paolo at Venice, the beloved of Ruskin, of which the grandeur of proportion and the large nave with its tall cylindrical columns are the chief characteristics.

The builders of many of these famous Dominican churches of Italy are unknown, but considering the number and fame of the architects of the Order at the time of their erection, we may safely assume that they were planned and built by the brothers themselves. But we do know of many public buildings and churches, not designed for the use of the Order, which were erected under the direction of Dominican architects, and that many of the chief architects in charge of the building of the great cathedrals of the Italian cities asked and received the aid of the Friars; for example, the cathedrals of Pisa, Orvieto, Milan, San Petronio at Bologna, St. Peters at Rome, and numbers of hospices and public buildings throughout Italy. For this knowledge we are indebted, not to the annals of the Order, but to the public records and the chronicles of the cathedrals and cities. Father Marchese in his splendid work, *Painters, Sculptors and Architects of the Dominican Order*, gives the names of these men and a list of their achievements, along with the sources of his information. Among these are Fra Mazzeto, Fra Borghese, and Fra Albertino Mazzanti (about 1250-1319), who built many churches and hospices in Tuscany,

and Fra Fugliemo of Pisa, who built the convent of his Order at Pisa besides being the author of many of the public works in the vicinity. In Verona the renaissance in architecture was developed mainly by Fra Giocondo (1435-1514), a native, who was famous throughout Italy and France as an architect and an engineer, and who was for a time associated with the building operations of St. Peters in Rome.

The typical and by far the most famous architecturally of the Dominican churches in France is the Jacques³ Church of Toulouse, which was rich in the possession of the relics of St. Thomas Aquinas before the Revolution. Miss Antony, in describing the church, writes, "It was built with two naves, a plan followed later by the architects of other Dominican churches. Its most remarkable feature is the single row of seven lofty white pillars running down the center of its great length, and supporting a roof whose beauty lies in its severe perfection of line, and the curious and exquisite colour contrast between the deep crimson of its shafts and its white vaulting."

Montalembert's opinion of the Dominican churches in France, which suffered so much in the Revolution, is quoted by Marchese: "I call to your attention in passing that a kind of unique fatality seems to attach itself to the churches built by the Dominicans, churches which are always of a taste so simple, so pure, so regular; everywhere they are the first chosen by the destroyers."

The churches of the Order in Belgium were lost to the Order during this same period of revolution, and attempts on the part of the Friars to regain their churches, which were spared destruction but not spoilation, met with failure. One of the finest examples of the Early Complete Gothic style was the former church of the Order in Ghent. After the Revolution it passed through many vicissitudes until finally it was used as a warehouse for coals, during the period of 1853 until 1861. It has since been torn down. Notre Dame des Dominicans in Louvain, which is in the First Pointed style, was built at about the same time as the church in Ghent. While it is smaller than the Dominican churches of Antwerp, Erfurt, and Ratisbon, it is majestic and well-proportioned. It has no steeple, but a modest *flèche*, so characteristic of the Order's churches in the Netherlands

³ The word "Jacobin," often applied to Dominicans as well as to their churches in France, was originally derived from the chapel of S. Jacques in Paris, where the Friars made their first foundation in that city, and where they were generally known among the people as Jacobins. cf. C. M. Antony, *In St. Dominic's Country* (London, 1912).

and North Germany. It has also another characteristic of the Belgian Dominican churches, the altar can be seen by the entire congregation.⁴

In old German manuscripts, Gothic architecture was termed Albertine, because of a common tradition that Blessed Albertus Magnus had introduced this style into Germany. A less well-founded tradition gives him the undoubted honor of being the designer of the Cathedral of Cologne. But there is little doubt that he was influential in the erection of many beautiful edifices in his diocese of Ratisbon. It was Brother Diemar who built the Dominican church at Ratisbon, and mention must be made of Brother Volmar of Colmar and Brother Humbert the architect of the church at Bonn.

In Portugal two blessed of the Order exercised their skill, Blessed Gundisalvus and Blessed Peter Gonzales, while Dominican art in Spain is a complete study in itself. There they have preserved some of the most perfect examples of Mudejar art.

Later ages were to bring forth more examples of the brothers' art. In our own country, Father Samuel Mazzuchelli designed and built many churches and was the architect of the Old Stone Capitol in Iowa City, now the Administration Building of the University of Iowa, while the island of Martinique knew the genius of Père Labat of Paris, and in more recent days Father Theodore Raymond Biolley, O. P., designed the College of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D. C.

No chronological order has been here attempted, and much has been omitted, but enough has been written to show that it is no idle claim to assert that Dominicans had a profound influence on architecture, almost from the inception of the Order. In the study of the Order's relation to this noble art, one meets with great difficulties. Many important records were lost or destroyed during the French Revolution; still others were carelessly mislaid or thrown away by disinterested people. But with the accounts that have survived by far the greatest difficulty lies in keeping to the subject at hand, for there are many fascinating byways which lure the reader away from the chosen path, *viz.*, sculpture, painting, glasswork, liturgy, etc.—all related subjects. One cannot divide the indivisible, and medieval architecture is but the expression in stone of a life that was unique in its unity. Viewed simply as monuments to the architectural

⁴ While this church was not destroyed, it has been "improved," a fate of many Dominican churches. Sometimes, the aim of the "improver" is purely iconoclastic. Intelligent restoration has been successful in several instances. Sta. Maria sopra Minerva in Rome was restored by a lay-brother of the Order (1849-1854).

genius of the Middle Ages, these old Dominican churches are like jewel caskets, cunningly carved, charming, and attractive indeed, but if we would appreciate their true beauty and wealth we must lay open the treasures of jewels within, see medieval life in its varied phases, study its creative spirit. Then permeating the whole we find the most alluring subject of all—the lives of the men who caused these fanes to have their being. To them architecture was “vacuity trimmed with lace,” whether it was church, palace, or hovel, unless it was erected to the greater honor and glory of God.

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