

## A DOMINICAN OF OUR TIMES

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BRO. BONAVENTURE MURPHY, O. P.



LET everything ready and then call me," cried a little lad of fourteen to his companions as they prepared their boat for a sail. Running up to the church nearby, he spent his time in prayer. This was Albert del Corona, born July 5, 1837, in the little Italian town of Leghorn, who in his later life was spoken of by Pope Leo XIII as "one of the most learned and saintly prelates of the Church." His love for the things of God revealed itself in his childhood. He delighted to mount upon a chair and preach to his sisters; his greatest joy was to attend Mass; and, one year, the permission to sing the Lamentations of Tenebrae filled him with happiness. Though educated by the Barnabite Fathers, through his devotion to St. Catherine of Sienna, he entered the historic convent of St. Mark's in Florence and was clothed with the white habit of St. Dominic on the vigil of the Purification, 1855.

With all the energy and enthusiasm of his ardent soul, he embraced the religious life. St. Dominic, in his saintly wisdom, bequeathed to his sons a precious heritage, a principle which was to guide their lives and to direct their every act from their entrance into the Order until their death—"contemplata aliis tradere." These words and the whole content of their meaning were deeply engraved in the mind and heart of little Albert, who became known in religion as Brother Pius Thomas. The religious at St. Mark's recognized this young brother as their choicest flower, at that time but a bud, but soon to blossom forth as a fragrant flower of purity, humility, and obedience, a glory to his Order and to the Church of God.

He advanced in his intellectual life as rapidly as in his pursuit after perfection. Besides philosophy and theology, he applied himself to the study of the Oriental languages and to perfecting himself in Greek, French and English, all the while devoting his spare moments to Latin and Italian literature.

On Sexagesima Sunday, February 12, 1860, he sang his first Mass. Upon his receiving the degree of Doctor of Theology, he

was assigned to teach philosophy at St. Mark's, and later on he conducted classes in theology and the languages. Brilliant as a pupil, he surpassed himself as a teacher.

While engaged in his professorial duties, he entered into that field which was "white with the harvest" of souls seeking the Word of God. His apostolate of preaching, extending over the whole period of his active life, was a series of triumphs for God. Equipped with a solid, profound, and extensive knowledge of theology and the Holy Scriptures, an eloquent tongue, and a heart burning with the love of his Saviour, his words sank deep into the souls of his hearers. It was not uncommon during his sermons to see the people rise from their seats and burst into applause, nor to see tears streaming down their cheeks, nor to witness them crowding to the confessionals for hours after he had descended from the pulpit.

In the confessional he completed the work begun by his words. There, he was a true "*alter Christus*," dispensing the mercy and grace of the Crucified Saviour to the sinner, strengthening the weak, consoling the sorrowful, and directing the holy. Intimately acquainted with many languages, he was at the service of men of all nations, and it is no wonder that he soon gathered about him a flock of devoted souls of more than ordinary sanctity.

In these early days of his ministry, his great zeal found expression in a work for which he was to rejoice all his long life. This was the planning and the actual establishment of the Monastery of La Pietra, commonly known as the Asile—a convent for women who desired to devote their lives to God. Upon these sisters he bestowed the rule which he had composed for himself and had followed assiduously. One is amazed at reading it to find how every second is accounted for. Viewing his arduous and busy life so crowded with the duties of a farsighted bishop and a zealous pastor one wonders that he could have followed it exactly. Yet so it was, for after fifteen years experience, Father del Corona wrote that he found it "but slightly burdensome" and that its observance was easy and sweet. This rule tells nothing of corporal penance, but the sisters of the Asile drew from their director avowals of his mortification. This was easily done because he was a little child in his simplicity, candor, and artlessness. An iron chain encircled his waist; his fasts were so rigorous that his brothers many times had to admonish him to lighten them; the bare floor was fre-

quently his bed; he daily used the discipline, increasing its severity when he besought God for some extraordinary favor or when he strove after the conversion of some hardened soul. He referred to his cell as his "nest" and there he would remain for hours at a time on his knees pouring forth his praises and supplications to God. When saying Mass, his face would become covered with sweat and tears, betokening the mighty struggle his soul underwent as it strove to break through the veil of his flesh and unite itself to its Maker. When he elevated the chalice, it was his practice to offer the complete holocaust of his life for the salvation of souls.

When he was only thirty two years of age, Father del Corona was appointed to the chair of Dogmatic Theology in the diocesan seminary of Florence. One of his pupils thus writes of him, "His scholars have never forgotten the enthusiasm he put into his dogmatical expositions of the works of God and the beauties of Faith; they have never forgotten how, after the most elevated speculations, he would humbly incline his head and say, 'In the study of God, we are as poor birds of the night who in gazing at the sun are dazzled by its brilliant light.' He succeeded in making his scholars as learned and saintly as himself and how he longed to have them all become priests."

In 1872, he was elected prior of St. Mark's and so well did he fulfill this difficult task that these words of praise are written of him, "He was in truth a model superior, because by the affability of his manners and by the gentleness with which he commanded he seemed rather to express a desire than to impose an order." When the convent was confiscated by the secular authority, it was evident to all that Father del Corona would be placed in some other position helpful to the Church and the Order. In apprehension that they might lose him, the people of Florence cried out, "At least let them leave him to us." In answer to the query of Pope Pius IX concerning his qualifications for a bishopric, the Archbishop of Florence replied, "Worthy in all respects, but too young." However, the Vicar of Christ, guided by the Holy Ghost, in November, 1874, named Father del Corona titular Bishop of Brasus and Coadjutor to the Bishop of San Miniato.

By the humble Dominican, whose only desire was to gain Heaven, this news was received as a calamity. Devoted to prayer, study, and the conventual life, he looked with dread upon assuming the responsibilities and burdens of a bishopric. He

hurried to Rome and cast himself at the feet of the Holy Father, imploring, "Holy Father, release me, free me for the love of God, of the Blessed Virgin, of St. Peter, and for the good of the Church." Although moved by this ardent plea, the Pope placed his hands on Father del Corona's head and answered, "For the love of God, of the Blessed Virgin, of St. Peter, and for the good of the Church, and also for the love of a poor old man, go and do not hesitate." Thus, it was on January 3, 1875, in the Church of L'Apollinare, at Rome, that Father Pius Thomas del Corona was consecrated Bishop by Cardinal Patrizi, Protector of the Order of Friars Preacher.

With splendid and magnificent fêtes, processions, and ovations, the people of San Miniato welcomed their new bishop, who, "mute in the midst of plaudits, music, and chants, adored the will of God, Who had torn him from everything and everyone." The episcopal palace, being the home of the Bishop, Mgr. Pius took up his residence at the Dominican convent of St. James the Great, in San Miniato.

That his flock might not stray, that their faith might be nourished and strengthened, Bishop del Corona realized that he must have a zealous body of priests whose minds were firmly stabilized by the true doctrine of the Church and whose hearts were lifted up to God. To this end he organized the studies in the diocesan seminary, insisting, primarily, on the theology of the Angelic Doctor since it rested on the tradition of the Fathers, and, secondarily, on the study of the Sacred Scriptures. He, himself, occupied the chair of Dogmatic Theology and superintended the education of his priests. This was the time when the teaching of St. Thomas was either scoffed at or considered as "one of those antique suits of armour suspended in the hall, respected even in its rust, but no longer made use of." The keen, penetrating mind of Bishop del Corona recognized the true worth of the Thomistic system of theology and his action in establishing it in his seminary was soon vindicated when Leo XIII, "the Pope of St. Thomas," ascended the papal throne.

But the great zeal of the Bishop did not end with the careful education of his priests. He did not forget the flock confided to his care. One day, in a sermon to the people, he said, "I beg of God that He will grant me the favor of spending myself for the service of the souls confided to me, of embracing them with an inexpressible ardor, and finally, of offering them one day as fragrant flowers to our Lord Jesus." He epitomized this ex-



pression of his holy desire in his pastoral visits. The diocese of San Miniato numbered one hundred parishes and to each of these he traveled, sometimes by carriage, but more often on foot. His rule on these visits was always the same. Rising at four, it was his custom to recite the Rosary, say the Divine Office, and then spend the remaining time in preparation for Mass which he celebrated at seven. The day would be taken up in the exercise of his episcopal duties, in preaching, and in the hearing of confessions. If a few minutes leisure were afforded him, he would retire to his room and there write and pray. Although his arduous labors often exhausted him, he never availed himself of any dispensations. In going from parish to parish, he prayed in silence or discoursed on spiritual subjects with his companions, as was the custom of his holy father, St. Dominic. The good he accomplished is untold. Entire villages crowded the churches to hear him preach. Hardened sinners, touched by his words, would make their way to the tribunal of Penance, their eyes filled with tears. In speaking of the mission he gave at the little village of Marti, the Bishop wrote to the sisters of the Asile, "The village of Marti presented today a spectacle of the first Christian era. The people declared openly that they would blaspheme no more and that they would bless the word of the Gospel." Cabarets were turned into churches, so willingly did the people there speak of Jesus and Mary, of whom the Bishop preached. But all this may be summed up in the phrase that fell from the lips of the peasants as they greeted the Bishop on the roads, "Blessed be the mother who gave thee birth." Father Cormier says of him, "There was in fact in his entire bearing, his courteous manners, his golden voice, his look, and his entire person, an angelic something rarely encountered on this earth; his manner of preaching completed the enchantment of the people."

Bishop del Corona had definite ideas concerning the education of the youths of his diocese who were to pursue civil careers in their manhood. In 1885, he opened the College of St. Thomas, in the old Dominican convent of the Annunziata, in order to provide his young men with a solid training that would fortify their faith and render them of the greatest use to the State. Thus he wrote on this matter, "Instilled with convictions and habits deeply Christian, yet qualified to come one day in contact with the living forces of the land, the youth will then infuse their Christian spirit in such a way, that little by little this spirit will

mould public morals and even influence legislation." The College accomplished great good for seven years and then was forced to close for the lack of adequate funds. This event saddened the Bishop, but he concluded that he had planted the good seed which would grow and bear fruit in the future, if such was the will of God.

In 1897, when Mgr. Barabese, the Bishop of San Miniato, died, Bishop del Corona sought to obtain release from his active duties in order that he might retire to his humble cell. Instead of accepting the resignation, Pope Leo XIII, on May 10, 1898, appointed him Bishop of San Miniato. Again the people gave proof of their love and devotion for their "white Bishop" by joyous fêtes, processions, and celebrations. However, from this time up until his return to the convent, the Bishop's one great desire was to wear once more the Dominican habit and to lead the regular life of a friar. In 1906, when preaching at St. Dominic's, Fiesole, with such love did he speak of St. Mark's that his emotion compelled him to stop. Lifting his eyes to Heaven, he prayed in silence. The people, struck by his words and his supplicating attitude, their hearts filled with sympathy, cried aloud, "Hear him, O Lord, hear him." The prayer was answered. On the feast of St. Dominic, the Bishop was stricken with jaundice and suffered the almost complete loss of his sight, and on September 10, Pius X, in solicitude for his health, relieved him from the administration of his See. Not long afterward, Mgr. Falcini was appointed Bishop of San Miniato and then the Holy Father named Bishop del Corona, titular Archbishop of Sardica.

The Archbishop retired to St. Dominic's at Fiesole and was supremely content and happy there except for the blindness which prevented him from reading and writing. However, after two delicate operations, his sight was restored and he was able to resume the studies so close to his heart. The religious at St. Dominic's rejoiced to have such a treasure in their midst. The venerable prelate, unmindful of the many great honors bestowed upon him, considered himself just a simple friar, attended all the religious exercises, giving example to all by his promptness and his devoted recollection. He was always the first one in choir. He considered it an insult to our Lord to be tardy for Office. Indeed, it is related that, one day, the Bishop, fearing that he might be late, ran down the cloister to the choir.

The labors of his long life of service to the Church and the Order had weakened his body. This was evident in the winter

of 1912, when it was discovered that he was afflicted with a malignant cancer. The spring found him in a very serious condition, yet the only pain he would mention was that caused by his inability to follow the exercises of the choir. On July 29, he went to the Asile and there on the morning of the Assumption, that glorious feast of the Blessed Virgin, he died. Thus were the words, which he had uttered to the nursing sister the night before, fulfilled. He had said, "At the dawn," and it was at the break of day that he died. Many times during his life he had expressed the hope that he might pass from this earth to the arms of his Heavenly Mother on one of her feast days—and his wish was granted.

People of all classes of society flocked to the solemn funeral services. They clamored for a piece of his habit which was cut up and given away. They besought his intercession in Heaven, for to them there was no doubt of the sanctity of their beloved Bishop. The Holy Father, the princes of the Church, the bishops of Italy, the nobility, learned societies, and prominent men of the world were one in expressing their grief at the loss of this holy Bishop. The letter of Cardinal Maffi, written to the community at St. Mark's, beautifully expresses their sentiment, "Mgr. Pio is gone with his smile of peace and serenity, with a foretaste of Heaven, that Heaven into which he wished to enter on a festal day. I tender my condolences to your venerable community for the sad loss. But at the same time, despite our tears, it would be unbecoming for us not to embrace before his tomb and not to rejoice that a saint has entered Heaven to watch over us."