

## SOME DOMINICAN ICONOGRAPHY

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THE visitor's attention upon entering the chapel of the Dominican House of Studies at Washington, is inevitably drawn to the large painting of the saints and blessed of the Order over the main altar. Although this picture may not be a masterpiece of art, it is, nevertheless, a noteworthy illustration of the Flemish school, singularly rich in Christian symbolism for it colorfully portrays at a glance the varied lives of many holy Dominicans.

The altar-piece was painted on thin canvass by Adolph Tassin, an eminent Belgian artist, who, in May, 1910, brought it to this country and set it up in the chapel. Only a close inspection will show that it is not a fresco. A study of the painting reveals something of the technique of Fra Angelico for whom M. Tassin had more than a passing admiration. He was also a deeply religious painter and often prayed as he worked. It is related that while he was on the scaffold in the chapel putting the picture in place, he stopped his work when the Choir assembled for Divine Office and knelt in prayer until the conclusion of the Hours.

The key-note to the painting is found beneath it in the appropriate words of the *Magnificat* antiphon for the first Vespers in the Feast of All Saints of the Order (November 12): *Fecit ordini magna qui potens est: suscepit Dominicum puerum suum, benedixit illi et semini ejus in saeculum*, He that is mighty has done great things for the Order: He has received Dominic, His servant, and has blessed him and his children forever. The predominant feature, both because of position and proportion, is the Blessed Virgin and Christ Child giving the Rosary to St. Dominic. From this it seems that the *motif* of the whole work is the giving of the Rosary. Six angels, two of whom hold a crown of glory, have lifted up the celestial canopy and exposed to our view the whole heavenly company of Dominic's spiritual sons and daughters. The Friars are conveniently grouped on one side and the Sisters on the other with all eyes turned in admiration on the scene



**ROSARY ALTAR AND ALTAR-PIECE**  
**Dominican House of Studies, Washington**



being enacted before them. Probably while planning the design, M. Tassin had in mind the vision of St. Dominic in which Our Lady unfolded her spreading mantle and let him glimpse the future sanctity of his Order. Outside of the large group and just over the sacristy door on the Epistle side is a panel with Blessed William Arnould and his companions. In the panel opposite on the Gospel side is St. John of Cologne and his companion martyrs of Gorcum. The four panels near the altar represent four Doctors of the Latin Church, Saints Gregory, Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose.

According to a ruling of Pope Benedict XIV, canonized saints should be distinguished by a gold plate or disk called the nimbus; the blessed by a golden circle called the aureole. These distinctions have been carried out in this altar-piece, and on the nimbus, or inside the aureole, we find the name of the Saint or Blessed. St. Agnes of Montepulciano, however, has the aureole with *B. Agnes de Politiano*. With this correction, we have thirteen out of the fourteen saints of the Order represented with their proper symbols and attributes. St. Catherine de Ricci, most unfortunately, has been left out of the picture. Perhaps the omission itself is significant of the neglect into which the cult of this great Dominican mystic has fallen.

Portraiture very seldom entered into the representations of the saints in Christian art. And this for two chief reasons because portraits of the particular saints were not made while they were living, and because it was not thought fitting to give the "citizens of heaven" the features they had while on earth. Hence it is by the distinctive dress of their calling or dignity and by certain appropriate symbols, objects connected with their life or death, that the individual saints are principally recognized. Thus we have St. Dominic in art with a wide variety of countenances, sometimes severely ascetical, now with a full face, sometimes bearded, and again clean-shaven, but he is always distinguished by the black and white habit, the star over his head, the lily or book in his hands, and the black and white dog with a flaming torch at his feet.

Christian iconography makes distinctions between a symbol and an attribute. A symbol is an object chosen to signify some quality or idea, as piety, eloquence, martyrdom. A crucifix, for example, is the proper symbol of a preacher, "I preach Christ crucified"; the palm branch is symbolic of martyrdom, for among the Greeks it was customary to award a palm to the

victor, and in the Christian sense martyrdom is a victory over the world. An attribute is a distinctive mark characteristic of the person represented. It usually has reference to some historical or legendary event in the life or death of a saint. The special attribute of St. Catherine of Alexandria, for instance, is a broken wheel and "represents the instrument by which she was to have been tortured, and the miracle through which she was redeemed." The black and white Dominican habit is an attribute of Dominican saints, while the colors themselves may be considered symbolic; white denoting purity, faith, light, etc., and black, mortification and penance. It is contrary to tradition and history, to represent Dominicans in art with sandaled feet, as some painters have done; they should always wear shoes.

With these brief considerations of symbolism, we see with what appropriateness Stanley B. James in a recent issue of *The Catholic World* calls it "the universal language." "An American or English Protestant speaking no tongue but his own would find himself very much out in the cold if he endeavored to share the religious life of his coreligionists in Germany or Holland. Not so the Catholic. Wherever he goes he meets the same symbols. He can recognize the saints who are venerated. The figure of Our Lady greets him, no matter where he may be, with the same gracious smile of recognition and benediction." From their place of eminence over the altar, our brothers and sisters in St. Dominic speak eloquently of faith, hope, and charity. Neither are they silent when it comes to prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—as may be seen from the following explanation.

The first figure on the Epistle side that attracts our attention, is that of St. Dominic (August 4). Besides the Rosary, he is commonly represented in the habit with a star over his head, a lily, book, crucifix, staff, and the dog with torch. The star is sometimes five, six or eight pointed, but usually the latter, and alludes to the light that appeared over his head in baptism. In the Divine Office he is called *Lumen Ecclesiae*, Light of the Church. The lily is symbolic of his purity of life; the crucifix, of his office as preacher, *Praedicator gratiae*, Preacher of grace; the book and staff refer to the vision in which Saints Peter and Paul commissioned him to "Go and preach," the book being the Epistles of St. Paul. When Dominic is shown with the book alone, it is taken to mean the Constitutions of his Order, and designates



him as the founder. Other incidents in his life are depicted on the windows of the chapel.

Bl. John of Salerno (August 9) holds a lily with his right hand to symbolize his victory over the many snares that had been laid for his chastity.

Bl. Bartholomew of Breganza (October 23) is dressed in bishop's vestments with mitre, crozier, and olive branch. He was made Bishop of Cyprus in 1246, and was transferred to Vicenza, Italy, his native city in 1256. The olive branch refers to his office as peacemaker, for he was often chosen as mediator in the struggles and dissensions that disrupt northern Italy.

Bl. Peter Gonzales, also called St. Telmo or Elmo (April 14) holds a ship. This has reference to his title as "Patron of Sailors." It is related that one time, while he was still living, some sailors in danger of shipwreck invoked his aid and straightway the tempest was calmed and the ship saved.

Bl. Mannes, brother of St. Dominic (July 30), is simply dressed as a Friar Preacher without symbol or attribute. His nearness to St. Dominic may denote relationship. An old engraving shows him holding a crucifix.

Bl. Jordan of Saxony (February 15). Tablet with the words *Salve Regina*; at his left hand, a weazel. The tablet commemorates him as the one who ordered the *Salve Regina* to be sung after Compline instead of merely recited. The weazel indicates his kindness to animals, but especially because he protected a weazel from the hounds and hunters, according to the story in the *Vitae Fratrum*.

Bl. Guala (September 3). Episcopal vestments, mitre; staff with a cross on top; left hand resting on a ladder. He was made Bishop of Brescia, Italy, about 1230. The ladder is an attribute alluding to a vision he had on August 6, 1221, the day St. Dominic died. It seems that he saw two ladders let down from the sky. At the top of one stood our Lord and the Blessed Mother at the top of the other. Angels ascended and descended the ladders, while at the foot of one sat a Dominican Friar with his hood over his head. Finally the ladders were drawn up, and Guala saw the unknown Friar received among the blessed. Making the vision known, he was told that St. Dominic had just died. The vision is recalled in the third antiphon of Lauds for the Feast of St. Dominic.

Bl. Reginald of Orleans (February 17) has no symbol, but the scapular he holds forward is his attribute. While lying dangerously ill in Rome, the Blessed Virgin appeared and showed

him the white scapular saying "Behold the habit of thine Order." This vision is depicted on one of the stained glass windows in the chapel. It is a mistake to portray Dominicans with the scapular in pictures intended to commemorate historical events prior to 1218.

St. Hyacinth (August 17) holds an ostensorium in which is the Blessed Sacrament, and a statue of the Blessed Virgin. These are the attributes commonly given to this Saint, and refer to the heroic and miraculous way in which he rescued these two holy objects from the hands of the Tartars when they attacked his convent. Holding them in his arms, he crossed the turbulent River Dneiper dry-shod and deposited his precious burden in a place of safety.

Bl. Benedict XI, Pope (July 7). Papal vestments and triple cross; book; dish of fruit with a serpent issuing from it. Nicholas Boccasino, the ninth Master General of the Order, was elected to the Chair of St. Peter on October 22, 1303. The book indicates his commentary on the Scriptures. The dish of fruit and the serpent refer to the manner of his death, July 7, 1304, believed to have been caused by poisoned fruit.

Bl. Peter Capucci of Tiferno (October 21). The human skull in his hands alludes to his practice of meditating and preaching with this emblem of death in his hands.

St. Antoninus (May 10). This Saint is vested in green archiepiscopal robes with mitre and crozier. He holds a pair of scales, one side of which contains fruit and is outbalanced by the other side on which lies a scroll with *Deo Gratias*. This attribute signifies the incident when a basket of fruit was presented to the Saint by a man of Florence with the hope of receiving a reward. Instead, he was dismissed with a kindly "May God reward you." After the man had gone away disgruntled, Antoninus sent for him and weighed the gift with a piece of parchment on which was written *Deo Gratias*. The slip of prayer far outweighed the fruit. St. Antoninus was made Archbishop of Florence in 1446.

Bl. John Dominici (June 10) wears a cardinal's hat and cloak, with a book and quill pen in his hand. This is after Fra Angelico's painting in the chapter room of St. Mark's Convent at Florence in which, however, he wears the black cappa and not the red cloak. He was created cardinal by Gregory XII, May 12, 1407. The book and quill denote the many works that came

from his pen, sermons, commentaries, treatises on education, and other subjects.

Bl. Innocent V, Pope (June 22), is distinguished by the pontifical robes and tiara. His right hand is raised in benediction, his left holds a triple cross. Peter of Tarantasia was Archbishop of Lyons and a Cardinal before his election as Pope in January of 1276. He died five months later.

Bl. James of Voragine (July 13). The olive branch he holds refers to his success in establishing peace and order while he was Archbishop of Genoa, signified by the archbishop's dress and crozier. A book in his hand would have referred to his justly famed *Golden Legend*, the most popular medieval collection of lives of the saints.

Bl. Henry Suso (March 2), has the capuche or hood on his head, a book and quill in his hands. He was one of the famous German mystics of the Meister Eckhart school. His love for prayer and contemplation is symbolised by the drawn hood; his many writings by the book and quill. He is sometimes called the Ecstatic Doctor.

Bl. Anthony Pavone (April 9), because of his vigorous preaching against the Waldensian errors, was murdered by the heretics. He bears the palm of martyrdom. His aid is invoked to recover lost articles.

Bl. Bartholomew of Cerverio (April 22) also has the palm of martyrdom. While faithfully carrying out his duties as Inquisitor of the Faith in Italy, five men ambushed and killed him on his way to Cerverio. He and Bl. Anthony Pavone came from the same convent.

St. Louis Bertrand (October 10). M. Tassin has given him the usual attributes, a crucifix and wine-cup or chalice. More commonly a serpent is issuing from the cup and the barrel of a pistol terminates in a crucifix. The latter alludes to an event that nearly cost him his life. A Spanish nobleman attempted to shoot him, but St. Louis calmly made the sign of the cross and the gun was changed into a crucifix. The wine-cup refers to an incident during his apostolate in Panama. One of the savages put a deadly poison in the Saint's cup of wine which he drank with immunity, although the effects of the poison lasted the rest of his life. The serpent or viper symbolises the poison.

St. Peter of Verona (April 29) is depicted in the traditional way after Fra Angelico's painting in the cloister of St. Mark's Convent. He has his finger over his mouth to indicate silence



and also his forgiveness of his slayers. The gash on his forehead is the usual way of representing his martyrdom. Fra Bartolomeo painted a portrait of his friend Savonarola in this way as "another St. Peter Martyr."

Bl. Martin Porres (November 5). His dark complexion readily distinguishes him from the other Dominican saints. His father was a Spanish nobleman and his mother of the colored race. As a Dominican Tertiary, he was infirmarian in the Convent of the Holy Rosary, Lima, Peru. His charity and kindness was extended to dumb animals, even to rats and mice which he fed each day in the cloister garden. M. Tassin has given him a mouse on a platter as an attribute.

Bl. Albert the Great (November 15). Episcopal vestments, mitre, and crozier; book; preacher's wand. Bl. Albert was made Bishop of Ratisbon in 1260 by Pope Alexander IV and resigned his See in 1262. The book refers to his numerous works on theology, philosophy, and the physical sciences. The wand recalls his profound mastery of the sacred and profane sciences. This attribute is sometimes given to *magistri*, as may be seen from Fra Angelico's pictures of the two Masters General, Bl. Jordan of Saxony and St. Raymond of Peñafort.

St. Thomas Aquinas (March 7). Sun-burst on breast; open book with the words *Summa Theologica*; quill pen. He is placed beside Albert the Great to show their warm friendship for one another. The book and quill denote his monumental work, the *Summa Theologica*, and incidentally his many other writings. The sun-burst indicates the great light shed by his teachings. In the liturgy of his feast he is called *Lumen mundi*, Light of the world, *Lux fidelium*, Light of the faithful. Christian art abounds in characteristic symbolism relevant to St. Thomas which cannot be mentioned here.

Bl. Alphonsus Navarrete (June 1), with one hundred and nine companions, gained the palm of martyrdom in Japan from 1614 to 1643. Among them were Dominican Friars and a large number of native Tertiaries and Rosarians, represented in the altar-piece by the Japanese martyr with the palm branch.

St. Pius V, Pope (May 5). Red papal vestments, tiara, triple cross; tablet with the words *Auxilium Christianorum*. Fr. Michael Ghislieri, Cardinal Alessandrino, was elected Pope in January, 1566. After the defeat of the Turks in the Battle of Lepanto, chiefly through the Rosary, he instituted the Feast of Our Lady of Victory, later changed to the Feast of the Most Holy

Rosary. He added the invocation "Help of Christians" to the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. Contrary to all old prints and engravings, he has no beard in this picture.

St. Vincent Ferrer (April 5). Angelic wings; hands joined in prayer. His preaching on the Last Judgment gained for him the titles "Angel of the Judgment" and "Angel of the Apocalypse," because he was like the "angel flying through the midst of heaven, having the eternal gospel, to preach unto them that sit upon the earth," bidding them "fear the Lord, and give Him honor, because the hour of His judgment is come."

Bl. James of Ulm (October 11) wears a Dominican lay-brother's habit, a white tunic, black capuche and black scapular. His attribute is a stained glass window. After a varied career as pilgrim, soldier and glass painter, he became a Dominican lay-brother, and devoted much of his time to making exquisite stained glass windows.

Bl. Andrew Abellon (May 17) has an artist's palette, easel, and brushes, because after many years of zealous preaching, he devoted his time to the cultivation of the fine arts, especially to the decoration of altars in Dominican churches in southern France.

Bl. William Arnould, Bl. Bernard of Rochefort, and Bl. Garcia of Aure, a lay-brother, together with their companions in martyrdom are in the panel below the large painting. All carry palm leaves in token of their deaths, and the various instruments of their martyrdom, as swords, knives, and hatchets. Bl. William holds a scroll with *Te Deum laudamus*, for this was the "swan song" of the Martyrs of Avignonnet as they met their Maker, May 29, 1242. Bl. Garcia is erroneously clad as a cleric, instead of as a Dominican lay-brother.

On the Gospel side of the painting, the first figure is that of Bl. Jane of Aza, mother of St. Dominic (August 8). She wears the dress of a medieval noblewoman, and holds a plaque on which is a dog with the torch in its mouth. According to tradition, Bl. Jane belonged to noble Spanish family of the Garciez. The emblem with the dog and torch denotes the dream or vision she had just before St. Dominic was born. The black and white dog symbolized her son, who with the torch of Catholic doctrine, illuminated the world with the achievements of his Order.

Bl. Jane of Orvieto (July 23). Guardian Angel at her side holding lily; wool spindle. Her life was remarkable for her

devotion to the angels and especially her Guardian Angel, who protected her angelic purity, signified by the lily. An explanation for the wool spindle has not yet been found.

St. Agnes of Montepulciano (April 20) holds a lamb in her arms. This has reference to her name, for in Latin *Agnus* means lamb. It may also allude to the time when the Blessed Virgin appeared to her and placed the Divine Infant, *Agnus Dei*, in her arms.

Bl. Sibyllina Biscossi (March 23). Closed eyes; tower. A severe illness when she was twelve years old entirely deprived her of sight. Shortly afterwards she entered the Third Order, and having completed her novitiate, she left the community to live the solitary life of a recluse in a cell adjoining a Dominican church. Her anchorite life is symbolized by the tower.

Bl. Jane of Portugal (May 12). Religious habit; royal crown. She was the only daughter of King Alfonso V of Portugal. Despite the pomp of court, her childhood was devoted to prayer and ascetical practices. When twenty-three years old she entered the Second Order. Bl. Jane added the Crown of Thorns to her coat of arms to denote her love for the Passion of Christ.

Bl. Margaret of Castello (April 13). Her eyes are closed and hands joined in prayer. This servant of God was born blind. Her parents, after science and prayer were of no avail in giving sight to their daughter, abandoned her at the entrance to a church. A pious family gave her a home and later she became a member of the Third Order. Her life was spent in prayer and almost continual ecstasy.

St. Catherine of Siena (April 30) wears a crown of thorns; her outstretched hands show the sacred stigmata. Our Lord offered her two crowns, one of gold signifying earthly honors, the other of thorns denoting suffering, contempt, and failure. Catherine chose the latter, for she had a passionate devotion to the sufferings of Christ, Who rewarded her with the sacred marks of His crucifixion.

Bl. Amelia Bichieri (August 19) has her hands crossed in prayer. When twenty years old she became the Prioress of a new community of Dominican sisters, composed principally from the nobility. Her devotions were centered on the Passion of Christ and the Holy Eucharist.

Bl. Margaret of Hungary (January 26). Royal crown; cross in her hand. She was the daughter of King Bela IV of Hungary.

On her fourth birthday she was clothed in the Dominican habit and asked the explanation of the crucifix placed in her hands. When told what it meant, she embraced it and said, "Lord, I give and abandon myself to Thee forever."

Blesseds Amata, Diana, and Cecilia (June 9). These three spiritual daughters of St. Dominic are always grouped together. They belonged to the convent at Bologna and were personally acquainted with St. Dominic. In this picture Amata has no symbol, for little is known of her life; her hands are under her scapular. Diana holds three roses for these three flowers of love and wisdom from St. Dominic's garden. Cecilia has a quill and book, for she wrote a life of the holy Founder.

St. Rose of Lima (August 30). Crown of roses; rose in her hand. She was baptized Isabel, but because a rose hovered over her cradle, touched her face and then disappeared, she was called Rose. It is said that the Blessed Virgin in a vision called her "Rose of St. Mary." One day her mother insisted that she wear a wreath of roses on a certain occasion, so the Saint fastened it on her head with needles which penetrated her scalp, in imitation of the Crown of Thorns.

Bl. Lucy of Narnia (November 16) holds a dish with two eyes on it. There is nothing in the life of Bl. Lucy to warrant this symbolism. Probably it has reference to her name, after St. Lucy of Syracuse, who is thus represented in art. Some pictures show Bl. Lucy with hands joined, visibly marked with the stigmata.

Bl. Mary Mancini (January 28), with the angel beside her, is holding an open book with the words *Constitutiones Sororum Ordinis Praedicatorum*. She was a friend of St. Catherine of Siena and at her suggestion entered the Third Order only to leave it later for the Second Order in the Convent of the Holy Cross at Pisa. With Blessed Clara Gambacorti she founded a new convent of cloistered nuns and wrote the constitutions for the new foundation.

Bl. Margaret of Savoy (December 23). Royal dress and crown; three swords. This daughter of Amadeus II, Prince of Piedmont of the House of Savoy, was born in 1382. She built the Convent of St. Mary Magdalen at Alba, Italy, and with the sixty other nuns embraced the austere life of the Second Order. In a vision Our Lord asked her to choose one of three poinards marked Calumny, Sickness, and Persecution. Blessed Margaret accepted and embraced all three.

Bl. Columba of Rieti (May 20) has a dove resting on her arm. Angela was her baptismal name. A dove, however, appeared during the baptism and after circling three times alighted on her head. Hence she was called Columba, the Latin for dove.

Ven. Agnes of Jesus, Prioress of Langeac, France, is pictured with a crown of thorns encircling *I H S* on a red background. These symbols allude to the fact that she had great devotion to every phase of Our Lord's Passion and to the Holy Name. She was the friend and advisor of Father Jean Olier, the founder of the *sulpicians*. She was born November 17, 1602, and died thirty-two years later.

Bl. Imelda Lambertini (May 13) holds a Communion cloth; a Sacred Host is suspended in the air. The Patroness of First Communicants entered the Second Order at the age of ten years. The attributes used here have reference to her miraculous first Communion, when the Host left the ciborium and remained suspended over her head until It descended on the paten held by the priest who gave her the Sacred Species. The joy was too great for her tender heart, for she expired while making her thanksgiving.

Bl. Peter Sanz (June 3). Episcopal vestments, mitre and crozier; palm. This apostle to China was consecrated Bishop of Mauricastrum in 1730. He, with four other Dominicans, shed their blood for the faith in 1747 and 1748. Kneeling beside him in the picture is a native Chinese martyr with palm leaf and Rosary.

Bl. Francis Serrano (June 3) was one of the companion martyrs of Bl. Peter Sanz. He holds a palm and crozier. The absence of the mitre indicates that he was never consecrated bishop. While awaiting death in prison he received the Papal letters of Benedict XIV making him coadjutor to Bishop Sanz and Pro-Vicar Apostolic of Fo-Kien. The artist has placed two Chinese martyrs close to him.

Bl. Anthony Neyrot (April 10) is distinguished by his Turkish garb, the stones and palm. He was a friend and disciple of St. Antoninus, but despite this holy influence he apostatized from the Catholic faith and from the Order after his capture by pirates, and became a Mohammedan. Four months was enough in his new life, for he suddenly realized the enormity of his crime, repented, was received into the Church and once more vested in his Dominican habit. Because of this and his subsequent preaching of the true faith, the Moslems stoned him to death.



St. Raymond of Peñafort (January 23) holds a large gold key. In the Office for his feast he is called "Special Minister of the Sacrament of Penance." The key signifies the binding and loosing power of this Sacrament. Or, it may refer to the authority of the Church expressed by Canon Law, for St. Raymond was a canonist of the highest repute.

Bl. Albert of Bergamo (May 11). Peasant's clothes; long white scapular; spade; Rosary. The Rosary and scapular denote his status as a Dominican Tertiary. He was called "the diligent laborer," having won this title because of his hard work in the fields, hence the spade.

Bl. Catherine of Racconigi (September 4). There is no symbol with this Third Order Sister, because of lack of space. Like her namesakes, St. Catherine of Siena and St. Catherine de Ricci, both of whom she resembled in many ways, she, too received the sacred stigmata, crown of thorns, and like St. Thomas, was girded by angels. In some pictures she is thus represented.

Bl. Madgalen de Panattieri (October 13) has a lozenge shaped tablet with the Holy Name monogram, *I H S*, because the Most Holy Name of Jesus was her favorite ejaculation. Her heroic penances and sanctity of life were rewarded by many divine favors, including the stigmata.

Bl. Stephana de Quinzanis (January 2). The large cross on which rests a lily suggests an incident in her life when she was twelve years old. St. Andrew the Apostle appeared to her with a large cross and said, "Behold, my daughter, the way to heaven." In the many visions that marked her life, the cross bore the most striking part.

In the panel below this group of Dominican saints, we have another, St. John of Cologne (July 9), with a few of the other eighteen martyrs of Gorcum. St. John is wearing a stole because he is carrying the Blessed Sacrament in a ciborium, and because he was a parish priest. The stole in red to denote martyrdom. All of the martyrs carry a palm branch. The Martyrs of Gorcum were put to death by the Calvinists of Holland in defense of two doctrines of the faith, the Real Presence and Papal Supremacy. St. John at the time, 1572, was parish priest in the town of Hornar, and undertook the task of administering the Sacraments to the people and imprisoned religious and clergy of Gorcum. He was apprehended, jailed, and later hung with eleven Franciscans, two Premonstratensians, one Canon Regular, and four secular priests.