

SAINT "ELMO"—THE SAILORS' PATRON¹

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QUITE recently, Rev. J. E. Rockliff, international prompter of the Apostleship of the Sea, returned to England after a visit to North and South America, where he had established several centers of the organization. The Apostleship aims to administer to the spiritual needs of Catholic seamen, who according to Father Rockliff make up more than fifty per cent of the entire number of sailors. These men have been sadly neglected spiritually, and when help has been given in the past, usually it has come through non-Catholic channels. From a Catholic point of view, such a condition is deplorable, and to combat it the Apostleship of the Sea has been organized. An organization of this nature needs spiritual as well as material aid, and could place itself under no better patron than one who spent the last years of his life preaching to the seamen along the coasts of Spain and Portugal. It was Blessed Peter Gonzalez, O.P., Patron of Spanish and Portugese Sailors, known commonly under the name "Saint Elmo" or "Saint Telmo," who brought so many of these men back to their neglected religious duties.

Peter Gonzalez was born in the year 1190 at Astorga, Spain. His parents, who belonged to the wealthy and ancient Castilian nobility, gave Peter an education suited to his rank. Endowed by nature with extraordinary intellectual ability, he excelled in all his studies. It soon became apparent, however, that his masters were tardy in their recognition of the spiritual ambitions of Peter, even though they perceived his unusual qualities of mind. He was well drilled in all those things which fit men to shine among savants, while the cockle of worldly ambition and love of ease was allowed to take root and thrive in his heart.

He was a tall youth of striking appearance, polished manners and winning personality, but, although destined for the

¹ In accordance with the decree of Urban VIII, the author does not intend to anticipate the judgment of the Church.

priesthood, he was woefully deficient in the virtues of humility, self-denial and solid piety which should be found in one who aspires to that holy state. He completed his studies under his indulgent uncle, the Bishop of Astorga, who, captivated by Peter's charm, appointed him Canon, and shortly afterwards obtained for him the office of Dean of the Cathedral.

Such precipitate elevation to dignity turned Peter's head. He decided to take possession of the Deanery with all possible pomp and splendor. But on Christmas Day, surrounded by a magnificent cortege, riding through the crowded square in front of the Cathedral, he was flung into the mud by the angered beast that bore him. As he rose from the mire he presented a ludicrous spectacle, and became the object of the laughter and jeers of the multitude. The lesson was rude but salutary.

In this moment of bitter humiliation, the grace of God touched Peter's heart, and, realizing the shallowness of worldly honor, he threw himself on the mercy of God. He retired to Palencia where he led a life of prayer and mortification, seeking the light to know the will of God and the courage to follow it. Peace came to his soul, and a great desire was born in his heart to combine a life of penance and prayer with the use of the precious talents which God had given him for the service of his fellow men. The Order of Friar Preachers offered him all he sought. Hence he applied for admission to the Convent of the Order recently erected at Palencia (1219), and began a life of penance, prayer and Apostolic labor. He strove arduously to "put off the old man" by the mortification of his pride and self love, and, with the aid of devout prayer, exact observance of the Rule, and fervent devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin, "to put on Jesus Christ." In changing his state of life, Peter had indeed become a new man.

His friends, however, did not give him up without a struggle. They tried by various means to draw him back to his former circle by emphasizing the ease and dignity which could be his if he would but return. They pleaded in vain, for he now looked upon the baubles which this world has to give with the eyes of a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

After he had finished the study of Sacred Theology and Holy Scripture he was sent out to preach to the people. Having laid solidly the foundation of all the virtues in his own soul, he was well fitted to lead others along the road to sanctification. He had a marvelous power over his audience, rich and poor alike,

and he brought even the most hardened sinners to repentance. He was eloquent it is true, but the secret of his success is to be found in his personal sanctity. He was no mere director, he was a leader whose every action was a living example of the doctrine he preached.

Eventually his reputation for sanctity reached the ears of Ferdinand III, who was at this time waging war on the Saracens, and Peter was summoned to his side. Ferdinand desiring to have Peter always at hand, appointed him Royal Confessor.² Peter profited by the King's confidence to reform the morals of the dissolute young nobles of the Court and the officers and soldiers of the army. His daily life was a powerful influence for good. At Court he lived the same life of penance, humility, and retirement as in the Cloister. Peter accompanied Ferdinand on all his expeditions against the Moors, and had a great share in the victories by his prayers, prudent counsels, and, above all, by the marvellous reformation in the morals of the Army.

The capture of Cordova by Ferdinand III in 1236 opened up a new field for the zeal of Peter. He restrained the ardor of the victorious army, saved the honor of the virgins and the lives of numberless children. He released Christian prisoners from the dungeons, purified the Mosques and preached the Gospel to the Moors.

The honors which the King and Court showered upon him did not spoil the man of God. About this time he saw in a vision a large multitude of people, steeped in ignorance and shackled by superstition, with outstretched arms imploring his aid.³ Their cry of distress touched the chords of Peter's heart, and they did not call in vain. He turned his back upon the Court to devote himself to labor among Christ's poor. Neither the earnest entreaties of his friends, nor the consideration of the good effect that his presence exerted on the Army could induce him to return. The poor were asking for bread; he would not give them a stone.

Marianna, a well known Spanish Historian tells us, "About this time there flourished an illustrious man named Peter Gonzalez, who after having left the Court, where he had held several offices of considerable importance, consecrated the rest of

² Confessarium fuisse Regis Castellae, cognomento Sancti, plerique affirmant Malvenda, Annal. P. 693.

³ Histoire des Hommes Illustres De L'Orde Saint Dominique. Avril, Tome IX, p. 56.

his days to instructing the poor of Galicia and the Asturias. He was a celebrated preacher and by means of missions which he conducted in all the towns and villages, banished ignorance and libertinism from those provinces."⁴

Galicia and the Asturias were the principal theatre of his labors. With the charity and zeal of an Apostle he went from town to town, bringing countless sinners to repentance, settling long standing family quarrels, and wiping out all kinds of scandals. He was a veritable angel of peace. His mere presence was sufficient to smooth over every misunderstanding. Great multitudes followed him from place to place, and he brought about so many conversions that he might be called "The New Apostle of Spain."⁵

In the Dioceses of Compostella and Tuy his ministry was crowned with signal success. There his sanctity and miracles brought many back to the practice of religion. "On one occasion, at Bayonne, the crowd which had gathered to listen to his discourse was so great that he was forced to preach to them in an immense field outside the walls of the City. Suddenly a violent storm arose. The thunder rolled, the lightning flashed, and his audience, fearing a deluge, prepared to disperse. Peter, however, calmed their fears and prayed God to protect them from the fury of the elements. His prayer was heard, and, although torrents of rain flooded the surrounding country, the place where he was preaching was undisturbed. He finished his sermon amidst the prayers of the people."⁶

Like Saint Dominic his model, our zealous and indefatigable friar ended his days in the Apostolate. Having preached in nearly all the principal provinces of Spain, he now turned to that work for which his name had been honored even to our own day, the evangelization of the sailors in the seaport towns. This was his last mission, the Apostolate among the seamen, and it ended only with his death. His arduous labors, great austerities and incessant journeys had sapped his strength, without, however, diminishing the ardor of his zeal. Like another Paul he preached to the seamen anywhere and everywhere. Though they were rough and callous characters, personal danger did not deter Peter. He sought them along the highways and byways, in the taverns, on the quays, and even in their very ships. His clo-

⁴ Marianna, *Hist. d'Espagne*, Liv. XIII. p. 49-50.

⁵ *Histoire des Hommes Illustres De L'Orde Saint Dominique*, T. 1. p. 57.

⁶ *Acta Sanctorum*, April. T. 11, p. 395.

quence held them spellbound, and gradually, almost in spite of themselves, his personal sanctity and earnest solicitude for their salvation melted the hearts of these hardened and long neglected men.

The bark of Peter's life was rapidly nearing port. On Palm Sunday, 1246, at Pesiguero he foretold his approaching death. Wishing to die among his brethren he set out for Compostella, but when he had reached the village of Santa Columba he became so weak that he was forced to return to Tuy. There after having received the last sacraments, he passed to his eternal reward on Easter Sunday, April 15, 1246. He was buried with great solemnity at the Cathedral of Tuy in a magnificent tomb.

Peter's influence upon the sailors, however, did not end with his death. On the contrary it increased. He who loved them in this world has not forgotten them in the next; nor have they forgotten him. With utmost confidence they call upon him whenever danger threatens them at sea, and their pleas are not in vain. The promptness with which he has obtained succor for them has earned for him the title of Patron of Spanish and Portugese Mariners. He is invoked under the name of Saint Telmo or Elmo, which is supposed to be a corruption of Saint Erasmus, formerly Patron of Sailors in the Mediterranean.

This is an unique situation and it might be well to seek an explanation. Some early chroniclers tried to settle the difficulty by claiming that Telmus was the surname of Peter Gonzalez. This theory has no real evidence to support it, for surely his contemporaries would have recorded the fact. Though "Peter Gonzalez" is quite often found in the chronicles of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the surname Telmus is conspicuous by its absence. It first appears in a history by Ferdinand Castillo in 1589, and subsequent writers followed his lead. Mamachi and his collaborators based their stand upon a document of Anthony Sers, a supposed contemporary of Peter Gonzalez. By historical criticism they later discovered the document to be a forgery and retracted their former statement.

Sousa gives the most rational explanation of this phenomenon. "Before the time of Peter Gonzalez, Saint Erasmus was the favorite patron of Mariners under the name of Saint Elmo. From the time of the miracle of Bayonne, however, whenever the sailors were in danger they remembered Peter's display of power over the elements and had recourse to him. Receiving favorable results through his intercession, the mariners gradu-

ally transferred to him, not only the devotion given to their former patron, but even his name."⁷

One point is certain. It is Blessed Peter Gonzalez whom the seamen invoke under the name of Saint Telmo or Elmo. Time and time again he has shown himself visibly to them while abating the fury of the sea. "In 1662 a Spanish fleet returning from the Indies richly laden, was overtaken by a raging storm and the boats were on the point of sinking with their valuable cargo. In their distress the mariners called upon Saint Elmo. Their prayers were answered. The Saint appeared to them and the tempest subsided."⁸

A lively devotion towards Peter Gonzalez, O.P., flourishes even to this day. In all the parts of the Iberian Peninsula and all along the coast, one can find chapels, altars, images, and paintings, all attesting to the profound devotion of the sailors to their Patron. Confraternities are established in his honor, especially at Bayonne, Vigo and Tuy. At the latter place his relics are enclosed in a beautiful silver shrine and exceptional honors are accorded him. He is the Patron of the Diocese and his feast is celebrated with the greatest solemnity.

The Holy See has frequently encouraged the devotion of the seamen towards Blessed Peter by granting, among many other indulgences, a plenary indulgence for visiting the Chapels of Saint Telmo at San Lucar de Barrameda,⁹ Valencia,¹⁰ Tuy,¹¹ and the chapel of the Confraternity of Calkers¹² under his protection at Toulon, France. Benedict XIV writes of Blessed Peter Gonzalez, "The confidence of the mariners towards that venerable servant of God is so well known and of such long standing, that he is regarded by these people as their Patron."¹³

So numerous were the miracles worked at Peter's tomb that Pope Innocent IV by a Bull of 1254 permitted the Spanish Dominicans to celebrate his feast every year with the same solemnity as if he had been formally canonized. The Bishop of Tuy judicially attested to one hundred and eighty miracles in the first twelve years after the Saint's death. After many petitions for his canonization, in 1741 Pope Benedict XIV beatified the servant

⁷ *Acta Sanctorum*, April, T. 11, p. 388.

⁸ *L'Annee Dominicaine*, Avril. T 1, p. 400.

⁹ *Bullarium*, O.P., V. 102.

¹⁰ VII, 264.

¹¹ VII, 456.

¹² VII, 483.

¹³ *De Servi Dei Beatif.* I, ii, C. XXIV.

of God and approved his cult for the entire Dominican Order, and for the dioceses of Palencia and Tuy. At the request of the King of Spain it was extended to all the dioceses in his kingdom, by a Papal Brief of September 18, 1748.

His remains have been transferred several times but now rest in a magnificent silver shrine in the Cathedral of Tuy. On the right side of the sarcophagus is a marble plaque containing the following couplet:

NAUTARUS PATRONUS ADEST HAC TEIMUS IN URNA.
FELIX QUAE MANES CONTINET URNA SUOS.¹⁴

It pertains to the future glory of Blessed Peter Gonzalez to be proclaimed officially Patron of Mariners by the Vicar of Christ. That supreme honor has actually been solicited from the Holy See by the Sailors and numerous Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops of France, Spain, Portugal, England, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland and Peru, and by the Apostolic Vicars of the Congo and China. Let us hope that these requests shall not have been in vain, and that one day Blessed Peter Gonzalez will be officially proclaimed by Holy Mother Church as "The Patron of Mariners."

In the meantime the Apostleship of the Sea could find no better Patron under whom to carry on its noble work, than under the Saintly Spaniard who labored so diligently during the last years of his life in that very field. At any rate we can all with great profit pray with Holy Mother Church: "O God who dost grant singular help through Blessed Peter to such as are in danger at sea, grant through his intercession that in all the storms of this life, the light of Thy grace may ever shine upon us whereby we may be able to gain the port of eternal salvation."

¹⁴ HERE LIES TELMO, PATRON OF SAILORS,
HAPPY THE SHRINE WHICH CONTAINS HIS REMAINS.

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