

SAINT ANTONINUS

ANTONINUS QUINN, O.P.



THE RIVER ARNO, in Italy, is about a hundred forty miles long and waters a large portion of Tuscany. Arising in the Apennines it flows south, then west, northwest and west, finally emptying into the Mediterranean south of Pisa. As it follows along its irregular course, it cuts through the city of Florence at the foot of the mountains. Florence, made beautiful by human art, came forth from the hand of God as a work of surpassing beauty. Its very name gives one a picture of verdant life, —Florence, Firenze, the flowery city. Among the poets it is known as *La Bella*, the beautiful.

Here, late in the month of March of the year 1389, a son was born to Niccolò di Pierozzo and Tomassa di Cenni di Niccio. This son, known to Moderns as the "Father of Economics," was given the name Anthony, which an affectionate citizenry later changed to Antoninus. The street on which he was born was the Via del Cocamero, now the Via Ricasoli. It stretches from the Duomo to the Piazza di S. Marco, and within this limited space, it may be said, the public life of Antoninus as a Dominican and as an archbishop was spent. He entered the Convent of San Marco as its first Dominican prior and left it finally to walk the length of the Via del Cocamero to the Duomo, the scene of his episcopal labours for thirteen years.¹

As a youth he had little chance for an education, even in the hotbed of Humanism. He tells us that before entering the Dominican Order he had scant training in the elementals and in no part of the higher studies save Dialectics, even that being interrupted continually.² His knowledge, therefore, must have come from his own industry. From his father, a notary of some repute in the city, he acquired those qualities of method, precision, and order, that were to characterize him for his entire life. It is quite within the bounds of

¹ Jarrett, Bede, *Saint Antonino and Mediaeval Economics*, p. 11.

² *Summa Moralis St. Antonini*, Lib. I, p. 2, col. 2, line 6.

probability to suppose that he accompanied his father on his daily round of business, thus deriving much benefit from an employment that in those days enjoyed an enviable renown.³

The few details of infancy given to us by his earliest biographers tell us that Antoninus was small, pallid of countenance and sickly. In fact his none too robust body caused trouble all his life; many times the doctors were in despair and predicted an early death. His illness forced his withdrawal from childhood games and turned his mind into serious and religious channels. A constant pleasure was to witness the processions of Dominicans from S. Maria Novella. These white-robed sons of Saint Dominic held an attraction for him that later burst into an ardent love under the influence of Bl. John Dominic's preaching.⁴

This famous Dominican had been in contact with Catherine of Siena, had been enamoured of her ideals for universal reform, and had resolved to continue her work. Under Bl. Raymond of Capua, onetime confessor of Catherine, he had his chance. As Master General, Raymond appointed him vicar of the reformed convents in Italy, an office he held for nine years (1390-1399) until its suppression by Pope Boniface IX. At the end of that time he returned to Florence and the convent of his origin. In the years that followed, his preaching drew crowds to the foot of his pulpit; he became the arbiter of all quarrels, the idol of his natal town.⁵

In 1404, Antoninus came before John Dominic, asking admission to the novitiate of the Order. The great Dominican treated his young caller kindly, asked the required questions, and found that in many respects the applicant was promising. Two obstacles, however, were noticeable; he was too young, and he appeared sickly. For a life of strictness a healthy body was necessary; for austerities only a mature mind could remain firm and fixed. Rather than give a direct refusal, John Dominic agreed to accept his application if within a year Antoninus memorized the *Decretum* of Gratian. Nothing daunted by so formidable and almost impossible a task, the lad consented to the condition imposed and returned with it fulfilled less than one year later. Judging by the numerous references to the Decretals in his own writings, we are led to the belief that it was a verbatim memorization. This feat was remarkable even in an age that witnessed the wonders of the memory of Pico della Mirandola.

³ Morcay, Raoul; *Antonin: fondateur du Convent de Saint-Marc, Archevêque de Florence*, pp. 13 and 16.

⁴ Walker, J. B., *The Chronicles of Saint Antoninus*, p. 3.

⁵ Morcay, Raoul, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Antoninus entered the novitiate house at Cortona early in February, 1405, where he made his profession in the year following. A new convent at Fiesole, just beyond the city walls of Florence, was opened in September of the same year. Here he was sent by John Dominic and here he remained until 1409. An uncertain tradition tells us that at Fiesole his novice-master was Bl. Lawrence of Ripafratta. Among Antoninus's associates were many saintly men, for we find that Pietro Capucci and Constanzo di Fabiano were his fellow-novices, together with Fra Angelico "whom all the world has put among the Saints." At Fiesole, too, he first met Fra Angelico's brother, Fra Benedetto, who in later years was to gain universal renown as a minaturist.⁶

For two years the regular life was carried out in the new convent. At the end of that time the vicinity of Florence became too dangerous for the Friars. After the election of Gregory XII to the See of Peter, followed by the double deposition of Gregory and the Anti-pope Benedict XIII, the Council of Pisa elected a third claimant, Pietro Filargo, Franciscan Archbishop of Milan, who assumed the name of Alexander V. The Convent at Fiesole had been too well versed in the ways of Catherine of Siena to recognize as pope anyone save the one at Rome. Since they chose to run counter to the ideas of Florence, the Brothers had to take themselves off to a place of safety. They fled to Foligno, where they were well received. At this convent the theological studies were continued without interruption until the plague forced the whole community to go to Cortona. Here Antoninus was raised to the sublime dignity of the priesthood.⁷

From this time on, life for Antoninus moved along at a rapid pace. In 1413 he was vicar at Foligno; the following year found him back at Cortona, becoming its prior in 1418; when affairs permitted he brought the community back to Fiesole (1421), and filled the office of prior. With the reestablishment of the office of Vicar General of Dominican Observants in Italy, the duties of visitor to the Convent at Naples were given to Antoninus. To this same convent of St. Peter Martyr he was returned in 1428 as Prior.⁸ This last assignment was the real beginning of his apostolic career. To the routine duties of his office he added other works of a constructive nature. Under his direction, church and convent were re-

⁶ Tinalli, P. Guiseppe; *S. Antonino*, p. 23.

⁷ Tinalli, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁸ Walker, J. B., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

newed and the religious standards of his flock were reawakened. On the strength of his success at Naples, his brethren elected him to the same position at the Minerva in Rome (1430). In his official capacity he had the opportunity of welcoming several members of the Sacred College present in the Eternal City for the papal election that brought Eugene IV to the Throne of the Fishermen. This brought him into contact with the highest ecclesiastics and was the occasion of future promotions. Along with his duties at the Minerva the Pope gave him those of Auditor General for the Rota and Vicar General of the Observants.⁹ Nine years all told were spent in Rome.

Meanwhile events at Florence were leading up to a point where the city Fathers were anxious to bring the Friars from Fiesole to a place within the city walls. Shortly after the return of Cosimo de Medici from exile, the Dominicans opened negotiations to obtain a church and convent near the center of the city. By the Bull *Super Gregem Dominicum* of Jan. 21, 1436, San Marco was taken from the Silvestrians and given to the sons of St. Dominic. Over this convent Antoninus was elected prior, ruling the convent of Fiesole as well as the new establishment. During his term of office memorable events transpired: the library that was soon to draw praise from all corners of the Christian world received its start; the old convent once more became habitable; and Fra Giovanni Angelico was brought from Fiesole to beautify the church and convent of San Marco.

A third monument to Antoninus's labours during his incumbency exists today in that association known as the *Buonomini di San Martino*, the Good Men of St. Martin. It was the work of this body to seek out and to aid the poor of the city. Chief among the victims of poverty were the once wealthy and powerful merchants who had opposed Cosimo de Medici. His return to power meant ruin for them; their revenues were cut off; their places of business were destroyed. They were unable to work and ashamed to beg. Formed as the *Provveditori dei Poveri Vegognosci*, providers for the shame-faced poor, the men of San Martino did wonders amongst the people of this class. Today after five hundred years, the original charter remains intact despite many attempts to subject it to civil administration. Two clauses taken from it are characteristic of the organization and its founder. No money received was to be funded, but simply spent; for Antoninus considered it a want of delicacy to traffic with alms for the faithful. No authority civil or ecclesiastic was to demand account of sums taken in, nor to take

⁹ Walker, J. B., *op. cit.*, p. 8.

upon itself the government of the society.¹⁰ In an age when charity—synonymous with love—has become an highly organized institution, these two points are noteworthy.

The career of our Saint as a Dominican was quickly nearing its end. The death of Archbishop Zarabella left vacant the See of Florence. After one whole year of dalliance, marked with plot and counter-plot of Medicean and anti-Medicean policy, Eugene IV named Antoninus as successor. It has been said, and not without reason, that Fra Angelico, then at Rome, was the one who prompted the Pope's choice. News of the appointment was joyfully received by the entire city, with the single exception of the leading actor. Fleeing from the honor, Antoninus got as far as a small seaport in Sardinia before his disguise was penetrated. Messengers from the Holy See met him at Sienna and informed him that it was the expressed will of Eugene that he should accept this latest dignity and return immediately to Fiesole.

San Dominico at Fiesole, the house of his novitiate, was the scene of the consecration. On March 13, 1446, the second Sunday in Lent, he came down the hill, stopping at S. Gallo's outside the walls to celebrate Mass; then he entered the city from the north, proceeding eastward to the Church of S. Pietro Maggiore, where was performed the mystic marriage of the archbishop to his see, represented by the Abbess of the nearby Benedictine Convent. When that was ended he hastened to the Duomo, addressed his flock and took formal possession of his diocese.

When Antoninus became bishop, Florence was the marvel of the Western World. With the Medici again in power, the Humanistic Renaissance had received a new and vital impetus. Cosimo by his generosity induced the learned men of Europe to make their home at his court; he fostered art with a munificence rarely equaled in the history of patronage; and as one author states, "he showered attentions and pensions on savants, and a coterie of scholars grew up in Florence. 'He was', says Schaff, 'both the Rothschild and Maecenas of his age; . . . Cosimo encouraged scholars by gifts of money and the purchase of MSS without the air of condescension which spoils the gift, but with the feelings of respect and gratitude for superior merit.'"¹¹ Famous names of famous men who flourished during the reign of Cosimo and his house are many. To mention but a few, there were Aretino, Poggio, Pletho, Boccaccio, Ficino,

¹⁰Jarrett, Bede, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹¹Lodge, H. C., *History of Nations*, IV., 470.

Pico Giovanni della Mirandola, Cennini, Gaddi, Gioberti, and a large following of savants enshrined in History's immortal halls.

On the other side of the picture the colors are not painted in these brilliant and gaudy hues. War and Florence were ever close companions; the plague had played its major rôle only too well; the revolve of the Ciompi in 1378 caused its share of trouble; in the same year the whole of Christendom was divided by the Western Schism; and while outwardly the city of Florence presented a front that was dazzlingly brilliant and magnificent in artistic splendor, yet many virulent poisons were infecting its interior. Poverty was common amidst uncommon luxury; vice thrived along with a philosophic cultivation of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful; horrible excesses were being perpetrated daily in the name of Justice; and on the whole the state of the city was not at all promising on the day of the new Archbishop's consecration.

Faced with such conditions, Antoninus felt the need of reform. Quite characteristic of the man was his very first move; he reformed his own diocesan clergy, instilling by his own example a love for the things of God. Working quietly and without undue haste, he proceeded to bring his flock back on the right path, *leading* them, in imitation of the Good Shepherd. Under his skilful guidance the children of the city enjoyed the care of an institution that he made truly home-like. For unfortunates and illegitimate children he had a special regard. His love for them may be witnessed even today in the well-known *Spedale degli Innocenti*, the Hospital of the Innocents.

Soon after taking office, he learned to know the horrors that the plague could bring. It struck Florence in 1446 and wrecked havoc. The record of the visitation is preserved in the literary works of the Saint. While he narrates the benefits bestowed by the city magistrates, the sums of money donated, and the relief given, he fails to mention the part he himself played in the terrifying game of fighting death. From the accounts of others we know that a familiar sight was that of the bishop leading his mule through the twisting streets and tending to the needs of body and soul of the victims. In the wake of the pest, a new nightmare shook the city in the form of an earthquake, bringing with it comets and meteors that threw the populace into a frenzy of fear. Had the world's end come? To quell their apprehensions, Antoninus was forced to write a treatise on the strange phenomena, "according to the mind of Aristotle and Albertus Magnus."

Thus it was, from day to day, year in and year out, that the

work of Antoninus took on and maintained its universal character. Neither personal sickness nor the press of business nor any other happening could stop his charitable hand. Where God's poor and suffering children were concerned, there Antoninus was found. As his Master did some fifteen centuries before, he too walked in the ways of the lowly; the oppressed he raised up; from his garments as from his Master's, virtue went out, and he found a warm place in the hearts of those whom his charity embraced. That he gave away all to help the poor is no matter of wonderment, for he was a Friar vowed to poverty; but that he went beyond his means in order to give, that is wonderful, for it is the blessed folly of the Saints. That he should have loved all men is in itself admirable, but that he induced all men to love each other is even more admirable, and that is a secret of the Saints.

In the decrees of Divine Providence, only thirteen years were given to Antoninus in which to do the work of his episcopate. Not the length of time nor what he did, but rather the manner in which he accomplished his task should be the norm of our judgment of him. By this standard his own age judged him, and its opinion may well be envied. Is it a mere coincidence that his contemporaries and posterity has known him under three different names and that each one begins with the one word *Father*?

Death, which touches every man but no two men alike, came to Antoninus in 1459 in his seventieth year. His life had been a gentle thing; his death had the same quiet air, as if at the very end he was sorry that his passing would bring unhappiness to others. In him the poor lost an invaluable friend and protector; popes, rulers, kings and emperors lost a sincere and wise counsellor; all were bereft of a noble friend.

His writings though not numerous are monumental, and more than remarkable when one considers the busy life he led and the scant training that had been his. A staunch witness to his erudition as a theologian is his *Summa Moralis* which merits him a place between Thomas Aquinas and Alphonse. It has been well said: "It would seem probable that our Saint was the first to develop the study of Christian Ethics on a scale so practical in treatment and extensive in scope."¹² By the historian, his *Chronicles* can not be passed over lightly. Lesser works have also found their way into print. Amongst these may be listed his *Confessionale* a composite of three separate works dealing with the Sacrament of Penance. A treatise

¹² Walker, J. B., *op. cit.*, 17.

written for the direction of certain pious ladies in the city, *Opera a ben vivere*, forms a valuable source for an intimate study of the Middle Ages, and its spiritual value can not be too greatly insisted upon. A short opusculum *De Ornatu Mulierum* and his *Sermones* have never been published.

Today when the visitor to Florence enters the city's hall of fame, he notices that amongst the statues of illustrious Florentines there is only one representing an ecclesiastic. Standing prominently in the Palazzo degli Uffizi, the statue of Antoninus is the fourth on the right as one enters from the Piazza della Signoria. Quite rightly have the authorities placed him beside Dante, who might well have written of him the beautiful words, so often quoted, that he made St. Bonaventure say of St. Dominic:—

"Messenger, he seem'd, and friend
Fast-knit to Christ; and the first love he show'd,
Was after the first counsel Christ gave
Then with sage doctrine and good will to help,
Forth on his great apostleship he fared,
Like torrent bursting from a lofty vein " ¹²

¹² Dante, Paradiso, XII, 67, 91, Translation of H. F. Cary.

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