

DOMINICANA

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ST. VINCENT FERRER—PRINCE OF PREACHERS

The ideal of St. Dominic in founding his Order was the salvation of others, principally through preaching. He would set up in the Church an institute of men who should have the credentials to preach Christ. How successfully his noble conception has been realized, and how worthy the succeeding generations of Dominicans have been of their official title—the Order of Preachers—is made plain by a glance at the history of the apostolate of preaching in the Church during the last seven hundred years. The most illustrious men engaged in that work were sons of St. Dominic, but the most notable of all, the one who manifested in the highest degree the apostolic zeal of the Holy Founder, was St. Vincent Ferrer.

Since the hallowed time of the Apostles the world has probably never been privileged to listen to a preacher whose gifts of eloquence, combined with learning and a burning ardor for souls, equalled that of St. Vincent. Born in the year 1350 at Valencia, in Spain, he entered the service of God at the early age of seven years, at which time he received the clerical tonsure. When only sixteen years old he answered the question of his loving and generous heart, "What must I do to be perfect?" by entering the Order of Preachers. Being human, he had his temptations. On one occasion he promised his pleading mother to yield to her wishes and leave the convent; but on the following day he conquered both his own heart and his mother by taking the crucifix into his hands and saying, "For Thee, O my God, for Thee, and always for Thee!" Henceforth he adopted as his motto: "My cell must be my heaven on earth." And in that silent cell he strove by prayer and mortification to become a perfect copy of his model and spiritual father, St. Dominic.

While sanctity is the first qualification of a great preacher, the second is erudition. His superiors, recognizing the precocity

and extraordinary habits of application of their young subject, gave him the best of educational advantages, placing him under great masters in Valencia, Barcelona and Toulouse. After having passed through all the different stages considered necessary by way of preparation for preaching to the people the truths of dogmatic and moral teaching, he continued to perfect himself in the divine sciences by instructing others, without, however, suffering the fervor which inflamed his soul to grow cold. Scholastic pursuits and teaching are rocks that are sometimes fatal to the piety of those engaged in them. But St. Vincent knew how to avoid such perils. Study was to him a continual exercise of devotion; not only did he refer it to God with perfect purity of intention, but he even pictured himself as hearing from the mouth of Divine Wisdom Itself all that he read and thought. So well did he succeed in harmonizing piety and science that his fame as a professor was surpassed only by that of his sanctity.

But his mission was not to be limited to the narrow confines of a professor's career; he was destined to occupy the pulpit of every center of Europe and announce the Divine Word to the world.

The first period of the public life of this saint, extending from his thirtieth to his forty-eighth year, may be called a sad failure. He was a defendant of the Antipope Benedict XIII, better known in history as Peter de Luna, and for a long time filled the office of his confessor. Even as St. Catherine of Siena in Italy devoted her life to the cause of Pope Urban, St. Vincent Ferrer, of the same Order, prayed and pleaded in Spain and France for Benedict. The disastrous consequences of this prolonged schism, the obstinacy of Peter de Luna, the failure of all his attempts to bring about a peaceful understanding, broke his heart and his health. In 1398 a burning fever began to consume his strength; the hour of death seemed to be fast approaching. But his sickness only marked the end of the period of preparation and the beginning of his apostolic life. His health being restored in a miraculous manner, he at once turned to the members of the Church, having been unsuccessful in his attempts to reform the supposed Head.

Not only was this prince of preachers endowed with every oratorical quality capable of impressing the multitude, but a pleasing exterior also weighed in his favor. He possessed a tall, well-proportioned figure, a handsome countenance, with a high forehead expressive of noble serenity. His blond hair, shorn for

the tonsure, resembled a natural halo; his eyes were large, black and full of expression, but the fire which shone in them was controlled by kindness. Although in time his beauty vanished under the fatigue of his work and the vigor of his penances, his appearance always betrayed the nobility and grandeur of his soul. His voice, which was sonorous as a silver trumpet, adapted itself with marvellous effect to the necessity of the moment. Did he speak of our Lord's Passion, the sorrows of His Blessed Mother, or the souls in purgatory, that sad plaintive voice, broken at intervals by sighs, inspired lively compassion and melted his hearers to tears.

God alone knows the number of souls whom this saint led from sin to penance by a daily course of preaching extending over a period of twenty years. But if we may judge by the exterior signs which everywhere accompanied his presence, we may believe that among those privileged to see and to hear him, there were very few, whether heretic, Jew or Mohammedan, who were able to resist his influence. Wherever he went, the effects of his preaching were marvellous. An official of a town visited by the saint, in a letter to his bishop thus describes the result of the mission:

"Never have the people confessed as frequently, and there are barely enough priests to hear them and give them Holy Communion. On Sundays and feast days, men and women come to Mass with such devotion as has never before been heard of, much less seen. The churches which were formerly too large are now too small."

And what he accomplished for this town may be said of hundreds of other cities and towns which had the blessing of hearing his words.

His mission was not less fruitful among the Jews than among those who had wandered from the fold of the Church. God seemed to have accorded him a special grace for the conversion of a people who are proverbially hostile to the Christian name. The number won over by him is incalculable. The process of his canonization shows that in the space of thirteen months he converted twenty thousand in Castile alone; that in the year 1415, within six months, more than fifteen thousand were led to embrace the true faith in Aragon and Catalonia, and that on another occasion in the same country over thirty thousand were baptized at the close of his preaching. The historians of the sect do not hesitate to confirm these facts by their testimony. In

a work entitled "Juehasin," it is related that in the year 1412, a Friar named Brother Vincent having preached to the Jews, the latter renounced their law to the number of more than two hundred thousand.

But were these miraculous results effected without intense effort?

During a period of sixty-nine years the great Apostle of the fifteenth century fought life's painful battle; for fifty years he bore the austere yoke of the religious life; and for twenty years he continued to sow the seed of redemption in the fairest fields of all Europe, proclaiming, like another St. Paul, Christ's kingdom on earth. All of these accomplishments were truly exceptional even for a saint. But we must remember that he was a saint of superior rank; one who according to the Dominican ideal of sanctity strove for, and attained, the goal of perfection. This ideal is based upon the ancient monastic standard, in which Choral Office and Liturgy are provided for in fulness and solemnity. Hence, we see that the Saint sang Mass every morning and had a body of priests to sing the Proper of the Mass. He carried out while on his missionary journeys the same solemn ceremonial in which he had been trained as a novice. He rose at two o'clock to recite the Divine Office chorally. It was his custom to recite the Psalter after Matins, then to read the Sacred Scriptures. After Mass he preached, and we learn that the sermon usually lasted three hours. He did not break his fast until one o'clock; after which he worked among the poor, among the children, and the religious cloisters, and, finally, among his own companions.

At first sight this may not seem, after all, to be such a very extraordinary life. But we must remember that in the time of St. Vincent travelling was accompanied by great inconveniences and attended by many perils. Still this holy man planted the seed of grace and repentance in the fairest fields of Spain, Italy and France, traversing every mile of his long journeys on foot. His zeal for souls exposed him to the fierce and burning heats of the south, and to the keen winds of the north, and compelled him to cross and recross swollen rivers, almost impenetrable forests and impassable mountains. Moreover, the fact that he was a saint did not make him less sensible of the weariness and exhaustion consequent to long and frequent journeyings, much preaching, extended vigils and rigorous fasts. Moreover, when



The Most Authentic Existing Portrait of St. Vincent Ferrer
1419—1919

we remember that day after day he lived the selfsame life, without any change or break, that he lived as if he were still within the cloister, we come to realize that St. Vincent was more than an ordinary man, that his life was in the highest degree an extraordinary life, an exemplification of the Dominican ideal to contemplate and to give to others the fruits of contemplation.

—Bro. Alfred Sibila, O. P.

THE ANNUNCIATION

“Hail, spotless maiden, full of grace,
A message from on high I bear
To thee, above all women fair.
God would through thee redeem thy race,
Maternity divine would place
Within thy care (Him born of thee
The Son of God and thine shall be),
Nor thy virginity efface!

“My soul, indeed, doth magnify the Lord
Who hath beheld His maid’s humility,
To me be done according to Thy word,
God’s power received, His will be done in me.”
The spirit on her soul His graces poured,
The word Divine assumed humanity.

—Bro. Raymund Grace, O. P.