

THE MISSIONARY CHARACTER OF THE DOMINICAN ORDER

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THE END and its means of accomplishment, the extent and basis of all missionary activity is to be found in the solemn commission of Christ to His Apostles, "Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized shall be saved . . ." (Mk. XVI, 15-16). The Popes, in speaking of the missions, have time and again explained that in treating of such matters they are but carrying out this command of Christ, and reminding the clergy and the faithful of their duty in this regard.

These words of Christ give us the end of all missionary activity—the salvation of souls; and the means for the accomplishment of this purpose, Our Lord tells us, is by preaching the Gospel of Salvation and by baptism. Christ Himself has also determined the extent of missionary activity for He has commanded His Apostles, and through them their successors, to preach the Gospel to *every creature*. Missionary activity, therefore, must be *universal*. It must extend to all souls. The basis for this activity is evident, for it is the command of God Himself.

From Apostolic times to the present day the Church has faithfully carried out this command of her Blessed Master. Sainly people of every age have unreservedly dedicated their lives to its fulfillment. Indeed, in order to realize more fully this sacred ideal the Church has approved and fostered various organizations whose only reason for existence is the salvation of souls through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Among these religious bodies is the Order of Friars Preachers, founded by St. Dominic in 1216. The sole purpose for the institution of this Order was that the Gospel might be more thoroughly and efficiently preached to every creature. Its mission, like that of the Church, was to be universal. This missionary purpose of the Dominicans is evident from the purpose of St. Dominic in founding the Order, and is clearly expressed in the very end of the Order, in its spirit and in its glorious tradition.

That the purpose of St. Dominic in instituting his Order was of a missionary character is an indisputable fact of history. In the Acts of his canonization we read, "He seemed wholly absorbed in the salvation of souls, by all means and as many as he could." From

his earliest youth Dominic was filled with this desire to win souls for Christ. Even before the idea of founding an order had occurred to him, he had decided that he would be a missionary. It was the missionary needs of the Church in the thirteenth century that prompted him to organize a body of Apostolic preachers, who would carry on his work and extend it to the whole world. While Dominic and his handful of companions awaited approbation of the Holy See, it was their common missionary interests that held them together. And even while taken up with the stupendous task of founding his Order, Dominic did not for a moment forsake his resolve to preach the Gospel to the pagans. "When we have established our Order," he said to one of his followers, "we shall go out to evangelize the Cuman Tartars."¹

It was this same spirit that was to be the distinguishing mark of the sons of St. Dominic. They were to be men of sanctified lives, skilled in the doctrine of Christ, who would bring the Gospel to unbelievers and defend it against its adversaries. This was to be done in perfect conformity with the wishes of the Holy See. The Friars were to preach wherever the Vicar of Christ deemed necessary. Reliving the lives of the Apostles, they were to spread the saving message of the Gospel just as did the Chosen Twelve. The distinctive characteristic of the Dominican Apostolate, therefore, is its special participation in the doctrinal and judicial mission of the Church. It was in view of this promising purpose of the Dominicans that the Church approved them; for, in his bull of confirmation, Pope Honorius III said: "Considering that the Brethren of your Order will be the champions of the faith and the true light of the world, we do confirm your Order." And Dominic, mindful of this sacred trust, immediately scattered his seventeen disciples, commanding them in the very words of Christ, to "go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature."²

As regards the end of the Dominican Order and its relation to missionary activity, we find a ready answer in the opening chapter of its *Constitutions*. There we read: "Our Order is known from the very beginning to have been founded for the express purpose of preaching and the salvation of souls. Consequently our chief desire should be that we may be of use to the souls of our neighbors."³

¹ Cf. O'Connor, *St. Dominic and the Order of Preachers*, Rosary Press, Somerset, Ohio, 1916, p. 156.

² Cf. Clerissac, *The Spirit of St. Dominic*, Burns Oates & Washbourne, London, 1939, p. 17.

³ *Constitutiones O.P.*, Lib. I, Cap. I, No. 3.

The *Constitutions* of the Order, which are the very keynote to the nature of Dominicanism, go on to say that "The brethren should look upon the Missions to the heathen, so warmly commended by the Holy See, as a very important part of their apostolic calling. For our Holy Father St. Dominic yearned for their conversion and earnestly desired to suffer martyrdom in their cause."⁴ Also embodied in the *Constitutions* are many regulations determining the preparation of missionaries, the care and extension of missions, and the means by which this may be best accomplished. It is to be noted that the *Constitutions*, ever vigilant in preserving the prominence of the apostolate in Dominican life, remind superiors that they can, for a good and just reason, grant dispensations from the regular observances of the Order, especially in matters which seem to hinder preaching and the salvation of souls.⁵ This supremacy of Apostolic preaching was confirmed by Pope Innocent IV who, in writing to the Dominicans said: "The work of evangelical preaching . . . must be the most carefully safeguarded of all the works undertaken for the good of souls, and no kind of charitable works whatever must be allowed to interfere with it."⁶

The end of the Dominican Order, therefore, is preaching and the salvation of souls. The *Constitutions* also determine what is to be the nature and the quality of the Friars' preaching. They are to preach from the abundance and fullness of contemplation, and "the means set by the most Holy Patriarch for the attainment of that end are, besides the three solemn vows of obedience, chastity and poverty, regular life with its monastic observances, the solemn recitation of the Divine Office, and the assiduous study of sacred truth. With us these means cannot be abolished or substantially changed although they may, the vows excepted, be opportunely moderated as time and circumstances may demand, so that they may become adapted to the end for which they are given and may have in consequence greater efficacy."⁷ Consequently, the salvation of souls by any form of doctrinal preaching (which also includes teaching,⁸ especially of a

⁴ *Ibid.*, Lib. IV, Cap. VI, No. 827, Par. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Lib. I, Cap. IX, No. 68.

⁶ Quoted in O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁷ *Constitutiones O.P.*, Lib. I, Cap. I, No. 4, Par. 1.

⁸ Although St. Dominic intended that his Friars should be intellectual, Apostolic preachers, the office of teaching was thrust upon them, in spite of themselves. "They went to the universities to listen; they stayed to lecture." Cf. Jarrett, *The English Dominicans*, Burns Oates & Washbourne, Ltd., 1921, p. 87.

theological kind) that can be carried on without an abolition or a substantial change in the means enumerated above falls within the scope of the Dominican Apostolate.

It is quite evident, then, that the purpose of St. Dominic in founding his Order, and the end and works of the Order as expressed in its Constitutions are very definitely of a missionary character. This dominant element of Dominicanism is well borne out in the spirit and tradition of the Order from its very inception. The very first activities of the Dominicans took the form of missionary endeavors. The Order had been confirmed but a short time when Paul of Hungary founded a province among the Cuman Tartars and began the evangelization of these and other fierce nomadic tribes. At an early date missionaries were also sent to the pagans in the Balkans. At "The Chapter General of Tears" held in 1222, all the brethren present begged the General, Jordan of Saxony, to send them to the foreign missions, and those not chosen immediately burst into tears. In the first century of the Order's existence the Friars were sent to preach in the Holy Land, Asia, Bagdad, India and Armenia. St. Hyacinth converted Poland while his companions were preaching in Prussia and Lithuania. Hyacinth then brought the Gospel to Bohemia, Russia and Scandinavia where he established a province of the Order. From this province went forth missionaries to evangelize Greenland two hundred years before the discovery of America. A fair idea of the colossal work of evangelization of the Dominicans in 1253 can be gathered from a letter of Pope Innocent IV, who addresses them as "Our dearly beloved sons, the Friars Preachers, preaching in the lands of the Saracens, Greeks, Bulgarians, Ethiopians, Cumarians, Syrians, Goths, Jacobites, Armenians, Indians, Tartars, Hungarians, and other infidel nations of the East."⁹ At this time, too, Dominicans were laboring in Scotland and Ireland. In 1268 missionaries were sent to convert the Ruthenians while St. Raymund of Pennafort was establishing missionary colleges at Tunis and Tripoli. Indeed, within twenty years after St. Dominic's death there was hardly a country in the then known world to which the Friars had not brought the good tidings of Christ.

As a result of this zeal for the missions there sprung up in the Order a unique organization known as *The Wandering Friars of Jesus Christ among the Pagans*. This society was made up of those Dominicans who eagerly desired to labor on the foreign mission field.

⁹ Quoted in Lacordaire, *An Historical Sketch of the Order of St. Dominic*, P. O'Shea, New York, 1869, p. 80.

It was directed by the Vicar General of the Order and was formally recognized by Pope John XXII in 1325. However, the Pope, in approving it, laid down stringent laws for its recruits as he feared that it would bring about a depopulation of the convents of Europe. These missionaries were granted papal privileges which were designed to quicken the advance of the Gospel among the pagans. The only distinctive sign of these Dominicans was the red sash they wore in place of the leather belt. As a result of their work among the heathen large Christian communities were established all over Asia and Africa, enabling the Popes to appoint hierarchies for those long-forsaken lands.¹⁰

However, all Dominicans did not go to foreign lands, for the needs of the Church required their services elsewhere. But regardless of the field of labor to which they were called, they ever kept uppermost in their minds the welfare of the missions. Outstanding examples of the work done for the missions by Dominicans engaged in other activities are the *Summa Contra Gentiles* of St. Thomas Aquinas, which is the classical handbook for missionaries; *A Treatise Against the Errors of the Arabs*, written in Arabic by Brother Accoldi of Florence; and the *Summa Against the Koran*, which was the work of Brother Raymund Martin.

While the Order sent thousands to preach the Gospel in distant lands, it did not forget the missions of Europe. In Spain the Friars preached to the Arabs and the Moors, who were endangering the Faith with the pernicious tenets of Islamism. We can get an idea of the extent of the missionary labors of the Order in Western Europe from the stupendous accomplishments of St. Vincent Ferrer, who converted over twenty-five thousand Jews and eight thousand Moors.

The Friars were given new scenes of labor by the Portuguese conquests in the East Indies, and after converting these lands they extended their activities to India, Ceylon, Siam and Malacca. Dominicans, led by Father Gaspard of the Cross, were the first Christian missionaries to set foot in China. It was also a Dominican who gave that land its first Catholic Church in 1575, while China's proto-martyr was the Dominican Fernandez de Capillas, who died for the Faith in 1648. China's first native bishop, the Venerable Gregory Lopez, was also a member of the Order of Preachers. The missionary labors of the Order in the Philippines and adjacent regions

¹⁰ Cf. Schwertner, *Seven Hundredth Anniversary of the Order of Preachers*, Rosary Press, Somerset, Ohio, 1916, p. 39.

from the sixteenth century to the present day is well attested by the flourishing faith of the inhabitants of those war-torn Islands.

The Friars, ever eager for new lands in which to carry on their conquest of souls, played their part in the discovery of America in the person of Father Diego de Deza, who was the outspoken supporter of Columbus. The aid which he gave the great discoverer was of such a nature that Columbus was forced to admit that without his aid he would never have been able to reach the new World.¹¹ Dominicans lost no time in coming to these new lands to extend Christ's kingdom on earth. Pope Clement X praises the Dominicans for being the first to bring the Gospel to America, and said that it seemed that God had raised up the Friars Preachers for the good of the New Hemisphere.¹² By 1550 the Friars were established in Mexico and South America with over two hundred foundations. The missionary accomplishments of St. Louis Bertrand who baptized over ten thousand, and the work of Bartholomew de Las Casas in defense of the Indians are facts well known to those familiar with the history of the New World. The honor of being the first to offer the Sacrifice of our Salvation within the limits of our own country belongs to the Dominican Father Antonio Montesino, who said the first Mass on the present site of Jamestown, Virginia in 1526.¹³ The first martyrs of our country were also Dominicans—Louis Cancer de Barbastro, Diego de Tolosa, and a laybrother, Fuentes—who were brutally killed in the sixteenth century while attempting to evangelize the Indians of Florida.¹⁴

We could go on indefinitely enumerating the almost incredible missionary achievements of the Friars. But their missionary spirit and activity can perhaps be best summed up in the eloquent words of Lacordaire: "Every coast bears a trace of their blood, the echoes of every shore have been awakened by their voice."¹⁵ During the glorious missionary history of the Order more than thirty thousand of its members have suffered martyrdom on the mission field. It is even more significant that during the seven hundred odd years of the Order's existence it has given at least one missionary martyr to the Church every ten years.¹⁶

¹¹ Cf. Schwertner, *op. cit.*, p. 40

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. X, p. 534.

¹⁴ Cf. Schwertner, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ Lacordaire, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁶ Cf. Schwertner, *op. cit.*, p. 41.