

FRA ANGELICO DA FIESOLE, ARTIST-PREACHER

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FRA ANGELICO was a true Dominican. As such, he stands as an example and inspiration to all those who share in the glorious traditions of the Order of Preachers. Those traditions have ever followed the purpose of the Order, "Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare." For centuries, Dominicans have praised God and blessed men with their preaching. But all this hardly bears repetition. The question here is, can an artist who spent most of his life painting the walls of churches throughout Italy be considered a true Dominican? Did Fra Angelico really preach? The answer should be obvious. It is a strange thing, though, that many people have not understood that he was a great preacher indeed—a preacher in paint.

The Order of Saint Dominic has adopted for its end the salvation of souls through the announcing from the pulpit or on the street corner, from the leaves of books, yes, and even from the murals of the cathedral, the Gospel of Jesus Christ—that is, the whole Christian theme, the very truth of history, culture and science. Consequently, a man is considered a true Dominican only in proportion to his devotion to truth. He must imbibe it through contemplation; then he must express it through one of the innumerable media at his disposal. In this respect, Fra Angelico is a bright star in the crown of Saint Dominic.

HIS INSPIRATION

In 1407, when our painter, Guidolino, was twenty-one years of age, he entered the reformed convent of the Friars at Fiesole, where he immediately began to develop a thoroughly Dominican spirituality. During the long period of preparation and study before ordination, the Angelic Brother became completely absorbed in theology, that queen of science. His Dominican training showed him the relation of all things to God, holding constantly before his mind its object, the perfection of man and his eternal happiness.

Later in his life, he did not forget his theology; in fact, as he continued his apostolate, he penetrated deeper and deeper into the love of God through this science. The gamut of revelation, tradition, and dogma was his subject matter as he painted; now in his own convent

of Fiesole; now at Santa Maria Novella in Florence; and even at St. Peter's itself, upon the invitation of Popes Eugenius IV and Nicholas V. It is no wonder that Fra Angelico never became exhausted nor had to search one moment for inspiration. His theology, now a part of him, fastened him to his brush and led him to the pinnacle of success.

A summary of his works shows that not once did Fra Angelico ever deviate from the object of his Dominican Apostolate. The subjects of his paintings do vary greatly; but, they are, oh, so pregnant with a love of God; for example, those of the Child Jesus and His Blessed Mother, which appear more often in his numerous paintings than any other subject. The purity and simplicity of his Virgin Madonnas remain unsurpassed. Then, there are Saint Dominic, Saint Thomas, Saint Catherine, and many other patrons in the foreground of his pictures, contemplating, along with the artist himself, the beautiful mysteries of God's love for men.

One conclusive proof that Fra Angelico's soul was truly learned and contemplative is *The Life of Christ*, which he completed while at Fiesole. If no other of his works were left but this one, we would be forced to recognize the depth of the soul that produced it. The complete work comprises thirty-five pictures. It begins with the vision of the prophet Ezechiel, in which our painter included Saint Gregory the Great, the author of the famous commentary on the symbolical wheel. Angelico certainly must have understood the thoughts of that great pontiff to give such life to them. When color and form were not sufficient to express the entire mystery of the redemption, the Angelic did not hesitate to employ the written word also. On all the pictures of this series he inscribed a text of the Old Testament along the upper borders and the corresponding fulfillment in the New Testament on the lower. He completed the work with the beautiful Coronation of the Virgin, in which these words are presented for our meditation: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated . . . and all the house was full of his majesty." "Behold the tabernacle of God with men, and He hath dwelt with them; and they shall be His people, and God Himself with them shall be their God." The picture, itself, is but an invitation of the artist to contemplate with him the Word of God.

Fra Angelico, who loved the Gospel of Christ and whose portrayal of it was as beautiful as his love, grew in skill as his sanctity increased. As a result, he was a conscientious preacher, constantly striving to develop his talent for announcing the truth; a talent which, for him, was the use of lines, shadows, color and the position of figures. Of course, he followed the style and manner of painting of his

day; in fact, he was a leader at that time when painting in Italy was making such great strides. However, it is sufficient to note here that he continued to advance by experiment and study, so that now he holds a place of honor among the world's finest artists.

HIS GIFTS

Since the development of his art is a study in itself, perhaps, it would be better to try to see how Divine Providence bestowed on our young painter every blessing and encouragement to portray the truth and beauty of His creation. God permitted him to draw his first breath in the province of Mugello, a country that actually pours forth every delight of nature that this world can produce. Here, in the presence of God's own handiwork, where the plains, hills and valleys were the subjects of his boyhood meditations and sketchings, young Guidolino learned to appreciate what true beauty is.

Later, with God's work indelibly inscribed on his memory, Guidolino journeyed to Florence, where he might learn of the works of men. For, at that time, Florence was the centre of the arts. She called within her walls every painter, architect and sculptor she could summon. Living so near the city where he might develop his talent by painting miniatures and adorning books, and where he could have easy access to Assisi, was a blessing to him. It was at Assisi that Giotto and Cimabue, not too long ago, had finished their work for the Franciscans. These two great painters gave the first impetus to the liberation of Italian art from the stiffness of the Greeks; and, consequently, had a profound effect on Fra Angelico's work. In fact, they placed him between a lack of natural beauty and an excess of it. But, through their wholesome influence, he was able to combine a grace and truth of movement with a simplicity of expression that was most suited for preaching the Gospel.

Besides these two providential advantages, namely, his contact with the beauties of nature in his youth and later with the great painters of the time, there must be added his vocation, which had no little effect in shaping his artistic soul. Not only did his vocation provide him with a thorough theological background pertaining to the contemplative part of his Dominican life of preaching; but also, as far as the active phase of his work was concerned, it drew him away from a threatening world and armed him with motives and skill that he might return and preach to that world.

This was the pitiful state of affairs from which his vocation withdrew him: in Italy, fighting between cities, families, even brothers, stained the soil with its own blood, and caused untold sorrow; morality

was on a decline as life became less respected; but, most shameful of all, religion itself had too often become the instrument of the powerful and political-minded. Besides, the religious orders, which, at least, should have remained strong, were notably lax. However, many reforms were under way in the various religious institutions. In the Dominican Order, Saint Antoninus and Blessed John Dominic were particularly vigorous in eradicating abuses. Among the followers of these two men in their work for peace and the spread of the Kingdom of God, was Beato Angelico himself.

HIS BRETHREN

From his first days in the Order, Fra Angelico became acquainted with men who were examples of spiritual perfection. To list some of his closest companions and associates in the cloister: Saint Antoninus, later Archbishop of Florence, the father of the poor, and the apostle of peace; Blessed John Dominic, afterwards a Cardinal; Father Lorenzo di Ripafrata, his novicemaster; Blessed Pietro Capucci; and Blessed Castano da Fabriano. One can easily imagine Fra Angelico and these holy religious spending much time discussing and planning their individual work. Furthermore, for one who has any idea of the way in which religious help each other by correction and inspiration, it is quite apparent that the relations of Fra Angelico with his saintly confreres brought out the purest and most noble elements of his work. In this regard, he was more fortunate than the painter who depends upon the sale of his works to gain a livelihood for himself and his family. When it is a matter of eating or not, the artist may be willing to sacrifice his higher ideals for what is more novel, sensual, and attractive. His critics become those who will pay a good price, not those who praise only the beautiful and pure in art. Fra Angelico's vocation to the religious life prevented this from ever happening to his work. His critics praised and sought his paintings for their spiritual value instead of any decorative or monetary worth.

THE ARTIST

Blessed Angelico, the artist, was the product of all this. He was well schooled in theology; he understood and loved the Gospels. Furthermore, his early surroundings and training endowed him with a love of nature quite essential to the painter. The Dominican Order recognized and fostered his talent while providing his soul with endless inspiration. These factors gave to his work two great qualities: natural beauty and moral beauty, the latter arising from the contemplative side of the Friar Preacher's life; the former perfecting the

active or expressive side of his work. The dancing angels that took form from his brush are typical of that natural beauty; while his Virgin Madonnas, with a purity and simplicity that approaches what must be the true likeness, are the epitome of that moral beauty.

However, in studying Fra Angelico's paintings, which are easily accessible in prints and copies, one notices a certain neglect of appeal to the senses. Though in many cases he did not spare color and ornamentation, still his Virgins are not alluring enough nor his Christs virile enough to satisfy many. It is just this aspect of Fra Angelico's expression that proves the point. The holy Friar painted to preach the Gospel of Christ; not to please men. Therefore, those who seek a mere earthly delight of the eye from Fra Angelico, to the detriment of the soul, turn their backs to him in complete disinterestedness. Because of this outstanding feature of all his paintings, it would seem that he intended his work for those who were already disposed to his pious meditations, leaving the work of converting others to them. For this reason and because he painted a great number of his murals for the cloisters of the Friars Preachers—forty in St. Mark's at Florence alone—Fra Angelico can be considered more a retreat-master than a missionary or a great converter of souls. Each picture is a conference on the truth and beauty of the Gospel.

Fra Angelico Giovanni da Fiesole was a Dominican in both his love for the truth and his expression of it. He truly praised God by devoting his entire life and talent to the spread of His Kingdom. And no less has he blessed men with his message of the Virgin Mary gazing on her Son, the glory of the Resurrection and the Coronation, and the severity of the Judgment. His was an apostolate of the brush and the palette. Preaching through paint, he gave to others the fruits of his Dominican contemplation.