



"THE DEATH OF SAINT PETER MARTYR"—Giovanni Bellini (1428-1516) — The National Gallery, London

THE SEVENTH CENTENARY OF THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT PETER OF VERONA



ON APRIL 6, 1252, seven hundred years ago, on the road between Como and Milan, St. Peter of Verona was slain by the sword of a hired assassin and became the Protomartyr of the Dominican Order.

For twenty years St. Peter had held the office of Inquisitor General of Italy. His life was one continuous battle for the extermination of heresy. The activities of the fearless Dominican were crowned with success; Pope Innocent IV went in person to Milan to thank him for his untiring efforts, and to encourage him to even greater victories. But the heretics were frightened and angered at the triumphant outcome of the Inquisition, so much so that they resolved to assassinate the leading inquisitors. The greatest precautions were taken to assure the death of Peter; he was their archenemy, and they were desperately determined to destroy him.

The first steps toward the consummation of the martyrdom were taken on Easter Monday, in 1252. Stephen Gonfalonieri, the originator of the plot, had summoned together in Milan three other heretics just as thirsty for the blood of the hated Friar Preacher. They had gathered a sum of money sufficient to hire a murderer. They found him in the person of one Carino, a vicious character, known and feared as a man of blood. He insisted that they allow him a companion, another notorious criminal, Albertino Porro of Lenta.

St. Peter was prior of the Dominican convent in Como. He had returned to his community for the celebration of the paschal festivities. Knowing well of the plot against his life, he foretold to his brethren the day of his death, the exact spot where he was to be slain, and even the sum of money which had been paid to the murderer. During Easter Week, Carino attended all the Masses at the conventual church, and under this pious disguise, he learned to his great satisfaction that the prior would depart for Milan on that Saturday.

This story of the martyrdom is based upon the account of St. Peter Martyr found in *The Lives of Dominican Saints*, edited and published by the Dominican Fathers of St. Joseph's Province, 1940.

The fatal day finally arrived. The Saint began it with a fervent confession, after which he sang the conventual Mass. Then followed a Chapter for the community, during which the holy prior gave what he knew would be his last exhortation to his brethren.

Peter left for Milan, taking as his companions three friars, including the lay brother Dominic, who was also to fall beneath the assassin's sword. The brethren used every pretext to induce their prior to put off his journey, but in vain. Meanwhile Carino and his colleague had gone to a deserted spot along the road, and concealed themselves in a clump of bushes.

After traveling all morning, Peter sent the other two friars to a farmhouse nearby for their dinner, while he and Dominic sought hospitality from the religious of a neighboring convent. Rested and refreshed, the Saint and his companion started on again slowly, expecting that the others would soon catch up with them. Peter seemed impatient for death; he could no longer wait for the martyr's crown. As the two Dominicans approached the place where the murderous villains were hiding, Albertino, suddenly filled with horror, threw down his weapon and fled through the fields to the road. When he met the two other associates of our Saint, he informed them of the frightful crime about to be perpetrated, urging them to hurry if they wished to save their brethren. In great alarm, the friars rushed to the aid of their beloved superior. They arrived too late. Peter was already dying. Brother Dominic lay mortally wounded.

The details of the cruel martyrdom form a horrible picture. Carino was filled with rage at the desertion of his partner Albertino; he determined to accomplish the slaughter at all cost. As the two religious passed his hiding place, he sprang upon Peter, striking his head a terrible blow with a pruning-knife. The martyr, in great agony, sank to the earth. Carino then turned to the terror-stricken Dominic, and in his fury struck him several times with the weapon. As the butcher turned to make his escape, he saw Peter writing on the ground by dipping his fingers into his own blood. The holy martyr was forming the words: "Credo in unum Deum." In a frenzy of rage, Carino drove his knife through Peter's breast.

In great sorrow the two friars and a few peasants made litters of branches, for the body of the martyr, and for the wounded Brother Dominic, who lived six days in extreme suffering. Bearing their precious burdens, they tried to reach the next

village, but night overtook them. They were forced to remain at the Abbey of St. Simplician.

The news of the martyrdom spread swiftly. In the early hours of the morning the Archbishop of Milan, followed by a vast multitude, came in procession to the abbey to escort the body of the Saint to the Dominican church of St. Eustorgius.

The impious Carino had been captured on the spot by a neighboring farmer and had been imprisoned to await trial. He escaped and fled, but not long afterward, crushed by the horror of his crime, he fell sick and was carried to a hospital close to the Dominican convent. Thinking that he was near death, Carino begged to see a friar to whom he might confess his sins. Once he had made his peace with God, he instantly recovered. Upon leaving the hospital, the murderer sought admission into the Dominican Order as a lay brother. He was received into the community with great kindness, and the rest of his life was marked by such holiness that Brother Carino came to be known as "Il Beato."

St. Peter was solemnly canonized, less than a year after his death, on the feast of the Annunciation in the year 1253. Pope Innocent IV performed the ceremony in the plaza of the Dominican church at Perugia, surrounded with great pomp and in the presence of an enormous throng of the faithful. Innocent designated the 29th of April for the celebration of his feast day.

Such was the death and canonization of the first martyr saint of the Dominican Order, one of Christ's most valiant soldiers. His life from beginning to end was one long warfare in defense of the faith he loved more than his own life.

*Mens fuit angelica,
Lingua fructuosa,
Vita apostolica,
Mors quam pretiosa!
Alleluia.*

(Dominican Breviary)