

THE CHARACTER AND INFLUENCE OF ST. DOMINIC*

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HERE IS ONE GREAT VIRTUE which is characteristic of St. Dominic personally, and of his vocation and foundation—zeal for the salvation of souls. The authors of the *Annales* in the year 1756 mentioned his many notable qualities, but they did not give eminence to this one. Denifle severely criticized Mamachus the moderator of the group because of this omission. The zeal with which Dominic labored was the very reason for his founding the Order. Any exposition which does not mention this virtue lacks unity and it does not give an adequate and concrete image of the Holy Father of the Order of Preachers. When we examine the testimony of those who knew St. Dominic we can readily see this ardent and unquenchable zeal for souls which animated him in the spirit of St. Paul.

Blessed Jordan of Saxony, St. Dominic's successor as Master General of the Order, said of him: "He labored in order that he might bring souls to Christ, and his heart was overflowing for the salvation of all. He was borne on high by a great inspiration of divine fervor which proved beyond a doubt that he was a vessel of honor and grace." Jordan recites in his prayer to St. Dominic: "Inflamed with zeal and the celestial fire of God, because of your perfect and apostolic poverty, you have wholly devoted yourself to the apostolic religion and at last you have brought this virtue to its perfection through the establishment of the Order of Friars Preachers." Brother William of Montferrat, who often conversed with his Spiritual Father when they were making a journey, relates the following, which is written in the process of canonization: "Brother Dominic, Founder and First Master of the Order of Preachers, was often in the Roman Curia and when there, he visited the home of the Bishop of Ostia. He and the Bishop would speak at length about their own salvation and the salvation of others. I have never seen a man so zealous for

* *Compendium Historiae Ordinis Praedicatorum*, §2. Character et momentum S. Dominici, Walz, Angelus Maria, O.P., S.T.D., Archivarius, Professor apud "Angelicum" de Urbe, Libreria Herder, Romae 1930.

the salvation of the human race." Brother Amizo tells us: "He was very diligent in preaching in order to show souls the way to life and he eagerly urged the brethren to do the same." Brother Bonvisus Placentine asserts: "He was very humble, kind, holy and merciful, patient, strong, a lover of poverty and of souls." John of Spain informs us: "Dominic had compassion on his neighbors and ardently desired their salvation. He instructed the brethren to be always solicitous for souls." Brother Faventine narrates: "Dominic wanted all men to be saved; not only the Christians, but also the pagans such as the Saracens and the Cuman Tartars. All during his life he retained the hope of going among the Cumans to convert them. Such zeal is a rare gift." We receive similar evidence from Fruger Pennis, Bernard Bauhan and others. Abbot Peter the Cistercian mentions, besides, St. Dominic's spirit of poverty. From William of Peter, Abbot of St. Paul, we learn a great deal about St. Dominic's preaching: "He was heard both during the day and at night, in the churches, in homes, in the fields, by the wayside and on the road—wherever he thought souls could be won. He often besought his brothers to go forth and do in like manner, keeping in mind that they should preach the word of the Lord and not speak unless it was about God and His kingdom. He was feared by the heretics because of his disputing and preaching."

In this virtue, zeal for the salvation of souls, we have found the key which will open the door to an understanding of the life and Order of St. Dominic. In this virtue God included the unity of all aspirations of that heroic soul as it dwelt in the Church and lived in the world. From all the testimony given we can clearly see the effect of the supernatural on Dominic's personal efforts and with perfect right we can call him an apostolic and sacerdotal preacher, doctor, and leader of men.

During his childhood he developed his natural talents which he brought to full maturity during adolescence and youth by the study of the arts and science, as was fitting a good cleric of his age. The many graces with which he was blessed present this natural formation in a new light. His theological knowledge was mainly scriptural. He put such great trust in the Sacred Scriptures that wherever he went he was known to carry with him the Gospel of St. Matthew and the Epistles of St. Paul. Nor should we wonder when we hear that he interpreted the sacred texts not only for the brethren but also for members of the diocesan clergy. By the example of his word and manifest learning he frequently admonished and urged his sons to devote time to the study of the Old and New Testaments.

The clarity of his spirit even manifested itself in his face which was almost always cheerful. His blond hair added to the brightness of his whole person. To this he joined amiability and compassion by which he could draw souls more easily to himself. His serene and cheerful face was often moved with compassion when gazing upon the misery of his neighbor.

His well trained intellect dominated all his actions and projects. This explains why there is such order, stability and harmony in the works of St. Dominic.

Virginity was the splendid ornament of the Father of Preachers. He held that purity of heart was of supreme importance in the office of a preacher conversing among men. He guarded this precious jewel by vigils, penances, fasting and regular discipline. Poverty was a virtue which he deeply loved. He took it upon himself at the beginning of his apostolic career and professed it until the day of his death. This holy man had only one habit and he did not possess a cell. Humility and patience were ever present in his life and actions. How backward he would appear in our world of today! St. Dominic waited for the approbation of the Church for his newly created group, in silence and with confidence, knowing that victory was not far away. Above all he manifested his humility by refusing ecclesiastical dignities and by embracing a life both hard and scorned by many. He possessed a humility which knew the freedom in accepting the gifts of God, and the obligation of the creature towards God. He showed his gratitude for the gift of redemption by word and coöperative action. At the end of his life, he begged the brethren always to prize humility. His fortitude was universal. During times of success it took the form of reserve. When there was trouble his untiring actions showed signs of joy!

We can perceive in St. Dominic the radiation of faith and charity. From these virtues he drew and increased his zeal for the salvation of souls. He nourished his mind with the truths of faith and lived with motives of supernatural love. He labored so that all might participate in the Divine Goodness and live in grace and charity. From his youth he gave himself wholeheartedly to the service of the Church which Christ the Redeemer had founded as the way to God. He wished to be transformed into a perfect servant of Christ and of the Church because as a priest he was a participant in the Priesthood of Christ. Christ was the center and measure of his life and actions. Dominic fully possessed an understanding of the spirit and supernatural life which he drew from the words of Christ, the advice of the Apostles, the sublime mysteries of the Church and the contemplation of heav-

only things. All during the night he spent the hours in meditation before the altar. He meditated during the day whenever it was possible. We learn from his companions that when on a journey he prayed, preached and meditated. His conversation was always "with God or about God." His brethren also testified that they never heard him use idle, harmful or flattering speech. He was interested in saving souls and not in passing trifles. This repression of useless discourse enriched the eloquence of his sacred preaching. "His edifying sermons abounded with examples which so moved his listeners that they wept with love for Christ and contempt for the world." Everywhere he showed himself a man of the Gospel both by his word and by his work.

The ideal of perfection which he embraced was not exclusively that of a monk, nor of a canon, but that of an apostle. He not only imitated the virtues of Christ, but also took upon himself the mission of the Redeemer: that of saving souls. "He took upon himself the Office of the Word," says St. Catherine of Siena in her Dialogue. While he was forced to impose a determined rule on the new institute, he never lost sight of the end for which it was created, with the happy result that all the essentials were preserved. The flexibility of spirit in the nature of the Order and in the work of legislation must be admired. Truth was his guide and it taught him liberty. He was by no means slow in granting dispensations from particular rules when the salvation of a soul was at stake. He devoted himself so fully to apostolic action that he did not have time to put in writing a single line of the constitutions. The Holy Founders of other orders such as Benedict, Francis, Ignatius and Alphonsus left their followers tracts on prayer and the religious life from which we can get a general view of their personalities. But Dominic wrote only a few letters on study from which we can not obtain an adequate picture. Only after we examine the foundation and development of the Order can we fully appreciate the wisdom, prudence and zeal of St. Dominic. Through apostolic labor for the salvation of souls he and his sons strove after their own personal perfection. Brother Radulphus says: "Dominic did not wish all the brothers to be burdened with temporal affairs since a sufficient number had been provided for this work. When he saw that a brother was having fruitful results in preaching he would not allow him to take any office which might prove a hindrance to his effectiveness." Study, prayer and preaching came first.

By his example and by his priestly apostolic action he conquered in the spirit of Paul not only excesses of ecclesiastical formalism but also heretical doctrines held by certain lay organizations which at-

tempted to practice evangelical piety without clergy or priesthood. This faithful servant of the Church of God and Christ fashioned new forces which were helpful for the extension and reformation of the Church. His mission was conformed to that of the Church by means of evangelical poverty and apostolic preaching. He was not content with any type of preaching, but preaching based on principles formed and nurtured by meditation and the study of the Faith. St. Dominic merits being called the Father of every apostolic religious order.

By means of untiring action, fortitude, meekness, mercy, persuasion and consolation he drew men to Christ and His service. The whole objective of the Church was clear to him and with this in mind he formed his institute in accordance with her desires. Both Dominic and Francis obeyed the perennial command of the Church, namely of saving souls. Francis through the admirable influence of his personality effected great changes in the hearts of men. Dominic achieved his end by means of apostolic preaching.

We can now see his character in a new light when we understand that all his virtues received unity from that one virtue—zeal for the salvation of souls. He who is all things to all men for Christ's sake is truly an apostle. St. Dominic is rightly numbered among the great men of the Church because in him the perfection of the active life and the contemplative was actually realized. The unity in the life of the Father of Preachers is expressed in the lives of his spiritual children. Just as the sun has many rays so too in the followers of St. Dominic we find one or another of his virtues exemplified. The love of truth and of study was continued in St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Antoninus, Cajetan and John of St. Thomas. Effective preaching was accomplished by St. Vincent Ferrer, Jerome Savonarola and Henry Dominic Lacordaire. St. Hyacinth, the great missionary of the North, fulfilled the dreams of his Father. The ascetical and mystical life of the Lawgiver was engendered by St. Catherine of Siena and Blessed Henry Suso. The successors of St. Dominic as Jordan of Saxony, Raymund of Pennafort, John the Teutonic, Humbert de Romans and John of Vercelli, all seemed to have inherited his spirit and method. The defense of Holy Mother the Church was carried on by Pius V. Compassion for the sufferings of others was clearly seen in the life of Bartholomeo de las Casas, Apostle of South America.

All these heroic men and women together with their saintly brethren of later generations were activated by a genuine spirit of St. Dominic and his Order. His character left its imprint upon them; his influence is fully illustrated in the Order he created. As members

of this family let us raise our minds and hearts to him, whose venerated image is revealed to us from heaven in the words of the antiphon:

*O Light of the Church, Doctor of Truth,
Rose of Patience, Ivory of Chastity,
Freely have you given the water of Wisdom,
Preacher of Grace, join us to the Blessed.*