

VIRGIN MOST POWERFUL, PRAY FOR US!

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IN THE YEAR 1725 the Jansenist heresy was tearing the heart out of France, the eldest daughter of the Church. That same year at Bologna, where St. Dominic had died just four centuries before, a General Chapter of the Friars Preachers met. The object of this meeting, of course, was to transact important affairs which had to do with the ruling of the entire order. The official acts show us that there was much to be discussed and acted upon relative to monastic observance, studies and the governing of the Order.¹ But among these matters of moment is an item which might be passed over with a quick glance, were it not for a phrase or two. This item is a list of liturgical feasts, for the celebration of which the Order had sought permission from the Holy See.²

One of the feasts in this list approved for celebration each year on the second Sunday of November was that of the Patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Now the acts of the chapter make the notation that, although the Office for the new feast is to be taken from the Common of the Blessed Virgin, nevertheless a proper prayer or Collect is to be used, one already in use by the Cistercian Order for a similar feast. This note clearly indicates that the Dominicans of the early eighteenth century had recognized that the Cistercians possessed a feast of deep significance, which they desired to share.

For the two hundred years or more which followed, the feast of Our Lady's Patronage was commemorated on the date originally set by the Chapter of 1725. But when the breviary and the entire calendar underwent a reform, in the year 1921, the feast itself was retained, although its date was altered. One of the objects St. Pius X had in mind in instituting this reform several years previously was to make

We wish to acknowledge the use of a manuscript containing a chapter from a forthcoming book on the history of the Dominican Order by the Reverend Father W. A. Hinnebusch, O.P. The chapter is entitled, "Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Dominican Order". . . . Special thanks are also due to Father Hinnebusch for other useful source material for the present article.

¹ Reichert, B. M., O.P., *Acta Capitulorum Generalium Ordinis Praedicatorum*, Vol. IX, Rome, 1904, pp. 1 sqq.

² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

as many of the Sundays as possible-free, so that the liturgy of the temporal cycle might once again flourish. Apparently the calendar had become so overgrown with feasts of devotion, that the Sundays were rarely celebrated as such.

Since the Patronage was one of the feasts removed from its position on Sunday, a new place was found, and a date, it turned out, most appropriate as far as the Order was concerned: December 22. On this very day in the year 1217 Pope Honorius III published the bull confirming the Friars Preachers; in a word, it is the Order's birthday.

These scattered facts manifest that the data concerning the history of this feast in the Dominican calendar are few indeed. Yet, in spite of their dearth, the reason for its introduction into the Dominican calendar can be readily seen. Without depending too much on an interpretation of the mind of the men who actually thought of establishing the feast, we can surely determine its place in the liturgy as a whole. We may be able also to see more clearly why Dominicans would want to include the Patronage in the Marian cycle of the liturgy, and, finally, to perceive the significance this feast has today. Thus Dominicans who celebrate or participate in the Mass of the day, and chant or recite the Office, will be able to say with St. Paul: "I will pray with the spirit; I will pray also with the understanding." (I Cor. 14, 15)

MARIAN CYCLE IN THE LITURGY

Of all the Marian feasts in the present Dominican calendar, the great majority have an intimate relationship with the temporal cycle of the liturgy. Some of them actually appear in the season with which they are connected. The feast of the Immaculate Conception, for example, coincides with Advent, and thus blends into that prayerful attitude of the Church which recalls the divine preparations for the Incarnation. Also the feast of Our Lady's Compassion is appropriately placed close to the commemoration of Our Saviour's Passion and Death, in Holy Week. Others, however, although they keep this relationship with the mysteries of the temporal cycle, are celebrated out of season. In this group the feast of the Annunciation stands out, occurring as it does during the time of Lent, even though its connection is with the Advent and Christmas mysteries.

It is evident that the basis of this relationship of Marian feasts with the temporal cycle is the *mysteries* which are commemorated in these feasts. These are mysteries in the life of the historical Christ, the God-Man, who was brought into the world, nurtured, schooled by

the Virgin Mother, and who willed also that she join with Him in the actions by Which He brought about our Redemption. Little wonder that, since Mary's whole reason for existence was and is to give Jesus to the world, her feasts are but an echo of His own mysteries.

Part and parcel of the mysteries of Christ as they are, the feasts of the Blessed Virgin belong to the whole Mystical Body of Christ. When the Word dwelt among us, Mary gave herself unreservedly to Him, who was truly her Son. But in the ages to come she gives herself entirely to His members, no less truly her sons. Spiritually she has begotten us all. So to all mankind belong the feasts which constitute a chaplet of praise for the "sublime gifts with which God has filled her, from the first moment of her conception, until the day on which, after her assumption into heaven, God crowned her queen of the universe."³

THE PATRONAGE IN THIS CYCLE

The connection of Mary's feasts with the temporal cycle is verified, we have seen, in the great majority of cases. But notably for Dominicans among the few that do not have this association is that of the Patronage of Our Lady. Here there is no event or truth recalled which fits easily into the scheme of the temporal cycle. Rather, Our Lady is honored under a special title, Patroness of the Order of Friars Preachers, a title which bears no immediate relationship with the historical Christ. The import of this feast must be understood in a different light.

First of all, it may be asked, just what is meant by this 'patronage' of Mary. The term, of course, in general signifies favor or even assistance. But here it is understood to mean the special aid or help given by Our Lady to the Order during the course of its existence. Indeed, striking signs of Mary's solicitude for her sons in St. Dominic have never been lacking in the course of the Order's life. It is these special marks of Mary's favor which form the basis of our Dominican devotion to her patronage.

MYSTERY OF MARY'S FAVOR

Mary's feasts, then, are generally the common property of the whole Mystical Body of Christ, but there is nonetheless a feast which is proper to a single part in this Mystical Body, namely, the Dominican Order. Naturally we conclude that this single part has a special function to perform within the Body. Truly, the Order might be com-

³ Marian Year Prayer of Pius XII.

pared to a vital organ, an integral part of the Mystical Body of Christ. We might say that the Order's function is to carry the food of doctrine to all the extremities of the Body, that pagans may be reborn in Truth and the faithful may be nourished by It.

In order, however, that we may "pray with the understanding," we must have recourse to history and find out just what part Mary has played in the founding, the propagation, the success of the Dominican apostolate. Really this history reads much like a *gospel*, for it is the good news of the maternal care of the Blessed Virgin for a group of men who have always placed themselves with utter confidence under her protection, and whom she has never failed in time of need. By citing a few examples from the past, then, we will be able to see what the patronage of Mary means to the Dominican Order of today, and what it can mean for the future.

THE PATRONAGE IN ACTION

To locate the beginning of Mary's patronage for the Order we must go back even beyond the bull of confirmation of Honorius III, of Dec. 22, 1216, to the period in St. Dominic's life in which, fired by zeal for souls, he contemplated founding an apostolic band of men who might preach the gospel, defend truth and combat heresy in every section of the globe. Father Mortier, the distinguished Dominican historian and authority on the liturgy, in commenting upon the significance of this feast, points to Prouille, a town in southern France, where the Albigensian heresy was robbing the Church of countless souls in the early thirteenth century. Here, he says, is both the center of the apostolate of St. Dominic and the origin of its patronage by Mary. Here Our Lady inspired St. Dominic with a plan which might have seemed outlandish to any sober man of that century. Here under her influence he conceived the world-wide apostolate of preaching which was to bear fruit even during his own short lifespan.⁴

It was from Prouille that St. Dominic set out for Rome as the winter of 1216 drew near. Passers-by who met him trudging along the highways that led to the Holy City might well have heard him chanting the familiar strains of the still popular Marian hymn *Ave Maris Stella*, for men who knew him testified that Dominic loved this song in praise of the sweet Mother of God best of all.⁵ Immediately after

⁴ Cf. *Liturgie Dominicaine*, Mortier, Vol. VIII. Paris, Desclee, De Brouwer and Co., 1921, p. 425.

⁵ Cf. *Maria*, edited by H. du Manoir, S.J. Paris, 1952, p. 740. This portion of the work is an essay on devotion to Mary in the Dominican Order by the Rev. Father A. Duval, O.P.

the Order had been approved, St. Dominic returned to Prouille and there "he gave Mary the recognition, which we but repeat on December 22."⁶

PATRONAGE IN HISTORY

How, it may be asked, can the part Mary played in these events be verified historically? Well, there is a living token of her role, a community of nuns which Our Founder established in that southern French town, under the title of Our Lady of Prouille. Dedicated to none other than Mary, it flourishes today as proof of Mary's influence in the first *crisis* in Dominican history, the very birth of the order. It bears witness also to St. Dominic's conviction that her role was all-important.

The quick spread of the Dominican order over all western and central Europe is a familiar, but nonetheless, astounding, story. We pass on now to consider a few highlights of this rapid propagation, with an eye especially toward observing cases where Our Lady saved the Order or members of the Order from what appeared to be certain ruin.

One of the first of Dominic's co-workers in the apostolate was Reginald of Orleans, whom he met at Rome in 1218.⁷ As a matter of fact a shadow cast itself over the first association of these two friends of God. Reginald, just recruited for the band of mendicant friars, suddenly took sick and his death appeared imminent. St. Dominic prayed for him, and Our Lady herself answered the prayer in a miraculous way. She appeared to Blessed Reginald, cured him, and at the same time anointed him symbolically with oil "for the preaching of the gospel of peace." It was on this occasion that she showed him the scapular, which was to be worn as part of the Dominican habit. Mary had preserved the Order in this crisis by restoring health to a man who would later in Bologna attract throngs of young men to the Friars Preachers. Here too she manifested the care of a supernatural Mother whose desire is that her sons be clothed with the inner garment of humility and holy purity, the virtues symbolized by the scapular.⁸

⁶ Cf. Mortier, *ibid.*

⁷ Manoir, *op. cit.*, p. 741.

⁸ When the Dominican novice makes his first profession, the scapular he has worn already for a year is blessed. The following prayer is designated for the blessing: Lord Jesus Christ, Thou who hast deigned to put on the garment of our mortality; seeking the immense bounty of Thy gifts, we implore Thee to bless this garment, which the Holy Fathers appointed to give evidence of *innocence* and *humility*; so that those who wear it, may merit to put Thee on, Christ our Lord. Cf. *Processionarium S.O.P.*, Rome, 1949, p. 157.

St. Dominic was rewarded for his labors in Christ's vineyard by a holy death at Bologna in 1221. By this time, however, other apostolic men were ready to receive and carry on the torch of the Dominican apostolate. Among them was Blessed Jordan of Saxony, who succeeded Dominic as the Master-General of the friars. Under his direction the work continued to flourish, but not without opposition. True, the friars were popular enough, at least among the Christian peoples. Their burning ardor clinched for them a mighty following and many vocations. But trouble did come from another quarter, the infernal regions. Blessed Jordan himself testifies that diabolical opposition began first to show itself outwardly in the very convent where St. Dominic was buried, in Bologna. A certain brother Bernard became possessed of an evil spirit, and Jordan deemed this a sufficiently serious cause, as indeed it was, for extraordinary counter-measures. After prayerful reflection the holy man could think of no better weapon to use against Satan's onslaught than the anthem of Our Lady, *Salve Regina* (Hail Holy Queen). He ordered it to be sung after Compline in the convent there; but the practice soon spread throughout all Lombardy and thence to the entire order⁹. The practice has been continuous from the time of Blessed Jordan. Today the most widely-known element in the Dominican liturgical life is the *Salve* procession.

In our day the condition of the Order in the Church is, thank God, quite stable, and so it is difficult to imagine a period when the existence of the Friars Preachers hung upon the thread of the disfavor of a pope. Yet this was so as late as the year 1254, when the thread was nearly cut. The popularity of the friars among the faithful of Europe, and especially at the great universities, had aroused the envy of many. Enemies were to be found even among the secular clergy, some of whom were powerful and influential enough to get a hearing in Rome. As the result, then, of certain representations of such men, Pope Innocent IV, on November 21, 1254, published the bull *Etsi animarum*, and thereby took away from the Order all the privileges granted by previous Roman pontiffs, practically destroying the edifice built by St. Dominic and his immediate followers. Within sixteen days, however, Innocent IV was dead; and it was on December 22 that his successor, Alexander IV, revoked the same bull. At the time of this crisis the Order was under the guidance of the saintly Humbert of Romans, the fifth Master-General, and the next year he wrote an encyclical letter to the entire order, wherein he referred

⁹ Hinnebusch, *ibid.*

to the event in this wise: "I commend you one and all to the grace of our Savior and His glorious Mother, our Advocate, whose *patronage* is believed to have been especially present during these days and to have been greatly advantageous."¹⁰ Again, Our Lady had brought the friars preachers through perilous times, and her solicitude was to bear fruit shortly in the golden age of St. Thomas, who lived, taught and wrote until the year 1274.

These are, indeed, striking instances of the help accorded by Mary to the Dominican Order; but they could be reproduced down through the seven and more centuries of the Order's existence. Father Hinnebusch, in fact, gives the following list of just such cases:

Recourse to Mary became the rule at every crisis in the Order's history: in 1290 when the Order resisted the demand of Nicholas IV that it depose Munio of Zamora, its master general; in 1302 when the quarrel of Boniface VIII and Philip IV of France posed a dilemma for the French friars and a danger for the entire Order; in 1314 when the slanderous accusation that Bernard of Montepulciano had poisoned Henry VII of Luxembourg unloosed the two-year persecution of the Order by the Ghibellines in Germany and Italy; among the people in 1334 during the controversy with John XXII over the Beatific Vision; in 1338 when Benedict XII contemplated radical changes in the Order's Constitution and was resisted by Hugh of Vaucemain, master general; in 1388 during the Western Schism which divided the Order as well as the Church; in 1615 to meet the generally difficult problems of the modern epoch.

This author further observes that each of these crises and the recourse of the brethren to Our Lady on the Order's behalf, has left its imprint on Dominican liturgical life. Special antiphons and memories were introduced in the Divine Office, and also the chanting of the Litany of Loretto and the singing of the prose *Inviolata* after Compline on Saturday.

Such is the testimony of history as to the foundation for the feast of Our Lady's Patronage in the Dominican calendar. But perhaps a more important aspect of this feast, and one not yet mentioned, is its function, its special role in the Dominican apostolate of today.

Spiritual writers teach that the feasts of the Church, as celebrated year by year, are, to the members of the Mystical Body of Christ, sources of particular graces, whereby they become more closely conformed to the image of God's only-begotten Son, whose life is re-

¹⁰ Hinnebusch, *ibid.*

presented in these feasts.¹¹ Can it be that in this feast the members of the Dominican Order can seek a special grace too, which is integrally connected with the success of the Dominican apostolate? The conclusion seems inescapable.

PATRONAGE BEARING FRUIT

The mystery of this feast is not centered on any specific action or event recorded in the Gospel. It rests solidly on the never-failing assistance that the Blessed Virgin has given the Friars Preachers in every crisis and emergency in the history of the Order. Not that such assistance is something which the Order can claim as its own exclusive property. Far from it; Our Lady's patronage extends as far as Divine Providence itself. In other words, no Christian is exempt; and unquestionably other religious orders have received unmistakable tokens of Mary's special protection. But this is not to deny that Dominican devotion to Our Lady is a thing distinctive, based on definite historical evidence and an unbroken tradition.

Today the feast of the Patronage of Our Lady ought to have as its end the obtaining of the extraordinary helps, the emergency aids, which are still equally as necessary to the Order as they were in the days of St. Dominic, Blessed Jordan, Humbert, and the rest. This is exactly what the patronage has meant to Dominicans of past ages, and it is implied in the prayer of the feast, adopted by the capitular Fathers of 1725:

O God, Thou who didst for the salvation of souls institute the Order of Preachers under the singular protection of the most blessed Virgin Mary, who hast also willed that this Order be showered with continual benefits; grant to Thy humble servants that we may be brought to heavenly glory by the protecting intercession of her whose feast we celebrate this day.

What of the future of this feast in the Dominican calendar and the growth of devotion to Our Lady, Patroness of the Order? This much can be said: standing on the date of the Order's foundation, and of its providential rescue from near destruction (1254), the feast is witness to the confidence that our fathers have had in the Holy Mother of God, ever Virgin. For the future, this confidence needs to be sustained, even strengthened, since she alone, by her powerful intercession, will make the tree of St. Dominic fruitful. *Virgo potens, ora pro nobis!*

¹¹ E.g., Marmion, O.S.B., *Christ in His Mysteries*, Herder, 1939.