

BLESSED JOHN DOMINICI, O. P.*

In the year 1380, Saint Catherine of Sienna, the only woman who dared to counsel a Pope, was called to her reward. Her death was a severe blow to Christendom, for it occurred just when her advice was most needed for the healing of the dangerous rupture of the Church known as the Great Schism of the West. However, God in His providence had taken care of this crisis by raising up an illustrious son of Saint Dominic who was to be a light shining in the darkness of those trying times. This light was predestined by the Almighty to shine before the religious and lay-people not only of Italy, but of the entire Christian world as an example of fidelity to the Holy See, and of all other deeds tending to the greater honor and glory of God.

John Dominici, of Giovanni Dominici De Banchini, was born about the year 1350 in the beautiful city of Florence. His parents belonged to the poorer class. However, what God did not give them in temporal wealth He made up in spiritual favors, which they docilely received and fostered, to the edification of their neighbors. Their piety had a most beneficial influence on their son, for he spent all his spare time in Church praying with an assiduity remarkable for a boy of his age. In his tender years he made it a practice never to pass a church without going in to pray. Naturally, he had a favorite church, which happened to be that of the Dominicans. Whenever possible—as on Sundays or holydays—he was present at the services in Santa Maria Novella from early morning until after the Friars had chanted Vespers in the evening. As time went on, these practices of piety were increased. So much time did he spend in church that when any one sought him at home, his parents would direct the inquirer to the Dominican Church, saying: "There he spends all his hours."

When Giovanni had reached the age of seventeen he desired with all his heart to enter religion. As was conjectured by his friends, his choice fell on the Dominican Convent of Santa Maria Novella. On account of his complete lack of schooling, due to the poverty of his parents, he was refused admission into the Order. The refusal, however, was not based solely on that circumstance, but was due in great measure to an impediment of

* This form of the name is used instead of Blessed John Dominic, O. P., on the authority of Quetif et Erhard and L'Annie Dominicaine.

speech, from which he had suffered since his infancy. Then, too, the good Dominican Fathers felt that it was his duty to support his parents. Far from disconcerting the holy youth in his aspirations, this refusal only strengthened his desire and led him to redouble the fervor and number of his prayers. Two years later, after many pleadings, the future glory of the Order was admitted into the community. From the day of his reception into the Order of Preachers, when he donned the "white wool" of St. Dominic, as the habit is often called, he acquired marvelous nobility of manner, manifested talent of a remarkable order, and, though still suffering from a defect in speech, astonished his brethren by his eloquence.

As might be inferred from the preceding sentence, he was a model to his brethren in the Novitiate, fulfilling his duties with the greatest alacrity and thoroughness. He always maintained a high standard in regard to keeping the silence and other religious observances, and he was ever ready to serve his brethren, no act being too lowly for him to perform. His profession marked the beginning of even greater devotion and fidelity to the rules of the Order, especially those pertaining to fasts and penances. He was sent to Paris to study Theology and Sacred Scripture. Needless to say his progress was remarkable. His studies in the Sacred Sciences however were supplemented by readings from the early Fathers, and also from the profane authors, for his motto was: "Take what is good, wherever it may be found." It is said of him, as of St. Augustine, that no matter what it was he read he thoroughly understood. Hence, St. Antoninus remarked of Blessed John Dominici: "It is the gift of intuition that proves his knowledge."

His studies in the schools finished, he returned to his convent where after a short time of preparation for the priesthood he was ordained. His superiors would have bestowed great honors on him, but with true humility, he refused all of them, being content to teach the novices within the cloistered walls of his own convent. After a few years the thought of going out to preach "salvation unto all men" was uppermost in his mind. As the stammering from which he suffered proved a hindrance to this laudable ambition—it was on this account only that his superiors refused his request—with indomitable hope, he besought St. Catherine Sienna, whom he had met in his youth, to ask God to

free him from this defect. And in answer to her fervent prayer his request was granted.

This miracle marks a new epoch in the life of Father John Dominici, for shortly after his superiors granted the permission which had been previously refused. His work of saving souls by preaching the Word of God was begun in his native city of Florence. During the several Lenten seasons at the beginning of his missionary career, he gave a double course of instruction each day to the Florentines. One course, consisting of explanations of the Gospels, Psalter and several books of the Old Testament, was conducted in the morning; the other, held in the evening, was generally a concise exposition of the Epistles of St. Paul. His majestic figure, his clear presentation of his subject, his serene appearance, all combined to make him one of the greatest preachers of his day. Surely, to him the words of Christ, "No prophet is well received in his own country," did not apply, for before he had finished his preaching in Florence it was necessary for him to appear in the pulpit, five times a day, that all might hear him. What is the more remarkable about this is that many remained in church for the five sermons, being as attentive to the last as the first. His courses in Florence completed, he set out for new fields, which embraced the important cities of Lucca, Pisa, Venice and Rome. Everywhere he preached with at least as much success as in his native city. To give an idea of the esteem in which he was held, the following incident, attributed to St. Antoninus, O. P., is narrated. While St. Vincent Ferrer was busy preaching at Genoa, an invitation was sent to him by the Florentines to preach the Word of God in their city. The Saint refused, saying that since Florence possessed such an orator as Father John Dominici, there was no need of their inviting a stranger to preach the Gospel to them.

His life was given largely to missionary work, until about the year 1392. At that time Blessed Raymond of Capua, Master General of the Order, appointed him Vicar-Provincial of the Roman Province. Immediately after assuming this office he sought permission from the Master General to establish houses of strict observance, following out the same plan of reform he had begun at Venice in 1391. Permission was granted, but the task was beset with difficulties. The Priors of the Province were reluctant to change the observance in vogue at that time. The Vicar, however, met them personally, and with the same per-

suasive powers that marked his preaching, he induced the local superiors to acquiesce in his plans. This was a victory bordering on the miraculous, on account of the then sad conditions, due to the ravages of the Black Plague which swept away thousands of religious. As an example of the toll it took, we cite the death of seventy-seven religious within four months at the Convent of Santa Maria Novella; other communities were reduced from nearly a hundred to less than five. But amongst the great number of quasi-religious that flocked to the convents after the plague, there were some who were imbued with the true spirit of sacrifice for the greater honor and glory of their Maker.

To these few devout persons the Very Reverend Provincial turned his attention. While he was busy preaching in Florence his labors were rewarded by a large influx of applications from pious young ladies who wished to carry out the counsel of Christ, "Every one of you that doth not renounce all thou possessest cannot be my disciples." For some of these who desired to live under the strict cloistral rules of the Order, he established the Convent of Corpus Christi, at Venice. Not long after, on account of the observance in this house, postulants almost innumerable sought admission to it. There were so many received, in fact, that it became necessary to establish another foundation at Florence. This community was placed under the patronage of St. Peter (Martyr), O. P. Our Blessed realized that the success of his communities depended on their good works. With this end in view, he saw to it that the spirit of prayers prevailed amongst them. He also developed well in this regard the spirit of study, his words being less powerful than his example. He had the Sisters paint and illuminate the choir-books with beautiful, though fitting, pictures, and often spent long hours teaching them this art. With these foundations well established, he continued preaching and writing on learned subjects and moved to other cities where his efforts were crowned with still greater success.

At Fiesole, land was given him by the Bishop that he might make a foundation in that city. Assisted by two Dominican bishops, he consecrated on the site the Church of St. Dominic, August 4th, 1405. The same day he received four young men to the habit, one of whom was the future glorious Archbishop of Florence, St. Antoninus, O. P. Two years later, at the same convent, he gave the habit to two brothers, Fra Angelico and

Fra Benedetto; the former was probably the sublimest painter of any age, the latter one of the greatest miniaturists the world has ever seen. To go on with the story of his founding of houses would take too long; it is sufficient to say that his labors did not cease until he had established strict observance in nearly all the Dominican convents in Italy.

One thing must be borne in mind, and that is that John Dominici did not pose as a reformer. His humility would not permit it. It was a true love for all things holy, and this alone, which prompted his every action, and which no doubt was responsible for the success that attended his work. Like all true Dominicans, Blessed John Dominici took a very active interest in things pertaining to the welfare of the Church in general. His first effort in this regard was his preaching against the Turks, who were then threatening to destroy Europe, Christianity and civilization. Infused with his zeal, the Christians offered a determined resistance to the infidels and finally repulsed them. This work accomplished, he turned his attention to Papal affairs. It was largely through his influence that a conclave was held for the election of a true Pope. The Florentines placed much confidence in him and sent him as their representative to the election, which resulted in the choice of Pope Gregory XII. As a reward for his labors, Pope Gregory made him Archbishop and Cardinal of Ragusa (1407), with the title of St. Sixtus. More than this, the new Pontiff chose him as his confessor and chief counselor. As is almost always the case where honors are bestowed, the newly-made Cardinal's dearest friends became his enemies. The Florentines accused him of false ambition and hypocrisy. His humility was so great that he made no answer to these charges. The cardinals, whose spirit at that time was not as harmonious as it is today, became jealous of the Pope for appointing a new cardinal without consulting them. In this spirit they convoked another council at Pisa, where they complicated the Papal Schism by the election of another Pope named Alexander V, who became the third claimant to the Chair of Peter.

A dark cloud now hovered about the Church and conditions appeared to be worse than before any of the elections. Cardinal John Dominici was firmly convinced that Gregory XII was the true Pope, and in this belief he went to the Christian countries, trying to persuade rulers and people alike to render their obedience to him. On account of the perversity of the anti-Popes, and

the indifference of the people, he had but little success. This little, however, nerved him for greater and more delicate work. Knowing it to be useless to preach to the people, the Cardinal set to work at the very root of the trouble. Going to the Popes, Gregory XII and John XXIII, the successor of Alexander V, he persuaded both to abdicate. This decision arrived at, it was announced by the Cardinal to all the hierarchy assembled at the Council of Constance. After delivering his message, the Cardinal with sincere humility added: "And I, who am that Pontiff's (Gregory XII) Legate, also renounce my dignity and my cardinalate." With these words he took a place among the bishops who were at the council. Though but a short time previous the cardinals were arrayed in their power against him, they now refused his resignation and accorded him the highest honors and deepest respect.

The cardinals, once more united, proceeded with the work of the council and deposed the remaining Pope, Benedict XIII, better known as Peter de Luna. Upon his deposition (Nov. 11, 1417), they elected Martin V as the successor of St. Peter the Apostle, and invested him with all the power and authority of the Papacy. Thus was the most dangerous schism that the Catholic Church ever experienced brought to a close, mainly through the efforts of an illustrious son of St. Dominic; for the cardinals admitted had it not been for the vigor and zeal and the absolute unselfishness of our Blessed the schism would never have come to so abrupt an ending. The new Pope recognized the sterling qualities of the Cardinal and made him his counselor, particularly in questions regarding the unity of the Church and the extirpation of heresy. It was the Pope who sent him on his final mission. With unabated zeal the Cardinal, though nearing the age of seventy, set out for Hungary to preach against the doctrines of John Huss and Jerome of Prague, and to urge the Christians to stand firm against the Turkish invasions. Whilst engaged in this work he was taken sick at Buda, and having a presentiment that death was not far off, he strengthened himself for the final conflict with the evil powers by the reception of the Sacraments for the dying. On June 10, 1420, after severe suffering, endured in a manner becoming a saint, he rendered back his soul to God. All Christendom, but particularly Italy, mourned his death. It was fitting that this should be rendered one who had re-established the regular life in the convents of

Italy, and labored so zealously and successfully for the unification of the Church in a terrible crisis. He was interred at Buda, in the Church of St. Paul the Hermit, with all the ceremony fitting the burial of a true saint of God. Many miracles had been worked at his tomb previous to its desecration by the Turks, when that arch-enemy of civilization captured and sacked Buda. These miracles were sufficient to convince Pope Gregory XVI that Cardinal John Dominici was deserving of beatification.

Blessed John Dominici was truly great as a preacher, an educator, and a statesman. Honors extraordinary were paid to him both during his life and after. He was cured of a natural defect through the intercession of St. Catherine of Sienna; St. Vincent Ferrer refused to preach in a town where John Dominici had previously been; Blessed Raymond of Capua, Master General of the Dominicans, made him Vicar Provincial of the Roman Province and authorized him to re-establish the monastic discipline; finally, the tribute paid to him by St. Antoninus, when he candidly confessed that whatever good was in him, or was ever performed by him, was due to the example of Blessed John Dominici. These facts and the confidence the Popes placed in him tended not to vain-glory, but made his love for his Order's rule and his zeal for the glory of God well-nigh boundless.

There are enough of his works remaining to show that although as a writer he had a great preference for religious subjects, he did not disdain the profane. His principal works known to us today are: "On Charity," written for the benefit of a religious; Commentaries on the Church, on the Psalms, and on the Epistles of St. Paul; and a work entitled "Lucula Noctis," in which he corrects for the benefit of the faithful the errors contrary to faith found in the works of a famous contemporary poet. His most widely read pedagogical work is "Regola del governi di cura familiare," in which he attacks the excessive devotion to paganism in the renaissance movement.

A suitable life, now being written in the Convent of Fiesole, will be at the disposal of Italian readers next year; and shortly after it is hoped his life will be dealt with in an extensive work in English, in commemoration of the fifth centenary of his death.

—John Dominic Walsh, O. P.