



FIFTH CENTENARY OF SAINT ANTONINUS

Reginald M. Durbin, O.P.

THE YEAR 1959 marks the fifth centenary of the death of St. Antoninus, Archbishop of Florence from 1446 to 1459. Five hundred years, of course, cannot extinguish the light of a saint of God, for that is immortal. But years can dim, in the memory of men, the external features of the saints. Fortunately this has not happened with St. Antoninus. Contemporary artists, of the early Renaissance in Florence, have preserved his features for us.

If we knew these features only from the famous statue in the Uffizi portico in Florence, executed in the nineteenth century by Giovanni Dupre (*opposite*), we would be struck most of all by the sadness of the face, by the lines of care, the creases and furrows of the brow, and the sad smile of one who had suffered much. These very aspects, however, witness to the accuracy of the portrayal, for seldom has any man suffered more violently and from a greater variety of physical afflictions than did St. Antoninus.

Yet there is another face of Antoninus, a smiling face. Contemporary terra cotta busts depict it so. In fact, even the death mask of the Saint wears a smile! The corners of the mouth turn up and not down. Grace had triumphed over suffering in St. Antoninus. And this personal triumph of grace is a symbol of the public triumph that was his episcopal work.

When Antoninus became archbishop in 1446, his beloved city, his native Florence, was suffering from social ills more terrifying than the physical pains he felt in his small and frail body. There was the "city of the poor" where unskilled workers from the countryside, who had flocked to the newly commercialized Florence, crowded into whatever space they could find for living quarters. These men were underpaid, deliberately exploited by the merchant class. There were bitter, violent urban revolutions, no more than blind explosions of the hatred and misery of these poor people. But more, in Florence not even the rich went without affliction! The city was in a state of constant class warfare, with frequent political upheavals in which the vanquished, no matter what their former state, were left to suffer wretchedly

with the most abject poor. There were plagues. There were external wars as well as the internal ones. And there was the overriding question as to just who held the legitimate authority—a legacy of the conflicts of the Great Western Schism.

Into this turmoil Antoninus stepped, and over it he triumphed, or rather, grace did, through his instrumentality. Immediately on his elevation to the archbishopric, St. Antoninus set out to reform the city, spiritually, socially and politically. So successful were his efforts that at his death in 1459, Florence was peaceful and a model archdiocese.

When St. Antoninus' work came to an end in 1459, the Pope himself, Pius II, celebrated the *Requiem*. Other honors were soon heaped upon his memory. Florence placed his statue in the exclusive Uffizi portico, the only ecclesiastic among such literary and artistic figures as Petrarch, Dante, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci. The Church paid her respects by canonization, in 1523, less than two generations after Antoninus' death!

A brief sketch of his life will show readily why such honors should have been paid this humble friar become a great archbishop. Such a sketch will also show us how St. Antoninus can be a model for our social-minded age.

St. Antoninus deserves recognition, if for no other reason, because of his position as spiritual leader of Florence at a time when Florence was the cultural leader of the world. The time was that of the birth of the Modern World: in 1453 Constantinople had fallen to the Turks, sending great numbers of Greek Scholars to the West and especially to Florence; in 1454 Gutenberg had printed the first Bible, an event that would prove even more important for modern times.

The Modern World even at its birth, in Florence at least, presented a great many of the social ills that plague it even today, some of which we have already noted. In addition, as a center of Humanism Florence presented special problems to a spiritual man, to a man imbued with medieval learning, which Antoninus was. This did not, however, prevent him from taking a moderate stand toward the "new learning."

The chief merit of St. Antoninus is not this moderate view toward the Renaissance. Rather, it lies in the fact that he was the first great ecclesiastic to attempt the application of Catholic moral principles to the manifest evils of modern society.

Antoninus was a native of Florence, born there in 1389. He was christened Antonio but seems to have gotten the name by which

he is known today from his small and frail stature (Antonino being the diminutive of Antonio). It was in his native Florence that Antoninus became enamored of the Dominicans, largely through the preaching of another great Dominican of the day, Blessed John Dominici, who later on as Cardinal did much to end the Great Western Schism. For about fifteen years after Antoninus' entry into the Order of Preachers (1405) Florence was the scene of almost perpetual warfare; the Dominicans, Antoninus among them, fled to Foligno. In 1421 they were able to return and Antoninus became prior of the convent at Fiesole in the hills overlooking Florence. From this time on, until he became archbishop in 1446, Antoninus was constantly in some position of authority in the Order.

The growing importance of this small and humble friar reached its next high point in 1439 when he became prior of San Marco in Florence. Here begins, truly, the period of greatness for St. Antoninus. San Marco, only lately acquired by the Dominicans from another religious community, was in a shambles. Antoninus managed to enlist the aid of the powerful Cosimo di Medici in the work of rebuilding. He thereby made his one impression, an immortal impression, on the world of the Renaissance. For the result was a new San Marco, one of the splendors of Italian art, enshrining the matchless frescoes of Antoninus' brother in religion, Fra Angelico.

Also included in the renovations of San Marco was a library, open to the public, which became a cultural center for the Humanists of Florence. The core of the library came from Niccolo Niccoli, but credit must also go to St. Antoninus. Niccoli's will had stipulated that his library, intact, be open to the public; it took some courage for a disciple of St. Thomas Aquinas such as St. Antoninus to allow this center of the "new learning" to be set up in his priory.

In 1446, as we have seen, Antoninus was chosen Archbishop of Florence. Shortly before, he had begun his greatest literary work, the *Summa Moralis*. Both in his role as archbishop and in his *Summa* he was to come to grips with the social ills of the Modern World. In the *Summa Moralis* he took up *all* the social questions of the day, questions that he was meeting personally, every day, as archbishop and spiritual reformer. In the latter role he performed wonders for Florence. He reorganized and revitalized the clergy, preached numerous sermons to the people, and organized catechism classes for the children.

In social reform, however, the work of St. Antoninus was even more extensive, including the setting up of orphanages, organized charities, the advocacy of political reforms, of better wages and working conditions. In his *Summa* he considered the questions of labor and capital, the just wage, commerce and usury, just prices, monopolies and trusts; the duties of the State to its citizens, to the poor, the aged, the sick—he even advocated a public health board! There is, however, no need to overstate the case. In the end St. Antoninus' social theories would prove too far in advance of the times to be influential, despite the fact that the *Summa Moralis* was often edited in manuscript, and later, more often printed. Although St. Antoninus' social theories did not directly influence those of the present day, his work was not fruitless. It stands as a monument to him, and indeed, to the great medieval thinkers from whom he drew his principles. If later ages have caught up with St. Antoninus and met the social question squarely, it yet remains true that they have not met the question in quite the same Christian way that Antoninus did.

As is true of so many of the saints, the labors of St. Antoninus were almost incredible (despite all his sickness). The *Summa Moralis* was, except for a small beginning, composed while he was archbishop; in all it includes six large volumes since he conceived of his "Chronicles" (two volumes on the history of the world to his own day) as an integral part of the *Summa*. His sermons and letters to important persons were numerous. He performed diplomatic services both for the city of Florence and for the Holy See. And all the while his life was one of extreme rigor. For instance, despite his illnesses, he attended Divine Office in the cathedral nearly every night, at midnight. (He had revived this monastic practice as part of his reform.) In the matter of poverty actual records indicate that he gave away to the poor almost the whole of his generous archiepiscopal income, retaining only 500 florins a year to maintain himself and his household.

St. Antoninus' motto, a safe guide for us, was: *Servire Deo regnare est*, "To serve God is to reign." And in serving God truly did he reign. Through him grace triumphed over moral and physical evils. As on his deathbed his face, always so careworn and lined with suffering, shone with a heavenly smile, so the face of Florence glowed with renewed life and vigor, with that spark of light that a work of grace can give. St. Antoninus was a genuine social leader as well as a true friend of God!