

Editorial: Dominicans at the Frontiers Of Human Thought

THROUGHOUT her history the Dominican Order has produced men "ahead of their times," men with the ingenuity and spirit to adapt the timeless Dominican apostolate of truth to concrete, changing facts and circumstances. It is no accident that the unmistakable record of history shows the unique capacity of the Order to produce pioneers. St. Dominic's own daring spirit, the innovation of apostolic preaching, the founding of an Order with a specifically intellectual purpose, his master-stroke in scattering the brethren to the four corners of Europe, his ardent desire to preach to the Cuman Tartars—all these have placed an indelible stamp on the entire Order, and have profoundly, often imperceptibly, influenced all of her great men from Jordan of Saxony to Pere Lagrange.

St. Dominic has been widely misunderstood by those outside the Order. Estimates of him have been colored by the Spanish absolutism of a later period and by the rigors of the Inquisition in which his sons were to play a predominant role. It is easy to forget that democratic government began in Spain, not in England, and that the concepts and institutions of popular government flourished in Spain during the period when Dominic was growing to maturity. As the English Dominican writer, Father Thomas Gilby, has pointed out in his study *The Political Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1958):—“(Dominic's) Castilian background was not that of the Inquisition and a centralizing court, but of local *fueros* and free communes that were the nurseries of European constitutional liberties. His Order was to grow with the guilds, corporations, parliaments and universities of the West, and to flourish most happily in the Free Cities and Nation-States where free citizenship was least impeded and the shadow of the Emperor did not fall” (p. 290).

The contrast sometimes drawn between the gentle humanitarian

with strong antinomian sympathies—St. Francis of Assisi, and the hidebound, relentless instrument of the medieval theocracy—St. Dominic, does serious injustice to the greatness of both Saints. Dominic's intellectual apostolate of its very nature was a spiritual sword of truth and made appeal to man's highest faculties. In endeavoring to appreciate something of the Order's early spirit it is extremely significant to note that the early legends of Dominic's life all tell us that the Order was founded to refute with the sword of the word heretics whom the material sword had failed to conquer.

Far from being the stern autocrat, Dominic was one of the most self-effacing of religious founders. The Constitutions of the Order, with all their accidental changes through the years, still reflect St. Dominic's own flexible, versatile nature, allowing the maximum opportunity for the use and development of personal talents in the service of God and the Church. Dominic breathed into the Order a democratic spirit which was unique for the times and which has remained an unbroken heritage. He showed how important he thought self-government was when he permitted his own better judgment to be overruled on the crucial question of the administration of the Order's property.

In the 16th century Cardinal Cajetan was to bear eloquent testimony to this staunch democratic tradition when in proposing the revamping of the Constitutions, first to the General Chapter at Genoa in 1513, and two years later to the Chapter at Naples, he asked that the equivalent of a universal referendum be held in which every religious in the Order would be allowed to express his opinion on the revision of the Constitutions. The Provincials were then to transmit to the next General Chapter the suggestions which had been proposed by their subjects. It is not really surprising then that the Order has had only one abbot!

And what was true of St. Dominic, what is true of the Order, is also found to be verified in the members of the Order. Time and again the calm, dispassionate application of metaphysical and theological principles, even in the din of partisan conflict, has enabled Dominican writers to compose genuinely theological tracts, often so impersonal in their tone that it would be very difficult to date many of them within a century from internal evidence alone, but so much to the heart of the matter that the solutions proposed have stood the test of time. In the life and death struggle between Boniface VIII and Philip le Bel of France, the Dominican theologian, John of Paris, proposed in his famous tract, *Concerning the Royal and Papal Power*, a via media solution to that Church-State crisis which was based most

fundamentally on St. Thomas' distinction of the orders of grace and nature. Though he was denounced by both the theocrats and regalian, his description of the ideal rapport of Church and State has now, in many important details, been discovered to bear a strong resemblance to Leo XIII's *Immortale Dei*.

The purpose of the following essays is to bring out in some detail the achievements of a few of the Dominicans who in different periods of the Order's history have like their founder been at the frontiers of human thought and alive to man's changing attitudes and needs. A complete chronicling would, of course, be impossible. Our principal intention has been to single out for attention those outstanding Dominicans whose great achievements too often lie buried under the dust of history. Dominican preoccupation with philosophy and theology has made us, in general, poor historians, even of our own glorious heritage. But the chief motive which should compel us to a rediscovery of their accomplishments is not so much to render them justice, or to fillip our own corporate spirit, but to give the 20th century Dominican a clearer notion of the Order's personality and purpose as unfolded in seven centuries of history. It is a perversion of history to brand the Order as a breed of stolid functionaries or bleak authoritarians. We should never forget that Thomas Aquinas, now the Church's Common Doctor, caused more than a few respectable eyebrows to be raised because of his unconventional approach, and propositions selected from his writings were condemned in turn by a bishop and two archbishops very soon after his death.

The liberal, adventuresome spirit of St. Dominic has never been lost in his progeny and is very much alive today. To be galvanized with his spirit is to go out to do battle as an authentic "champion of the Faith and true light of the world."