



The Death of St. Dominic

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ST. DOMINIC'S DEATH

In the year 1916, on the twenty-second day of December, the Dominican Order joyfully celebrated its seven hundredth birthday. During that jubilee year Province after Province, recounted, in various tongues, the Order's achievements in Christ's Kingdom. Sometimes the story would relate how the faith was planted where it had never been before, but only after blood had made fertile the difficult soil of heathendom; sometimes the history narrated the activity of the Order where the vineyard had long been planted, but was made to yield more abundant harvest when watered by the copious stream which Dominic made to flow, like the spring which rose out of the earth to water paradise. But now, in 1921, we are at the eve of another anniversary, the seventh centenary of the death of St. Dominic, which took place August 6, 1221. The celebration of five years ago was joyous, and was for the world as well as for the Order; the commemoration of 1921 will have a more tender, personal aspect. It will consist of the reenactment in spirit of that Friday in August, 1221, at which the heart of each Friar Preacher will be present to hear St. Dominic speak his dying message.

It was late in the month of July, 1221, that St. Dominic returned from Venice to Bologna. The summer's heat was at its height, and at the end of the journey the Saint's strength was exhausted. Nevertheless, instead of seeking rest immediately, he gave his attention to the affairs of the Order, and thus he spent a part of the night in a long conference with the prior of St. Nicholas, Friar Ventura, and the procurator, Friar Rudolfo. When it came time to retire, these two insisted that their travel-worn Father take a little rest that night, and even tried to persuade him not to rise for Matins. But fully awake that soon, very soon, the night was coming when he could no longer work, Dominic did not yield to their prayers and after Matins, he, imitating his Divine Master, "passed the whole night in the prayer

of God." The fever which had attacked the Saint increased in violence, indicating to those about him the near approach of the Patriarch's death. Now begins the series of touching scenes which were the fitting close of the tender Dominic's life. Often he gathered the novices about him and exhorted them in gentle words to observe the Rule with faithfulness, to love God, to love the Order. How eagerly must they not have drunk in the words of their dying Shepherd! There is no record of all these discourses, but together with his counsels to the observation of the Rule, St. Dominic may have instructed them how to avoid the snares of the university world, telling of his own college days at Palencia. And dwelling on his nine years of hidden life at Osma he probably described the blessedness of a cloistered life. Or did he with ardent words instruct them for the work so dear to his heart—preaching for the salvation of souls—urging a love for the Gospel, especially as narrated by St. Matthew, and the earnest cultivation of the Epistles of St. Paul? For some of the Saint's instructions we do not need to conjecture. Once he summoned all the friars into his presence and made a general confession aloud to the prior, Friar Ventura. Turning to the religious then, the fever-stricken Saint, living exemplification that he was of Christ's words, "He that can take, let him take it," implored them to preserve their chastity inviolate: "God has in His mercy kept me till this day in pure and unblemished virginity. If you desire the same grace, avoid any suspicious relations. It is by his care for this virtue that the servant becomes agreeable to God, and respected by his neighbor. Serve the Lord always in fervor of spirit; strengthen and extend our rising Order; be strong in holiness and in the observance of the Rule; grow in virtue!" Afraid lest he had spoken too much of his purity (though he had attributed nothing to himself, but all to God's mercy), Dominic displayed his simple heart by adding, "Though Divine grace has preserved me from all stain till this hour, I must confess that I have not entirely escaped the weakness of finding more pleasure in the conversation of young than of old women." But this confession did not entirely relieve the Saint, since "the good often acknowledge their faults," says St. Gregory the Great, "where faults do not exist." "Brother, I think I sinned in speaking aloud of my virginity; I should have been silent." It was time now for the Founder of the Order to leave to it some sort of fatherly be-

quest. But like Peter and John before the temple gate, silver and gold Dominic had none; what he had, however, he gave, and it is a treasure which may be possessed wholly by each of his sons, though divided among a thousand: "O my sons and brothers, this is the inheritance I leave you; have charity, keep humility, preserve voluntary poverty." The friars, suffering to see their Father suffer, endeavored to relieve him by removing him from the city to the heights of Santa Maria di Monti, where the air was fresher and purer. Again the dying Saint addressed the little company about him in beautiful and fervent words, but he then bade the friars take him back to the convent, thus to assure himself that no other resting-place would be his, save an humble grave beneath the feet of his brethren. Afraid lest he die on the way, they bore him back to Bologna, and placed him in another brother's cell. The Father had none of his own. Then it was that the dying man spoke the blessed words which are the inspiration of the "O Spem Miram!" Friar Rudolfo was standing by, wiping the large drops of sweat that gathered on the brow of the Saint. The brethren were near. Tears fell at the sight of the Holy Man's agony, which he bore without murmur. Dominic spoke: "Do not weep, my beloved sons, nor grieve because my body must disappear from you. More useful to you I shall be in the place where I am going than I was here. After death, you will have a more powerful advocate than you have had in life." O wonderful hope which thou hast given us! For the last time the Saint summoned the brethren. "Father," said the prior, voicing the unspoken words of all, "you know in what desolation and sadness you leave us. Remember us before the Lord in prayer." Already Saint Dominic had been reminded of his promise. The first "Imple Pater, Father, keep thy word," had been spoken! But Dominic was absorbed in God: "O Holy Father, I have accomplished Thy work with joy. I have carefully kept those who Thou hast given me. Now to Thee I commend them, protect them. Behold, I come to Thee, O Heavenly Father." "Begin," he said to the brothers, and at once the prayers of Commendation were begun. The lips of the dying man moved, but no sound of his voice was heard. "Come to his assistance, ye saints of God; come forth to meet him, ye angels of the Lord, receiving his soul, offering it in the sight of the Most High,"—and St. Dominic's soul was with Christ. His poor body lay upon the ashes strewn on the floor,

just as he had desired. Dominic Guzman, the nobleman of Calaroga, died—not like the scion of an illustrious family of Spain, but on the ashes of penance, at Bologna! Did the white shining star of his brow disappear into the heavens, or was its radiance to become spiritualized in the hearts of his followers forever?

The history of many an institution is the history of its founder. While the latter lives, the former grows and flourishes, when the one is gone, the other disappears also, as color fades when the light dies. But twelve years after the death of St. Dominic there occurred a significant manifestation, proof sufficient that Dominic's work and Dominic's personality had not passed into the land of oblivion. In 1233 a new tomb was prepared for the sacred relics of the Saint. After the bones of the Holy Man had been arranged therein, three hundred religious, lead by the Master General and successor of St. Dominic, Jordan of Saxony, came forward and pressed a last kiss on the withered brow of their Father. And behold! they retained with them a long time the fragrance which emanated from the precious relics. A year later, not only a few hundred, but the entire Order, which already extended from Italy to Germany and from the Dnieper to the Thames, was rejoiced at the canonization of the Saint. Holy Church had confirmed Dominic's promise that he "was going where he could be of more assistance to them after death than before."

The essentials of a thing are that without which the thing cannot be. St. Dominic constituted preaching and teaching the proximate end of his Order. This end is arrived at or not proportionately as the essential means, prayer and study, are either employed or neglected, and the great furtherance to both is furnished by the Order's fundamental elements namely, the regular life, monastic observances and the solemn recitation of the Divine Office. But what have these to do with St. Dominic's legacy of charity, humility, poverty? This much, that the former without the latter remain a dry husk, a kernelless shell. With a motive directed otherwise than by charity the greatest work of man remains at most, merely human. With charity, a supernatural touch enhances the value of lesser deeds. And humility's victorious force is clearly established by reflecting that (to quote one who has written profoundly on the subject): "by the divine exercise of humility the fallen race of man was redeemed from evil and brought back to God" and "by the exercise of this vir-

tue the Christian soul is transplanted from dependence on her own native resources to dependence on the inexhaustible resources of God." One glance at Bethlehem, at the poverty of God Incarnate, thus is St. Dominic's love of this virtue explained. These three, charity, humility, poverty, and the purity of life for which the Holy Patriarch had so high a regard, are our inheritance. But not only these. Together with them there is the promise that divine assistance would be more surely obtained by Dominic in heaven, than by Dominic upon earth.

Death is often likened to sunset, when shadows deepen and darkness creeps over the land. From dawn to twilight, throughout the long day, Time does not linger for a moment. From morning until night-fall, unhurried but unhalting, the hours keep their steady pace. So it is with Life. At sunrise, "Man shall go forth to his work, and to his labor until the evening," the sunset of which will be as promising as the day-duty has been faithfully performed. Life, steadily even as Time, is in constant motion to the end: this truth once fully realized, exerts an influence truly wholesome, and not less truly God-given. The benign influence begins as soon as it becomes part of the daily life, so in Youth it is none too soon to begin to make ready for the one thing for which man is born—to die.

One of the first steps in this preparation is prayer to the God of wisdom and of counsel for light to know the state of life to choose. And what if the Father in His generosity indicates the way His Son trod—the path, the path of the evangelical counsels! But generosity demands a generous response, there remains nothing to do but answer the "Follow Me" and begin the life devoted wholly to God. The outward sign of this consecration is the vow of obedience, but the interior consecration must be the surrender of heart and will to the One Whose single purpose of life was to do the will of His Father; "I do always the things that please Him." This utterance of the First Religious teaches what must be accomplished by His followers, while one brief sentence describes the manner in which it is to be executed: "He hath done all things well." Whether it be to "cry aloud in the streets" or to remain tranquilly within the walls of the sanctuary and on the steps of the altar, the motive must be humble obedience to God's will, together with a working principle of performing every duty with thoughtfulness and care. This implies the unlocking of the most secret chambers of the

heart to the influence of God's holy light and grace, so that there is no dark corner in which to hide any reservation.

A life in accord with this principle will draw to its close with the confidence of a child awaiting the embrace of an indulgent father. Death will have been robbed of the two chief circumstances which make it especially fearful, of which one is the rending of the ties which bind to earth and to men. Partings are always painful; nay, even the anticipation of farewells to be said bring a pang, the severity of which is greater, the more ardently the heart clings to what it must release. When Death, Death who began his inevitably victorious pursuit the moment that Life sprang up, finally comes, he will begin, with little ceremony, to sever the hundred or be it the thousand ties which have been fastened. Each stroke of his sickle will work such agony that at the end the cheek will fall hollow and the features lie pinched. But if there be but few ties the going will be easier. As regards the second circumstance Holy Scripture says "it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God." But even the fearful ordeal of Judgment can be duly provided for in life. A soul that is faithful may appear before God with faults, but "beside the mountains of God's mercy" said the Curé of Ars, "our faults are as grains of sand." In the Church of God how many exiles from the fatherland above have awaited, with joy and gladness, the fulfillment of their oft-repeated prayer "Thy Kingdom Come!" St. Dominic tranquilly passed from the land of exile to the Kingdom of Heaven.

—Bro. Ferrer Cassidy, O. P.

