

ST. DOMINIC AND THE SCRIPTURES

The unfailing source of inspiration for the pulpit-master and the treasure-house of our most spiritualized thought and language is to be found in the Bible, the message of the Creator to His creatures. So true is this that every preacher of note who has succeeded in winning the hearts and awakening the consciences of his hearers has first impregnated his own soul with supernatural fear and love, by daily study of the precepts of the Sacred Writings. This is also a certain fact in its application to pastors in the fold of Christ, upon whom devolves the burden of supplying the invisible manna for the nourishing of the spirit. To strengthen weak and hesitating footsteps for untried paths of virtue, to revivify languishing fervor, to instil in more advanced souls the longing for closer union with the Sovereign Will, the good shepherd opens and reads to all, in every degree of perfection's estate, the word of Holy Writ, "that through patience and the comfort of the Scriptures"¹ they might have hope.

In the event of the widespread defection which was rampant in Spain and southern France at the beginning of the thirteenth century, it was only natural to expect the rise of some great champion of the faith. "The labourer whom Christ chose in His own garden to be His helpmate"² was St. Dominic; to him was given the arduous mission of announcing the word of salvation to those who were blinded by vice and heretical doctrine. Long years before he set out to fulfil his trust, St. Dominic had learned to practise the salutary lessons taught in Holy Writ. These he was now skillfully to apply to the needs of all who came under his influence.

The command to undertake the work of evangelization seems to have come to St. Dominic at the special instance of the Most High. For tradition tells how the two Apostles of Rome appeared to him one night while he was wrapped in prayer before the altar. Peter entrusted him with his staff, Paul with the Book of the Gospels. "Go," said the latter, "and preach, for to this ministry thou art called." Henceforth it was St. Dominic's vocation to proclaim the word of salvation to his fellow-men,

¹ Romans, XV, 4.

² Dante, Paradiso, Canto XII.

and ever after in all his long journeys he carried with him the Book of the Gospels and the Epistles of St. Paul.

The man of God who was thus selected to instruct others, first tutored himself in the ways of perfection. In the Bible he found his rule of life and a living exemplar of holiness toward which he directed every endeavor; there he discerned that exalted type of Christian and religious excellence which characterized his blessed career. When the daily offices of charity had been completed, it was St. Dominic's delight to retire to some quiet spot where he could meditate without disturbance upon the mysteries of God's love. Taking out the Sacred Book, he would reverently kiss it and open it to a favourite passage. After he had become absorbed in his text, his countenance would betray mingled feelings of joy and grief as the passing emotions of his soul sought expression. Here was the secret of his untiring zeal and energy; for "not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God."³

In his weary and protracted journeys, as St. Dominic travelled barefoot along the uneven roads, his brethren would often observe him take the Bible from the shelter of his mantle, and after making the sign of the cross, pursue his way reading and pondering its inspired contents. In this manner he prepared himself for the work of preaching that lay before him. Through humble prayer and study, and by assiduous perusal of Holy Writ, he schooled his heart in the knowledge of virtue, and in reward was vouchsafed the grace to turn hardened consciences to thoughts of repentance. Trusting in the power of his mighty will, and with a boundless confidence in God's cooperation

"Forth on his great apostleship he fared,
Like torrent bursting from a lofty vein;
And dashing 'gainst the stocks of heresy,
Smote fiercest where resistance was most stout."⁴

Filled with the spirit and the wisdom of the Gospel, St. Dominic, with unshaken courage entered the lists against the heretics, and victoriously engaged the enemies of truth. One need scarcely marvel that vast numbers, fired with holy enthusiasm, gave ready response to his plea for amendment. From the prophets and the apostles he derived the vehemence of his utterance, the unction and persuasion of his words, the solemn

³ Deut. VIII, 3.

⁴ Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XII.

tones of reproach that struck terror into the most calloused hearts. From the Sacred Text he drew his moving entreaties, his pointed illustrations, and the irrefragable arguments that silenced his adversaries and conquered the obstinacy of his hearers who seldom refused to return to the obedience of the Church.

However efficacious were the words of this matchless orator of divine eloquence, St. Dominic, after the example of his patron apostle, "came not in loftiness of speech . . . but in shewing of the Spirit."⁵ In Christ Jesus by the Gospel he begot his spiritual children, and when he sent forth his companions to continue his labors, he bade them take no book save the Sacred Scriptures. In the light of the preaching vocation of his order, St. Dominic's practical mind saw at once the necessity of a thorough and ready conversance with Scriptural subjects. The unlettered populace could always grasp the meaning of the Sacred Text. The simple language, familiar parables, and elevating truths with which the Scriptures are replete, readily fall within the scope of the most ordinary intelligence.

Hence it was St. Dominic's fervent wish that the Bible should always be the object of careful study among his children. They immediately caught the enthusiasm of their father, and it required but little persuasion to make them realize the value of Scriptural studies for the success of their apostolic ministry. At once they assumed the initiative in this particular field of learning, and the fruits of St. Dominic's example and encouragement soon became evident. In one of the very earliest General Chapters of the Order (1236), mention was made of the preparation of a Concordance of the entire Scriptures, as well as a revised Vulgate Text of the Bible—both works achieved by the immediate disciples of St. Dominic under the direction of Hugh of St. Cher. Those Dominican master-minds, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas laboriously gathered invaluable Scriptural treasures in their works. Scriptural erudition from St. Dominic down to our own day has remained a distinctive characteristic of the Order. To pass over a host of facts that abundantly prove such a statement, it will suffice here to mention but one phase of this extensive knowledge of Biblical subjects, namely, the practical and immensely impor-

⁵ I Corinth. II, 1-4.

tant task of translating the Sacred Text into the vernacular of the several peoples among whom the sons of St. Dominic labored. To the brethren belongs the honor of having produced the first standard version of the Bible in Italian, German, Hungarian, Catalanian, Valencian, Castilian, Dutch, and Armenian. To these may be added the Arabic and Syriac versions recently published at the Biblical school of Jerusalem. Here alone is sufficient testimony to St. Dominic's abilities as a Scriptural leader, and the impetus which he gave to the promotion of Biblical studies.

As in all things else, so in this particular line of endeavor St. Dominic, with his versatile genius, established a fitting precedent. Before he died, he had composed many commentaries on the various books, particularly the Epistles of St. Paul, in which were included his admonitions to preachers. These, unfortunately, have been lost to the world. But there is one lasting memorial to St. Dominic's biblical learning always present to the minds of his posterity—the office of Master in the Sacred Palace. In its immediate institution the sole purpose of this high trust was the exposition of the Scriptures. Upon St. Dominic it was first conferred and with his sons it has ever remained.

Truly the word of man can add nothing to the word of God. St. Dominic gave expression to this in the spirit and tenor of his final warning to his brethren before their dismissal for fields of missionary activity: "Foolish and improvident, my sons, are those preachers who in speaking of religion and the things of God, use no words but those of human science and human prudence, trusting to their own reasoning rather than to that of the All-wise One. Their discourses may be brilliant but they must also be feeble and cold, for they lack the fire of the word of God, and fall far short of the mighty power which the utterance of the Omnipotent possesses."⁶

⁶ Cf. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical "Providentissimus Deus."

—Bro. Edward Brennan, O. P.