SAINT DOMINIC IN DANTE'S SONG

Francis Thompson in that remarkable essay on Shelley, repining over the low estimation into which even genuinely Christian poetry had fallen in the Church after the classical revival, says: "The palm and the laurel, Dominic and Dante, sanctity and song, grew together in her soil; she has retained the palm but forgone the laurel. . . . Fathers of the Church (we should say), pastors of the Church, pious laics of the Church; you are taking from its walls the panoply of Aquinas; take also from its walls the psalterly of Alighieri. Unroll the precedents of the Church's past." Such, indeed, might have been the cry of yesterday, for the laurel bough lay broken and severed from its trunk planted in Catholic soil; but such cannot be the cry of today, for the laurel bough has been grafted on its ancient stem. The stigmas of heretic, of precursor of Martin Luther, of hater of the Priesthood, of the Pope and the Church have long since been effaced and remain, at least in Catholic circles, terms relegated to the past. Dante's fearless and vehement denunciation of all corruptions of his times has led many to question his attitude towards everything Catholic. His position, however, as staunch loyal defender of the Church, has been frequently and most ably vindicated. In later times Popes have honored his memory and university chairs have been established for the exposition of his divine poem. Pius IX in 1857 placed a laurel wreath upon his bust; Leo XIII of whom it is said he knew the entire Comedy by heart, commended the poem in a Brief; and Benedict XV, in a recent encyclical for the sixth centenary of Dante's death, while lauding him as the Poet of Christian Ideals, the Disciple of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Defender of Dogma and of the Church, hails him the "sublime Poet, whom we do not hesitate to proclaim the most eloquent singer of the Christian Idea."  

It is a peculiar fact that many readers of the Sacred Drama never pass from the Inferno to the realms of purging and beatitude. The Inferno is perhaps the greatest of the canticles from

---

2 Pope Benedict XV: Encyclical to Catholic Teachers and Pupils, under the caption “The Poet of Christian Ideals.”
the standpoint of power; but of the three, it is not so artistic as the Purgatorio, nor so richly imaginative and pathetically tender as the Paradiso. And among the sweetest strains, no doubt, to Dominican readers of the Paradiso are those beautiful lines in which the poet sings of the great patriarch Dominic of Guzman.

Dominic and Dante, saint and seer;—what has the medieval seer to say of our great medieval saint? The Paradiso consists of nine moving spheres which revolve around our globe which symbolize the "many mansions," the accidental beatitude of the saints, crowned by the tenth motionless heaven, the Empyrean, where all the blessed enjoy essential happiness, the eternal fruition of the sight and contemplation of the Divine Essence.

Dante does not tell us in what sphere of accidental glory Dominic is detained. In the fourth heaven, however, the sphere of the sun, among the souls of the great teachers and doctors, St. Bonaventure narrates of the cherubic St. Dominic. It is thus he begins leaving us know that in Dante's plan St. Francis and St. Dominic should merit similar glory.

"The love, that makes me beautiful,
Prompts me to tell of the other guide, for whom
Such good of mine is spoken. Where one is,
The other worthily should also be;
That as their warfare was alike, alike
Should be their glory." (Canto XII, ll. 28-33.)

Readers are well aware of the life-long mutual friendship that existed between the two geniuses, St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas. In history they cannot be disjoined, nor can the founders of their respective Orders. Dante was well aware of this. By an act of reciprocal courtesy Bonaventure is now made to proclaim the praises of St. Dominic as St. Thomas had in the previous canto celebrated those of St. Francis; and in like manner each blames the irregularities, not of the other's Order, but of that to which himself he belonged. The painters and sculptors of that time were fond of taking for their subjects incidents in the lives of the Founder-saints and they were sometimes familiarly represented as giving each other the kiss of peace. Père Lacordaire remarks that the great Florentine bard whose pen did not spare the culpable occupant of any dignity, always
spoke of the Friars Preachers and Friars Minor as the heroes of his age. And the people among whom they flourished ever cherished the memory of the holy Fathers. This in influential quarters was often the private as well as the public opinion of the Middle Ages. Even Macchiavelli, no great friend of the Church, attributes the revival of Christianity to the influence of these two saints. The simultaneous appearance of Dominic and Francis appeared as a miracle of Providence to all who played any role on the stage of human affairs, for, in the fore-ranks of "the army of Christ," leading the religious awakening of the thirteenth century were these two saints. In canto XI, St. Thomas is made to say:

"The Providence, that governeth the world,  
In depth of counsel by created ken  
Unfathomable, to the end that she (The Church),  
Who with loud cries was 'spoused in precious blood,  
Might keep her footing towards her well-beloved (Christ),  
Safe in herself and constant unto Him,  
Hath two ordain'd, who should on either hand  
In chief escort her: one, seraphic all  
In fervency; for wisdom upon earth,  
The other, splendour of cherubic light.  
I but of one will tell; he tells of both,  
Who one commendeth."  

(11, 27-38).

To return to St. Bonaventure's words:

"Slow, and full of doubt,  
And with thin ranks, after its banner moved  
The army of Christ, (which it so dearly cost  
To reappoint*) when its imperial Head,  
Who reigneth ever, for the drooping host  
Did make provision, through grace alone,  
And not through its deserving. As thou heard'st,  
Two champions to the succour of His spouse  
He sent, who by their deeds and words might join  
Again His scatter'd people."  

(Canto XII 11, 33-42.)

After these verses Dante introduces saintly Dominic and proposes to give us briefly his true picture. More concisely and withal artistically than it has ever been done, as by the strokes of genius, Dante sketches our Patriarch's history, laying bare his real heroic character in lines that remain a lasting eulogy

---

8 Lacordaire: Apology for the Order of St. Dominic.
9 Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di T Livio, lib. III, c. 1.
8 To redeem.
which time cannot weaken or destroy. With Dante Alighieri the truth was as a religion. If sometimes he was engulfed in the whirlpool of faction (which he ever detested), if at any time he was borne along by the eddying tides of a misguided party spirit and placed in Heaven an unjust partisan or in Hell a just political enemy (he even condemned to the Inferno Pope Celestine V, whom the Church has subsequently raised to her altars), he has represented the characters in his poem either as he knew or believed them to have lived in actual life, or as the tradition or the history of his times revealed them to him.

The sources Dante employed in his portrayal of St. Dominic are unknown and must ever remain more or less a matter of conjecture. Dominic having died forty years before Dante's birth, his memory was still fresh in the minds of the poet's contemporaries and in his childhood days it is very probable that he conversed with those who at Florence or elsewhere had heard the zealous preacher's words and had witnessed his wondrous deeds. Dante, too, knew well the liturgy of the Church. Several biographies also (most noteworthy among them those of Jordan of Saxony, Theodoric of Appoldia, Humbert of Romans, Vincent of Beauvais and a metrical account of a troubadour of Picardy), had already been written when Dante composed the Comedy, and it is very probable he drew from one or the other of these.

Here is the poet's picture of the birthplace of Dominic:

"In that clime
Where springs the pleasant west-wind to unfold
The fresh leaves with which Europe sees herself
New-garmented; nor from those billows far,
Beyond whose chiding, after weary course,
The sun doth sometimes hide him; safe abides
The happy Callaroga, under guard
Of the great shield, wherein the lion lies
Subjected and supreme." (Ibid. 11, 42-50.)

In sunny Spain, in the province of Burgos, about one hundred miles south of the Bay of Biscay, the traveller making his way from the city of Osma to the neighboring town of Aranda suddenly finds himself in the fortunate village Callarogo (Calaruega) which in Dante's time was under the rule of the Kings of Castile, in whose arms the lion was now above and now below the castle.
With this description of Caleruega Dante proceeds to paint for us the distinctive vocation of the Saint:

"And there was born
The loving bridegroom of the Christian faith,
The holy athlete, gentle to his own,
And to his enemies terrible."

(Ibid. 11, 50-53).

These words are the keynote to Dominic’s character and mission and might be styled the gist or theme of Dante’s entire narrative of him. As Francis is the Spouse of Poverty, Dominic is the Spouse of Faith and the holy athlete who in order to protect the bride uses love as his only weapon. Such according to the conception of Dante, which indeed is in accordance with the mind of the best historians of Dominic, is the typical spirit of our Saint. “Gentle to his own and to his enemies terrible”; and if terrible, only so by reason of his utter detestation of the errors and sins which he had come to combat by the sharp two-edged sword of his speech and holy example, never so, however, on account of his hatred but love for the sinner and the erroneous.

The vision of Blessed Jane of Aza, the mother of St. Dominic, is widely known. Before Dominic’s birth she beheld him in a dream under the figure of a black and white dog holding in its mouth a burning torch which kindled the world. Thus before his birth the infant prophesied his mission and that of his Order:

“So replete
His soul with lively virtue, that when first
Created, even in the mother’s womb,
It prophesied.”

(Ibid. 11, 53-56).

From his cradle the child seemed marked as specially chosen for the service of God. At his baptism the god-mother saw a brilliant star shining on his forehead which betokened the wondrous fruit (truth), that was to proceed from him and his Order. Dante selects this well-attested tradition and preludes it with the incomparable grace that was to attend him on his great mission, the grace known as the mystical espousals.

*Note from Rev. Louis Ferretti, O. P.: The Rosary Magazine, Vol. XV, August, 1899: “In the time of Dante the word ‘druudo’ had but its primitive signification of ‘spouse’ from the German treu, or dreu, which means faithful friend. We have followed Cary’s translation except in this instance in which Cary has ‘loving minion’ for ‘loving bridegroom,’ and in the next line ‘holy athlete’ is substituted for ‘hallow’d wrestler’ which appears a misprint.”
"When, at the sacred font,  
The spousals were complete 'twixt faith and him,  
Where pledge of mutual safety was exchanged,  
The dame, who was his surety, in her sleep  
Beheld the wondrous fruit, that was from him  
And from his heirs to issue."  
(Ibid. 11, 56-61).

Dominic was of the spirit of truth, "doctor veritatis." His Order has long since been recognized as the Order of Truth. Listen to the words that the Church employs in the Office of his Feast: "The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and in equity and turned many away from iniquity." (Mal. 2-6). And this spirit, for the most part, never departed from the mouths of his followers. "My spirit that is in thee, and my words that I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed." (Isaiahs 59-21).

In this manner Dante develops the title, Spouse of Faith, as great an encomium as he could bestow on a mortal. "New and eminently poetical as is the idea embodied in the eleventh canto," says Ferretti, "unfolding the wonderful life of St. Francis, who is said to be the 'Spouse of Poverty,' who having been deprived of her first Bridegroom remained for eleven hundred years despised and disdained "without a single suitor, till he came; no less beautiful and significant is the idea presented in canto XII, which describes wonderfully the true character of St. Dominic's mission, though between the first and second similitude one can note a difference." Dominic is the Spouse of Faith, Francis, that of Poverty. Herein lies the difference of the appellations. While speaking figuratively Jesus may be called the first Spouse of Poverty, and Francis the second, we cannot properly apply to Jesus the title of the Spouse of Faith; for He is rather its Father, and according to St. Paul "its author and finisher." Hence St. Thomas remarks that while the Fathers of the Church might fittingly be termed Masters of the Faith and the Spouses of the Faith, they can never be called Fathers of the Faith. Thus Dante by giving our Patriarch his title places him in the category of a Father of the Church and a Master of the Faith, and therefore preeminently a defender of truth, who with intense love, warded off the adversaries of the Faith.

---

and converted them to Christ. This was the wondrous fruit which the god-mother saw while "at the sacred font the spousals were complete 'twixt faith and him."

"And that such
He might be construed, as indeed he was,
She was inspired to name him of his owner,
Whose he was wholly; and so call'd him Dominic."

(Ibid. 11, 61-64).

Whether the holy alliance was, in the first instance, the reason for naming the Saint is not certain. History tells us otherwise. The father and mother, it is said, desired greatly to obtain a son to carry on the succession of their family. The anxious mother therefore, resolved to petition God through the intercession of St. Dominic of Silos, a saint of that time renowned throughout Spain by his fame of miracles, that her prayer might be heard. In gratitude for the gift of a son she offered the child to the saint and promised that in memory of this favor he should bear the name of Dominic. Nevertheless Dante is poetically correct, for such the child was as the name signifies, a child entirely "belonging to the Lord."

"And I speak of him, as the labourer,
Whom Christ in His own garden chose to be
His help-mate. Messenger he seem'd, and friend
Fast-knit to Christ; and the first love he show'd,
Was after the first counsel that Christ gave.
Many a time his nurse at entering, found
That he had risen in silence, and was prostrate,
As who should say, 'My errand was for this.'"

(Ibid. 11, 65-72).

A friend and help-mate Dominic assuredly was. Even from his childhood he gave signs of his later vocation. The first counsel Christ gave was that of poverty in the stable of Bethlehem. We read that at a tender age Dominic was often found by his nurse lying on the bare ground. The fact was remembered in after years as a token of his love of poverty and mortification. In the words of Blessed Jordan, "he seemed at once both young and old, for whilst the fewness of his years proclaimed him to be still a child, the sagacity of his demeanor and the steadiness of his character seemed rather to belong to one

---

9 Theodoric of Appoldia: C. 1; n. 14.
who had reached maturity.”

These dispositions filled the hearts of his parents with joy and thankfulness:

"O happy father! Felix rightly named.
O favour’d mother! rightly named Joanna;
If that do mean, as men interpret it." (Ibid. 11, 73-75).

Felix means, favored by fortune; and Joanna, grace of the Lord.

After picturing the youthful Dominic in his holy life, Dante immediately has St. Bonaventure tell us of his fruitful mission; for as the tree grows, is pruned and nourished, accordingly we look forward to the abundance and excellence of its fruit. Dominic began his studies and prosecuted them with characteristic ardor. The greater part of his time was divided between reading and prayer and the service of the altar. Though he applied himself with diligence and success to the acquisition of human letters, it was with yet greater zest and eagerness that he entered on the study of theology and the Sacred Scriptures; all this to serve for the greater fruitfulness of his mission.

"Not for the world's sake, for which they toil
Upon Ostiense and Taddeo's lore;"

for according to Dante men studied the works of Henry of Susa, Cardinal Bishop of Ostia (died 1271), a famous decretalist, and Taddeo Alderotti (died 1303), a writer on medicine, more for the world’s fame and gain than for recompense in the future life,

"But for the real manna, soon he grew
Mighty in learning; and did set himself
To go about the vineyard, that soon turns
To wan and wither’d, if not tended well." (Ibid. 11, 76-81).

"And from the see, (whose bounty to the just
And needy is gone by, not through its fault,
But his who fills it basely,) he besought,
No dispensation for commuted wrong,
Nor the first vacant fortune, nor the tenths
That to God's paupers rightly appertain,
But, 'gainst an erring and degenerate world,
License to fight, in favour of that seed
From which the twice twelve coins gird thee round.
Then, with sage doctrine and good will to help,
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.
Thence many rivulets have since been turn’d,
Over the garden catholic to lead
Their living waters, and have fed its plants."

(Ibid. 11, 82-98).

---

10 Jordan of Saxony: C. 1; n. 6.
From the Apostolic See (which Dante says in his times no longer continued its wonted liberality towards the indigent and the deserving; not indeed through its own fault, for its teaching is ever the same, but on account of the Pontiff who ruled), "Dominic did not ask leave to make unjust gains on condition of devoting a part to pious purposes, nor for the next fat benefice vacant, nor to apply tithes to his own advantage, but leave to fight against the heretics (Albigenses) in behalf of Catholic truth, the seed from which these twenty-four blessed spirits (teachers and doctors) have sprung." And as the Founder, like a torrent, so his followers as many rivulets have watered the garden of the Church by their preaching of the Gospel of Christ.

With these few words ends the description of Dominic so briefly yet so exactly and delicately wrought, that the result remains forever a complete, characteristic picture of our glorious Founder:

“If such, one wheel (Dominic) of that two-yoked car, 
Wherein the holy Church defended her, 
And rode triumphant through the civil broil; 
Thou canst not doubt its fellow’s (Francis’) excellence, 
Which Thomas, ere my coming, hath declared 
So courteously unto thee.”

( Ibid. 11, 99-104).

“The palm and the laurel, Dominic and Dante, sanctity and song,” grow together in the Church’s soil. Dominic, indeed, raised to the altars of the Church, cannot die; nor can Dante, for he is a saint of poetry, “if we will think of it,” says Carlyle, "canonized.” Sad as was the Florentine poet’s life in exile, his death on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1321, was indeed the exaltation of a life’s burdensome cross, exchanged, we fondly hope, for the further exaltation of his soul in the domain of the blessed in Heaven. His works endure and in his song one great character shall ever live, Dominic Guzman, of whom no one but Dante Alighieri could have sung so well.

---

12 Carlyle. Heroes and Hero-Worship; The Hero as Poet.

—Bro. Gabriel Knauff, O. P.