

## SILHOUETTE OF A SAINT

Fabio Giardini, O.P., *The Spirit of Saint Dominic*. Summit: DNS Publications, 2012.

In *The Spirit of Saint Dominic*, Fabio Giardini, who taught moral theology and spirituality at the Angelicum in Rome for 50 years, sets aside the miraculous events often used to depict Dominic's life. He does this not so much to downplay them, but rather to give himself the freedom to paint a different portrait of the saint. Giardini's goal is to describe the spirit of the founder of the Order of Preachers as the key to understanding the charism given to his Order. To accomplish this, he takes up the early works of the Dominicans—rather than the historical events of Dominic's own life—examining their rich content and drawing out the deeper meaning of the texts. Originally written as a series of conferences for cloistered Dominican nuns in the United States, Giardini principally focuses here on the interior life of Dominic. It is on that canvas that Giardini paints his portrait.

Giardini begins his image of St. Dominic with a preliminary sketch in which he draws out the basic silhouette of this great saint. At the heart of Dominic's life, Giardini depicts compassion, prayer, and apostolic zeal. Giardini writes, "The living and essential core of the 'spirit of Dominic' could be imagined as a triangle with equal sides: across the bottom we would write 'compassion;' on the left ascending side 'prayer;' and on the right side 'apostolic zeal.'" For Giardini, these three aspects—individually and in relation to each other—seem to sum up Dominic's life and thus the Dominican's life.

## COMPASSION

Giardini begins with a treatment of compassion. Here, he follows Bl. Jordan of Saxony's description of St. Dominic. Jordan does not present Dominic as effeminate. Rather, he highlights that Dominic's compassion was firm, founded on the strength and virility of his character. After all, Dominic was quick to correct those who had transgressed the Rule. Yet, at the same time, Giardini doesn't depict Dominic as being rough around the edges. On the contrary, he is shown to be tender in his love for the brethren and the poor. These two aspects of compassion, tenderness, and firmness, come together in Dominic in a perfectly balanced way. Giardini astutely depicts this compassion as coming from a deep level of charity. Thus, for Dominic, it was through his love for the God who is merciful to sinners that he was able to become truly compassionate.

## PRAYER

St. Dominic nourished this love of God in a unique way while he was a canon. There he spent his days in prayer and study, contemplating the Truth. Because of the fruits of this contemplation, Dominic continued to place a great importance on prayer even after the foundation of the Dominicans. Giardini notes that the inclusion of many of the monastic elements in the life of Dominic and his friars has its roots in the deep and contemplative prayer of Dominic.

One example, according to Bl. Jordan, is Dominic's *secretae*, or "secret prayers." Famously, Dominic spent his nights praying to his heavenly Father in secret. But Giardini offers a fleshier reflection on these *secretae*. From the secret recesses of his interior life, Dominic secreted these prayers "in a manner analogous to the secretion of digestive juices in the stomach." Because Dominic spent so much of his time as a canon praying the liturgy, a



ALBRECHT DÜRER - ST. DOMINIC

wellspring developed in his soul that would bubble up in his heart. The result? Compassionate prayer for sinners: “Lord, what will become of sinners?”

## APOSTOLIC ZEAL

These two aspects, compassion and prayer, come together not only in intercessory prayer but also in apostolic preaching. Giardini describes this relationship like the process of heating a kettle. When the compassion and prayer of Dominic reached the boiling point, the kettle whistled, and Dominic's voice sounded out in preaching. On the night spent debating with the heretical innkeeper, Dominic struck the boiling point, and the heretic's dawn conversion made a whistle that changed the world. No longer could Dominic content himself by living the life of a canon. Impelled by concern for the salvation of sinners, he left all behind and took up a life of preaching.

This was not an abandonment of prayer. Rather, Dominic's prayer and compassion became the foundation of his preaching. Giardini writes, "In this way, Dominic's charity acquired such an apostolic drive that at the first opportunity coming his way, he broke out of his early contemplative lifestyle and was transformed into a preaching apostle." This is Dominic's "apostolic compassion."

For Giardini, apostolic compassion is St. Dominic's *singularis gratia*, his singular grace. And in it, the three aspects of Dominic's life come together to manifest what lies at the root of the Dominican charism. This "apostolic spirituality," Giardini states, "appears as . . . directly motivated by the union of the Friar Preacher with Christ our Savior and is especially realized through the practice of prayer and contemplation."

Without this foundation, Dominic's apostolate would have been empty. He might have had knowledge of the truth, but without the love of his heart he would have been a resounding gong or a clashing symbol. Filled first with the love of God, Dominic's apostolic zeal overflowed into his preaching.

Picking up one of St. Catherine of Siena's analogies, Giardini states that a Dominican, in imitation of Dominic, "ought to be a vessel always full of the living water of charity and divine wisdom which flow unceasingly from the fountain of God and under whose

inflow the vessel should unceasingly be kept.” For Giardini, this perfectly describes Dominic.

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While these three aspects of compassion, prayer, and apostolic zeal might not be novel, one thing sets Giardini’s biography apart from the rest. The beauty of this portrait of St. Dominic lies in Giardini’s methodology. He has a unique perspective in which he sees the saint with renewed eyes—the eyes of Bl. Jordan, Bl. Humbert, and other early Dominicans. They knew him because they lived with him and are thus able to communicate his interior life with a peculiar clarity that other authors lack.

Giardini, in his turn, picks up their subtle cues and draws out with precise strokes the interior image of Dominic. From this silhouette, he patterns the Dominican charism. And while Giardini does not paint an entirely new picture, he does present Dominic with such clarity and depth that Dominic and the Dominican charism truly come to life.

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