

USEFUL BRETHERN

A REVIEW ESSAY ON *DOMINICAN BROTHERS*

Augustine Thompson, O.P., *Dominican Brothers: Conversi, Lay, and Cooperator Friars*. Chicago: New Priory, 2017.

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St. Dominic's vision for the Order of Preachers included from the beginning a role for non-ordained brothers. Such brothers have accordingly been part of the order for the entirety of its history under various names, as reflected in the title of Fr. Augustine Thompson's book *Dominican Brothers: Conversi, Lay, and Cooperator Friars*. Not only the name but also the vocation of these brothers has been subject to dispute, as seen in Thompson's characterization of two sharply opposing views submitted to the 1965 General Chapter of the Order:

[The first] saw the brothers' life as essentially hidden and an exercise in humility. They had only an indirect involvement in the apostolic work of the Order: they freed priest friars of domestic drudgery so that they could dedicate themselves full-time to prayer, study, preaching, and sacramental ministry. Thus the work of the brothers was essentially manual labor. . . . Their functions did not require training in the sacred or [secular] sciences. Their forms of prayer and way of life were wholly distinct from that of clerics. . . .

[The second position] saw the Order as fundamentally directed to the preaching apostolate. In this view, the traditional life of the brothers was a monastic relic. The constitutions needed to be changed so that the formation, work, and role in governance of the brothers would all be identical to that of the clerics. The only distinctions

remaining would be those directly connected to the sacramental function of the ordained. (226–7)

With these and other complexities in mind, the 2013 World Congress of Cooperator Brothers in Lima, Peru, recommended that “in tandem with the 800th Anniversary of the Order, a rich history be published on the history, vitality, permanence, and presence of cooperator brothers in the life and mission of the Order.” That heady task “to help the Order situate, in a historical perspective, its reflections on the specific vocation of the cooperator brothers today,” was given by the Master of the Order to Fr. Thompson, a historian of medieval Christianity currently teaching at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley, California, the school for the Western U.S. Dominican Province of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, and he has met it with aplomb. Thompson recognizes that gaining real historical perspective on the vocation of cooperator brothers, rather than engaging in ahistorical criticism, romanticism, or sanitization, is difficult because “in addition to the lack of attention the brothers have received, there is also a gap between modern sensibilities and the traditional religious and social culture typical well into the twentieth century” (2). Both of these difficulties play to Thompson’s strengths as a historian, but his conclusion about the specific vocation of cooperator brothers suggests a higher synthesis of their integration into the Order.

PIERCING THE HISTORICAL VEIL

Thompson remedies the lack of attention given to the brothers by going beyond capsule “biographies on the Saints, Blessed, and Martyrs” (ix) to include “as often as possible, something on the other brothers of whom we know more than a name, even if what we know is sometimes meager” (x). *Dominican Brothers* is worth purchasing for the indices and endnotes alone, as Thompson surfaces centuries of information buried in the

archives of the Order. As with his earlier work *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Cornell, 2012), he also takes the time to correct enduring myths by recourse to primary sources. St. Martin de Porres's status within the Order of Friars Preachers, for instance, was apparently as ambiguous as his racial, social, and educational background (154): he made solemn vows, but as a *donatus* (a habited member of the Third Order living among the Friars), he never became a friar properly speaking (156). Misunderstandings about St. Martin's status have endured partly as "the result of an anachronistic projection of the modern canon law of profession back into the 1600s" (156). These interpretive anachronisms are common precisely because of dramatic changes in religious and social culture over the last two hundred years which bedevil not only accurate reporting about individual cases but also attempts at theological synthesis.



Fr. Thomas McGlynn, O.P., sculpting St. Martin de Porres

Thompson addresses the gap between traditional religious culture and modern sensibilities by tracking the Order's changing understanding of what separated the labor of lay and clerical

friars. The mature adult tradesmen of the medieval period, who “called themselves ‘conversi,’ meaning that they had undergone a ‘conversion of life’ from secular livelihoods to monastic practice” were “usually totally illiterate in both Latin and the vernacular” (2). By 1965, in contrast, the constitutions “assume that the modern brother will be literate in the vernacular” (207) while “clerical brothers could rarely speak Latin well, if at all, and some found the recitation of the Breviary with understanding difficult. . . . The great wall of Latin literacy that previously separated the lay and clerical brothers was crumbling” (203). Meanwhile, the clerical state was ever more closely associated with the license to preach. For the first several hundred years of the Order, many of the numerous “common friars,” who studied and sang the Office but never preached outside the house, were not priests but rather deacons or clerics in minor orders (7). In the wake of Trent, these friars would be ordained to the priesthood, and, following Lacordaire’s reestablishment of the Order in France after the losses of the revolution, these priests were needed to preach, a work no longer restricted to a privileged few. The large priories of the medieval period, with hundreds of friars, no longer existed (174). Following Pope Paul VI’s suppression of the minor orders in 1972, clerics and preachers were functionally interchangeable categories in the Dominican Order. At the same time, the understanding of lay brothers changed from that of skilled tradesmen who were also contemplative religious, and essential to the Order in both regards (197), to an understanding of the brothers’ work as interchangeable with that of lay employees (195), performing services “priests cannot do . . . because of time or ‘ineptness’” (198). Whereas large “monasteries could not function without physical labor,” and so “conversi were essential to their existence” (30), such labor was more optional for the smaller Dominican houses of the nineteenth century, especially after the industrial revolution (179). This situation was then projected historically, and so when a biography of Martin de Porres from this period “makes him illiterate and

unskilled . . . it is hard to recognize the skilled healer, fundraiser, and organizer of hospitals and orphanages” (198).

THOMPSON’S PROPOSAL

It is only with this history in mind that Thompson can identify a “convergence” between the two opposed 1965 views on the presence of cooperator brothers in the life and mission of the Order: “Both agree that the purpose of the Order is essentially clerical: administration of the sacraments and pulpit preaching. So, brothers should either do traditional domestic work or be ordained” (227–8). This dichotomy Thompson rejects as ahistorical on the basis of his archival work and historiographical perspective. On the one hand, “Dominican *conversi*” were, from the beginning, “laborers by definition” (30). “The lay brothers did not preach externally or internally, as they could not receive the license” to preach externally, granted only to priests, “and they did not speak Latin,” the language of the internal sermons (7). On the other hand, Thompson does not see the labor of the brothers as devoid of training, wholly distinct in way of life from the clerics, or even purely of benefit to the ordained preachers. Instead, “when medieval Dominicans speak of a *conversus* as ‘useless,’ they mean that he was admitted without a useful skill or could not learn one, not because he was a noncleric” (17). Drawing on Bl. Humbert of Romans’ commentary on the Constitutions and early obituaries of the brothers, Thompson gives a whole litany of internal and external labors provided by the brothers (31–40, 45–71). Further, “*conversi* professed their vows using exactly the same words as clerics did,” and so “Humbert instructed the brothers’ master to remind them that, as religious, they were ‘equal to clerics’” (19). Thompson goes so far as to conclude that “the *conversi*’s work was not seen by medievals as ‘cooperating’ in the ministry of preaching,” but rather that the *conversi*’s labors for the material needs of the Order “had clear value in themselves” due to their performance under vowed

obedience to Christ, and thus “did not need to be justified by some vicarious share in public preaching” (7).

Thompson’s perspective is certainly a welcome shift from the less historically informed oppositions of 1965 which seem to devalue the work of brothers, but it also unnecessarily heightens the opposition between the value of the brother’s work and its relation to that of the clerics. Pope St. John Paul II’s teaching that “profession of the evangelical counsels is complete in itself” and thus has “a value in itself, apart from the sacred ministry” occurs in the very same paragraph of *Vita Consecrata* as the claim that in clerical Institutes which “presuppose the exercise of Holy Orders . . . the sacred ministry is constitutive of the charism itself and determines its nature, purpose and spirit.” Thus, paragraph 60 continues, “the presence of Brothers constitutes a different form of participation in an Institute’s mission, through services rendered both within the community and in the apostolate, in collaboration with those who exercise the priestly ministry.” The Order’s Fundamental Constitution of 1968 similarly says that “since the ministry of the word and of the sacraments of faith is a priestly office, ours is a clerical Order, whose mission the cooperator brothers, exercising in a special way the common priesthood, also share in many ways.” While the exact language of these documents may reflect their twentieth-century composition, Thompson’s own evidence that the implicit sentiment must be as old as the Order itself is in tension with his characterization of the brothers’ saving work as deriving its value independently from the preaching of the priests.

Thompson highlights that both the Order as a whole and its houses were referred to as “Holy Preaching” because “the Order as a whole received the license [to preach] from the pope and gave a limited or extended share in it to individual friars,” in accord with Dominic’s founding intention (6). Vows in the Order of Preachers must lead to some kind of participation in the charism of preaching, because it was for the sake of preaching that Dominican houses were founded, and preaching the Word of God is the manner in

which the Order contributes to the salvation of its members, as both the second approbation letter of Pope Honorius III promulgated in 1216 and the Primitive Constitutions of the Friars Preachers promulgated in 1228 tell us. Acts done out of obedience that are unrelated to preaching might thus have a religious character, but they would not be specifically Dominican. Both 1965 views agreed that the purpose of the Order is essentially clerical because the purpose of the Order is preaching, and preaching is essentially clerical, even if the scope of both “preaching” and “clerical” have evolved over the last eight hundred years.

A COUNTER PROPOSAL

How, then, can a historical perspective on the 1965 dispute lead to something more than a muddled middle? A clue is offered by Master Bruno Cadore’s foreword, which suggests that we read Thompson’s research as a commentary on the brothers’ “manner of integration within the body of preachers ‘totally dedicated to the evangelization of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ’” (v). Both the opposed 1965 views and Thompson’s own position seem to regard Dominican brothers as a kind of species of religious life. The Dominicans are a religious institute specifically devoted to preaching, and preaching is essentially clerical, so if the brothers have “equality in religion” then they must have “very distinct, even different, religious vocations” than the clerics (19). What the Master suggests, however, is that the brothers do not have a specifically different vocation but rather an integral function within a body. The nature of integral parts, St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us, “is that the whole is not present in each of the parts, as to its entire power, or as to its entire essence, but that it is present to all of them together at the same time” (*Summa Theologiae* III, q. 90, a. 3, co.) “in a certain order being dependent on one another” (ad. 3). For example, man is specifically rational, and the brain is required for man’s exercise of rationality, which makes it a kind of first part, but it does not possess in actuality the entire essence. The brothers

are not identical to the clerics, but have their own integral part to play in the life of the order—a distinction which “always requires inequality” (*ST I*, q. 47, a. 2, co.) but not “through any preceding inequality, either of merits or of the disposition of the matter; but inequality comes from the perfection of the whole” (ad. 3).

Does this leave the brothers only in a kind of “domestic drudgery”? No, because Bl. Humbert tells us that such domestic work which could easily be done by all *should* be done by all, on a rotational system (16, 40). Such work was only to be assigned exclusively to a brother when he had “so little skill as to be nearly useless” (32, 40), exactly the kind of man that legislation and exhortation repeatedly tried to prevent from being accepted (17–18, 31). Even the most obvious kind of inequality, the brothers’ “subjection . . . to their own superior, a cleric, the master of *conversi*” was not to promote clericalism but rather “to protect (one would hope) the *conversi* from clerics who sought to turn them into personal servants” (22).

The cooperator brothers today, as in St. Dominic’s vision, can have a special role “in the administration and care of temporal affairs” (11), quite broadly understood, that are necessary for preaching in its more restricted sense, and still “cooperate fully in [the Order’s] mission of evangelization for the salvation of souls” (v).

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