

THE DOMINICAN PATRON OF COLUMBUS

On October 12 Spain will celebrate the memory of two great men, Father Diego de Deza and Christopher Columbus. The friar by his influence and encouragement, the seaman by his conviction and enterprise gave Spain an additional territory and us a fatherland in the discovery of America. Every schoolboy knows of Christopher Columbus but the name of Deza has become the property of only a few. But finally convinced of his potent worth and intent upon just publicity, the Minister of Public Instruction of Spain as well as the Ambassadors and heads of the more important universities of that country, Portugal, Argentine, Chile and other South American Republics, have offered prizes for the best dissertations of his life and work, and will themselves personally participate in the laudation of Deza.

Diego de Deza was born at Torro, Spain, in the year 1444. Brought up in deep piety, and an education wholly uneffeminate, he soon recognized the light of a divine vocation and entered the Order of Preachers at the age of sixteen. By his constant application and marked brilliancy he became one of those lights whose brightness is not given to illumine every age. He was by far the most eminent theologian of his time and served God, Church and country in the capacity of teacher, writer, confessor, reformer and diplomat. His talents were recognized and rewarded. He rose steadily in pastoral ascendancy and became Bishop and Archbishop in turn, and finally, Primate of all Spain. These are the main details of his life and it will suffice to pass over them with a glance; but we must inquire more scrupulously into his personal connections with Christopher.

It is indeed strange that the name of Deza is comparatively unknown in this country when we consider that it is so intimately connected with Columbus, whose story is repeatedly told in glowing praise by writers of the world over. And yet even more strange is the silence of many historians who, in spite of contrary facts deign to disregard, and in some cases totally obliterate the name of Deza. It is not the intention of this article to see in the Friar the sole instrument, or through his instrumentality the sole reason of Columbus' discovery of America; but mainly to show the role which he more than all others actually and uniquely played in the finding of America.



Diego de Deza



The story of Columbus' life is familiar to all. It needs no repetition save where his entrance to Spain occurs. He had been turned down respectively at the courts of Portugal and England but determined in his purpose of exploration he came to Spain to seek succor there. This was about 1486 or 1487. The King and Queen resided at Salamanca, and thither did the adventurer betake himself chiefly because "Salamanca was then the intellectual and literary capital of Spain." Here, too, resided the astrologers and cosmographers, professors at the university who, if they could be won over, the royalty must needs be influenced, and once their interest was aroused support would necessarily follow.

Close by the University stood the convent of St. Stephen's, the flourishing house of studies of the Friars Preachers. "Their large libraries contained vast treasures of erudition" and their curriculum embraced not only theology and the arts, but every known subject that was taught in the schools. Fr. Deza held the chair of theology. His eminent knowledge recognized by all was patronized by the King who confided to his tutelary care his son, the Prince Don Juan. It was at St. Stephen's that the savants of Spain assembled at the bidding of the king and queen to discuss the conclusions of Columbus.

We can picture Columbus as he stood in old St. Stephen's: the world dreamer who had wandered from his native Genoa as one bewitched by the vision of the earth as a huge ball; who had been spurned by the courts of Portugal and England and who now stood before this mighty gathering of erudition as a friendless stranger. A stranger to all? To all but the Dominicans by whom "he was kindly and hospitably received" and especially by Deza who, "from the very first hour of Columbus' arrival at the convent, offered him a friendly hand."

The meeting of this aggregation was the beginning of what is known as the "Junta of Salamanca." Of its proceedings Francesco Tarducci tells us that the Dominicans alone by reason of their accustomed application to philosophical and theological truths earnestly followed him, "the others finding the labyrinth of figures and calculations too fatiguing, let him go on as he pleased remaining entrenched behind this argument, that after the study of so many profound philosophers and learned cosmographers concerning the earth's form, and after so many bold and

expert navigators for thousands of years had traversed it in every direction, it was absurd and ridiculous to suppose it was reserved for an obscure mariner to reform the language of science and the experience of so many centuries. And with that they shut their ears to his arguments and only waited for the moment to give their vote for condemning his proposals as foolish and untenable."

This "junta," or diet, extended over a period of four years or more. The odds were against the mariner. For as already mentioned the majority of the professors bigoted against the spheroid theory held for the flatness of the earth, and in support of their tenet they adduced principally three proofs. The first was taken from the text of Holy Scripture: "The heavens extending as a skin." For the second they relied on the argument of Lactantius: "Is any one so foolish as to believe that there are men who walk on their feet higher than their heads? or that things that with us lie down, there, hang inverted? that vegetation and trees grow downwards? and that rain, snow and hail fall upwards to the earth? The third argument they took from St. Augustine: "As to the fable that there are antipodes . . . that is on no grounds credible. And indeed it is not affirmed that this has been learned by historical knowledge, but by scientific conjecture on the ground that the earth is suspended within the concavity of the sky and that it has as much room on the one side of it as on the other; hence they say that the part which is beneath must also be inhabited. But this is not so. . . . For Scripture which proves the truth of its historical statements by the accomplishment of its prophecies gives no false information; and it is too absurd to say that some men might have taken ship and traversed the wide ocean and crossed from this side of the world to the other, and that thus even the inhabitants of that distant region are descended from the one first man."

Columbus on his part with Deza and the authority of St. Thomas, produced the following arguments from Blessed Albert the Great. "If the earth were not spherical the section of shadow in the eclipse of the moon would not be constantly circular. A spherical body alone produced a circular shadow." (2) "If the earth were flat every one would see the same heavenly bodies. These facts show us that the terrestrial globe is not very large. If it was otherwise a slight change of place could not make so

great a difference in the appearance of the stars." "The third proof of the sphericity of the earth is based on the earth-measuring operations of the ancients and the conclusions of the Arabs." But in vain. His arguments availed him nothing; he was voted out. This was a despairing time for Columbus. His plans as far as the diet went were defeated. The king and queen accepted the verdict of the diet and deafened their ears to him. His funds always low, now became so reduced that he was forced into beggary. During this stormy period Columbus could find but two friends. One of them was Deza who obtained for him monies from the royal exchequer, the other, Juan Perez, Prior of the Franciscan Convent of "La Rabida," harbored him within monastery walls. Thus says Columbus: "I was joked at by all except two monks who were always constant to me."

Six years rolled by full of discouragement and without much demonstrative expression of public sympathy. This sapping tension of postponed hopes and insupport must soon be relaxed or broken. Columbus would dare a last effort. He would again seek Deza, and request him to use his prestige in this ultimate effort as there was "no one who had greater influence with the king and queen." Columbus sought Deza and success rewarded the request; not however the outcome. The king and queen refused to finance the enterprise, nay more, "they ordered him to withdraw." Shattered in his most sanguine hope he turned his face from the court of Seville and from Spain. Apparently all was in vain . . . lost. In vain until Deza arrested his exodus from the country. Lost, until Deza finally and absolutely prevailed on the king to accept Christopher's proposals. Columbus confirms this in the most decisive terms. Writing to his son in later years he says: "Two things require particular attention. Ascertain whether the queen who is now with God has said anything concerning me in her testament, and stimulate the Bishop of Palencia (Deza), he who was the cause that their Highnesses obtained possession of the Indies, who induced me to remain in Spain when I was on the road to leave it." And Lefevre, an unquestionable historian of facts but on account of his radical tendencies in no way over-lenient to Religious, does not scruple to quote from fontana that "Christopher Columbus by the intercession of Fr. Deza set out under the auspices of the

king in the month of August to discover the New World, and to navigate for the sake of the Holy Gospel."*

We know the story of the discovery of America, and with the other voyages of Columbus we are not unfamiliar; of the disastrous second; of the third, his homecoming in chains; and of the fourth. We know of his almost obscure life after his last voyage; so lamentably contrasted to his triumphant reception after the discovery; so culminatingly linked to that long and involved chain of melancholy events. Judged from a mundane standpoint this last epoch of his life portrays a scene of absolute disaster, a sickening impression of the time-old repetition of worldly desertion, of poverty, of oblivion, of obscurity unprecedented in the lives of really great men. But there were more than sublunary hopes in the heart of this heroic man and in his purposes. And if readers of history see nothing but failure, they know not his success. If they lament his short-lived popularity, they know not his friendships. If they are touched by his obscurity, they know not his glory. For dark and gloomy as the scene may at first appear it has, when viewed in its proper light, optimistic interpretations which weightily overbalance the scales of success on the more noble side of spirituality. And three beacon lights of heaven which shone at all times remarkably bright, and which converged harmoniously in his latter years to guide him steadily into an unmistakable harborage of consolation here, and into an eternal haven of future glory above were, the desire of God's Holy Name, the spread of His Church and the friendship of Deza.

The first, which is the outstanding desire of his life, he sums up in these words: "I spent . . . years of painful labor showing in the best way I could how bravely our Lord could be served by propagating His Holy Name"; and in the following words the second: "and His Faith amongst numerous peoples." In his letters to the king and his own son Diego he has not infrequently extolled Deza. He writes on one occasion: "The Senor Bishop ever since I came to Castille has always favored me and has always desired my honor." And again: "Tell the Bishop of Palencia how much I have been gratified by his prosperity, and that if I come I shall lodge with his grace even though he should not invite me, for we must return to our ancient fraternal friend-

* Fontana in Monumentum, p. 390. Col. I.

ship" And once when the king was perplexed as to whom he should appoint Columbus writes: "Who could be better than the Archbishop of Seville (Deza) since it was he who was the cause of your Majesties possessing the Indies." Nor on the other hand are we lacking in Deza's personal expression of friendship and esteem for Columbus. Las Casas, the historian, tells us that Deza after his consecration as Archbishop of Seville was pleased to recall with a certain pride that his greatest title to glory lay in the fact of his having been able to convince their Catholic Majesties to accept and patronize the enterprise of Christopher Columbus.

This is the story of Deza and Columbus in its barest details. More could be written, much more concerning their staunch friendship and mutual cooperation, but space will not permit. Besides, enough has been seen to convince us that Deza has won for himself not only an enviable place in history, but the sole distinction of having been the most potent factor in the discoverer's triumph. Columbus, however, would even augment the importance of Deza, for it was he who wrote to the king: "This priest Deza is the cause of your Majesties possessing the Indies."

—*Bro. Dominic Morris, O. P.*

Works consulted: "Christopher Columbus, His Life, His Works, His Remains," John Boyd Thacher; "Life and Voyages of Columbus," Washington Irving; "The Life of Christopher Columbus," Francesco Tarducci; "La Histoire des Generaux Maitres," Mortier; "La Histoire des Hommes Illustres," Touron; "Dominicains en Amerique," Roze.

