

ST. DOMINIC*

IF we make anything, it seems that we cannot avoid making it in our own image and likeness; to this fact I attribute the note of autobiography which creeps into any 'life' written by one man of another. We cannot see in another qualities of which we are ourselves deficient; a man that is colour-blind cannot introduce accurate tones into his picture, be his line ever so perfect. It follows that we cannot expect a good life of St. Dominic except from a Saint. Nevertheless, as no one is without some elements of sanctity, each one, according to his measure, will be able to appreciate St. Dominic, in whom these are pressed down and running over. We must not discount his virtues because they appear as perfections of our own, for it is through these virtues that we shall reach him. The philosopher will see St. Dominic as a philosopher, the contemplative as a contemplative, the organiser as a Master General; indeed, each man sees his hero as himself, generously bereft of the frailties and indecisions flesh is heir to. This limitation of our vision is, in a way, a reflection of the mystery of the Incarnation, and, as such, a source of comfort. Man can make or reproduce only what he has seen, but the vision takes form in his own image; the maker is revealed in the thing made. It is not only 'Dawn' which, Eblis-like, sits upon the portals of the Underground, but Epstein; it is not Spring arising from the shell, but Botticelli; it is not only the mystery of Father Brown, but the life of Mr. Chesterton in which we are intrigued. If we want to know a man we discover him in what he does: that is his autobiography, and one much more accurate than any picture he may draw of himself. Recently I have had occasion to read the

* A paper read by a Tertiary to a group of Tertiaries.

Blackfriars

work of James Joyce, much of which is consciously autobiographical. He is that rare thing, a poet without a sense of humour.¹ He never seems to have seen himself as that comic and curious bifurcated piece of anatomy, the human being; he has always taken himself seriously. A man with a sense of humour could never begin a self-portrait; his funny insignificant little ego is suitable only for caricature: he imagines looking in the glass for the line of his own nose, and hearing the laughter of his schoolfellows, the angels, he desists. But Joyce sees his own problems magnified into Greek tragedies and hammers his soul out on the anvil of self-importance We may rejoice that God deprives some men of the one divine sense which would keep them dumb. If the man making a self-portrait be the most grotesque sight in the world, of the same order as the man running after his own hat, yet he may take courage; Lisieux and Hippo are known because a man and a woman did not hesitate to appear as foolish for Christ's sake.

St. Dominic did not write about himself. It is said that he never spoke of himself; all his words were of God or to God. He would seem to present difficulties to a biographer. When John and Orpen make a portrait, they have the advantage of a hundred-weight or so of all too solid flesh before them; we have little but a tomb and a tradition. They catch the sitter at one phase in his life, when he is a Lord Mayor or M.F.H., or Commander of a Submarine or of the Salvation Army; when in fact he is at the summit of an earthly success and approached with reverence by those who have not 'pulled it off' with the same ease. But we want to know of the early years of struggle, of prayer and often thwarted desire. It is true that, in any portrait, the past cannot be entirely

¹ *Sense of humour*: the spaciousness of mind which compels a man to laugh at himself; any fool can laugh at another.

Blackfriars

who are vowed to his service. It is not for me to say what attributes of sanctity are most conspicuous in his brethren, since I have only known the Order of Penance for a dozen years. This does not invalidate the conclusion that here is a window through which St. Dominic may be seen. There is a long list of Saints through whom we may discern something of him whose name they bear; and each, whether it be St. Thomas or St. Catherine, will add to our knowledge of him. Not only among the dead will our search be rewarded; from the first moment I entered a Dominican Priory, where St. Dominic's rule and habit obliterate the seven centuries time has put between us and his living flesh, the chief impression made upon me has been the love of truth manifested in his sons. The star shining from St. Dominic's forehead still glows even to the danger of suggesting to the unwary that there are two truths—the Dominican and the other! When I say that the rule and the habit obliterate seven centuries, I need not be supposed to suggest that there are no unsanctified excrescences needing removal before the Master can be discovered in the disciple. . . . The preaching of Father X and the actions of Father Y are not the exact reflections of the words and doings of St. Dominic, nevertheless Fathers X and Y do suggest to me that the Order has maintained a continuity in character, in the same way that a nation preserves its individuality from one generation to another. We may assume that the virtues common to the whole Order will be found at their purest in the Saint himself.

So from learning of the lives of the brethren we may proceed to the fourth point in our inquisition and discover from the words and works of his lovers what they thought of St. Dominic. His contemporaries were not silent. Bd. Jordan of Saxony wrote his

life; many gave evidence in the process of St. Dominic's canonisation.

A hundred years after him came Dante, who wrote of St. Dominic as 'the hallowed wrestler, Christ's help-mate, mighty in learning, a torrent bursting from a lofty vein.' It is true that Dante had but poor words for the Dominicans of his own day, but there is no mistaking his view of their master. A century or so later, we have evidence on the walls of St. Marco in Florence from the brush of Fra Angelico. Here we get a picture of St. Dominic as one of God's lovers as opposed to one of God's fighters, although confirming the Dante portrait of him as 'gentle to his own.' We realise that Fra Angelico found in St. Dominic a director of his meditation and prayer, for in every line he not only tells us what he (Fra Angelico) is himself, but what kind of master he served. 'Art demands much quietness and to paint the things of Christ you must abide in Christ.' These are, I believe, the only recorded words of Fra Angelico, but surely they cannot be left out of a portrait of St. Dominic. Fra Angelico persuades us that there was no hurry or anxiety about this most active Spaniard, that his will clung to the Divine Will as a vine clings to a wall. Again, Fra Angelico has left hundreds of Dominican portraits—is it incorrect to say that these represent a Brotherhood improved since Dante's day and united in something more vitally important than the black and white habit each is wearing? Is the stamp given by Fra Angelico—of himself? Do these friars represent the men known to him, or those dreamt of in an idealized order? Even assuming that they were solely a creation of the painter's mind what a significant comment upon his view of St. Dominic! We know that the fruits of Dominican contemplation were sought for by the Councillors of Kings and Masters of Universities, and feel that the Church was well offi-

Blackfriars

cered by these sons. Their Spiritual Father, whom they honoured as a Saint, could use their hours of communion with God most effectively in the practical affairs of the world. They kept the vision of the poet in harmony with the prudence of the philosopher. In our own day, if we look at any portrait of St. Dominic, whether it be a sentimentally inept caricature of sanctity or a scholarly life written by one of his most accomplished sons, we may still gather some fruit from the Dominican tree. It needs skill to cut away all that belongs to the artist or author, all that has been added by the usurious hand of the merchant—but there he is, the Saint emerges from the most unlikely places. But what may we not get from San Marco, from Bologna where he is buried (though not now under the feet of his brethren as he had wished) from the Priors in which he prayed? Even the stones cry out in his honour.

This consideration brings us to another stage in our portrait making, that is in the opportunity we have of knowing much about St. Dominic's personal friends and associates outside the order. The two Popes, Honorius III and Innocent III, under whom he served and from whom he received his constitution, St. Francis from whom he received the cord—more is known of these three than of St. Dominic. If we hear only one side of a conversation, we may learn much of the kind of person whose silences provoke it. Again, something is known of St. Dominic's friend and director, Bishop Diego. If I remind you of one incident in which they were both involved, it will indicate what to expect from this line of enquiry. Bishop Diego was, perhaps, forty-five. I don't know more of him than his status, and he may have been older. St. Dominic was thirty-three. These two go on a mission for the King. That being accomplished, they go to Rome on purpose to ask the Pope if they may preach

the gospel to some wild tribe called the Cumans. They had said to themselves, quite simply: the surest way to enter heaven is by the door of martyrdom; the surest way of being martyred is to take the Gospel to the Cumans. The Pope, not without sympathy, sends the Bishop back to his diocese and St. Dominic to the Albigenses. This incident seems to me to show a simplicity in St. Dominic much in tune with the Angelico portrait. His eye was single and the whole body full of light.

Another opportunity open to us for appreciating St. Dominic is through his enemies. Who were his haters? Why did they hate him? In human affairs we cannot just splash the contrasts of good and evil upon the canvas, condemning the Count of Toulouse simply because he opposed St. Dominic and dismissing his opinions because they are false. We have too many neighbours, almost violently anti-catholic, whose personal goodness reminds us that the Faith is often hidden from the wise and prudent, the good and honourable. Their antagonism is not against the Faith, but against what they believe the Faith to be. For such reasons it is unlikely that our yield of enemy evidence about St. Dominic will be great. But considering the nature of his message, his uncompromising opposition to the heresy found in high and feudal places, it is significant that there is only one recorded attempt upon his life. This means that his charity was undimmed by any bitterness, that the warmth of his love tempered the severity of his truth and that he must have been a very likeable person, even to those who mistrusted his doctrine.

Leaving his friends and enemies, let us proceed to another avenue of approach, that through the knowledge we may have of the state of society and events of the time in which he lived. The Crusades; the Feudal system; the growth of the towns which were

Blackfriars

to break it; whether or no St. Dominic saw the end of that system as inevitable, it is certain that he did not attempt to prop it up, he did not put the new wine fermenting in his soul into the old bottle; his friars fitted into the new society not despising the fatal beginnings of democracy nor fearing to join issue with the intellectual pride known as free thought.

St. Dominic did not bother himself whether or no a town should get its charter and the Guilds acquire powers which the feudal lord had hitherto regarded as his own, though I imagine his personal sympathy to have been with the lord. It would seem that he saw God and His Church on one side and Man burdened with ignorance on the other, sin separating them. The cruelty and license of the rich, the indifference of the poor, the violent revivals of ancient heresy—a system so riddled was bound to fail though as a system it were perfection itself. He had to share in one crusade, he had to endure the humiliation of its failure. What an upheaval was taking place about him—in the midst of it he disperses his Order, but a year old, sending his brethren to the centres not of war but of learning, knowing them to be ill-equipped but certain that the Holy Spirit would supply the deficiencies. Had not our Blessed Lord sent out his disciples knowing that they were to forsake Him at the hour of trial, but knowing also that the Church would arise out of their failure? St. Dominic followed that example—and what arose out of this gesture of his? The Saint, being prodigal of his all, in the midst of a disorganised and disillusioned society, makes room for another Saint—Thomas of Aquin.

We are ourselves living again in a time of unrest and false securities, we have not forgotten the war, the strikes, even the suffragettes. What is the Church's answer to our problem? Briefly that if man knew the nature of God and the nature of his own soul he would

not make such an ass of himself . . . and St. Thomas is staged again.

The last way to St. Dominic of which I will speak is that of his country, climate and natural surroundings, which even the most staunch Darwinian will not affirm to have progressed since the thirteenth century. The mountains have not increased in grandeur, the fertility of the plains is not diminished and even the floods, which last winter directed the eyes of Europe to that corner of France, may have been known; but in a milder form as they were not dammed in those days. We may still see the Pyrenees as he saw them—for the greater part of his life he was probably within sight of them. In his boyhood they were the gates through which came all that his world knew of Christian culture. In his early manhood he passed through them to find an enemy to that culture as dangerous as the pagan he had left behind—and then their shining peaks separated him from his home. Doubtless the culture of Christian Spain, in which he had his roots, received some stimulus from his prayers though he returned not. He sent his brother Mannes to the University at Palencia, where a Dominican Priory was founded as in other university towns, Paris, Bologna, Rome and Oxford. We may visit that country from which he evangelised the world. It is, I understand, chiefly remarkable for its fertility. All the bodily necessities of food and clothing can easily be obtained by the labour of the women-folk alone. The men are left free to fight—at least they seem to have had such freedom in St. Dominic's day, otherwise the constant state of war between the various principalities and powers would not have been possible. A fruitful soil for the things of this world, a stony one for the things of the spirit. Of course sin is sin whether in the warm sun of Southern France or in the bleak countries of the North, and St. Dominic's answer to it was the same

Blackfriars

everywhere; yet we should understand him better if we had breathed the air he breathed, enjoyed the sights which gladdened his eye, and shared the discomforts also which the dust and mosquito are still able to provide.

HILARY PEPLER.

PILATE

LITHOSTROTOS : the Prisoner waiting there,
A silence : and the rabble hold their breath,
Then down the echoing centuries they hear
The voice of Justice sending Love to death.

ELIZABETH BELLOC.

DISMAS

INTELLECT upon the right
Speaking through the darkness saith :
'If thou be the Christ indeed
Save us now from pain and death.'

'Hold thy peace, blaspheming Thought,
All our due reward have we.'
Saith Emotion on the left
Crying, 'Lord, remember me.'

ELIZABETH BELLOC.