

## ST. DOMINIC AND THE ROSARY

THE familiar representations of our blessed Lady giving a rosary to St. Dominic are symbolical of a tradition, so tenaciously upheld by the Church, that she not only insists upon such representations being placed on, or near, the Rosary Altar in every church where the Confraternity of the Rosary is established, but forbids all representations of Our Lady giving a rosary to any other Saint.<sup>1</sup>

This tradition has been questioned, being alleged to date only from the time of Alan de la Roche, who was born in 1428. This zealous preacher of the devotion of the Rosary, so it is insinuated, foisted upon a credulous public the legend that St. Dominic had been commanded by the Mother of God to preach the Rosary, and the legend has persisted ever since his day. Alan appealed to 'tradition and documents' in support of his assertion, but there are no documents, we are told, and there is no tradition anterior to Alan himself. If this were indeed the truth, it is amazing that Alan could have succeeded in causing his claim to be accepted. Even if criticism in those days was not so acute or perfect as it is in our own, it is difficult

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<sup>1</sup> A picture in the chapel of the Franciscans at Toulouse in which Our Lady was shown as giving a rosary to St. Francis and St. Clare was condemned by Pope Alexander VII in 1663. Twenty years later the Congregation of the Index condemned another picture of Our Lady between two saints of the Society of Jesus, to one of whom she gave a book and to the other a rosary, and which bore the inscription: 'The Virgin Mother of God with her Son, inspires and recommends to the Society of Jesus the institution of sodalities and the use of the Office and of the Rosary: *Deipara Virgo cum Filio inspirat commendatque Societati Jesu institutionem sodalitatum et officii Rosarii que usum*; cf. *Histoire des Maîtres Generaux de l'Ordre des Frères Prêcheurs*, by Père Mortier, O.P.; Vol. VII, p. 203. *Le Rosaire et la Nouvelle Critique*, Père Etchevery, O.P.; p. 13.

to think that there were no critics able and ready to show that Alan was romancing. We do not know if Alan was brought to book for his statement, nor have we found that he was accused of having invented or imagined it. But the later critics do not fail to emphasize the silence of St. Dominic's early biographers with regard to the Rosary, pointing out that there is no mention, direct or indirect, by these writers, their contemporaries, or immediate successors, of the supposed fact that the Founder of the Order of Preachers was also the Founder of the Rosary.

Disregarding the various theories that have been put forward in place of accepted tradition, we offer for consideration the following facts which will be found both illuminating and authoritative.

## I

In October, 1925, Father Maxime Gorce, O.P., published a number of extracts from an old manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris which aroused interest.<sup>2</sup> The manuscript had previously been examined by experts, but it was Father Gorce who discovered its importance in regard to the Rosary. This document—No. 12483, *Fonds Français*—originally belonged to the Royal Priory of Poissy, and was composed by a Dominican of Soissons in 1328. It apparently consisted of three books, each of which contained fifty legends or *gaudia* in honour of Our Blessed Lady. The Prologue, almost half of the first book, and some leaves at the end of the third book are unfortunately missing, but the two hundred and sixty-five parchment pages that remain are covered with double columns of verses of eight syllables.

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<sup>2</sup> *Le Rosaire aux XIII et XIV siècles. L'Année Dominicaine, octobre, 1925.* Closer examination of the manuscript gave further results which Father Gorce published in a volume in 1931: *Le Rosaire et ses Antécédents Historiques.* We shall give a brief summary of this very interesting book.

In the Litany of Loreto we address Our Lady as *Rosa Mystica*, Mystical Rose; the title is ancient and has given rise to a literature concerning the symbolism of the Rose in its application to the Virgin Mother of God. A fairly large number of 'Flower-prayers' and 'Flower-poems' were composed in the Middle Ages in honour of Our Lady, 'The Virgin Flower,' and are described by Father Gorce in his introductory pages.<sup>3</sup> These 'Flower-prayers' came to be linked with the *Ave Maria* chiefly because of the influence of the Cistercian monks whose devotion to Our Lady, like that of St. Bernard, is proverbial. In many places the custom obtained of wearing wreaths or crowns of flowers as a sign of joyousness, and by degrees another custom crept in of wearing such wreaths on the head while saying the 'Flower-prayers.'<sup>4</sup> Father Gorce gives an interesting account of the equivalence of *Gaudia*, Flowers, Roses and Garlands of flowers, couplets, and repetitions of the words: *Ave Maria*,<sup>5</sup> and of 'Confraternities of Our Lady, and the Chapel Vert,'<sup>6</sup> since it was easy to transfer the terms wreaths, garlands, crowns, *chapelets*, *chapels*, *courrones*, *petit chapeau* from the actual wreaths or garlands to the 'Flower-prayers' themselves. The document compiled by the Soissons Dominican is in the style of these 'Flower-verses,' and frequent mention is made of flowers as symbolical of 'The Virgin Flower,' but more frequently still is the 'Rose-flower' mentioned as the most fitting symbol of 'The Rose of roses,' Our Blessed Lady, and always with increasing emphasis linked with the *Ave* or *Salve*. The compiler naturally has a peculiar liking for the *Salve Regina*.

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<sup>3</sup> Pp. 9-31. Cf. *Le Sainte Rosaire*, by the late Bishop Thomas Esser, O.P., Chapter IV.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *The Month*, June, 1908, where this custom is described by Father Thurston, S.J.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, *ibid.*, pp. 14-34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86, sqq.

The document itself, which might well be called a verse sermon, inculcates the necessity for everyone to have recourse to the Mother of God, since everyone, 'prestres, clerics, nobles et lais, chardinaux et Pape de Rome,' requires her assistance. While this recourse to Our Lady should be unceasing, 'with *Ave* or by *Salve*,' everyone must think upon 'Jesuchrist and His sweet Mother' when they pray. It is in this manner that the Order which is *her* Order prays, the Order which is the fruit of her prayers, which is under her special protection, whose enemies are her enemies, but who defends and will continue to defend it against all its foes.' This Order is that of 'the Preachers.' The compiler then relates the story of the foundation of the Order which Gerard de Frachet gives in the first chapter of his *Vitae Fratrum*. As Father Gorce pertinently remarks: 'This legend . . . assumes extraordinary importance in the document . . .'<sup>7</sup> The Soissons Dominican does not reveal his name in the document, but in many places he has written in the margin the letters *ROS*: in this place he has written almost the whole word *ROSARI*. Jeanroy added the two letters *UM*.<sup>8</sup> Father Gorce writes *US* and gives the manuscript the title of *ROSARIUS*.

## II

The legend referred to is that of the monk who beheld Our Blessed Lady in a vision pleading for sinners 'during

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<sup>7</sup> We give the Old French verses as Father Gorce has published them :

La benigne Marie  
 Qui est de l'ordre la baillie,  
 Mes par dessus mestre et mestreuse.  
 C'est icelle que l'ordre adresse  
 Et defend et deffendra  
 Qui l'ordre grieve li meschera. Folio 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Histoire de la Littérature Française*, p. 393. Quoted by *L'Année Dominicaine*, October, 1925; p. 434, Note.

three days and nights on bended knees and with clasped hands' before her Son who was about to smite the world because of its wickedness, but who relented at His Mother's prayer, saying: 'I will send unto them preachers and men of truth, through whom the world will be enlightened and reclaimed.' The conversion of the world will not be accomplished by any preachers but by 'the Preachers' who have been raised up by God at the prayer of His Mother for this purpose. Shortly after St. Dominic had begun his mission he was known as 'Dominic the preacher.' He founded the Order of Preachers; and in the thirteenth century Dominican and Preacher were synonymous. So the document continues: 'When the gracious Mary had made her request to Jesu she presented Dominic to Him. Jesuchrist commended him greatly, said he was good and zealous, a fearless champion and learned, and would do much good. He will be like a nurse; will praise virtue and denounce vice, and give the food of holy preaching which is the nourishment of souls.'<sup>10</sup>

The document tells us the nature of this 'holy preaching' which would convert sinners; it is the unceasing repetition of the *Ave Maria* which 'the Preachers' under the guidance of St. Dominic preached to men. 'It is the *Ave Maria* which overcame, and overcomes, and will always overcome the enemy as often as it is said . . . When Satan hears this prayer he is put to great confusion . . . Let us say then *Ave Maria*. Put all thy heart into it and say it often from devotion in honour of Mary that she may guard thee through life.'<sup>11</sup> Something more, however, is required than the mere repetition of the prayer. The document insists that it is necessary to *think*, not only on 'Jhesuchrist et sa douce mere,' but also upon certain events in their lives.

Devotion to the Joys—*Gaudia*—of Our Lady was fairly

<sup>10</sup> Gorce, p. 53, folio 21 recto.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55, folio 24 verso.

common in the Middle Ages, and some of the lists of *Gaudia* which were honoured mention as many as twenty, others fifteen, seven, or five. These *Gaudia* are connected with the 'Flower-prayers' already mentioned, and again the Rose as the Queen of flowers is specially dedicated to Mary 'the Rose of roses,' who unfolds her beauties in what this old writer calls her 'Five principal Joys' and in 'the Sorrows she had to endure,' as well as in other Joys which are eternal. In one verse he tells us 'to place this Rose upon thy head';<sup>12</sup> it is not merely a garland of roses he desires we should wear, but in symbolical language he urges us to *think* upon the Joys of Our Lady 'since they will banish evil.'

These Joys are mentioned in detail: The Annunciation, the Birth of Our Lord, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Assumption of our Lady, and her Crowning.<sup>13</sup>

The Sorrows we should remember are 'The Sorrows Five which Jesuchrist bore for us when He was nailed to the cross.'<sup>14</sup> The writer insists that, while the Joys of our Lady should be remembered, 'it would be shameful, foolish and unbecoming not to think of this favour, the Passion, in a special manner. Remember then with great pity these things, else it would be a sin of deep ingratitude. Set thyself therefore to learn to love God.'<sup>15</sup> He particularly urges that the *Ave Maria* shall be said while thinking of these Joys and Sorrows, and while he would have us practise this devotion continually he mentions Saturday as the day specially dedicated to it. He had Dominican tradition and practice to guide him. Humbert de Romans, who was General

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Met ceste rose en ton chief  
Ele t'ostera tout mischief. *Folio 33 verso.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62, *folio 45.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59, *folio 42 recto.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60, *folio 42 recto.*

of the Order in 1254-1263, ordered a sequence to be sung during Mass on Saturday in which we read: This is the day, O Virgin, on which thy Order pays its vows to thee.<sup>16</sup>

We have said that the writer urges unceasing repetition of the *Ave Maria*, now he urges the repetition of a *fixed number of Ave Marias*, which he calls in one place 'the Psalter of Our Lady,' and in another 'the Paternoster of Our Lady,' and he supports his advice by a legend which he says he has taken from the Book of Bees composed 'in the year of grace, one thousand, two hundred and fifty-one.'<sup>17</sup> The Book of Bees was composed by Thomas de Cantimpré, who lived thirty years after St. Dominic, and the legend is that of the young man who addressed Our Lady by the recitation of one hundred and fifty *Aves*. This is what the Soissons Dominican calls 'the Psalter of Our Lady,' which should be recited after the manner in which the Psalms are sung in Choir.<sup>18</sup> He recommends everyone to practise this devotion, but 'the Preachers' especially, for 'if thou hast Mary on thy tongue, and she in her graciousness inspires thee, thou wilt be able to preach with more solidity and instruct the people better.'<sup>19</sup>

The First Book of Rosarius closes with a long exhortation to remember the merits of Him he calls 'Jhesuchrist-flejur' when reciting the *Ave Maria*, and he continues the same theme in the remaining extant portions of the manuscript. The entire document, as we have suggested, might well be called a verse-sermon on the advantages of devotion to the Mother of God by the multiple recitation of the *Ave Maria* while thinking on her Joys, Sorrows and Heavenly Joys. It is even urged that the young maiden who wants

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<sup>16</sup> *Haec est dies in qua suu Vota tibi, Virgo, tua reddit haec familia.* Cf. *De Vita Regulari*, Humberti de Romanis. Ed. Berthier. Vol. II, pp. 73-75.

<sup>17</sup> Gorce, pp. 64-65, folio 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65, folio 48 verso.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67, folio 57 verso.

a Psalter of David would do better if she thus said the *Ave Maria* frequently.<sup>20</sup>

Mindful of the aim of his Order this Soissons Dominican again tells 'the Preachers' that 'they should honour the Mother and her Son as he has told them how to honour them. He insists upon this method of honouring Our Lady as specially fruitful and efficacious for the work of the apostolate, and harks back to the legend previously mentioned that the Order of Preachers was raised by God at His Mother's request to convert the world. 'From heaven worthy labourers go forth who loyally carry out their task,' and chiefest amongst them is 'St. Dominic the man of wisdom, who was filled with the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost.'<sup>21</sup>

The old writer then relates the legend which Blessed Cecilia gives in her narrative of the vision St. Dominic beheld when he saw his spiritual children gathered under the mantle of Our Lady in heaven, and how he summoned the brethren to the chapter-room and preached 'un grant sermon, edifiant et bel et bon,' in which he told them of his vision and urged them to redouble their zeal in honouring the Mother orf God.<sup>22</sup>

### III

This manuscript was composed in 1328, a century *after* the death of St. Dominic and a century *before* the birth of Alan de la Roche, and it is evidently composed under the inspiration of a living tradition. The writer asserts that St. Dominic and his Preachers were sent by God at Our Lady's prayer to convert the world, and that the method of 'holy preaching' inaugurated by the Saint and his brethren

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72, folio 189.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75, folio 238 verso.

Saint Dominique fut preudome  
Du saint Esprit eut les VII dons.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75, folio 238.



ren was the multiple recitation of the *Ave Maria* while thinking upon certain events or mysteries in the life of Jesus and His Mother. St. Dominic is distinctly mentioned as the great apostle of Our Lady, who chose him to preach this particular form of devotion, and that his sons, 'the Preachers,' would continue what he had begun. He identifies this method of prayer and preaching with the Rose-prayer, as particularly applicable to the Mother of God; but the signature—ROS—which is written in the margin of the manuscript so often and which ultimately becomes ROSARI—is significant. It indicates that the special method of prayer practised by 'the Preachers' and preached by St. Dominic, while similar to other 'Flower-prayers' of the time, was assuming a uniformity these other prayers did not possess. The signature, *ROSARI*, tells us that this prayer was pre-eminently *the* Rose-prayer; it was the *Rosary*.

We may conclude, then, with Father Gorce that the Rose-prayer had its period of evolution and development like other devotions, and that by degrees it assumed the form in which we use it, but 'around St. Dominic and with St. Dominic as its centre.'

It has been asserted that meditations on the mysteries were first introduced by a Carthusian monk, Dom Dominic of Prussia, in the fifteenth century; but the following example will be enough to make one hesitate to regard his additions to the *Ave Maria* as proof of this. In one Mystery he adds the words: 'And mayest thou deign to reward with the crown of eternal life all who recite this Rosary in thy honour.' This is an *addition* to the *Ave Maria*, but it cannot be called a meditation on the mystery of the Rosary. In the manuscript of the Soissons Dominican, however, we are told to 'remember,' to 'keep in mind,' certain definite events in the life of our Lord and His Mother during the recitation of the *Ave Maria*, and these events are specified for us. Surely such remembrance is the equivalent of meditation. When one of St. Dominic's companions, Romeus

de Livia, was dying, he held in his hands a knotted cord on which he was accustomed to count the *Aves* while 'he thought upon the Child Jesus and His Mother Mary, and urged his brethren to practise this devotion.'<sup>23</sup> 'If anyone had told us St. Dominic had done this,' says Père Joret, 'no one would have denied that he was the founder of the Rosary, yet Romeus de Livia was a disciple and companion of St. Dominic.'<sup>24</sup>

A set of verses, said to have been composed after the Battle of Muret in 1213, and which was inserted in the Archives of Muret or Montpellier by a notary of the latter city, has been the subject of criticism. Jean de St. Benoit, who published the poem in 1693, says he had seen the original. In these verses Our Blessed Lady is addressed as The Virgin-Flower, *Virgo flos*, who has overcome the enemies of God, and St. Dominic is represented as 'praying with tears.' Then we read: 'As soon as the humble Dominic brings roses, the Lord immediately begins to bestow crowns. Truth rises in triumph because Dominic by his preaching moves heaven and earth . . . Dominic by his prayer obtains the cessation of evils, and while he fights by preaching he upholds the cause of the just.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> '*Ruminans Puerum Jesum et Dominam Mariam Matrem ejus.*'

<sup>24</sup> *Le Rosaire de Marie*. Éditions du Cerf, 1933, p. 225. In this small volume Père Joret gives the principal passages from the Encyclicals and Letters of Pope Leo XIII on the Rosary in Latin and French. It is regrettable that in the volume published by Benziger in 1903, *The Great Encyclical Letters of Pope Leo XIII*, not a single Encyclical on the Rosary is included. Pope Leo XIII published twelve Encyclical Letters on the Rosary between 1883 and 1898; a Papal Brief on the Rosary in 1883; an Apostolic Letter on the Rosary in 1901, and two other Letters on the Rosary in 1886 and 1887, but none of these documents are included in the above volume.

<sup>25</sup> We give three stanzas of this poem and italicise certain words:

Writing in *The Month*, May 1908, Fr. Thurston said: 'If it (the poem) is genuine, it not only deserves all that Dominican writers have said of it, but even more . . .' With this statement we heartily agree, but we cannot agree with the distinguished writer when he goes on to say that although 'this coupling together of the word *roses* with St. Dominic's name will still seem very suggestive . . . even that mention loses all significance if we rightly appreciate the familiarity to the mediæval mind of the practice, especially in sunny Provence, of bringing roses as a mark of joy and thanksgiving.'

The manuscript of the Soissons Dominican confirms the story contained in the Muret verses. It takes account of the mediæval custom of weaving and wearing flowers and roses 'as a mark of joy and thanksgiving,' but it also insists upon the weaving and wearing of spiritual garlands, particularly rose-garlands, composed of the *Ave Maria* recited many times, and during the recital of which the mind of the weaver and wearer should dwell upon certain events in the life of our Lord and His Mother. The document further tells us that it was in this manner the Order of Preachers honoured Our Lady, and that the founder of the Order, St. Dominic, was the chiefest of those 'labourers sent from heaven, a fearless champion' of Truth whose preaching would convert the world. It is not likely that while the Battle of Muret was being fought St. Dominic

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Dominicus *rosas affere*  
 Dum incipit tam humilis,  
 Dominus coronas conferre  
 Statim apparat agilis.

*Veritas* surgit triumphans  
*Quia Dominicus praedicans*  
 Coelum et terram commovit.  
 Dominicus *ab oratione*  
 Finem malorum obtinet,  
 Et dum pugnat *praedicatione*  
 Sortem justorum sustinet.

was weaving wreaths of flowers for the soldiers of Simon de Montfort; he was praying; the Muret verses stress this fact. They attribute the victory at Muret, the victory of Truth over Albigensian heresy, to the prayer and preaching of St. Dominic, and, like the *Rosarius* manuscript, they identify the prayer of the saint with his preaching. If the words *rosas afferre* mean anything, they mean that St. Dominic was weaving the rose-wreath of the Rosary which he preached to the people, and that it was this prayer which won the victory at Muret in 1213 as the same prayer overthrew the Turk at Lepanto in 1571. When the humility of the Saint is mentioned by the writer of the Muret verses—*tam humilis*—it is not to emphasize the truth that St. Dominic was humble; every saint is humble, but to direct attention to his use of a method of prayer which even in those days some wise persons might consider as suitable only for the illiterate.

The *ROSARIUS* document is illuminating, since it was evidently written under the inspiration of a living tradition. It is unfortunate that some portions of the document are missing, since those extant allow us to think it probable, at least, that the writer had given a more detailed account of the circumstances connected with the Rosary-apostolate of St. Dominic in the first part of the manuscript. The portions that remain, however, and which Fr. Gorce has examined with such critical skill, are sufficient to show that Alan de la Roche is not the founder of the Rosary or the inventor of the Dominican tradition; they show that Alan was correct in appealing to 'tradition and to documents he had read' when he claimed that St. Dominic was the author of the Rosary.

This is the Dominican tradition, but it is also that of the Church, having been explicitly accepted by Popes from Sixtus IV, in 1471, to our own day. The more recent Papal pronouncements carry additional weight, in that, while the Popes who have issued them are conversant with the criticism of recent as well as of earlier years regarding the

traditional Dominican account of the origin of the Rosary, they have not been influenced by this criticism, but have ignored it and stood by the tradition.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. especially Pope Benedict XV, Encyclical Letter for the Seventh Centenary of Saint Dominic published on June 29th, 1921, where we read that Our Lady had 'used the ministry of St. Dominic to teach the Most Holy Rosary to the Church.' Also Pope Pius XI, Apostolic Letter to the Father General of the Order of Preachers on the occasion of the Seventh Centenary of the Canonization of St. Dominic, March, 1934, in which we read: 'Amongst the arms which St. Dominic used for the conversion of heretics, the most powerful, as the faithful well know, was the Rosary of Mary, the method of which was revealed by the Blessed Virgin herself, and is propagated far and wide throughout the Catholic world.' And, finally, the Encyclical Letter on the Rosary, 1937, in which the late Holy Father says of this devotion that 'St. Dominic promoted it in a wonderful way not without inspiration from the Mother of God and heavenly admonitions.' Later, in the same Encyclical, he speaks of Lourdes, where 'the most holy Virgin has also in our own times most strongly commended this form of prayer . . . and taught a pure maid to recite it by her own example.' Here, indeed, Our Lady of Lourdes has, in the words of Père Cros, S.J., 'made the Wild Rose-bush bloom again, in the Rosary of St. Dominic, Our Lady's Garland of Roses.'