

## BLACKFRIARS

### DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY

IT is a sequel to the Catholicism of the Church that the unity of her members has not necessitated their uniformity; racial cultures have been strengthened by the acceptance of a common faith, and English like French or Irish or Italian types are still most distinctively national when most deeply Catholic. The history of the great religious orders affords a parallel, for the common end to which they are directed, the common faith that has created them and the bond of priesthood, have yet enabled them to maintain a full individuality. The greatest of their saints are those who most incarnate the particular spirit of each order. For they have found their perfection in the fulfilment of God's will, and God's will has been fulfilled in their obedience, an obedience to tradition as well as to command, an acceptance of custom as well as of written law. Each of the greater religious orders has therefore possessed its own school of spirituality. For "spirituality" is but a clumsy term for the conscious following of a way to God.

Yet it would seem puerile to discuss which order and which tradition in spirituality is the more perfect in the concrete. Each retains the possibility of corruption and each will mirror in its finite contrasted achievement the infinite unity of God, since each will be perfect in so far as it participates in the divine and yet remain inevitably separate in so far as it is participant; "*quod in Deo est simpliciter et uniformiter in creaturis est multipliciter et divisim.*"<sup>1</sup> It follows that in a study in Catholic spirituality it should be impossible to ignore either the unity or the diversity, for neither is intelligible to us without the other. The unity derived from the acceptance of Christ is the Way and Truth and Life, and it is merely emphasized by a contrast in the mottoes of the orders. *Pax, Veritas, Ad maiorem Dei gloriam, Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, are only real through reference to a single reality. The search for the Peace of God,

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<sup>1</sup> *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 47, art. 1.

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the conscious effort for the realization of His greater glory, the union with Christ upon the Cross, the union with God in truth have the same final end and the same origin. The end is the vision of God in His essence, the origin is the love of God by charity. Both presuppose a common life in grace. Success or failure in each approach is determined by the same factors, intensity in charity or its loss; and yet each approach remains distinct. This diversity is derived from finite circumstance. It will result partly from the special purpose for which each order has been created and from the choice of means this has necessitated, it will be affected perhaps permanently by the personality of its founder and by the cumulative influence of generations striving, however imperfectly, to keep the spirit as well as the letter of the rule. The history of Dominican spirituality has been formed by the interaction of these four factors.

The due fulfilment of the purpose of the Order, *contemplata aliis tradere*, implied a lifetime of contemplation as well as a lifetime of action. It was to be the order of preachers, in the phrase of a mediæval eulogist the "order of apostles," and yet to remain primarily contemplative. Action was never to be the purpose of contemplation but always its natural result. Since contemplation is the direct vision of a truth and the apostolate the effort to bring it to others, *Veritas* was almost inevitably the Order's motto and through its implications formed the framework of Dominican life. The emphasis on God as Truth rather than as the object of desire was stressed by accidental circumstance. The founding of the Order in Provence was occasioned by the quick growth of a primarily metaphysical heresy. The surge of Dominican activity through thirteenth century Europe had been occasioned by the sudden development of the universities, and passing up the trade routes of mediæval thought first reached Paris and Bologna and Oxford. Necessarily the sustained study of theology became recognized as an essential means to the fulfilment of the purpose of the Order. The need for clear dialectic, a recognition of the metaphysical root in so much mediæval controversy, and the acceptance of the mediæval concept of a single universe of

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knowledge, led to the slow triumph of the school of St. Albert and to the study of all known truth.

Such a movement was not revolutionary in the thirteenth century Church; there had been the great tradition of the Victorines and sporadic Benedictine learning. But it was a new conception for religious to rank study with the liturgy as their *opus Dei*, and it marked a lasting breach with the hearty voluntarism of much mediæval spirituality. The intellect and not the *principalis affectio* remained the Dominican road through prayer. Dominican spirituality was to be in detail the application of reasoned theology, and the greatest of the mystics of the first Order were to be among the most subtle of scholastics. It is possible to trace almost genealogically the Dominican writers on spirituality until the divided lines of their teaching fused at last in the commentaries of John of St. Thomas, perhaps the second greatest among them. They formed themselves into dynasties of theologians. Even the great Rhineland school, radically unthomist in approach, remained intellectual in the theory of prayer, was marked by an almost excessive subtlety, and had its founders from the lectors of theology; Meister Ulrich, Meister Dietrich, Meister Eckart. Among the roots of all Dominican mysticism lay the doctrine of essence and existence.

Regarded historically it may seem strange that Dominican spirituality has so long escaped sterility. Had it possessed merely these qualities it might so easily have lapsed into an exclusive concentration upon the reality of the abstract and a slightly lethargic content in the carefully wound coils of speculation; it was a Dominican who first noted that lectors in sacred theology like sacristans forget to bow before the altar. It was safeguarded from such forms of development by the two remaining factors in its formation, the personal influence of the founder and the achievement of the greatest among his successors.

Two characteristics marked St. Dominic in the world as well as in the *Paradiso*; an indomitable magnanimity and the passionate desire of apostleship. It was not until his work had failed in Languedoc that he determined to win all Europe and, in the phrase of Blessed Jordan, "he deemed

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himself then only a real member of Christ's body when he could spend his whole being on gaining men." His life had been foreshadowed by his first choice at Palencia; "better live bodies than dead skins." He had spent thirteen years in the founding of his Order and he was only to govern it for five, but the influence of his personality was never to be entirely overlaid. The evidence of the witnesses at the process of his canonization has preserved the sudden spontaneity of his traits, and his quick, vivid phrases. It is significant that they have been echoed, often so unconsciously, among his followers for seven hundred years.

The presence of such qualities had its own danger; prudent discretion has never been noted as a Dominican virtue and efficiency has suffered recurrently from the lack of disciplined co-ordination. By coincidence rather than by design some of the greatest of the religious orders still seem to reflect the tactics if not the strategy accepted in the period of their founders. The well-planned sixteenth century victories of the close-knit *tercias* of the Spanish foot were to be paralleled and to be surpassed by the triumphs won for Catholicism by the greatest of the sixteenth century orders; at times Dominican action was to mirror the feudal levy of new Castille riding southward, loosely, with its many leaders to some chance-won foray or to some quite unnecessary defeat.

Spontaneity was to remain a note of Dominican spirituality and perhaps the primary characteristic of its school of prayer. St. Dominic's utter concentration upon the personal following of Christ was to continue to dwarf all other devotion in the Order, the desire to spend themselves for men, as Christ had spent Himself upon the Cross, was to drive the greatest missionaries among the Friars across the boundaries of an unknown world, east to central Asia and south to Ethiopia. In the gibe of an English Benedictine, even the Dominicans of the English province were to have the earth their priory and the sea their cloister. Yet all this was to remain not merely compatible in ideal but complementary with the other tradition of a careful study of the minute, of the zest to distinguish and to subdistinguish, and

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of the use of the long chains of syllogism upon the road to God. Dominican spirituality in its highest form remains one of the chief of the syntheses of St. Thomas. It is not that it was created by him or even re-fashioned, but it was to attain to the expression of its final unity in the clear splendour of his thought.

For details in the mode of spirituality which might have seemed contrary while studied in segments, appear necessarily indivisible when shifted into the fresh perspective demanded by Thomist metaphysic. A part is only in existence as a part because of its relation to a whole. The primary contribution of St. Thomas to the spiritual theory of his time was the application of the principle of potency and act to the recognized divisions and the sanctioned conclusions of the schools. The doctrine of human unity, which seemed to the thirteenth century the distinctive mark of the Dominicans, was based on the conception of the human soul as act informing matter. The new Dominican theory of contemplation was framed by the dual relation of faculty to substance and faculty to object, and if Thomist mysticism is dynamic rather than static it is as a corollary to a definition of movement as the act of a potency in so far as it is still to be realized, still realizable. It is not that St. Thomas was ever intentionally an innovator in the spiritual life; St. Gregory is quoted over forty times in the two questions *De Vita Contemplativa*, and much of the early thirteenth century synthesis of Augustinian and Dionysian tendencies in mystical theory survived in mediæval Dominican treatises just as the mediæval Franciscans were the heirs of the twelfth century Cistercian writers. But he had altered traditional conceptions by integrating them.

Forms of prayer and study which had already grown traditional in the Order were at last welded in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth chapters in the third book of the *Contra Gentiles*. The conception of a higher phase of prayer as remote and antithetic to the intellect could have no place in a Thomist system precisely since human prayer is the giving and the uniting of a man to God; "*Deo autem assimilatur maxime creatura intellectualis per hoc quod intellectualis*

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*est.*"<sup>2</sup> It is from an exigency of nature that man finds his beatitude through intellectual vision. The impulse to know more perfectly is the corollary of love, for the lover is not content with a superficial knowledge of the beloved.<sup>3</sup> The conception of prayer as a sudden immobile experience could have no place in a Thomist system, even ecstatic prayer cannot possess the immobility of God's essence and is still dynamized by finality. It remains one phase out of many phases in the soul's ascent to God. For in contrast to the neo-Platonizing theologians St. Thomas is intent upon the ascent of being and not on its cascade. To a Thomist all finite being is in movement in so far as it is finite, an unbroken movement in so far as it is in being; for the finite precisely since it is not self-sufficient must tend towards the self-sufficient, and precisely since it is only participant must retain the possibility of becoming and the desire to become. "*Unde patet quod omnia appetunt divinam similitudinem.*"<sup>4</sup>

It is the universality of this vision that has preserved Dominican spirituality undepartmentalized; contemplation has never been divorced from action. Even the Thomist prayer of quiet is practical as well as speculative and has as its scope a better ruling of all the moral life. For the excellence of the gift of *Intellectus* consists precisely in the consideration of the eternal and of the necessary not only as they are in themselves but also as the rules of human action.<sup>5</sup> Mysticism is not a closed compartment in the Christian life. Mystic knowledge is regulated by faith, and to a Thomist the value of an advance in mystic prayer lies primarily in the advance in charity that it may presuppose. The doctrine of the Gifts remains the essential note in Thomist spiritual theory precisely since it provides the unbroken rhythm in the ascent to the divine. The contemplative will possess a higher degree of knowledge as he grows more connatural with the contemplated, and he has grown more connatural through the growth of charity and its corollary the more

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<sup>2</sup> *Cont. Gent.*, III, cap. 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Sum. Theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 28, art. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Cont. Gent.*, III, cap. 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Sum. Theol.*, IIa IIae, q. 8, art. 3 ad 2.

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patent presence of the Gifts. Speculative wisdom gives correct judgment after reason has made due search, but it pertains to the gift of wisdom to judge of God by kinship.<sup>6</sup> Precisely in so far as Dominican spirituality is Thomist it is integrated into a *Summa Theologica* derived from the same principles governed by the same laws.

A specifically Dominican school in spirituality had been first created through the special purpose of the Order and the choice of means that it necessitated. Its theory had been synthesized by St. Thomas; its application was due to the half successful endeavour of many Dominicans now forgotten. It is probable that many in the Order have come to realize and embody the full idea of Dominican contemplation; it is doubtful if many of them have achieved the full ideal of Dominican activity. The interplay of natural talent and obedience has led inevitably to specialization in action if not in thought. A full expression of Dominican life is often only possible to communities at the cost of the canalized energies of their members. It was a consequence that the wide use of personal dispensation characterized early Dominican legislation and that variety was so soon accepted as a means to unity; historically Dominican spirituality has been marked by this individual variety in its application. The saints and *Beati* of the Order have achieved sanctity in very different settings: in the *studia*, the anchorholds, or the parish houses, or the wandering life of the mediæval preacher. Yet the constant effort to sustain among so much illusion the sense of the real has given their lives a special unity. Success in preaching as well as in study must presuppose the recognition of the immediate factors in each very concrete situation. At times, monastic spirituality has been the spirituality of a liturgy moving securely through a shadow world intent upon the world it shadowed. In a phrase of St. Bede's, the literal has been to the allegorical as water is to wine. But Dominican spirituality has remained in practice the application of literal fact to literal fact. It is significant that the long traditions of Dominican exegesis

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 45, art. 2.

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have been concentrated on the literal sense of texts. The Rosary is in itself a symbol; Dominican devotions have always centred in the detailed following of Christ's life on earth. It is this that has linked for ever study and apostolate. St. Dominic had desired to spend himself for men as Christ had spent himself upon the Cross, and the greatest of the Dominican schoolmen were to be aided by syllogism to the Incarnate Word. At the last analysis all Dominican spirituality has remained the spontaneous following of Christ as Truth.

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