

## ENGLISH DOMINICAN SANCTITY (I)

THE English Dominican Province has given to the Church five cardinals, seventy-two archbishops and bishops, several papal legates and nuncios, and to the state some ministers of prominence such as Archbishop William Hotham, the favourite minister of Edward I, and Bishop John Gilbert of Hereford, twice Lord High Treasurer. In theology, philosophy, Sacred Scripture and other branches of ecclesiastical science English Dominican writers of repute number more than a hundred, and it is easy to show that during the first three centuries of their existence they were by far the most prominent theological body in England, whilst extant MSS. of sermons and state documents testify to their ability and popularity as preachers. In contemplating this long list of eminent men the question has sometimes been asked why there are no English Dominicans officially enrolled in the Calendar of Saints either as canonized or beatified. The difficulty, which applies equally to the Irish Province with its lengthy list of martyrs, is not really hard to answer. At the time of the Henrican schism the feasts of six Dominicans only were kept in the Order, now the number is three hundred and four, of whom two hundred and ninety-four have been raised to the altars since 1600. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the English Dominicans, persecuted and generally working in secret, and frequently in prison, had little leisure for gathering the information necessary to obtain the beatification or canonization of the many members of the Province noted for their sanctity or heroism as martyrs. It has been left to us in more propitious times to undertake this task, and surely we can hope that such a work will be blessed with success.<sup>1</sup>

The first English Dominican to possess a *cultus* was Lawrence the Englishman, who from the earliest times has

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<sup>1</sup> In obedience to the decrees of Pope Urban VIII and other Roman Pontiffs we declare that all the graces, miracles, and other supernatural facts mentioned in this paper rest on human authority alone, and in regard to these we submit unreservedly to the judgment of the Holy and Apostolic See.

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been styled by the historians of the Order Blessed Lawrence. He was one of the first companions of Saint Dominic, to whom he had attached himself before the confirmation of the Order, and on August the 15th, the feast of the Assumption, 1217, together with the other fifteen disciples he made his profession in the hands of the holy founder. The following day took place the well-known dispersal of the brethren, Lawrence being one of the seven appointed to found the Order in Paris. These seven were a veritable little company of saints, two of them, Bertrand of Garrigua and Mannes, Saint Dominic's own brother, having been raised to the altars of the Church; nevertheless it was to Blessed Lawrence, as Blessed Jordan tells us, that God in a vision revealed the success of their own labours and the glory that was to come to the Order there from its great saints and doctors, a glory realized in the work of Blessed Reginald, Saint Albert the Great, and the Angelic Doctor, to mention but a few of the saintly men who taught there. We are told that Blessed Lawrence's preaching in Paris was accompanied by striking miracles, including the restoring of sight to a priest. "A Spanish priest who was quite blind of one eye felt convinced that if Brother Lawrence from England would only put his hand upon it he would recover his sight. The Brother complied with his urgent request, and the sight was restored immediately."<sup>2</sup> Blessed Lawrence died in the year 1235, probably at St. Jacques in Paris, "renowned for the gift of prophecy, purity of life, and the working of many miracles." His cult has continued till our own day, and in 1888 and 1892 the English Province petitioned the Master-General (the late Cardinal Frühwirth) that steps might be taken to obtain the approval of the Holy See for this unbroken *cultus*, and this request of the Province was supported by the General Chapters held at Avila in 1898 and at Viterbo in 1904. Blessed Lawrence's name is included in the latest list drawn up by the Postulator-General of the Order for the guidance of the General Chapter of Rome in 1935.

Another English Dominican with a *cultus*, which however

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<sup>2</sup> *Lives of the Brethren*, trans. P. Conway, O.P., 192.

has lapsed, was a friar called "Saint Brice of Newcastle" by Lawrence Pignon, O.P., Bishop of Auxerre, in his chronicle of the Order to which he prefixed a list of saints of the Order, written, he tells us, in the year 1394. Leander Alberti in his *Lives of the illustrious men of the Dominican Order* published in 1517 adds that Saint Brice lived towards the end of the thirteenth century and miraculous oil flowed from his tomb. The writer possibly had his information from the English Dominicans. Seraphino Razzi in his *Lives of the Saints of the Order* written at the end of the sixteenth century evidently relied on Alberti for his knowledge of Saint Brice. No further facts are at present forthcoming on this saintly son of the English Province, and his *cultus* in this country evidently passed with the Reformation.

That the Province was renowned for its sanctity in the thirteenth century is abundantly proved by the unusually large number of brethren remarkable for miracles and supernatural wonders mentioned by Gerard de Frachet, Provincial of Provence, in his records of the saintly brethren of the Order compiled, in obedience to the request of the fifth Master-General, Blessed Humber de Romans, between the years 1256 and 1259 and entitled *Lives of the Brethren*. The value of the collection is historically very great, written as it was at a time when many witnesses still lived who had known Saint Dominic and the early brethren, and these same witnesses forwarded their information to Gerard, as he himself frequently mentions throughout his narrative. Thus, for example, he tells how Brother Seyer, a Dominican professor "of Cambridge University, who was renowned for piety and learning, reported to us how a certain holy man used often to behold a globe of light come down from heaven and rest upon the heads of the brethren while they were devoutly singing Blessed Mary's anthem after Compline."<sup>3</sup> Again we read: "While one of our English Brethren, a lector in theology and a good preacher, was supping with a soldier's family, the house unexpectedly took fire. From the scarcity of water and difficulty in getting help the flames spread

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

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rapidly. While his companion was bustling about and adding to the general uproar, this brother threw himself on his knees and by his prayer not merely checked but extinguished the fire, and so utterly too that not a trace of it could be seen. He secretly communicated this prodigy to the Master of the Order, neither exaggerating it through vainglory nor yet unprofitably concealing it, but to no one else did he breathe a word about it."<sup>4</sup> In another place Gerard relates how a certain prior of the English Province told him of the extraordinary case of a peasant he had exorcized, who, though thoroughly illiterate, was able to answer questions in Greek, Latin, French and, English, which story incidentally witnesses to the prior's own erudition.<sup>5</sup>

A great part of Gerard's book is devoted to descriptions of the saintly deaths of the brethren and here the English Province figures prominently. Brother Walter of Norwich, a young but very gifted preacher, was taken seriously ill, and after receiving the last sacraments told the brethren kneeling around his bed that Our Lord Himself had come to comfort him in company with His Blessed Mother and the angelic choir, and added: "Nothing can evermore trouble me for I lean upon the true faith, and I have given myself up entirely into the Blessed Virgin's hands," and he gently died with the holy name of Mary on his lips.<sup>6</sup> A like vision of the Holy Mother of God was granted to a dying prior of York, Alan by name, who at first was terribly tempted to despair by a horrible vision of demons and cried out, "Cursed be the hour in which I became a religious," but after a short while added: "Oh no! but, rather, blessed be the hour in which I entered the Order, and praised for ever more be the glorious Mother of Christ, whom I have always loved tenderly." He then described to the brethren standing by how Our Blessed Lady had put to flight his diabolical tormentors; all of which, Gerard says, was communicated to him by an eyewitness.<sup>7</sup> A Dominican named Gerard of the

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 248, 249.

convent of Derby died in the house of the Friars Minor in a neighbouring town, almost certainly Nottingham, where he had been taken suddenly ill whilst preaching a mission. The subprior of Derby hastened over with two companions, and in their presence and that of his good hosts the Franciscans "he began to laugh heartily." To the rather shocked subprior he explained that "Saint Edmund, our king and martyr, has just arrived, and the whole house is full of angels"; and then laughing still more gaily he cried: "See, Christ's most blessed Mother has deigned to visit me, come let us greet her affectionately." The assembled friars thereupon knelt down and sang the *Salve Regina*. "O how pleased the Blessed Virgin appears to be with your greeting," interjected the dying man, "she is smiling upon you this moment." After this he began to tremble violently and the bystanders gathered that he was being judged. Earnestly he besought Our Lady to stand by him and said: "Merciful Jesus, pardon me these little faults." The subprior exhorted him not to lose heart but to trust in God's mercy. Soon after he grew calm and answered with a smile, "Yea, indeed the Lord is merciful," saying which he expired. It was Pentecost day of the year 1257.<sup>8</sup>

Of Brother William, another professor of Cambridge University, we are told he appeared after death to the subprior, Brother Bennet, wearing a golden crown; whilst to **Brother Martin**, lector of the convent at Northampton, there appeared in vision the soul of a friar who had formerly led a vicious life as a parish-priest but had been converted by him, and was now wearing the beautiful garments of the blest. When Martin asked him to obtain the same for himself the glorified soul replied, "Dear brother, these will serve for both of us," referring to Brother Martin's heroic action in surrendering to him on his death-bed all his own merits.<sup>9</sup> Another English friar, whose name is not given, told the brethren when he was dying that he had been granted a vision of heaven, and had seen an angel holding out a resplendent copy of the Gospel of Saint John; then

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 242, 249.

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crying out, "I must away to hear it," gave up his soul.<sup>10</sup>

A marked characteristic of English Dominican zeal was the missionary spirit which led many of them to distant lands such as Palestine, Greece, Asia Minor, and Russia to convert the adherents of Mahomet or the schismatical Greek Church. One of them, Richard, was consecrated bishop by order of Pope John XXII and probably suffered death in the Chersonesus when his bishopric was devastated by the Tartars about 1340.<sup>11</sup> Built into the wall of a farm-house at Rhuddlan in North Wales can still be seen an incized slab bearing the effigy of Archbishop William Fresney of Edessa (perhaps nephew of Geoffrey Fresney, founder of the Province) who had laboured many years in the East, chiefly in North Africa and the Holy Land, and died in the Dominican priory at Rhuddlan (of which the farm-house is all that remains) about the year 1290.<sup>12</sup>

Though abundant material exists for the history of the English Province it consists for the most part of official references in Episcopal and State registers; all domestic documents including the Acts of the Provincial chapters have been lost, so that we have few biographical details of a personal nature. We can however get glimpses of the veneration extended to some prominent men of the Province from some out of the way sources. For example, there is the obituary list of the Guilford Dominicans that has been preserved almost accidentally, and though it is very laconic, giving usually only the name and date of the deceased friar, it has two insertions of interest, one after the name of John Thursby, once prior of Salisbury and a friar of Guildford, "qui vitam religiosissimam ducens et pater multorum existens, feliciter vitam consummavit A.D. 1458," the other following the name of William Richford, many years Provincial, "Sacre scripture scientie humilis professor ac provincialis Anglie qui moribus ac sana doctrina totum

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>11</sup> Bullarium, O.P., II, 216; Palmer. *Introd. to the Life of Card. Howard*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Bull, O.P., Appendix, Vol. VII, 513; Gumbley, O.P., *Flints. Hist. Soc. Journal*, 1915.

ordinem decoravit." Richard ruled the Province from 1483 to 1501, in which year he died.<sup>13</sup>

During the terrible days of Henry VIII when heroes were few and on all sides men accepted the claims of Royal supremacy, there were found several Dominicans of prominence who withstood the evil laws. At the head of these was George Ateca, a Dominican from Aragon who had resided in England as chaplain and then confessor to Queen Catherine of Aragon for thirty-six years, twenty of which he spent as Bishop of Llandaff. He alone of the hierarchy ranged himself at the side of the martyred Cardinal of Rochester, Saint John Fisher, but because Henry VIII feared Charles V the bishop's Spanish nationality saved him from death, and after twice suffering imprisonment for refusing the Oath of Supremacy he was driven into exile. A curious story is related of his entrance into Aragon. At Saragossa his goods were seized by the officers of the customs and he was heavily mulcted on certain of his possessions. Justly incensed at these exactions and at the disrespect shown to his episcopal rank he called down the vengeance of God on the extortioners, and the customs' house immediately took fire and was burnt to the ground, without injury being done to the neighbouring buildings.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the priors too showed a bold front and suffered accordingly, one of them, John Pickering of York, being barbarously executed at Tyburn on May 25th, 1537, for his share in the Pilgrimage of Grace. The cause of Pickering and the other martyred "Pilgrims" has not yet been decided, but we can hope that one day the Church will declare them saints.<sup>15</sup> Another prior, Lawrence Godfrey of Canterbury, was denounced to the King by the arch-apostate Cranmer for having preached the "clean contrary" to what he, the archbishop, had taught concerning the Papal Supremacy, and for having dared rebuke him (Cranmer) for his uncharitable

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<sup>13</sup> Palmer, Guildford Obits. *Reliquary Magazine*, January, 1887, pp. 7-20.

<sup>14</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, Vols. VII, IX, X, XI passim; *Année Dominicaine*, Vol. VI, under June 18, ed. Lyons, 1894.

<sup>15</sup> Gillow, *Biog. Dict. of Catholics*, s.v. Pickering.

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references to the Popes.<sup>16</sup> As early as 1534 the prior of Cambridge, Robert Buckenham, who had succeeded to that office when Pickering became prior of York in 1531, also opposed the royal supremacy, but made good his escape to Scotland and thence to Louvain. He was supported in his action by a learned member of his community, Doctor Thomas Charnock, who was denounced to the government both for writing and preaching against the King's pretensions, but his fate remains unknown.<sup>17</sup>

On the death of Edward VI, the new sovereign, Queen Mary, restored the Province by giving the Dominicans the priory and church of Saint Bartholomew in Smithfield in 1555. The seventeen years between the suppression by Henry and the restoration by Mary is the only break in the continuity of the Province which stretches over seven centuries from 1221 to 1937, for the new beginning under Mary has persevered despite many difficulties to our own day. Even these seventeen years can hardly be described as a break, seeing it was actually men of the old Province who constituted the new commencement under Mary. Moreover two members of the old Province, John Hopton, a former prior of Oxford, and Maurice Griffin of the priory of Bangor, were chosen bishops by Cardinal Pole, one of Norwich, the other of Rochester, but both died before the Elizabethan troubles began.<sup>18</sup> When William Perrin, the first prior of Smithfield and Vicar-General of the re-assembled brethren, died in 1558 he was succeeded in his double office by Richard Hargrave, another old member of the Province who had been acting as chaplain and confessor to the Dominican nuns brought back to their former convent by Mary. But before he could take over his new charge the Elizabethan change in religion had begun, and the royal visitors arrived at Dartford to administer the oath to him and the nuns, all of whom rejected it and cheerfully went into perpetual exile. Hargrave wrote to the Master-General: "That Lord who saved me from schism in the time of Henry VIII, delivered me once

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<sup>16</sup> *Archæologia Cantiana*, vii, 13, 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, Vol. VII, 259, 260, 923.

<sup>18</sup> Gillow, s.v. Hopton and Griffiths (or Griffin).

more from the lion's mouth, gave me constancy, and kept me from apostatizing either from the faith or from the religious state." Hargrave died in exile, still acting as chaplain until his death, in 1566, to the little band of heroic sisters among whom was Elizabeth Wright, half-sister to Saint John Fisher.<sup>19</sup>

On Hargrave's death a very celebrated friar, Doctor Thomas Heskins, took charge of the community and was likewise Vicar-General. A Lancashire man and a member of both universities, he became Doctor in Divinity at Cambridge in 1557 and in the following year he was appointed Chancellor of Salisbury and Vicar of Brixworth in Northamptonshire, but had to surrender his preferments at Elizabeth's succession and leave the country. He withdrew to Flanders where he entered the Dominican Order and, as we have seen, succeeded Hargrave as chaplain in 1566. In the previous year he had published at Brussels his well-known defence of the Blessed Sacrament under the title of *The Parliament of Chryste*, a work so successful that it was republished at Antwerp in 1566. In replying to this book in 1579 Doctor William Fulke styled Heskins "Provincial or General of the English Dominicans." In 1573 the surviving English nuns were assigned by the Master-General to Engelendael, outside Bruges, where there was a small convent of the Second Order, and here the last of that brave little company, Elizabeth Exmewe, sister of the martyred Carthusian Blessed William Exmewe closed her long life of suffering in 1585. Of Father Heskins we have little further knowledge; perhaps he accompanied the sisters to Engelendael. During his term of office he made at least one secret visit to England, and that this was fraught with danger is evident from the charge made in 1569 against Doctor Philip Baker, Provost of King's College, Cambridge "of having brought to his table in the dark and conveyed away again in the dark, the famous papist Dr. Heskins."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Reg. of the Master-General, Vincent Justiniani*, fol. 79, 94. Fr. Bede Jarrett, *English Dominicans*, C.T.S. Pamphlet no. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Cooper, *Athenae Cantab.*, ed. 1858, I, 419; *English Hist. Review*, 1918, p. 248.