

DOMINICAN MISSIONARIES IN SOUTH AMERICA

THAT little band of Franciscans in the wake of Cortes, who brought the light of faith to the Aztecs, and gave to Mexico, or New Spain, as it was then called, its first bishop, Don Francisco de Zumarraga, had its counterpart in the company of twenty-two sons of St. Dominic, who landed at Santa Marta on the southern shores of the Caribbean Sea, four hundred years ago, July 29th, 1529. Don Tomas Ortiz was their leader, and he in his turn was the first bishop of Santa Marta, the first, indeed, in New Granada. Another of the friars, Don Domingo de las Casas, was a near relative of the intrepid Fray Bartolomé, so conspicuous for his defence of the natives, since he fourteen times crossed the ocean to gain the ear of Charles and of Philip on their behalf.

Don Domingo was selected by Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada as chaplain to his troops on that expedition into the interior which resulted in adding to the Spanish crown the famous empire of the Muysca Indians or Chibchas. It was due, indeed, mainly to the brave friar's encouragement and exhortations that they eventually reached the great plateau of Bogota and took possession of the capital.

At sight of his soldiers decimated by hunger and thirst, and the appalling difficulties of the passage of the Cordilleras, de Quesada was several times on the point of turning back to Santa Marta, but the good Dominican urged him to press forward and animated his troops by the thought that they were suffering for the eventual triumph of the Faith.

It is related that while wandering in the intricate passes of the Carare mountains one of the soldiers, named Tordehumos, sank exhausted at the foot of a

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large cotton-tree, and, after giving him the last sacraments, since there was no hope of his recovery, Fray Domingo exhorted him to continue the recitation of the Rosary as long as he was able. Resuming their march, the troops eventually reached a city called Velez, where they obtained provisions, for they were starving, and were enabled to recover from their fatigues. What was their astonishment when Tordehumos appeared there one day in perfect health. He recounted that when they left him he went on reciting the Rosary, and presently fell into a deep sleep. In his dream he was comforted by a vision of the Blessed Virgin, who told him that he was healed. In effect, when he awoke, all his weakness had disappeared, and he was thus enabled to rejoin his comrades. In gratitude, he afterwards procured from Spain a statue of St. Dominic, the first statue of the saint to be set up in Bogota.

On August 6th, 1538, de Quesada raised the Spanish standard in the city and declared the empire of the Muyscas to be part of the dominions of Spain. On the same day Fray Domingo offered for the first time in Bogota the Holy Sacrifice. A probably contemporary painting shows him saying Mass in the open, surrounded by the troops and a large concourse of the native population. The Muyscas or Chibchas had attained a high state of civilization, and Fray Domingo has left many interesting details of this expedition in his *Relacion de la conquista del nuevo reino de Granada*.¹

The natives possessed a great abundance of gold and silver objects, which they had no reluctance in parting with to the invaders, and Fray Domingo asked that some of the precious metals should be set aside for religious purposes. This was done, but sub-

¹ *Biblioteca dominicana de Colombia*, por R. P. Mesanza. (Caracas, 1929.)

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sequently, when the good friar, indignant at the enslaving of the defenceless Indians, denounced in no measured terms the cruelty of the conquerors, he was accused of appropriating this portion to his own use. How false was the calumny is clearly proved by the testament of de Quesada, wherein his heirs are strictly enjoined to return to Fray Domingo de las Casas the deposit for religious uses which the friar had confided to his care. The Dominican was also reported to have renounced his sacred profession, but as the Act of his demise, still extant in the priory at Seville, shows that he died surrounded by his brethren, this slander is effectually refuted.

Many other incidents could be related of Fray Domingo's fruitful apostolate, but it will suffice to mention that he acted as peacemaker when de Quesada, Federmann and Belalcazar, the conqueror of Quito, were disputing about their respective spheres, and he also effected a reconciliation between the troops of Lebron and Hernan Perez, who were engaged in a fratricidal struggle.

Before long the Dominicans had given a University to the City of Santa Fe de Bogota, and founded many colleges and convents in what was then part of New Granada and is now called the Republic of Colombia. They established no less than one hundred and eighty missions or villages on very similar lines to the Jesuit reductions of a later period in Paraguay. But so soon as these missions were sufficiently developed to form parishes, they were handed over by the friars to the secular clergy. They were constant in their efforts to protect the poor natives from the rapacity and oppression of the European adventurers who flocked into the country. In 1546 Fray Leon made the arduous journey to Rome to obtain from the Holy Father Paul III a declaration that Indians were entitled to full Christian recognition. This prompted the witty remark of

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a native prelate, Bishop Piedrahita : ' Por los Dominicanos los americanos tenemos almas ' ' Thanks to the Dominicans we Americans really have souls.' The Holy See recognised the Friars as the apostles of this new region by decreeing that the feast of St. Dominic, August 4th, should be observed throughout the land as a holiday of obligation. Charles V gave to the Priors of Dominican houses in his new dominion the privilege of hearing appeals from the secular courts, and he presented to them the first bell which was used in New Granada; the second was actually made in Bogota, under the direction of Fray Garaita, in 1548. Fray de Carvajal was the first to make his way to the waters of the Amazon from Bogota; this city, in effect, is watered by a tributary of the Magdalena. Fray Francisco de la Cruz discovered the mines of quicksilver near Ibagué. In 1619 Fray Bernardo de Lugo composed a vocabulary of the Muisca or Chibcha language, the only one in existence. Upwards of thirty native dialects, many now lost, are referred to by Fray Juan Martinez in a treatise written on the subject.² St. Lewis Bertrand was elected Prior of Bogota, but on his way there was recalled by his superiors. He is the principal Patron of Colombia. His companion, Fray Lewis Vero, performed many miracles, and was endowed with the gift of prophecy and of tongues. Some of the early missionaries gained the martyr's crown, several perished in their endeavours to reach the savage tribes of the Cordilleras. The magnificent Church of St. Dominic in Bogota, unequalled, it is said, in South America, for purity of style combined with richness of decoration, is a striking monument to their zeal. The statue of Our Lady of the Rosary, now called ' La Virgen de los conquistadores,' which the first missionaries brought with them from Spain, is

² *Biblioteca dominicana de Colombia: estudios sobre las lenguas, etc.*; por R. P. Mesanza. (Caracas, 1929.)

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still to be seen in the left aisle of this church. It has been said with some truth: 'Take away all traces of the Dominican Order from Colombia and you leave a desert.'

When, a century after the conquest, the Jesuit missionaries came to help in the work of evangelisation, some, like St. Peter Claver, to devote their lives to the oppressed slaves, negroes, and Indians, they were welcomed and encouraged by none so warmly as the Dominicans.

Coming nearer to our own times, when, in 1819, the heroic Simon Bolivar sought to give a settled government to the provinces which had raised the standard of independence, he took as chaplain to his army the valiant Fray Ignacio Marino. The generous 'Liberator' attributed to the friar's exhortations to his soldiers no small measure of his success in the decisive engagement at Boyaca. He named him Colonel in the army, and granted him the highest decorations in his power to bestow. Bolivar died in 1830 in his forty-seventh year without having achieved the consolidation he had hoped for.

In 1860 the sectaries who had forced their way to power confiscated all the Dominican foundations, including the Universities and thirty-six priories, and banished the Religious. But the Friars have returned, and now, once again, Santa Fe de Bogota sees the black and white habit of the Order. Convents of tertiaries are numerous, and many colleges and schools have been erected in towns still filled with tokens of the former glory of the Friars Preachers.

FRANCIS MONTGOMERY.