

THE PORTRAIT OF ST DOMINIC

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A MEDIEVALIST rarely has the experience of reading for review a book which impresses him at once as being definitive in its field. Père M.-H. Vicaire's life of St Dominic¹ gives this impression in the first chapter, and continues to give it till the last page is reached, many days later. No historical work as such is immortal; Thucydides and Gibbon live chiefly as great literature; new material will always be appearing and no two ages will seek for exactly the same answer from their sources. But when these reservations have been made, it may be confidently said that this life, like Vacandard's *Life of St Bernard* and that of St Philip Neri by Ponnelle and Bordet, will remain standard for fifty years or more, and will influence all that is written about St Dominic far into the future. It will not put an end to writings on the saint; it will probably lead to their multiplication, for St Dominic is a figure that every generation and every nation will seek to understand and to interpret for themselves, but it will be from these volumes that the ore is extracted, to be moulded into this shape or that.

It is frequently remarked, both by historians and devout Catholics, that little is known of the life and personality of St Dominic. Certainly the lessons in the breviary on his feast day are more than usually successful in confirming such a view. One reason for this is undoubtedly the lack of an adequate contemporary biography. Dominic lived when the monastic centuries, with their tradition of literary education and classical models, had ended. In the eleventh and early twelfth centuries every saint had one or more biographers, usually very competent. Eadmer's life of St Anselm, and the groups of lives of St Bernard and St Thomas of Canterbury, are but outstanding examples of a great class. In the thirteenth century education had shifted from literature to dialectic, and men were more interested in speculative problems and principles than in individual characters. The great saints and bishops of the period—St Albert, St Bonaventure, St Thomas

¹ *Histoire de Saint Dominique*. By M.-H. Vicaire, O.P. 2 vols. (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1957.)

himself and Robert Grosseteste—are very badly served, and some—St Simon Stock, for example—remain to us no more than names. It is true that St Francis, who has in so many ways ‘stolen the show’ from St Dominic, was fortunate also in his biographers, but St Francis was peculiarly ‘biogenic’, and even so Celano’s *Lives* were command performances which on their own merits would scarcely stand alongside of the great lives of the past.

Another reason for Dominic’s elusive quality is perhaps the ceaseless movement of his life. He had no home-town like Assisi, no abbey like Bec, no fatherland that knew him well, and even when he was for several years in a district he was always on the road. Nor did he carry with him for any length of time a particular group of disciples or an intimate confidant. He had no secretary like St Bernard, or First Companions like St Francis, and those who worked with him for a year or two were then sent out afar to become in their turn apostolic travellers.

Whatever the cause, the historian has to deplore the lack of obvious material for a life, and until modern methods of historiography were discovered, there was little to attract a biographer. Fortunately for us Père Vicaire, after many decades of distinguished work, first as a disciple of Mandonnet and then in his own right as a scholar, has spent many years in sifting the records of every phase of St Dominic’s life, with the result that for the first time the spacious background of that life can be seen in its breadth and depth, thus allowing the full significance of every known incident or decision of the saint’s career to stand out sharply and clearly. The historian can remain completely at ease with all his authorities and documents in sight, while the general reader—or at least the reader who means business—will not find that the trees, numerous though they are, wholly obscure a sight of the wood.

Nevertheless, not even Père Vicaire can find gold in every load of ore. His book is nearly eight hundred pages long and when the reader has reached his third century he would still be hard put to it to fill a postcard with hard facts about St Dominic. Yet these early chapters which build up such an accurate and vivid picture of Caleruega, of Osma and of the Albigeois give us the knowledge essential for the understanding of Dominic’s character and life-work. Out of them come very clearly two impressions. One is of Dominic himself silently realizing his vocation stage by

stage. The other is of his bishop. One of the surprises of this book is the emergence of Diego. He is usually thought of as a mediocre prelate yoked to a zealous saint. Here he is seen as a leader active, impetuous, resourceful, who during the considerable period in which the two men were together was in many ways the chief. We have the impression that St Dominic owed more to him than to any other single human being.

From page 288 Dominic begins to take charge of the book. The chapters on Prouille, Fanjeaux and Toulouse are excellent. The picture they give of the society, the problems and the landscape of the Albigensis is one of Père Vicaire's great contributions to the history of the saint. For the first time the full importance of these years for his own spiritual growth and for the development of the idea of the Preachers is seen clearly. Even so the story is not always easy to follow. Throughout Dominic's life his disappearances from the records for months on end, and the tantalizing glimpses seen between these disappearances, make it very hard for a casual reader to keep dates and places in his mind. It would have been of great assistance if we could have been provided, either at the beginning of some of these chapters or at the end of the work, with a chronological chart or itinerary of Dominic's life. The first volume ends with the journey to the Lateran Council in 1215. Dominic was already forty-three years old and had only six more years to live.

The second volume shows the rapid growth of the Order, which so speedily attained to its full self-realization and constitutional perfection at the chapters of 1220 and 1221. In this story perhaps the major historical contribution is the careful record of the close contacts between Dominic and the reigning popes, especially Honorius III from 1218 to 1221. The list and the careful analysis of the bulls of recommendation and others given during this period shows the founder constantly at the Pope's side, if not at his elbow, urging and suggesting, while the Pope's formula of recommendation grows ever warmer and more compelling. Perhaps in no point is the contrast between Dominic and Francis seen more clearly than in the programmatic use of the papal directives by Dominic to promote the spread and efficacy of his Order and to penetrate the reluctance or hostility of bishops, compared with the passionate refusal of Francis to have anything to do with privileges. It is Père Vicaire's thesis throughout the

book that Dominic saw with growing clarity, and helped Innocent III and Honorius III to see, that the needs of the Church demanded that the bishops, the traditional and only canonical holders of the right and duty of preaching, should accept *en bloc* an organized and independent body of clerics as delegates of the Apostolic See with the mission of preaching and teaching throughout the world.

What is the picture that emerges from the pages of this long book? Herein, for the reader who seeks the portrait of a saint rather than the history or rationale of an order, lies Père Vicaire's principal achievement. It has been said to satiety that Dominic is a shadowy or an unattractive figure. He can never be this to the reader of these pages. It is true that he is glimpsed rather than contemplated, felt rather than comprehended; but the personality is there nevertheless. In its main lines, there is nothing new. Dominic is still the man who moves slowly towards his end and then, when once the moment has come, acts swiftly and decisively. 'I know what I am about' remains his most characteristic utterance. Similarly, his apostolic zeal for souls, which has always been taken as a principal characteristic, remains clear. In a sense, and if the phrase is rightly understood, Dominic always considered his brethren and his Order in relation to their work for souls. With all his monastic affinities his gaze and his interest is always fixed upon the souls without, that need the word of God. Yet other facets appear more clearly than before. One is Dominic's austerity. Every saint in his own way is heroically severe with himself, but severity and rigour may be manifest in many ways or even not be manifest at all save to the closest and most discerning scrutiny. Dominic's physical austerity was clear for all to see throughout all his life. Physical rest, physical comfort, the satisfaction of the senses, high and low, in any form were unknown to him. We are told, and we see by his own words and by the words of others, that he was in human relations the reverse of morose, that he gave sympathy, help and care without stint and that his countenance and presence radiated serene happiness. Nevertheless the characteristic, the 'differential', of Dominic is his austerity, and he undoubtedly formed his brethren to this spirit. A Preacher of any age, one may think, who chastised his body and brought it into subjection both for his own good and that of others would not be mistaking his Founder's wish.

Père Vicaire uses more than once of Dominic another word

that is singularly apt: *virilité*. Dominic was to the depths of his natural being virile, with all the essential qualities of courage, endurance, honesty and directness that the word implies, and perhaps also with some of the characteristics that often accompany those qualities— independence, almost transcendence, of others and insensitivity to certain manifestations of emotions, of beauty, or of intelligence. This book, intentionally or not, leads one to think that though Dominic could give and inspire devotion and love—and what saint could not?—yet he did not himself feel the need or the attraction of comradeship or sympathetic understanding and never gave to others more than a part of himself. He was certainly not one of the self-revealing saints. We have indeed a few pregnant sayings that strike deep, such as his advice to his friars to spend their day 'speaking to God or about him', and we must believe the innumerable witnesses to the force of his words when he was preaching. Then, at that moment, no doubt the living spirit in him struck its warmth into his hearers; but he never felt the need or the call to put the secrets of his life or the appeal of his message into words and, much as the historian must deplore the practically total loss of his letters, it is doubtful whether they would, if preserved, have taken rank among the spiritual classics. His own inner life went from strength to strength, but there is no evidence of any stage of 'conversion' or any externally obvious crisis such as the imprisonment of St John of the Cross or the stigmata of St Francis. We may regret Dominic's silence, but it is all of a pattern with his masculine strength and reserve.

Père Vicaire does well to note his Founder's care for women and skill in directing them. It is indeed something of a paradox that this most severely practical, most (one might wrongly say) unimaginative of saints should have begun his work as a founder with a nunnery, and closed it with the establishment of another in the heart of Rome, and that we should have the clearest glimpses of his person and character from one of his nuns. The paradox is not perhaps as great as it seems. The foundation in Prouille was little short of a practical necessity and the foundation of San Sisto was, as the phrase goes, 'wished on' him by others. Still, the facts remain to make us pause, though here again we may remark that there is no evidence that Dominic either received from one of his nuns or gave to her in return what Francis and

Clare, or Francis de Sales and Jeanne Françoise de Chantal, gave to one another and to us.

Dominic, as this book shows so clearly, gave to his Order a spirit of ardent zeal and an observance and constitutions which have stood the stress of centuries and of human frailty more successfully, perhaps than those of any other religious order save for the Carthusians. Yet one who is not a Dominican may feel that it is not from Dominic that comes what has been, if not an essential, yet at least an inseparable mark of the Order for almost the whole of its existence: the preservation and presentation of the intellectual content of revealed truth. Dominic was a Preacher, and he wished his sons to be trained theologians, as theology was taught in his day, but there is no evidence—or at least none in this book—that the intellectual framework of theology or the claims of the human mind for intellectual satisfaction, still less the integration of all forms of knowledge in one harmonious structure, had, or would have, any appeal whatsoever to him. The Dominican inheritance of *Veritas*, the comprehension of one supreme Truth attainable and maintainable on every level—natural truth by reason, revealed truth by faith and supernatural truth by the purified soul illuminated in contemplation—this was no part of the programme explicitly seen and laid down by Dominic. Can it be that the Dominican hatred of opportunism and eclecticism and ‘probabilism’ in things of the mind is a heritage, a true extension of some quality in the mind of the Founder? It is easy to say that Dominic’s Order received as it were a transfusion of new blood at the hands of St Albert and St Thomas just as, in a different way, the Franciscan order did at the hands of St Bonaventure. It may be so, yet some of the great Dominicans of the generation before Thomas—Kilwardby, for example—have a clear sense of the unity of all truth.

There are many pages over which a reviewer would gladly linger. There are the two episodes of Dominic’s contact with Englishmen. The first is well known: the appearance of Dominic and his first companions in the lecture-room of Alexander Stavensby at Toulouse and the subsequent friendship between the lecturer when bishop of Coventry and the English Preachers. The other is less well known; it is the long and ultimately fruitless negotiation between Innocent III, Honorius III and the English Gilbertines with a view to the foundation of a house of nuns and

canons in Rome. Why, we wonder, did the Pope look so far afield? And why did the English canons miss their chance?

Again, a word should be said of one or two of the many pieces of original scholarship in the book; the clear exposition, for example, of the circumstances of the first journey of Diego and Dominic to Denmark and Dominic's first interior call to preach to the heathen of the Baltic lands. Nor will the medievalist fail to note Père Vicaire's scholarly integrity in recording where he has changed his opinion since the days, twenty years ago, when he presented Mandonnet's views of the early history of the Augustinian Rule. Now, it seems, he accepts the consensus of recent scholarship that Letter 211 is prior to the Rule, and abandons the direct Augustinian authorship of the latter document; he also accepts the traditional view that the letter was addressed to the Saint's sister and her nuns.

No doubt there are many small points on which the expert will quarrel with Père Vicaire and even correct him. The present reviewer has no competence in this specialized field. There is however one broader issue on which he would break a lance. The reader acquainted only with the general lines of medieval history would find with gratitude that the whole affair of the Albigensian crusade and of Dominic's early work comes to life 'in the round' for the first time. The heretics, the crusaders, the bishops, the preachers, the very landscape and economy of the region is seen in clear daylight. On the other hand, the Italian scene (apart from the houses at Bologna and the Aventine) is comparatively dim, and one great feature is for all practical purposes blacked out altogether. The effective references to St Francis and his friars can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Certainly St Francis and they have had their due from historians and writers in the modern world, and more nonsense has been written about them than about any other body of religious. One does not expect a biographer of St Dominic to be a *françiscanisant* or to accept with gratitude all that emotional historians have written about the contrast between the two founders and the allegedly superior attraction and originality of St Francis. A revision of history in favour of Dominic and his Order in its early days has long been overdue and an authoritative assertion of the basic originality and independence of the Preachers is very welcome. No one who reads Père Vicaire's book can doubt that

Dominic was a Preacher and would have been the Father of Preachers, even if he had lived thirty years earlier and never visited Italy. At the same time it cannot be forgotten that Dominic and his order were coming to birth at a particular moment, that the crucial scene was Italy, and that in central Italy at least Francis and his friars were the most burning topic of religious interest and the cynosure of all. Granted that the chronology of Francis's life and the collections of his sayings and doings are snares and pitfalls for historians, yet the existence of Francis and his friars and their dynamic influence remains. The reader of Père Vicaire's book would suppose, on the other hand, that Dominic's plans and his institute had matured in Italy as it were *in vacuo*. He is able, by questioning this date or that, to throw the meeting between the saints into the limbo of legend, though later, *chemin faisant*, he accepts the incident and indeed Celano's account cannot possibly be dismissed out of hand.² But on the neuralgic spots of poverty and 'mendicity' he is a stubborn isolationist, and on the 'friarhood' of the Preachers he has no comment to make. Assuredly no one who is familiar with Dominic's early years would deny that apostolic poverty was his practice from the beginning, and that he intended that his brethren should follow his example for their own sanctification and for the salvation of souls. Yet one might well feel that it would be humanly and historically improbable to the last degree that the Preachers would have become, not only in their mendicity but in their whole external way of life and work, so twin-like to the Minors had there been no cross-fertilization. Where the records are so scanty and self-contradictory a historian, if he adopts obstructive tactics, can keep an army at bay, but there are cases where convergent lines of probability achieve an historical moral certainty. The history of institutions, of ideas and of the communion of saints here below in every age is the history, not of direct imitation and emulation, but of inspiration and cross-fertilization. On more than one occasion Dominic showed himself both receptive and adaptable until he had seen clearly the perfect form. There is no need, either on the plane of historical scholarship or on that of institutional *amour propre*, to exclude from our minds the probability, the virtual certainty, that he drew inspiration from the

² Compare *Histoire* II, 219, note 59: 'La rencontre des deux saints demeure hypothétique', with *ibid.*, 251: 'au cours de la célèbre rencontre avec François. . .'

sight and fame of the poor men of Assisi and their 'Servant'.

Lives of the saints have not in the past been regarded as the lightest of reading; hitherto the Bollandists have produced no illustrated edition of the *Acta Sanctorum*. Here, however, we can follow St Dominic's life and illuminate the tough historical narrative with the aid of an admirable volume of photographs.³ Those of the Spanish landscapes alone, with their parched fields, treeless valleys, endless ridges and stone-built villages, go far to explain the strength and the severity and the solitude of Dominic, while in the realm of art the saint and his Preachers have never found more perfect interpreters than Giotto and Pisano. Indeed almost all the plates are admirable both in themselves and as illustrations; though one may feel that one or two of the shots of today's Dominicans, vivid as they are, are artistically anachronistic. For some obscure psychological reason a photograph of Holy Mass⁴ or Communion jars, whereas a fresco of Giotto or Angelico does not. But taken as a whole the book is eminently successful. The photographs are accompanied by a brief narrative, moreover, which may perhaps be irreverently described as 'Vicaire without tears'.

Our last word must be of the larger book. Père Vicaire, and Dominicans in union with him, may be justly satisfied with his work. St Dominic has been shown, perhaps for the first time since Blessed Jordan of Saxony wrote, in his full stature as a personality and as a saint, and we can see clearly also that he was graced with that abundance, that reserve of spiritual treasure that is God's gift to those who are chosen to be fathers and founders of a great order and of a multitude of sons and daughters.

³ *St Dominic. A Pictorial Biography*. By Leonard von Matt and M.-H. Vicaire, o.p. (Longmans; 30s.)

⁴ The plate of 'Mass at Santa Sabina', however, would seem actually to show the chanting of the Passion on Good Friday.