

LAUDARE, BENEDICERE, ET PRAEDICARE¹

BY

FR DUNSTAN, O.F.M.Cap.

HOWEVER gladly I have accepted this invitation to lead you back to the well-springs of the intensely Catholic tradition enshrined within this Priory, I confess my shortcomings and would, in all sincerity, beg your indulgence whilst I ask you to praise and bless and proclaim a simple fact—the fact that our Father, Dominic, was not imprisoned in his own century, but lives for every century; that his mission was not temporary but eternal; that he represents a Catholic inspiration, simple and inexhaustible. In that fact I see the whole *raison d'être* of this Feast.

If, therefore, I praise and bless and proclaim the merits of one who died as long ago as August, 1221, it is in the conviction, not only that he is a living personality well worthy of our imitation, but that this present time needs him and, perhaps, needs him more than his own time; that Dominic can be given to our own time by his faithful sons. It is to add power to the petition we offer in the Mass that the walls of *Blackfriars* may yield what they promised in the days of their hopeful building. What they can send forth is Catholic. It is therefore mine, no matter what habit I wear. It therefore belongs to the pew; it is for the enrichment of the pew, no matter what its task in life may be.

For, I repeat, it is Catholic, and we who are Catholics are aware that we must close our ranks under the challenge 'What we have we hold' before we become yet more aggressive, and an essential part of what we have to help us in our fight against modern evil is the Dominican tradition I would praise and bless and proclaim.

I can never forget that I was privileged to sit under your illustrious Brother, Father Bedè Jarrett, during the early twenties, both here and in New York, whilst he insisted so eloquently and with legitimate pride, that this same Dominican tradition was the possession of the whole Catholic world, and I confess that it is under his vividly remembered tutorship and with the guidance of his crystal-clear studies that I have tried to frame my words. Neither do I wish to forget that I was present whilst stone was placed upon stone here, enjoying the brotherly companionship of the first friars and hearing their pious ambitions.

¹ Sermon preached at Blackfriars, Oxford, on the Feast of St Dominic, 1948.

Had these ambitions been other than what they were I know that a vastly different institution would have begun and been continued. Some there were, and they were quite friendly souls, too, who thought of the new *Blackfriars* as just another home of learning. Others there were, still under the influence of a jaundiced history, who prepared for the dropping of fireworks and even steeled themselves against the coming of fierce and narrow Churchmen to whom thumbscrews and faggots were the only arguments acceptable.

And when the life began, it proved one thing at least—the timelessness of Dominic. Over seven centuries ago he had set out in his quest for truth; during these long years he had inspired others, headed by the incomparable Thomas Aquinas, to make uninterrupted quest for truth, yet here his sons took up the task of that same seeking, precisely as if they were beginning with Dominic, beginning all over again with his first privileged companions.

That is a point I would strongly stress. Here, as was Dominic's, the preparation is wholly unworldly. It is a preparation of austerity, of complete surrender. It is a preparation of obedience to a Rule which puts a heavy burden upon the shoulders of talented men. Its sustaining life is a sublime act of faith in a principle lived by Dominic and underwritten by the Angelic Doctor, that in all that is done for the glory of God or the good of humanity, it is what a man *is* rather than what he *does* that counts. Hence the self-abnegation, the self-discipline, the full liturgical service; hence the mind, heart, eyes, directed Christ-wards. Find here the chief fashioning of the men within *Blackfriars*, and know that it is all accepted in the blessed conviction that the present world has grave need of men rooted and formed as Dominic was rooted and formed.

I cannot free myself from the impression that in his own day the multitudes who had cut themselves off from the Church did, in their heart of hearts, long for the advent of Dominic, no matter how vigorously they might repudiate the very suggestion. I do not wish to bury this simple idea beneath a mass of details, and therefore will content myself with reminding you of his long years of patient preparation.

Dante, in the twelfth *canto* of his *Paradiso*, makes St Bonaventure sing of Dominic's espousal with faith at the baptismal font, when a star is seen on his forehead. It is in piety that I believe in the star, but it is historic fact that a strong faith led him, in earliest possible youth, to the service of the Church; and that faith was not weakened when, in spite of his powers, his life was perforce hidden and uneventful. Deprived of the supernatural, we might say that until 1203 his years were wasted years. Besides, by that time,

only eighteen more years of life and opportunity remained to him.

But, let us not forget it, before the eighteen years of ceaseless, tireless activity, a tremendous task had been performed, a terrific battle had been won. The true Dominican is speaking, Fr Bede Jarrett, when I quote: 'It is a standing lesson to Christian souls that the amount and endurance of their work depend far more upon the character which they have previously formed than on the years of labour they put into their life. Patiently, quietly should a man fashion and temper that sole real tool with which all that he does is finally achieved. The only thing or person on which he can always depend is himself; on himself then, above all, must he concentrate. The preacher, the organiser, the administrator, is such in virtue of his own soul; because he has learnt to control himself, he can hope to control others; because he can set in order the household of his own heart, he may dream of arranging, in due and precise relation, the affairs and work of others; only if he has found the way to God can he dare venture to lead others in the same pathway since only he knows whither it leads. Only a man who has built carefully his character may hope one day to build the world "nearer to the heart's desire".'²

Confusion cannot overcome confusion and that is as true today as it was in the time of Dominic. It was in the company of sorely distracted men that Dominic was asked to do something about his world. Not so long before, the very recollected and penitential St Bernard had confessed to failure. At this distance we can see that there were appearing, in attractive garb, the worst elements of the later, more widespread Protestantism, and of our own curse, modern Bolshevism. And this stands out so clearly; as today, power is in the hands of leaders, admired of the masses, rightly or wrongly, because of a reputed sincerity, so, in the time of Dominic, power was confined to a few who had deliberately and cleverly created a façade which, they were convinced, would appeal.

The warfare was about matter and spirit. What could the masses know about this? Even the Lords and the Ladies had little or no philosophy, but they did have greed. The common people had even less philosophy, but they anticipated the idea that it is a good thing to get something for nothing. So was the simple policy thrown to both: Cut adrift from the Roman Church, repudiate the Sacraments, and all stand to gain by the general share-out of the Church's goods. That was plain speaking, and it was good enough for the masses, but not good enough for the leaders. Dominic was at first alone in recognising these as disciplined men, mortified men, even convinced

² Bede Jarrett, O.P. *Life of St Dominic*. pp. 16-7.

men. They were, or they claimed to be, irreproachably disinterested men, wanting nothing for themselves save the joy of spreading the new truths, and to prove their sincerity, they so lived that many, seeing their extraordinary penances, their emaciated forms, cried out: 'Verily, these are sons of God' and obeyed their every word.

The penetrating mind of Dominic took all this in swiftly, whilst others, even in high places, shrugged their shoulders, or stood pathetically bewildered. They were not necessarily living evil lives indeed, but at best, they were living just ordinary lives, and to him it was a veritable scandal to be ordinary in such extraordinary circumstances. Hence came his challenge wedded to deed: The leaders say they have the truth and they have indeed, partial truth. I have the whole truth. They appear unworldly, mortified, subject only to the spirit. I shall be even more unworldly, more mortified, more subject to the Spirit I worship, for it is the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Hence the consistent march of eighteen unbroken years down a long road of profound study and meditation, of austerity and Christian penance. No pausing whilst he organises the Ladies of Prouille and his imperishable Order of Preachers. One penetrating glance at those who came under his spell and longed to share his apostolate, to discover whether they will join with him in leaving far behind the so-called 'perfect' sowers of evil doctrine, whether they are ready to out-mortify them in offering evidences of sincerity, and then the completest, kindest trust that ever man gave to his fellow-workers. I love to remember Fr Bede's emphasis: 'Dominic is not only the saint of truth but also the saint of kindly trust'.

That remembrance helps me to add finishing touches to my poor picture. St Bonaventure is also made by Dante to say of him that he was 'kindly to his friends but deadly to his foes', and his foes have sought a Franciscan *imprimatur* upon their assertion that he was indeed very deadly, deadly to the point of unfeeling cruelty, hard-visaged, and relentless, the worthy Father of Inquisitors.

How false a picture they paint! In Dominic, we sons of the Poverello have always found one of the most powerful ecclesiastical personalities ever to show appreciation of that most precious possession of anyone called Franciscan—Francis himself. In Dante's *Paradiso* they appear together as the two 'Princes' of their age. Over the door of the *Loggia* of the church of *San Paulo* in Florence they stand in exquisite effigy, forever embraced, and the effigy expresses the reality, that though they started far apart, one to convert the heretic by power of reason, and the other to convert the world by power of love, yet, when they met upon the road, they were singularly at one. Dominic perceived the truth of Francis' love,

and Francis embraced no cold, loveless, inhuman figure, but the man who had sold his books for bread for the poor; the man who had once offered to sell himself into slavery to redeem from the Moors a captive with a family to support, the man who had persuaded a haughty prelate to lay aside his robes and go barefoot to a conference with heretics, armed only with the humility of the Gospel; the gentle soul who persistently refused to hold a sword as well as a Rosary and to continue the secular war against his fellow Christians; who trusted to convert them by the Word of God in the mouths of men who lived according to its precepts. Could any method be more Franciscan?

And let us insist: the man whose embrace Francis so happily received was the great romantic as well as Catholic soul, whose devotion to the Mother of God, whose exquisite reception of the Mother of God into the scheme of his own purifying and the purifying of his Ladies and his Brethren, gave birth to a sweetly-sounding series of stories worthy to be set side by side with the immortal *Fioretti*. Dominic had his Lady, the Madonna, beloved of both; Francis had his Lady, Poverty, equally beloved of both.

And let another note be struck. This time in filial protest. In protest against those who have said and still say that his figure fades into the palest insignificance as soon as thought is directed to his son, the Angelic Saint Thomas. It would be idle to speculate: No Dominic, no Thomas, and I do not propose to touch it. But this I know, and it is cold fact, it was with Dominic's tradition, still fresh and vigorous, that Thomas fell in love, and it is to Thomas that we must still look, in ultimate analysis, to discover the most powerful expression and defence of Dominican spiritual values. And however dazzling the brilliance of the *Summa Theologica*, it will always be true that the deliberately chosen, the hard-fought-for setting of that brilliance, is the Dominicanism owed to a Father in God.

So, to my Dominican Brethren I would say, in true humility: Rejoice in splendid faith because your own chosen life-line remains open and clear, and recognise its saving grace with all the conviction of a Lacordaire. Rejoice on such a day as this that its apostolic strength was proved in striking fashion to Catholic and Protestant, Gentile and Jew, in our own day, within your cloisters and outside them, by an unforgettable figure the other 'athlete of the Lord', the uncompromising, the clear, the truthful, the loving and the loveable Father Vincent McNabb.

Here your days are passed, exhausted perhaps by the 'Laudare' and the 'Benedicere' that demand sheer penitential selflessness. But be sure of this, that the 'Praedicare' is there, as vigorous as ever.

By your very patient presence you do preach to the world the truth of Christ, and the power of Christ, for it is in pursuit of his truth you are here, and it is by his power you are held. Let your waiting be the waiting of Dominic, and in God's good time you will be, you *must* be, among those, fire-tried and very well prepared to take up arms in our own grim warfare. Once again the enemies of Christ are far above the ordinary. Their eminence is due to the ignorance of the masses once more. To meet their representations, Dominic, your Father, appeals to you to rise to heights of sincerity and truth no matter what the cost of the ascent may be. For it is only men who tread those heights who can, with assurance, discern and preach the falsity of the most gifted and subtle opponents of the Saviour of Mankind.

And may our Father Dominic turn his 'kindly eyes, stored with simple truth' in benediction not only to his sons of Mary's white habit, but to those who still venture to wear the garb of Christ's Poverty.



SIGRID UNDSET, T.O.S.D.

1882-1949

BY

A. M. SCARRE

(The Norwegian authoress, Sigrid Undset, was born in Kalundborg, in Denmark, on May 20th, 1882. Her father was the well-known Norwegian archaeologist Ingvald Undset. Her mother was Danish, daughter of the mayor of Kalundborg. The family removed to Norway two years later. In 1912 she married the artist Anders C. Svarstad, by whom she had three children. Her marriage was dissolved in 1924, the year she entered the Church.)



SIGRID UNDSET'S conversion in 1924 aroused something like consternation in Norway. There are few Catholics in the country—not quite three thousand—and there is much prejudice and accompanying ignorance of Catholic teaching. And yet her intimate friends and those who read her books carefully had long been aware of the trend of her thoughts. As far back as 1915 she wrote to a friend that 'the Roman Church has at least form and is not irritating to one's intelligence'. Later on she remarks that Roper's life of his father-in-law, Thomas More, is one of the most beautiful things she has ever read; and her preoccupation with and widening knowledge of the middle ages, the ages of faith, in