

THE WISDOM OF SAINT DOMINIC¹

BY

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*For by wisdom they were healed, whosoever hath pleased thee,
O Lord, from the beginning. (Wisdom, 9, 19.)*



THE work of the Church is a work of reconciliation, of restoring men to God, by whom they were made and to whom they must return. It is the work of Christ, 'for he is our peace, who hath made both one . . . breaking down the middle wall of partition, the enmities in his flesh' (Eph. 2, 14). He came into the world that he might redeem it; he died for the world that it might live for God.

And through the centuries the Church, which is the Body of Christ, continues his work of healing: bringing back the alien to the household of God, forgiving his sins, feeding his soul, teaching him the truth that alone can set him free, and at last preparing him for the destiny of heaven. And of all the evils which pervert that work of healing, heresy, the choice of a lie instead of the redemptive truth of Christ, is the deepest and most dangerous. For it is at last the choice of slavery, the return to the desert of alienation: and its fruits we know. The only answer to the lie is the patient truth that outshines it, the heavenly wisdom that restores a right order that has been lost. But the easy answer, one that appeals to generous men often enough, is the display of strength, the big battalions and the anathemae unexplained. The exhilaration of a crusade can forget the radical evil it seeks to destroy.

For St Dominic, our father and founder, heresy was a wound in the Body of Christ: it could never be healed by the slick professional reply, still less by the argument of arms. How often indeed the temptation comes to the priest and the preacher to regard the heretic or indeed any sinner at all just as one who has offended against the code, to be condemned simply, to be silenced. We are impatient, but Christ and the Church are patient. From the Cross our Lord looks down on a world that has rejected him. But he prays for it, he achieves in his own suffering and death the hope of its redemption.

When St Dominic came through Languedoc, a diplomat attached to the Bishop of Osma, and stayed at Toulous, he met, in the very

¹ The text of a sermon preached at Blackfriars, Oxford, August 4th 1949.

house of hospitality, the evil of heresy. And he spent the whole night in discussion, pleading with his host, healing the evil with wisdom, meeting the anger with patience, dispelling the darkness with the light of truth. Already his vocation was established—and the methods it must use. For the heresy of the Albigenses was not a theologian's option: it was the recurrence—and still it recurs—of a basic rejection of God in his goodness, and rejected under the form of a seeming goodness and ascetic zeal. It is easy to understand the contagion of such a heresy in that indolent southern land. For the initiates, a fanatical rejection of created good—marriage, food and all the gifts of God that can make even man's material needs a means of grace: for the many, the assurance that the body and its demands belonged to the devil anyway, nothing can be done about it, responsibility need not arise.

Here was an evil that went beyond the world of ideas; it attacked society itself, and as such the sanctions of society could be invoked to end it. But first of all it must be met and answered in the light of truth.

In honouring St Dominic, then, we honour the work which, under God, his order has continued through the centuries. It is the work of the Order—yes; but it is the work of the Church as such, the work of Christ our Lord. It is the work of truth, but not as an idea to be accepted merely, a series of propositions to be proved. 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' This truth is redemptive: a life in which to be incorporated, for it is the life of Christ made available to men. *In lumine tuo videbimus lumen*. In the light of Christ alone shall we see light. Most truly, therefore, is the Order of Preachers called apostolic, commissioned as it is by the Church to build up the Body of Christ, restoring, reconciling, healing, so that man who has been made in the image of God may be made ready for the unending union of heaven.

And this work begins and ends in prayer. For St Dominic the life of contemplation was not a means; it was a life, and every moment of it, and out of the abundance of that life wisdom and truth might grow. So it was that he, already a priest, established his work of reconciliation, of bringing men back to their unity in Christ, on the rock of contemplation. His first foundation was at Prouille, where women, themselves converted from heresy, might spend their days and nights in prayer, building up the hidden resources of prayer so that the active work of their brethren might find its context *there*—in silence, in a single dedication to God. So it is that the setting of all Dominican life is the choir, where

the brethren are gathered together about the altar, where Christ our Lord whom they preach is present, where the sacrifice he offered is re-presented every day. The church, we are told, was St Dominic's home: here he spent his nights in prayer, and, when weariness overcame him, he would rest his head against the altar to sleep for a while. A Dominican church is the house of God, and the brethren's home. And home is where we set out from, as it is, too, the place to which at last we return.

The crusade had begun in Languedoc, the quick answer which could never be ultimately that of Christ or St Dominic, whose whole purpose was to restore Christ to those who had rejected him. As yet St Dominic's preachers were not an order. Ten years of preaching, of giving to others the fruit of contemplation, had convinced St Dominic that here was a need of the Church that must be met. An order, yes, and one rooted in the traditional discipline of monastic life—vowed to poverty, chastity and that obedience which is the crown of religious perfection; but an order, too, that would in a special way be dedicated to the work of reconciliation through the *wisdom* that is born of prayer. And in 1216 Pope Honorius III was to confirm the Order, whose members, he prophesied, would be 'champions of the faith and a true light of the world'.

St Dominic's vocation had been born in the stress of a particular tragedy. He had answered the evil of the Albigenses with a purity and singleness of life that was the best answer to a perverse asceticism; he had brought men back to the Church through the example of holiness and the precepts of wisdom—that wisdom which is a gift of the Holy Ghost, docile to his inspirations, moving easily under his will. And his mission was to be as wide as the Church, for its aim, too, was one and holy and catholic and apostolic. It is not a mere proprietary pride that enables us to say that the Order of Preachers is the Order of the Church.

Seven hundred years have passed, and much of St Dominic's work, to human eyes, belongs to history, to the things that were and are no more. The great priory of St Romanus in Toulouse, first and finest of all Dominican churches, still stands: a pink-brick fortress, double-naved, a motive of credibility to a city no longer heretic indeed so much as pagan. The church still stands, but you will find no Dominicans there today. For fifty years it was a barracks, and horses were stabled in its sanctuary. It is a symbol, perhaps, of the perennial vocation of the Order, less bound than most to the security of walls and historic place. For the work of wisdom is always being begun anew: there is no close season for

truth. There are Dominicans in Toulouse and France today; not in the traditional places most often, not always in the traditional clothes for that matter. The man in dungarees you passed in the street may be a priest who works in a factory. His cloister is the assembly-bench; for the moment his work of reconciliation lies there. And so with the new needs of the years there may come new methods, a new language to learn: but fundamentally all is ever the same, for truth does not alter, Christ does not alter—though his ministers must never despise new ways to make him known and loved. The condition of the Order's survival—and how providential that it, almost alone among the ancient orders, has never known a lasting division—is simply that it should remain faithful to St Dominic and the initial work of grace which fashioned the vocation of us all. We must, if need be, go back beyond Lacordaire, beyond St Vincent Ferrer, beyond St Thomas himself, to our Holy Father St Dominic, matching error with truth, not any truth, but the truth that springs from the love of God, the truth that it is a life lived, dedicated, offered in all its moments to God alone.

And in our own day the need was never so great; never has there been an order so 'contemporary' as that of St Dominic, for its credentials are those of Christ himself. The source of its strength remains ever the same, and its power cannot grow less if its members are faithful to the commission of its founder, which we dare say is none other than the commission of Christ our Lord. 'Teach ye all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.' So it is that with reason we sing in the Preface of the Mass of St Dominic: *Sapientiam ejus narrant populi, ejusque laudes nuntiat ecclesia*. The nations speak of his wisdom and the Church declares his praise, for 'by wisdom were they healed, whosoever hath pleased thee, o Lord, from the beginning'.



UNSERE LIEBE FRAU VON DER ERFRISCHENDEN QUELLE. By Franz Maria Moschner. (Herder, 1950; DM.7.80.)

This book is a profound, if occasionally somewhat didactic, commentary on the Litany of Loretto. Unlike some Marian devotional literature it avoids all fanciful descriptions, but brings out the meaning of each invocation by a careful examination of its component parts, such as *turris Davidica*, *domus aurea*, etc. For priests who know German the book might give many useful hints for sermons on our Lady.

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