

On the Beginnings of the Order of Preachers

Jordan of Saxony
(ca. 1200-1228)

Prologue

To all the brethren of the Order of Preachers, sons of grace that they are and co-heirs of glory, brother Jordan, their useless servant, wishes health and joy in their holy profession.

Many of the brethren have been asking about the founding of the Order of Preachers, which God's providence has raised up as a remedy for the perils of these latter days, and how it all began; they want to know who the first brethren of our Order were and what they were like, how they increased in number and how they were made "strong in grace." Prompted by such queries, I have for some time now been questioning the brethren who were involved in the very beginnings of the Order, who were able to watch and listen to the venerable servant of Christ, Master Dominic, the first founder of this Order, its first Master and its first member, whose mind communed devoutly with God and the angels even while he was living in this mortal flesh, surrounded by sinners; he kept God's commandments and zealously followed the counsels, serving his eternal Maker in every way he knew how to and was able to, and the innocence and heavenly purity of his way of life shone like a beacon in the grim darkness of this world.

Now that I have gone systematically through all this material, I have decided to write it down, so that the sons who are to be born to the Order in the future will not be ignorant of how it began, and will not be frustrated in their desire to find out about it, when there is no longer anyone there, because of the passage of time, to give them any reliable information. I know that I was not one of the very first brethren, but I have lived with some of them, and I was acquainted with the blessed Dominic both before and after joined the Order, and indeed I knew him quite intimately, because I went to confession to him and it was at his wish that I became a deacon, and it was only four years after the founding of the Order that I received the habit. So, as I say, I have decided to write down both what I observed and heard for myself, and what I have learned from the earliest brethren, about the beginnings of the Order and about the life and miracles of our blessed father, Dominic, and also about some of the other brethren, as they occur to my mind.

So, my dearest brothers and children in Christ, please accept this book, which has been put together as best I can, to encourage and inspire you, and receive it with devotion, and, when you read about the friars' first fervor of charity, strive eagerly to imitate it.

Chapter 1

There lived in Spain a venerable man named Diego, the bishop of Osma, who was renowned for his knowledge of the bible and for the worldly respectability of his birth, but who was particularly distinguished for the remarkable integrity of his character and behavior. His love was so totally given to God that he renounced himself and sought only what belongs to Jesus Christ, turning his mind and will especially to finding some way of winning many souls for Christ. He was determined that his Master should receive back his talent with generous interest. So he sought out, wherever he could, men who were commended by integrity of life and character and, by any means at his disposal, he tried to draw such men to himself and to give them benefices in the church which he ruled.

If any of his subjects were sluggish in their desire for holiness, being more interested in worldly things, he urged them in words and inspired them by his example to adopt a more commendable pattern of behavior and a more serious form of religious life. As part of this program, he did his best, by means of frequent exhortations and unceasing encouragement, to persuade his canons to agree to follow the Rule of St. Augustine and to live as canons regular, and, as a result of his efforts, he succeeded in winning their minds to his purpose, though some of them resisted him.

During his time there lived a young man called Dominic, who was born in the same diocese, in a small town called Caleruega. From his earliest years Dominic had been brought up with loving care by his family, especially a certain archpriest who was an uncle of his. The earliest education they procured for him was in the practices of the church, so that, as one whom God had foreseen as a "vessel of election," he would absorb in childhood, like the proverbial "new-made pot," an odor of sanctity which he would never thereafter lose.

Afterwards he was sent to Palencia to be formed in the liberal arts, because there was a thriving arts faculty there at this time. When he thought he had learned enough of the arts, he abandoned them and fled to the study of theology, as if he was afraid to waste his limited time on less fruitful study. He began to develop a passionate appetite for God's words, finding them "sweeter than honey to his mouth."

He spent four years in these sacred studies, and throughout the whole period his eagerness to imbibe the streams of holy scripture was so intense and so unremitting that he spent whole nights almost without sleep, so untiring was his desire to study; and the truth which his ears received he stored away in the deepest recesses of his mind and guarded in his retentive memory. His natural abilities made it easy for him to take things in, and his love and piety fertilized whatever he learned, so that it brought forth fruit in the form of saving works. The verdict of Truth himself pronounces him blessed: as he said in the gospel, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it." There are two ways

of keeping the word of God: one is to retain the word in our memories, once we have heard it, the other is to put it into practice and display it in action. There is no doubt that the second way is better, just as it is better to keep seed by planting it in the earth than by hoarding it in a box. Now this fortunate servant of God, Dominic, was adept at keeping God's word in both ways: his memory was a kind of "barn" for God, which God "filled to overflowing" with crops of every kind, and his external behavior and actions broadcast publicly the treasure that lay hidden in his holy breast.

Because he accepted the Lord's commandments so warmly, and because his will welcomed the voice of his Lover with such loyalty and pleasure, the God of all knowledge gave him an increase of grace, so that he became capable of receiving more than the milk of beginners, and was able to penetrate the mysteries of difficult theological questions with the humble understanding of his heart, and to swallow easily enough the testing promotion to more solid food.

He was of a good disposition from the time he was a baby, and his remarkable childhood promised that great things could be expected from him when he grew up. He did not join in with other children's games, nor did he associate himself with those who "walk frivolously"; like quiet Jacob, he avoided the wanderings of Esau, preferring to remain in the lap of his mother, the church, and the homely tents of sanctity and repose. Looking at him, you would have said that he was young and old at once; his lack of years proclaimed him a child, but the maturity of his way of life and the stability of his character were more suggestive of old age. He spurned the enticements of a dissolute world, to walk in the way of innocence. To the end of his life he preserved the glory of virginity intact for the Lord, who loves purity.

While he was still a child, God, for whom the future is no secret, granted a sign that remarkable things were to be hoped from him. His mother saw him in a vision, with the moon on his forehead, signifying that he would one day be given to the world as a light for the nations, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. In the outcome, this was proved to be a true prediction.

While he was a student at Palencia, there was a severe famine throughout almost the whole of Spain. He was deeply moved by the plight of the poor, and resolved, in the warmth of his compassion, to do something which would both accord with the Lord's counsels and do as much as possible to remedy the needs of the poor who were dying. So he sold the books which he possessed, although he needed them very much, and established an almonry where the poor could be fed. In this way "open-handed he gave to the poor." His exemplary kindness so moved some of the other theologians and masters that they too began to give more lavish alms, seeing their own sluggish parsimony shown up by the young man's generosity.

While the man of God was "planning his pilgrimage in his heart" like this and progressing from strength to strength, daily surpassing himself in goodness, as everyone could see, because his innocence of life shone out like the morning star in the midst of the clouds, making everybody marvel at him, his fame reached the bishop of Osma, who carefully enquired into the truth of what was being said about him, and then had him sent for, to make him a canon regular in his church.

He at once became conspicuous like a brilliant constellation among his fellow canons. He was the lowliest of them all in his humility of heart, but he was their leader in holiness. For all of them he was "a fragrance of life leading them on to life" and "incense on a summer's day." The brethren were amazed that he attained to such an unusual height of religious perfection so quickly and they appointed him sub-prior, so that his superior position would attract everybody's attention and they would all be led on by his example. Like "a fruitful olive-tree," like "a cypress which rears itself up to heaven," he haunted the church by day and by night, devoting himself ceaselessly to prayer. Claiming for himself the leisure for contemplation, he hardly ever showed himself outside the confines of the monastery. God had given him a special grace to weep for sinners and for the afflicted and oppressed; he bore their distress in the inmost shrine of his compassion, and the warm sympathy he felt for them in his heart spilled over in the tears which flowed from his eyes.

It was his very frequent practice to spend the night at his prayers, praying to his Father, "with his door shut." During these prayers, he sometimes felt such groaning in his heart that he could not stop himself from bursting out loudly, so that even at a distance people could hear him roaring and crying. He had a special prayer which he often made to God, that God would grant him true charity, which would be effective in caring for and winning the salvation of men; he thought he would only really be a member of Christ's Body when he could spend himself utterly with all his strength in the winning of souls, just as the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of us all, gave himself up entirely for our salvation.

He read and loved a book entitled "Conferences of the Fathers," which deals with the vices and with the whole matter of spiritual perfection, and in this book he strove to explore the ways of salvation and to follow them with all the power of his mind. With the help of grace, this book brought him to the highest purity of conscience and to considerable enlightenment in contemplation and to a veritable peak of perfection.

Chapter 2

While Dominic was being cosseted like this in the embrace of the beautiful Rachel, Leah began impatiently to claim him for herself, wanting him to come in to her so that she could silence the people who criticized her for her bleary eyes by showing how fertile she could be in bearing children.

King Alfonso of Castile was wanting at this time to arrange a marriage between his son, Fernando, and a noble lady from the Marches. For this reason, he approached the bishop of Osma to ask if he would act as his agent in the matter. The bishop accepted the commission, and quickly gathered together a respectable entourage, such as the holiness of his position required, and set off, taking the man of God, Dominic, the sub-prior of his church, with him.

In time they came to Toulouse. When the bishop learned that the people in that neighborhood had been heretics for some time, he was sincerely upset and sorry for all the many souls who were being so wretchedly deceived. During the night which they spent in lodgings in Toulouse, the sub-prior argued powerfully and passionately with their host, who was a heretic, and at last brought him back to the faith, by the help of the Spirit of God, because the heretic was unable to withstand "the wisdom and Spirit which was addressing him."

After that, they left Toulouse and went to their destination, where the girl was, arriving there at last after a great many difficulties. They explained why they had come and obtained the girl's consent, and then returned quickly to the king. The bishop told him of their success and of the girl's reply.

The king accordingly decided to send him back again, with a more splendid entourage, to fetch the girl with all due honor, so that she could be married to his son. So the bishop undertook the difficult journey for a second time.

When he reached the Marches, though, he found that the girl had died in the meantime. However, the journey was not wasted, because God was planning to make use of it for something far more profitable. As we can see from what happened afterwards, he was taking the opportunity of this journey to arrange the beginnings of a much more wonderful marriage, between God and souls, in which souls throughout the church would be joined to everlasting salvation and recalled in various ways from various kinds of sin and error.

The bishop sent a messenger back to the king, and then made use of the occasion to hurry off with his clergy to the papal court. As soon as he came into the presence of Pope Innocent, he begged to be allowed to resign his see, if possible. Over and over again he pleaded his own incompetence and argued that the enormous dignity of the job was beyond his powers; he also opened his mind to the pope about a purpose he had conceived of devoting all his energies to the conversion of the Saracens, should the pope allow his resignation. But the pope refused, and would not even accept his suggestion that he might be permitted to go and preach to the Saracens while remaining a bishop. This was, of course, due to a hidden purpose of God, who had destined the energies of this great man for a rich harvest of salvation in another direction.

On his way back home, the bishop visited Citeaux, and when he saw the way of life of all God's servants there, he was drawn by the excellence of their religious

observance and put on the monastic habit. Then he hurried on to return to Spain, taking with him some monks from whose teaching he could learn their pattern of life. He had no inkling of the obstacle which was going to prevent him, by God's providence, from hurrying home as he intended.

Chapter 3

Pope Innocent had recently sent twelve Cistercian abbots and one papal legate to preach the faith against the Albigensian heretics, and these men were holding a council with the archbishops and bishops and other prelates of the region, to discuss the best way of carrying out their commission effectively. During their meeting the bishop of Osma happened to pass through Montpellier, where the council was being held. They received him with honor, and, since they knew that he was a holy, judicious and just man, and that he was zealous for the faith, they asked for his advice.

He was a prudent man, and he had some understanding of the ways of God, so he enquired about the practices and behavior of the heretics. Learning how the heretics were enticing people into their faithless party by arguing and preaching and by a feigned example of holiness, and seeing how this contrasted with the missionaries' enormous supply of provisions and horses and clothing, he said, "No, brethren, I do not think that you are setting about things in the right way. In my opinion you will never be able to bring these people back to the faith just by talking to them, because they are much more inclined to be swayed by example. Look how the heretics urge their ways on the simple people by displaying an outward show of holiness, by feigning an example of evangelical austerity and asceticism. If the example you give is the opposite of all this, you will build little and perhaps destroy what is already there, without ever convincing them. Use a nail to drive out a nail. Chase off their feigned holiness with true religious life. The imposing appearance of the false apostles can only be shown up for what it is by manifest humility. Paul found himself obliged to play the fool and list his genuine virtues and show off all the hardships and hazards of his life, in order to rebut the conceit of people who were boasting of the meritoriousness of their lives."

They asked him, "So what do you advise us to do, good father?" He replied, "Do what you see me doing." At once the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he summoned his companions and told them to return to Osma with his horses and goods and all the various kinds of provisions that he had brought with him. He only kept a few of his clergy with him. His intention, he told them, was to stay on in that country to spread the faith.

One of those whom he kept behind was Dominic, his sub-prior, for whom he had a high regard and a warm affection. This Dominic was the first founder and the first member of the Order of Preachers, and from that time onward he was no longer called "sub-prior," but "brother Dominic." And "Dominic" indeed he was,

because he was "kept by the Lord" in innocence of sin, and because he "kept the Lord's will" with all his might.

The abbots listened to the bishop's advice, and, inspired by his example, they agreed to adopt a similar policy themselves. They sent back to their monasteries everything that they had brought with them, except for the books which they would need for the celebration of the Office and for study and, should the opportunity arise, for purposes of debate. They accepted the bishop as their superior and as the head of the whole enterprise, and set off on foot and without provisions to proclaim the faith in Voluntary poverty.

When the heretics saw this, they launched a counter-offensive of more insistent preaching.

Frequent debates were held, at Pamiers, Lavaur, Montreal and Fanjeaux. Judges were appointed to pronounce on the outcome of these debates, and, on the days fixed for them, rulers and knights and women and the ordinary people assembled, all wanting to listen to the arguments over the faith.

On one occasion a famous debate was held at Fanjeaux, for which a large crowd of believers and unbelievers was assembled. Several of the believers had composed tracts containing arguments and authorities to support the faith. When these were all examined, the one which was considered best and was most generally approved of was one by the blessed Dominic, so this was the one chosen to be submitted to the three judges who had been appointed, with the agreement of all the parties concerned, to decide the debate. The heretics too had written a tract, which was also to be submitted. Whichever side submitted the book which the judges ruled to be more reasonable, the faith of that side was to be considered the winner.

There was a long verbal tussle, but the judges still could not agree on a verdict in favor of either party. Eventually they had the idea of throwing both books into the fire. Should either of them chance not to be burned, that one was to be regarded as undoubtedly containing the true faith.

A big fire was lit, and both the books were thrown in. The heretics' book burned up immediately, but the other one, the one written by the man of God, Dominic, not merely remained unharmed by the flames, it actually leaped a long way out of the fire in the sight of them all. They threw it in again, and it jumped out again. When the same thing happened a third time, this plainly proved both the truth of the faith and the holiness of the book's author.

The character of the man of God, bishop Diego, was so radiantly attractive that he won the affection even of unbelievers and he touched the hearts of everyone with whom he came into contact, so that the heretics said of him that it was impossible for such a man not to be predestined for eternal life. They surmised

that perhaps he had been sent to that part of the world precisely in order to learn the doctrine of the true faith from them!

At a place called Prouille, between Fanjeaux and Montreal, he established a monastery to receive certain noble women whose parents had been forced by poverty to entrust them to the heretics to be educated and brought up. To this day the handmaids of Christ there offer acceptable service to their Maker, leading vigorously holy lives, in outstanding innocence and purity; a life such as theirs is conducive to salvation for those who lead it, an example to others, a joy to the angels, and pleasing to God.

Bishop Diego exercised his ministry of preaching for two years, but at the end of this time he decided to return to Spain, to avoid incurring the charge of neglecting his own church if he stayed away any longer. After visiting his church, he intended to come back, bringing some money with him to finish building his monastery for sisters; he also wanted, with the pope's permission, to ordain some men in that region who would be suitable as preachers, whose job it would be to keep hammering away at the errors of the heretics and tirelessly to support the truth of the faith.

He left brother Dominic in charge of the spiritual government of those who remained behind, because he knew him to be a man genuinely full of the Spirit. In temporal affairs, William Claret of Pamiers was to be in charge, it being understood that he was to give an account to brother Dominic of everything that he did.

So the bishop took leave of the brethren and set off on foot. After passing through Castile, he arrived at Osma. But a few days later he fell ill and finished his life in this world in great sanctity, winning a glorious reward for the good and hard work he had done, and going to his grave in prosperity to enter into "a wealthy rest."

It is said that after his death he also won renown for working miracles, and it would not be surprising if he were powerful in this way in the presence of God, since even while he was among men in this weak and miserable dwelling place of ours his life was characterized by remarkable evidence of God's favors and by the resplendent beauty of his virtues.

When the news of the death of the man of God reached the missionaries who had stayed on in the Toulouse district, they all went back to their homes. Brother Dominic was the only one who carried on preaching the whole time. Some people did join him, but they were not bound to him by any promise of obedience.

Amongst those who joined him were William Claret, whom we have already met, and a Spaniard called brother Dominic, who was later the prior of Madrid in Spain.

Chapter 4

After the death of the bishop of Osma, a crusade against the Albigensians began to be preached in France. Pope Innocent was angry that the unremitting rebelliousness of the heretics could not be tamed by any love for the truth, so he decided that, if they could not be pierced by the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, at least they should feel the power of the material sword brought against them.