

A TERTIARY OF ST. DOMINIC

ANYONE assisting at Mass in the Chapel of the Fathers of the Assumption in Paris on a May morning in the year 1865 might have observed the frail, slightly mis-shapen figure of a woman, bowed in prayer. On enquiry he would have learnt that her name was Antoinette Fage, the directress of an orphanage run by some charitable ladies, a Tertiary of St. Dominic, and a recent penitent of the Assumptionist Père Pernet. He would have required unusual prescience to have discerned in this small delicate woman, already in her forty-second year, the Foundress of a Congregation that would spread to two Continents before the end of the century.

Left a virtual orphan at the age of thirteen by the death of her mother, her spine permanently injured in an accident during her childhood, Antoinette grew up in an atmosphere of sorrow and suffering. Thus early she learnt her first lessons in resignation to the Divine Will. 'It was His Holy Will that I should suffer anguish of mind, sadness of heart and extreme bodily pain so that I might the more easily enter into the sufferings of others and minister to them,' she said in later years.

Antoinette was cared for by kind friends until she was old enough to earn her living with her needle. In 1850 she joined a dressmaking establishment, and it was about that time that she first became acquainted with the Dominican Fathers. Of a naturally religious nature, gifted by God with remarkable qualities of heart and mind, yet with a highly-strung temperament and a want of confidence in her own powers, she needed the direction of a master of the spiritual life. For the next fourteen years she was to find in Père Faucillon, O.P., such a director.

From her Dominican confessor Antoinette learnt to worship God in truth as well as in beauty. He taught her how dangerous to a nature like hers, with its overflowing sympathy and craving for affection, were habits of devotion which have an emotional appeal. 'Be practical in

all you do for God,' he writes. He led her into paths of solid virtue, through reason enlightened by faith and experience. Above all, he grounded her in the cardinal virtue of Prudence—the 'discrezione' of St. Catherine—which induces the intellect to select in every instance the best means for attaining its aims by subordinating them to our ultimate end. Under the guidance of Père Fauconnier her zeal for souls became infused with supernatural charity and did not consume itself at the dictates of her own will. The steady progress she made in her spiritual life led, inevitably, to a desire in her to consecrate herself yet more to God. The delicate state of her health seemed to preclude any idea of her entering one of the enclosed orders, and so she asked to be received into the Third Order of St. Dominic. Nine years after she had first put herself under the direction of the Dominican Fathers she made her profession 'until death' in the Order of Penance of Blessed Dominic. Soon after this she left the dressmaking work-room and became the directress of an orphanage run by Dominican Tertiaries.

How came it, then, that on this May morning in 1863 she was to be found in the chapel of the Fathers of the Assumption, the penitent of Père Pernet? The frequent absences of Père Fauconnier, inevitable consequence of the apostolic life of a Friar Preacher, had been a great cross to Antoinette; and so when, in 1864, he was sent to preach missions in country places, which would necessitate a lengthy absence from Paris, she conceived the idea of asking Père Pernet to be her confessor. In this she must have been responding to heavenly inspiration, since she had only met Père Pernet once before, when he had approached her in an unsuccessful attempt to find employment for a poor teacher in whom he was interested. In one of her first letters to him she wrote: 'I require to feel myself helped, supported, encouraged . . . I found all this in my dear Dominican family.'

The first year of Père Pernet's care of her soul coincided with the crystallisation of her desire to send in her resignation as directress of the orphanage. For some time her views had differed from those of the foundresses, who, though good and pious women, had no breadth of vision.

This friction had been the cause of much mental and moral suffering to her, and was affecting her health. Her new director, however, used his influence to induce her to remain. At the beginning of May an event occurred which precipitated her departure. Père Pernet chanced to hear that the foundresses of the orphanage were making enquiries for a suitable young person to fill Antoinette's position. Considering that an injustice was being done to her, since she had received no intimation that she was being relieved of her charge, he advised Antoinette to send in her resignation at once. It was now that, for the first time, he unfolded to her the project which was so dear to his heart, and for which he had, from the very first, recognised in her the instrument chosen by God.

Before he came to Paris Père Pernet had had great experience of social work among the working classes in the manufacturing town of Nimes. He had, therefore, first-hand knowledge of those conditions in the industrial world which were pre-occupying so many sons of the Church and calling for protest and action. Already the Church was experiencing that spontaneous social impulse that, throughout the remaining years of the century, was to manifest itself so generously in so many countries, and from which it is impossible to dissociate the names of Bishop Ketteler, the Marquis de la Tour du Pin and the Comte de Mun, Gaspard Decurtins, Cardinal Manning, Cardinal Gibbons, and the Bishop of Perugia, who, as Leo XIII, was to give it its culminating impetus in the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Père Pernet saw that evil industrial conditions, such as the exploitation of cheap woman and child labour, were disorganising family life, and that undue poverty in the wage-earning classes was banishing God from the home. If society was to be cured, in no other way could it be cured but by a return to Christian life and Christian institutions. To re-establish the Christian family Père Pernet realised that it was necessary to come to the aid of the working man. But in that age of rationalism and materialism, with its militant anti-clericalism, it was not always possible for a priest to gain entry into the hovels of the poor, made desolate by want and sickness. Vaguely, at first, the picture formed itself

in his mind of a woman—a nun—who would nurse the poor in their own homes, and who, while attending to their bodily needs, might succeed in evangelising the family. One day, early in 1864, whilst saying Mass with the intention of seeking the Will of God, he received full and perfect light. He was to establish a nursing Congregation who by alleviating the sufferings of the poor would gain their hearts and rekindle their faith. It would be dedicated to the Christian regeneration of the working-class family. Père Pernet waited and prayed. Some weeks later two women came to ask him if he could find them patients, as they were nurses out of employment. Finding them in good dispositions he disclosed part of his design to them, and under his direction they were soon nursing the poor for no reward, and living themselves in utter poverty. They were joined by a third, but not one of them had the qualities necessary for undertaking the direction of the work. So once again the holy priest waited and prayed. As soon as Père Pernet met Antoinette he felt an intuition that she was the chosen one, and on this day, early in May, 1865, he disclosed this to her for the first time.

Her first reaction was consternation.—‘ But, Father, I cannot suppose that you wish to make me a nun, still less a nurse! ’ Père Pernet counselled complete abandonment to the Will of God, and so throughout the month of our Lady Antoinette thought and prayed.

How often she must have gone back in mind to the day of her reception into the Third Order of St. Dominic. She had most certainly felt herself led by God to make that solemn profession. Was it, then, compatible with this new vocation? Were the vision of Père Pernet and the vision of Prouille—the Signadou of St. Dominic—in some way cognate? St. Dominic had established the Convent at Prouille as a beacon of Truth in a land dark with heretical teaching, it was apostolic and educational as well as contemplative. Would not Père Pernet’s nursing sisters be the bearers of new fire from that beacon to the cold and blackened hearths of the disinherited? They would be ‘ doing the truth in charity ’ and so fulfilling the Dominican watchword ‘ Veritas.’ They would most cer-

tainly be sharing the apostolic life of the Friars Preachers, and if they preached by precept and example rather than by the word, would they not be moving among people more able, perhaps, to grasp the truth in action than the truth in thought? Like the priories of St. Dominic, they would be found in the heart of great cities, and if the Dominicans were teachers at the universities, the Little Sisters would be teachers in that great university of suffering humanity—the sickroom. More and more Antoinette must have come to realise that in the work proposed for the Little Sisters of the Assumption was nothing inimical to the Dominican spirit, and that she would merely be passing from a religious state to the religious life. It remained, therefore, only to seek the Will of God . . . *Veni Creator Spiritus* . . .

On May 31st Antoinette Fage left the orphanage, and after a month spent in the Convent of the Ladies of the Assumption, receiving instruction in the religious life, she found herself at the head of a community of eight women. The life of the Nursing Sisters had begun. The story of the remaining eighteen years of the life of *Mère Marie de Jésus*, as we must now call her, is one of great beauty. Extreme poverty, approaching at times to destitution, war, calumny, and occasional failure served but to strengthen her dependence on her Heavenly Father, and her faith in Providence. If on the one hand she had much to suffer, on the other she saw the manifold blessing of God upon the work. Vocations multiplied, new foundations were called for increasingly, and, to crown all, the Congregation was officially recognised by the Church. In 1883, in the midst of her large and growing family, *Mother Marie de Jésus* was called to her reward. The seed of her spiritual life, watered by tears in her youth, had reached its flowering under the care of the Friars Preachers. It came to its full and perfect fruition in the Congregation she was called upon by God to found.

For a little over half a century *Mère Marie de Jésus* lay in the crypt of the lower chapel at the Mother House, in the heart of that great power house of Catholic Action of which God had made her the corner-stone. In 1936 the Cause of her Beatification was successfully introduced, and

the tribunal of the Apostolic Process nominated. The following year the exhumation took place under the Presidency of the Auxiliary of Paris. It was with deep thankfulness to Almighty God that the Little Sisters learnt that the body of their beloved Mother Foundress had been found incorrupt. This was the more remarkable having regard to the nature of her last illness, and to the fact that the crypt where she lay had been inundated by floods some years before. So yet another of the daughters of St. Dominic is in the process of being raised to the Altars of the Church. Meanwhile, her daughters are living embodiments of that Christian Social Action united to, and springing from, a vital spiritual life which, necessary as it was in the last century, is even more the need of the world to-day.

DIANA BURY.

THE SPIRITUAL MAN¹

The Spirit breatheth where He will, and thou hearest His voice; but thou knowest not whence He cometh or whither He goeth. So is everyone that is born of the Spirit.

(JN. iii, 8.)

CAJETAN rightly observes that in these words our Lord, describing the way and state of the Spirit, described also the way and state of the spiritual man. Now, since Christ our Lord, the very truth, declares most plainly that this is the case of everyone who is born of the Spirit, we should conclude that the state of the spiritual man, as formed by the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, cannot be explained in any better way than by the similitude here employed by our Lord.

Note, therefore, that this text lays down three conditions for the state of the spiritual man.

¹ From John of St. Thomas: *Cursus Theologicus in Iam II ae, D. Thomae, D.XVIII, De donis Spiritus Sancti. Art. 1.*