

## THE DOMINICAN NUNS OF SAINT-JACQUES<sup>1</sup>

IS intellectual work compatible with the religious life? According to St. Thomas Aquinas<sup>2</sup> a life of contemplation and asceticism normally demands it. Intellectual activity is closely bound up with contemplation and the teaching apostolate. Study is not just idle curiosity; for it springs from a love of all truths included in the Supreme Truth, in the Being Whose essence is Truth: God. Love of God demands contemplation, and contemplation, in its turn, demands study. Whosoever loves God desires to know Him and to explore the secrets of His infinite perfection; and without study it is impossible to have a clear and intelligent faith. Again, if contemplation should express and complete itself in the mission to teach divine truth to others, a knowledge of religious doctrine, as complete as possible is obviously essential.

The Order of Friars Preachers has so thoroughly understood the importance of intellectual work that it regards the latter as a fundamental necessity and has placed it, alongside of the Divine Office, first in the hierarchy of means. It was St. Dominic's wish that his sons should be sufficiently detached from primary material interests to apply themselves, without intermission, to study, prayer and preaching. The Order of Preachers was, in fact, the first religious group to make organised and collective study an essential part of the religious life. The Friars Preachers were students; and there has been no modification of this characteristic of theirs during the course of the centuries. The actual directions given by the present Master General of the Order, the Very Reverend Père Gillet, successor of St. Dominic, are faithful

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<sup>1</sup> Translated and adapted from *Les Dominicaines de Saint-Jacques* by M.-M. Davy (Mère Henri-Dominique), Foundress of the Community. Mère Henri-Dominique is hoping to make a foundation in England; and it is with her permission and encouragement that this article has been written, with a view to making the life and work of her community known in this country.

<sup>2</sup> *Summa* IIa IIae, Q. 188, a. 5.

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to this spirit. One might, perhaps, describe the main feature of the present Generalate as being an insistent exhortation to study—an exhortation directed, not only to the Friars Preachers, but also to the nuns and sisters belonging to the different branches of the cloistered Order.

The first Dominican nuns were, above all, women of prayer. The conventual Tertiaries devoted themselves to the care of the sick and the education of girls. Such accounts as we possess of the nuns of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have much to tell us of their mystical life; but they have less or tell us of their intellectual activity. Apart from prayer, there was little variation in the life of the sisters: they looked after the maintenance of the convent, served and did embroidery.

Yet real learning had not always been unknown in monastic life for women. We are reminded of the Aventine, where virgins and widows submitted themselves to the discipline of intellectual work. Marcella, the "great student," as St. Jerome loved to call her, inspired Paula and Eustochium, while intellectual culture equalled their religious fervour. They devoted all their time to contemplation and study, and often night would overtake them at their work. They acquired a vast knowledge of Holy Scripture and their eager enthusiasm involved them in the problems of sacred science. The contemporaries of Gertrude and Mechtilde were also students. They read the Fathers in the original with the greatest ease; and they followed, in their convent, the courses of study prescribed for the Trivium and Quadrivium, which the clerics followed in the Universities. They wrote books themselves and their studies nourished their contemplative life. They also taught the young women who frequented the convents in great numbers at that period to receive education and instruction.

Thus the life of study is no novelty, but the revival of an ancient tradition encouraged by the Church, a revival demanded by the new needs of women in the modern world and by the part which women play in modern society. There is no need to describe these new developments here.

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The point to be emphasized is this: a number of young women, while finding themselves called to the contemplative life, have realised, at school or at the University, that study must always claim a place of the first importance in their lives, whether as a means of illuminating their own faith or as a remedy for that spiritual and intellectual distress which is so prevalent in these times. Such women have felt that it ought to be possible to combine this taste for study with the religious life of a Dominican nun.

Since the modern world has made study so accessible to women, it is only normal, in view of the position assigned to intellectual work in the Dominican Order, that women students with a vocation for monastic life, should become Dominicans. The Order of Friars Preachers has ever been ready to adopt itself to the needs of the Church and of the times. So, once again, St. Dominic's tree has produced yet another young branch. There was room for something quite new, homogeneous and complete in itself, for a new community of sisters, in fact, drawn from student *milieux* and devoting themselves to contemplation, study and the apostolate. It would not have done merely to start some intellectual current in communities accustomed for generations to other forms of work or to grant special facilities for study to certain sisters with the taste and aptitude for it. Besides, the success of the idea depended on finding modern formulas, on adapting the Constitutions and on devising something more elastic and more comprehensive in its scope.

We must frankly recognize the fact that many young women, desirous of leading a monastic life and possessing a taste for study and the intellectual apostolate, cannot find what they seek in the existing Congregations. In enclosed Orders a large amount of time, after the recitation of the Office, is devoted to manual work. Organized and continuous study is rarely to be found and, even then, the facilities are few. Moreover, the enclosure prohibits all direct apostolic work. In the active Orders, the exterior works restrict monastic life; while concentrated study is even less possible there than in the enclosed orders, if one wants to

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carry on advanced research and not merely prepare school lessons for a class.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to this need for study there is also the intellectual apostolate. The two are, in fact, intimately related. The development of women's education demands a new type of apostolate. Large numbers of women students now attend the Universities. They concentrate almost entirely upon secular subjects, generally at the expense of any form of religious training. Many intellectual women professedly agnostic are interested in religious problems, but have no means of studying them. The secular, "neutral" and even anti-religious teaching given in Government schools and in the Universities has often to be refuted and always to be faced. Women who want to become Catholics now demand more in the way of instruction than they used to do. In fact, wherever there are centres of intellectual women there exists a crying need for teaching and for a type of apostolate which could be very well undertaken by Religious, properly instructed and thoroughly conversant with the moral and intellectual difficulties which beset the student world of to-day.

It may be objected that monastic life is not adapted to modern conditions. But here one must discriminate between the spiritual side, which is permanent, and the material side, which is temporal and variable. There is nothing fixed or unalterable about monastic observances in themselves. It is possible to keep the essence and dispense with whatever is useless or cramping on the material side. Given good sense and intelligence the distinction is easy.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. the words of Père Gillet in his address delivered at the opening of the convent of the Dominican nuns of St. Jacques (June 2nd, 1933): "In enclosed Dominican convents the emphasis is laid above all on penance: convent libraries are too often inadequate. The sisters are generally so taken up with manual tasks that they have no facilities for intellectual work. In the case of the teaching Dominican sisters, the nuns have little margin whether of time or energy; they educate and instruct their pupils, but they have seldom the leisure to devote themselves to work of their own. It is therefore essential to found a religious community at once contemplative and learned, consecrating itself to the doctrinal apostolate."

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Such was the origin, in Paris, of "Les Dominicaines de Saint-Jacques," consecrated to study and the intellectual apostolate. The first convent of Dominican Friars founded in Paris in the thirteenth century bore this name. Planted in the very midst of the Schools, the Friars Preachers were chiefly recruited from the *milieux* of lecturers and students; and the University centres were the chief scene of their activities. The Dominican nuns of Saint-Jacques are, for the most part, students and lecturers, at any rate women with a definite taste for intellectual work. Their religious life is lived only a few steps away from the Rue Saint-Jacques, the great scholastic centre of the Middle Ages. They are also closely connected with University circles by a students' centre established in the very middle of the Quartier Latin.

The life of the Dominican nuns of Saint-Jacques is divided between contemplation, study and the apostolate. The hours and daily routine are modelled upon those of the houses of studies of the Friars Preachers. The religious exercises are so arranged that these sisters may devote themselves to study for several hours on end; for it is obviously impossible to do serious intellectual work if one's time is cut up into small portions. At 5-50 a.m. they are in Choir for Prime, Meditation, Terce and Sext, followed by Mass, sung every day. From 7-15 to 11-50 the sisters are free for study. At 11-55 they meet again for None, followed by dinner and a short recreation. Then come Vespers, after which they are again free for work from 1-30 to 6-45. At 6-45 there is Compline (sung), Rosary and Meditation, followed by supper and recreation. Finally, at 8-15, come Matins and Lauds.<sup>4</sup>

To a Dominican nun of Saint-Jacques contemplation is her first objective: her contemplative life is the measure of her vocation. She contemplates with an ardent love for the knowledge of God and of all truth which bears witness to Him. Meditation, the Sung Mass, the Divine Office recited

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<sup>4</sup> When leaving the convent for lectures, classes, work in libraries or apostolic activities among University students, the sisters, for obvious reasons, lay aside their habits and assume lay clothes.

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in common, the usual monastic mortification, are the potent means for promoting contemplation. To these are added, always with a view to contemplation, the solitary life and intense concentration on study. The sisters work continuously in their cells: they only meet for the various choir-offices, meals and recreation.

Holy Scripture and Theology rank first among the subjects studied by the Dominican nuns of Saint-Jacques. Philosophy and kindred subjects give such mental training as the sisters need for their own personal work and for their apostolate. All knowledge is valued; for no study, if animated by a living faith, can degenerate into mere curiosity, since it is always dependent upon Divine Truth.

All the sisters devote a certain number of years to Philosophy, Latin and Greek, and also to Hebrew in the case of those who are going to specialize in Holy Scripture. But just as with the Friars Preachers individual capacities are always taken into account, so the nuns of Saint-Jacques are not all forced in the same direction. There are some who show ability for abstract study and for learned work leading to publications. Others have a special taste for teaching; and these, when they have taken their degrees, are free to teach in institutions of various types. All values are respected. The important thing is to know one's own capacities and deficiencies and then to give oneself to God along the lines that He has laid down. It is not a question of pandering to merely human tastes, but of knowing where one's capabilities lie, so that one may discover what is essentially one's work in life.

A library, mainly religious, philosophical and theological, has been organized for purposes of study. Thus the sisters can easily find, on the spot, the books and periodicals which they wish to consult. Special books may be consulted in the various Paris libraries.

The intellectual work of the nuns falls into two distinct categories: first, their own personal work, whether religious or secular, and secondly, directly apostolic work, carried out by means of study-circles, lectures or teaching.

All the sisters are expected to undertake personal study.

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It is the business of each one of them to consider, under the direction of authority, what work she should take up and in what subject it would be best for her to specialize. This condition being pre-supposed, they apply themselves eagerly to study, according to their individual gifts and previous examinations; and for this purpose they may follow the various University courses in the Free or State Faculties and attend the necessary lectures. But such courses are only regarded as preliminary to further work; and the sisters always supplement them by personal study carried out in their cells in the recollection of monastic silence.

The solitary and studious life of the Dominican Nuns of Saint-Jacques does not in any way impair their life as a community. On the contrary, their fraternal charity is all the greater in proportion as less of their time is spent in common. At recreation the sisters pool the results of their research-work, reading or teaching; and they profit mutually by one another's experiences. Conversation on serious and vital topics contributes to the general good both of individuals and of the community: it prevents pettiness and absorption in details; while their ascetic training helps to eliminate that excessive sensibility or susceptibility which sometimes becomes so distressing in communities of women.

The Dominicans of Saint-Jacques leave their prayers and studies from time to time in order to give themselves to the apostolate. This is, of course, not the primary purpose of their foundation, but it is a secondary purpose and one, moreover, which springs naturally from the first. Their motto being "Caritas Veritas," their charity leads them to contemplate the truth of God; and this same charity urges them to express eternally what they have learnt of Divine Truth. Their apostolate is, above all, doctrinal, and its natural field is to be found in the various intellectual *milieus*. They direct study-circles of girls in *lycées* and teach the fundamentals of religion to students who want to become Catholics. But the most important side of their work is the organization of a students' centre with a library for the study of religion, a chapel and a lecture-room. The sisters are in constant contact with the women students. By

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meeting them at lectures and conferences and by talking to them individually, they are able to guide their studies, instruct them, clear up their difficulties and strengthen their moral and Christian life. This wise and prudent penetration of University life, with its moral and religious aim, is a work particularly dear to the Dominicans of Saint-Jacques. They have, too, to their credit, conversions and "fresh starts" in which they have actively co-operated.

The life of the Dominican nuns of Saint-Jacques is not without its difficulties. From the outside this studious existence may appear attractive; but in actual practice it is, as is the life of all Religious, rooted in sacrifice. Because the Dominican of Saint-Jacques specializes in study, she must always be humble; and because she desires to hand on Truth to others, her personality must not act as a kind of screen in front of the light which she has made her own and wishes to share. Simplicity is the daughter of intelligence; it is only sham intellectuals who pose. The Dominican nun of Saint-Jacques does not try to acquire a uniform knowledge of many subjects. She keeps steadily before her the aim which she pursues—the acquisition of divine science, first to nourish her powers of contemplation, and secondly to nourish her apostolate. She studies in order that she may come nearer to God and live by Him alone. Her favourite prayer is that of the Psalmist: *Da mihi intellectum et vivam.*

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