

## Comment: *Dominicanism*

People often talk as though they think that the Catholic Church is a totally united and homogeneous institution. A glance at the newspapers would dispel that idea. It would be amazing, in any case, if such a network of institutions, stretching all over the face of the earth, implanted in such a variety of cultural and economic situations, with such a weight of history, did not require a great deal of energy and persuasion to remain united. For that matter, in her self-understanding as expressed in the liturgy, the Church quite often appeals to God for the *gift* of unity. This means, not unity among Christians at large, but unity within the body of the Catholic Church. As a couple of prayers from the Latin-English Missal edited by O'Connell and Finberg (1949) are enough to show, from pre-ecumenical days, Catholics prayed that their partaking of the sacrament would give them unity (postcommunion of the ninth Sunday after Pentecost) and that God would grant the Church the gifts of unity and peace (secret of Corpus Christi).

But such unity has always included a certain diversity. The effervescence of religious movements, as well as the tendency to fanaticism, easily lead to schism, factionalism, and a fissiparous denominationalism. One of the ways in which the Catholic Church has dealt creatively with what might otherwise have become separatist and secessionist movements is to sanction and foster a great variety of monastic families, religious orders and congregations, secular institutes, and so on. No one need feel any desire or obligation to be attached to any of them. On the contrary, the vast majority of faithful Catholics find access to God in the context of their local parish. But distinctive 'schools' of Catholic life are there, whether Benedictine, Franciscan, Carmelite, Jesuit or Salesian, not to mention more recent foundations, each offering something distinctive and particular, within the bond of Catholic faith, for those who find themselves at home in one or other of them.

None of these traditions could be characterized in a single phrase. Rather, what holds each together is best described in terms of the various resemblances between members of a family — 'build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross', in Wittgenstein's words. There is certainly no 'essence' of Dominicanism — no single item that defines what counts as 'Dominican'. More by accident than design, the contributions to this issue all bear on some element or other of the Dominican tradition. That does not mean, however, that it would be easy to spell out the similarities between the pioneering women who founded the Bushey Congregation of Dominican Sisters in South Africa a century ago and the unknown friar who composed a treatise on the spiritual life in

Welsh in the middle of the thirteenth century, or to say what they have in common with Meister Eckhart, one of the most celebrated Dominicans who ever lived, whose fame extends far beyond the Church and whose often misunderstood thoughts are now being retrieved for orthodoxy by the Order (largely at the instigation of Ursula Fleming, a Lay Dominican). And how precisely are any of them related to David Jones, the London-Welsh poet and artist, who was (like Ursula!) a not uncritical member of the Third Order of Saint Dominic (as it was called)?

But for the faith in the journal steadfastly displayed by the Bushey Congregation of Dominican Sisters, *New Blackfriars* would probably have closed down years ago. The Dominican story has always had its ups and downs.

'A great idea extinct', Newman once said of the Dominicans. He considered applying to join the Order when he first entered the Church. On his way to Rome in 1846, however, he heard that the Dominicans at Florence were 'manufacturers of scented water, etc. and had very choice wines in their cellar'. This information seems to have cured him of the idea. The interesting thing is that he had already met Dominicans in the shape of Margaret Mary Hallahan, professed as a Dominican tertiary in Belgium in 1835 and well into founding what became the Congregation of Saint Catherine of Stone, Staffordshire, by the time that they made friends. Her conception of Dominican life among the poor of the English Midlands must have seemed very remote from the wine-bibbing Florentine perfumers. Her support was extremely important for Newman because, born to Catholic and Irish parents in the East End of London (a pretty unsatisfactory pair, it has to be said), she had nothing of the suspicion of 'converts' that so many of her fellow 'cradle' Catholics had at the time. She spoke up for Newman when Bishop Ullathorne was still hesitant about him. She supported Newman again during the libel case brought against him (which he lost) by the ex-Dominican Giacinto Achilli, who had toured the Midlands with his 'No Popery' lectures. She had Newman to preach at the opening of the church at her convent in Stone. Several of his women friends entered the community. By the time that she died, in 1868, he had of course made the acquaintance of two or three Dominican friars; but Newman's perception of the Order was formed predominantly by Mother Margaret.

What might have happened to the Dominicans in England if Newman had joined them? What might have happened to Newman? Idle speculation, no doubt; but that they were not right for him, and that he owed so much to Mother Margaret's friendship, surely helps a little to characterize the complexities of Dominicanism.

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