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DOMINICANS AND THE PRINTED WORD

An Address by the Most Reverend Father Stanislaus Martin Gillet, Master General of the Order of Preachers¹

IT has become a commonplace to repeat what has been so often said of St. Paul, that had he lived in our day he would have been a journalist. And had St. Dominic been living in our own times instead of in the 13th century, what would he have done? I believe that, for reasons similar to those which moved him to found his Order, he would not have changed any essential point of its Constitutions; but, because of the spirit which quickens them, essentially an apostolic spirit, he would have required his Order to make use of the Press as one of the most efficacious means of its apostolate. These are the two points that I shall endeavour to develop briefly, before referring to what the Order of St. Dominic has actually accomplished in the domain of the Press in order to remain faithful to the apostolic spirit of its Founder.

Why did St. Dominic found the Order of Preachers? For a simple answer to this question it suffices to recall in a few words the religious condition of society as it was then, at the beginning of the 13th century. Admittedly that century was one of faith; historical witness of every kind which has come down from those times will not allow us to think otherwise. But at the beginning of that same century the Faith throughout Europe was exposed to great danger, from two sources, firstly, because of the ignorance of religion prevalent among the faithful themselves, and then because of the spread of certain heresies fostered by this very ignorance.

Of the existence of a widespread ignorance in things religious there can be no doubt. The two General Councils of the Lateran recognized it explicitly and attempted, though

¹ This Address was delivered by his Paternity to the International Congress of Tertiaries of the Order during their visit to the Catholic Press Exhibition on May 6th, 1937, when they were gathered in Rome for the reopening of Santa Sabina.

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in vain, to provide a remedy. Not only were the faithful not instructed, but the clergy of that time were incapable of carrying out their duty of teaching them, being themselves inadequately instructed. All theological learning at this period was confined to the Universities, and priests who studied in them did not leave them to carry their knowledge to distant parishes. It was in these circumstances, so favourable to the spread of error, that the Albigenses were able to infect the whole of the South of France with their heresy, a heresy which, at any rate in its use of violence to encompass its ends, clearly showed itself to be a forerunner of Communism. These heretics, who believed in the ultimate and complete victory of *matter*—the principle of evil—over *spirit*—the principle of good, and regarded the earthly paradise as irrevocably lost, preached the abandonment of the world by individual, family and society, through the medium of self-murder, race-suicide, and war. The Communists to-day, for their part, teach on the contrary, that the earthly paradise can be recovered, but through the same means of hate and violence. At first sight it seems astonishing that such doctrines can spread so rapidly and profusely amongst the public at large; but one's astonishment decreases when account is taken of the widespread ignorance that prevents even the faithful from separating the cockle from the wheat, errors from the truth.

In the fact of Albigensianism thus helped by the ignorance of Catholics, what was the task that St. Dominic set himself? He founded a religious Order in which, following the traditional plan of the common life, the members prepared themselves for the apostolate by personal sanctification, but employing new means, namely the study of sacred learning. True, study of the sacred sciences, even in the cloister, had not awaited the coming of St. Dominic. But it had been so far a question of particular cases, of purely personal studies. St. Dominic, on the contrary, placed study of the sacred sciences, together with prayer in common and the monastic observances, amongst the *constitutional* means of personal sanctification and of the apostolate imposed upon all members, with the exception of the laybrothers. His intention was that his sons, having absorbed sacred learning by arduous toil of mind and heart, in solitude and in the presence of God, and having thus become worthy apostles, should

deliver to others the fruits of their contemplation; *contemplata aliis tradere*.

This, then, was what was new in the idea of St. Dominic, confronted as he was by the heresies and religious ignorance of his day. But if he were living amongst us to-day what would he do? Precisely the same thing, for the dangers which spiritual needs encounter are essentially the same to-day as they were in the 13th century—on the one side religious ignorance immeasurable, on the other errors that are no longer mere heresies but a brutal denial of all faith, even of all mind. This religious ignorance of Catholics to-day cannot be denied. Pius X caused enquiry to be made during his time, which not only exposed the depth and extent of this ignorance, but also showed its chief causes, neglect of the Catechism, of the reading and expounding of the Gospel, the abuse of secular reading, the continual association of Catholics with those who are not of the Faith and live almost as pagans. Truly in order to withstand evils so grave we have need of saints by the thousand, embodying in their daily lives the doctrine of Jesus Christ and awakening the slothful from their spiritual torpor; but there is likewise need of apostles, and those in great number, versed in that same doctrine and teaching it to the ignorant, making it loved by those who combat it, and refuting the errors of those who distort it.

Looking at the matter from this point of view, we can be sure that St. Dominic, were he with us to-day, would permit of no essential change in the organization of his Order and would insist more than ever that it should place the study of sacred science in the first rank of its duties as one of the *constitutional* means of personal sanctification with a view to the apostolate. Moreover, I believe, and for the same reasons arising out of religious ignorance and the spread of gross yet subtle errors, that he would insist on the most up-to-date and effective means of combatting this ignorance and these errors. He would require, for example, of those having charge of parishes that they should utilize for teaching the catechism all the progress made in psychology and pedagogy, and desist from teaching to children, as to adults, an abstract doctrine in words that the children cannot understand or to which they give a different and quite utilitarian meaning. He would ask of the Provincials of

the Order that, more and more, the preachers should be specially trained to adapt their teaching to the spiritual needs of their hearers, which needs, though doubtless always the same, are not manifested nor satisfied in the same fashion for reasons, easy to understand, of age, sex, education, profession, and circumstances. He would demand of the best instructed and literary of his sons a combined effort to counter the flood of scientific or romantic literature with which the modern world is inundated, by an increase, above all in quality, of religious works, scientific or popular, such as have already compelled the attention of the better disposed, but must be spread more and more amongst the middle and lower classes who are more exposed to religious ignorance and anti-Catholic prejudices.

Lastly, I feel sure he would ask those of his sons who are able to do so, whilst collaborating in the reforms we have just suggested, to utilize the Press in order to give wider scope and greater penetration to their apostolate. It is a fact that the Press, especially by means of Reviews and Newspapers, has become the most efficacious means for the diffusion of error amongst all classes of society. Why should it not also become the most penetrating means of propaganda in the interests of truth? This possibility the sons of Saint Dominic have already grasped, and have applied themselves to the task. It now remains for me to indicate the main lines of their endeavour in this direction. It will be seen that in this, as in so many other things, they have remained very faithful, on the whole, to the spirit, as well as to the word, of their holy Founder.

Since the invention of printing the Dominicans have not failed to turn it to their own good account. During the Reformation their literary activity, especially in Italy and Germany, was particularly intense. The religious struggles of that epoch led to a great output of pamphlets and other forms of controversial works, which may rightly be considered as foreshadowing the modern newspaper press. The Dominicans were specially to the fore in this controversial struggle. But we must admit that the Dominican Press, periodic or daily, dates from recent times, beginning with the *Année Dominicaine* founded by Père Lacordaire in 1860, at the time of the reform of the Order in France. My aim is not to enumerate here all that the Dominicans have pub-

lished and are publishing since that time in the way of books, periodicals, or literary collections. That would be both tiresome and interminable. I wish especially to give an idea of the *quality* of their publications, and more especially to consider these from the point of view of the apostolate. And And to that end, for even from this angle the output is immense, I shall content myself with speaking only of the *Reviews* published under the direction of the Dominican Fathers in the various Provinces of the Order. These we will divide into three categories: *Scientific Reviews*, published for a select group of scholars; *Reviews of General Culture*, for the popularizing of Christian thought; and lastly *Religious Reviews*, by far the most numerous.

No one will be astonished to see the sons of Saint Dominic, whose history in the world of science, taking that word in its wide yet strict sense, is so remarkable, busying themselves to-day in the publication of scientific *Reviews*. It is the best means for introducing Catholic thought into those circles which make a cult of science and where only too frequently there is evidently the intention of opposing science to religion. There is no better apologetic and therefore no better apostolate than that wherein science is made to answer science and the pretended opposition between science and religion is shown to be more apparent than real provided that neither religion nor science are confused with their counterfeits such as superstition and *scientisme*, which latter is nothing else than superstition in the realm of science.

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