

material things and happenings of his reign: 'And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers did. . . . He trusted in the Lord God of Israel. . . . He clave to the Lord and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses. And the Lord was with him and he prospered whithersoever he went forth' (4 Kings. 18, 2).



ST VINCENT FERRER IN SPANISH AND EUROPEAN HISTORY

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SPANISH Catholics—that is to say, Spain—are commemorating this year the fifth centenary of St Vincent Ferrer's canonization. Thus, 1954, the Jubilee Year of St James the Apostle, has found a worthy successor, for, amongst the thousands of names forming Spain's imposing contribution to hagiology, hardly one has a greater significance for the student of history, as well as for the layman, than that of this Valencian saint. It would be pointless and extravagant to try to evaluate what each of the great saints has given to the chronicle of human happenings, since their deeds and words are outside the scope of earthly speculation. Yet it is plain that St Theresa's reform of the Carmelite Order, St Ignatius's foundation of the Society of Jesus, with its all-powerful effect on the ebb and flow of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, or the flight into the world of mystical lyrics of St John of the Cross, have not had upon literature, society or the politics of their epoch such an immediate impact, so clearly perceptible even to the ordinary reader's eye, as had St Vincent's personality and action upon the turmoil of religious and political strife of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Their influence lies deeper and goes further, but not being recorded as historic fact in every handbook, is not so apparent and indisputable for all to feel and see as that of the Levantine¹ thaumaturgist, who united the

¹ In Spain the natives of Catalonia and especially those of Valencia and Murcia are collectively known as 'levantinos'.

skill of the politician to the insight and width of vision of the statesman.

Through his intervention in the thorny question of the succession to the Aragonese crown, St Vincent was one of the first promoters in the Middle Ages of the unity of Spain. His mediation in the quarrels of Burguignons and Armagnacs also affected profoundly the process of the formation of French nationality. Having in this way assisted in the birth of two of the most historically important nations, his part in the life of Europe is, through this sole fact, already clear. He was also not unconnected with the history of England. As if this were not enough, as one of the main actors in the great tragedy of the occidental Schism, he proved himself an indefatigable and successful worker for the unity of Christendom, postponing for more than two centuries the great upheaval of the Reformation. And in spite of all this, St Vincent, if not forgotten, is not remembered as he should be. A Valencian chronicler, during the commemorations, prompted by that healthy local pride which, at bottom, is one of the mainstays of Spanish national feeling, has pointed out that in the hierarchy of 'official' Spanish saints St Vincent does not occupy his rightful place. This might also be said to be true of the Castillian St Dominic of Guzman, because to follow the worldly errands of both saints as God's messengers demands an amount of historical erudition which the average man of our unhistorical age does not possess. For this very reason we shall have to say something about St Vincent the man and St Vincent the saint, before we deal with St Vincent the statesman and politician.

This might well seem superfluous, but the experience of St James's Jubilee Year has already shown that in the world of 1955, with Universities which provide at best a scant humanistic formation and a smattering of history, even Catholics need to be reminded of their Church's glories.

Born in Valencia, the son of a public notary, both his father and mother had, before his birth, forebodings and premonitions of such clarity and portend that the town council resolved to act as godparents to the child to be born. Valencia was a town, in which civil strife was endemic. Famous is the quarrel between Centelles and Vilareguts, two factions divided by an enmity as bitter and tenacious as that of the Veronese Cappuletti and Monteschi. 1350 was the year of the Black Death, which later decreased, and the

infant Vincent, obviously predestined to a portentous life, was tonsured at seven, received into a Dominican convent at seventeen, and ordained priest at twenty-seven. According to one biographer, it is said that when he was a boy, another child, trying to mock him, let himself fall to the ground feigning death. Vincent stooped to look at him, but the foolish, unfortunate boy was really dead. As an adolescent he is tempted, temptation taking the form now of a venerable hermit, now that of a harlot or of a seductive maiden.

As a member of an Order already made illustrious by Aquinas and others, St Vincent had, before he was thirty, written two learned treatises. Apart from these, we do not know when St Vincent wrote his *Treatise on Spiritual Life*. In it, in the knowledge of human nature it shows at the turn of every page (for instance in the fifteen steps to perfection), we find a proof of one of St Vincent's features, once which we would feel inclined to consider as the touchstone of his 'Spanishness', namely his sound common sense, his down-to-earth wisdom, which is no obstacle to, but rather goes along with, saintliness and is also found in St Theresa's love of laughter, in her detestation of morose, brooding minds.

Not more than two years after being ordained by Pedro de Luna, St Vincent wrote his *Treatise on Schism*. It cannot therefore be said that he was unprepared for the part that was providentially assigned to him in the epilogue of the conflict that for decades was to tear Christendom asunder. The facts are well known. The fourteenth century was nearing its end and the Papal Court (which for nearly three-quarters of it had been living in Avignon) had returned to the Eternal City in 1376, thanks mainly to the efforts of St Catherine of Sienna. It was in Rome that Gregory XI was destined to die, to be followed as Pontiff by Urban VI. Shortly afterwards there was a reversal of the situation. The Avignon faction, under French inspiration or with French help, sees in the new Pope's stern, uncompromising character a reason or a pretext to rebel and to declare void the Pope's election, designating Clement VII in his place. Urban refused to comply and the breach was complete.

Amongst the protesting Cardinals we find again Pedro de Luna, who ordained St Vincent to the priesthood. Pedro, Cardinal de Luna, is one of the most remarkable characters in history. He was a typical stubborn Aragonese capable, as the Spanish popular say-

ing will have it, of driving a nail into a wall with his head. This Aragonese obstinacy, in fact, instead of provoking annoyance, compels a reluctant admiration. A close relationship was to link the two men, the future Saint and the future Pope, for Pedro de Luna was later to become Benedict XIII, and St Vincent, ordained by him, was in turn to become his confessor and to hold several offices at his Court. He it was who, through a tragic paradox, was to bring about Benedict's downfall. For in 1415 Ferdinand of Aragon, whom as we shall see, St Vincent had presented with his crown, calls the saint to Perpignan and asks him to persuade Benedict to lay down the tiara, as his two competitors Gregory XII and John XXII (for there were three Popes at that moment) had already done. At Perpignan this moral burden prostrated him with a fatal illness. Miraculously healed, however, he pronounced a fiery sermon in the presence of the Pontiff, which still failed even to shake the nonagenarian's untractable resolve. The King then, on St Vincent's advice, withdrew his allegiance from Benedict. Pedro de Luna, as his name was again, now anti-Pope, but indomitable as ever, took refuge in Peniscola, a quaint little town perched on a rock peninsula jutting into the Mediterranean. In Peniscola's steep, winding, forlorn streets Benedict's shadow lingers on, or so it seems, to the solitary visitor.

We have said that the King of Aragon owed his crown to the Valencian saint, and this can hardly be considered an overstatement. Going back a few years, King Martin the Humane had died, leaving his kingdom a prey to anarchy, as is often the case with too humane rulers. On his deathbed he had been unable to make up his mind on the choice of a successor; or rather, he had not dared appoint as such Don Fadrique, a bastard of his son Don Martin, whom he would have liked to name as his heir, had his courage not failed him. The peninsular domains of the Aragonese crown consisted of Aragon proper, ruled by the King and a host of powerful families, a rule severely limited by very extensive national and municipal franchises; Catalonia, a loose confederation of feudal principalities and baronies (with some commercial towns, democratically governed by an oligarchy of merchants); and Valencia, governed in a way which did not differ greatly from that of Catalonia.

The pretenders to the throne were several, but only two really counted: namely, Don Jaime, Count of Urgel, and Don Fernando

de Transtamare, Regent of Castille, who was to emerge victor of the dispute. The first was a brilliant man, ambitious, brave, of a rather tempestuous nature, something of a condottiero, in short a man of his time and one likely to enjoy some popularity in the Spanish Levant, that is, those Spanish lands where, in spite of Greek and Byzantine influences, a Latin atmosphere prevails. In fact the Levant is so clearly 'Latin Spain' that one of the writers who nowadays daringly and confidently refers to Spain as a 'non-occidental country', has called that part of our country 'a suburb of Rome'. The Count of Urgel had therefore a certain popularity in Catalonia and a not inconsiderable following in the other two kingdoms.

As to Ferdinand of Castille, he was a courageous and determined knight too, but also pious, wise and altogether a more cautious and balanced man. He counted on the benevolence of the dying king, whose amiable disposition rendered him averse to the restlessness and roughness of Jaime de Urgel, and he had the sympathies of all those, and they were many, who, for one reason or another, hated the turbulent Catalan. Besides, Ferdinand had behind him all the might of Castille, which meant not only military backing, but also that if he were chosen King of Aragon, he would bring with him to the Aragonese crown all the advantages of a powerful alliance. On the other hand, the Castillian pretender did not evoke any implacable hostilities as an alien, not even in Catalonia. It should be remarked that half a century later the Catalans themselves were to try to have a King of Castille, Henry IV, as Count of Barcelona, in defiance of their own monarch, Juan II of Aragon.

The struggle for the crown was to be protracted and colourful. There were plots, assassinations, excommunications, troops marched and countermarched, and all sorts of dramatic incidents followed in quick succession. The Cortes or Parliaments of the three different Aragonese States assembled separately, dispersed and reassembled, and finally set up a mixed Delegation, composed of nine people, three delegates for each kingdom, St Vincent and his brother Bonifacius being delegates for Valencia. This delegation was to decide who, among the claimants, had the better right to the crown, and this, given the overwhelming authority of Vincent Ferrer, was a foregone conclusion.

Now if we were to say that the saint favoured the Castillian

candidate because he foresaw this would be a step forward towards Spanish unity, we should be indulging in that favourite pastime of many an historian, writing history backwards. However, in the fourteenth century Spain was more than a name. It is usual nowadays to think of Spain as a modern nation, formed at a comparatively recent date, simultaneously with the other national states of Western Europe. But Spain had, under the Visigoths and even under the Romans, been unified to a degree unknown elsewhere. There are in the writings of St Isidore of Seville or of Alfonso the Wise references to Spain couched in terms of such warmth and expressiveness that they leave little room for doubting how far the word 'Spain' was from being for them a mere geographical expression. Let us also consider that Vincent Ferrer was at that time devoted body and soul to the cause of the unity of Christendom, which implied not only unity of Faith, but also unity of obedience. To preserve the homogeneity of Aragon, giving it a God-fearing ruler, bringing the States of the Peninsula closer together, within a stronger unity, must have appeared to him as desirable ends in themselves and an effective contribution to his greater aim. Furthermore, he had been preaching the Faith and converting Moors and Jews throughout the length and breadth of the land of Spain, whose unity, physical and moral, he must have perceived as something, so to speak, plastic and tangible. Incidentally, it was during this proselytising activity of St Vincent's that he performed one of his most remarkable miracles. He had converted Moors and Jews by the scores of thousands, so the chroniclers state, but once, during one of his sermons, one of his listeners proved more obdurate. It was a Jewess, and unconvinced, she rose and was about to leave the church, but on crossing the threshold, the lintel of the door crumbled and she was instantly killed, only to be brought back to life by the saint whom she had scorned.

Coming back to our subject, the fact remains that when the body appointed to bring the conflict to an end assembled at the Aragonese town of Caspe, Vincent Ferrer cast his vote for the Castilian candidate, followed by five of the delegates. Thus, Ferdinand of Castille was recognized as King of Aragon, by what is known in Spanish history as the 'Compromise of Caspe', all the more famous in a nation not known for its propensity or ability to compromise.

After the end of the Schism, St Vincent travelled widely through France, preaching everywhere, always in his Valencian vernacular, inexplicably understood by everyone. We now find ourselves at the time of the final phase of the Hundred Years War, and France, governed nominally at least by a Council of Regency, is more deeply divided than ever. Two great lords, the Dukes of Burgundy and Brittany, dominate the scene with their rivalry. Vincent Ferrer, who at Dijon had been fêted, cajoled and pampered by the Burgundians, journeyed to Vannes at the pressing invitation of John the Wise, ruler of Brittany. Shortly thereafter, at Caen, he meets Henry V of England. His presence there, his wanderings to and fro throughout the French land, meeting now this lord now that, preaching before all of them, must have had a soothing, pacifying effect and we can surmise that the truce of five years, which was then agreed upon, was due to his mediation. He could do nothing more for France, for he was to die, worn out and exhausted, on the 5th April, 1419. He had worked 873 authenticated miracles and he was to accede to the ranks of the army of God's chosen barely forty years later, in 1458.

During the seventy years of his life, Providence had cast him for one of the most outstanding roles in the theatre of European public life. A major contributor to the unity of Spain, he had, as a Spaniard, contributed greatly to the shaping of Europe, whose history would, without Spain or the Spaniards, be so hard to write. And we shall say nothing here about his contribution to the glory of God, for this would require a better pen and a greater authority.

But, is it not true that this is a commemoration that should have had a wider echo, even in those countries not favoured by the presence and action of the saint?