Three Virtues of Saint Dominic

This year is the eighth centenary of the death of Dominic Guzman, founder of the religious Order which bears his name. One of the main reasons the Church canonizes certain of its members is in order to propose them to the faithful as models to imitate. Saint Dominic has many virtues to imitate, but he recommended three in particular when on his death bed he said to his brethren :

“Behold my children what I leave you as a heritage : HAVE CHARITY, GUARD HUMILITY, AND MAKE YOUR TREASURE OUT OF VOLUNTARY POVERTY.”

To commemorate this anniversary, let us look and admire these three virtues in the life of Saint Dominic. To do this we can simply read the authentic testimony of the witnesses at the process of his canonization and listen to what they have to tell us, under oath, about the practice of these virtues by him whom they call “Friar Dominic” : it is in itself a powerful predication that needs no commentary.

We can begin with poverty. We read in the process of canonization :

“He loved poverty very much and applied himself with great zeal to making it loved by his brothers. When the witness is asked how he knows this, he responds that the blessed considered it a glory to wear coarse habits, he had abandoned all temporal goods and very often, in the presence of the witness, he exhorted his friars to poverty.”

“When he was going from one place to another, he took off his shoes and walked barefoot until the next locality : there he put the shoes on, but on the other side of town he took off his shoes again and carried them himself, refusing to let anyone else render him this service.”

Another friar witnesses :

“He wore the same tunic in summer and winter ; he loved poverty and exhorted his friars to love it. How does the witness know this ? I saw him wearing a very coarse habit and he heard his exhortations to the love and practice of poverty. And if sometimes Friar Dominic found a friar reprehensible for the luxury or the form of his habits, he corrected him immediately and obtained that he amend his ways. His love for this virtue was so great that he forbid his friars to accept possessions. His will, which he had inserted in the rule of the friars, was that they live on alms. He wanted their houses to be poor and poor as well their writing desks, and that in all their possessions they put their preference in what was poor and common.”

“The witness has never seen him wear more than one tunic and it was full of patches; he always wanted to wear capes that were coarser than those of the other friars.”

“Friar Dominic was a veritable lover of poverty; the witness very often heard him preach this virtue to the friars and recommend it to them insistently. If someone offered to him or to the community some capital, he refused it and forbade the friars to accept it. Also he did not want, for his Order, anything but small, poor houses, and he himself wore a poor habit of coarse cloth. When asked how he knew these details, the witness responds that very often he saw him wearing a short scapular of coarse material; and even in the presence of important people he did not want to hide it under his cape. At Saint Nicolas, the friars’ cells were poor and low and so the procurator, Friar Rudolph, in the absence of Friar Dominic, began to have some of them made a cubit length higher. But at his return, seeing the cells raised, Friar Dominic several times reproached Friar Rudolph and the others weeping and saying : “Already then you want to renounce poverty and built grand palaces!” And for this reason he ordered them to stop right there the construction that had begun and it remained that way as long as he lived. As he loved poverty for himself, so he loved it in his friars; thus he made it a precept for them to wear clothes of little value, to never have money on them when they travelled but to live everywhere by alms. And he made that be written in his constitutions.”

In this modern age of opulence, we can all examine ourselves on this point. Every day, all day we are solicited everywhere by hawkers wanting to sell us something and we have to stop and ask ourselves : “Do I really *need* that ?” Our Lord Himself compared riches to thorns that choke out spiritual life and even went so far as to say that a rich man has as much chance of getting into heaven as a camel has of passing through the eye of a needle. The saints understood this teaching**,** but no else has.

Let us hear now what the witnesses have to say about the humility of Saint Dominic.

“He surpasses all the religious that the witness has ever known. He professed for himself a very great contempt and looked upon himself as a man good for nothing.”

“When the first general chapter was celebrated in the city of Bologna, he said to the friars : ‘I deserve to be deposed because I am useless and lax’, and he profoundly humbled himself completely. But the friars refused to depose him; he then had Definitors named with authority over him and all the friars and over the whole chapter.”

“He refused the bishopric of Conserans, not being willing to be at the head of this diocese although he had been elected to be its prelate and pastor. The witness has never seen a man more humble in everything nor one who despised more the honours of the world and earthly glory. He endured with admirable patience curses and injurious words and received them with joy like a gift and a great reward.”

Blessed Jordan of Saxony, his first successor as Master-General of the Order and his first biographer, develops this trait in speaking of the very difficult ministry of Saint Dominic in the cities of the heretics :

They spat on him and threw mud and filth at him. One of them came later, remorseful, to avow in confession that he had struck Saint Dominic, throwing mud at him and that he had stuck pieces of straw on his back to make fun of him. When he was asked one day why he didn’t like staying at Toulouse and in its diocese rather than going to Carcassonne and its diocese he said : “Because in the diocese of Toulouse I find a lot of people who honour me, but in Carcassonne everyone fights me.”

It is the same humility that he showed again when God favoured him with the gift of doing miracles. Sister Cecilia, a nun of the Order who knew him in Rome, tells us of his conduct after he had raised from the dead by his prayers the child of a widow at Rome :

“He gave the child back healthy to his mother, asking her to say nothing about it. But coming back with great joy to her home with her son, she recounted what had just happened, so that the news of it came even to the ears of the Sovereign Pontiff, who wanted to make this miracle known to all the people in a public sermon. But Blessed Dominic, true lover and guardian of humility, stopped him from doing so, declaring that, in that case, he would cross the sea and go to the land of the Muslims and would not stay in this country. Frightened, the Pontiff was careful not to make the story known.”

We can all ask ourselves if we know how to “guard humility” in this way when circumstances, that is, Divine Providence, allows perhaps that a little talent that God has given us makes us shine before men ? And what is the intimate opinion that we have of ourselves ? Do we have this veritable contempt of ourselves that Saint Dominic had ?

Finally, let us see the last and the most important of the virtues : charity. Blessed Jordan writes about this :

“God had given him a special grace of prayer for sinners, the poor, the afflicted : he carried their misfortunes in the intimate sanctuary of his compassion and the tears running down his cheeks manifested the ardour of the sentiment that burned within him.”

He speaks of this compassion again in another place, where he says :

“There was in him a very firm equality of soul, except when some suffering troubled him and moved him to compassion and mercy.”

And Sister Cecilia makes a remark very similar, saying :

“He always remained smiling and joyful, unless he was moved by compassion by some suffering of his neighbour.”

The witnesses at the process also often speak of this compassion. One of them witnesses, for example :

“He consoled paternally the ill friars and admirably bore all their infirmities. As soon as he learned that some persons were suffering from some tribulation, he made haste to exhort them to patience and to console them as much as he could.”

Another recounts the well-known episode of him selling his schoolbooks to help the dying.

“Friar Dominic was at Palencia devoting himself to the study of the Holy Scriptures. While he was there, a terrible famine ravaged the country, to the point that many poor people were dying of hunger. Profoundly moved by compassion and mercy, Friar Dominic sold the books which he had annotated himself and gave the price of them to the poor, as well as other objects that he possessed. ‘I do not want,’ he said, ‘to study on dead skins when men are dying of hunger.’ Some very influential upper-class people followed his example.”

Let us ask ourselves if we find in our hearts something at least of this flame of fraternal charity the devoured the heart of Saint Dominic. Its presence is a very sure sign of that the grace of God is in us and its absence is a sure sign that it is not.

To conclude we can simply quote what Blessed Jordan writes to conclude his biography :

“Let us follow, brethren, according to our possibilities, the footsteps of our father, and at the same time let us give thanks to the Redeemer who gave to His servants on the road they are following, a leader of such value and who has newly begotten us by him in the light of his holy life. “