

THE CLASSICS
OF WESTERN
SPIRITUALITY

EARLY DOMINICANS

Selected Writings



EARLY DOMINICANS

Selected Writings

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Saint Dominic by Guido da Siena, Italian mid-thirteenth century Sienese School.
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A. St. Dominic

Saint Dominic is an unusually retiring kind of founder. He deliberately tried not to impose his own views too much on his associates, and he did not leave his followers either a Rule of his own devising (as St. Francis did) or a corpus of writings to guide and inspire them. All the same, it is clearly appropriate to begin any outline of Dominican spirituality with some attempt to portray the founder of the Order. In the almost total absence of writings of his own, such a portrait has to be built up from a variety of sources. In this section, we begin with two early hagiographical writings from within the Order. The first is a Life of St. Dominic included by Jean de Mailly in the second edition of his collection of saints' lives (which was a forerunner of the more famous Golden Legend by another Dominican, James of Varagine). This dates from about 1243. The second, very different in style and, it must be admitted, decidedly less attractive, is a sermon (or sermon notes) by Thomas Agni of Lentini, a Sicilian Dominican who, as the first prior of Naples, clothed Thomas Aquinas in the Dominican habit. In its dry, schematic way, this sermon, presumably preached some time before 1255 when Agni became a bishop, is interesting because of its exclusive concentration on St. Dominic as a preacher. While Franciscan hagiography from the very beginning strove to present St. Francis as a kind of "second Christ", the Dominicans never forgot that what was most important about their founder was the job that he did and that he bequeathed to them to do. After this, we turn to one of the major sources for the biography of St. Dominic, the evidence submitted by nine Dominicans who knew him to the commission set up by the Pope to investigate his sanctity with a view to his Canonization. After this, I have put together a miscellany of texts from a variety of sources, which illustrate different facets of St. Dominic's life and character. Finally,

we have a very precious little document, the Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic, of unknown authorship, but evidently based on material collected in Bologna and put together between 1260 and 1288, probably nearer the earlier date than the later.

The Life of St. Dominic

by Jean de Mailly

St. Dominic, the first father of the Order of Preachers, originated in Spain in the town called Caleruega in the diocese of Osma. Before conceiving him, his mother had a dream in which she saw a puppy emerge from her womb carrying a blazing torch in its mouth; it appeared to be setting the whole world on fire. This dream signified what kind of man he was going to be: an outstanding preacher, who would rekindle with the fiery word of his preaching the charity which was growing cold in many people,¹ and chase the wolves away from the flocks with his timely barking and rouse to the watchfulness of virtue those who were asleep in their sins. Also a certain lady who lifted him from the font dreamed that he carried a kind of star on his forehead, filling the whole earth with its light.²

His father, who was called Felix, and his mother, Jane, brought the boy up religiously and were careful to have him instructed in how to read the Divine Office. After he had finished studying the liberal arts, he applied himself seriously to theology for four years, almost always staying up at night or sleeping on the ground, as his custom had been from early childhood. While he was a student at Palencia, there was a severe famine in Spain, and he sold all that he had in the way of books and other equipment, to help those who were dying of hunger.

Because of his reputation, Diego,³ the bishop of Osma, made him a canon regular in his church. And the canons too were so impressed by his outstanding virtues that they made him their subprior, against his will. He became a model of life for everyone and an exemplary religious, and amongst all the other virtues with which he was endowed he had a special gift of weeping for the afflicted and for people in distress and for souls that were perishing, whose salvation he longed for jealously. He often used to spend the night in prayer, asking the Lord to give him the grace to help the salvation of those who were perishing.

Meanwhile the king of Castile asked bishop Diego to go to the Marches⁴ to arrange a marriage between the king's son and a certain noble girl there. The bishop took Dominic with him on this journey.

When they came to Toulouse, St. Dominic converted to the faith a heretic who gave them hospitality. They returned to the king and told him gladly that the girl had accepted his proposal; then the king sent Diego back to the Marches with a larger retinue, but he found that the girl was dead. So he sent a message to the king and went to Rome with his clergy, to resign his bishopric. But his resignation was refused, so he set off home. On the way he visited Cîteaux, where he took the monastic habit, and then set off to hurry back to Spain with a few monks. But in the land of the Albigensians he met the legate of Pope Innocent, with a great council of archbishops and bishops and twelve Cistercian abbots; they received him with honour and asked his advice about what ought to be done for the defense of the faith. On his advice, they abandoned all their splendid horses and clothes and accoutrements, and adopted evangelical poverty, so that their deeds would demonstrate the faith of Christ as well as their words; in this way they hoped to bring back to the true faith the souls which had been deluded by the heretics with their false appearance of virtue.⁵

Bishop Diego himself gave the lead in doing this, keeping only brother Dominic and a few other clerics with him; they began energetically to travel round the whole district on foot, preaching in word and deed. The heretics saw this and resented it, and began a counter-offensive of more intense preaching. Amongst other forms of conflict, a debate was held; both heretics and believers compiled tracts against each other, and, on the day appointed, in the presence of the people, a book by St. Dominic, which had found more favour than any of the others, and a book by one of the heretics were read out, and, after a long argument, the judges ordered both books to be thrown into the fire, to be put to the test that way. The heretic's book burned up at once, but the book by St. Dominic emerged unscathed even after being thrown into the fire a second and then a third time. This made it plain on whose side truth and holiness were more surely to be found.⁶

The bishop drew a considerable number of people to the faith, and he also built a monastery to receive the girls who were being entrusted to the heretics to be brought up and educated because of the poverty of their parents. Then, after two years, he decided to return to Spain to raise money for the needs of this monastery of women and, with the Pope's approval, to ordain people who were suitable for

the job of preaching. But he died while passing through Castile and, when they heard of his death, the other clerics who had remained in Toulouse to preach returned to their homes, leaving brother Dominic on his own except for a few people who had attached themselves to him by some kind of vow; these few persevered in constant preaching.

The heretics, for their part, mocked the holy man in all kinds of ways, spitting at him and throwing mud at him and fastening straw on his back to make fun of him; but when they threatened to kill him, he was not in the slightest bit afraid. They said to him, "What would you have done if we had ambushed you in such and such a place?". He replied, "I should have asked you not to kill me quickly or easily, but to do it bit by bit, mutilating my limbs one by one, then gouging out my eyes, then leaving my truncated body half dead, wallowing in its own blood, or finishing it off in whatever way you liked." This amazed the heretics so much that thereafter they abandoned their pursuit of him.

He was so full of charity and compassion that he wanted to sell himself into slavery to convert a man who had become a heretic because of his poverty; in the same way, in his own country, he had on an earlier occasion offered himself for sale to rescue some woman's brother who had been taken captive by the pagans.

During the whole of Lent he fasted, with his companion, on bread and water; and he took the little sleep he allowed himself on bare wooden boards, and always in a hair shirt.

So St. Dominic remained like this at Toulouse for ten years, and then he went to Rome because of the Council, with the bishop of Toulouse⁷ who loved him fondly. There he asked Pope Innocent III to confirm for him, brother Dominic, and his followers, an Order which would be called and which would in fact be an Order of Preachers. The Pope told brother Dominic to go back to his brethren and choose some approved Rule which they could all agree on⁸ and then come back to the curia to be granted his petition. At the end of the Council St. Dominic went back and told the brethren what the Pope had said, and at once they all agreed to choose the Rule of St. Augustine, and in addition to adopt certain more strict customs with regard to food and clothing.⁹ Meanwhile Pope Innocent III died and Honorius became Pope. St. Dominic went to him and had all that he asked for confirmed in the year 1216.

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Six hundred, six again, and yet sixteen,
These were the years since God's own human birth,
When, under Dominic, there first was seen
The Order that should preach to all the earth.¹⁰

In the following year Count Simon de Montfort¹¹ died, as St. Dominic had foreseen; and the holy man, knowing that seed bears fruit when it is scattered but goes bad when it is hoarded, no longer wanted all his brethren to remain in one place. So he called them together and said that he wanted to scatter them all to different places, even though they were still only a very small number. He selected brother Matthew¹² to be their abbot, whose judgment was to rule the others, while he himself was going away to preach to the pagans.¹³ This brother Matthew was the first and last abbot in the Order, because the brethren preferred that the man who was in charge of the whole Order should, for humility's sake, be called "Master of the Order" rather than abbot,¹⁴ while lower superiors should be known as priors and subpriors. Some of the brethren at that time went to Spain, others went to Paris, and others went to Bologna, and in extreme poverty they grew in numbers, by the power of God.

Brother Dominic himself went to Rome, and while he was there Master Reginald, the dean of St. Aignan in Orléans,¹⁵ arrived in Rome, intending to cross the sea with the bishop of Orléans. He was a man of great learning and virtue, and he had taught canon law in Paris for five years. By the Lord's inspiration he was already intending to abandon everything and devote himself to preaching, but he did not know how best to do it. One day while he was talking about this privately with one of the cardinals, he mentioned this intention of his; and the cardinal said, "A new Order of Preachers has just emerged, whose profession is just what you want, consisting of the job of preaching and voluntary poverty. And the Master of this Order is actually here in Rome now, preaching." At once Master Reginald sent for brother Dominic, and revealed his mind to him. He was attracted by the words and by the appearance of St. Dominic, and from that time he began to think about entering his Order. But shortly after this he fell seriously ill; there seemed to be nothing more that could be done for him in the natural way, and the doctors despaired of his life. But St. Dominic prayed urgently for him to the

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Lord, and the blessed Virgin appeared visibly to Master Reginald, with two beautiful girls, while he was lying awake in a high fever. She said to him, "Ask me for anything you like and I will give it to you." While he was wondering what to ask for, one of the two girls suggested that he should not ask for anything except for whatever she wanted to give him. So he left it to the blessed Virgin to give him whatever she liked. Then she stretched out her hand and touched the sick man's eyes and ears and nose, then his mouth and his hands, his loins and his feet, anointing them all with a healing ointment she had brought with her. While she anointed his loins she said, "May your loins be girt with a belt of chastity," and at his feet she said, "I anoint your feet in readiness for the gospel of peace."¹⁶ Then she said, "Three days from now I will send you a bottle which will completely restore you to health," and at the same time she showed him the habit of the Order of Preachers, saying, "Look, this is the habit of your Order." Next morning St. Dominic came to see him and asked how he was. "I am well," he replied. The man of God thought he was referring to his soul's health, but he insisted that he meant the health of his body, and told him all about the vision he had had. So they both gave thanks to God. The doctors were amazed at his sudden recovery, because they had quite despaired of his life.

On the third day after this, while St. Dominic was sitting with Master Reginald, a religious from the Order of the Hospitallers who was with them saw the blessed Virgin coming in near where he was and anointing the whole of Master Reginald's body with her own hand. And that heavenly anointing not only entirely freed the flesh of Master Reginald from fever, it also rid it of the fire of lust, so effectively that, as he later confessed, he never afterwards felt in it even the first stirrings of lust. Immediately he made profession to St. Dominic. Then, at the urgent request of the bishop of Orléans, he went overseas, with St. Dominic's permission. When he came back, he went to Bologna and made many converts by his preaching. From there he went to Paris, and shortly afterwards died.

While St. Dominic was in Rome, he raised from the dead a young relation of Cardinal Stephen's,¹⁷ who had fallen from his horse and been killed. Also, while he was travelling, he protected a whole number of people who were travelling with him from the rain, by interposing the sign of the cross. And when he was in Spain, he had a vision in which he saw a huge dragon with its mouth open, swallow-

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ing up the brethren who were with him; the holy man understood that some grave temptation from the devil was threatening the brethren.

While St. Dominic still only had a few brethren, and they were not very well educated, he used to send them out to preach, shielding them with his prayers. One day a priest saw him with his brethren and conceived a holy jealousy of them, and wanted to put everything else behind him and join them and devote himself wholeheartedly to preaching; all he wanted first was to get a copy of the New Testament. All at once a young man came along and offered to sell him just such a book. He bought it without any hesitation, but then began to have doubts about whether it would be best for him to do what he had been planning to do. So he thought he ought to ask for an answer from the Lord. So he prayed and made the sign of the cross on the book and then opened it, and his eye fell immediately on the text from Acts where the Holy Spirit says to St. Peter, with reference to Cornelius' messenger, "Get up, go down and go with them without any anxiety, because I have sent them."¹⁸ Immediately the priest abandoned the world and followed them.

On another occasion, a papal legate, the bishop of Porto, a Cistercian monk,¹⁹ went to Bologna and was received with honour by the brethren; he began to wonder what this new and unheard-of kind of religious Order signified and whether it was from men or from God. So he sat down at the altar, and when he was brought a Missal he made the sign of the cross and opened it in the name of the Lord, and at the top of the first page he read, "To praise, to bless and to preach."²⁰ Taking this gladly as an answer from heaven, he was reassured and began to love the Order with all his heart, and commended himself to the prayers of the brethren.

We do not mean by these stories to imply any approval of diviners and soothsayers; presuming to have certain knowledge of the future through the diabolical art of divining is quite different from trustingly looking for an oracle from God in prayer, when human counsel is insufficient to resolve a dilemma. The saints and the fathers often used to consult the Lord when the need arose. This is why the Jews were always looking for a sign.

At last St. Dominic, after a lifetime of virtues in which he was more easily admired than imitated, fell seriously ill at Bologna. Calling the brethren together, he referred to his own virginity, which God had preserved in him, and offered himself as an example to

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them, bidding them especially avoid keeping any doubtful company or holding any doubtful conversations with women, and particularly with young women. He also left the brethren an inheritance, not of earthly money but of heavenly grace; his last will was that they should have charity, preserve humility and possess voluntary poverty.²¹ He gave strict orders that no one was to introduce the possession of worldly properties into the Order, terrifyingly laying God's curse and his own on anyone who should dirty the Order's practice of poverty with the dust of riches.²²

His funeral was attended by the venerable bishop of Ostia, who was then the legate of the Roman see in Lombardy and subsequently became Pope Gregory. He knew and loved his sanctity. He buried with due honour in the church of the friars preachers at Bologna the holy body of him who had been their first father, in the year of our Lord 1221.

On the same day and at the same time that he died, brother Guala, the prior of Brescia, of the same Order, later the bishop of Brescia,²³ having dozed off while resting under the brethren's bell tower there, saw heaven opened and two brilliantly white ladders being let down to earth. The top of the one was being held by the Lord, the top of the other was held by the Lord's Mother, and angels of light were going up and down on them.²⁴ Between them, down below, there was a chair with someone sitting in it, and the person sitting in it was like a friar with his face hidden in his capuce, which is the normal way in the Order for dead brethren to be buried. As the Lord and his Mother gradually pulled the two ladders up, the chair was drawn up too, with the person still sitting in it, until it reached heaven; the angels were singing the whole time. Brother Guala then woke up and went at once to Bologna, where he discovered that the holy soul of St. Dominic had left his body on the same day at the very time of his vision.

After the death of St. Dominic, God worked many miracles through him, many of which are not widely known because they have been concealed out of humility, and some of which have been forgotten entirely through carelessness, but many of them were written down and they were carefully evaluated and approved as reliable by Pope Gregory.²⁵

When the number of his virtues and miracles made it impossible for the sanctity of the blessed Dominic to be hidden any longer, the devotion of the people wanted his body, which was still buried in the

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ground, to be moved with reverence to a more exalted place. So the cement, which was very hard, was broken with iron tools and the stone was removed; when the tomb was opened, suddenly there came out a fragrance so sweet and strong that it surpassed all perfumes. And this fragrance was not confined to the dust of the holy body or the coffin, it also clung to the hands of the brethren who had touched these things. This enables us to guess what immense delights his spirit enjoys in heaven, if his body while still lying in the dust is as fragrant as this. St. Dominic was translated in the year of our Lord 1233.²⁶