

A Sermon on St. Dominic by Thomas Agni of Lentini

"He who practises and teaches, he is the one who will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (*Mt. 5:19*).

In praise of our blessed father, there are three things indicated in this text which recommend someone to us as a saint: his life, his teaching and his glorification. Our father is to be accounted happy in that he did not lack the merit of perfection of life, because he practised, or the ministry of teaching, because he taught, or the reward of great glory, because, as it says, "he is the one who will be called great."

Take first the merit of his life. He was a doer of the work referred to in 2 Timothy 4:5, "Keep vigil, toil in everything, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry, and be sober." There are five things laid down here which constitute the perfection of his life and that of every preacher: keeping vigil, toil, work, ministry and sobriety. Keeping vigil concerns study,²⁷ toil concerns service,²⁸ work concerns the proclamation of the gospel, ministry concerns responsibility, sobriety concerns a man's way of life.

First, then, St. Dominic kept vigil when he was a student. And he directed his study to three things: wisdom, abstinence and compassion. On the first it says in Proverbs 8:17, "Those who keep vigil for me from early morning will find me." The second is mentioned in Ecclesiasticus 31:1, "Keeping vigil for an honourable life will reduce your flesh." And on the third it says in Psalm 40:2, "Blessed is the man who shows understanding towards the poor." Look all this up in the Life of St. Dominic. This is why it says, "Keep vigil."

Notice here three people who can be blamed for going to sleep. Peter went to sleep when he was threatened with death (*Acts 12:6*). Jonah went to sleep when he was in danger of drowning (*Jonab 1:5*). And Abner went to sleep when he was supposed to be guarding his lord: "Why did you not guard the lord your king?" (*1 Sam. 26:15*). Similarly the apostles went to sleep just when their Lord's passion was about to begin. "Could you not keep vigil even for one hour?" (*Mt. 26:40*).

Secondly, St. Dominic toiled in service or in labour; this was

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when he was a canon regular. And this involved three kinds of toil: he laboured to increase his merits, to follow the example of the saints, and to serve his brethren. Look this up in his Life. This is why it says, "Toil in everything."

And notice here three possible faults which may occur in this regard. There is the risk of not toiling sensibly, so Ecclesiastes 10:15 refers to "the toil of fools," and Ecclesiastes 5:15 asks, "What use is it to have toiled for the wind?" Then there is the risk of toiling lazily. "You shall eat the labour of your hands" (*Ps. 127:2*). "Do whatever your hand can do" (*Eccles. 9:10*). Finally there is the risk of not seeing your labour through to the end. "Do not let anyone else have the honour which is yours . . . in case outsiders fatten themselves on your resources and your toil goes to benefit another man's house" (*Prov. 5:9-10*).

Thirdly, St. Dominic worked at proclaiming the gospel, when he became a preacher, and then he "did the work of an evangelist," renouncing everything, refuting the claims of heretics, and preaching the gospel. "Do the work of an evangelist." Or mention here the work of an evangelist, as it was revealed to the Cardinal of Porto: "To praise, to bless and to preach";²⁹ to praise, that is, in the Divine Office, to bless in all one's conversations, and to preach among the people and the clergy.

But now praise has lapsed into silence. "Where were you when the morning stars praised me?" (*Job 38:7*). And blessing has turned into insult. "Bless, and do not curse" (*Rom. 12:14*). And preaching has made way for fighting. "Ruben is divided against himself, and great-hearted men are found to be quarreling" (*Judges 5:15-16*).

Fourthly, he fulfilled a ministry of leadership, after he had become the founder of the Order of Preachers, and so it says, "Fulfil your ministry." The Gloss says: "Fulfil it by your life, learning and teaching."³⁰ Or he fulfilled it by humility: "Whoever wants to be great among you shall be your servant" (*Mt. 20:26*). "It is fitting for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness" (*Mt. 3:15*). Also by his dedication: "See, you have served us earnestly in all things" (*4 Kings 4:13*). "He who presides, let him do so carefully" (*Rom. 12:8*). Also by his purity: "He who walks a blameless way shall be my minister" (*Ps. 100:6*).

Finally, he was sober in his living, and this has to do with the blessedness of his life. This is why this virtue is mentioned last of all, because it governs all the others. Sobriety is particularly necessary in

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matters of wisdom: "Do not be wiser than you ought, but only within the limits of sobriety" (*Rom. 12:13*). It is also necessary with regard to behavior: "Let us live in sobriety and justice and loyalty" (*Titus 2:12*) It is also necessary with regard to the practice of abstinence, and this is how the Gloss interprets it here: "Be sober, do not practise excessive abstinence."³¹ This is the "reasonable service" mentioned in Romans 12:1.

This shows us how meritorious our father's life was. You can develop this any way you like.

"He who practises and teaches."

Merely to live well is not enough, and so teaching is brought in as well. So, after dealing with the meritoriousness of St. Dominic's life, take up next his role as a teacher. The teacher of the world says, "He who practises and teaches." Practice is mentioned first, then teaching. "Jesus began to do and to teach" (*Acts 1:1*). Mere doing is not much, mere teaching is futile, but doing and teaching together constitute perfection.

Not only, then, did St. Dominic possess the life of the gospel, as one who did the work of an evangelist, he also possessed the teaching of the apostles, which is commended to us in the gospel. And there are five things which give this teaching its special quality. It should be savoury, and so it is compared to salt: "You," he says, "are the salt of the earth." It should also be radiant, and so it is compared to light: "You are the light of the world." Also solid, so it is compared to a mountain or to a city set on a mountain: "A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden." Also it should be on fire, so it is compared to a lamp: "Nor do men light a lamp. . . ." Finally, it should be complete, and so the Lord goes on: "Do not think I have come to undo the Law . . ." (*Mt. 5:13-7*).

Now this is how our father taught. First of all, his teaching was useful, because it was salt. "Let your word be always seasoned with salt by grace" (*Col. 4:6*). Happy is the man whose teaching is salt. The Gloss points out: "Salt is used to dry meat, to season food and to keep away maggots."³² But notice how weighty the three things are which the Lord says here: "You are the salt of the earth"; that refers to the job, and this is serious. "But if the salt loses its savour"; this is the risk, and that is more serious. "It is worth nothing"; this is the penalty, and that is the most serious of all.

Secondly, his teaching was radiant, because it was light. "The lips of many will bless the man who is radiant in the bread he

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bestows" (*Ecclus. 31:28*). Happy is the man whose teaching is light. The light shines to enlighten the world, and this is why it says, "You are the light of the world." And it shines to bring edification to a man's neighbour: "Let your light so shine before men." And it shines to bring honour to God: "That they may see your good works and give glory to the Father."

Next, St. Dominic's teaching was constant, because it was a mountain. "A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden." The Gloss interprets this as "The solidity of the apostolic teaching."³³ And truly it is a high mountain: "Rise up on a high mountain" (*Isaiab 40:9*). And it is a luminous mountain: "You shine wonderfully from the everlasting mountains" (*Ps. 75:5*). And it is an unshakeable mountain: "The floods came and the winds blew . . ." (*Mt. 7:25*).

Next, his teaching was on fire, because he was a lamp that had been lit. "His words burned like a torch"³⁴ because he "came in the spirit and power of Elijah."³⁵ This is the meaning of "Nor do men light a lamp." So he was a lamp, a lamp that was lit, and a lamp that had been placed on a lamp-stand.

Also his teaching was effective and complete, because it fulfilled the law and the prophets. This is the meaning of, "Do not think I have come to undo the law, but to fulfil it."³⁶ The Gloss comments: "Undoing the law means not putting into practice what you understand correctly, or distorting your understanding, or whittling away the wholeness of the law of Christ."³⁷ The first of these is aimed at men who are educated but immoral, the second at heretics, and the third at people who fall short of perfect completeness. After this, the penalty is indicated for undoing the law: "Anyone who undoes the law and teaches men to undo it will be called least." The saints interpret this in three ways: being least means being unworthy of the kingdom of heaven, or not being anybody, or loving and pursuing things which are of least value, namely temporal things.³⁸

This is sufficient to show the quality of our father's teaching.

The meritoriousness of his life and his job as a teacher led to the reward of glorification. Only great men have entry to the court of heaven, so it says: "He will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." In the spirit of what our Lord says, we may go on: "He who acted and taught is great, but even greater is he who made others into teachers." "You anoint kings for penance and make people into prophets to follow after you" (*Ecclus. 48:8*). Greatest of all, then, is a man who has founded an order of teachers. On this look up the Gloss on Luke

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14:17, "He sent his servant at the time for the dinner": "His servant, that is, the Order of Preachers."³⁹

So "He shall be called great" means more than it says, because there is also "greater" and "greatest."

There are likewise five different elements which make up his greatness. He is great in his mind: "He will be great in the sight of the Lord and will be filled with the Holy Spirit" (*Lk. 1:15*), because he preserved his baptismal innocence. Also he is great in his working of miracles. "By the word of the Lord he closed up the heavens; thus was Elijah made great in his wonderful works" (*Ecclus. 48:3-4*).⁴⁰ Also he is great in his kindness to others. If there is anyone who has not known his kindness, he may refrain from praising him.⁴¹ Who has ever called on Dominic and been let down, whether in sickness or in time of need or in distress? He has done great things for everyone, because he is mighty and holy is his name.⁴² He is also great in his reward, and this is what is said here: "He will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." And this is because he is ranked with the virgins because of his integrity, with the confessors because that is what he was, with the martyrs because he was a martyr by desire, with the apostles because of his descent from them (he was their successor), and with the angels because he consorted with them. Truly he is great indeed in the kingdom of heaven.