



EIGHTH CENTENARY OF ST DOMINIC'S DEATH

This Friday will be the eight hundredth anniversary of the death of Saint Dominic, founder of the Order of Preachers and patron of our parish. He died in the Dominican priory of St Nicholas of the Vines, about noon on 6th August, 1221.

The scene above, painted by Fra Angelico about two hundred years later, presents the death as described by Dominic's friend and successor, Blessed Jordan of Saxony.

Dominic had fallen ill, and was carried up into the hills above Bologna, to a Benedictine monastery where the air was considered fresher. Realising that Dominic was dying, the Benedictine prior said he would insist that Dominic be buried there, in the monastery church, but Dominic begged to be brought home to die in our own priory and to be buried "beneath the feet of the brethren."

We see Dominic in the very low-roofed priory beside the church. In fact, when the brothers had once begun works to enlarge a priory and raise the roof, he had reprimanded them for seeking luxuries. He is surrounded by the brethren, and the words coming from his mouth were, we are told by Jordan, Dominic's final testament: "Have charity, preserve humility, and possess voluntary poverty."

The scene above the priory roof details a vision experienced at noon that day by a certain Brother Guala in Brescia, who saw angels on a ladder – reminiscent of Jacob's ladder in the Book of Genesis, of course – drawing up to heaven a friar with the capuce pulled down over the face, as was the custom at death.

Jordan continues, "Before his death he also assured his brethren that he would be of more benefit to them after death than in life, for he knew the one to whom he had entrusted the treasure of his labours and fruitful life." This testimony forms the basis of the chant *O Spem* which we sing to this day: "O wonderful hope which you gave to those who wept for you at the hour of your death, promising that after your death you would be helpful to your brethren; Fulfil, Father, what you have said, and help us by your prayers."

THE HOMILIES OF FRA ANGELICO



Guido di Pietro – known as ‘Fra Giovanni’ to his brethren and ‘Fra Angelico’ to history – is a painter of critical importance in the history of European art, standing on the cusp of the Italian Renaissance. He is also firmly rooted in the medieval tradition, and every painting of his may be considered a homily, a ‘sermon’ in paint, with a profound spiritual meaning for the attentive viewer. Many of his masterpieces were painted on the plaster of the friars’ cells, where they would serve to guide the brothers’ meditations for years.

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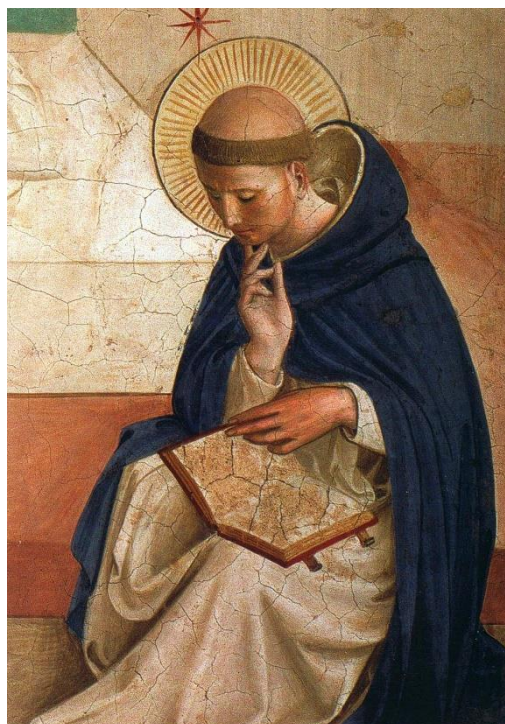
THE HOMILIES OF FRA ANGELICO

Although his paintings are very well known, they are rarely appreciated *in context*.

Consider this famous image of St Dominic, which Fra Giovanni painted in a friar's cell at St Marco in Bologna in 1440.

Viewed alone, it pictures a serene, contemplative saint with his attention focussed on the Sacred Scriptures. Viewed in context, however, we see that it is a detail in the extraordinary *Mocking of Christ* (see adjoining page.) There, Jesus is being mocked by assailants, of whom we see only disconnected body parts. Does this represent the inhumanity of this torture, or perhaps suggest that these blows, this spittle, belong not just to particular soldiers but to all who mistreat Christ – for *whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me*.

The Virgin and Dominic model the Christian response. Mary averts her eyes, unable to behold her Son's suffering, her sadness revealed by the droop of her head and the hand pressed to her cheek. The other hand is raised, perhaps directing the viewer towards the scene she cannot bear to watch, or perhaps urging restraint in the outrage that the tableau may provoke. Even at this moment, she continues to *ponder in her heart* its true meaning. Dominic contemplates the appalling scene too, but in the living words of the Gospel. The hand to his chin suggests pensiveness, the other touches the book. His head is lowered, recalling perhaps St Catherine of Siena's comment, "Any man must be ashamed to raise his head in pride, seeing you, Highest Lord, humiliated on the part of our humanity."



Contemplare, et contemplata aliis tradere (To contemplate, and to give to others the fruits...)

This Dominican motto that enjoys wide popularity comes from the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. Since we cannot give what we do not possess, St. Thomas characterizes the Dominican life as a balance between contemplation and active preaching. Jesus himself models this mutuality: before any significant act, Jesus first steals away to a quiet place of prayer. It is from this place of communion with his Father that Jesus teaches and preaches with authority.

Prayer and preaching complement each other — one nourishes and stimulates the other. Prayer without preaching would be stagnant, while preaching without prayer would be empty. For the Dominican, contemplation begins with Scripture. Through studying and pondering the meaning of revelation, we are led to preach the gospel to others. Like Mary who "pondered" the words of her Son, we too reflect and meditate on the word that Jesus has for us today, in this moment. And when we receive this word, we imitate Mary's own visitation, as we rush to our friends to share the good news of God's activity in our lives. This quiet contemplation that bursts forth into joyful expression is characteristic of Dominican spirituality.

— Fr Michael Hurley, O.P.

DOMINICAN WOMEN

The first Dominicans were women. Bishop Diego probably got the idea from the Albigensian heretics, who had houses of dedicated women, and when Dominic met a group of women near Toulouse who had been converted from Albigensianism to the Catholic Faith, he was anxious about their security: their families might attempt to forcibly re-convert them, or others, knowing they were separated from families who shunned them, might take advantage of them. He encouraged them to form a community of nuns, and when he left to return to his diocese of Osma, he left the women in Dominic's care.

Over the centuries, the vocation of Dominican women has taken many forms: contemplative nuns, sisters living in community, and various groups living a Dominican charism "in the world", as the saying goes, such as the *Mantellate* to which St Catherine belonged in Siena, or the Dominican Laity who remain active in our city and our parish today.

A DREAM

We dare to dream – to be as Dominic was,
ardent fiery apostles.
Beloved and lovers fast-knit to Christ,
radiant with His joy.

Preachers whose silent voices resound
Throughout the universe,
By love, by prayer, by quiet pondering
of the Word of Life.

Compassionate listeners, pleading, interceding
for mercy on the broken and needy people
of our world.

Companions united in the Truth
Graced by our sisterly communion

Sinners in need of Redemption
identifying with our fettered
brothers and sisters
in our chosen immobility.

Yes, we dare to dream –
to be as Dominic was,
ardent, fiery Apostles
of the glad tidings of Salvation.

Dominican Nuns, Drogheda, Ireland

