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The World of Saint Dominic and the World of Today

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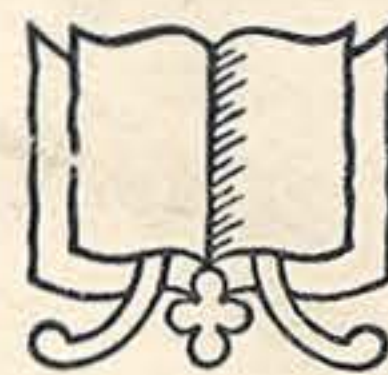
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*Ad. ...
for Dr. ...*

THE WORLD OF SAINT DOMINIC
AND THE
WORLD OF TODAY



An Address delivered on the Seven Hundredth Anniversary
of the Approval of the Order of Friars Preachers
by the Apostolic See, Sunday, November
19th, 1916, at Washington, D. C.

BY

CHARLES J. BONAPARTE.

CP 917

Venerated Prelates, Revered Fathers, Ladies and Gentlemen:

If the great and good man, the crowning work of whose saintly and wonderfully useful life we commemorate today, could come back to our Earth and stand in the flesh in our midst, what would he think of the world around him? How well or ill would it remind him of the world he left in 1221? How far, if at all, would he deem the men and women he might see about him changed from the men and women to whom he preached and ministered, or human life in the Twentieth Century different from the human life he strove to enlighten, elevate and sanctify in the Thirteenth?

Doubtless if we are guided in our judgment by mere externals, if we gaze only on the surface and care not to pry below, the change is great and striking; nowadays it demands a strong effort of the imagination to picture to our minds the civilized world as it was in the days of Dominic. In the first place, it was a far smaller world than that we know: it was made up of Europe, of, perhaps, the half of Asia and of less than one-fourth of Africa. Such vast countries as China, Japan, Siberia and the further Indies were, indeed, believed to exist, but the few facts known of them were so overlain with myth and fable that they were hardly more real than Atlantis, or the Garden of the Hesperides or the Isles of the Blessed. All Central and Southern Africa was thought of as a waste of burning sands, tenanted by frightful monsters; North and South America and the great islands of Australasia were unheard and undreamed of; the Atlantic was an unexplored desert of water; of the Pacific men knew less than we know, or some of us think they know, about the Canals of Mars. To a man of the Thirteenth Century the civilized world of today would probably seem as much expanded as might seem to one of us the

civilized world of 2600, if he should then come back to find that the human race had reached and become dominant in two or three of our sister planets.

But there were many other differences. The men of 1200 used no tobacco, nor tea, nor coffee, nor chocolate, nor potatoes, nor Indian corn; they had Thanksgiving Days, but they ate no turkey, for turkeys were then unknown. So were automobiles and motor-cycles and telephones and telegraphs, with or without wires, and aeroplanes and airships and even our old-fashioned balloons. So were submarines, whether for warfare or commerce, and steamships of every kind, and railroads and trolleys, and all the numberless practical uses of steam and electricity to serve human needs. So was coal, of every kind except charcoal; so were illuminating gases; so were all forms of electrical or chemical lights; so was photography in every shape. Most important, perhaps, of all was the non-existence of the printing press, and therefore of printed books and magazines and newspapers: contemporaries of Saint Dominic, could they have foreseen the future, might well have envied us many things, but must have rejoiced to think they had no cause to dread the interviewer or the book-agent. They had some knowledge of medicine and astronomy and were acquainted with certain phenomena of chemistry and physics; but they had never heard of microbes or bacteria, of atoms or molecules (at least in our sense of the words), of the Copernican system or the discoveries of Newton. Spoons were employed on great occasions, but the only forks they used were the five pronged and flexible ones supplied them by nature. Cotton, although very little used, was not unknown, and the explosive properties of gunpowder may have been discovered; but even the old time black powder was certainly not then employed for military purposes and all the immense possibilities of higher explosives were shrouded in the mists of futurity. The art of war was held in high repute, but men had not yet learned to kill each other with poisonous gases,

or to drop bombs from the sky on sleeping households, or to destroy ships of all kinds with under-sea infernal machines. In the physical features of his life, in his knowledge of and command over the powers of nature, the man of today is, or seems, very different from the man of seven centuries ago.

But we may safely conjecture that Saint Dominic, were he with us, would not rest satisfied with externals or even greatly care for changes in man's relations to the facts and forces of nature. He would ask whether the man of today knew more than his brother of seven hundred years ago about his own nature and destiny; whether he knew more as to the existence, the attributes and the purposes of an Almighty and Eternal Creator and Ruler of the Universe; whether he could better picture to his mind and conceive as possibilities eternity of Time and infinity of Space; and, if he could not, whether he had learned when Time began and when it would end and what went before or would come after it, and what ever was or could be beyond the outermost limits of Space, if this were not more Space. And it may well be that Dominic would be less interested in what we know than in what we are. Do we better love justice and more cordially hate iniquity than did good men in his day? Are we more nearly our own masters, able to resist with greater ease and more reasonable confidence the promptings of our lower nature at the call of duty, and more readily to subject our passions and our weakness to our will? In brief, has all that we have learned during these seven hundred years made us stronger, wiser, braver, better men?

Some five hundred years before Dominic, in Saxon England, human life, as known to human senses and human reason, was compared to the flitting of a bird through one and out of another of the windows (then unglazed) of a banquet-hall—a mere moment of conscious, visible existence, preceded and followed by eternities of nothingness.

Religion and philosophy struggle today, as they have ever struggled, to follow the bird in its further flight. In dealing with this problem, we have now, as men have always had, counsels of indifference, which are really counsels of despair. "Eat, drink and be merry: tomorrow ye shall die." "Be not righteous overmuch." "As the beast dies, so also dies man." These precepts logically imply that the bird ceases to be when it ceases to be seen, and that its course during the bare instant of its fluttering through the hall, after all, makes too little difference to anybody or any thing to be worthy of a wise man's anxious thought. Here and today the human mind revolts, as it has always and everywhere revolted, against this theory of our life's infinitesimal brevity and inherent insignificance; men cry out, with our own American poet:

"Life is *real*, life is *earnest*;"

"And the grave is *not* its goal:"

"'Dust thou art, to dust returnest,'"

"Was not spoken of the soul!"

Finally, we have in our midst some, even many, who can only gaze wistfully and sorrowfully into the gloom which engulfs the bird as it fades from their sight, and murmur the prayer attributed to a dying German soldier in the war of 1870: "O God (if there be a God)! Save my soul (if I have a soul)!"

Moreover, every thoughtful man feels today, as thoughtful men have felt in all ages, that, in his nature, there is a sort of moral locomotor ataxia; that he is not fully and always his own master; that he sometimes, even often,

"Does the wrong he would not do,"

"And shuns the right he would pursue;"

and now, as ever before, he feels this subserviency of his reason and conscience to his frailties and his passions to be well called by Calvin "a miserable bondage," whatever he

may think of Calvin's theories as to its origin and nature. Men of our time call for delievery from this bondage no less loudly and insistently than they call for delivery from the agony of doubt and uncertainty as to the riddle of immortality, or than they have, in all times and all lands, called for delievery from both; they ask now, as they asked seven hundred and nineteen hundred years ago: "What must we do to be saved?" And to this momentous question, many false answers, as well as one true one, are made now and here, as they have been before and elsewhere.

All these things would seem to Saint Dominic strangely and significantly familiar: he would find our world struggling with the same doubts and perils and perplexities and evils which assailed the men with whom he lived; he would find in us precisely the same fatal infirmities of heart and mind and sense, the same instinctive longing to do right overmastered by the same inveterate proneness to do wrong, which were stumbling blocks to salvation in the days of his ministry. Indeed, I am tempted to believe that he would feel, in an especial sense, at home in our time and in our country; for, to my mind, he would find in some of those ravening wolves in sheep's clothing abounding among us much to remind him of the teachers of false doctrine and guides in the paths of spiritual danger and death against whom it was his allotted duty to contend.

Formerly, even as lately as my own youth, the so-called "Catharists" of his day (generally, but erroneously known as "Albigenses") received much unmerited sympathy by reason of the belief that they were, in some sort, pre-Reformation Protestants. Without presuming to speak with any authority on an obscure and intricate subject, as to which I know very little, I believe I voice the present opinion of all competent and fair-minded scholars in saying that, under a thin veneer of Christian nomenclature, and notwithstanding their use of certain rites more or less resembling in form some of those of the Catholic Church,

their religion was not really Christian at all, but, in its essence, a revived and, in some respects, a degenerate Manichaeism. However this may be, the resemblance between the undoubted division of the Manichaeans into *electi* and *auditores*, and the no less undoubted division of the Catharists into *perfecti* and *credentes* seems too striking to be fortuitous.

A few words may be here appropriate as to the character and ethical effect of this division in the latter case. The *perfecti* were practically all old men (occasionally, but rarely, women) of exceptional zeal and energy, who lived in absolute poverty and the strictest celibacy and practised a severe asceticism, with many fasts and careful limitations of diet at all times. They were admitted through a rigorous novitiate, were instructed in all the doctrines of the sect and were expected and believed by the *credentes* to observe to the letter all of its moral precepts. The *credentes*, who made up at least ninety-nine *per centum* of the entire sect, were taught but little of its doctrines and were, in fact, freed, not only from its peculiar discipline, but from all moral restraints whatever, since their conduct was held to be altogether without effect on their prospects of salvation. They could not even pray, for their Deity would listen only to the prayer of a *perfectus*: they could, however, ask a *perfectus* to pray for them, and thus only might obtain the grace to become, in time, *perfecti* themselves. Meantime, however, they were assured of ultimate salvation, if they professed implicit faith in the teaching of the *perfecti* and promised, with sincerity, from time to time, to become a *perfectus*, if possible, before death, a promise which, in the great majority of cases, if fulfilled at all, was fulfilled *in extremis*. It was in nowise forbidden for a *credens* to conform outwardly to the precepts of the Catholic Church (another point of resemblance to the Manichaean *auditores*), or, indeed, to practice any other form of deception: the *perfecti*, on the other hand, were pitiless critics of eccles-

iaistical abuses and sought to gain influence and spread their doctrines by dwelling upon the supposed contrast between their own apparently austere lives and the laxity of discipline, and even of morals, with which they habitually charged the secular clergy of the time in Provence.

I strongly suspect that Saint Dominic would be impressed with the prevalence among us of a type of *credens* bearing a close family resemblance to the one he knew: that is to say, a man who conforms to religious usages, at least when these are not onerous, who contributes in money, sometimes liberally, to religious enterprises and for religious purposes, and who deems himself thereby about as fully released as any *credens* could have held himself from the inconvenient restraints of Christian morality. Moreover, the Saint might well note in American society of today some at least of those fruits of economic prosperity and moral decay which marked the Provencal society of his day. The inhabitants of Southeastern Gaul had grown rich and luxurious, had developed marked ability in making and in spending money, were averse to self-restraint and self-sacrifice, and called their softness and craving for gain and for amusement and love of profit and of pleasure "civilization" and "enlightenment:" is this a wholly unfaithful picture of our own people today?

A moment of further thought to this comparison and I have done. It is easy to see why the Catharist tenets should have spread rapidly amid such a people and especially amid the licentious feudal nobles who then ruled the country: they became *credentes* in multitudes, sometimes openly, more frequently without formally disowning the Church, and, although great preachers were sent by Rome to combat the false doctrines, their work was impeded at every turn by the local aristocracy. At last the brutal murder of a Papal Legate convinced the Holy See that this spreading danger to the faith and morals of the world could be stamped out only by the strong hand, and a crusade was

finally preached against these misbelievers. It now appeared that, in the words of Macaulay:

“The ingenious and polished inhabitants of the Languedocian provinces were far better qualified to enrich and embellish their country than to defend it. * * * * * They wanted that iron courage, and that skill in martial exercises, which distinguished the chivalry of the region beyond the Loire, and were ill-fitted to face enemies who, in every country from Ireland to Palestine, had been victorious against ten-fold odds.”

Dominic witnessed the war: he is even said to have been reproached by some “Pacifists” of the day among the vanquished with having prayed for victory to the Crusaders at the battle of Muret. He might hear much in our day and country to recall these reproaches to his mind, but we can more profitably think of the war’s lesson for us, especially at this critical time. Napoleon I said, in effect, that, in promoting military strength, moral forces are to physical as three to one. The “iron courage” of those warriors of the Cross, whereof Macaulay speaks, swept away their enemies like chaff before the wind, because it was nourished and inflamed by worthier beliefs, by nobler sentiments, by truer and sounder principles of life, thought and action than the gilded moral rottenness to which it was opposed. The two great virtues of military men, self-sacrifice and obedience, must be taught at the mother’s knee and at the home fireside, if they are to be safeguards for national life and honor when it may please Almighty God to try a country’s worth by a storm of steel and flame, of conflict and devastation. The Christian faith which Dominic preached, the heroic virtues which he practised, the unquestioning self-abnegation which he enjoined on his followers, these things are a form of preparedness for national peril which will not, indeed, make needless material provision for defence, but must be furnished to render the amplest provision useful.

