

# Dominicans and Franciscans

*Reflections of a Dominican fellow-traveller*

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A medievalist at my College tells me that the story of Francis and Dominic meeting in 1215 in the house of Cardinal Ugolino is very probably true. Tradition has it that Dominic, taking his hand, said to Il Poverello: “Brother Francis, I wish your Order and mine should join to live under the same Rule in the Church.”<sup>1</sup> Fortunately this amicable proposal was never implemented – the two Orders, while influencing each other, went very much their separate ways and the Church was the richer for it, despite tensions, bickerings, quarrels and rivalry.

For more than half a century I’ve been fascinated by Francis: in 1950 buying a translation of Englebert’s excellent biography; consorting with Anglican Franciscans at St Francis House Cambridge in the early 1950s; being intrigued and moved by Chesterton’s curate’s egg: *St Francis of Assisi* (1923) and Kazantzakis’ *God’s Pauper* (1962); and, in the 1970s, producing, with a cast of schoolboys, a dance mime of the life of Il Poverello. But fascination with Francis has gone along with precious little knowledge of Franciscans. With some hasty reading over the last few weeks, I’ve tried to come to Alnmouth not too scandalously ill-informed. Successive attempts to phone the local Capuchin Friary failed, so my hearers must kindly correct ensuing misconceptions and inaccuracies.

Francis plays so crucial a role in the spiritual lives of his followers that Franciscans are focussed on Il Poverello to a degree that is in striking contrast to the reverence which Dominicans feel for *their* founder. Writing in the full tide of the liberal Protestant rediscovery of Francis, the irascible medievalist C.G.Coulton, scourge of careless Catholic historians, eleven years after the founding of the Society of St Francis, records the manifest failure of mendicancy in the Orders of friars but challenges us: “...we must measure the whole height of the personal greatness of St Francis.”<sup>2</sup> That surely remains the challenge and not just for medievalists or Franciscans.

On retreat at Buckfast Abbey, a good many years ago, I was spotted by a keen-eyed Irish traditionalist, using the rosary. He later congratulated me and, in the conversation that followed, said that he went every year to San Giovanni Rotondo to make his confession and to hear Padre Pio’s Mass. “I have,” he told me, “some pieces of the bandages which he wraps around his poor hands.” Nearly 30 years later, this Capuchin who reputedly bore the marks of Christ’s wounds, was canonised in a ceremony which brought central Rome to a standstill. Just as Francis has often been regarded as an ‘icon’ of Christ, even an *alter Christus*, so Padre Pio was throughout his life regarded by his devotees as a living ‘icon’ of our Lord. Both men appear to have been so ‘conformed’ to Christ crucified as to have carried “in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may

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<sup>1</sup> O.Englebert, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Burns Oates 1949), p.175.

<sup>2</sup> C.G.Coulton, *Two saints: St Bernard & St Francis* (Cambridge 1932), p.120.

also be manifested”.<sup>3</sup> The image of Il Poverello with his stigmata is so powerful an ‘icon’ that, together with the radical challenge of his life, he is a powerful focus for Franciscans in a way that Dominic never was or ever will be.

My recent skimming of Franciscan history makes me wary of any deeper engagement with it. Not that it is lacking countless examples of heroic sanctity and profundity of thought, nor is it any more unedifying at times than Dominican history, but because it seems to me intolerably complicated. Discerning the true Francis from the pious legend is perplexing enough, but the fissiparous history of the Friars Minor is bewildering in its complexity. Popes and their officials have tried to sort and simplify, not always successfully, but eventually Leo XIII in 1897 shepherded them into three folds: Observants, Conventuals and Capuchins.

Why the proliferation of Franciscan Orders? I believe it is because Francis bequeathed to his followers a never-to-be-resolved tension: between the radical perfection of the evangelical counsels and the reality of life in an imperfect world. Basically this is the tension in which all Christians have to live. And yet there is something of an unyielding literalism in Francis’ teaching which points up the conflict. Coulton is undeniably correct in claiming that the mendicancy and dedicated destitution of the friars failed – it failed in Francis’ life-time and it will always fail. Not for a moment do I question the relevance of an impossible ideal – it humbles us, spurs us on, even if it sometimes tempts us to chuck in the towel. Franciscan Orders proliferated because there is no escape for Friars Minor from being in an *ordo semper reformandus* – always reforming, reshaping, attempting to realise the impossible ideal.

I was once acquainted with an Anglican Franciscan friar, a student, who required a Third Order companion to buy bus tickets and cups of tea because he couldn’t handle money. I wasn’t the only fellow student who thought this not only dotty but a circumvention of the injunction of the Rule: “I firmly order all the brothers not to accept coins or money in any form, either themselves or by an intermediary.”<sup>4</sup> Now, I believe that this is mainly aimed at donations – though the Rule was soon circumvented in that respect too – but it illustrates my point that impossible ideals lead to evasions, compromises and disputes, sometimes bitter, about what is prescribed.

Dominicans too had their tensions and disputes between Observants and those who had mitigated or evaded the injunctions of the Constitutions. Lacordaire, the charismatic preacher who revived the Dominican Order in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Jandel who organised it brilliantly across the face of the world, fell out over the interpretation of the Constitutions. All Orders except the Carthusians (never reformed because never needing reform) have a history of relaxation, adaptation, mitigation of the Rule and a counter movement towards a more strenuous, rigorous interpretation. Pere Jandel as Master General had to write to the Prior of the novitiate house to temper the observant enthusiasm of the Novice Master: “re-establish seven hours sleep for your novices from

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians, ch.4, v.10 (RSV).

<sup>4</sup> R.B.Brooke, *The Coming of the Friars* (Allen & Unwin 1975), The Rule of the Friars Minor, p.122.

eight o'clock to three a.m.”<sup>5</sup> They'd been rising at midnight and making their way from their make-shift Priory down a fairly steep hill in all weathers to sing matins. The Novice Master obeyed grudgingly, alleging that Englishmen “love to push things to extremes”.<sup>6</sup>

As a fellow-traveller with Dominicans and a writer on aspects of Dominican history, I feel a little more confident when expressing opinions about the Order of Preachers than about the Friars Minor. In the Order of Preachers, Dominic is revered, is asked for his prayers at every Mass, but in no way does his role in the Order match that of Francis' with Franciscans. Much less is known of his life, though the outlines are sufficiently defined. Like Francis, he emerges in the 13<sup>th</sup> century against a background of challenges to the Church by Cathars and popular reformist movements in the expanding urban culture of Western Europe. Francis, when he appeared with his scruffy band of friars before Innocent III, must have startled the Pope, causing him to wonder whether they were yet another band of heretical wayfarers or semi-detached Catholics like Peter Waldo. But Dominic was a cleric, an Augustinian Canon Regular. What reassured the Pope was that both men were resolutely orthodox and readily professed obedience to the Holy See.

Dominic had at first only moderate success in converting Cathars, even after he had adopted the simple life-style of a mendicant. He concluded that the friars had to be intellectually equal to any challenge. They needed to be taught before they could teach and preach effectively, so off he sent them to the Universities. The rest of the story is pretty well known – Dominicans, and Franciscans not long after them, came to dominate University teaching by their talent as teachers and by the adventurousness of their thought. It's not too much to claim that the great medieval Universities were moulded and shaped by the friars. The names of their most distinguished members reverberate to this day: among Dominicans, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart, and among Franciscans, Bonaventure, Roger Bacon, Scotus and Grosseteste. They were the glory of the Universities of Paris, Oxford and Bologna. The synthesis of Aristotle and Catholic theology represented by the writings of Thomas continues to animate philosophy in the contemporary Church.

Not all charismatic leaders are brilliant organisers or administrators. George Fox, John Wesley and Dominic were outstanding in giving their followers a structure which has stood the test of time. Dominic didn't have to start from scratch – his background as an Augustinian Canon provided the foundation of the Rule and he added the Constitutions. In any case, the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council had decreed in 1215 that there were to be no more new Orders. So Dominic simply adapted the Augustinian Rule, adding on what he thought essential and producing a system of government which may justly be called the earliest example of a democratic, representative structure. It has functioned well and without major adaptation for nearly 800 years.

No office in the Order is held for life, but for a distinctly limited period which may be extended by one further period only. All offices are elected. No representative attends a

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<sup>5</sup> Pere Vincent Jandel to Fr. Dominic Aylward, letter of 3 April 1852, English Province Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. Augustine Procter to Pere Vincent Jandel, letter of 6 November 1852, English Province Archives.

Provincial or General Chapter without a *socius* who cannot vote but has the right to speak, particularly if he believes the views of brethren haven't been adequately expressed. No major change can be made to the Constitutions unless ratified by three successive General Chapters. The machinery of government is geared so that the general will is carefully discerned. How Quakerly it seems and yet devised four centuries before the emergence of the Society of Friends. Franciscans soon adopted some of these forms of government just as they followed the Dominicans within a few years into the Universities.

An example of how well the system works - the former Master, Timothy Radcliffe who today is again simply a friar of the Oxford Priory, went in 1992 as English Provincial to the General Chapter in Mexico: "I knew that my name had come up in the course of the meetings, but I did not take it seriously. I thought I was too young [46!], too disorganised, lacking in the necessary gravitas..." When he was called in to the electors to speak about his vision for the Order, he said: "I am in my first term [as Provincial]. I have never worked in a parish. I have never lived in the Third World. I don't fulfil any of the criteria." He was elected. He accepted like any good Religious out of obedience and hoped he wouldn't be "a spectacular failure".<sup>7</sup> He was a much loved, much travelled, highly successful Master. I think this illustrates the wisdom of the electors, the humility of the friar and the sophistication of the system of government.

Dominic's legacy to his Order is therefore twofold: effective government and dedication to academic excellence. From his own experience he realised that the Church needed intellectual shock troops and his startled friars were told to disperse in small groups to the Universities of Paris, Bologna and, a little later, Oxford. They were in Oxford by 1221 and sufficiently established to be able to offer short-term hospitality to the first group of Franciscans sent thither in 1224. As Bede Jarrett, amazingly successful Provincial from 1916 to 1932 wrote, Dominican friars "...looked upon themselves as spiritual freelancers tilting the world over from west to east at every form of error and in defence of every truth."<sup>8</sup> That is as true today as it was in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It was Bede Jarrett who re-established the friars in Oxford on 15 August 1921, 700 years after their first arrival and in the teeth of considerable scepticism on the part of some of his brethren who didn't share his vision or faith in Providence. It is now the thriving Studium of the Province. It is no great mystery why the Province is blessed with vocations – that can largely be explained by the influential presence of Dominican chaplains in the Universities.

A fashionable question asked by politicians and commentators: is such and such an organisation, institute or department 'fit for purpose'? It is perhaps an oddly phrased question to ask of Dominican and Franciscan friars. Their purpose, broadly stated, is to proclaim the Gospel by their particular 'charisms'. How they proclaim the Gospel must take account of contemporary circumstances and challenges.

Does the Church and the World need dedicated Catholic intellectual shock troops? Allow me a few words of personal testimony. I owe my faith as a Catholic Christian to many

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<sup>7</sup> Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, *I Call You Friends* (Continuum 2001), pp.25 & 26.

<sup>8</sup> Fr. Bede Jarrett, *The English Dominicans* (Burns Oates 1921), p.15.

who have influenced my life, not all of whom have been Catholics, but under God I owe a great debt to one lucid, clear-headed philosopher friar, Herbert McCabe. Another eccentric friar, still a member of the Province, many years ago before he became a Catholic, picked up a copy of the Dominican journal in Quarr Abbey library and, reading it, with a sigh of relief, "...realised at last that one didn't have to commit intellectual suicide to be a Catholic".<sup>9</sup> That has been my experience too. The intellectual apostolate of Dominicans is of vital importance in proclaiming the truth of the Gospel to the 'cultured despisers' of the Age and in challenging fashionable nostrums and false philosophies. Unless Catholics can give good reasons for the faith that is in them, then the Church is doomed to relegation on the margins of western society. I consider Dominicans fit for purpose, perhaps in need of several more brothers with the intellectual daring of Herbert McCabe and at least twice as many friars.

I hesitate to speak of Franciscans since my hearers will be better able to answer the question: fit for purpose? The followers of Il Poverello would seem to me to be peculiarly suited to living the truth of the gospel among the destitute of this world and they are doing so, I know, all over the face of this troubled earth. In richer societies their witness of voluntary poverty among those infatuated with consumerism would seem a potent act of witness. How far is that witness known and noticed? Also among the Friars Minor are those who have an intellectual apostolate. Some of their books are on my shelves. However, I get the impression of decline, particularly among the Conventuals and I think I'm right in saying that the diminishing number of friars in the SSF gives cause for concern. If that is right, then there is need not only of prayer for vocations but analysis of the causes of decline.

Bede Jarrett was convinced that vitality among Dominicans relates to the challenge which they are called upon to address. Whenever the challenge was fierce, the Order flourished. I wonder of that's true to some extent for Franciscans? Dare I suggest a daunting challenge for the Friars Minor? Some may already be energetically responding to it.

Few events impress me more in the life of Il Poverello than his determination to proclaim the Gospel to Moslem rulers.<sup>10</sup> True, we probably wouldn't want to go about it quite so uncompromisingly as he did in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Today, not just Franciscans but all Christians have in a sense to go humbly to Damietta. No inter-faith dialogue is more important than that between Christians and Moslems. We share so many dimensions of faith and yet seem locked into misunderstanding, misconception and mistrust. I regret that the Holy Father failed at Regensburg to acknowledge the debt which Catholic rationalism owes to Moslem scholars. To promote peaceable, well-informed dialogue is difficult and even dangerous. I cannot believe that Franciscans, with their noble army of martyrs down the centuries, would fail to offer themselves as readily as brave Cistercians and a Dominican bishop did in Algeria a few years ago.

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<sup>9</sup> Fr. John Orme Mills [I've unfortunately been unable to identify the source, but the saying isn't apocryphal, I'm sure].

<sup>10</sup> I had written this before an excellent article appeared in *The Tablet* of 7 October 2006: S.M.Thomas, 'Franciscan guide to dialogue'. The illustration is of one of Giotto's frescos in Assisi depicting St Francis and the Sultan of Egypt.

The liberal intellectuals of the west cut very little ice with orthodox Moslems, but those secure in their faith and peaceable in spirit – they could build the bridges we need so that there might be a stronger two-way flow of understanding and mutual respect. I believe that Franciscans could be abundantly blessed in this urgent work of reconciliation. And they have one further advantage – they can ask the support of those power-houses of prayer where Poor Clares perpetually intercede for humanity. As the Franciscan friar in Woodford Green said to the troubled young seminarian, Peter Cornwell: [the nuns] “have the power to perform miracles. The good Lord cannot refuse them.”<sup>11</sup> The fostering of love, respect and understanding between Christians and Moslems – now that would be a challenge worth responding to and praying for. The Good Lord would surely not refuse to bless and prosper the work.

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Cornwell, *Seminary Boy* (Fourth Estate, 2006), p.269.