

Saint Dominic and the Landlord

Saint Dominic accompanied his bishop, Diego of Azevedo, sent on an embassy by the king to Denmark. They crossed the Pyrenees; they crossed from a country of Christendom into a land infested with heresy. They experienced for themselves the catharism of which they had only heard tell in Castile. On the way to Toulouse they saw many churches abandoned; they realized the hostility of the people; certainly they talked with priests and bishops, some of whom were hardened by hatred and fear into a refusal to understand, others were opportunists, others again more or less conquered by the ideas one breathed everywhere in this country. What is terrible and decisive in such experiences is to discover the strength and attractiveness of error, the best people being led astray, to have firsthand acquaintance with the failures of the Church, the scandals to be met with, the disappointment she causes.

Of course a sensitive member of the Church is forewarned in the matter; he knows well enough that this drama is nothing less than the passion of Christ continued in his mystical body. He is more than forewarned, he already suffers the agony of it. St. Dominic used to groan at night with appeals to the mercy of God. He experienced the drama of the Church personally in the depths of his soul because his depths were open, in love, to the great depths of the Church. But it is one thing to pray, to suffer, in mystery, outside time, another thing altogether to discern some of the great data of human destiny as they are being realized in one's own time. To read some of the signs of the time is to become a prophet. The understanding one gains of them turns the passion of salvation into the effective action of this salvation, and one rises an apostle.

So far as he survives this ordeal the apostle is put by the Lord into encounters in which the grace that awakens faith must pass through him. The game's opening move was St. Dominic's finding himself in the presence of a convinced Albigensian, his landlord, on the evening of his arrival at Toulouse.

Here is a man who is in his adult conviction. The apostle must close with him, the real 'him', as he is, with his problems and his solutions. He obliges the apostle to think, to experience the supernatural realities by which the apostle lives, in terms of what is right in the landlord's conscience. The man must recognize in the apostle his better conscience; his own voice in the apostle's, but purer. The apostle has to enter into the reasons of this mind, this heart, these emotions, reasons so dizzily plausible that he must think as he does; reasons which wound the Church and crucify Christ. In refuting what is false in them the apostle must contrive not to wound him with the spite of his errors, but to substitute the truth for them in a way more his than the way his evil reasons, so much his own, had been. He must redirect the convictions by which the man lives, surpassing, deepening and opening them, rather than annulling them: making them open out into the full truth that makes us free. This is identification with the enemy (and his enmity is true and savage enough), more exhausting than the stretching of the prophet upon the child whose life he was to bring back. It is battling for the enemy's victory: to reconcile him back to the true self from which heresy estranged him, to the communion of saints. "I will not let thee go," the apostle says, "except thou bless me" (Gn 32,26). A humiliating rout under mere superiority of arguments would not be the victory of faith in this soul. The soul is infinitely precious because it is the image of God: it is free! Once set free, it must fulfill itself, with the whole spontaneity of its powers of life, in the light of Christ, in the deep peace of the Church joyfully recognized, and it must bless its liberator. In the morning the Albigensian landlord of the night before was a Catholic.

The apostle bears the wounds of such a night for ever, like Jacob lame for life at the angel's touch. He has had in full the decisive apostolic experience.

Pie-Raymond Regamey, O.P., "The Five Beats of Every Apostolic Life," in *Life of the Spirit*, March 1960, 406-409.