

A DOMINICAN PRIORY OF YESTERDAY AND TO-DAY.

BY

REV. BEDE JARRETT, B.A.

*Read at a Meeting of the Society at St. Dominic's Priory, Haverstock Hill,
June 18th, 1910.*

I AM starting on the assumption that you are well acquainted with the history of the Order of Friars Preachers, or the Dominican Order, as it is more popularly known to-day, for it would be impertinence on my part to go into antiquarian lore before such a society as yours. I wish only to sketch for you Dominican life as it is lived to-day, in order to manifest the continuity which links it up to the ways and manners of the Black Friars of old. It is a commonplace defence of history to say that the past explains the present; but you will permit me to hazard the paradox that the present no less explains the past.

Moreover, the Dominican Order is one which has had within its borders many noted men. I do not intend to dazzle you with their names. But to make good this boast, I will instance simply the General Chapter of the Order held at Montpellier in 1271—that is within 60 years of its foundation. At this attended the various Provincials: the Provincial of France was Peter of Tarantaise, later Archbishop of Lyons, and finally Pope as Innocent V.; the Provincial of England was Robert Kilwarby, later Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal; the Provincial of Germany was Albert the

Great, later Bishop of Ratisbon; the Provincial of Greece was Peter of Conflans, later Archbishop of Corinth; the Provincial of Lombardy was James of Voragine, later Archbishop of Genoa, but more famous to us as the author of the Golden Legend. Just this one chapter then justifies your interest in Dominican life.

I propose, therefore, briefly to describe (1) a Dominican Priory of the thirteenth century, and (2) a Dominican Priory of to-day, that of Haverstock Hill, in which you are assembled; and thus to show how we do in a real way continue in the old paths.

I.—A DOMINICAN PRIORY OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

Now, the outside appearance of such a priory would have seemed a huge mass of low building, pricked out with here a steeple and there a tower. By Papal ordinance it was separated from all other buildings by a space of some 200 paces. In form, the whole would consist, generally speaking, of a quadrangle, of which one side was occupied by the length of the church; this can be seen in the extant plans of the Dominican priories of Canterbury, Bristol, and Gloucester. The buildings ran along two floors only. S. Dominic ordained that the brethren should inhabit humble dwellings: *Mediocres domos et humiles latres nostri habeant*. The height of the buildings was to be 20 feet; of the church 30 feet. But this ordinance as regards the exact height seems to have been seldom actually put into practice. The House of Studies for

the English Province at King's Langley was a most gorgeous erection; and even earlier than its foundation, Mathew Paris has sarcastic words about the palatial convents of the English Dominicans. Indeed, the General Chapter of the whole Order assembled at Holborn in 1250 heavily penanced the English Provincial with disciplines and days on bread and water, for busying himself overmuch in buildings. Yet one must remember that we are speaking of a time when Decorated Gothic was in its first flush of beauty, when Fra Ristoro and Fra Sisto, two Dominican lay brothers, were building in Florence S. Maria Novella, which Michael Angelo, for its chaste loveliness, was to call *La Sposa*.

The English priories were apparently two stories high—the ground floor was occupied with the community rooms, the upper storey with the cells and the library. In many convents there was a distinct quadrangle jutting off from the larger one, wherein were buried the dead. It was surrounded by an open cloister, where the Friars might walk, but in absolute silence only. Such a quadrangle exists at S. Eustorgio, in Milan; and, again, many will remember another at New College, Oxford.

Let us enter the convent. We approach the door and summon the porter by knocking. This door is placed near the church, but at the apsidal end of it; for the brother porter could hear Mass from his little hall *de loco portae*. At Ipswich one would have gone along a narrow passage from the street to the front door. The brother porter lets us in. He is a discreet and prudent man, say the writers, of gracious aspect. His cell adjoins the doorway; and in it he plies his

trade as tailor or bootmaker, so that in between his answerings of the door, he may not be idle. In the thirteenth century he would have taken us at once to the cloister, for there were then no guest apartments. But in 1422 we hear of a heretic condemned in *Le Hostrye* of the Blackfriars at Ludgate. Also, in 1441 a French embassy lived in the same apartments, as in 1522 did the Emperor Charles V. Moreover, at Shrewsbury, the Queen of Edward IV gave birth in the Dominican Priory to two sons, one, the luckless Richard of York, murdered by Uncle Gloster in the Tower. And at Oxford the guest-house remains. Indeed, it is all that does remain.

We go then with the brother into the church, and if we find there any priest, we kneel to him and get his blessing. Such was the law for Dominican guests. The church seems austere as we look around it, though very beautiful. At Ludgate we would note the tombs of Hubert de Burgh, and many noblemen; even we might notice where lay two Dominican Cardinals, and several Bishops. Probably the brother would not fail to draw our attention to the small Gothic memorial, gaily pricked out with paint, which enclosed the heart of Eleanor of Castile, Edward's queen. The church seems barricaded across by a heavy choir screen, which forbids us to see the brethren there assembled, and even the altar where is reserved the Blessed Sacrament; though had we come at Masstime, and waited for the Elevation, the screen doors would have been flung open wide, and we could (in the touching phrase of the Middle Ages for hearing Mass) "have seen our Maker." Naturally, as devotion to the Blessed Sacrament increased, the people were impatient of this

hiding; and the altar was brought right forward, and the choir was pushed behind it. But this was only in the sixteenth century; and I do not think such an arrangement was ever to be found in our English churches. Over the screen hung the Rood, as in Westminster Cathedral to-day. In the church were no benches or chairs, but the vast space was carpeted with straw in winter and grass in summer.

The choir also is austere. Any tombs were fiercely forbidden there; indeed, no sepulchral effigies at all were allowed in any Dominican churches. The Renaissance makes us wish such prohibitions had been of general obligation. We note the great breviaries chained to their iron stands. Bishop Ringstead, of Bangor, a Dominican, left his great breviary to the Friar Preachers of Cambridge, but if removed and not put back within three days it was at once to be taken to the Friars in Ludgate.

In the choir would office be said day and night. Matins began at midnight, *i.e.*, not at the hour of midnight, but at the *watch* of midnight, at any time between 12 and 3 a.m.; for of course the length of the hours varied, day and night, winter and summer, from 45 to 75 minutes. Prime was said at the first light of dawn, and Compline ended with the failure of the evening light. Thus the times for the seven hours of the Divine office varied enormously at the various seasons of the year. Apparently all were in bed at 6.30 or 7 at latest, and rose at about 3 o'clock. This gives some seven or eight hours of sleep; and should this sleep be shortened, as happened in the summer owing to the earlier rising, the afternoon siesta kept the Friars in good health.

All day long the church stood open, but ordinarily it was locked at night. Office was customarily sung, but quickly, and not drawn out. After compline the Friars came out in procession to sing the *Salve Regina*, an antiphon to the Mother of God, walking down the church for that purpose.

Thence through the sacristy, the brother porter leads us into the cloisters. They are, like at Westminster Abbey, open to the air, bordering round the quadrangle, in the centre of which the playing of the fountain catches our eye.

There we find the guest master awaiting us, a priest. To him the brother hands us over, and smilingly returns to attend the door. The master of the guests should be of gay humour, a lovable man, yet grave withal; tactful in speech and unsparing of his time. He offers us bread and wine, or some refectio if our journey has been from far off. Should we stay too long, he has the unpleasant task of hinting and hurrying our departure. First he shows us the infirmary. This is a quarter apart. It has its own dormitory, refectory, etc. Close at hand is a garden or some open meadow for the recreation of the sick. The infirmarian himself comes across the grass to meet us; we note him affable and discrete, of unalterable patience. An open-handed man, we declare as we leave him. Says a thirteenth century writer, he must be as tender as a woman, for it is written in the Book of Ecclesiasticus: "Where no woman is, the sick man is in want." Here is the infirmary; the friars come for their monthly blood-letting, performed by a physician from outside, who is doctor, dentist, and surgeon in one. Here, too, small concerts are given to cheer the sick. We have some of their

songs, with their quaint, mirthful tunes, extant to-day. Even death, as far as may be, loses here its unloveliness. Amid the gentle chaunting of the *Salve Regina*, the soul lifts the latch and passes into the outer air of the next life. When it is gone each friar says his masses of suffrage, and year by year the obit is noted. If he be Master-General his name is publicly announced after the Martyrology at Prime. Moreover, four anniversaries were yearly celebrated for all buried in Dominican churchyards, for the parents of all Dominicans, for all benefactors of Dominicans, and for all Dominicans themselves.

From there, keeping along the cloister, we turn into the refectory. This was most often the largest room in all the house, sometimes stretching the whole length of the cloister on one side. It was here, too, I imagine, that the parliaments were held, like the Black Parliament of 1523 in the Priory at Ludgate, and the Mad Parliament of 1258 in the Priory at Oxford. Just as one would hold Parliament to-day at Oxford in one of the college halls, if anywhere at all. In the refectory the tables were round the walls, with the benches placed by the walls, so that the brethren sat facing the centre. At the farthest end from the kitchen (which communicated with the refectory through a turn or hutch) sat the prior, on his left the sub-prior. Between them and over their heads hung a crucifix or some sacred picture was painted. Thus the famous "Last Supper" of Leonardo da Vinci is frescoed on the walls of the Dominican refectory of S. Maria delle Grazie at Milan. Humorous designs also brightened the room. At Gratz, amongst others, is a dog with a piece of bread balanced on its nose, while an imperious hand, with

finger uplifted, holds the animal in suspense; under it is written, "Licentia Comite." No doubt the hungry friars waiting for the prior's command saw the analogy, and patiently expected the given signal. From the Feast of High Cross (September 14) till Easter—the long fasting season—the friars dined at two or three in the afternoon; from Easter to High Cross at midday. For the novices and old and sick there was an earlier meal at six or seven in the morning. This must have been a pretty solid refectio, for one thirteenth-century writer bids them not to take too much, lest they should spoil their dinner (which, remember, came some five hours later). But this same writer has left us a delightful picture of hungry friars pacing the long cloister, going out to gaze on the sun-dial, and urging the brother sacristan to ring the bell and hasten on the time for meals.

Supper consisted apparently simply of a drink of wine or beer. Perhaps some sort of biscuit or cake was added.

The bell has just gone for dinner. We go and wash our fingers in the long trough of water outside the refectory and wait till all the friars are assembled. Then the prior says the De Profundis Psalm; and we follow him in, beginning at the youngest. Grace is sung, and we sit while some verses of the Scripture are chaunted. Then there is silence, broken only by the noise of the dishes, and by the reader's voice as he chaunts through part of the constitutions (this would be omitted, as we, strangers, are present). On Mondays we should hear the Rule of St. Augustine; on other days special writings of the Fathers, called *Originalia*, (*i.e.*, homilies) and the Passions of the Martyrs. But in

the Scripture the story of Christ's Passion (out of reverence) is omitted; the reader goes straight to His Resurrection. When he has finished he marks the place where he left off with lead or wax.

The tables are not covered with table-cloths, but each has his separate cloth, which stretches up under his chin to form a napkin. Also on a smaller cloth in front each places his salad, his jug of water, wine, or beer, his candles and his fruit skins. He has a knife and a spoon, but no forks, for they were practically unknown till 1303, and for long after were a luxury. The drink was beer or wine, according to the custom of the country; in any case, each was advised to add water to it. There is a pathetic story recounted of how a friar appeared after death to one of his old companions, suffering severely in Purgatory, because, as he said, he had taken his wine neat, so that he might sleep the better.

They never tasted meat unless they were sick, and then only in the infirmary. They had ordinarily two courses, to which the local superior could add a third. At times some benefactor would send in presents. Thus at the General Chapter of London, 1250, Henry III provided the food on the first day, the Queen on the second, the Abbots of Westminster, St. Albans, Waltham, and the citizens of London helping on other days. They were austere in their diet; yet remembering, says one writer, that they were like horsemen with but one horse for lifetime. Chaunted grace ended the meal. Later a recreation followed of the whole community, but in the thirteenth century a dispensation to talk was only allowed individually, and had to be asked for each time, for silence lasted all the day. Just

before leaving the refectory listen to the three qualities demanded of the brother who presided over the kitchen : " He should be a good cook, clean, and patient."

Next from the refectory let us go to the chapter room. This was a lofty hall, with seats running all the way round. At one end was the prior's stall, overhung with the Crucifix. Later, as soon as the custom for benefactors to be buried there came into vogue, an altar was placed at the end, and a chair accommodated the prior. He held chapter as often as he liked ; not every day. Chapter meant that each in turn accused himself publicly of his faults against the rule—not of his sins. Complaints were made, when made at all, before all thus assembled, and the prior publicly gave his penances. It was an eminently wholesome system: public avowal, public accusation, public punishment. Also in the chapter room were held all meetings to consider the administration of the convent, elections, receptions to habit, professions, etc.

Let us now climb upstairs to the library. This was not usually on the ground floor, for the damp could so easily destroy the parchment rolls and harm the illuminated books. It was not usually a large room, for books were scarce. Round the walls were placed cupboards, each with divisions neatly labelled for some special subject. All were catalogued. In each was written the name of the priory and the name of the donor, with a request to the reader to pray for the giver's good estate. On the table lay pumice-stone to erase mistakes and markings, and many a sarcastic word was spoken in the Middle Ages against those who scribbled comments on the book margins ; lead for closing the books and keeping them shut ; knives for

sharpening the quills; candles for night-time, etc. As we cross to open some of the cupboards we cannot help noticing the huge pulpits with their chained books of reference. On the shelves it is clear that the sections most filled deal with Scripture. In the Ludgate library were, besides Biblical commentaries, the works of Master Wycliff and replies to the same, several tragedies of Seneca, a volume or two of Cassiodorus, some of the chronicles of Giraldus Cambrensis; and under the label of science, an illustrated manual on the motion of the heart and a complete treatise on the life and behaviour of comets.

This library occupies, together with some private cells (*camerae*), two out of three sides of the quadrangle. These private cells are the privileged abodes of the professors and of a few of the more advanced and most promising students. For the others, there is the dormitory (*domitorium*), which covers the whole of the third side and abuts upon the wall of the Church. This is one long room, arched by a single span. As we enter we notice the line of beds stretching from end to end. Opposite each bed is an alcove formed by partitions that jut out from the opposite wall. These partitions, perfectly preserved in the old Priory at Glo'ster, are about a man's height, project about five feet from the wall, and are about four feet wide. These are the cells (*cellulae*) of the brethren. They are thus exactly opposite each bed; have table, chair, and a locker for a few books; are ornamented with a crucifix, and a picture of Our Lady, and another of St. Dominic. Since each cell is open at the top and front, silence is necessarily enjoined fiercely, else how are the good Friars to study at all?

The dormitory of the novices was simply a long room filled with beds. They alone had no cells. There was a bed-warden whose duty it was to attend to the cleanliness of all within the dormitory. Of course in time this dormitory, distributed into open cells, was split by a corridor into one long dormitory or sleeping place, fronted across by closed up cells for prayer and study.

Now that we have completed our brief survey of the Priory, just let us stop for a minute to examine the Guest Master's habit. He tells us first that he may not wear linen at all next to his skin, though we do have records of certain friars being dispensed from this on account of the delicacy of their flesh. And the inconvenience was certainly great at times. We know of Friar Thibaut, who was made so irritable by the wool and so restive that as he paced the cloister trying to say his office, he met the Sub-prior, who had been the cause of his entering into the Order, and, chafing at the prickly wool, as a vigorous protest struck him over the head with his breviary. However, he soon got accustomed to the irritation and lived, he tells us, happily ever afterwards.

The habit consisted of a white tunic, girdled with a leather belt (so Dante distinguishes St. Dominic from rope-girdled St. Francis), over which hung a hood and scapular of one piece. Over all this, when out of doors and on solemn occasions, was a hood and cloak of black. Hence the popular name for Dominicans was Black Friars. To provide for the General Chapter of the whole Order at Holborn in 1263—at which St. Thomas Aquinas assisted—Henry III ordered from royal wardrobe accounts 700 habits; in 1243 he also gave a pair of shoes and a habit to each of the eighty

London Dominicans. From the belt hung writing tablets, a knife, a handkerchief, and a pocket. The lay brothers had strings of beads called paternosters. But the Fathers did not use rosaries till the fifteenth century. Hats were used only when travelling, especially when riding. The tonsure was given every three weeks in winter and every fortnight in summer. Beards were at first evidently optional. But later on they became quite forbidden. A contract is extant between the Priory of Perugia and a barber, stipulating for the Friars to be shaved every ten days in summertime and every fifteen days in the winter.

In the house, cloth slippers were worn ; out of doors the Friars Preachers, says a chronicler, used, like the Cistercians, laced boots.

As we turn to leave the Monastery door, the Guest Master points us out the prison, where were kept the refractory brethren—a necessity indeed, as the Friars were exempt from lay courts and clerical courts as well. We make some offering ere we leave ; for the brethren are dependent on charity—they beg, though they may receive gifts and legacies (for they had not the absolute poverty of the Franciscans). None has any personal wealth ; all things are held in common. But the Prior can give to each permission to hold a small sum on account with the Father Procurator against any little personal wants, as books, paper, paints, etc.

II.—A DOMINICAN PRIORY OF TO-DAY.

Perhaps you will think that I have spent too much of your time on matters of past history, and have left but a few minutes in which to describe this our Priory

of St. Dominic's. Yet really, though I have so far scrupulously followed old books and prints and ruins, I have really simultaneously been detailing our modern life. You will find the Priory almost exactly now as would have been the Priory of Ludgate seven hundred years ago.

The brother porter opens the door, living in his cell near by. But he takes you now into guest-rooms that are round about his cell. If you are Dominicans you must, as of old, receive a blessing as you come in and as you go out.

There is the same quadrangle, of which the church forms one complete side, though here, owing to lack of funds, the fourth side has not yet been finished. The church, as I think you will admit, is austere and yet full of grace and beauty. The choir, in which we say our office, is in front of the altar, whereon we still reserve the Blessed Sacrament. Only we have put no choir-screen across the church, but have left all things open. Our liturgy and chaunt have remained untouched since they were first drawn up in 1256. Our choir books are printed from the original exemplars arranged in that year, one of which may be seen in the MSS. Room of the British Museum.

The time of the Divine office, however, differs, chiefly because now the hours are fixed definitely winter and summer alike. We rise at six, say office, make our meditation, hear Mass and say our own masses. Then again we have office at 12, at 1.30, and at 7.30. Matins, however, are said overnight at 9.15. Evening by evening you may come and hear the brethren chaunt the *Salve Regina*, trooping out from the choir into the body of the church as of old.

The infirmary is not a separate establishment here, owing to the small size of the community; and in the case of any grievous sickness, the Catholic Hospital at St. John's Wood is a more commodious and more beneficial place for recuperation. But should one fall sick here at St. Dominic's, the same time-old gentle antiphons are chaunted at death. The same obits are remembered, the same four great anniversaries are kept up.

The refectory is quite unchanged. The tables and benches are the same in form and position. But the cloth and napkins are as you know them in your own homes.

We breakfast about 8, dine at 12.15, and have our supper at 6.30. Before meals we wash our fingers, recite our psalm, sing our grace, as was done for three hundred years here in England. We observe the same fasts and take meat but thrice in the week, and then only once a day, *i.e.*, at dinner, on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. This is a dispensation called for, it is said, by the exigencies of modern times.

Throughout meals there is silence, save for the singing of the Scriptures, the reading of constitutions and of some modern work on history, politics, art, etc.

The chapter of faults still continues weekly. The library is but a modern equivalent for the old. The dormitory only, as I have noted, is split up into cells in which we study, sleep, and pray, *i.e.*, each has his own cell, in which are his bed, his writing table, books, etc.

Our habits are practically the same, though scapular and capuce are divided, as also are the black hood and black cappa or cloak. But wool only is worn next to

the skin. We do not now, however—at least, as far as my experience goes—strike the Sub-prior with our *breviaries* when we are restive with its pricking.

But here I must note that, partly from penal enactments, partly from convenience, out of doors we wear the customary clerical dress of the Catholic priesthood in England.

The tonsure is given every three weeks in winter, every two weeks in summer; but no beard is worn. We shave day by day, and not as in Perugia.

Nor, again, have we—since we now stand under the law equally with all our fellow citizens—the dungeons of ages past.

We still have all things in common; but small sums may be, if the Prior agrees, received by individuals for small needs, such as books, etc.

I think, therefore, that we may fairly boast that our life is much the same, our priories much the same after the tumbled changes of seven hundred years. We may still justly look back to the old Friars with the same affection and the same pride as you look back on the past generations of your own family.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have done.

I have spoken, I hope, without boasting; I have spoken simply, without parade of the sacred things which we hold in dear reverence, not apologising for nor hiding my beliefs. I have not feared to pull aside the curtain that shrouds our life about, because I felt sure that you would not misunderstand or misconstrue. We do not claim to be equal to our fathers who are gone;

but we do not yield even to them in our loyal love of the same Dominican ideal of monastic contemplation joined to active labour for souls, for—

“Not wholly in the busy world, nor quite
Beyond it blooms the garden that I love.”

NOTE.—The citations in this paper were necessarily so numerous that it has been thought better to omit them in detail, and instead to name briefly the chief authorities consulted:—

Humbertus de Romains, Omnia opera I, II. Ed. by Berthier. 1888, Fribourg.

Acta Capitulorum Generalium Ord. Præd., I. Ed. by Reichart. 1898, Rome.

Analecta Ordinis Prædicatorum. 1896, 1897, Rome.

Mortier: Histoire des Maîtres Généraux de l'ordre des Frères Prêcheurs, I. 1904, Paris.