CHAPTER XV

Liturgy and Art

A Dominican church, always established in a large city, was a center of intense religious life. Frequent preaching, practiced for the first time in the Christian world, was its essential and special attribute. To this direct instruction of the faithful, the prayer of the liturgy and the voice of art contributed their share as in the past, but in new forms.

LITURGY

Established in the beginning as canons regular, the Preachers were bound to the canonical Office. Therefore, they required a liturgy. Their status also as a centralized and apostolic order created a liturgical problem that had to be solved: their liturgy had to be uniform and brief. The establishment of a special liturgy for the Order of Preachers gave rise to serious difficulties. The chief of these proceeded from the fact that the attempt at unification was not made from the very first hour. Dispersed rapidly in 1217 throughout every country of Christendom, the friars had accommodated themselves to the liturgy of the place where they were established. Consequently there was a great divergence, from the beginning, in the Divine Office of the Preachers. The Order quickly felt a sense of this disharmony. For purposes of study, preaching, and administration, the Preachers made frequent journeys not only from convent to convent, but from one country to another. Each of these moves on the part of an individual friar entailed the difficulty of adaptation to a new ecclesiastical Office. To obviate this inconvenience, it was decided to attempt a unification which, before reaching completion, passed through three stages and took about twenty-five years. The first attempt was certainly made, we believe, before the year 1235 and probably after 1230. It was carried on, very likely, at Paris where at the same time work was undertaken on the revision of the Latin text of the Bible. This first formation of the Dominican liturgy, whatever its date, has endured as the groundwork of later reforms which seem not to have introduced essential changes. The development of the Order and the multiplication of the liturgical books led the general chapter of Bologna in 1244, probably seeking to parallel the work of the Church for the reform of the breviary, to take measures to verify the state of its liturgical books, and it directed the definitors of the chapter of the next year to bring with them, for the purpose of establishing a concordance, the rubrics and notations of the breviary, the gradual, and the missal. In view of the work to be accomplished by the next general chapter, the provincial chapter of the Roman Province had in the same year decided upon the correction of its liturgical books; but it was not simply a matter of textual correction. At any rate, the chapter assigned to two religious the composition of a lectionary for the lessons of the seasons and feasts. The Dominican liturgy did not yet have such a book.

THE WORK OF HUMBERT OF ROMANS

The general chapter of Cologne in 1245 probably found itself faced with a problem more complex than it had appeared to the preceding chapter. Four religious taken from the provinces of France, England, Lombardy, and Teutonia were assigned to the convent at Angers to correct, harmonize, and rectify, as economically as possible, the text and chant of the Divine Office. The three general chapters of 1246-48 promulgated a constitution approving the revision made by the four friars. The project of a lectionary confided by the chapters of 1246 and 1247 to the provincial of France, then Humbert of Romans, was not confirmed by the chapter of 1248, probably because the introduction of this new book was not yet approved by everyone. The revision accomplished at Angers gave rise to numerous complaints. Many mistakes were found in it, and the general chapter of London
But it must be acknowledged that no research studies have been undertaken on the liturgical monuments of the one. Whence also comes the fact that there are no manuscripts containing the liturgy in its first and second form. That they did not require the composition of new liturgical books, but only the correction of the old. To cover the expense of the composition of these general exemplars, a tax of twenty pounds was imposed on each province by the general chapter of 1256. 

Successive corrections of the Dominican liturgy seem to have greatly modified the primitive character as it appeared after its first unification. There is proof for this in the fact that the second and third revisions suppose that their innovations do not require the composition of new liturgical books, but only the correction of the old one. Whence also comes the fact that there are no manuscripts containing the liturgy in its first and second form. But it must be acknowledged that no research studies have been undertaken on the liturgical monuments of the Order scattered through the libraries of Europe.

Since the unification of the liturgy was carried on, it seems, for the first time in Paris or in the province of France, the Parisian liturgy must have exercised a special influence on that of the Order, a fact which would explain the statement of the Dominican Henry of Herford in the fourteenth century to the effect that Humbert of Romans standardized and corrected, at the same time improving, the Divine Office of the Preachers according to the Gallican Office. But only a detailed comparative study can effectually solve this problem. The primitive Constitutions require that all the hours be said breviter et succincte, that the brethren may not lose devotion and that study may suffer no hindrance. Composed according to this directive principle, the liturgy tended to be modeled on the shortest forms and rites, as is characteristic of the liturgy of the Preachers in many points. Moreover, there was no obligation to chant the hours. The conventual prior regulated the matter according to his discretion, as he did the hour for the recitation of Matins and many others, we should note among the special features of the Dominican liturgy, the introduction of the Office of the Blessed Virgin and the institution of the Salve Regina chant and procession after Compline.
ART

The artistic expressions of Dominican activity deserve honorable mention in the history of art, even in the medieval period. Interests of this nature were not only foreign to the thought of the founders and the first generation of Preachers, but for a long time the Order resisted the interior artistic impulse that was unconsciously germinating in its bosom. Art has an accompaniment of the sumptuous and striking. But the Preachers aimed at a rigid practice of poverty and humility. Their mission was to propagate the Christian spirit, not to dazzle men. The Preachers brought into existence a body which was to be the strongest and most influential of the epoch, and they proposed to themselves an incessant labor for the instruction of the Christian people. In so doing, they posited some principles and facts that would react on their primitive ideal of poverty and humility, and would modify it or, better, adapt it to the evolution of the contemporary social environment and the exigencies of a great and powerful institution. It was in buildings that art early appeared among the Preachers. The evolution proceeded and developed at the end of the thirteenth century with the advent of painting. Moreover, the artistic activity of an educated and propagandist Order like that of the Preachers would radiate even from its very dwellings and touch more or less deeply the life and forms of art then being rapidly fashioned in Christian Europe.

THE CHURCHES

In several cities in which the Order was established, churches already constructed were given to the Order, but generally the Preachers had to undertake the building of their own edifices: churches and convents. The primitive Constitutions enjoined ordinary and humble structures and, for more security, state the height beyond which they should not go. They also forbade (and this prohibition was to have great influence on the appearance of Dominican churches until the second half of the thirteenth century) the use of arches, except over the choir and sacristy. The Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome, given to the Order in 1219, kept its antique roof of great beams, and gave warrant perhaps for this measure which was inspired by a solicitude to maintain poverty. Everywhere the Preachers adopted the French ogival style and did not hesitate to introduce it into the large cities of Italy where it did not yet exist. Depending on the circumstances of the place, their cloisters and their churches had a great variety of dimensions. In many places the edifices were reconstructed or enlarged and grew into monumental churches that contemporary writers call opera sumptuosa. This style had its origin with the convent of Salamanca in 1229. Gregory IX himself gave the impulse in this direction and his successors followed him. By a letter of April 9, 1228, he gave the title of convents to all the houses of the Order, so that they might have their place among the honorable structures reared by the Christian people. The initial stimulus was thus given to the opera sumptuosa.

Nevertheless many of the religious viewed with suspicion the trend toward the erection of grand buildings, which the enemies of the Order soon called palaces and royal houses. In general chapters the legislative authority resisted this trend. Again, toward the end of the thirteenth century, we are told that a master general, Stephen of Besançon, held in horror these sumptuous buildings. All the opposition was in vain. The Preachers were the victims of their success. Communes, kings and princes, even simple bourgeois vied with one another in erecting churches and monasteries, worthy of the men from whom they had received incomparable benefits, men who counted their sons and their brothers in the ranks of the Preachers, and whose glory added to that of their province or their city.

This outside patronage found a support from many within the Order, especially conventual priors who were more concerned with the material development of their house than with its moral growth and who heaped up with equal ardor the stone of their buildings along with mediocre or useless vocations. But at times even men of study, said Humbert of Romans’ let themselves be caught by the contagion of a passion to build, and expended on wood and stones devotion they should have reserved for books which serve for the welfare of souls. Whatever may have been the case, a remarkable flowering of Dominican churches and cloisters grew up in Christendom, and the movement gained in intensity especially toward the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the following century. Taking into account the lapse in observance of the two Constitutions on the plainness of buildings and the prohibition of vaults for churches, the Order suppressed them in the general chapter from 1297-1300.

The individualist spirit of the Preachers expressed itself in the great diversity of their structures. Humbert of Romans, the fifth master general, observed it with some regret and seemed to envy the splendid uniformity which made brethren of one and the same family the establishments of Cluny and Citeaux. From the end of the thirteenth century, however, the beautiful Dominican churches kept a greater unity of style. In the plan of their churches, the Preachers were guided by the needs of their ministry and the desire to give an example of poverty to the faithful. Thus it is that the Dominican churches had the appearance of oblong halls, finished in simple framework, which, even with one or more naves, formed a single auditorium for the reach of a preacher's voice. The construction itself was simplified as much as possible. The walls were flat and plain without useless architectural adornments. There was no sculpture, or its use was reduced to a minimum. The windows of the naves and choir ordinarily were very high, and in some churches almost equal to the vertical dimensions of the walls. This device, along with an almost exclusive use of lines in the construction of the edifice, led the architect
to create a style remarkable for simplicity and elegance. Moreover, general chapters of the Order endeavored to rule out all luxury in decoration, furniture, or devotional objects; but there again, although more slowly, the evolution followed that of architecture. It was only with the fourteenth century that separate steeples or bell towers made their appearance, especially in Italy. In the thirteenth century the churches had only one little tower rising above the highest point of the edifice, with a single, modest bell. Some of the first large Dominican churches had characteristic lines by their division into two naves, separated by seven or twelve columns, a symbolic number. The church of St. Jacques in Paris seems to have been the first of this kind, a type which may still be seen in the beautiful church of the Jacobins at Toulouse. This innovation of French origin, found also in other Dominican churches, as in Barcelona and Augsburg, was owing to the desire of establishing a church for the laity and another for the religious and clerics. In Paris and Toulouse the Preachers were numerous; but hardly numerous enough, it seems, to justify such a procedure. But these churches and those of the Order in general were frequented by the masters and students of the Universities, and the Preachers wished to reserve a choice place for these guests who were their academic colleagues and their first benefactors in Paris. Thus a Dominican church with two naves might be called a church of the university type. In the beginning, the Order confided the direction and superintendence of conventual structures to three religious. Very soon their work was assumed by a single friar who was named operarius, praefectus, or praepositus operum, and was, at times, himself the architect of the church. The names of a number of these prefects and architects are known.

PAINTING

During a great part of the thirteenth century the Order prohibited all decoration or interior ornamentation of churches: sculptured tombs, trophies or banners, statues, pictures, and mural paintings. The magnificent tomb of St. Dominic at Bologna was an exception, justified by the veneration of sons for their father. Likewise, in its successive embellishments, this monument portrays the stages by which art made the conquest of the Dominican churches. The tomb of St. Peter of Verona at the church of St. Eustorgius in Milan is of the fourteenth century, a period in which the Preachers had renounced their ancient scruples about the sumptuous, and the cause of art had long since won its way. The introduction of painting into the churches and other conventual edifices began with pictures, that of the Blessed Virgin, the Founder of the Order, and other saints, after the canonization of St. Dominic (1234). The earliest mural paintings of the Dominican churches have disappeared. Santa Maria Novella of Florence, which holds an artistic primacy among Dominican churches and convents, probably possessed frescoes in its original state before the construction of the actual church begun in 1278. Nowhere can the history of the introduction of painting into the Dominican churches and cloisters be studied with greater surety than at Santa Maria Novella, because nowhere did it have a like distinction or bear an impress so strongly Dominican. This is especially true of the famous frescoes of the ancient chapter room, the work of Andrea di Bonaiuto of Florence (1366-67). The chapter room of the convent of Treviso, with its series of illustrious Preachers, painted by Thomas of Modena (1352), represents the expression of a thought wholly Dominican and bears witness to the expansion that mural decoration had reached in the Order in the middle of the fourteenth century.

The names of a number of Dominican artists of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have survived as have some of their works. But time, as well as the malice and the stupidity of men, has destroyed much. The activity of Dominican artists was not limited, moreover, to the service of the Order alone. They worked on projects of religious and secular art, either in the construction of churches and public edifices, or in sculpture or other adornments.

Lastly, the Preachers exerted a general influence on art by their literary productions, many of which became practical guides for painters and sculptors at the end of the Middle Ages and a constant source of inspiration for their artistic counselors: such were the encyclopedia of Vincent of Beauvais, the Golden Legend of Jacopo de Voragine, the Speculum humanae Salvationis of Ludolph the Carthusian, written during his Dominican career. The Preachers, moreover, were often the inspiration of artists in the conception of their works, as, for example, in the Campo Santo of Pisa and the cycle of symbolic paintings representing the doctrinal triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas.
Saint Dominic was born in Caleruega, Spain in 1170. His parents were members of the Spanish nobility and related to the ruling family. His father was Felix Guzman, and was the royal warden of the village. His mother, Bl. Joan of Aza, was a holy woman in her own right. According to one legend, his