

## CLASS DISTINCTION AMONG OUR SAINTS

SEBASTIAN BULLOUGH, O.P.

ONE does not need to be a snob to be interested in, or even to admit the existence of, people's different social background or family origins. Moreover, it is even customary to give special credit to the distinguished person who succeeded in spite of a 'bad start', to the field-marshal who began in the backstreet and not on the playing-fields of Eton, or to the business magnate who graduated in the cycle-shop and not at the university. Of course all this may have little or nothing to do with sanctity, but when we are considering Dominican Saints (and Beati), in an order where a certain level of education is required in its subjects, to carry out the order's aim, the matter of childhood opportunities does have a certain relevance. The same may be said to some extent of the priesthood in general. And furthermore, when we consider that the greater number of the Dominicans now raised to the altars lived in medieval times, when the 'clerks' were often the only people who could read, and a friar would probably be called upon to read and study very much more than the average person, the question of educational background becomes still more important. The son of a labourer (presumably illiterate), who became a distinguished preacher and a cardinal (John Dominici), has therefore a special glory on this account.

Of the hundred and nine people whose lives are recounted in the Second Nocturn of the Breviary on feasts of Dominican Saints and Beati, eighty-four have a specific indication of social background—that is, over three-quarters of them, and it would seem that some sort of stereotyped labels came to be devised for the purpose of indicating this background.

All who read or consult the Breviary are familiar with phrases such as 'nobilibus ac piis parentibus natus' (Gundisalvus, January 16), or 'honestis piisque parentibus ortus' (Marcolino, January 24), or 'pauperibus piisque parentibus ortus' (Andrew of Peschiera, January 26). These are Dominican examples (with which we are here concerned), but the same phrases occur in the Nocturns of medieval saints in the Roman Breviary too (e.g. St Anthony of Padua, June 13, was 'honestis ortus parentibus').

Ignorant people sometimes accuse the Breviary of snobbery in

these matters, and they even invent a misquotation 'pauperibus sed honestis parentibus', and, worse still, translate this monstrosity 'poor but honest parents'. It is monstrous because 'pauperes' and 'honesti' never come together on the same label. One of the chief troubles is ignorance of the meaning of the Latin word 'honestus': it does not mean 'honest' in the sense of an 'honest man' who does not swindle, it means rather 'worthy in itself', 'fulfilling its purpose in itself', 'having a dignity of its own', as when we speak of 'honesta recreatio'.

Now there is no difficulty about translating 'nobiles' or 'pauperes': a family of nobles or a family of paupers has some immediate, if exaggerated, connotation, and it is not difficult to understand that in medieval Latin not all 'nobiles' need be in Debrett, nor all 'pauperes' in the workhouse. I am suggesting that there are three habitual medieval labels: the 'nobiles' on one hand, the 'pauperes' on the other, and the 'honesti' in between; middle-class people, neither nobles nor paupers. Social distinctions of birth are largely based, at least originally, on occupation, and the three labels might be translated according to occupation: the 'nobles' as employers, the 'honesti' as self-employed tradesmen, and the 'poor' as employees. The 'nobles' have money and make or keep it by organizing the work of their employees, their task is ultimately administration of property; the 'honesti' keep themselves and make a living by their own work or trade, they are merchants or artisans; and the 'poor' are wage-earners, getting their money by working for someone else. And in the medieval scene these three classes fit plainly enough: the framework is the landowner, the lord of the manor or the 'nobleman' in his castle, who provides work for the workers (as they are called nowadays) and pays them as his servants; and then there is the self-employed merchant, who buys and sells in his own right, or the artisan who lives by charging for his particular skill, and is paid not so much as a servant, but as a skilled man called in for a particular purpose; even if the skill be no more than that of buying and selling. Thus the landowner or property-owner is dubbed the 'noble', and the regular worker or servant the 'poor', because he has no capital beyond what he earns, and the middle-class merchant or artisan is called 'honestus' because he has a special worthiness in himself, is self-employed and gives or withholds his services in accordance with his own purposes. Here we see the weight

of the Latin word 'honestus': we might almost translate it, in the light of the above argument, as 'respectable', in a quite literal sense. At this particular moment in history, people seem to have little difficulty in speaking of 'upper class', even calling it 'U', 'middle-class', though not all 'white-collars' are self-employed these days, and 'working class', many of whom are nowadays much richer than the 'upper class' and buy televisions long before them, and the three labels are not far from the three medieval labels of 'noble', 'honest' and 'poor'.

In the middle ages there were not the opportunities of education for all that we now enjoy: usually it was only the nobles who could read and write and had the leisure, opportunity, or inclination for the pursuit of letters. The poor did not possess books and could not read them. The honest, or middle class, had probably risen from the workers, and probably acquired enough skill in reading and writing to be able to ply their trade, and only gradually acquired the taste for 'polite letters', when presumably they gradually became 'nobles'. Such, after all, is the way of the world, and in three generations, they say, the label may be changed. In medieval Italy especially there was a remarkable growth of a wealthy merchant class, who sometimes became the rulers of a republic. In the modern world, education is open to the poor and the honest, as well as to the nobles, so that merely on the score of education there is nothing whatever to prevent the labourer's son from becoming a cardinal or even a pope—but Pius X is one of the very few popes who came from the ranks of illiterate workers.

When therefore we read in the Breviary that someone was 'honestis parentibus natus' we have to picture to ourselves someone with moderate resources of education, who nevertheless achieved the status of a learned friar and distinguished archbishop (Antoninus, May 10), and give due credit, and still more to his fellow Florentine and contemporary, who became a cardinal, though 'pauperibus parentibus natus' with no resources at all (John Dominici, June 10).

There is another label that is attached equally to that of 'nobilis', 'honestus' or 'pauper', and that is the word 'pius'. Of the eighty-four Dominican Saints and Beati who have social labels, only twenty-three are also labelled 'pious'. It cannot mean that the sixty-one other families were not devout and good Catholics: on the contrary we know that many families, to quote only St

Dominic's own, were very devout, but have not got the label. Perhaps we may assume that 'pious' is added when the family made some special sacrifice in letting their children enter the cloister? However that may be, it may certainly be taken to indicate a particular willingness on the part of the family, and something of a 'good start' in holiness for the child.

Now when we come to the Dominicans, it is not surprising, in view of the question of the education necessary for the Dominican life, that we should find nearly three-quarters of our Saints and Beati recruited from families in some sense 'noble', where there were opportunities for previous education. This applies also to the Second Order (or enclosed) nuns: in medieval times, the enclosed nuns, who recited the Divine Office, were mainly drawn from the upper classes, since women's education outside the nobility was very rare. Of the Second Order nuns raised to the altar, ten in number, eight have labels and are all 'noble', including three of royal birth (Margaret of Savoy, December 23; Margaret of Hungary, January 19; and Jane of Portugal, May 12). Sometimes the nobility has an interesting qualification, signifying that it was exceptional: Damian dei Fulcheri (October 26) comes from a family that was 'nobilis ac locuples', while the laybrother Simon Ballacchi (November 3) comes from a family 'nobilis ac opitulens', and that brilliant character Peter of Tarentaise, the first Dominican to become pope as Innocent V, had a family simply described as 'nobilis ac dives' (June 22)—all indications that riches among the nobility was a thing to be noted and not taken for granted. There is one case of a Beatus whose noble family had fallen on evil days and was 'honoribus ac divitiis destituta': this was John Massias in the sixteenth century; it was probably why he went to America to seek his fortune and became a cowboy and eventually a laybrother at Lima.

When we consider the Third Order, which began with Tertiaries living in the world, and then also produced alongside groups living in community who with Emilia Bicchieri (†1314) became Third Order nuns, we find a greater variety, particularly perhaps because in the early days, and especially with the Tertiaries, there was no preoccupation about the Divine Office. The two earliest Tertiaries raised to the altars are the 'nobilissima' Lady Zedislava (January 3) (†1252) and the farm-labourer Albert of Bergamo (May 11) (†1279). Of the fourteen Tertiaries (men and women),

eleven have a specified background, and of these seven are noble, two honest and two poor—incidentally only one has a 'pious' family: St Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, the priest-tertiary. With the Third Order nuns we find a preponderance of the honest: five out of eight, the other three being noble.

By looking through the Breviary one can make a complete table, and it is very interesting, though too long to print here, with its hundred and nine names, but a few statistics and occasional notes are worth giving. There is a considerable variety of title for the 'nobles': the families are 'nobilis', 'nobilissima' (only five: Guzman, Odrowaz, Salomoni, Bojani, and the Lady Zedislava), 'pernobilis' (Gambacorta), 'praenobilis' (Cecilia Cesarini), 'clara', 'clarissima', 'illustris', 'vetera' (John of Salerno), 'perantiqua' (Fortescue, July 8), and 'inclita', as well of course as 'regia'.

*Of the First Order*, there are seventy-seven names, fifty-seven specified. Of these, forty-two are noble (of which twelve are pious, three rich, and one decayed); twelve are honest (five of these pious); and three are poor (two pious). There is a higher incidence of 'piety' among the poor—sixty-six per cent as against forty-one per cent of the honest, and only twenty-eight per cent among the nobles. Of the twelve honest, six are Italians (including Antoninus Pierozzi and Nicholas Boccasini, otherwise Pope Benedict XI, July 7), four are Spaniards (including Vincent Ferrer, April 5, and Louis Bertrand, October 10), one Frenchman (Andrew Abellon, May 17) and one German (James of Ulm, October 11). The three working men are Andrew of Peschiera (January 26), John Dominici (June 10) and John Licci, the Sicilian reformer (November 14), who also had the distinction, if dates are correct, of living to the age of a hundred and eleven.

*In the Second Order*, among ten names, eight are specified, and all are noble, including the three princesses. Not one had a 'pious' family.

*Among Third Order nuns* all are specified: eight, among whom only three are noble: Catherine de' Ricci (February 13), Emilia Bicchieri (August 19), and Lucy Brocadelli of Narni (November 16). The other five are 'honestae', Columba of Rieti having such a good bourgeois name: Guadagnolio—but it must also be admitted that the three noble names have no great aristocratic ring. All the Third Order nuns are Italian, for it was in Italy that

the first communities were formed. Of the three nobles, one is pious, and of the five honest, two are pious.

Of *Men Tertiaries*, we have first of all the farm-labourer Albert of Bergamo (May 11), then the priest Louis-Marie Grignon, of noble and pious family, and finally Sir John Fortescue of 'most ancient lineage (perantiqua prosapia)': of three names, two noble (one pious) and one poor—no 'honesti'.

*The Women Tertiaries* here include St Dominic's own mother, Blessed Jane de Aza ('clarissima'). Eleven names, with three of them unspecified, including unfortunately St Catherine of Siena, who, had she been labelled, would have been a typical 'honesti' of the commercial class, provide, among the eight specified, five noble ladies (four true Tertiaries, one being St Dominic's mother, included here for convenience of grouping), two of the middle class—Villana de' Bottis (February 28) of prosperous Florentine family, and that remarkable woman Magdalene de' Pannatieri (October 13), to whose spiritual conferences everyone in the little town of Trino went, including the Dominican novices—and one poor, the Dalmatian serving-maid converted from schism, Osanna of Cattaro. So here, as is to be expected, we have among the women Tertiaries a real cross-section of society, and none of them come from families labelled 'pious'.

Finally, the statistics for the whole Order should be added. Of the hundred and nine names, twenty-five are unspecified. Several of these latter are the leaders of the missionary martyrs of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, none of whom have any specification of the medieval type: the last in order of time were St Louis-Marie Grignon and Francis de Posadas (September 20) in the early eighteenth century. Of the eighty-four specified, sixty in all are noble (three royal, only three rich, one decayed, and fourteen pious); nineteen are 'honesti', with seven of them pious; and five are poor—the three friars, and two Tertiaries, the farm-labourer and the maidservant (two having a pious background). Some of those unspecified in the Breviary we know quite well where to place: Albert von Bollstadt certainly belongs to the 'nobles', Catherine Benincasa to the artisans, and Catherine Mattei of Racconigi to the very poor.

But an observation of the figures yielded by the Breviary alone may help us to appreciate the Second Nocturns more, to feel that we get to know the saints more closely, and to imagine their back-

ground: some of the 'nobles' indeed coming from their ancestral castles, but many of them probably from no more than a small country property, which nevertheless makes them 'employers', the 'honesti' from their *botteghe*, shops or workshops, and the 'poor' from their labourers' cottages where there were no bookshelves. And while we take into account these differences, we realize with all the more joy that not only did they all find their place within the Dominican family, as they do now, but they also all achieved sanctity through the life and spirit to be found in that family, as they can, and please God they still do.



## ST DOMINIC AND THE LOVE OF THE BRETHREN

ADRIAN DOWLING, O.P.

**S**TORIES told to illustrate the different spirits prevailing in Religious Orders are legion. One, that must have many variations, jibes at the Order of St Dominic for being coldly intellectual. Whatever foundation in fact can be discovered for these diverting little legends, it must be admitted that the founder of the Order himself was anything but cold. There is an abundance of detail from eye-witness accounts which glows with warmth—a warmth which proves, if any proof were needed, that if an intense intellectual activity dries up the heart it need not necessarily do so. The Lessons for the Commemoration of St Dominic in Suriano, for example, must make surprising reading for those for whom the name of St Dominic conjures up visions of a heartless inquisitor or even an absent-minded if holy professor. The people who knew him and indeed had to live with him, tell us a very different story, a story that is not a vague eulogizing, but one that is alive with human interest: that relates little incidents from personal reminiscence. It is difficult to resist the charm of the man who emerges. A wise man, yes indeed, and a man wise to the ways of men: their weaknesses, their foibles, their capacity for great things if understood and handled wisely. A man of great tact and delicate sensibility who could get the best out of a man because he could elicit that loyalty which is in reality love. 'Never so long as he lived in the flesh', said one witness, 'did the Blessed Dominic raise bitterness in the heart of any of his brethren; he