

EBUR CASTITATIS

WHEN the Church pays honour to the remains of the Saints, when, for example, she translates them with pomp and ceremony, she wishes not only to invite us to venerate their relics, but also to draw a lesson from their memory. Even when for mere social or natural reasons we gather round an illustrious tomb, there is not just homage to be paid, but also a lesson to be learnt. On a tombstone we read at a glance the whole story of a life, its chief moral features and its meaning. In this we find one of the many reasons that justify the veneration of relics. At the first translation of the body of St. Dominic, so touchingly described by Blessed Jordan, there took place a wonderful manifestation of the merits of the holy Patriarch's life. The miraculous perfume which clung to the hands of Blessed Jordan was a lesson as well as a testimony. Lesson and testimony—both teaching and attesting his admirable purity. But to seize the full meaning of that lesson, we must connect that heavenly testimony with the last recommendations of St. Dominic on his death-bed.

Just as St. Francis, when dying, desired to be laid naked on the ashes, so St. Dominic on his death-bed, by an act of sublime simplicity, strips his soul before our eyes. It is sad to see modern historians, blind to the beauty of that scene, toning down its most striking features. Père Lacordaire is perhaps among the few who have gauged its true significance. St. Dominic, to lay stress on the counsel he gives to his children, begins by revealing to them the jealous esteem in which he has always held the virtue of purity, and owns that he has received the grace of perfect virginity of body and soul. Then, unexpectedly, he adds that nevertheless he was no stranger to the charm of youth in woman. I do not think that it was to avert a remote temptation to vainglory that such a confession came from his lips; and still less was it remorse for the slightest sin against purity. St. Dominic had reached that degree of humility which does not tremble under divine favours. The hint of self-reproach, coming after

the public avowal of his special graces, could have but one meaning. It is only the test of his exquisite sense of spiritual detachment from things human, required from a soul approaching nearer to the possession of God. At the moment of entering into the eternal espousals, the instinct of purity in St. Dominic becomes transfigured; he begins by speaking of purity in the ordinary sense of the word, and then rises to that absolute simplicity of soul which crowns the preparation of the elect.

Simplicity is indeed the word to use here, for simplicity shines out in St. Dominic's utter candour and is the proof of his entire detachment. So, from his death-bed to his tomb, we follow the whole scale of purity: first, purity as a special virtue and as the matter of the religious vow; secondly, purity as a higher degree of spiritual detachment and as a general virtue; then, purity almost identified with the angelic life in heaven, and glorified by the miraculous fragrance.

Why do the saints of the Middle Ages speak so openly, and sometimes so realistically, of purity, while a Doctor of the Church, living in the time of the Renaissance, classes purity among the virtues of which one should not speak? Was it a result of the rude simplicity of those ages? Refined though we may be, we have no right to think so. Apart from all the other reasons, it was especially fitting that the Order of truth should give a forcible illustration of those words of Our Lord, "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God." The austerities of the Dominican Order are inspired chiefly by the motive of protecting its purity. St. Thomas, asserting the traditional teaching of the Church, links together purity and illumination of mind. Besides, the men of the Middle Ages did not think of purity in any merely limited and rudimentary sense. It is rather by the men of our own day that the vow of chastity is looked on as a mere negative act of renunciation: in earlier days it was regarded as a glorious consecration. In the Dominican form of profession, the vow of chastity is not explicitly mentioned, but is embodied in the homage of the whole life by the vow of obedience. This is symbolical, for the purity to which members of this Order are vowed does not merely draw them

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from the ranks of animality, but places them in God's reserve; just as the most lovely blossoms are snatched from the law of reproduction to become things of beauty.

St. Thomas Aquinas takes us a step further in his doctrine of purity. When drawing from the *Epistle to the Galatians* his teaching upon the fruits of the Holy Ghost, he gives chastity its place among them. A fruit is an ultimate perfection, a final and peaceful delight, the enjoyment of what is good and the quelling of what is evil—“*aliquid ultimum—fruitionem bonorum et sedationem malorum, quod videtur ad rationem fructus pertinere.*”

Such perfection and such delight evidently result, in the first place, because the vow and the virtue have become easy and almost instinctive; they imply that one is acclimatized to the spiritual life which leads to that realm where the friends of God are as the Angels in heaven; they neither marry nor are given in marriage. They belong to God, and feel the joy of belonging to Him. The uplifting to a higher life necessarily has a joy of its own.

The taste of this spiritual fruit should be perceived to some extent by all Christians who practise, according to their state, this holy virtue; as St. Paul says to all, “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” It is the grace of baptism which produces such fruits. Yet, since the religious life is the perfection of the Christian life, the fruit of purity should have a finer flavour for religious. We may recall here the teaching of St. Thomas, that religious profession is a second Baptism washing away all past sin through the charity with which it is embraced. Consequently they should deem themselves young and renewed, as if their lives had begun afresh on the day they made profession. The sense of belonging to God admits thenceforth of no shadow of doubt. Nor is there now any possibility of withdrawal. They definitely belong to a new kingdom. They have a right to a special intimacy with God. If they rarely experience this privilege and joy, there is ground to fear that they have not understood the real nature of their dedication.

The lesson of purity goes further still; it can be considered

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as a general virtue in the sense of the words of St. Thomas: "*In quadam spirituali conjunctione mentis ad res aliquas consistit quaedam delectatio, circa quam est quaedam spiritualis castitas, metaphorice dicta*" (IIa IIae, 2, 151, 2). There are many things with which mental contact is a source of joy, about which, metaphorically speaking, there is a kind of spiritual chastity. That general virtue represents in the spiritual life the sense of honour. *Potius mori quam foedari*. We are all aware of the importance in our social relations of a high sense of honour; its object is not always adequate to that of Christian morality, and yet, within the sphere in which it acts, it gives to the natural character a strength and delicacy that indeed, sadly enough, are not always conspicuous in some Christians. The sense of honour is fidelity transformed into an invincible passion and jealousy. It presupposes, therefore, in one way or another, a great love. In effect St. Thomas adds that purity, as a general virtue, comes from divine charity: "*principaliter ratio hujus castitatis consistit in charitate.*" It is solely the love of God, which can inspire the desire to refrain from lawful and innocent pleasures. Here purity is not only the defence of a religious vocation, not only the happiness of belonging to God, but the most intense satisfaction of the desires of the soul. It becomes a latent and exquisite heroism, which, not content with the sacrifice implied in the slaying of concupiscence, seeks ever to accomplish the holocaust of nature on the altar of charity. Such thoughts give meaning to St. Dominic's death-bed confession. The purity which wins, even after death, the heavenly approval of that miraculous fragrance, is purity carried to this high degree of heroic holiness.

Few have perceived or expressed the lesson of purity left to us by St. Dominic in the same way as St. Catherine of Siena. In her *Dialogue* she points out that purity is an indispensable condition for carrying out the purpose of the Order. "Since impure living obscures the eye of the intellect, and not only the eye of the intellect, but also of the body, he does not wish them to obscure their physical light, with which they may more perfectly obtain the light of science;

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wherefore he imposed on them the third vow of continence, and wishes that all should observe it with true and perfect obedience." What strength in that woman's hand, which traces both the negative and prepatory character of purity and its illuminative power! How the Dominican note rings through it! From St. Dominic himself on his death-bed we have another promise of a special blessing on perseverance in the virtue of purity: "The spotlessness of your lives will ensure you great triumphs among men." His very tomb was the first pledge of this promise. The relics of him who was detached from all the things of earth, and whose purity had made him a light and a flame, were enshrined in a sepulchre of which the perfection and beauty are a triumph of the art of man. The greatest masters, representatives of the best periods of Italian sculpture, produced by the originality and the power of their execution a monument comparable to the ancient masterpieces. Michelangelo brought the offering of his genius, as if the mighty sadness of his soul sought rest on that tomb. Every scene and figure radiates intellectual vigour, and the whole is a triumph of the idea of wisdom, harmony and life. Here is solved the problem of the union of human art with its supernatural expression. As one kneels at his tomb, one may well feel in one's soul the sweet odour of the virginal virtues of St. Dominic, and rise up comforted and spurred on to work valiantly, in these evil days of materialism when the spirit and apostolate of Dominic are so much needed for the safeguarding of one's own soul and for the salvation of others.

HUMBERT CLERISSAC, O.P.

(Translated and revised by Bernard Delany, O.P.)