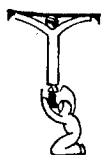


A MEDIEVAL DOMINICAN MARITIME MISSIONARY

BY

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HANKS to the preservation of an exceptionally detailed and graphic journal, kept by a certain German Dominican for the entertainment and edification of his brethren, it is possible to form a clear idea of what seafaring conditions were like on the Mediterranean towards the close of the fifteenth century.¹ What is more, we learn that the spiritual welfare of both passengers and crews was not neglected, at least in ships carrying pilgrims to the Holy Land.

Brother Felix Fabri was a member of the community of the Dominican Priory at Ulm. In 1480 he managed to obtain permission from the Master General of the Friars Preachers to make a pilgrimage to Palestine. Four years later he repeated this journey. His travel diaries are remarkable for their wealth of topographical detail, but even more for the subtle humour that creeps in on every page. Br Felix never minimises the discomfort of travel or the hardships he endured, but he can smile over them as he looks back. Nothing seems to have escaped the eye of this German friar; he notices everything, and on the least excuse starts off on a long dissertation on matters of general as well as religious interest. His erudition is amazing; his knowledge of maritime life surprising when we remember that he was a native of Bavaria, and had never beheld the sea or a ship until he arrived at Venice. Whereupon he devotes about 4,000 words to a treatise on 'The Threefold Nature of the Sea', and several more pages describing the various perils of those who travel by sea. Then follows a detailed account of the Mediterranean ships of this period, in particular the Venetian galleys in which the pilgrims sailed to Palestine. Having studied this section of the book one has no excuse for not knowing the difference between a *bireme* and *trireme*, or how the sails were hoisted, or how the galley slaves worked their oars.

Conditions aboard the oldest and dirtiest modern tramp-steamer are luxurious when compared with those of a typical medieval sailing ship. Many of the pilgrims were wealthy nobles who, had

¹ *The Book of the Wanderings of Felix Fabri*. Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society. 2 vols. 1896.

they been alive today, would have occupied private suites in a luxury liner. But they had no choice but to put up with worse discomfort even than that in emigrant ships of the last century. The male passengers were herded together in a manner that would now be regarded as hardly fit for cattle. They lived, slept and took their meals—when the weather was too stormy for them to eat on deck—in one large cabin. There was no privacy of any kind. The women occupied a smaller cabin by themselves. During the day the mattresses and blankets were rolled up and stowed away, in much the same way as a blue-jacket stows his hammock. At night, priests and laymen made up their beds on the hard deck, side by side, with their feet towards one another. The feet of the sleepers reached to their chests and other luggage which was piled up amidships. If anybody had need to go on deck during the night, he had to walk over the bodies of the other passengers. Not infrequently, when the vessel was sailing before the wind and heeling over, the sleepers on one side would fall on top of each other. Brother Felix remarks that ‘monks who are accustomed to sleep alone in their cells find it hard to sleep on shipboard because of their restless or snoring neighbours’. The narrow mattress, the hard pillow, and above all, the heat and many ‘foul vapours’ added to the general discomfort. The only light and ventilation came from the hatchways, which were battened down in rough weather. Fleas and lice swarmed everywhere, also mice and rats. We read that there is ‘among all the occupations of seafarers one which, albeit loathsome, is yet very common, daily, and necessary—I mean, the hunting and catching of lice and vermin’.

After the pilgrims had gone below at night, there was ‘a tremendous disturbance when they made up their beds; the dust was stirred up, and great quarrels arose between those who are to lie side by side, for one blames his neighbour for overlapping a part of his berth with his bed, the other denies it; the first persists that he is so doing’. Then, very often, naked swords and daggers were drawn, and a fight ensued. When peace was restored another quarrel would start. ‘Often times, I may say every night, I have risen silently and gone into the open air, and have felt as though I had been freed from some filthy prison’, so Brother Felix adds. The constant tramping and running about of the sailors overhead, likewise the noise of the wind and the waves, made sleep difficult.

During the day the force of the wind or waves breaking over the vessel often made it impossible for the passengers to remain on deck. All they could do was to stay below in their dark, crowded, hot and smelly quarters. The smoke from the kitchen blew into it. Whenever the bilge water was pumped out, and this was frequent

during stormy weather, the stench was overpowering. So the long days at sea could be very monotonous. Some men, so brother Felix tells us, passed the whole time either gambling or drinking. Water was scarce, but there seems to have been plenty of wine. Others played musical instruments, others ran about the deck, climbed the rigging or played games. There were some who read books, or occupied their time in endless arguments. 'I have sometimes seen so many quarrels and disputes arise from the most trifling causes that the galley was like hell with their curses and blasphemies. I have marked it for a fact that the movement of all human passions is more violent on the water than elsewhere.'

The noblemen had their own servants to cook meals; the other passengers had to be content with the food provided by the captain. Brother Felix describes these meals. In fine weather the tables were 'well and orderly set out on the poop', and the hour of dinner and supper announced by four trumpeters. Everybody rushed to seize a place; those who came late had to sit outside the poop on the galley slaves' bench—in the sun, rain or wind. The officers had their meals after the passengers, and the captain had his food on silver dishes. The meat provided was often disgusting, for sick animals were slaughtered, even diseased sheep. The presence of live animals on board must have added to the varied smells. The pious Dominican remarks that 'unless Divine Providence had thus ordered it, no man could live on board of large old ships'.

Such then is a brief idea of the manner of life aboard a fifteenth century passenger ship. The conditions described by Brother Felix cannot have been very different to those of earlier times, or throughout the following century, when ships were making much longer voyages across the Atlantic and to the Far East. He is such a minute observer that lack of space makes it impossible to refer to countless other details he records, all of which are interesting. Having thus sketched in the background, let us deal with the religious life at sea four hundred years ago.

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Weather permitting, it was customary to hold three services daily on the galleys and other ships carrying passengers. Soon after the sun had risen above the horizon the boatswain blew his whistle to rouse the sleepers and bring them on deck. When all were assembled he held up a board on which was a painting of our Lady and her Divine Child. On beholding this, all knelt down and said the *Ave Maria* and other prayers. When these morning devotions

were ended the sound of a bugle was a sign for the crew to start work.

'About the eighth hour before midday' another signal for prayer was sounded. A chest which stood on the upper deck, near the mast, was covered with a linen cloth, with two candles, a crucifix, and a missal. The passengers and crew gathered round the mast. 'Then comes the priest wearing a stole about his neck, and begins the *Confiteor*, and from thence he reads the service which follows, leaving out the Canon which he does not read, because he does not consummate; thus he performs the Mass without the sacrifice, ending it with the Gospel "In the beginning was the Word". These Masses are termed "dry" or "torrid". . . . They chant such Masses as these on feast days, but the sacrifice of the Eucharist is never consummated on shipboard.'

Brother Felix states that in earlier ages Mass was celebrated at sea in fine weather, and produces evidence that the Blessed Sacrament was reserved in some ships. But he is bold enough to express the opinion that he regards it as a great piece of negligence on the part of the Church that provision had not been made long ago for administering the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist 'to men who are in the midst of such great perils, and more especially to pilgrims, who are enduring those perils for the love and honour of God.' On the other hand he produces fifteen reasons why 'our wise and holy mother Church doth not desire the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist to be consummated, nor yet reserved on board ship'—too long to be given in this article, although of great interest.

Towards sunset a third service was held round the mainmast, where all knelt to sing the *Salve Regina*. During bad weather or 'exceeding great straits' the Litanies of the Saints were recited. After the *Salve* the captain's coxswain blew a call on his whistle, and standing on the poop, wished everyone good-night in the name of the master. Then he held aloft the painting of Our Lady. The passengers and crew, standing below him on the main deck, recited the *Ave Maria* thrice. When the pilgrims had gone below to prepare beds for the night, the 'clerk of the galley' stood on the poop, where he began a 'long chant in the common Italian tongue', and joined thereunto a litany to which all the galley slaves and officers of the ship replied on their bended knees. 'They use many words', Brother Felix remarks, 'and this prayer of theirs lasts for about a quarter of an hour. At the end thereof he begs everyone to say one *Pater Noster* and one *Ave Maria* for the souls of the parents of St Julian'. Our Dominican pilgrim tried to discover who was this particular saint, but different explanations were given him by the officers.

The material conditions of life on board these medieval ships were appalling. It is evident from the accounts left us by travellers that every sort of vice and immorality was indulged in both by the passengers, officers, crew and galley slaves. They had the faith all right, but their morals might have been better! Yet, not content with the public devotions at sea, many other prayers were said by the pilgrims both by night and by day. 'As soon as they arrive at any port, all run to church with the utmost devotion to hear Mass. But as for the celebration of Sundays and saints' days at sea, I declare that they are most infamously kept. . . . I have often observed on solemn feast days there is always a greater disturbance on board ship than at other times; and sometimes when we have laid four or five days in some harbour, as soon as Saturday evening comes we make ready to set out, and, having started, sail all night, so that on Sunday no Mass can be held. . . . Indeed, the holier the day the harder is the work done at sea.'

Brother Felix tells us that it was his custom on board any ship to preach a sermon on holy days, but often this was resented, and he decided that it was wiser not to 'cast his pearls before swine' or to 'pour out his words when there were none to hear'. On another voyage, so he relates, many noblemen objected to his sermons, believing that he was holding them up as examples of certain vices.

It appears that priests making sea voyages did not carry the Holy Oils, so the Last Sacraments could never be given on board ship. When anybody died, the body was rolled in a shroud, and rowed ashore if the ship was able to put into a port where there was a Christian cemetery; if not the body was committed to earth elsewhere. If the vessel was near 'a land of the infidels' they did not take the body ashore, but cast it into the sea. 'They take the shroud, pour sand on it from the hold, lay the corpse on the sand and roll it up, tying a bag of stones to the feet. Then, in the presence of the whole ship's company, the priests chanting *Libera me, Domine*, the galley-slaves take up the body and let it fall into the sea in the name of the Lord; and straightway the body, thus weighted with stones, sinks into the depths, and the soul climbs to heaven. . . . Many think this to be the noblest kind of burial, and preferable to being crushed by the weight of the earth.' When Venetian grandees died at sea their bodies were buried in the sand within the ship, and brought back to Venice.

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Our observant and practical-minded Dominican pilgrim goes to the trouble of giving much advice to those who are making a sea

voyage for the first time. He says that he has seen men who ate, drank, and did whatever they pleased at sea, who kept no rule of diet, yet withal never took to their beds, and always were cheerful and happy. Others, on the contrary, no matter what precautions they took, were ill all the time. He warns us of the dangers of bathing from a ship, even in calm weather. He reminds us that decks are often slippery, and that ropes should not be trusted unless they are firmly stretched. Care must be taken to keep on good terms with the officers, crew, and in particular galley-slaves, for 'it is a ruinous thing for a man to have enemies on board ship'. We must avoid sitting on any ropes, lest the wind should change suddenly and we are thrown overboard. Look out for blocks and pulleys—they can kill a man outright if they hit him! Do not get in the way of the crew, for even if you should be a bishop, they will push you over and tramp on you 'because work at sea has to be done with lightning speed, and admits of no delay'. Be cautious where you sit, for every place is covered with tar, which becomes soft in the heat of the sun. Above all, be on your guard against thieves, and always carry your money on your person, 'for men are strangely apt to play the thief on board ships, even though they may abhor thieving when not at sea, especially in the matter of trifles'. Lastly, when you go ashore in any port, beware of entering inns, especially after dark, for by so doing, there is great danger not only to honour and goods, but even to life. 'For the inns of the isles of the sea are houses of ill-fame, kept for the most part by Germans, who dwell there with courtesans; albeit they send them away when pilgrims enter their houses. . . . Experience will teach a man many other things to be avoided and shunned.'

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Such then was the manner in which priests carried on the sea apostolate four hundred years ago. As Brother Felix reminds us, 'a journey by sea is subject to many hardships', and quotes Ecclesiasticus XLIII, 2: 'they that shall sail upon the sea, tell of the danger thereof, and when we hear it with our ears we marvel thereof'. It needed heroic courage and great faith for a priest, monk, or friar to leave his normal environment to face a very different way of living—the perils caused either by the sea, the wind or the ship; likewise the special perils without number, arising either from a man's own disposition, or from evil companionship, or from want of food and drink, or from bad steersmen, or excessive heat or cold, or bad equipment, and the like, of which perils there are so many that words would fail me should I attempt to tell them all'.

So we can picture these medieval missionaries of the sea, conducting morning and evening prayers on the deck of a galley, or celebrating their 'Dry Masses' while it was often hard for them to keep their balance, what with the rolling and pitching of the vessel. They consoled and encouraged the sick; warned open sinners of the fate that awaited them if they did not repent and give up their evil ways; set an example by their own lives; their patience and acceptance of discomfort and hardships. Had it not been for them there would have been nobody on board to speed many a soul on its last voyage, and to commit the body to the sea. Very few of the names of these sea apostles of the later Middle Ages have been recorded, but, thanks to *The Book of the Wanderings of Brother Felix Fabri* we are able to visualise how others besides himself revealed Christ to seamen.

REVIEWS

A SIMPLE WAY OF LOVE. By a Poor Clare, edited and introduced by Columba Cary Elwes, O.S.B. (Burns Oates; 6s.)

As the Editor of this little book well remarks, 'it is obviously written for nuns. This may keep many from reading it, even nuns. But that would be a pity, as the spirit is strong and manly, full of sound sense and humour, besides being uncompromising'. God calls all souls to a loving union with him. This is obtained by uniting the will lovingly with his. In religion this is more easily attained, though the young aspirant will soon discover that he or she has not left behind self-love, which is the greatest obstacle to the love of God. The love of God is not a matter of sentiment, nor does it consist in performing great and extraordinary austerities, or in prolonged prayer. Such practices are only pleasing to God when they are according to his will, 'but if they are not His Will they are a danger to the soul who seeks holiness in them and neglects to do the Will of God in humbler ways'.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the only one way to know and love God. 'Some tell us that to attain to union with God we must tread down all created images under our feet, even the humanity of Jesus must be left behind as we strive to dart up to the Godhead. No, this is not the way. Union with God cannot be arrived at by any forcing of the will; no, not even by any fervent effort except the effort be the sacrifice of the will in love. There is no other way to union but looking at Jesus and desiring Him, and then, for the sake of that desire, renouncing all other desires, even the desire of pleasing yourself'. It is Jesus who sends his Spirit of Love forth. In the Heart of