

THE RELIGIOUS ORDERS IN ENGLAND AND WALES¹

2. *The Friars*

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

THE varieties of religious life are but variations on a single theme, that of Christian perfection sought in a life lived in common according to rule. But a religious order in its beginnings is always an answer to a contemporary need: the centuries pass and modifications may be necessary. Circumstances change and they have to be met in a new way. But, as was suggested in speaking of the monastic order, what is essential remains—and the idea behind the life of every religious order is written throughout the Gospels: the counsel that those who want to love Christ perfectly will leave all things to follow him.

The end of the twelfth century saw grave threats to the Church's unchanging mission of presenting the Gospel to the world. The bitter struggle between princes and the Papacy was affecting the primary work of the Church. Prelates were often largely engaged in affairs of state, while the ranks of the lower clergy were often recruited from men too ignorant or too worldly to commend the spiritual backing of the Church. In the new universities the rediscovery of Greek philosophy was making for a materialist scepticism which could attack the very roots of religion. And in France a new and terrible heresy had grown up—that of the Albigenses—in effect a revival of the Manichaeism against which St Augustine fought. The Albigenses taught a dualism, that there were two gods, one good and one evil, and in fact attacked the foundations of faith, and through their organization, the foundations of society itself. The spiritual life of Christians who remained faithful had itself grown careless and was grievously affected by worldliness and corruption. It was at this critical moment of the Church's history that two men rose who were to meet the challenge of religious decline and unbelief. They were Francis and Dominic, founders of the Friars Minor and of the Order of Preachers.

¹ The second of a series of three talks broadcast on the General Overseas Service of the B.B.C. in October 1955.

Perhaps no saint has so profoundly affected men's hearts as has St Francis of Assisi. But the picture of the gentle lover of all created things, preaching to the birds, with his passionate feeling for the sad and the sick, must not obscure the essential meaning of his mission. He in fact canalised a current of reform within the Church itself, expressed as it had been in lay movements, enthusiastic and undisciplined as they often were. St Francis confronted a worldly society with the evangelical poverty of Christ: he restated in its most compelling form the ideal of gaining all things through the willing abnegation of the Gospels. With his first companions, preaching penance for sin and the joy of a literal following of Christ, Francis restored to the Church the innocence and impetus of its youth. The Friars Minor, as his order was called, achieved an astounding success: within ten years of its approbation by Pope Innocent III, there were five thousand friars. They came to England in 1224, and within twenty years were established in Oxford, Cambridge, and most of the cathedral cities and the growing towns of the country.

St Dominic's aim was parallel to that of St Francis, but was more consciously affected by his own experience of the Albigensian heresy. St Dominic realized that the answer to heresy can never ultimately be the invoking of force to repress it: the truth itself must be declared and defended: once known it is to be loved and served. Thus his order was from the first an Order of Preachers, finding its natural home in the new universities and its characteristic saint in St Thomas Aquinas, who used the newly discovered philosophy of Aristotle as the ground of his reasoned defence of religion. But the Dominican Order was not a merely intellectual organization: it preserved intact the traditional sanctions of religious life—with its emphasis on liturgical prayer and a common discipline under vow. The difference between the friars and the monks was essentially that the friars, Franciscan and Dominican alike, were meant to be mobile: they were to live in community, but were equally meant to be free to leave their cloisters to give to others the fruits of their own contemplation.

The Dominicans arrived in England in 1221, and they, like the Franciscans, soon multiplied and within a few years were to be found at Oxford, Cambridge, London and in all the principal towns of the country. The names Greyfriars and Blackfriars, so

common still in English towns, are proof of how intimate a part of English life the friars had become.

The Dominicans had a strongly intellectual element in their foundation and training: the first Franciscans were more concerned with moral conversion, with preaching the need of penance. For the Franciscans the problem of preserving their original ideal perhaps proved harder: the reforms within the Franciscan Order (and today there are three great orders that look to St Francis as their founder) were always concerned with restating the wonderful ideal of Franciscan poverty and simplicity. And so for three centuries the Friars (and there were other orders—Carmelites, Augustinians and Servites—of similar origins and aims) enriched English life with their ideal of a religious life lived among the people—a life of the towns, dedicated and disciplined but always available.

It was to come to an end. The dissolution of the monasteries at the Reformation meant that the friars, with the monks, were scattered or even put to death. And once more the continuity of the life of the English friars was assured abroad, and it was not until after the French Revolution that the Franciscans and Dominicans were able to return to England to resume an organized life in community.

Today the friars are at work in England and Wales on a scale, and with an emphasis, that may superficially seem very different from their medieval history. But essentially the ideals of Francis and Dominic are preserved in the great cities, in the university towns and in an immense variety of work of preaching and teaching. Thus, Dominicans in England and Wales have latterly undertaken a special responsibility for what might be called Catholic adult education at Spode House in Staffordshire and in the Aquinas Centre, now opened in London. And the Carmelites, having recovered possession of one of their most historic houses at Aylesford in Kent, are making of it a popular place of pilgrimage.

It is plainly impossible to give any adequate picture of the many activities of the friars today. They have many important parishes—a work which they undertook, though it is not normally theirs, because of the lack of parochial clergy in the last century; they have important missions abroad; they are to be found teaching in the universities; the Dominicans in particular

have a series of important reviews which fulfil the purpose of preaching just as surely as the spoken word from the pulpit. And always there remains the work of being available, so that wherever there is a monastery of friars there may be found priests who are at hand for spiritual help.

One might perhaps end with a word or two about a friar who died twelve years ago, who summed up in himself all that a friar can be in the modern world. He was in fact a Dominican, and I happen to be a Dominican too. But the meaning of his life, is I think, valid for all the friars—since all alike find their ultimate sanction in the following of Christ. Father Vincent McNabb was a preacher and a teacher of national renown: he was a familiar figure in the London streets or on a platform in Hyde Park, dressed in the black and white habit of his Order. To some he may have seemed a picturesque relic of the past, but he was a fearless champion of the truth—a man who castigated modern materialism with all the evangelical vigour of the early Franciscans and with the theological strength of the first Friar Preachers. He was a portent and a sign, and so any friar must want to be, for his vocation is to proclaim to the world the truth of the Gospels, and that not as an idea merely, but as a life to be lived. And that life, the apostolic life of Christ and his first followers, he presents to every age and nation, so that Christ himself may be present to heal the hearts of men.