

Comment

*Brother Dominic,
of the Company of St Martin (Weston Manor): 1919—1985*

On 13 May died an extraordinary Dominican. An extraordinary *lay* Dominican.

This year the lay branch of the Dominican Family is celebrating its seventh centenary. It is exactly 700 years, says tradition, since Munio de Zamora, seventh Master of the Order, composed a rule for it. Over the centuries millions of people—some of them gifted and famous—have been attracted by the Dominican ideal while not feeling called to live what we call ‘the common life’. Unhappily, the rule for lay Dominicans perpetuated among them a basically monastic type of spirituality, with paternalistic overtones. Until the last ten years the all-important apostolic dimension of Dominican life was generally understood to be the preserve of the friars and maybe some sisters.

Even so, this did not cramp the personal vision of the greatest of all the canonized lay Dominicans, St. Catherine of Siena. And surely the same could be said of the personal vision of Clive Duncan, better known as ‘Brother Dominic’.

When he was a young man nobody would have guessed what that personal vision was to be. A Scotsman, Duncan trained at Glasgow School of Art and at the Slade to be a fashion designer. And by the late 1950s he was a very successful one. Living in a handsome Belgravia house, he led a vigorous social existence among the rich and glamorous people whom he helped to dress (name-dropping would be out of place here). One of the top jobs in the Paris fashion world was offered to him.

But he did not take it. He had already become a Catholic, and was thinking of becoming a priest, but what finally made him throw over his career was a sermon on that disturbing passage in James ch. 1: ‘Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves...’. He announced that he was going to start a home for unwanted old men. And he did.

In 1962 he and his old men moved to Weston Manor in the Isle of Wight, once the home of W.G. Ward, ‘the most generous of all ultramontanes’ (quoting Tennyson), but by then a barren place, painted in institutional colours. And gradually, as the unwanted old died, unwanted young—mentally handicapped young men—took their place.

The story, so far, sounds edifying but distinctly humdrum: just one more story of a Christian rejecting all the loveliness of this passing

world for drabness and admirable intentions. But this, in fact, is not the way this particular story ended. However radically the direction of a person's life may change, the essentials of that person's make-up do not change. Those qualities which had made Duncan such a good fashion designer—passion for beauty, and insistence on excellence in all things, even seemingly unimportant things, and sensitivity to the needs of each individual—he brought to this new work of making a genuine home for fifty handicapped men coming from all sorts of backgrounds. It was his conviction that they had as much right as anybody else to live in a beautiful and humane environment, and that they could be educated to respond to it. To the amazement and delight of his many friends and even some of his critics, he turned this conviction into a reality.

His early days in this work were not, of course, easy, and he owed a lot to the support of his friends: of, for example, Dean Abbott of Westminster Abbey (who organised collections in the Abbey for Weston Manor) and Valerie Hobson and, above all, Henry St. John, the far-sighted English Dominican Provincial. It was Henry St. John who persuaded him to set up Weston Manor as a Third Order confraternity, and Clive Duncan became a lay Dominican living in community, with the name everybody eventually knew him by: Brother Dominic. In spite of that, there was quite a lot of misunderstanding and mistrust, especially among the clergy, for Weston Manor seemed so different from conventional institutions of its sort. Critics thought it was much too splendid, and too much like a family home, and, in any case, they did not approve of Brother Dominic's rather theatrical manner. When he and the community went down to the Catholic parish church in their habits, as lay Dominicans, they were ordered out by the then incumbent, who went on to warn the parishioners to have nothing to do with them.

Like St Paul, just because he was so faithful to his ideals he was not always easy to work with. But there is no doubt about his achievement. Ever since Vatican II popes have been speaking untiringly about the dignity of the human person. And Aidan Nichols writes in these present pages about Balthasar's emphasis on the importance of the 'forgotten transcendental', beauty. Brother Dominic was no theologian, but these ideas were at the centre of his personal vision. He wore himself out in fulfilling it; influenza turned to pneumonia and killed him. Until almost the end he was up every day at 3.30, doing the laundry.

B.B.
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