

ASPECTS OF FRENCH DOMINICAN LIFE¹

A RECENT contributor to *Orate Fratres* has written of Paris that there 'at present the Dominican world seems to be in its flower' (H.A.R., April 21, 1946), and the undoubted truth of this makes it difficult to give a whole picture of the Dominican scene, so diverse and powerful are the black and white apostles. They have rightly succeeded to Bl. Jordan and St Thomas Aquinas who first graced the Parisian Priory with their vigorous learning, culture and piety. Now however there are several Dominican centres in the same city, each with its special work.

At the very end of May, 1940, Paris was a highway for refugees. Most of the shops were closed. Cars and lorries of all descriptions and sizes were moving always in a southerly or westerly direction—mattresses tied to the roof and carrying every type of small household goods and furnishing. The southerly stations were jammed with refugees struggling for their trains. The Germans were only forty miles away. But at 222 Fauburg de St Honoré all was peace, and Dominican life continued normally. The brethren were served with an excellent dinner in the refectory, and the brother server collected the surplus bread at the end of the meal for the poor who would be always with them, German invasion or no. At recreation they spoke of their brethren at the front, serving as ordinary soldiers. Vespers was recited with dignity and tranquillity . . . then they were apparently smothered by the German blanket.

Five years later we were to learn in England that the spy and police system of Hitler could not repress these *Domini canes*. Their periodicals were stopped, their movements were hindered, but they continued to publish brochures on set subjects, expounding the principles which, when worked out in practice, were the direct antithesis to the Nazi régime. They gathered groups of lay experts to discuss these topics—economics, the family, the parish, education, culture, contemplation. The results were published in place of *La Vie Intellectuelle* or *La Vie Spirituelle*, printed on paper largely derived from the black market. The brethren themselves were constantly crossing frontiers and boundaries at risk of their lives; and often spending months in concentration or prisoner-of-war camps. They were in the heart of the youth movement, the resistance and every Christian activity which had any vitality left under the crushing weight of the Occupation. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that once the liberation was effected the Dominicans came forth in full

¹ The substance of a paper read to the Tertiary Congress held at Holy Cross, Leicester, at Whitsun, 1946.

flower. The struggle for life and liberty had brought even greater strength and influence. Within a few months they had re-commenced their influential reviews, and added to their number others like *Fêtes et Saisons* which began during the occupation as a way of calling attention to the big feasts as they come round and now looks like an attractive religious version of *Picture Post* or *Everybody's*. There appeared a Liturgical Quarterly, *Maison Dieu*, which sprang from a Dominican-inspired liturgical revival. This plays an influential part in encouraging and taming with *sana doctrina* the great burst of enthusiasm in France for vernacular liturgy, altars facing the people, dialogue Masses, Masses down among the worshippers, etc. Yet another periodical of a more technical nature deals with liturgical art and architecture, the rebuilding of the bombed churches, the designing of new up-to-date places of worship; this is *Art Sacré*, well illustrated and written by experts. Paper seemed to descend upon these publishing Dominicans like manna from heaven; for besides these periodicals they have been turning out volumes both large and small; nearly every day a new one sees the light. They have been running various special series—a liturgical series of volumes links up with the *Maison Dieu*, *Fêtes et Saisons* and *Art Sacré*; a series of studies on the fathers, of educational handbooks, of works on the union of Christian men, and so on. The authors of these works are drawn from every section of French Catholic society.

Into all this publishing business the writer stepped at 10.30 one night last year. Famished, he was restored by the concierge, a homely Madame who cooks for and tends the fathers with the help of her large and slow husband. She is respected by the fathers, not least because she controls the difficult food situation, the tickets for bread and other essentials. That night she produced ham and mince and fried potatoes; and there was wine from her own native country in the South. Then assisted by the lift a bed was found for the traveller high up under the roofs of Paris. For the house stands in a central position to the south of the river overlooking with its back windows the great square in front of the *Invalides*; and it rises seven stories to the office of the liturgical movement which is appropriately nearest to heaven.

The whole establishment is an amazing mixture of an important publishing centre, a centre for cultural and liturgical groups of French laymen, and a Dominican house occupied by twelve fathers. On the ground floor, apart from Madame Guiton's sanctum, there is a bookshop with a most attractive window. Here they sell mainly the publications of *Les Editions du Cerf*, which is the title of this publishing house. There is also a store of publications, which is continued in a basement filled to overflowing with this ammunition of the Dominican

apostolate—one of the Order's arsenals certainly. On the first floor there are two chapels, a sacristy and a room leading off the main chapel, to be used either as a lecture hall or as an extension of the chapel. Here every morning a group of laity assist at a Dialogue Mass. These men and women are connected in various ways with the Dominican apostolate. For some of them it is the first act of the day in the very house where they work. They are employed in the publishing and begin their work here at the public dialogue Mass; they are sent off to this apostolate by the final dismissal or 'mission' of the *Ite Missa Est*. There are in fact at least forty such employees directed by a business manager who relieves the fathers of the non-priestly side of the publishing summed up in the word 'business'.

In this chapel the fathers say all the Little Hours of Divine Office, singing Compline in the evening and Vespers for the big feasts. The attendance in choir varies. Sometimes there are not the three necessary for a quorum, and the the 'Hour' is abandoned; the house is not a formally constituted Priory so that communal Office is not of obligation. But even when the brethren can only muster three, Compline is chanted in full. Every note of both Vespers for the Annunciation was sung with only four in choir. But equally there may be ten or a dozen fathers in the small chapel, darkened by a large, mysterious stained-glass window by Père Couturier, O.P. There is a plain wooden altar with six plain and handsome but stubby wooden candlesticks and a small tabernacle. All this is made to accord with the Liturgical Movement centred here amid the bustle of editing and publishing. Either by design or war necessity the worship of God is carried on with the minimum of external decorative support.

No sooner has the last morning Sacrifice been completed than the offices above begin to fill with secretaries, typists, accountants and the rest. Right up above on the sixth floor the fathers have been having breakfast in the spacious refectory which commands a view on both sides across the roofs of Paris to the *Invalides* with the Eiffel Tower quite near on the one side and the roofs and towers of the Palais Royal on the other. The silence is not observed as the house is not a Priory, so the fathers con the papers and discuss the latest outburst of Mauriac in *Figaro*, or describe the meetings and lectures attended the night before. It is in this, their most presentable room, that the fathers entertain guests from all over France and beyond. Here have supped or dined François Mauriac, Georges Duhamel, and such men of letters, as well as statesmen and youth leaders, engineers and economists. Scarcely a meal is taken without the presence of some such guest. The procedure—after grace and the reading in French of a chapter from the Old Testament, the assembly breaks into animated conversation about the situation in Europe or the

latest philosophical or literary outburst. If the guest of honour at the evening meal should wax eloquent, 'Père Superieur' allows the brethren to remain sitting round the table, dispensing with the singing—or even saying—of Compline. Sometimes they walk on the veranda outside the refectory windows, smoking and looking out across the vast expanse of Paris—the refectory does indeed provide a common table round which the whole city and the whole country gathers in spirit. It conveys this universality in other ways, too, for the brethren are constantly on the move. In that refectory the writer said goodbye to a father who was off to Belgium, to another off to the confines of Switzerland or to Bordeaux. There is no narrow enclosure here nor a restricted view of world affairs.

Perhaps when we return to the rooms downstairs and find sprightly young typists in the offices of the *Vie Spirituelle*, or the *Maison Dieu*, when we hear the tap of many machines, the continuous buzz of the telephone bell and the shrieks of operators, perhaps with all this atmosphere of 'the world' the visitor may think the outlook a little too wide and unrestricted. But a remarkable thing about this strange Dominican house is that despite all the activity and the continual coming and going, the spirit of the choir and the morning Mass continues to pervade every corner of the house and every section of the work. In many of the fathers' rooms there is a picture, in a prominent position, of the austere but kindly face of Père Lacordaire, and it can be maintained with assurance that were that great ascetic to return today he would approve of his sons' activities. St Dominic too must bless their work, for their devotion to choir when it is at all possible can come from no other source. Without that spirit of St Dominic reigning, the house would fall to pieces as a religious community and become a purely business establishment like any other publishing house. The whole place is inspired with the Dominican apostolate; that is its *raison d'être*. And when the editor of *Vie Intellectuelle* goes off to have private converse with a Communist, or persuades Mauriac to write in the quondam Dominican weekly, *Temps Present*, when the other fathers go to grace the pulpits and lecture chairs in various churches and colleges in Paris, when they gather French intellectuals of all sorts for a conference in the hall by the chapel downstairs, and when they sit in their rooms, writing, reading, editing, all this is designed for the conversion of the millions of wanderers over the face of the earth and the extending of the Kingdom of God.

If one were privileged to assist at the 'cuisine', as they call it, or the reviews such as the *Vie Spirituelle*, when they are mixing the future numbers, he would find there three or four professors (including the Regent of Studies) from the Dominican House of Studies,

Le Saulchoir, nearly two hours' journey away, 'Père Supérieur', personnel from the other reviews, art and literary experts, as well as the editor himself. At the back will be sitting a bright young Parisian secretary-stenographer to cover the meeting. The professors and others previously study the articles proposed for the future issue, and these are freely discussed and criticised by all present, and corrections or modifications are suggested; the order of their appearance is discussed, and thus all is prepared for the copy of the issue to be sent off to the press. But that is not all. After the immediate issue has been prepared, future policy and special issues are discussed, papers read or outlined, and round these the subsequent numbers of the review are built up. The inner workings of the editorial committee are here given to show how closely the fathers of the whole Paris Province cooperate in producing these world famous reviews. These publications are all neatly sorted out into their specialised channels, each with its own public and its own apostolate. The office of *La Vie Intellectuelle*, a large room with a great table in the midst and surrounded by shelves bearing the learned periodicals of the world, is quite distinct from *La Vie Spirituelle* and *Fêtes et Saisons*, etc.; each of these reviews has its own three Dominicans to edit and propagate it. But these compartments are not water-tight—the fathers assist each other with suggestions and criticisms, and sharing each other's plans they can dispose the whole of this vast apostolate of the Press without fear of redundancy or repetition. That the members of any religious Order should so cooperate may seem a foregone conclusion, but even within the cloister the danger of isolation and consequent narrowness through specialisation is always present and must be guarded against. The French Dominicans have discovered the art of working together in specialised activities.

One last impression, a personal one, of *Les Editions du Cerf* may be given here to avoid a false emphasis on publicity work. During this visit the writer was for several days practically incapacitated by a heavy cold. Now a busy community often finds the presence of a sick stranger one of its greatest problems; each member is fully occupied and the stranger has few claims as strong as the urgency of the work. Indeed a very busy community sometimes tends to fall to pieces through the very intensity of its devotion to the work. And this community is certainly one of the busiest. The press always encourages speed and occupation; publishers and editors are easily carried away on the flood of words which flow from their own pens and presses. But here the spirit of the Mass and the choir dominates the establishment; and so the sick stranger found himself as tenderly cared for as a child of the family. Honey and liqueur from Brittany,

chest rubbings and hot potations, all were lavished on him with almost embarrassing attention, for his ailment was of the slightest. The brethren certainly dwell together in unity—this was a test if any were needed. But in fact their attitude towards each other, their patience and readiness to help, are evidently part of the life of the house. In that unity, of course, lies the strength of the little community of Dominican publicists at La Tour Maubourg. They are a Dominican family. Perhaps this is more remarkable in that the members do not all come from the same French Province.

Of the other Priors and Dominicans there is no space to tell. But at the Novitiate House of St Jacques, where they have thirty-three novices for this one year alone, one may meet a learned and well known theologian who has been helping in the great work of the *Missionaires de Paris*, priests who are trained and vowed to labour in the desolate suburbs of Paris, where the faith is dead and where, in the industrial empty misery, men have turned to paganism and Communism. These missionaries, organised by men like this Dominican, take an ordinary job in a factory in these places; they begin utterly alone, no church, no presbytery, no parish. They attract one or two laymen, discovering latent faith or reconverting the more generous; then, gathering these as far as possible in the same lodging place, they begin their little Christian cell. Before breakfast the kitchen is a church, the kitchen table an altar; the missionary says the first part of the Mass in French. Then after Holy Communion, and the thanksgiving after Mass, the liturgical instruments are packed away and the group has breakfast and then off into the factories and businesses to work as labourers and apostles. Gradually the group gathers strength. Eventually they are in a position to reconcile or baptise their converts out in the public highway. There the missionary demands a public recantation from the trembling convert as he renounces satan in terms of the local drinking dens and gambling holes. And the group around cheers his expression of faith. 'Salvationist', it might be called, but it has the savour of the true faith to keep it wholesome. And the priest missionary does not work alone; he is one of a group, the rest of whom are layfolk. That is a point to be stressed here.

One other fact connected with French Dominicans is equally linked with this well known theologian, who has begun a tradition for casting young Dominicans scarcely fledged out of their cloistered nest into the thorny bushes of industrialism. One of the most promising students he turned on to the road without a sou. He had to find a job, learning what life was like, the life which he had to regenerate by his word. During the war this example has been extended and many of the young Dominicans go into different industries in order

to experience the different types of life and to get into contact with people and their problems. The gulf between the pulpit and the people is thus being bridged in a way that is unknown in this country where we continue in the main to preach to the converted.

Now there is a moral at least implicit in the scenes described, that of the possibilities of a close cooperation between all the members of the Order but especially between the 1st and 3rd Order, between the brothers of the cloister and the brothers and sisters in the world. And it must surely apply to all recognised Third Orders in relation to their parent stock. Perhaps the employees at la Tour Maubourg were not Tertiaries, but in ideal they should be. The apostolate which they work for materially by typing, book-keeping, packing, and other work, could be their own apostolate in which they share formally. They can earn their living by a work for the Dominican apostolate. The distinction between the Tertiary and the member of a Sodality may be said to lie in this, that whereas the Sodalist joins his society to reap spiritual benefits, the Tertiary joins the Order to give himself and all his virtues to the brotherhood. But this does not mean that if he gives all he may not expect to live by his gift—and if he gives his basic livelihood in the way of work then he should be kept—or, to put it more simply, even though he earn a living wage he can share just as fully in the apostolate. Furthermore, it would enable the members of the Third Order to use their own special gifts and abilities to the full for the Order; whereas usually it is necessary to earn one's living by one's special capabilities and give only the spare tithe to the work of the Order. If this seems a pet idea tacked on to the end of an entirely different paper the reader is reminded of those Paris Dominicans surrounded by their business managers, typists, secretaries, telephone operators working all in the Dominican apostolate of the Press, or of those layfolk working with the *Missionaire* of Paris. Without them the apostolate would fail. At all events there is scarcely any good moral for Tertiaries which cannot be derived from looking at the French Dominican province, so alive with the spirit of prayer and the apostolate are they, so full of the spirit of St Dominic. CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

O B I T E R

It is scarcely necessary to insist that the Church was the only consistent core of resistance to the deepest evils of National Socialism. The fact is acknowledged, and the evidence is available. (Some of it will be reviewed in a forthcoming issue of *BLACKFRIARS* by Dr Nathaniel Micklem, well-known for his book on the Nazi persecution of the Catholic Church.) Writing in *Evangeliser* (November), the