

## LUMEN ECCLESIAE\*

MANY who would know St. Dominic better, who would enter more deeply into the inward spirit of the Dominican ideal, will turn almost instinctively to historical sources and strive patiently to piece together necessarily fragmentary evidence, to form a portrait of the saint and fashion in the mind a vision of the ideal. Such an approach is normal and fruitful when handled by those competent in the delicate intricacies of history. Still, happily, there are other methods, other approaches to an understanding of St. Dominic; and assuredly in this domain the evidences of history were never meant to be an exclusive norm for our judgements. Why not, for instance, learn from the *liturgy*, which has much to say on St. Dominic and his purpose? Thus (one point only, among many) the Dominicans' day of liturgical prayer closes with an antiphon which vividly calls to mind him who, in his time, was a 'burning and a shining light,' calls to mind, too, his brethren who have shone in every age because they worked for the Church, preaching not themselves but the Light of the World. '*Lumen Ecclesiæ, Doctor Veritatis, Predicator Gratiæ*'—'Light of the Church, Doctor of Truth, Herald of Grace . . .' There is more than an ordinary ring in such incisive titles, battering mind and will of those who will to listen.

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'Light,' 'lightsomeness' and kindred terms are perhaps worn thin in common parlance. A little thought, a return to Scriptural and Patristic texts soon refurbishes this age-old currency. The Scriptures from Genesis to the Apocalypse, abound in examples of the use of light, even

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\* [This article and the following are offered in anticipation of St. Dominic's Day, August 4th.]

in its mere physical sense, for the vivid intensity of southern and oriental skies play upon the minds and imagery of those who have experienced them, the inspired writers included. Stark contrasts prevail over gentle nuances. The day stands for life, work, a sense of security; darkness is linked in the imagination with a deep awesome fear, checking work,<sup>1</sup> oppressing man's very breath. Light is associated with life; darkness with death, pain, irremediable loss.<sup>2</sup>

More often a spiritual sense obtains. At the heart of it all, and essential in its implication, is the fact that Our Lord certainly taught in terms of light and darkness. So much is clear from a study of the Evangelists; it little matters that we cannot determine when exactly in His life or in what order the teaching came. St. John expressed it most fully in clear-cut terms, continually harking back to and dwelling on a favourite theme. 'Life' and 'light' became the keynote of his writings, just as 'kingdom of God' had been that of the synoptic writers; and 'the life was the light of men.'<sup>3</sup> St. John goes further: 'God is Light,'<sup>4</sup> thus speaking absolutely of the nature of God, of what God is and not of what God does, an attempt to crystallise an impression of God's very Being. The parallels are other absolute declarations: 'God is a Spirit' and 'God is Charity.'<sup>5</sup> Thus is completed a little triptych designed to convey to limited human capacities something of what God is in Himself.<sup>6</sup> And the notion of light is sin-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 'the night cometh when no man can work' (Jo. ix, 4). 'Walk whilst you have the light, that the darkness overtake you not' (Jo. xii, 35).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Matt. viii, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Jo. i, 4.

<sup>4</sup> I Jo. i, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Jo. iv, 24; I Jo. iv, 8, 16.

<sup>6</sup> It also suggests another and a fruitful way of conceiving the tractate *De Deo Uno et Trino*.

gularly appropriate; light being essentially self-diffusive, it invites a transition from an aspect of God's being to aspects of God's action in His dealings with creatures, and more particularly with man.

In the beginning God created the light. Yet that primeval blazing forth was as nothing compared to the spiritual light that comes from above and from outside, deftly eluding without doing violence to the potentialities of sense and touch: 'the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, light is risen.'<sup>7</sup> 'The 'fulness of the time' is a transition from expected to actualised reality. Our Lord quite simply is the Light.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the full sense of St. John's *Prologue* is apparent when it is placed against its proper background, namely the first chapter of Genesis. To creation corresponds, on a higher plane, re-creation, which is the work of the Incarnation and of grace. Then, if we step back to gaze at the whole tableau of God's craftsmanship,<sup>9</sup> there is a final passage from the re-creation of grace to the consummation of glory. And in this final actualisation, mysteriously yet firmly outlined in the Apocalypse, an unearthly resplendence transfixes and stabilises the whole . . . 'the city hath no need of the sun nor of the moon to shine in it. For the glory of the Lord hath enlightened it, and the Lamb is the lamp thereof. And the nations shall walk in the light of it.'<sup>10</sup>

At every stage of God's dealings with creatures, 'light' has an appropriate and notable significance. But the more universalist aspect of light-diffusion, which holds a greater place in the writings of St. John, includes, as a whole includes the part, the particular, individual aspects of light

<sup>7</sup> Isaias ix, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Jo. viii, 12; ix, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Creation — re-creation — consummation. Cf. *Summa Ia. LXXIII. 1*, a splendid example of St. Thomas's power of vision.

<sup>10</sup> Apoc. xxi, 23.

and lightsomeness. One rich phrase of St. Paul conveys the essential truth, curiously enough again against a background of creation: 'God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts.'<sup>11</sup> The perception of that light is made possible by the gift of faith which banishes a universe of darkness, spiritual, intellectual, moral. The realisation of this is too often blunted at the present day. The coming of Our Lord, in faith, is a great light and radiance; our very entrance into the Christ-life is a plunging into dazzling light. Greek patristic tradition<sup>12</sup> is more conscious of this, identifies Baptism and Illumination (*φωτισμός*), is more fascinated by the Epiphany, whereas we are drawn most by the Babe of Bethlehem.

This is not to suggest a whittling down of the mysteriousness of faith, nor that the believer may bask in the smug and depressing comfort of a world without mysteries. But it is to suggest that the lightsomeness of faith, and its consequences, are necessary for a full appreciation of that bridge between God and man which is faith, of that friendship between God and man which is living faith. The mysteries of faith remain mysteries so long as the believer is of this life; but the mysteries are also his light. The life of the mind consists in having the light of knowledge. The light of revealed knowledge is not to numb but to enliven the mind.

The Scriptures, then, speak of the gift of faith as a great light shining in our hearts. Acceptance of that light is an act of faith. This may be termed the first moment. There

<sup>11</sup> II Cor. iv, 6. Fittingly enough, for St. Paul had entered into the life of faith after being struck down by the blinding light on the road to Damascus.

<sup>12</sup> Resting on a solid *donnée* of Scripture. Cf. e.g. Heb. vi, 4; x, 32, and the verse from one of the first Christian hymns in Ephes. v, 14: 'Rise thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead; and Christ shall enlighten thee.'

is a second. Faith steep us in the Christ-light; but we must also be *lightsome*, in 'a crooked and perverse' generation shining as lights in the world.<sup>13</sup> The light that is given is a summons to fuller life, living faith. And so whereas the life of God is His light, the Light of God is men's life.<sup>14</sup> And the individual *is* lightsome, becomes a light or luminary (*φωστήρ*),<sup>15</sup> in so far as he participates in the light of the Word Incarnate: *sunt lux in quantum habent aliquid lucis illius qui erat lux hominum sc. Verbi Dei irradiantis nobis*.<sup>16</sup> Or we can apply the cognate notion of glory (*δόξα*). On entering that fuller life we reflect the glory of the Risen Saviour, participate even now, in a measure, in His splendour, become like Him, are transfigured, grow in being.<sup>17</sup> Thus we can be, as we are bidden to be, sons of light and lights of the world.<sup>18</sup>

In a word, the believer is invited to pass from seeing a great light to being a great light.



The above considerations, drawn from Scripture, can show something of the depths of meaning in the words *Light of the Church* and something of what is to be understood by the individual lightsomeness of the Saints. It is at once apparent how fully it was exemplified in St. Dominic, for St. Dominic was one who had seen a great light and responded as the saints respond, one who had faith deep, unswerving, developed from earliest childhood, fostered through long years of a hidden life of prayer and contemplation. A living faith, where the light glowed

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<sup>13</sup> Phil. ii, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Jo. i, 4; viii, 12; iii, 19-21, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Phil. ii, 15.

<sup>16</sup> St. Thomas in Phil. xi, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. II Cor. xiv, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Matt. v, 14; Ephes. v, 8; I Th. v, 5, etc.; *i.e.* the moral aspects of lightsomeness.

through and the will ever intent upon God and drawing near to God, *non gressibus corporis sed affectibus mentis*. There is no need to dwell on this. But one special consequence of the lightness of the saints deserve mention, because so applicable to St. Dominic.

Acceptance of the light and surrender to the suzerainty of grace affects the believer, not merely in the next life, but in this life, not only spiritually, but even *physically*. From St. Paul's 'anthropology' we can even urge that the grace of Christ must show itself externally, in our very bodies.<sup>19</sup> There is to be a very real spiritualisation of flesh and blood. Our *bodies* are members of Christ.<sup>20</sup> The body is 'for the Lord, and the Lord for the body';<sup>21</sup> even in this life the body is for the Lord because it is the organ of the soul and must help in the gradual transformation of the Christian's life into the Christ-life. And the Lord is for the body because He is the model and source of all supernatural life, gradually transforming the whole man, compact of body and soul, into His likeness. The result, because man, body and soul, is essentially one, is something even *physically* discernible, if not in the eyes of 'the world,' certainly among those to whom it has been given to see with eyes of faith rendered more penetrating by the gifts of the Holy Ghost. There is a radiance which appears in the eyes, in the face, in the whole demeanour of those who have kept themselves unspotted from this world, of the Saints. Thus is explained the striking example of St. Stephen: 'and all that sat in the Council, looking on him, saw his face as if it had been the face of an angel.'<sup>22</sup> And so thus the even physical attractiveness of St. Dominic—which so struck his contemporaries—bearing little resemblance to what is usually understood by these terms: rather

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. II Cor. iv, 10; I Thess. v, 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> I Cor. vi, 15.

<sup>21</sup> I Cor. vi, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Acts vi, 15.

was it an attractiveness born of virginal purity and the abiding presence of God in the soul.

Further, the personal translucence of St. Dominic was the foundation of his power as an apostle. Because light-some and crystal-clear in his whole being, he could convey faithfully, without refraction, the precious light of revealed truth and of all truth. Often enough a long discipline is needed to acquire that stern objectivity, necessary for those who would preach not themselves but Christ crucified. It is not the saints who shrink from such discipline.

To objectivity must be added firmness, the courage of an apostle. Precisely because the apostle knows that the light to be diffused is not his but God's, he can have unbounded courage. He will be dogmatic about dogma; and though perhaps continually preaching dogma, he will avoid the all too human failing of ceaselessly bearing about with him a dogmatism of manner. St. Dominic fought mercilessly against error all his life. His brethren, after his death, remembered him above all as 'consoler of the brethren.'

St. Dominic is presented to us as Light of *the Church*. This is not to impose a limitation on the light which he in his own person, in his preaching, in his Order, has diffused throughout the world for some seven hundred years. Rather does it enhance it. St. Dominic was a magnificent churchman, loving the Church and expending himself for her, as Our Lord had done. He shone in the Church and enlivened it, and has not ceased to do so. Perhaps the ideal of being great churchmen, of being luminaries of the Church is hardly appreciated enough. There are clerics who affect anti-clericalism; but the pose is a poor substitute for the acquisition of a certain temper of mind and will which would for ever banish any pejorative sense attached to the word 'ecclesiastic.' St. Dominic, light of the Church, has shown the way.

*Jerusalem.*

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