

Sainte-Marie de Prouilhe, 800 years of Dominican History

Prouilhe: an isolated hamlet in the depths of the countryside, near the village of Fanjeaux, itself barely better known. And yet for the brothers and sisters of the Order of Preachers, it is their birthplace, where their on-going, living adventure began, and with the grace of God, it is still serving the Church through preaching, teaching and the witness of a life based on gospel values. At the beginning, there wasn't much: an itinerant preacher and a few Cathar women converts. But the seeds were already planted, in the intuition that prayer and contemplation should be the root stock of all true and committed service of the Word. Austerity, yes, but joyfully as all are gathered together to experience something of the life of the apostles. Poverty, yes, but as a means of «following the naked Christ» as texts of the period put it. It is not a question of rejecting creation because it is bad, or a world scarred by evil, but on the contrary, the starting point is rather a deep love of this creation which is God's own work, the aim being to sing the Creator's praise, to seek out his face through the common life, prayer and study in the service of the Church, so that the world may glimpse him in reflection. The first brothers adopted certain aspects of the Cathars' life style, taking on board what was justified in their criticism of a society and a Church tempted by worldly riches and becoming dominated by trade. At the same time, they retained that just measure, characteristic of the well-balanced Catholic faith.

Prouilhe: out of a haven fashioned by the sisters' prayer, Dominic made a place of renewal and refreshment for himself and later for the brethren who gathered around him for the Holy Preaching. Then the whole thing took off: the sisters of Prouilhe were called upon to help restore monastic life at San Sisto in Rome, while another monastery was being born in Madrid. Soon Blessed Diana would communicate her fervour to the community of St Agnes on Bologna, and then the whole of Europe would be covered with Dominican monasteries, while the friars were also founding convents at a steady pace. Very quickly lay associates joined the Order, providing at one and the same time support the necessary for its material development, and also producing great witnesses from Catherine of Siena, to Pier Giorgio Frassati and Giorgio La Pira. A little later, active sisters were to contribute their talents, generosity and creativity, inventing different forms of preaching, in order to reach out as witnesses of charity to those cut off from the Church. Today also the Dominican family is continually enriched by new groupings, particularly by the Dominican volunteers and Dominican youth groups. But it all began at Prouilhe.

Prouilhe: a deserted place in ruins after the Revolution. It was as if the Order was defeated after the revolutionary turmoil, and yet it was reborn. Prouilhe was rebuilt, the nuns returned. A Source was rediscovered, and today it is celebrating eight hundred years of history, whilst remaining the living symbol of the relevance of St Dominic's charism to today's world. Also and above all,

Prouilhe reminds us that any renewal and updating of the Order necessarily proceeds via choral prayer and contemplation, loving study of the word and fraternal life. There would be no point in celebrating eight hundred years, if it were not in reality the occasion for discovering anew the savour of shared study, prayer and common life, and of contemplation as the source of preaching.

Through St Dominic's prayer, may this jubilee be a time of grace, a time of awakening and rediscovery, so that the Gospel may be preached by the life, works and the words of the nuns, friars, sisters and laity, and of all those who are challenged by the urgency of preaching the Good News!

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Preface to the book Sainte-Marie de Prouilhe, 800 years of Dominican History, 1206-2006