

THE COMING OF THE PREACHERS SELECTIONS FROM THE TALK BY SR. BARBARA BEAUMONT, OP

The title I have chosen for this historical input 'The coming of the preachers' is also a quotation, this time from the Cistercian monk Pierre de Vaux de Cernay, the chronicler of the Albigensian Crusade - and I believe it is important because this is the term used consistently in this chronicle to refer to Bishop Diego, Dominic and their companions. On the one hand, it describes their function in the Church, preachers ten years before there was any question of founding an Order of Preachers. And on the other it also serves consistently to distinguish Diego and his companions from the crusaders, the military men, whose coming was to be several years later from 1208 onwards. For Pierre de Cernay, 1206 is indeed the year to be marked out as 'the coming of the preachers'. It was at the end of this same year that Prouilhe was to be founded. A lot was going to happen within the space of six months or so.

This chronicle of Pierre de Cernay is one of the most detailed sources for the history of this period. It is a non-Dominican source, therefore its purpose was not in the least hagiographical, and it can thus be of great interest to us as a more objective witness to the beginnings of the Order, than, for example the Libellus. This chronicle was composed between 1212 and 1218 and so is closer in time to the events described than Jordan's work. The Dominican Order was still in swaddling clothes when the chronicle was completed, and so its author was not likely to be unduly impressed by the glory that accrued to St Dominic thereafter. This is not the only chronicle of its kind; there are also those by Robert d'Auxerre and Guillaume de Puylaurens to be taken into account.

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If we find no evidence for a preconceived plan on Dominic's part, what did happen? If he founded the Order of Preachers as opposed to an Order of scribes for example, it was because he had encountered a pastoral need for sound preaching as early as 1203, on the occasion of the famous encounter with the innkeeper at Toulouse, when he was on the way to Denmark with Bishop Diego. And even more so, on the return journey from Rome in 1206. And later Dominic's charism as a preacher attracted disciples who joined him even before there was a formal Order to join. ...

Likewise, one can argue, in the case of Prouilhe: it was not so much the desire to found a monastery as the need to find a solution to a practical problem on the ground. Otherwise, and if the problem were not fairly urgent, surely Diego and Dominic would have waited for a more favourable conjuncture of circumstances to launch into such a venture. ...

In this case, the urgent pastoral problem would seem to be on the one hand: what to do with women converted from Catharism, and hence alienated from their families, and with no means of financial support, and on the other: how to prevent young girls from being sucked into Catharism by heretical

educational establishments, to which they might have been sent by impoverished parents of the local Catholic nobility. ...

This question of women converted from Catharism sets Prouilhe apart in the history of medieval monastic foundations, and can perhaps be seen a pertinent reminder of the various gospel passages in which Jesus proclaims that he has come to call sinners rather than the virtuous, that he has come to heal those who are sick, as the healthy have no need of a doctor. And here lies one of the most original features of the early Prouilhe, and hence of the beginnings of our Order. It was essentially a charitable foundation, intended to take in women, recently reconciled with Catholicism, without family support or financial resources. These were the kind of aspirants who might not have been readily accepted in the conventional Catholic abbeys of the region. This is surely an aspect of Dominic's vision in the beginnings that we should not lose sight of....

...the community was established at Prouilhe on the feast of St John the Evangelist, 27th December 1206,..

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It is perhaps important to say a few words about the history of this term 'holy preaching', which was not, in fact, a Dominican invention. It has its origins in the writings of Gregory the Great, and was applied to the mission to the Cathars by pope Innocent III. The term holy preaching applied to Prouilhe is used in a legal deed of gift as early as August 1207: the gift in question was made to «the Lord God and Blessed Mary and to all the Saints of God and to the Holy Preaching and to Lord Dominic of Osma and to all the brothers and sisters who are today and will be in the future».

... 1211 is now fairly generally accepted by historians as the date when Dominic returned to Fanjeaux/Prouilhe after an absence in Spain to put his affairs in Osma in order; even if there is no extant documentary evidence for this journey, it would seem inconceivable that he did not at some point after Diego's death return to secure permissions from his superiors for what was now his new venture at Prouilhe. The monastic community had by now acquired a sufficiently solid economic base to allow it to expand. The statistics we have reveal 12 sisters at the outset (of which 9 were probably Cathar converts) which had grown to 20 in 1211.

It would have been an option for Dominic at this stage to move his male preaching companions off the site, and house them, for example, in one of the houses vacated by the sisters in Fanjeaux. This he did not do, and we must surely take it as a deliberate choice on his part to keep the two communities in the one place. Was it a double community? Fr Vicaire argues that it cannot be considered as such in the way that Fontevraud or Sempringham were, as there was no common authority linking the two. For one thing many of the preachers had left Dominic after the death of Diego, and those who remained were not religious linked to him by vows. Only the sisters were in the process of being constituted as a religious community at this stage, but it is important to note, despite legend and or tradition, that Dominic was never their prior. The sisters

had their own prioress from the start; she is named as such in the earliest documents, and Dominic acts only on her behalf.

...It might have been a convenient solution for Dominic to make the community over to the Cistercians, as they had been so much involved with the preaching mission any way. The fact that he did not take this option would seem to argue in favour of Dominic's already planning, or at least desiring, to do something new. And besides, if he had made the monastery over to the Cistercians, he would almost certainly have lost the refuelling facility for his preachers. The very fact that the nuns of Prouilhe were never affiliated to any other Order can be seen as an argument in favour of the idea that Dominic at this early stage was already starting to think about a religious entity that would encompass both brothers and sisters, and that the presence of two communities, one of nuns and one of preachers, separate but on the same site appealed to him.

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So here we have as elements of Dominic's newness of vision, preachers and sisters living on the same site, in a process of becoming. He was obviously prepared to live with the possible ambiguities and difficulties inherent in such a situation. But this isn't all, for almost immediately, that is to say as early as August 8th 1207, there is incontrovertible evidence for the presence of lay people living and working alongside the preachers and the converted ladies at Prouilhe. Indeed such an enterprise as the Holy Preaching was becoming would clearly need help with the various tasks associated with subsistence agriculture and housekeeping. Yet these lay people to whom I am referring were not there simply as hired casual labourers. No, and to my mind it is one of the most amazing things about the early history of Prouilhe, that we have legal deeds by which, in this pre-Order period, several married couples of fairly humble origin from local villages - Villasavary and Villepinte, that still exist just down the road - made a gift of themselves and all their worldly goods. The earliest surviving such document refers to 'Ermengard Godolina and her man', and it is indeed even more interesting, given medieval society, that the deed is in her name. She states that she is of sound mind, and that of her own free will she gives her house and all she has «to the Lord God, Blessed Mary, and all the Saints of God and to the Holy Preaching, to Lord Dominic of Osma and to all the brothers and sisters present today and in the future». It reads very much like a form of profession, but as there was no Order at this stage, there could be no Third Order either. Notwithstanding, Dominic accepted these people who gave themselves to the community of the Holy Preaching, very much in the manner of Benedictine oblates. The term 'Holy Preaching' is frequently used in these early deeds of gift which refer to «cunctis fratribus atque sororibus in monasterio de Prolano».

So, in the first ten years at Prouilhe, there were incontrovertibly sisters, preachers, women aspiring to be nuns and lay men and women living within the same enclosed space...When Dominic moved his centre of activity away from the Lauragais region to Toulouse in 1215, he left behind him a rapidly expanding monastery: by 1258 the limit was fixed at 100, in 1269 at 140, and in 1283, 160.

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Thus it is surely not an exaggeration to suggest that Prouilhe is not just the first fruits of the Order, in so far as it was the site of its first religious community, but rather that he Holy Preaching laid the foundations for what has been called - and indeed called for the centuries - the Dominican family. The term is used quite unselfconsciously in the 17th and 19th centuries). These are surely grounds enough for refuting those sceptics who like to see in the notion of a Dominican family some invention of the late 20th century....