

Who are my "Cumans" ?

fr. Vincent de Couesnongle, OP

A strange question, but a very Dominican one. During the last years of his life Saint Dominic frequently said: "When the Order is properly established, I am going off to the Cumans". Barbarous hordes from Eastern Europe - or Southern or Northern, it does not matter much - these Cumans were not Christians, and were reputed to be very cruel (1). This was enough. Dominic wanted to preach Jesus Christ to them and, if God accepted his sacrifice, he wanted to die a martyr, after asking his executioners to cut his body into little pieces so that he could be more suited to the Passion of his Lord.



Saint Dominic spoke all the time about the Cumans and about his own departure for their lands :

- while his Order was putting down roots and extending in all directions;
- while he himself traveled around founding houses and encouraging the brethren;
- while he was organizing his Order, preparing its constitutions and often going to Rome to seek support from the pope;
- while, like any other friar, he prayed ceaselessly, considering his work at the head of the Order to be less than sufficient!

Historians are full of admiration at the intense activity of these years, and wonder how he could have achieved so many things at the same time. And still all this was not enough for him. "I'm going off to the Cumans". And he made preparations for going, letting his beard grow, as a sign of his wish to become a missionary.

For us the Cumans should be a symbol of the apostolic zeal which inflamed Saint Dominic. Is there a similar apostolic zeal in our lives? Deep in my heart have I too the desire to become a missionary? Who are my "Cumans"? For Saint Dominic the "Cumans" did not mean living happily with his brethren, rejoicing everyday to see the extraordinary spread of the Order, continuing to preach, conscious of the success he had with attentive and well-disposed audiences. Saint Dominic was not a man of routine, repeating what was always done and always known. He was a man who went beyond what was usual, and well-known, who did not settle for quiet situations or well-trod paths.

Go and preach the Gospel! Go to the Cumans! This was no idle dream for him. His whole life shows that he was too much of a realist to be caught in an illusion. Going to the Cumans was not looking for a way out, a way of escaping from the incessant problems of the order he was founding, indeed we know he gave himself completely to this task. It was not out of weariness but out of humility - on account of his incapacity, he said - that he asked to be relieved of his office. Going to the Cumans was for him a desire, a driving force, a passion which drove him forward all the time. He always wanted to go further, to do more, to give himself more and more, to be more and more like his Saviour.

Saint Dominic never went to the Cumans. He never succeeded in realising his ambition, but he died surrounded by the tears and affection of his brethren in Bologna. However, it was this desire that kept him alive. Would his last years have been so productive if he had not been obsessed by his desire? Should not those too who want to live a rich and full life in the steps of brother Dominic, be tormented by a wild and never realised ambition, which urges them forward and releases their powers? There can be no true life unless one strives to accomplish something.

Who are my "Cumans" ?

The "Cumans" - that Dominican ambition springing inevitably from a forward-looking and creative apostolate - can have a thousand and one forms. It is much more than one particular place, or mission, more than any particular people, coloured or from deprived districts, rich or poor, Christian or non-believing. It is above all a frame of mind, a power, a driving force in what is deepest in us, which always leaves us dissatisfied with what we are and what we do. It is an ambition which on account of its own vitality, and the suffering it causes us is able to change our communities, the world and above all ourselves.

We always run the risk of limiting our material horizon and our field of action, and it is above all through the heart that we break through these barriers. "We too, I too, will go to the Cumans, with our eyes on Christ". In other words we always want to do more, to do what is harder, more difficult, more dangerous, that which is, humanly speaking, the most hopeless enterprise, more unimaginable for each one of us.

Is it possible to love without paying a price? Today this price to be paid, this fatigue means much more than forgetting yourself or giving yourself to others. It must include a continual seeking to find out what should be done, seeking the necessary changes in our methods and our apostolate, in the way we express our relationship with God

and with others, whether they be close to us or far away.

"To go to the Cumans" for us means to look on the world as it is, to find out what it is in the process of becoming and what it will be tomorrow. It is to be present now in the blossoming bud of the evolving world. "Where are the people today who tomorrow will be the driving force and the dynamism of the new world? Is the Order present to them? What should it do for them? What is it actually doing for them?"

"To go to the Cumans" means not being satisfied with "saving the saved", but reaching out also, indeed especially, to those who are not "saved", but who will make or unmake tomorrow's world. Above all it does not mean criticising what is happening in our times, and then carrying out as well as possible the narrow way of life which we have laid down for ourselves, once and for all. What it does mean above all is to carry on the work of Saint Dominic, or in other words to allow him to be,, still present in the world as it exists.

But how can we live up to this ideal if in our heart of hearts our "Cumans" are not alive, if they died within us before coming to birth? I know brothers and sisters of ours who all through their lives did their best to be sent on the missions, as we used to say in those days. For them the Cumans had a very definite shape. But some of these religious never succeeded in going on the missions. However, their longing to go kept them alive. It made it possible for them to carry out as well as they could the work that was given to them. They did this out of a sense of loyalty certainly, but also perhaps in the secret of their hearts, because they hoped to persuade their superiors and even God himself to let them achieve their ambition. If this ambition had not urged them at times to take refuge in the Lord in prayer and silence, would they ever have learned to do just this? Indeed they suffered too much in carrying out a monotonous apostolate, amongst an unfeeling community, in the face of illness, and especially in the face of a drab and unhappy existence.

"I am going off to the Cumans".

If that cry of brother Dominic was alive in us, if it tormented us all the time, would not our communities, and our life with God for other people be totally different from what they are?

1. During their two journeys to the Marches (Northern Germany) Bishop Diego of Osma and his companion Dominic had the opportunity of passing through areas devastated by the Cumans. The desire to win these pagans for Christ sprung from this experience as also did an appreciation of the danger these people posed for Europe and the Church: cf V.J. Koudelka, "Notes pour servir à l'histoire de Saint Dominique. II", Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum 43, 1973, PP 5-11.