

MENDICANT ORDERS AND CONFRATERNITIES

Mendicant comes from the Latin word for begging – mendicare, to beg. The term was used to describe religious orders whose members lived by begging.

Confraternity comes from the Latin word, confraternitas, which is derived from the Latin fratres, meaning brothers. It describes an association of people united for some purpose, or some profession.

INTRODUCTION

THE GROWTH OF TOWNS

From about the twelfth century onwards, one of the distinguishing features of the Middle Ages in Europe was the growth of towns. After a long period of feudalism, people began to drift away from the control of the local lords on the great estates and into the towns. Some of these towns survived the years of neglect during the barbarian invasions, and others began to develop as centres of commerce and trade and attracted large numbers of people.

In some cases, new towns were built with protective walls surrounding them. Usually, the towns were granted some basic rights for their citizens by the king and these were written into a charter. These basic rights gave people a sense of security and were one of the main reasons towns became very popular with working people. On many estates, they had no rights at all.

Generally, life in medieval towns was not as comfortable or healthy as life in the country. Streets were usually unpaved and very narrow, with very little sunlight. There was no provision for sewerage. Water was stored in community wells which at times

became polluted, resulting in the spread of infection and disease.

Houses were wooden, making the outbreak of fires a constant hazard. Even so, the towns continued to attract more and more people. Life in the country might be healthier, but life in the city seemed to be more exciting and offered more prospects for work, entertainment and money.

THE CHURCH AND THE TOWNS

As the towns grew, the Church seemed to be unsure of how to cater for the special needs of this new mixture of people. For a long time, it seemed not to know how best to respond to the needs of the poor in the towns and cities.

One historian writing about the period stated: "The rapid growth of population had far outstripped the Church's organisational ability to teach and look after the townspeople." As a result, people who had no priests to preach to them fell prey to false teachings (heresies).

To make matters worse, priests and travelling preachers whose duty it was to care for these communities were either poorly educated themselves, or they spoke to the faithful in such an

abstract way that ordinary uneducated people could not understand; or they ignored the condition of the poor and led a life of luxury, showing off in expensive garments and riding in coaches, which only the rich could afford.

In the past, the centres of learning and the places where care and shelter were available had been the great monasteries. But these were mainly in country areas or in remote locations and therefore not able to bring about any changes for the betterment of people in the towns.

FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND DOMINIC DE GUZMAN

Two outstanding people set about to work among the poor, Francis of Assisi, and Dominic de Guzman. Their orders came to be known as Mendicant Orders.

Eventually, others followed their lead and new religious orders were established based on their ideals. In the turmoil of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, these new orders cared for the poor and ignorant in the towns and cities. The two main orders were the Dominicans and Franciscans; others were the Carmelites and the Augustinians.

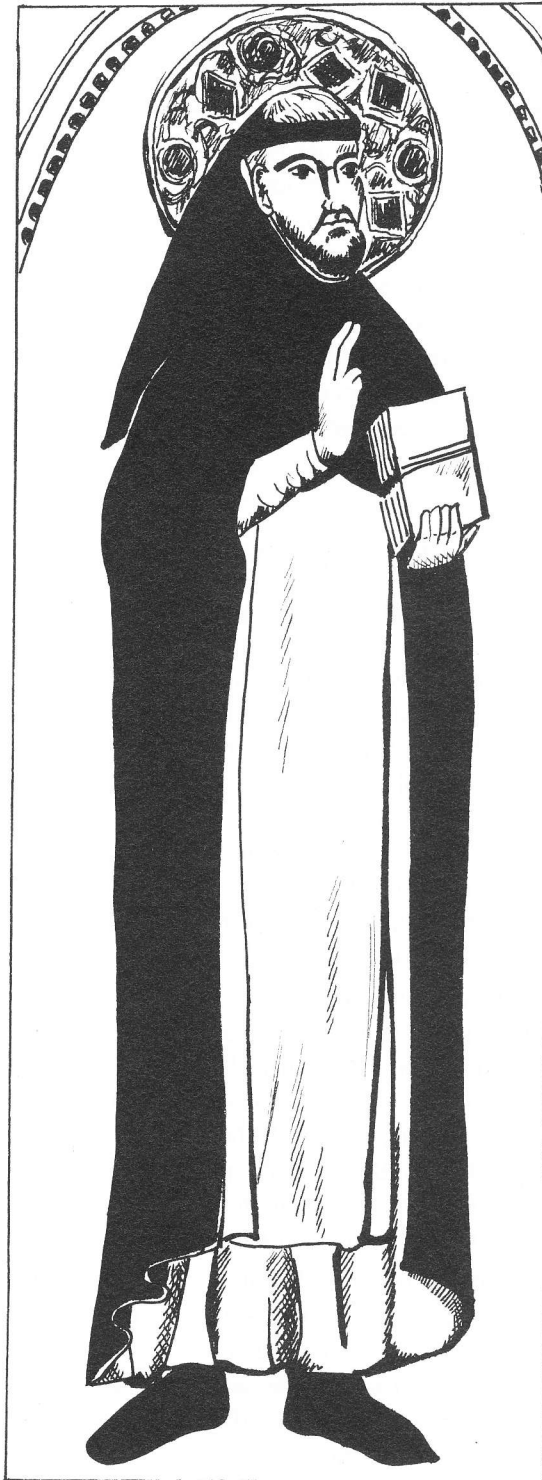
THE DOMINICANS

In 1191, Dominic de Guzman, a young aristocratic Spaniard became a canon of the diocese of Osma, in Spain. (The word canon comes from the Greek, *kanon*, meaning ordered pattern and from the Latin word for rule. Canons were priests who, in the early twelfth century were inspired by the revitalising spirit of monastic reform and followed a type of monastic rule of life. These priests usually helped the local bishop and lived near his cathedral.)

DOMINIC'S IDEALS

Dominic was an intelligent, scholarly person. From his earliest years he had shown a concern for the wellbeing of others. During a time of famine, he sold everything he owned to buy food for the poor.

One of the things that was outstanding about Dominic was his ability to understand the needs of the poor and uneducated in society. He was a brilliant scholar, but he knew that most people would not be able to understand the message of the Gospels if it



St Dominic

was preached with difficult words and complex ideas. Contemporary sermons were often preached in that way, and the people who listened were often confused, angry and generally turned off the Church.

Many poor and uneducated Christians joined heretical sects for guidance and comfort. Often the teachings of these sects were easy to understand; they stressed the need for Christians to live simple lives following the example of Jesus. At a time when so many of the Church's preachers and priests lived in luxury and dressed in expensive clothes, separate from their parishioners who were often desperately poor, the message of the heretical sects made a lot of sense.

DOMINIC'S VOCATION

Dominic believed it was his vocation to preach the Gospel and to follow the example of Jesus and the Apostles. He led a simple life and cared for the poor. He soon attracted followers who shared his ideals. The Order of Preachers or Dominicans as they were eventually called, tried to preach clear, easily understood sermons and to share the same lifestyle as their parishioners. Dominic believed that priests and members of religious communities should show by example that they lived the ideals of the Gospels, and that they did not just talk about them.

In a short time, Dominic had many followers who were inspired by the learning and sense of mission among the poor which characterised the Dominican Order. In 1214, Dominic founded a community in Toulouse, France. It was the beginning of the Order of Preachers. By contrast, many other travelling preachers were poorly educated and some preached a lot of superstitious nonsense.

Dominic believed that if a priest were truly well-educated, he would be able to preach to all people about their faith and not fall prey himself to heresies. For this reason he sent his followers to the new universities in Paris (France) and Bologna (Italy), to further their studies.

In 1218, the Dominican Rule was established (rule means a code of discipline observed by a religious

congregation, like a way of life). The guiding principle of the Dominicans was to study and preach the Scriptures.

Dominic himself spent the rest of his life travelling throughout Europe, organising his monks. On three occasions he was asked to become a bishop, but each time he refused, believing his vocation was to work with his Order. When he died in 1221 the Dominicans had spread all over Europe and had been influential in bringing the Church into contact with the people in the towns. The Dominicans also improved the standard of preaching.

THE FRANCISCANS

One of the most exceptional people of the Middle Ages was Francis of Assisi.

He was born into a wealthy merchant family in central Italy. As a young man he was spoilt and self-indulgent. Like all fashionable young men of the day, he enjoyed fighting, loved fine clothes, good company, good food and wine. Then, in his early twenties, he had a remarkable religious conversion.

In the Middle Ages, a conversion usually meant that the person entered a religious order, but Francis did not do this. Instead, his turning to God brought about a dramatic change to his life that was total and absolute.

He chose a life of utter poverty, an ideal which he maintained until his death. He called his vow "Lady Poverty" and his renunciation was all inclusive – he would own no property, and no material things whatsoever.

FRANCIS' MISSION TO THE POOR

At first, Francis was unsure how he could best serve God. He looked after the lepers who were the outcasts of society; he retreated to isolated places to pray and seek guidance in his life. Eventually Francis saw that he needed to preach and win back people who had strayed from the Christian community.

He travelled extensively, always barefooted and without any possessions. In the early years of his travels, he carried a broom with him so that he could sweep the floor of any church that he visited. Many churches had been abandoned; others were in a state



St Francis of Assisi

Compare this painting of Francis with the one of Dominic. Examine the way these two saints have been depicted. What difference do you note in the clothes and demeanour of the two saints?

of neglect, with parishioners not attending Mass, or in other cases, with no priest.

After two years, Francis was joined by two companions, Bernard of Quintavalle, who was one of the wealthiest men in Assisi, and Pietro Cathanni. Like Francis, Bernard and Pietro had been inspired by the Gospel words:

If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all you own and give it to the poor. (*Matthew 11:21*)

Take nothing with you for your journey, neither staves, nor pilgrim's bag, neither bread, nor money; you should not own two coats. (*Luke 9:3*)

If any man wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (*Matthew 16:24*)

THE CHURCH'S REACTION TO FRANCIS

Francis' renunciation of material things troubled some Church authorities. His ideas were too similar to the heretical beliefs of the Cathari who stressed poverty as a way of being close to God. But Francis was loyal to the Church and did not preach heresy. Still, some Churchmen continued to have doubts about Francis. They were mainly concerned to know how his belief in absolute poverty as a way of life could be maintained in a working community of preachers.

In 1210, when Pope Innocent III gave Francis verbal approval to follow his vocation, he had only eleven companions. Innocent saw that Francis and his companions were doing good work. This he knew to be very important, especially at a time when many others in the Church had little or no contact with the poor in towns.

In a dream, the Pope saw Francis holding up a crumbling church; he believed this was a sign from God that he should encourage Francis.

FRANCIS AND HIS FOLLOWERS

By 1220, there were thousands of men who sold all they owned and became friars ('Frater minor' from the Latin words meaning 'brother underling', a state chosen by Francis because it was without any

authority and was therefore in keeping with the ideals of poverty and humility).

SHOULD FRIARS HAVE RULES TO FOLLOW?

As the numbers who joined Francis grew, Church leaders considered that it was no longer possible to allow the new religious group to continue without any formal organisation or definite rules. One of the fears the Church had, was that all these men would try to copy Francis' behaviour. To many observers, Francis' behaviour was bizarre. At times he would throw off his clothes as a sign of his contempt for ownership of anything. He preached to the birds, he cured cattle, he tamed a rabid wolf, he subjected himself to extreme hardships. Francis had a unique holiness and spirituality that few could copy or cope with. Some people looked at what he did and were suspicious of his sanity and his motives.

It was not surprising that the Church became apprehensive at the thought that some of what might be called the 'lunatic fringe' would wander the countryside copying Francis' behaviour and claiming to be his friars. It was clear that some settlement had to be reached about organising a regular Rule of life for the Franciscans.

FRANCIS' BELIEFS

Francis, however, believed that elaborate rules and organisation for his friars would hinder the work of God. The Church did not agree. One Church authority wrote:

To us this religious order seems exposed to a great danger, for it accepts not only the perfect, but also the young and imperfect who ought to be trained and tested by a period of conventual [in a monastery] discipline, and it sends them out, two by two, to all quarters of the globe.

THE POPE MAKES A DECISION

In 1220, Pope Honorius III issued the order *Cum Secundum* which made it compulsory for all who wished to enter the Franciscans to undergo a year of training. Pope Honorius also appointed Cardinal Ugolino to be the guide and counsellor of the new Order.

The Cardinal admired and respected Francis' ideals but he believed that the best interests of people and the Church would be served if these ideals were given a more formal structure and the community was better organised. Cardinal Ugolino also believed that if the friars were to carry on their work among the poor in an effective way, then they needed some rules to guide them.

If they were going to be good preachers, they needed to be educated. If they were going to help the poor in towns, they needed to have a place to live. All of these things needed to be organised. If they were not, things would soon become chaotic and the people they were trying to help would lose all the benefits. Whether Francis liked it or not, some form or organisation was necessary.

FRANCIS' LAST YEARS

Francis was asked to write a formal set of rules to guide his community. For Francis, the changes happening in the community were distressing. Increasingly he withdrew to pray and by his example tried to influence his followers to maintain his original ideals. The friars were now permitted to own prayer books and two cassocks. They could choose to sell all their worldly goods before entering the Order, or they could give their goods away 'in the spiritual sense'.

In 1220, Francis resigned as Minister General of his Order to be succeeded the next year by Brother Elia of Cortona. Elia was a good organiser and administrator and his vision of how the Franciscan Order should develop was similar to that of Cardinal Ugolino. The Cardinal eventually became Pope Gregory IX.

Francis' final declaration of his ideals was made in his Testament which he dictated when he was dying. It was the story of his conversion and a statement of his beliefs. It was Francis' wish that it be read along with the Rule that was to guide his followers. In it, the spiritual basis of Francis' life was presented as a source of inspiration and guide for all those who wanted to follow his example. Even when the Order changed from its original ideal, its

fundamental message remained true to Francis' vision.

On the 16th of July in 1228 Francis was canonised (i.e. made a saint) by Pope Gregory IX.

CONFRATERNITIES

The spirit of charity and care which inspired the Dominicans and Franciscans also extended to the general community. People joined together to form associations to help the poor and sick in the towns and cities. These associations were called confraternities.

Usually each confraternity took over a specific task, such as looking after the sick or running food depots for the poor. The confraternities all had some common features:

- they were under the guidance of a spiritual director who was in most cases a Dominican or a Franciscan;
- members met regularly to pray and discuss the needs of their community;
- each confraternity would have a patron saint to protect and inspire it.

The basic concern of the confraternities was to care for the spiritual and physical needs of their own members as well as providing help for the sick and poor. Increasingly in the Middle Ages, they cared for the pilgrims and travellers who were such a common feature of the times.

The work done by the confraternities was much the same as that done by the great monasteries in past centuries, only now much of the charitable works needed to be done in the urban centres of Western Europe. Increasingly too, the confraternities became involved with caring for the sick. Some confraternities established hospitals of their own and followed rules similar to monastic rules. Some of the hospitals in Europe today date back to their establishment by confraternities in the Middle Ages.

Much of the finance of these works came from wealthy people. They believed it was their duty to support works of charity as a way of gaining forgiveness for their sins, and of following the example of the Gospels in their own way.



The Duke of Leicesters Hospital in Warwick, England, built in 1090.

THE SPIRIT OF CONFRATERNITIES TODAY

The following is an extract from an article in the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council's newsletter about young people who have given up a year of their life to do work where they feel there is a need.

The hero in Christopher Koch's novel had his year of living dangerously.

For these young people from four different cities now occupying a rambling old house near the skyscrapers of North Sydney, it's their 'year of living generously'.

Primary school teacher Bill Jennings, 22 of Melbourne, works in the streets and as part of the St Vincent's Hospital alcohol and drug service. He waits on table one night a week at a coffee shop and drop-in centre run by the Anglican Church and frequented by street dwellers and transsexuals.

Angeline Healy, 21, of Melbourne, who has an applied science degree in consumer science, spends a lot of time talking in her job with the St Vincent de Paul Society in a family crisis centre.

Jon O'Dea, a 23 year old law graduate from Sydney, helps sort out the problems of the Sri Lankans, Tamils, Kurds, Chileans, Africans and Lebanese as a caseworker with the Refugee Advice and Casework Service.

Hobart secondary school science teacher David Foong, 26, chats, plays cards and gives emotional support to the men at Gowrie House who are trying to break their cycle of drug or alcohol addiction after detoxification.

Anne Marie Devereux, 21, from Brisbane, who is part way through an arts/law degree at the Australian National University, works at a youth crisis and drop-in centre at suburban Rozelle, the Rendu Centre.

"I see 14 and 16 year olds who have dropped out of school and there are also large numbers in the 20 to 30 age group who may be squatting. They may have a drug habit", she said. Like the others, Anne Marie's work is basically "being company".

"It's more tiring and engaging than anything I have done in my life, but it is also more rewarding."

For their work, they get their keep and a \$30 a week stipend. But as part of a Companion Volunteers Community, there is much more to it than that. As one of the group explained: "CVC is based on four basic philosophies: community, spirituality, simple lifestyles and social justice."

The group had not met until they were chosen to share a house from February to December; they made a commitment to support each other.

Busy working different hours and sometimes putting in 'extras' such as talking to homeless people in Sydney's Central station, they have a 'community night' once weekly to keep in touch.

As a joint project of the Jesuits and the Mercy Sisters, they have two support people in Fr Celso Romanin and Sr Felicity Evers, who are friends rather than minders. According to Bill, the spirituality is emerging out of "the struggle that comes when strangers get together and live in a house."

"We don't pray together that much, but there is something that is different from a religious spirituality", he said.

All have been changed by their experience. Jon said it was a good chance for him to "jump off the conveyor belt". Bill feels he will not now be able to teach in an affluent school and when he starts, will seek a disadvantaged area.

Angeline said, "I went home recently and it was so different, I could see so many of my friends going through life not knowing of people who don't know where to sleep". She now wants to be a community worker at the "people level".

Companions Volunteer Community started last year in Melbourne and Adelaide and one is being considered for Brisbane.

There are similar organisations doing this sort of work all over the world.

Review Questions

1. What was one of the most significant changes in population distribution in Europe in the twelfth century?
2. Why were people attracted to town life?
3. What were some of the disadvantages of town life?
4. Was the Church prepared for this shift in population?
5. In what ways was the Church finding it difficult to minister to its people in the towns?
6. What were some of the criticisms people levelled at the Church at this time?
7. In your own words, describe Dominic's ideals for his new religious order.
8. Why did Dominic place such importance on his followers being well educated?
9. Dominic refused the office of bishop on three occasions. Why do you think he did that?
10. How did Francis believe he could best follow Jesus Christ?
11. Did the Church authorities agree with his ideas?
12. Do you think the Church authorities should have allowed Francis to lead his community in his own way? Present both sides of the argument as fully as you can.
13. Before you answer the next question you need to consider the following: From the earliest times, one of the vows taken by monks and nuns when they entered a religious order was the vow of obedience. In fact St Benedict, one of the greatest founders of the monastic movement, wrote that monks or nuns

were bound to obey their superiors even when asked to do something which they might consider impossible. From the eleventh century onwards, the Church stressed the importance of obedience in the life of all religious and considered that disobedience was a sin of witchcraft.

When Francis wrote his first Rule (a set of rules to guide his community), he wrote:

If any of our ministers should give to any brother an order that is contrary to our way of life or his conscience, that brother is not bound to obey him. For if a sin is committed by following such an order, it is not obedience.

(*Regula Prima*, Chapter 5)

The Church changed Francis' rule to this:

The brothers, who are subjects, must remember that on account of God they have renounced [given up] their wills. Therefore I firmly order them to obey their ministers in all things which they promised God to observe, and which are not contrary to the conscience or our Rule.

(*Regula Secunda*, Chapter 10)⁶

What changes have been made in the second text?

14. Besides the fact that the first Rule was not in keeping with the Medieval Church's ideas of obedience, why else do you think the Church authorities thought it wise to change the ideas in the second Rule?

15. One historian writing about Francis has said:

[because of Francis and his inspirational leadership] . . . the Church apparently had been saved, and Christendom was secure. But in order to effect this it had been necessary to damp the ardour of a saint, to regularise his sanctity, and almost (one suspects) to break his heart. Yet who can say that Ugolino was wrong? Had he not served his Master well in finding

the souls that were lost, and in making possible so wonderful a Christian revival?⁷

What do you think of this statement?

16. Why do you think people joined confraternities?

17. Besides the CVC (the example of a modern confraternity), are there any similar organisations today? Can you explain what some of these organisations do?

EXTENSION WORK

1. Write a short story, or a play, on the early life of St Dominic up to the time he entered the priesthood.

2. If you were a chronicle writer in the Middle Ages, what would you write in your journal (or tape) as part of an interview with an Albigensian (Cathari) who has just heard Dominic preach?

3. Pretend you are a young man or woman considering joining Dominic and his companions, and write a letter to your parents explaining your decision.

4. Read an account of the way St Francis came to know that he was called to do God's work, then prepare a talk or a story that shows what took place.

5. If St Francis lived today, do you think people would find him exceptional? What do you think he might do in today's world to help people?

6. What do you think motivates people to devote their lives to helping others? Interview some one who works for charity and get their views on the work they do.