

THE CLASSICS
OF WESTERN
SPIRITUALITY

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EARLY DOMINICANS

Selected Writings

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Saint Dominic by Guido da Siena, Italian mid-thirteenth century Sienese School.
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B. Dominican Laity

The thirteenth century saw an enormous increase in the demand for ways in which lay people could express their piety, and two ways in which this demand was met were the Order of Penance, which took shape during this century, and the development of new kinds of lay confraternity. The Dominicans were the first actually to set up an Order of Penance that would formally be part of the Order, under the jurisdiction of the Master of the Order; this was done in 1285. The most famous member of the Dominican Order of Penance was St. Catherine of Siena († 1380), who developed its apostolic possibilities in an unprecedented way. In addition to this, the Dominicans also contributed to the formation of a variety of confraternities, and stamped something of their spirituality on their way of life. Here we shall only take two such confraternities, whose statutes show particularly clearly the temper of their Dominican guidance, especially in the great concern that the members should be encouraged to give themselves with unforced generosity to works of devotion and compassion, rather than be bullied by laws and sanctions.

Statute of the Congregation of St. Dominic, Bologna

1244

To all the faithful Christians who belong to the confraternity of St. Dominic at Bologna, brother John,¹ by the grace of God bishop and Master of the Order of Preachers: may you walk worthily in the works of saving grace, in the sight of God and man.

The grace of God's regard has shone in your hearts; inspired by the example of St. Dominic and confident of his help and support, you have joined together to devote yourselves to works of kindness, by which the wretchedness of the poor will be relieved and a service provided for the salvation of souls.

We see how wonderful the Lord is in his saints.² The example of only one man has been like a tiny seed sown in the ground, from which the Lord has raised up an abundant harvest of faithful souls. Congratulating you, then, on your devotion and the spiritual zeal you have conceived in the Lord, we judge your way of life and your organization, which are contained in the chapters written here, to be holy, fruitful and useful, pleasing and acceptable to God. The details are as follows:

This is the brotherhood or congregation of St. Dominic, confessor, established for his honour and for the salvation of souls.

(1) Whoever wishes to become a member of this brotherhood is to be accepted unless he has been denounced for or suspected of any error of faith, in which case he is certainly not to be admitted until his name has been cleared by his good conduct.

(2) On the last Sunday of every month, all the members of the congregation are to assemble, if they conveniently can, in the church of St. Dominic, to hear Mass in his honour and to listen to the word of God, if it is to be preached to them; and there each member of the brotherhood is to offer one *denaro* to the treasurers of the brotherhood, or, if he is unable to attend in person, he is to get somebody else to bring his offering.

(3) There are to be four treasurers for the brotherhood; it shall be their responsibility: to encourage those who are at enmity to make peace, to visit the fatherless and widows and orphans and the sick and

EARLY DOMINICANS

prisoners and the poor and any others who are afflicted in any way, offering them brotherly and loving service of help and advice. They are to use the money raised by the monthly collection faithfully for these people or for others; so that they can do this in the best possible way, the treasurers are to meet after None on the Sunday mentioned above, in the church of St. Dominic, to discuss these and other similar good works, as the Lord Jesus Christ, in his mercy, chooses to inspire and guide them.

(4) Every year, on the solemnity of St. Dominic, all those who belong to the brotherhood are to come to the church of St. Dominic with reverent and devout minds, to hear Mass and to offer one candle each, according to each one's position, in honour and praise of our Lord Jesus Christ and of St. Dominic. We say that they are to do this unless they are prevented by some legitimate difficulty.

(5) Each member of the brotherhood is to say the Our Father seven times a day in remission of his sins.

(6) Each member of the congregation is also to say the Our Father seven times for any member of the congregation who has died, and they are to do the same for any Friar Preacher who dies at the church of St. Dominic in Bologna.

(7) If they have been notified, all the members of the brotherhood who can conveniently manage it are to attend the funeral of a dead brother or sister, and if the dead person was poor, the cost of the funeral is to be supplied from the money raised by the collection already mentioned.

(8) They are always to keep one lamp burning before the altar of St. Dominic.

(9) The brotherhood as a whole is to keep two large candles in the sacristy of St. Dominic's, which are to be carried at the funerals of dead members of the brotherhood.

(10) Because we believe that God is more pleased with services performed freely than with those performed under constraint, and because our purpose is rather to remove snares from the necks of men than to place snares, we do not want to bind anyone in the sight of God to incur either guilt or a penance³ in the case of transgression of any chapter or activity contained in this Rule; if they do anything good in these or any other ways, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we desire and pray for them, through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and the merits and prayers of the most blessed ever-

DOMINICAN LAITY

virgin Mary his Mother and of St. Dominic and the other saints of God, that such good deeds will bring them happily to everlasting life.

So it is our desire to advance with fitting approbation the special devotion which you have, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, towards our holy father, St. Dominic, and therefore, granting your loyal desire and your fair request, on behalf of all the brethren, we receive you and all those who will later join your brotherhood in honour of God and St. Dominic, giving you a share in the benefit of all the Masses, prayers, preaching, and other spiritual undertakings which our Order will, by God's inspiration, perform throughout the whole world, granting you also the privilege that, when any of you, brother or sister, is called by God's will to move from the light of this world to a better world, he or she shall receive the same prayers as are normally said for the dead brethren of our Order.

To authenticate this, we have seen fit to validate this document with our seal.

Given in Bologna on the 12th of June, 1244.

New Statutes of the Congregation of Our Lady, Arezzo 1262

In the name of eternal God, Amen. In the year of the Annunciation of the Lord Jesus Christ, 1262.⁴ The customs and ordinances of the fraternity of St. Mary of Mercy, drawn up and approved by wise, sensible men belonging to the fraternity, which they started in the month of June. They run as follows:

(1) THE FOUNDATION AND APPROVAL OF THE FRATERNITY

The Lord, who is compassionate and merciful,⁵ whose compassion is on all that he has made⁶ and whose mercy fills the earth,⁷ wanting no one to perish, but to bring everyone back to the way of truth, decreed lovingly in the law of his gospel and established it as an inviolable precept forever, that anyone who wants to obtain his marvellous mercy in this world and in the world to come must follow his most sacred example with regard to mercy, in this time which he has granted for the salvation of men, and must love mercy and devote himself zealously to the works of mercy. He exhorts us in the gospel to practise mercy, following the example of the Father: "Be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful."⁸ He also entices us to be merciful, by indicating the precious fruit of mercy, when he says, "Blessed are the merciful for they will obtain mercy."⁹ So in the Last Judgment he will give unutterable happiness to the merciful, giving them a generous reward, when he says to them, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, receive the kingdom which has been prepared for you from the beginning of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat."¹⁰ On the other hand, those who despise mercy or are careless about it he threatens with a dreadful warning, through his apostle James: "There is judgment without mercy for those who have not shown mercy."¹¹ And he will himself blast them appallingly in the Last Judgment, when he says to them, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire which has been pre-

DOMINICAN LAITY

pared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat."¹² In consideration, therefore, of the splendid example we have to follow of mercy, and the immense profit which results from practising mercy, and the dreadful danger and harm that there is in despising it or being careless about it, we, certain citizens of Arezzo, came together in the church of St. Dominic, of the Friars Preachers, on the inspiration of God's grace and on the advice and encouragement of certain sensible friars of the same Order, with the permission and good will of our venerable father, the Lord William, Bishop of Arezzo,¹³ and decided to found a fraternity, to be made up of ourselves, albeit unworthy, and any others whose hearts God may touch in the future and who offer themselves freely to the fraternity, to win God's mercy for themselves by performing works of mercy, and to relieve the various needs especially of the embarrassed poor, and of widows and orphans and also, in times of urgent distress, to help religious houses, poor monasteries, hospices and recluses,¹⁴ to foster mutual charity and love and harmony, to strengthen the bond of peace and to encourage everything that is good, with the help of our Saviour's grace and with the support of the glorious intercession of his most merciful Mother, of our valued martyr bishop Donatus, and the blessed confessor Dominic and all the saints.

(2) THE APPROPRIATE NAME FOR THE FRATERNITY

So this association of ours, which we founded for the undertaking of works of mercy, so that by means of it we might obtain God's mercy in this present world and in the world to come, we thought it appropriate to call the Fraternity of Saint Mary of Mercy, both because its aim is works of mercy, and because it is under the patronage of the Queen of Mercy, by whose merciful ruling and guiding we believe and hope that the fraternity is supported and advanced and led into all success and all that makes for salvation.

(3) COMMENDATION OF THIS FRATERNITY

That fraternity, whether this means the spiritual assembly of the faithful or, sometimes, their actual bodily assembly to honour God and to be useful to other people, would be pleasing to God, the

EARLY DOMINICANS

Saviour himself proclaims in the gospel, when he says, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."¹⁵ People may surely claim to be gathered together in the Saviour's name when they come together at set times to carry out his will and commandment concerning mercy, and when they oblige themselves freely and unanimously to abide by certain common salutary laws for this purpose. This brotherhood of mercy, I say, derives the origin and vigour of its laws from our patriarch, the teacher of the gentiles, the apostle Paul, particularly with regard to collecting alms on one day in every week; he declares in his letter to the Corinthians, "With regard to the collections which are made among the saints on the first day of the week, you too are to follow the practice I established in the churches of Galatia" (*1 Cor. 16:1*). This brotherhood is also eagerly recommended by the prince of the apostles, when he says to us in his letter, "Be compassionate and lovers of the brotherhood" (*1 Pet. 3:8*). Solomon too praises it splendidly in Proverbs 18:19, "A brother who is helped by his brother is like a strong city." The merciful works of this brotherhood are expressed and commanded by the Lord through Moses in the Old Law, when he says, "If one of your brothers is reduced to poverty, you shall not harden your heart or withdraw your hand," and he adds, "I command you to open your hand to the poor and needy" (*Deut. 15:7,11*). How glorious and pleasing such brotherhood is, which is enlightened by such teaching and adorned with such examples! And how impressive and how free from any suspicion of covetousness it is made by the edifying humility of respectable people, who are well enough off, begging in person for money or for bread, for the common good; for that is what the four directors of this fraternity do each week, taking it in turns for three months at a time. Apart from their humility in doing this, it is a burdensome responsibility for them, so they must often abandon their own business for it and freely take on the embarrassment and the unwonted labour of begging to do the business of fraternal charity.

(4) THE ELECTION OF A PRIOR

It is well known that any congregation needs to be directed and led by some good and understanding man, if it is to survive and grow, and so, by our common will and good pleasure, and with the grace of

- *The selection provided is only a portion of the early constitutions of this particular fraternity. The entire selection can be found in the book.*