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The Gyves of Freedom.

IN one of the most populous and wealthiest cities of the United States which I visited during my recent begging tour I was speaking to a well educated nun who was a convert of some twelve or fifteen years. With some of that pride which a Dominican naturally feels for his Order, I was explaining the fact that all the major offices of the Order were elective, and that more than elsewhere the spirit of mediæval freedom was to be found still clinging to our rule. The Sister suddenly interrupted me to say: "We have none of that. I should not like it. It is such a relief to have nothing at all to do with who is to be one's superior or where one is to be sent."

Now in spite of having read or heard read many treatises, including Rodriguez, on Obedience, the convert sister's interruption really interrupted. I gasped inwardly; as if inwardly a blow had been struck or a vision vouchsafed. When I could recover my intellectual footing, I stood to look on the phenomenon of this woman's words.

"This woman," I said to myself, "most undeniably relishes the idea of complete subjection." I was assured of her idea, for my experience of American women, slender as it had been, had convinced me that they had an unmistakable power of meaning what they said, and saying what they meant.

"Moreover," I added, as if questioning and answering my own self, "this woman is of high moral and intellectual worth. Her speech and her circle of acquaintances make that certain.

"Again," I mused, "she is a convert, she was born and reared amongst men whose boast it is that they go to God in their own way. She came to the true fold for

what she could get nowhere else. And to crown it all with something almost incredible this woman is an American of the Americans. The love of freedom is born in her veins, and," here I judged summarily from my slender experience, "it has been her daily bread since she could speak or think. Yet she seems to take as much pleasure in giving up all charge of herself as most men take in following their own will."

In my confusion of soul I seem to find expression and relief in a phrase from the office of St. Augustine :

"Alius sic, alius sic ibat."

At length, whilst inwardly praising this well-schooled and well-bred convert whose blood ran "Stars and Stripes," and whose ideal was the paradox of submission, I thanked God and St. Dominic that my poor shrinking soul was allowed the larger liberties of the Bark of Dominic.

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Whereupon I entered a long alleyway of thought concerning the Friar Preachers' birthright of freedom. So wide is this reign of freedom that no other Order in the Church may be compared with it; and withal so subtle that it reaches to the fine divisions between soul and spirit. Indeed, at first sight, and perhaps at second and third sight, the organisation of the Order is so interwoven with principles of freedom that it seems to hold every element of destruction. Scarcely is there to be found any mathematical or mechanical force of cohesion; everywhere the elements of the Order seem loosely articulate with that most unaccountable factor, the human free-will; and that most unruly exercise of the human free-will, the free and secret ballot.

E pur si muove.

By ten thousand psychological laws, the Order founded

by Dominic Guzman, the friend of the Father of Parliaments, ought to be dead or at least divided. But it is alive and one.

This is not only a fact, but an astounding fact. Indeed, in these days when Society is in search of methods for leading the enfranchised multitude into ways of self-respecting power, the civic and ecclesiastical authorities might do worse than name a "Commission of Enquiry" to ascertain why the Order of Friar Preachers, whereas it ought to be divided or dead, was never more one or more at vital issues with the "errors and terrors of the world."



All this lays upon the units of the Order a certain burden. It is wrong to look upon servitude and kindred forms of organisation merely as a burden. To some souls nothing can be so burdensome as freedom; and submission to a well-established and strong-handed authority can be looked upon as an emancipation.

Moreover, an order of human units everywhere jointed with an absolute obedience to a practically self-nominated authority can at times have an overwhelming power and influence. Napoleon, who knew the power of authority, used to say that he would rather have an army of sheep led by a lion than an army of lions led by a sheep. The great Captain of armies, no doubt, was right in thus choosing. But the choice was not limited to these two, there was a third, to wit, an army of lions freely led by a master lion of their choice. Nevertheless the modern history of religious organisations gives us ten thousand examples of the work done by armies of devoted human units scattered over a kingdom or a continent and led by human intelligence.

That ideal is not ours. Upon us lies the burden of

freedom, that is, of such freedom as is compatible with solemn vows of obedience.

No amount of freedom foiled or spoiled should wean us from loyalty to our unique profession. From time to time there arise in the Order, as a kind of reaction to their environment, a number of over-zealous and not over-wise people, who repent of the Order's birthright of freedom, and look upon it as individuality run mad. Not unfrequently there is only too much to lend colour to their phrases and schemes. But abuses in administration are not cured by abuses in reconstruction. The Order will not begin to live, but will begin to die by such schemes as the appointment of all superiors, or the re-arrangement of our executive on lines of modern centralisation. Perhaps our Holy Father St. Dominic left us an example in the fact that he had no head-quarters, not even in Rome—his room at Santa Sabina is a cupboard under the stairs!—and he died at Bologna.*

Fitly his Order has been called the Ark of St. Dominic. At times when unwise zeal suggests a reform of our Order on lines that are not after St. Dominic's own free spirit, we feel borne to cry out in despair: "For God's sake, lay not your hand on the Ark—even to prevent it falling."

All this, as we have said before, lays upon us the burden of freedom. Of these burdens, the first is to recognise that freedom is a burden. It is not a mere lawless thing; though the laws are neither mathematical, mechanical, nor even organic. Neither is freedom a theory unconditioned or undefined. To say that

* There is an illuminating story told of a certain friar who went to a General Chapter in Rome full of a "mission" to reform the Order by casting aside boots and shoes and going barefoot. The Capitular fathers put him into the prison of the Inquisition. Whilst there his eyes were opened and he grew to wisdom. He might have been spared this humiliation had he studied the history of St. Dominic's foot-gear.

human liberty is the absence of conditions is like saying that human life is the absence of atmosphere. Some minds court submission to save thinking. The difference between the necessary acts of beings that are not free, and the free acts of man, is that, over and above the conditions of all acts, man's free act demands the added condition of knowledge and choice. It would be egregious to think that choice does away with conditions, when, on the contrary, it seems to multiply them almost ad infinitum.

The second burden is to recognise that unless the gyves of freedom are freely accepted, the result is failure; personal failure, when the evil is personal; collective failure, when the evil is collective. Every relaxation in our Order is a relaxation of the burden of freedom. Every reform of our Order is a reform of freedom. So obvious do these two principles seem, that it is perhaps true to add that our Order can never be reformed from without. Just as life wells from within so must renewed life well from within.

Few men seem to have recognised this law of Dominican life as did Leo XIII. With many inducements to deal out to us methods of coercion, he took a wiser and more effective way. When he first looked upon us from the Chair of Peter the Order could scarcely boast of being more than a splendid memory. Through causes which it would be difficult or dangerous to analyse, the spirit of Guzman and Aquinas was, at the great banquet of the Church, seated apart,

“A somewhat alien guest.”

Moreover, its aloofness was not only self-conscious, but largely self-made and self-sufficing! Like fallen nobility, its chief wealth was its past and its pride.

Many a ruthless worshipper of the practical would have

sought to mend or end our almost hopeless medievalism with a flourish of fiat and caveats. But Leo XIII had the wisdom to see a valuable and perhaps a unique quality in this Order, which could be as modern as Lacordaire, and despise modernity with the warmth of a major prophet. When men asked "Could these dry bones live?" he, with a tenderness nowhere more at home than in the heart of the Servus Servorum, laid the dying limbs together and gave us a life renewed. Not one act of his had the scent or colour of coercion. He dealt with us as with a thing beloved; and by showing his confidence in us he gave us confidence in ourselves. For reward, he saw a renewal of our life and thought without parallel, perhaps, in our history of seven hundred years.

The last burden of our freedom lies upon the brethren at large, and those whom the brethren have honoured with their trust. St. Augustine reminds superiors that it is their duty to be loved rather than feared. In saying this he laid down a vast programme for their zeal and wisdom. Blessed Thomas More again reminds kings it is no great honour to rule a nation of slaves; but to rule a nation of freemen is everlasting glory. The Dominican Superior should, then, take it as his programme to rule over, and, if they do not exist, to create, a community of freemen. The guiding principle must be, that what we do by compulsion is done *in* us rather than *by* us. If compulsion is ever needed it should be wrung from him with much accompanying pain; for it may be an unhallowed sign that he has not yet begotten a child in that covetable race of freemen, whose service is a holocaust.

On the other hand, the brethren at large who enjoy the liberties of St. Dominic's Bark must be indeed un-

sensitive if their heirloom of freedom does not often state itself as a burden. The unique quality of freedom, now sanctuaried in our midst, can be kept and handed on intact only by proving its supreme worth. One of its splendid notes, which the centuries are still further heightening, is its unity. Our freedom has not frittered us into anarchy. We are one, like the Bride of Christ.

Another note commissioned to us who obey is that of life. Each unit of the Order must be a living cell with its own act and energy welling from within. Knowing that it is the very virtue of our superiors to rule without commands over a free people, it should be our instinct to be beforehand with all directions of authority. Our apostolic life should be like our liturgy. Every man should be master of his own duties, which he fulfils so easily and so harmoniously with others, that there is no need for a Master of Ceremonies.

If our second vow of religion is looked upon as "treasure in an earthen vessel," how can we look upon our obedience save as a still diviner treasure, carried in a vessel of still frailer flesh?

In no other Order, perhaps, is the good estate and good odour of the commonweal so much in the hands of the brethren. In other Orders, what matters most is the character of the men who command, for the Order is like clay in their hands. With the children of Dominic, what matters most is the character of the freemen who obey; for such as they are, such will be the leaders of their choice, and such will be their Order, which their freedom moulds for good or ill.

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