

Comment

Dominic of Calaruega died on 6 August 1221. He was probably not fifty years of age. It was not yet observed as the Feast of the Transfiguration. That started as a celebration of the defeat of the forces of Islam at Belgrade, on 6 August 1456, by the Christian army raised by the Franciscan friar St Giovanni Capistrano (canonized 1724). The day is familiar to more people now, no doubt, as the anniversary of the first bomb in the nuclear age.

Dominic's last day was eventful. He had been moved to the Benedictine priory on a salubrious hillside to the south of Bologna, where the air was healthier for a very sick man. The monk in charge made no secret of his intention to have Dominic buried in the Benedictine chapel: he evidently had a nose for the benefits that thrive in the odour of sanctity. Told of this, Dominic exclaimed "God forbid", and his brethren did as he ordered:

"Carry me outside. Let me die in the street, and then you will be able to bury me in your church".

In fact he died that evening, safely inside the Dominican priory, with his head cradled in Friar Rodolfo's arms and the whole community gathered round his bed.

Dominic left behind nothing like the Rule of St Benedict or the 'Spiritual Exercises' of St Ignatius. If there is a legacy of 'spirituality' from St Dominic it has to be the juridical structure for the government of the Order which he put his last energies into establishing.

By February 1220 Dominic could have dictated the statutes that he wanted for his Order and simply imposed them in virtue of the obedience that every friar had promised him at profession. He could certainly have had extraordinary powers from the Holy See – always there for the asking. Instead of that, however, he sent round all the priories asking them to elect delegates for a general chapter to be held at Pentecost in Bologna. He wanted all the brethren to have a share in the definitive constitution of the Order.

Dominic's first act, when the meeting got to work, was to offer his resignation:

"I should be allowed to go out of office, for I am no longer able to serve as a superior".

It was no false modesty. He must have known that his health was declining. He agreed to remain, provided that his authority was vested in the chapter, and that he would be bound by their decisions, like every one else. He then insisted that the principle of dis-

penance should be written into the statutes. Very high standards of liturgical observance, asceticism, and so forth, were to be required of every brother and every community – but every superior, in his own house, was to have authority to relax the rule, for this individual or that situation. These mitigations were not just to deal with personal weakness. On the contrary, the rules were to be relaxed whenever they seemed to hinder study, preaching and the good of souls. There would not necessarily be anything odd about a Dominican for whom the rules were frequently relaxed. Paradoxically enough, that might only show how zealous a Dominican was! But the main point is that Dominic placed his faith in the judgment of the brethren who would be elected superiors. Ultimately, then, he trusted the brethren to elect superiors who would have the judgment to relax the rules in the right circumstances.

Dominic even trusted the judgment of the brethren when he must have thought that they were wrong. One of the ideas that he put formally to the chapter was that administration should be entirely in the hands of the lay brothers so that the priest brothers might be free to concentrate on the ministry of the Word. He had seen the principle at work in the Order of Grandmont (extinct since the French Revolution). In fact it had failed there, with the lay brothers' misusing their power over their priest brethren to such an extent that the Pope and the King of France had had to intervene. Dominic nevertheless proposed the system for the Order of Preachers – and the general chapter voted against his proposal.

There cannot be many instances in the history of the Church in which the founder of an order, or (even less likely) the foundress, ever put a pet scheme to the vote in the first place, let alone saw the proposal rejected. It says a great deal about Dominic. He was able to use his authority to create an atmosphere in which men who (under God) owed everything to him could nevertheless reject completely one of his own proposals. It takes a very free man to enable others to be as free with his ideas as *that*. But it wasn't just a personal gift Dominic had: that kind of freedom is exactly what the juridical structure of the Order of Preachers makes possible. That is why the Dominican spirit originates with Dominic's conception of decision making.

A successor to St Dominic will be elected by the general chapter in Rome this month. Of course, there are many other ways of making decisions, and of leading institutions, in the Catholic Church. But there is plenty of room for leaders who can free people even to disagree with them.