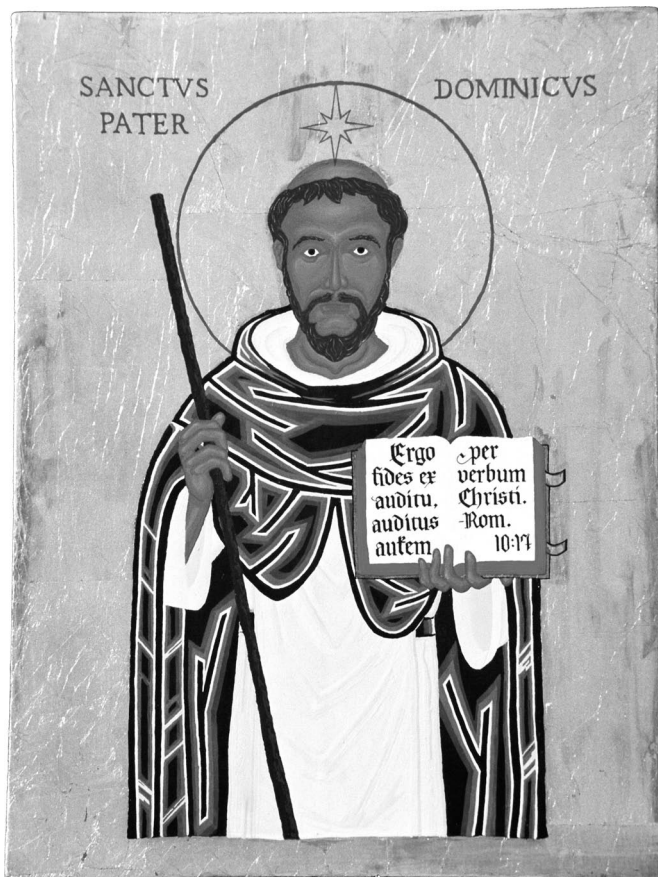




St. Dominic de Guzmán



Icon of St. Dominic, by Fr. Antoninus Niemiec, OP

BORN 1170; DIED 1221
PRIEST AND FOUNDER
FEAST DAY: AUGUST 8

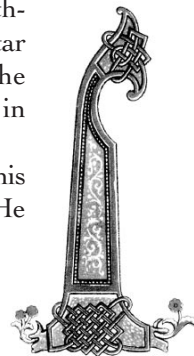
ST. DOMINIC, founder of the Order of Preachers, or Dominicans, is best known as a great preacher — and as a great advocate of the holy rosary, not as a simpleminded devotion but as a means of bringing people to understand the great truths of the Catholic faith through meditative prayer. The rosary remains the most popular devotion among Catholics even today, nearly six centuries later.

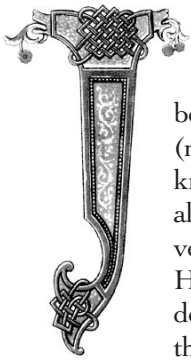
Dominic de Guzmán was born into a holy family that gave all its sons to the service of God. Born in Caleruega, in the Spanish kingdom of Castile, he was the prayed-for youngest of four children, three sons and daughter. His parents were Felix de Guzmán, a commander

of knights, and Bl. Juana of Aza. At his birth, his brothers were already grown and ordained priests: Bl. Mannes, who later joined the religious order his youngest brother founded, and Anthony, a holy man who later died caring for victims of plague. His sister's two sons also became Dominican priests.

Before Dominic's birth, his mother dreamed that her child was a dog that ran with a flaming torch in its mouth with which to set the world ablaze. This dream is the source of a pun on "Dominican," for *Domini canes* means "watch-dogs of the Lord." At his Baptism, his godmother dreamed that he appeared with a shining star on his forehead, enlightening the world. The dog and the star are both common symbols in artwork depicting the saint.

When Dominic was seven, he was sent for his early education to his uncle, a parish priest. He





began his education at the university of Palencia (near Valladolid) when he was fourteen. Little is known about this period in his life. He once sold all his books (hand-copied, these would have been very valuable) and gave the proceeds to refugees. He even sought to sell himself into slavery to redeem others. He became an Augustinian priest at the cathedral of Osma (somewhat east of Valladolid) when he was twenty-nine, and succeeded Bl. Diego D’Azevado as head of his Augustinian community when Diego was ordained bishop of Osma two years later. This was the most important period in Dominic’s life for developing his relationship with God. He was often found in church weeping in compassion for the sins of others. He already seemed to his contemporaries to be a bright burning torch.

When Dominic was thirty-three, he accompanied Bl. Diego, who had been appointed ambassador to negotiate a royal marriage, to Denmark. This journey necessitated going through the southern part of France, known then as Languedoc. Discovering that their host in Toulouse was an adherent of a heresy known as Albigensianism (which had spread from Toulouse), Dominic sat up all night discussing doctrine with him. This discussion was so fruitful that, by morning, the man had embraced the true faith. Without then knowing it, Dominic had embarked on his life’s work.

At that time, Languedoc was overwhelmed by heretical movements. Albigensianism, a form of a general class of heresy called Catharism, had first appeared about one hundred fifty years before Dominic’s birth in eastern Europe, France, and Italy, but it remained underground for its first hundred years. In 1194, the ruler of Toulouse had become Albigensian, and the heresy rapidly spread and became entrenched. Civil disorder grew, and the social fabric of Languedoc dissolved into chaos.

Albigensianism was an especially dangerous heresy. Like the older heresy of Manichaeism

to which St. Augustine had succumbed early in life, it taught that the material world was created by Satan, not God, and was therefore evil, and taught that people are evil by nature. It denied the Trinity and both the humanity and divinity of Jesus. It also taught that most people are damned, except for those who underwent *consolamentum*, a form of spiritual conversion. Since most people never experienced this conversion, they felt free to

live lives of depravity. For the *perfecti* (the converted), it taught that there was to be no marriage and no children and severe and lengthy fasting. It encouraged suicide through self-starvation as a positive good. Albigensianism therefore threatened not only the Church but also the structure of society. Efforts to impose law and order resulted in about a century and a half of disorder and warfare that were so severe that physical structures built before about 1250 are rare in Languedoc.

Complicating matters was the appearance, about the same time, of Waldensianism. Apart from its doctrinal errors, which in many

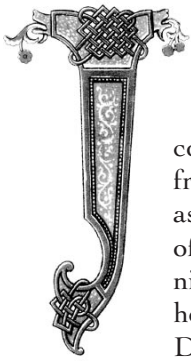
ways anticipated those of the sixteenth-century Protestants, the most notable features of this heresy were an emphasis on extreme poverty and on preaching, putting to shame the relative comfort of bishops, priests, and monks and the neglect of preaching by the Church.

After completing their work in Denmark, Bl. Diego and Dominic returned by way of Rome, where they requested permission to undertake missionary work in Russia (it is not known why this attracted them). The Pope instead instructed them to oppose the heresy closer to home. They went to the Cistercians in Languedoc, the religious order that was assigned to preach against heresy. They immediately recognized that the monks’ lifestyle was no match for extreme austerities practiced by the heretics. Bl. Diego and Dominic lived and traveled in humility and poverty, and used a style of preaching based on persuasion and discussion, rather than threats of damnation.



Monks and nuns of the Dominican Order, detail from the Madonna of San Domenico, by Fra Angelico, 1387-1455





In 1206 Dominic founded near Toulouse a convent to shelter women who had converted from Albigensianism. This convent acted also as a place of education and permanent house of prayer. The next year, Bl. Diego left Dominic to recruit more preachers in Spain; he died, however, in Spain at the end of the year, leaving Dominic to carry on alone.

Ardent and zealous, Dominic's preaching style was filled with charity and appealed to the heart as well as to the mind. He preached the doctrines of the Incarnation and the divine maternity of Mary, which proclaim the goodness of the material world and the full divinity and humanity of Jesus. He always encouraged his listeners to prayer. He constantly meditated on the Gospel of Matthew and St. Paul's epistles. He often wept during the consecration of the Eucharist at Mass, and spent evenings in prayer in church. He was found many times the next morning asleep on the altar steps. Fasting and other self-denials were a further means of spiritual growth.

Two significant events occurred in 1208. First, it is in this year that Dominican oral history states that Dominic experienced a vision of Our Lady, to whom he was deeply devoted, during which she instructed him to use the rosary to convert souls. The rosary became for Dominic his primary weapon against the Albigensian heresy, and his followers have been responsible for greatly spreading its use and popularity. His emphasis on meditating on the mysteries of Mary's and Jesus' life taught the truths of the faith in a way that preaching did not. The rosary also facilitated meditation, a form of prayer that rapidly deepened his listeners' attachment to God and adherence to the true faith.

In the same year, a papal legate was assassinated by Albigensians. The Pope called for a crusade (this was the age of crusades), to be supported by other European rulers. Savage warfare in Languedoc foreshadowed the bitter religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Dominic was chaplain for the army of the English earl Simon de Montfort, but he trusted in the efficacy of spiritual, not physical, warfare against heresy. His use of disciplined prayer, especially the rosary, is credited with de Montfort's miraculous vic-

tory at Muret just south of Toulouse in 1213 by eight hundred cavalymen against an army of seventeen thousand infantry and cavalry.

From 1204 to 1214, Dominic had preached as an Augustinian. In 1214, he founded the Order of Preachers, as the Dominicans are formally known, with sixteen companions. Preaching, the purpose of the order, was to be built on a foundation of personal sanctification, a life of individual and community poverty, and an assiduous study of the truths of the faith. For this reason, *Veritas* ("truth") is a Dominican motto. Dominicans were to have confidence in God alone and to distrust themselves so as not to succumb to spiritual pride. While he was obtaining the necessary approvals from the Pope, Dominic met St. Francis of Assisi in Rome, whom he had first seen in a dream as his companion in holding up the Pope's cathedral

church, St. John Lateran — that is, saving the Church.

Immediately after Dominic founded the Order of Preachers, his priests were sent to Paris, Madrid, and Rome, and shortly thereafter to Bologna, Italy where he himself lived when not traveling. These were all university cities that could train the next generation of Dominicans. By 1221, the year of his death, there were Dominicans in Poland, Scandinavia, Palestine, and England. His dying bequests to his friars were fraternal charity, humility, and voluntary poverty.

Aided by a papal Inquisition instituted in 1229, eradication of Albigensianism took nearly another one hundred eighty years. Known for their fairness and moderation, some of Dominic's spiritual sons became inquisitors, a task the Dominicans did not want but were required to undertake. In the Spanish Inquisition — a tribunal of the Spanish government, not sponsored by the Church — only two inquisitor-general were Dominicans (including Torquemada, whose reputation is worse than he deserves). The association with the various Inquisitions should not outweigh the great contributions of Dominicans to the Church and to the world of the mind. The order attracted and continues to attract great intellects, and fulfilled Dominic's desire to become a missionary by carrying the faith to the farthest parts of the world.

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