THE MENDICANT ORDERS (THE FRIARS): DOMINICANS AND FRANCISCANS

Prayer: St. Francis of Assisi's "Canticle of the Sun"
Hymn: 602 "All Creatures of Our God and King"

In the frescoes on the walls of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi Giotto depicted a series of scenes from the life of the saint. One portrays the dream of Pope Innocent III who in a vision beheld the church as a tottering edifice upheld by the shoulder of one man--St. Francis. Francis and Dominic were two of the great men of the Thirteenth Century, founding the last two great orders of the Medieval Church. They were the founders of the mendicant orders or the Friars. The Friars were to the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries what the monks had been to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The monks lived within the walls of a monastery and concentrated on saving their souls. The Friars took the world as their cloister and spent their lives in growing cities and in the universities. They were intent on ministering to the world in the spirit of Christ. Conditions in the cities provided the climate for mass hysteria and mass movements fed by wandering preachers. Franciscans and Dominicans were two movements that survived.

DOMINIC

EARLY LIFE: Dominic was born in Castile in Spain in 1170. He was a model youth--a brilliant student of deeply religious spirit. He became a canon at Osma, about 90 miles northeast of Madrid under Bishop Diego. The bishop and his canon started on a mission to Denmark but passed through Southern France when the Cathari were at the height. Diego and Dominic saw the failure of the Cistercian missionaries among the Cathari--thier luxurious dress and pompous manner further alienated the people. They were shocked at the contempt with which the people treated Roman missionaries. At a meeting of missionary leaders in Montpellier in 1204, Diego urged reform in method: Only by missionaries as self-denying, as studious of "apostolic poverty," and as zealous to preach as the "perfect" of the Cathari, could the Cathari be won back to the Roman fold. Diego had to return to Osma where he died in 1206.

DOMINIC ATTEMPTED TO ESTABLISH A MISSIONARY ORDER: Dominic attempted to carry out the plans of Diego. He gathered around him a small band of zealous men who pledged themselves to apostolic poverty and preaching. They would out-live, out-pray, out-sacrifice, and out-preach the heretics. Dominic founded a monastery for converted Cathari women at Prouille--here converted heretics and missionaries could find shelter and poor girls could receive an education. His work was very discouraging and a thankless task but he persisted despite the offer of attractive bishoprics. When the Cathari murdered the papal legate, Peter of Castelnau, and Pope Innocent III called for a crusade against the heretics and the long anti-Cathari war started, Dominic's work became even more discouraging. Some friends gave Dominic and his little group a house in Toulouse. In 1215 Dominic attended the Fourth Lateran Council in Rome seeking approval for his order. The council had just decreed that no new orders should be established. Dominic's request was refused.
Pope Innocent III urged him to work in one of the established orders. Dominic was already an Augustinian canon. He was not one to easily give up his plans. He led his men into the Augustinians, an order already well known for its preaching.

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Francis of Assisi has often been called the most Christ-like man since the apostle Paul. He is the saint most admired by both Catholics and Protestants.

EARLY LIFE: Francis was born in 1182 as Giovanni Bernadone, son of a rich cloth merchant of Assisi in Central Italy. The nickname "Francesco" or "Francis" supplanted his baptismal name. Francis grew up a gay, careless worldly young man given to mischief and revelry. He was a member of the militia of Assisi in the war with the neighboring town of Perugia. Assisi was defeated and Francis was taken prisoner and spent a year as a prisoner of war in Perugia. This was followed by a serious illness--Francis began to show a change in character. He was becoming more serious. He joined in Assisi's military expedition against neighboring Apulia but he withdrew and returned home before the battle.

THE CONVERSION OF FRANCIS: Francis experienced a call to Christ-like poverty and service to the poor and suffering and to rebuild fallen churches and chapels. Francis took the call literally and seriously and took money and cloth from his father's business for his work of ministering. In 1206-07 his father took him before the bishop to disown him but Francis disowned his father, declaring he had father but the Father in Heaven. Francis spent two years wandering as a beggar, preaching ministering to the poor and unfortunate and restoring churches. His favorite was Portiumcula on the plain outside Assisi. Here on February 24, 1208, he heard his trumpet-call in the words of Christ to his apostles in Matthew 10:7-14. Francis determined to preach repentance and the kingdom of God without money. He would imitate Christ in absolute poverty, love, and humble service.

GROWTH OF AN ORDER: Like-minded associates, both men and women, gathered about Francis. He pointed them to the commands of Christ to his apostles as he sent them forth. He preached against the wealth of the monasteries and their learning.

RECOGNITION OF THE FRANCISCANS: Francis journeyed to Rome with eleven followers to appeal to Pope Innocent III for approval in 1210. The pope reluctantly gave approval. Francis and his companions took the name "Penitents of Assisi." By 1216 they were known as "Humbler Bretheren" or "Friars Minor." Francis insisted on absolute poverty. The brethren were to work with their hands and avoid idleness. They were to receive their pay in goods rather than in money. They were to use for themselves only what was absolutely necessary and were to give the rest to the poor. If they were unable to earn a living they might resort to the table of Christ--begging. Francis applied the teachings literally. The movement grew rapidly. The secret was the personality of Francis--guileless simplicity, genuine humility, endless patience, great courage, and infinite love for all creatures--men, animals, birds. He taught his friars to regard themselves as God's troubadours--they were to find joy in their sacrifices and service. They were God's jugglers, entertainers. They were gay and playful.
LEGENDS THAT GREW AROUND FRANCIS:

Preaching to the birds
Brother Wolf
Preaching to the Turks
Brother Fig
God's greatest blessing

MISSIONARY WORK AND ORGANIZATION:

Francis resisted all organization except to divide the world into provinces where he sent his followers two and two to preach. He himself had planned to go to Spain to preach to the Moslems. An illness prevented his going. In 1219 he did go to Egypt to preach to the Sultan. While he was gone, Brother Ugolino and Brother Elias secured permission to organize. Francis in his absence had lost the leadership of his movement. When he returned he found it greatly changed to his sorrow. He was pressured to give approval to a new rule for the order in 1221 and to another rule in 1223.

THE LAST DAYS OF FRANCIS:

The rules and organization were a great grief to Francis but he deferred to ecclesiastical authority. He withdrew increasingly from the world, spending much time in prayer and singing. Illness increased and his body became feeble and blindness progressed. The Stigmata—the wounds of Christ—were reported to have appeared. Francis died in the Portiuncula on October 3, 1226. In 1228, two years after his death, Pope Gregory IX canonized Francis. In 1230 Gregory IX declared that Francis will binding absolute poverty had no binding force. The order grew in wealth and borrowed the organization of the Dominicans. They also rivaled the Dominicans as scholars. The early lives of St. Francis were an embarrassment. In 1266 all early lives were ordered destroyed. Around few lives have so many legends grown.

THE RECOGNITION AND GROWTH OF THE DOMINICANS

In 1216 after the death of Pope Innocent III, Pope Honorius III finally gave recognition to the order of the Dominicans. At the time Dominic had sixteen followers—six from Spain and the others from Toulouse, Provence, Lorraine, North France and England. Dominic kept the best features of the Augustinians but made striking modifications. His order was to be the "Order of Preachers" or "Friars Preachers." They would continue the charity work of the Augustinians but preaching was central. Though their number was small, Dominic sent them out to preach to the whole world. At his death in 1221, they were divided into five provinces—Lombardy, Rome with southern Italy, Provence, Spain, and France. By 1230 the Dominicans had added Hungary, Germany, England, Poland, Denmark, Greece and the Holy Land.

Dominic put great emphasis on training preachers. His preachers were to concentrate on university towns and to seek places on university faculties. It became a goal of the Dominicans to have the ablest and most popular members on each faculty.

Dominic also provided for an order of women. They could not preach but were to devote themselves to teaching.

After his death Tertiaries were formed for married laymen—"Militia of Jesus Christ". Married people could devote themselves to holy lives and service.
THE FRANCISCAN CLARES AND TERTIARIES

Early in the Franciscan movement while the brotherhood was still small Clare of Assisi and her first companions took vows at the hands of Francis. For women, Francis felt it necessary to accept the traditional monastic way of an enclosed life. The Poor Clares or Poor Ladies followed the ideals of poverty and service. Later they developed into a contemplative body of great strictness.

Either before his death or shortly thereafter the Franciscans provided Tertiaries for married laymen known as "The Tertiary Order of Minorities." Pious laymen devoted themselves to holy living and service. They were not held to the vow of absolute personal and corporate poverty. They did pledge themselves to live a pious life according to fixed rules and to abstain from military service and refused to take oaths. By their lives, their service and their teaching, they exercised a powerful influence on their contemporaries.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MENDICANTS

Dominicans were noted for the system of organization they developed. It was characterized by an intricate system of election and representation for conventual, provincial and general chapters, with a master-general at the head of the order. The Dominicans soon became mendicants. All property and wealth was held by the order.

The Franciscans soon adopted a highly developed system of organization and began to rival the Dominicans in the universities.

The pope soon found Dominicans useful as informers for Inquisition. Dominic was called "Hammer of Heretics" and his followers became feared as "Hounds of God." In time Franciscans also became informers of the Inquisition.

The pope also found it useful to confer on the mendicant orders ordination so that they could take confessions, baptize, conduct masses, and bury the dead. Great jealousy arose between the mendicants and the local priests and bishops.

The Franciscans split over organization and the holding of property by the order. The Spiritual Franciscans took up the teachings of Joachim of Fiore and came to be regarded as heretics and were severely persecuted.

By the fourteenth century, the Dominicans had about six hundred houses while the Franciscans had about fourteen hundred. There were probably about 28,000 Franciscans and about 12,000 Dominicans. The Dominicans were roughly equal to the Cistercians in strength.

The Friars developed the vices that went with their way of life. They became notorious for their sharpness in securing wills and gifts. Some were criticized for living in comfort but their wealth never rivaled the monasteries. They carried the church to lay society. They continued to go to the people and arouse their consciences against the worldliness of the age. Till the end of the Middle Ages the Friars continued to exert a greater influence on the people than any other section of the clergy. When one of the faithful Franciscans saw the splendid church erected over the tomb of St. Francis, in loathing scorn he remarked, "Now the only thing you lack is women!" Common report was that soon the Friars had their women and often they were the butt of popular ridicule and scorn. Even so, leading saints, leading figures in science and philosophy, and leading churchmen came from their number. The Friars inspired a new personal note in medieval religion. When the empire and papal monarchy were declining, from the Friars came some of the greatest names in theology. From the Dominicans came Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Eckhart. From the Franciscans came Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.