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Thematic Issue (Inspiring Faith)

SAGI: The Greatest Experiment

St. Louis Bertrand: Apostle of the New World

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Words of Wisdom: God will bring about the greatest good in ourselves and in others if we are pliable in the Hands of Divine Providence and are open to doing His Holy Will in all things. St. Louis Bertrand, in a spirit of humility and docility, devoted himself to accomplishing God's Will, no matter what kinds of sacrifices and sufferings it entailed. Thus, not only did he become a means by which God brought about many blessings, but he also found the greatest happiness and fulfillment where it alone can be truly found: in God's Holy Will.

A SAINTLY CHILDHOOD

St. Louis Bertrand, born on January 1, 1526, was the eldest of nine children in a Catholic family in Valencia, Spain. The son of a royal notary, there seemed to be nothing about Bertrand, nor about the circumstances of his childhood, that would indicate that God destined him to become one of the greatest missionaries of the New World. While a young child, however, Bertrand began to dedicate himself to the service of God, applying himself seriously to prayer and mortifications, such as fasting and sleeping on the floor (1). Under the guidance of his spiritual director, Bertrand often visited the hospitals of Valencia, and he found great joy in helping tend to the sick (2).

ASPIRANT TO THE ORDER OF PREACHERS

When Bertrand was fifteen years old, he developed a desire to join the Order of Friars Preachers, also known as the Dominican Order, of which a relative of his, St. Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419), had been a prominent member and who continues to be a great intercessor in heaven (3). Indeed, it was no coincidence that, as an infant, Bertrand had been baptized in the same font in which St. Vincent Ferrer had been baptized many years earlier (4); Divine Providence likewise arranged that the Dominican monastery to which Bertrand applied was the same monastery in which his holy predecessor had dwelt (5).

Bertrand's first attempt at joining the Dominican Order met with difficulty: his father, wishing to keep him at home, argued that young Bertrand was an unsuitable candidate for the religious life because his delicate health would pose an insurmountable obstacle to his fulfilling the daily demands of life at the monastery. The prior agreed to this, and Bertrand was refused entrance to the community (6).

Although this denial was an occasion of great sorrow for Bertrand, he did not lose his aspiration to become a Dominican; thus, he waited patiently for the prior's term of office to expire, in the hopes that a subsequent prior would be willing to admit him into the community.

In the meantime, the friars allowed Bertrand to be an altar server at the monastery and to tend to their garden. When the time came for a new prior to be elected, the choice of the community fell on Fr. John Mico, a gifted theologian who spent his childhood as a poor shepherd (7). Notwithstanding Bertrand's poor health, Fr. Mico was convinced that God willed Bertrand to embrace the religious life in the Dominican Order. Fr. Mico promptly accepted the young candidate into the community "and conducted the fervent novice in the path of true virtue by the love of the cross and humiliations, the contempt of earthly things, and the exercises of obedience, humility, and charity" (8).

PRIEST AND NOVICE MASTER

In 1547, Bertrand was ordained to the priesthood by St. Thomas of Villanova (d. 1555), an archbishop and member of the Order of St. Augustine (9). Bertrand's soul was penetrated with the realization of the holiness of Mass; further, to prepare himself to say Mass, he often spent several hours in prayer beforehand. Additionally, his reverence and recollection at the altar was striking to all who saw him, and he often wept while saying Mass (10).

Bertrand is said to have possessed a certain angelic quality about his countenance and a radiance which shone especially in his eyes (11). "In demeanour he was grave and apparently without any sense of humour, yet withal possessed of a gentle and sweet disposition that greatly endeared him to those with whom he came into contact" (12).

The Order of Friars Preachers, as its name denotes, is devoted to the study of divine truths and their transmission to others by preaching. Thus, Bertrand, as a Dominican friar, was expected both to become well-versed in theology and to develop competence in public speaking. "While he could lay no claim to the great intellectual gifts and ripe scholarship that have distinguished so many of the saints of the Dominican Order, [Bertrand] applied himself assiduously to study, and stored his mind with the sacred truths expounded in the pages of the 'Summa'" (13). Further, although Bertrand naturally faced difficulty in preaching, through perseverance he eventually surmounted such an obstacle, and his sermons became very successful (14).

Bertrand's virtues did not go unnoticed by his superiors: about three years after his ordination to the priesthood, he was appointed Master of Novices. As such, his responsibilities primarily consisted in the formation, instruction, and correction of the new members, or novices, of the monastery. When speaking with the novices under his charge, Bertrand sought to instill in their hearts a spirit of self-denial in order to embrace perfectly the will of God in all things; he likewise encouraged them to strive perseveringly for union with God by prayer and other good works (15).

MISSIONARY TO SOUTH AMERICA

An epidemic, which began to afflict the people of Valencia, became an occasion for Bertrand to apply himself again to the care of the sick—a work he so cherished in his childhood. With his own hands he buried the bodies of those who died of the plague, and he also encouraged others to perform such corporal works of mercy (16).

After the plague had ceased, Bertrand approached his superiors with a request for permission to preach the Gospel to the yet-unevangelized tribes of America (17). His superiors consented, and he was informed that he would be sent to New Granada (18). In 1562, accompanied by another Dominican friar, Bertrand began his journey across the ocean,

quickly converting the ship's sailors to a holy life by his example and preaching (19).

Having reached the New World, Bertrand and his companion took up residence at the Dominican friary of the province of Golden Castile. To prepare himself for his missionary work among the pagan tribes, Bertrand practiced fasting and other bodily penances, asking God for the graces necessary for his preaching to be successful (20). As he assessed the state of affairs in South America, Bertrand soon realized that he was about to face exceptionally difficult circumstances in his missionary labors: "It was very unpromising. The people were devil-worshippers. They lived in a country almost impossible of access, and they spoke a medley of languages that seemed impossible for Europeans to understand"(21).

Despite all such obstacles, God suited the holy missionary to undertake the work to which he had been assigned. Although Bertrand preached in Spanish to the Indians, they miraculously understood his words in their own language (22). Further, his efforts in evangelizing were so successful that the number of souls who received baptism after hearing his preaching is estimated to have been approximately 25,000 in the span of seven years (23). Bertrand traversed mountains and jungles to reach those to whom he would bring the Gospel. Among the many wonders which surrounded Bertrand and his works, it is recorded that he raised the dead, restored sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, had the spirit of prophecy, and was miraculously preserved from several attempts on his life (24).

PRIOR AND REFORMER

In 1569, at the order of his superiors, Bertrand left South America and sailed back to Valencia. He was assigned to the position of prior in two Dominican monasteries consecutively. As prior, Bertrand sought to bring about a reform of his monastic communities, which had grown somewhat lax in their practices, so that they would again embrace the strict observances of the Dominican Order (25).

Bertrand became a friend, confidant, and advisor of the famous reformer of the Carmelite Order, St. Teresa of Avila. When Teresa confided to Bertrand her plan of reforming the Carmelite Order, he assured her that God certainly willed it, and he prophesied that within fifty years the Carmelite Order would become one of the most exalted Orders in the Church (26).

Bertrand spent his last years preaching to the people of Spain. His sanctity of life and sound judgment were such that he was consulted even by Spanish government officials (27). Although his fame spread throughout the country, and he was often lavished with praises, Bertrand preserved humility of heart and sought only the glory of God (28).

A HOLY DEATH

During the last two years of Bertrand's life, he continued preaching in Spain despite the sicknesses and fevers which afflicted him. However, on one occasion, as he was preaching in the cathedral of Valencia, he fell gravely ill and was carried from the pulpit to his deathbed. Bertrand, surrounded by all the friars of the monastery, "appeared cheerful at the approach of death, having foretold the very day to several friends in secret, almost a year before"(29). Bertrand died on October 9, 1581, at the age of fifty-five years (30).

A MODEL FOR ALL CATHOLICS

Although the imitation of many of St. Louis Bertrand's deeds—especially of his extensive missionary labors in South America—is outside the scope of most priests and faithful, nevertheless, his humility, docility, and trust in God's ineffable Wisdom is a worthy and imitable example for every Catholic. As exemplified in the life of St. Louis Bertrand, God suits each of us for the particular vocations which He has chosen for us, despite all apparent obstacles and difficulties. By humbly following the will of God in all things, St. Louis Bertrand became an effective instrument through which Divine Providence brought about the conversions of many souls. The French Trappist and spiritual author, Dom Chautard, O.C.S.O., reflects on the truth that, through prayer, souls can receive great strength from God, despite their weaknesses:

The immense labors accomplished, in spite of precarious health, by a St. Augustine, a St. John Chrysostom, a St. Bernard, a St. Thomas Aquinas, or a St. Vincent de Paul amaze us. But we are still more astonished to see how these men, in spite of their almost unceasing work, kept themselves in the most constant union with God. Quenching, more than others, their thirst at the source of life, by contemplation, these saints drew from it the most unlimited capacity for work (The Soul of the Apostolate) (31).

Although Dom Chautard does not mention St. Louis Bertrand by name, nonetheless, Bertrand is certainly in the great company of the aforementioned saints, for he, too, suffered from poor health and, despite this, brought about a tremendous amount of good. Indeed, "the weak things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the strong.... That no flesh should glory in his sight" (1 Cor. 1:27, 29 [D-R]) (32).

As evinced in the lives of the saints, God is often pleased to work some of His greatest designs through those instruments which to man seem only insufficient and weak, that all glory be given to His Holy Name.

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