

Saint Dominic

Saint Dominic was born in Caleruega, Spain in 1170. His parents were members of the Spanish nobility and related to the ruling family. His father was Felix Guzman, and was the royal warden of the village. His mother, Bl. Joan of Aza, was a holy woman in her own right.

According to one legend, his mother made a pilgrimage to an abbey at Silos. Legend says there were many signs of the great child she would bear. One of the most common legends says that during the pilgrimage, Joan had a dream of a dog leaping from her womb with a torch in its mouth. The animal "seemed to set the earth on fire." His parents named him Dominic a play on the words Domini canis, meaning the Lord's dog in Latin. An alternative, and possibly more likely story says he was named after St. Dominic de Silos, a Spanish monk who lived a century before.

It is known that Dominic was educated in Palencia, and he concentrated on theology and the arts. He spent six years studying theology and four the arts. He was widely acclaimed as an exemplary student by his professors. In 1191, a famine left many people desolate and homeless across Spain. Dominic sold everything he had, including his furniture and clothes and bought food for the poor. When he sold his manuscripts, required for study, he replied, "Would you have me study from these dead skins when people are dying of hunger?"

On two other occasions, Dominic attempted to sell himself into slavery to the Moors to obtain the freedom of others.

In 1194, Dominic joined a Benedictine order, the Canons Regular in Osma. He became the superior, or prior of the chapter in 1201.

In 1203 he joined his bishop, Diego de Acebo on a trip to Denmark. His mission was to help find a bride for Crown Prince Ferdinand. Although an agreement was made, the princess died before she could depart for Spain.

Her untimely death left the pair free to travel where they wished. They opted to travel to Rome, where they arrived in late 1204. The reason for this trip was that Bishop Diego de Acebo wanted to resign his office to pursue a new mission, the conversion of unbelievers.

Pope Innocent III did not wish the pair to travel to a distant land filled with unbelievers. Instead, the pair were asked to go to southern France, the region of Languedoc, to convert heretics back to the true faith.

At that time, the Albigensian heresy was flourishing. This heresy was so dangerous that it even praised the suicide of its members, often by means of self-inflicted starvation! The heresy wrongly taught that all material things, including the human body itself, were fundamentally evil. The Christian faith teaches otherwise. In fact, it proclaims the very resurrection of the Body.

A group of monks, an order of Benedictines who returned to an ancient Rule known as the Cistercians, were specifically assigned to combat the heresy through prayer, fasting and instruction, but they made little headway. According to writings from the period, some of the monks had become worldly and even pompous in their approach, surrounding themselves with material artifacts which repulsed the Albigensians.

Diego and Dominic were austere by comparison to some of these worldly monks and this austerity and personal self discipline appealed to many of the heretics who had been deceived in their thinking.

When Dominic debated the heretics, they could not defend themselves. Naturally, there is no defence against the truth. Many heretics threatened Dominic with violence. Despite the threats, Dominic travelled throughout the region, preaching and converting many back to Catholic Christian faith and practice.

Dominic recognized the need for a physical institution in Southern France to preserve the gains he made against the Albigensian heresy. The nobility needed a place to educate their children and Catholic women needed a safe place away from hostile heretics. Dominic established a convent at Prouille in 1206, which would become the first Dominican house. Bishop Diego and Dominic established their headquarters there. The monastery remains to this day as the Notre-Dame-de-Prouille Monastery.