

IN OUR KEEPING

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congregations, and some convents were closed. In a general process of clearing out, this book had obviously just been disposed of, and ended up on the flea market... One wonders how many other treasures have disappeared without trace over the years. To have such things "In Our Keeping" is indeed a responsibility.

Cardinal Georges Cottier, the Swiss Dominican who was for many years theologian of the pontifical household wrote on the eve of the third millennium: "The way we look at the past, the way in which we take it on board is part of the dynamic of the present. History gives out lessons that we must receive."⁵ And Léo Moulin, a rather more radical Belgian historian has stated quite simply: "If you don't feel rooted in your past, then you have no present."⁶

But if we are honest, we have to admit that history is not the most popular of subjects – we can all remember being bored in school with lists of dates of battles or the names of the kings of England to

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mind are historical chauvinism and individualism. In fact they are related, and are features of contemporary society in general, and not just of the Dominican Order.

Historical chauvinism: this is the temptation is to limit our study of history to taking into account what happened in our own backyard. This is obvious from the way the dates of wars are given. In England, the Second World War is given as lasting from 1939-1945; in France it is over by 1941, when the Vichy government was set up, and similarly in the USA its beginning is dated from American involvement after Pearl Harbour, but naturally enough, from this perspective it does not end with victory in Europe, but carries on until the end of the war in the Pacific.

Our schoolchildren rarely get anything resembling an overview of history these days. In a religious Order like ours, which is both very old and very international

passing judgement, rejecting some aspects and choosing others. This is the business of discernment, for which the guidance of the Holy Spirit is indispensable.

Feeling that we have new and urgent needs, we set about reorganising the past. I am not just pointing the finger at 21st century Dominicans, but this process of selectivity has operated in every age, for each succeeding generation reads history through its own particular socio

Although it is undoubtedly administratively convenient, there has been, in the twentieth century, a tendency on the part of the Vatican to seek to “standardise” religious life, particularly that of monastic women. Yet religious Orders were born out of the intuition of a charismatic person, who is, by definition, someone extra-ordinary.

To come now to the second major influence on my reading of Dominican history: that is the lessons to be learnt from the French Revolution and the Dominican restoration of the 19th century.¹³ And indeed this period is sufficiently close for us still to be very much under its influence, in ways that we may not even

the 19th century. I am by no means saying that these are not good practices, leading to the sanctification of the nuns and their prayer during these devotions surely bears

handed it back to me the following day, he said "I'm convinced now, faced with that amount of detailed evidence, there is nothing more to say."

This scientific approach to the writing of history typically begins with a question – i.e. the onus is on the investigation, the author is not seeking at the outset to prove one thing or another, but simply to find out

unknown at the time of St Dominic but had been an important feature of the life of that American monastery at Buffalo NY since its foundation in 1905.

Iconoclasm is not the name of the game, however: the simple fact that we cannot trace something back directly to St Dominic does not mean that it is without value or that we should reject it. By no means, but it is surely good to be aware of the different layers that go to make up our history. At Fanjeaux, for example, I regularly take groups to visit the house of St Dominic. And one of the things I have to tell the pilgrims is that there is no way we can know for certain that this actually was the house that Dominic lived in when he was parish priest at Fanjeaux. But, I add, and it is an important but, for one thing it would have been a house similar to this, in this part of the village, and surely he is in any case made

force, for as it says in the book of Leviticus: "Whoever complies with my laws and my customs will find life in them".²⁵

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