

THE COAT OF ARMS OF THE ORDER OF PREACHERS

BRO. CHARLES M. DALEY, O. P.

I



THE Dominican shield is a hall mark of Truth. It is a mark of distinction, hundreds of years old, designed to keep before the eyes of the world that here is the "Order of Truth," here the "champions of the Faith." It is found strikingly embossed on the books of the Order, displayed on its stationary and printed on its literature. Done in its heraldic colors of black and silver, the Dominican coat of arms holds prominent place among the decorations in the Friars' chapels and churches. With *Veritas* as its motto, it is found carved in stone on Dominican convents, enhancing their medieval spirit and architectural beauty. As a modern trade-mark denotes a certain material or commercial standard, so the Dominican emblem indicates a certain spiritual ideal in spreading the Gospel of Christ by preaching and teaching. *Laudare, benedicere, praedicare.*

The constant appearance of the shield in one form or another on the buildings and appointments of the Order has led many people to inquire about its meaning and its history. It is our purpose to attempt an explanation that will be enlightening and interesting. If reasonable theories are sometimes advanced where historical evidence is not available, the reader will understand that the historians of the past have curiously neglected this subject. The only thing left for us to do is to gather together a number of isolated and scattered data and build up a fairly satisfactory solution of the development of the Dominican shield until future discoveries bring us nearer the real historical truth.

Before discussing the evolution of our shield, a brief sketch on the origin and development of heraldry in general will give the reader a background and help initiate him in the symbolic mysteries of what has been variously called a "noble science" and "the shorthand of history." A little knowledge of heraldry, even in this democratic age, may be very useful at times, for we are not unaccustomed to coats of arms. The ecclesiastical arms of the Holy Father,

the Papal Legate, Cardinals and Bishops were very much in evidence during the Eucharistic Congress held in Chicago. Every bishop in the United States has his heraldic shield with his personal arms and the arms of his diocese. Many of the States, Maryland for instance, display true armorial charges on their great seals. "For the pursuit of national or family history, and for the due appreciation of the meaning of countless devices in medieval illuminations, stained-glass, on monuments and seals, and so forth, it is altogether indispensable. The writings of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott, again, are full of heraldic allusions that are entirely lost on readers who have not at least some little knowledge of our subject, while the artist, in depicting scenes of medieval life, can by no means ignore a feature so characteristic of the period."¹

Strictly speaking, there is a difference between heraldry and armory,² but modern writers use them promiscuously, preferring "heraldry." It has been defined as "the art of arranging and explaining in proper terms all that appertains or relates to the bearing of arms, crests, badges and other hereditary marks of honor."³ In other words, it is a symbolic language, with its own system of significant marks, colors and emblems, classification and nomenclature, used to identify persons of rank and distinction.

The germ of heraldry, that is, its underlying principles of identification, goes back to primitive man; its colorful and symbolical properties are from the Middle Ages. Long before the dawn of history, man felt the need of marking his possessions in such a way that he could easily recognize them from his neighbor's. Primeval man was simple; his system of marks must have been very simple. "In those days," as G. K. Chesterton⁴ characteristically remarks, "few could read or write; they signed their names with a pictorial symbol, a cross—and a cross is a great improvement on most men's names." Writers on the subject often refer to the resemblance between medi-

¹ F. Edward Hulme, *The History, Principles and Practice of Heraldry* (New York, 1892), p. 2.

² "Armory is that science of which the rules and the laws govern the use, display, meaning and knowledge of the pictured signs and emblems appertaining to shield, helmet or banner. Heraldry has a wider meaning, for it comprises everything within the duties of a herald; and whilst Armory undoubtedly is Heraldry, the regulation of ceremonials and matters of pedigree . . . most decidedly are not Armory. Armory relates only to the emblems and devices; . . . 'arms' . . . to the device upon the shield only." A. C. Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (London, 1909).

³ Burke, *General Armory* (London, 1878), p. v.

⁴ *The Defendant* (London, 1907), in chap. "A Defence of Heraldry."

eval heraldic emblems and the standards used by the ancient peoples. We know from archaeology that the Greeks had mythical creatures on their shields; the Romans rallied around the eagle and later around the Labarum, or Standard of the Cross; the Viking had a raven and the Norman a lion. Plutarch is recorded as saying that the old Teutons had, as tribal ensigns, brightly painted shields with figures of wild beasts and other distinctive marks. These various insignia of the ancients are deeply rooted in human nature's love for the symbolic and ostentatious, but they cannot be considered heraldic in the accepted sense of the word, although it is granted that they are involved in the origin of heraldry as a pictorial language.

As to the origin of heraldry, we can do no better than to quote the late James R. Planche,⁵ an officer in the English College of Heralds whose critical research did much to dissipate the clouds of fiction and fable that obscured heraldry for many centuries: "Notwithstanding all the ink that has been shed, and all the learning that has been displayed in the controversy, the origin of heraldry is still but conjectural, its first resolution into a science without an authenticated date. It has been attributed with the almost general consent of every rational writer on the subject, to the necessity for distinguishing the principal leaders during the crusades, and the conjecture is natural enough, when we consider the confusion likely to have occurred through the junction of so many powers on the plains of Palestine." Taking the Third Crusade (1189-1191) as a pivotal point, all authorities agree that it was not until after this crusade that definite rules and regulations gradually came into use, although armorial bearings were not uncommon during the hundred years previous. By 1216 heraldry was a well regulated science in France, Germany and England. France and Germany were the pioneers in this systematization and their influence is still manifest in the present technical terms and expressions of heraldry. It was at this time too that heraldic devices were skillfully embroidered on the velvet or silk surcoat worn over the armor, from which custom we have the expression "coat of arms."

During the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century heraldry spread with amazing rapidity to nearly every European country, reaching the peak of its glory about 1377. "In the palmy days of heraldry it entered into every possible occasion of use, and

⁵ *The Pursuivant of Arms* (London, 1873), p. 29.

was found not merely on the garments of the knight and his lady, but on all the articles of daily service, in the rich stained glass of the castle and cathedral, on the stone and wood carving, the metal vanes, the flooring tiles, mural painting, and wherever it was possible to introduce it."⁶ It was an age of symbolism and an age of chivalry; but with the decline of chivalry, the concrete was substituted for the abstract, the real for the unreal, and naturally heraldry suffered abuses and disregard for its laws, which led someone to call it the "science of fools." In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries heraldry reached its lowest ebb, and it is during this latter period that we have the "abominable atrocities" known as "landscape shields."

Now, going back to the origin of medieval heraldry about the time of the Third Crusade, we find that whatever the natural instinct for symbolism and personal adornment had to do with it, its chief motive was sponsored by the fact that plain, simple emblems were convenient and practical means of identifying leaders in the dust and heat of battle. Personal emblems at first, then later became conventional and heraldic. The lion first appears as an heraldic bearing (lion rampant) on the seal (1164) of Philip I, Count of Flanders; later (1195), three lions passant guardant (walking forward facing out) appear on the seal of Richard I, of England. The fleur-de-lis appears as a personal mark on the seal (996) of King Robert, son of Hugh Capet, but later (1180) it is used as an heraldic device on the counterseal of Philip II.⁷

These simple distinctive marks admirably answered their primary purpose of identification—*arma sunt distinguendi causa*—for the warriors of the Middle Ages, clad from head to foot in steel armor, were all but unrecognizable, and when the closed visor was introduced about 1180 the disguise was complete. The early knights, in choosing their devices, had a special fondness for emblems directly or indirectly connected with pilgrimages and crusades, such as the scallop shell of St. James, various forms of crosses and the water-bouget. They did not hesitate, however, to assume other objects that conformed to the growing popular custom. The cross, being the mark of the Christian, predominated in a great variety of forms. "Crosses . . . were assumed as a badge, enabling those who were strangers alike in person and in speech to recognize in each

⁶ Hulme, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁷ cf. Planche, *op. cit.*, p. 27; G. W. Eve, *Decorative Heraldry* (London, 1908), p. 90.

other the votaries of one faith, pledged to unite their powers and energies in one common cause.”⁸

Among the organizations of knights who used distinctive insignia, the knights of the military religious orders deserve special mention. They used emblems to distinguish them in their noble purpose of defending the holy places and taking care of the sick and infirm. Moreover, being religious with vows, they were prototypes of their later and more peaceful brethren, the Carmelites, Dominicans and Trinitarians who also used insignia to distinguish their laudable works. First among these military orders were the early Knights Templar (1118) who adopted the Benedictine rule and the Cistercian white habit, adding a red cross to the habit in 1128. The Knights of Aviz (1128), a branch of the Templars in Portugal, chose the Benedictine rule in 1162 and also took the white mantle of the Cistercians, changing the red cross for a green fleur-de-lis cross—a cross with a fleur-de-lis at each end, called the “cross fleury or flory.” The Order of Calatrava (1157), another off-shot of the Templars in Spain had their rule approved by Gregory VIII in 1187, and they too used the white Cistercian mantle, but with a scarlet cross flory. The coats of arms of these military religious in the thirteenth century conformed to the habit of their Order, a red, green or scarlet cross on a white background or field. The Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem (Hospitallers, Knights of Rhodes, Knights of Malta), strictly religious infirmarians in the beginning but later also military, had as their distinctive garb a black mantle with a white eight-pointed (Maltese) cross. When these knights went to battle they wore over their armor a red mantle with a white cross. It was after the latter habit that they later designed a coat of arms—a plain white cross on a red field.⁹ It will be well to keep in mind this custom of the military religious orders when we come to treat of the arms of the Dominican Order.

Early in the thirteenth century the various devices arbitrarily assumed or granted in token of chivalrous deeds performed in the Holy Land or elsewhere, were gradually converted from personal emblems into more permanent and hereditary insignia. This hereditary principle was destined to play no little part in the development of heraldry. No doubt it was due to some degree of pride in their lineage or a desire to perpetuate the chivalry of their ancestors that

⁸ E. J. Millington, *Heraldry in History, Poetry and Romance* (London, 1858), p. 191.

⁹ cf. Carlo Santa Maria, D. D., *Rivista Araldica* (Rome, 1915), p. 295 ff.

brought about this transmission of arms. But Planche¹⁰ and other recent writers insist that in assuming coats of arms, "the object of the assumers was, not, as it has been so generally asserted and believed, to record any achievement or to symbolize any virtue or qualification, but simply to distinguish their persons and properties; to display their pretensions to certain honors and estates; attest their alliances or acknowledge their feudal tenures." Exceptions of course, to this broad statement occur; Hulme¹¹ mentions the arms of the Douglas family as an example. The original Douglas shield (about 1198) was plain except for three stars in the upper part or chief. When Robert Bruce, King of Scotland was dying, and could not go to the Holy Land in fulfillment of a vow, he requested Sir James Douglas to take his heart and perform the vow. In commemoration of this commission, his descendants added a heart to the Douglas shield in 1355, and when the Scottish king ascended the throne of the United Kingdom in 1603, the heart was crowned. Another example sometimes given is the shield of Tetlow (1760) "which included, besides thirteen other charges, a book charged with a silver penny, upon which was written the Lord's Prayer, to commemorate the fact that one of the family had accomplished that feat with a quill pen."¹² It should be noted here that as heraldry developed on an hereditary basis, coats of arms became more complicated and harder to read. Confusion was avoided to some extent by inventing certain marks of "cadency" to show seniority and degrees of kinship; certain "differences" were used to show matrimonial and feudal alliance. But the simplicity and clearness of the early shields were practically disregarded during the eighteenth century and the Tetlow arms is a patent example.

The Douglas and Tetlow coats belong to a class of arms that allude to the deeds, personal peculiarities, name, estate or occupation of the first bearer. Such arms are called in English heraldry "canting arms," in French *armes parlantes*—arms that tell their tale, *non verbis sed rebus*. "There are certain real advantages in pictorial symbols," Chesterton¹³ has well said, "and one of them is that everything that is pictorial suggests, without naming or defining. There is a road from the eye to the heart that does not go through the intellect. Men do not quarrel about the meaning of sunsets; they never dispute that the hawthorn says the best and wittiest thing about the

¹⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 282.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, pp. 12, 40, 167.

¹² F. J. Grant, *The Manual of Heraldry* (Edinburgh, 1924), p. 4.

¹³ *op. cit. ibid.*

spring." The *rebus* was very common on coats of arms in the early days, for the owners took pains to choose something that very closely resembled their names or professions either by sound or form. Father Marc Gilbert de Varrenes¹⁴ has noted "that our ancestors, less curious and more simple than we are at present, usually took care in the composition of their arms, that there should be a correspondence between their names and the figures with which they emblazoned their shields: which they did, namely to this end, that all sorts of persons, intelligent or ignorant, citizens or countrymen, should recognize easily and without further inquiry, to whom the lands or the houses belonged wherever they found them as soon as they had cast their eyes upon the escutcheons." Planche declares that it is scarcely possible to find an ancient coat that was not originally canting or allusive.

These allusive or canting arms conveniently fall into two classes: those that refer to the history of the first bearer, and those that play upon his name. As an example of the first class we have the Dominican shield which refers, as we shall show later, to the part played by the Order of Preachers in defense of the doctrines of the Church. Amusing examples of the second class abound—a whale on the arms of Whalley Abbey, Yorkshire, England, and on the arms of the family of Whaley; standing dishes for Standish; a capital A on a bell for Abell; snail shells for Shelly; a cock perched on an awl for Alcock. A modern example, common to all of us, is the papal coat of arms of Benedict XV. on which a church occupies the center of the lower shield referring to his name, della Chiesa (of the Church).¹⁵ The ecclesiastical arms of many bishops in the United States belong to this class. It is practically impossible at this time to discover the original allusions of a *rebus* and other charges on coats of arms, either because their key-word has become obsolete due to the changes in language, or, as is more likely, the older writers and heralds invented or distorted the original meaning into the most fantastic legends in order to oblige their clients who had to have a symbolical answer for everything.

Besides the canting or allusive arms, heralds generally enumerate about ten other classes according to their nature or origin, but we shall mention here only those concerned in our study. Arms of Community are those used by corporate bodies such as cities, universities, societies, religious orders or houses and episcopal sees. Hence

¹⁴ *Le Roy d'Armes* (Paris, 1540), p. 469. Planche's trans. *op. cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁵ For a complete description cf. Pierre de Chaignon la Rose, "The Arms of Benedict XV," *Ecclesiastical Review*, LIII (1915) No. 2, 129 ff.

a bishop is entitled to heraldic arms (if he be not a noble by birth), because he is "corporation sole," and not chiefly because of the nobility of his office. We may note in passing that a bishop carries his personal arms on the left or sinister part of the shield, while the arms of his diocese are on the right or dexter part; a bishop being considered as wedded to his see, *maritus ecclesiae*. This joining of two coats on one shield is called "impaling." In the olden days, the wife impaled her arms with those of her husband, taking the sinister side, for the dexter side was considered of higher rank and therefore more honorable. Arms of Community are usually derived from the arms of founders or benefactors. Paternal or Family Arms are those that have been inherited from the original bearer. In the medieval period, a "noble" had to show a coat of four generations *quia sanguis non purgatur usque ad quartum*. Arms of Patronage are those that are added to their own arms by governors of provinces, lords of manors and patrons of benefices to show their rights and jurisdiction. Sometimes this class is called Arms of Affection when they are borne out of gratitude or respect for a benefactor. It was quite the common thing among ecclesiastics. We find that George Da Costa, Archbishop of Lisbon and Braga, impaled with his family arms a blue shield with a gold St. Catherine's wheel, in memory of the Infanta Catharina daughter of Edward, King of Portugal, to whom he owed the beginning of his fortune.¹⁶ Likewise many Cardinals joined to their personal arms those of the Pope who raised them to the cardinalate. "Members of a Religious Order often impaled its armorial bearings or its device, with their personal arms, giving the place of honor on the dexter side of the shield to the bearings so assumed. Thus, the book-plate of Frère Jacques Renaud, of the Order of Friars-Preachers, at Lyons, bear the arms of the Dominican Order impaling his personal coat."¹⁷

Even a little knowledge of heraldry must include the fundamentals of reading or describing the composition of a coat of arms. It would unnecessarily lengthen this paper to go into the details at this time. It will suffice to say a few words about an interesting feature—the colors employed in the designing of a shield. Seven colors or "tinctures" are usually given of a field or the charges on a field: two metals, gold and silver; five tinctures, *viz.*, or (gold), argent (silver), azure (blue), gules (red), vert or sinople (green), purpure (purple),

¹⁶ Rev. J. Woodward, *Ecclesiastical Heraldry* (London, 1894), p. 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

sable (black). When the tinctures are printed, engraved or sculptured, they are represented by a system of lines invented by an Italian priest, Fr. Silvestro di Petra Santa, about 1630. By this system gold is represented by dots, silver by no marks at all or just plain, blue by horizontal lines, red by perpendicular lines, green by diagonal lines from right to left (that is from left to right of reader), purple by diagonal lines from left to right, and black by a combination of horizontal and perpendicular lines crossing each other.

*Aurum puncta notant, argentum absentia signi;
Linea stans rubeum, coeruleumque jacens;
Descendit virida in loeram, qua purpura surgit,
Cumque jacens stanti linea mixta nigrum est.*

With this little outline of heraldry, although somewhat hurried and sketchy, the reader should be able to follow with greater interest and more clearly the development of the Dominican shield. If we in this twentieth century cannot fully comprehend the influence that heraldry in all its branches exerted during the Middle Ages, we can and do feel to some extent the nobleness of character that it inspired, the greater efforts that it encouraged and the reverence for authority that it demanded — or we should have no coat of arms today. If “coat-armour was the *preuve de noblesse* of the possessor, it was the hall-mark coveted by the parvenu.”

(To be continued.)

