

1256-1956

On April 9, 1256, Pope Alexander IV's bull « *Licet ecclesiae catholicae* » united several groups of hermits into a well-organized, modern Order called « The Order of Hermits of Saint Augustine ». This consolidation is traditionally known as « The Great Union » to distinguish it from various earlier mergers of Augustinian groups. It entailed a radical change in the life of the hermits, for the Pope also commanded them to move into the cities and take an energetic part in the care of souls « through preaching and hearing confessions ». For this reason the Great Union can be considered the birth of the Augustinian Order as we know it today.

The Cistercians had long since proved the effectiveness of a centralized order with a common superior general elected at a general chapter. The Church favored this system and in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council made it mandatory for all existing Orders. Before 1223 a number of hermitages in Tuscany obeyed this command and accommodated themselves to the centralizing spirit of the times by combining into some kind of union, and five years later the number of participating hermitages had grown to fifteen. In March, 1244, Cardinal Richard Annibaldi united all houses of hermits in Tuscany, giving them a common superior general, uniform laws, a uniform habit, and the ancient Rule of St. Augustine. By 1250, they had grown to at least 61 houses and formed a strong, well-organized order known as the « Hermits of the Order of St. Augustine in Tuscany ». It formed the main body of hermits at the Great Union.

The second most numerous group were the Hermits of Bretino with at least 41 houses, principally located in the Marches of Ancona and Treviso. Third in line stood the Brethren of (St) John Bonus with 26 known places, mostly in Lombardy. A fourth group of hermits, the Williamites, had been excepted from the papal decree of 1244 but were forced to join in 1256, only to regain their independence in the same year ; they had little if any influence upon the development of the Augustinian Order.

More important than the union itself was the accompanying papal directive to move into the cities and take part in the care of souls. By this command the hermits were obliged to undergo a fundamental change in their spirituality as well as in their exterior way of life. After the hermitages had ceased to consist exclusively of laymen, its priests advocated a more apostolic role, and to some extent had carried their theory into practice ; but the old ideal of eremitical seclusion did not yield to them, nor at first even to the Pope himself. Indeed, the Pope had to be quite firm with some brethren who were reluctant to exchange their beloved hermitages for a stormier life in the cities.

In this period the cities were growing like mushrooms. The mere marketplaces of yesterday were now rising to an eminent position in social and political life. Their suburbs were overflowing with new citizens for whom the bishops and cathedral chapters were slow to provide needed religious facilities. Pastors instructed their flocks but little, and in many cases neglected them almost entirely. Itinerant preachers of heresy found a fertile soil in which to plant hatred of the priesthood and disbelief in the Holy Eucharist. The people could be protected only through an intensified effort in the care of souls and although the Franciscans and the Dominicans had already begun their tremendous work, the need of the day was so great that the Pope had to send the hermits, too, into the cities. He allowed them to retain the title of hermits so as to distinguish them from the Canons of St. Augustine, and wisely made them conform to the efficient pattern of the brand new mendicant Orders.

The main agitator for the Union as well as the guardian of the ensuing transformation was Richard Annibaldi, Cardinal Deacon of St. Angelo, who ruled the Order with almost unlimited power until his death in 1276. His greatness is indicated by the fact that he was four times a leading candidate for the papacy. It was he who shaped the legal, ascetical, and liturgical form of the new Order. He promoted its expansion with every means at his disposal, and he saw it grow to over 300 houses in all parts of Europe.

The Austin Friars or Augustinians look back this year upon a history of 700 years. Not once during all this time were they lacking a saint in their midst — a sure sign that their Order has always lived up to its principal purpose, and that the observance of its Rule and spirit will make men holy. The Order produced great

preachers and theologians, and its missionaries converted hundreds of thousands to God. It took care of parishes and colleges, and it did not leave untouched a single work in the Church for the salvation of souls. Even to modern science it gave one of its greatest men in Gregory Mendel, the discoverer of the laws of heredity.

The Order seemed about to perish on more than one occasion, but time and again it produced new saints to restore its life and strength. When Luther fell away (and with him a great part of Central Europe), Cardinal Jerome Seripando, the former Prior General of the Order, became one of his main antagonists as legate to the Council of Trent. At the same time St. Thomas of Villanova sent the first Augustinian missionaries to the newly discovered countries, thus opening a new era for the Order. When Secularisation had undermined the Order to such an extent that even its own Prior General believed the end near, Blessed Stephen Bellesini restored its will to life in Italy. When he met Michel Hurley, the first native North-American novice, he scarcely guessed that within a hundred years the Augustinians in the United States would be the strongest part of the Order.

According to the latest statistics the Augustinians are again one of the fastest growing Orders of men in the Church. Our time is so torn by hatred, strife, and mistrust that it needs men filled with the spirit of St. Augustine, which has for its symbol a heart pierced by God's arrow of love. Only such men can lead the world back to Christ.

On the Feast of Our Holy Father Augustine, 1955.

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