



Images and stories of saints in the regional territory and in its museums

Bevagna, chiesa dei Santi Domenico e Giacomo

Painter of Assisian culture of the 14th century

*Saint Dominic at table with his friars whilst served
by Angels; Burning of heretical books*

Fresco

The church, whose titular saints are Dominic and James, stands on the ancient oratory dedicated to Saint George, bestowed in 1291 on Giacomo Bianconi, who founded the church and the Dominican convent there; the church was rebuilt in 1397, when it acquired its present-day name, and then radically restored once more in 1736. In 1842 the convent was used as an orphanage and subsequently passed into the hands of the Lay Sisters of the Holy Family.

The frescoes in the choir, discovered in about 1920, were only partly saved after the numerous restorations. They are by an exceptional artist of Assisian culture who shows the influence of Giotto's early works. The paintings on the left-hand wall narrate two stories from the life of Saint Dominic, founder of the Order of Friars Preachers.

Domenico Guzmán was born in Calaruega in Old Castile around 1172 to Felix and Joanna (who was recognised as a blessed soul in 1828). Having completed his studies in philosophy and theology, he became a canon at Osma. Thanks to the numerous documents that have survived it is possible to reconstruct with great accuracy each stage in the eventful life of this saint and miracle worker. He died on the evening of 6 August 1221 in Bologna and was canonised in 1234. His mission was embodied in the struggle against heresy, which represented one of the main threats for the Church. The Albigensian heresy in particular, which was spreading rapidly in the south of France, was opposed by Dominic through the creation of a monastery in Prouille, through preaching and through conversion. This undertaking was followed, after the bloody Crusade against the Albigensians, by the

foundation of the new Order, which took place in Toulouse in 1215.

The scene showing the burning of books refers precisely to the dispute that arose between the saint and the Albigensians, who had challenged him by subjecting a text on their doctrine and the book of the Gospel to the ordeal by fire; the latter, unlike the former, was saved from the flames and jumped out of the window three times without coming to harm. In the upper register of the same cycle, the second of the two miraculous episodes is shown: *Saint Dominic at table with his friars whilst served by angels*. The event took place in the refectory of the convent of San Sisto in Rome prior to 1221, when the saint decided to found an enclosed monastery there, requiring the friars to move to the basilica of Santa Sabina. It is worth remembering that Dominic was responsible not only for the Constitutions of the Order of Preachers, but also for another legislative work, the so-called *Regula S. Sixti*, whose sensational innovation lay in the introduction of strict reclusion for nuns. According to legend, Dominic and fourteen of his brothers were eating in the refectory of San Sisto one day with a single piece of bread between them; whilst Dominic was preparing to divide it up, two angels appeared who placed bread in abundance on their table. This scene is frequently found in Dominican refectories in place of the *Last Supper*. In these terms it is important not to underestimate the will of Dominic, who, as a reformed canon, hoped for a return to the early Church and to the imitation of the Apostles. It is not surprising therefore that in the refectory, overlooking the cloister, Andrea Camassei painted another fresco depicting the *Supper of Saint Dominic and his friars*, which was recently destroyed.