

The Dominicans: Eight centuries of the intellectual and spiritual life

Briefly:

Created in 1865, the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir is the library of the Dominican Province of France.

Specializing in the Humanities and in Religious Studies, the library currently houses a collection of over 350,000 books and nearly 8,000 periodicals, in addition to engravings and devotional images, all of which are available to researchers.

HISTORY

The Order of Preachers, founded by Saint Dominic, was confirmed in 1216 by Pope Honorius III. Dedicated to preaching the Word of God, the Order's mission was to deepen the expression of Christian faith in a continuous dialogue with other religious philosophies and traditions. In the 13th century, friars Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas taught theology at the University of Paris. The introduction of Aristotle into the program of studies there challenged old mentalities and opened up new areas of research within the intellectual life of the university. In order to meet these challenges, books were required: thus since the very beginning, the priories of the Order paid a great deal of attention to developing libraries that had to cover the entire field of scientific research of the day.

In Paris, the extensive libraries of the three Dominican priories (Saint-Jacques, in the Latin Quarter; Saint-Dominic, in the Saint-Germain district; and the Annunciation, in the district of Saint-Honoré) provided support for the theological studies and publications of the friars. The Revolution put an end to these activities. Like other religious orders, the Dominicans were banned in France, and the books were confiscated from their libraries. Those sources today enrich the collections of the University of Paris and the Bibliothèque Nationale.

In 1838, Father Henri Lacordaire announced his intention to reestablish the Dominicans in France; the following year in Rome, he took the habit of the Preaching Friars. First of all, he founded the priory in Nancy, because the former curate of the cathedral there bequeathed his library of 12,000 volumes to the renewed Order. This fact highlights the crucial importance of a good library for the Order's priories. The *studium* of the Province of France was set up in 1865 at Flavigny-sur-Ozerain, on the Côte-d'Or, where it remained until 1880. The library there flourished.

After 1880, new troubles began. Once the French government had decided (once again) to expel all religious orders, the friars resigned themselves to exile. Some fled to Spain, others to Austria, taking with them what they could of their libraries. This state of affairs

lasted until 1895, when the friars were allowed to return to the priory of Flavigny. In the meantime, the library languished.

The Dominicans' return to Flavigny was short-lived: once again, religious congregations in France were suppressed, this time by the Law of July 1, 1901. The expulsions took place in 1903, and the *studium* took refuge in a former Cistercian abbey in Belgium. It was called "Le Saulchoir", "grove of willows" (from "saule": willow). Their books were moved in and the collection began to grow steadily. In 1907, the professors of the studium decided to establish the *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*. This was an academic journal that came out three times a year, containing two sections, one devoted to articles and the other to bulletins, book reviews and the like. The items reviewed were placed in the library for the use of students and faculty; this procedure naturally favored a rapid growth of the collection. Shortly afterwards, in 1924, another periodical started, the *Bulletin thomiste*, which specialized in reviewing and analyzing works relating to Thomist theology. This also enriched the library in a particularly sensitive area of study. In 1927, the Saulchoir received the personal library of Father Pierre Mandonnet, professor of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. This was a collection of rare books and other materials of great importance for Church history. In 1937, Father Marie-Dominique Chenu published "Le Saulchoir, a School of Theology". As indicated by the title, it was a proposition for a program of studies in theological science, which would integrate exegesis, history, sociology, and science (and soon, psychoanalysis) within the traditional study of dogma. In 1939, the Dominicans were able to return to France; the Saulchoir moved to Étiolles, near Évry, where the library was reinstalled. It consisted then of some 65,000 volumes.

From then on, despite the Great War, Dominican study and the library which supported it, enjoyed a period of stability and sustained development. Under the direction of Father André Duval, librarian from 1943 to 1962, the Saulchoir library reorganized its rich collections, and opened them to outside readers. Ongoing research, and numerous publications in theology and philosophy, contribute greatly to the breadth and depth of the collections; much essential groundwork for the Second Vatican Council was prepared here. In 1963, these activities led to the foundation of the Association of Friends of the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir. Its first president was Jean Porcher, head librarian of the Bibliothèque Nationale. This Association has proven to be a source of moral and financial support to the library.

The repercussions of May 1968 hit the French Dominicans hard. They reluctantly left the priory of Étiolles and relocated to the priory of Saint-Jacques in Paris. The library was moved into specially arranged quarters, including a reading room that was opened to the public in 1974. Today this library welcomes a significant number of students and researchers from various Parisian universities and further afield. The Saulchoir is an important part of the cultural life of the 13th arrondissement and beyond.

The Saulchoir is now over 150 years old. For the most part it contains works which the Dominicans acquired to support their teaching, their research and their publications. The diversity of the collection continues to broaden, in response to the needs of new

generations of researchers. Today the collections include some 350,000 books and several thousand periodicals.