

November 8 - Blessed John Duns Scotus 1266-1308



During the first decade of the 14th century, the most famous teacher at the universities of Cambridge, Oxford, and Paris was Father John Duns of Scotland - the Blessed John Duns Scotus. Not only did he possess one of the keenest and most penetrating minds the world has ever seen, but he was also a humble Friar Minor and close follower of St. Francis of Assisi.

Born in 1266 at Littledean in Scotland of an Irish family which had settled in Scotland, he received his early education from his Franciscan uncle, Father Elias Duns, in the friary at Dumfries. He was clothed with the Franciscan habit in 1279 or 1280; and even before his ordination he taught theology to his brethren (1289-1290). Bishop Oliver Sutton of Lincoln, England, ordained him a priest on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1291. After he had continued his studies at Paris and Oxford for some 8 years, he began to lecture at Cambridge in 1301 and the following year taught at the Sorbonne, Paris. At that time Phillip the Fair was engaged in a disgraceful quarrel with Pope Boniface VIII, and Father John fearlessly defended the spiritual supremacy of the Vicar of Christ. Thus he incurred the anger of the French king, and together with his thirty confreres of the Paris friary he was forced to flee from the country.

Returning to England, Father John then taught at Oxford for some three years (1303-06), and there obtained the doctor's degree in 1304. Soon the fame of his genius and learning spread abroad, and students came in great numbers to sit at the feet of the new teacher. "From almost every corner of the globe," wrote Rodolphus, "large numbers came to see and hear him whom they revered as an oracle from heaven." The title of **the Subtle Doctor** was conferred on Father John; for, as Rodolphus wrote, "there was nothing so recondite, nothing so abstruse that his keen mind could not fathom and clarify; nothing so knotty that he, like another Oedipus, could not unravel; nothing so fraught with difficulty or enveloped in darkness that his genius could not expound." Another writer declared: "He described the Divine Nature as if he had seen God; the attributes of the celestial spirits as if he had been an angel; the felicities of a future state as if he had enjoyed them; and the ways of Providence as if he had penetrated into all its secrets."

In 1306, Father John returned to Paris; and there came to be known as the Doctor of Mary, after he had championed her Immaculate Conception and refuted all the objections of the learned men of the time against this prerogative of Our Lady. Perhaps the most influential point of Duns Scotus's theology was his defense of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (i.e., that Mary herself was conceived without sin). At the time, there was a great deal of argument about the subject. The general opinion was that it was appropriately deferential to the Mother of God, but it could not be seen how to resolve the problem that only with Christ's death would the stain of original sin be removed. The great philosophers and theologians of the West were divided on the subject (indeed, it appears that even Thomas Aquinas sided with those who denied the doctrine, though some Thomists dispute this). The feast day had existed in the East (though in the East, the feast is just of the Conception of Mary) since the seventh century and had been introduced in several dioceses in the West as well, even though the philosophical basis was lacking. Citing Anselm of Canterbury's principle, "**potuit, deuit, ergo fecit**" (He [i.e., God] could do it, it was appropriate, therefore He did it), Duns Scotus devised the following argument: Mary was in need of redemption like all other human beings, but through the merits of Jesus' crucifixion, given in advance, she was conceived without the stain of original sin. God could have brought it about (1) that she was never in original sin, (2) she was in sin only

for an instant, (3) she was in sin for a period of time, being purged at the last instant. Whichever of these options was most excellent should probably be attributed to Mary. This apparently careful statement provoked a storm of opposition at Paris, and suggested the line 'fired France for Mary without spot' in the famous poem "Duns Scotus's Oxford," by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Scotus's argument appears in Blessed Pope Pius IX's December 8, 1854 declaration of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: "at the first moment of her conception, Mary was preserved free from the stain of original sin, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ." Scotus's position was hailed as "a correct expression of the faith of the Apostles." "The perfect Mediator," Father John pointed out, "must, in some one case, have done the work of mediation most perfectly, which would not be, unless there is some one person, at least, in whose regard the wrath of God was anticipated and not merely appeased."



The seal of the Church's approval was also placed on Father John's Christocentric doctrine on the universal primacy of Christ, when the Feast of Christ the King was instituted in 1925. "Duns Scotus," writes Father Gemelli, "conceived the universe in the form of a gigantic pyramid, built up of every kind of genera and species, rising upward by degrees, the lower stages united in their most noble part to the higher. . . 'Jesus Christ is the culminating logical point of creation.'" Thus, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity would have assumed a human nature even if Adam had not sinned. Because Adam sinned, Christ came as Redeemer of the human race, but He is at the same time King of all creation.

In 1307 Father John was sent to Cologne, and there he died and was buried in the *Minoritenkirche* or Friars' Church. The date usually given as that of his death is November 8, 1308. Long honored as a Blessed by the Order of Friars Minor, as well as in the Archdioceses of Edinburgh and Cologne, in the 19th-century the process was started seeking his recognition as such by the Holy See, on the basis of a *cultus immemorabilis*, i.e., one of ancient standing. He was declared Venerable by Pope St. John Paul II in 1991, who officially recognized his liturgical cult, effectively beatifying him on 20 March 1993. His tomb has been visited through the centuries by large numbers of the faithful. During the Second World War, the Friars' Church, which was formerly in the care of the Conventuals, was demolished; and while it was being rebuilt, the relics of Blessed John Duns Scotus were kept in a secret place in the famous cathedral of Cologne, except for an arm which is now kept in an ancient sarcophagus in the crypt of the Franciscans' new church in another part of the city.



PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

O God, who by the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin prepared a worthy dwelling for your Son, grant, we pray, that, as you preserved her from every stain by virtue of the Death of your Son, which you foresaw, so, through her intercession, we, too, may be cleansed and admitted to your presence. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

[compiled by Deacon Dave Ream, O.F.S., November 2018]