CHAPTER TWO

THE CONTENTIOUS BIRTH OF A NEW PROVINCE

Procedural tensions, institutional instability, and degrees of uncertainty having roots reaching far back into the Order’s first years complicate the generalizations some historians have made about a decline in the Order of Preachers beginning near the opening of the fourteenth century. In the previous chapter I sought to illustrate positive, negative, and progress-neutral manifestations of growth and change. Difficult decisions, uncertain prospects, and unanticipated outcomes were as much a part of the organization’s essential condition from its start as were the determination of saintly leaders, the thrill of some friars’ achievements, and the prospect of new mission possibilities. Turning away for the moment from our previous interest in pointing to continuities, the present chapter begins by identifying an event that marks an important break; here is an alternate starting point. The Province of Aragon began its operational life when the Order’s leaders carved it away from the Province of Spain in 1301. For friars in the new province, the start of the fourteenth century offered a new beginning eighty years into the Order’s history. Nonetheless, efforts by the province’s managers to take advantage of the opportunity fell short when undermined by the habits and expectations their own men, friars like those that Nicolau Rossell would at mid-century derogate as a dangerous brood of vipers breaking away from the mother who nurtured them.

Settling the First Friars

The factors at play in the long struggle leading to the division of the Province of Spain are not well-recorded, although what remains in chronicles and chapter acts hints at a very contentious process, one that has much to tell us about the nature of broader conflicts in the Order at large. The subject of this chapter is the birth in controversy of the Province of Aragon.

The first wave of men sent out by Dominic in 1217 included two groups who went to the Iberian Peninsula to establish convents there. Michael of Ucero and Dominic of Segovia returned to Bologna to
report utter failure in their effort to find a place for the Order in Spain. The progress of Suero Gomez and Peter of Madrid barely surpassed that of their brothers. The friars’ apparently feeble advance into the Iberian Peninsula has given rise to disagreements about why the region did not produce more and faster results for the Order. Dominic, after all, was Castilian, born to a noble family of Calaruega. Why would he not have taken special interest in his homeland?

Dominic made a trip through the region from 1218 into 1219, which included stops at Burgos, Segovia, and Compostela, where convents opened to local aspirants in those years or soon thereafter.\(^1\) On the same trip, Dominic also visited Zaragoza, an important urban center within the Kingdom of Aragon. From early on chroniclers have disagreed about the date of founding of the Zaragoza convent, some crediting brothers Suero and Peter, others seeing it as a direct outcome of Dominic’s visit. The house was almost certainly in operation by 1219.\(^2\) Barcelona’s convent opened perhaps a year earlier, or maybe in the same year or the next, likely under very different impetus.\(^3\) Some historians have deemed the opening of so few convents a meager result and have offered a range of explanatory suppositions: Iberia possessed few towns interesting enough to attract the attention of mendicant preachers looking to concentrate their efforts in urban settings; peninsular towns lacked merchant and aristocratic classes sufficiently strong and stable to offer consistent support to fledgling associations of friars; local ecclesiastical authorities saw greater success than their French or Italian counterparts in resisting the friars’ advance; local potentates invested too heavily in the politics of extraction and extortion to take much interest in making grants to newcomers. Robin Vose, offering a summary, recently opined that “Spain remained something of a backwater for the Order when compared with centers of activity such as France or Italy.”\(^4\)

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1. Jordan of Saxony, *Libellus*, 59 records Dominic’s visit to Segovia, and indicates that he preached to a large crowd there.