CHAPTER THREE

GROWTH, CRISIS AND RECOVERY

In Dominican historiography a “first crisis” – when an old-guard of recalcitrant bishops and jealous schoolmasters tried to block the progress of the newcomer mendicant preachers – ended in the friars’ favor, with the result that the Order of Preachers continued its trajectory of growth and success into the decades approaching 1300. The same historiographical tradition has it that the Order’s leaders carved away from the Province of Spain a new Province of Aragon in order to resolve the administrative pressures brought by the growth that came with mission successes. This reading, as we have seen, does not account for all of the evidence. International politics, internal contests and local pride of place played their part in advancing and forestalling plans for division, perhaps contributing even more, from the perspective of workaday friars, than an ill-defined push for administrative efficiency. Historians have also admitted a second crisis, beginning around 1300 with a slow decline of discipline caused by external intrusions upon the common life and then intensifying into decay as the result of a singularly brutal event – the Black Death. As William Hinnebusch lamented, following the wisdom of generations of friar-historians who claimed that conditions created by the plague’s ravaging of Europe in the years from 1347 to 1350 nearly brought the Order to its demise, the plague left behind it “empty priories and devastated provinces.”1 The fourteenth century was not a good one for the Dominican Order, certainly not for friars in the Province of Aragon, but it is nonetheless worth testing the story of a blow to the pride and purpose of the fourteenth-century Dominicans caused by external factors.

Crisis and decadence function well in so many contexts, to the point of having become tropes, precisely because their emotional tenacity substitutes for critical description.2 In the Dominican case, as

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1 Hinnebusch, Short History, 71–75.
generations of friar-historians sought solutions to the meta-historical predicaments uncovered by their research, “crisis” became an answer both suitably vague and sufficiently poignant to permit the entire fourteenth century to serve as a placeholder in a sacred narrative. The Order’s first century was remarkable, which is to say providential: Dominic’s divinely inspired efforts perfectly matched the needs of the time. And a later development, the fifteenth-century Observant Reform, regained commitment and zeal, thus anticipating New World missions and a counter-Reformation defense of Catholicism. Sandwiched between these ages of enterprise, the fourteenth century stands as a long period of wanting and waiting, an interim during which the Dominican vessel drifted, without direction, wrenching its moorings by forces largely beyond the friars’ control.

This traditional view of slow disciplinary decline turning to operational decay in the wake of the Black Death has gone largely unchallenged, and is routinely reiterated by some friar-historians without much consideration of the substance of the assertions. Among the few weak supports of the decay-decline thesis are untested assertions about demographic decline, assertions that have stuck in Dominican historiography largely because evidence to the contrary has remained scarce and fragmented. But the chapter acts of the Province of Aragon, being the most complete of any fourteenth-century provincial records, offer an exceptional opportunity for a reappraisal. Until recently they suffered two constraints that prevented their thorough examination: first, the historiography of Spain’s exceptionalism discounted their value in

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3 The most concise and direct expression of this meta-narrative is found in Hinnebusch, “How the Dominican Order Faced its Crises,” 1307.

4 E.g., Ashley, *The Dominicans*, 57–59.