CHAPTER TWO

CONVENTUALS AND OBSERVANTS

1. Unreformed and Reformed Dominicans

The factors that gave rise to the movement of Dominican reform in northern Italy during the last decades of the fourteenth century are complex and historians have as yet even to begin fathoming them. They might have included the desire of the succession of Dominican masters general of the Roman obedience to acquire, by fostering the movement, a certain degree of legitimization in the face of the juridical continuity rightly asserted by the succession of Dominican masters general of the Avignonese obedience in the context of the struggle between them engendered by the split within the Dominican order entailed by the Great Schism (1380–1418). More prosaically, they might have included the push on the part of newly-developing social classes for changing property-relations, for even the convents of mendicant friars were only rarely immune from such interests in their local contexts. Certainly the continuing, further spread of the reform movement during the course of the fifteenth century and at the beginning of the sixteenth was often aided by the intervention of secular authorities—princes and civic entities—concerned with an envisaged extension of political influence.1 Whatever the case, the movement of reform as it manifested itself in northern Italy with the founding, encouraged by Master General Raymond of Capua (1380–1399), of the reformed vicariate by Giovanni Dominici in 1393 that Pope Pius II reconstituted as the Observant Congregation of Lombardy in 1459, claimed to be inspired, in the first place, by a desire to return to an authentic Dominican life style.

Raymond of Capua expressed this, somewhat laconically, by claiming that the intention of the reformed Dominicans that he promoted

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1 See, for example, the discussion of the political calculations that informed the attitude of the Visconti and Sforza dukes of Milan to the spread of the Congregation of Lombardy in Fasoli 1992.
was simply to fulfil the letter of the Dominican constitutions. In practice, however, the fundamental point of divergence between reformed and unreformed friars was the interpretation of the vow of poverty. The conventual friars accepted a certain measure of individual ownership of such things as books and clothing and, especially, the custom of friars being allowed to have a personal fund (peculium) for approved, day-to-day expenses—funds of which the order, at least in theory, retained radical ownership. This entailed a degree of economic independence of individual friars from their communities—the situation often referred to as the ‘private life’ and, in the somewhat paradoxical terminology of the fifteenth century, as the ‘common life’ (vita communis), meaning not a life lived in common but the Dominican life as then commonly lived. This state of affairs had developed in the order from its very beginning. Whether it deserves to be judged entirely adversely remains a moot point, for it seems to have been the inevitable result of both the emphasis that Dominicans placed on studies, with its implication of expensive needs such as books, and the undesirable obstacles that a rigid adherence to mendicancy would have placed on apostolic activities such as itinerant preaching. Accordingly, fifteenth-century defenders of conventuality, such as Raffaele da Pornassio (d. 1467), argued that the way of life of the conventuals was, in fact, even more authentically Dominican than that of the observants, since it had been followed in the order since its earliest days, was allowed for by the Dominican constitutions with their stress on the necessity of apposite dispensations, and had been practised by such eminent confreres as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. Be that as it may, the situation had certainly deteriorated in the aftermath of the Black Death, and the consequent economic insecurity of communities, and, once ensconced, the practice of conventuality perpetuated itself.

Perhaps the conventuals’ preoccupation with, in effect, earning their own separate living—often by the acquisition of benefices outside the order—had a deleterious influence on their performances, whether academic or apostolic. But one must be wary of rushing to conclusions. Certainly, whether there was in fact a marked difference between conventuals and observants in such matters as apostolic fervour and efficacy or academic dedication and prowess remains to be seriously inves-

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2 Raymundi Capuani... opuscula et litterae, p. 55.
3 See the discussion of this issue in Tugwell 1992, pp. 334–367.