

A message for Christmas and the New Year 2010

Towards the 8th centenary of the confirmation of the Order

2010 - How can people preach unless they are sent?

(Romans 10, 13-15)

THE MISSION OF PREACHING

A Christmas Letter

Rome, 29th November 2009

First Sunday of Advent

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

While we prepare ourselves to celebrate the Festive Season I send you my last Christmas message as Master of the Order. I wanted it to be a letter that is full of best wishes and good resolutions as we advance, year after year, towards the **Jubilee for the 8th centenary of the confirmation of the Order** (1216-2016). The coming year – 2010 – multiplies our joy for Providence will allow us to recall an event that is very important in our history: **Five centuries since the foundation of the first Dominican community in “the Americas”!** Dedicated in a special way to reflection on “**The mission of Preaching**”, this year will open our minds and hearts and so will offer us an ideal framework for the celebration of the next Elective General Chapter¹.

Our Dominican life is orientated in a special way to search for and to know God, to keep and to deepen the Faith and, through our preaching, somehow make ourselves “responsible” for the faith of the others up to the confines of the world.

Saint Dominic was aware that it is not enough to conserve the patrimony received: a religious and moral treasure that is always fruitful. Surely, although by its nature this is an arduous and difficult task, it is not enough. The contents of Faith have to be renewed, not in themselves (objectively) for they have to remain unchanged and incorrupt, but subjectively, in ourselves, in our communities and institutions, in our culture and in our life. A more mature and missionary faith is becoming more and more urgent and necessary!

I. “We would like to see Jesus”

(John 12, 20)

We have been called to search for and to know God

Christmastime invites us to appreciate in our heart the beautiful words of the prophet Isaiah: *“The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone.”* (9,1)².

¹ **It would be the 290th chapter, although three Chapters were cancelled: 1468, 1642 and 1952;** Cfr. Angelus Waltz, *Compendium Historiæ Ordinis Prædicatorum (Romæ 1848)* 700.

² In the Second Part of the Book of Isaiah (42, 16): *I will lead the blind on their journey; by paths unknown I will guide them. I will turn darkness into light before them, and make crooked ways straight. These things I do for them, and I will not forsake them.*

On the solemnity of the Epiphany another text is proclaimed. It is taken from the Third Part of the Book of Isaiah which proclaims anew the theme of light: *“Arise, shine out, for your light has come, the glory of the Lord is rising on you, though night still covers the earth and darkness the peoples. Above you the Lord now rises and above you his glory appears. The nations come to your light and kings to your dawning brightness. Lift up your eyes and look around; all are assembling and coming towards you, your sons from far away and your daughters being tenderly carried. At this sight you will grow radiant, your heart throbbing and full; since the riches of the sea will flow to you, the wealth of nations come to you; camels in throngs will cover you, and dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; everyone in Sheba will come bringing gold and incense and singing the praise of the Lord.”* (Isaiah 60, 1-6)

Certainly, this passage gives us a very clear and relevant image. It gives the impression that, in the presence of “Light”, everything starts to move: nature, the kings, the peoples and the heart. Experiences like that of Moses in the desert contemplating the bush burning without being consumed, impel us to move, to ask questions, to start walking. We cannot just stand where we are as if nothing happened!

The birth of Christ, the manifestation of his mystery, our personal adhesion to the faith, all these generate movement, a responsibility. In the face of such revelation immobility cannot be justified. All things invite us to an enthusiastic, joyful and constant search.

At Christmastime, the visit of the Magi providentially presents us with an icon of this wise search, of a movement that is at the same time profound and centrifugal. I say that it is providential because we are starting a new year which the Order will dedicate in a special way to reflection on its apostolic, missionary and evangelizing effort.

During his studies in Palencia, the young Dominic also saw the suffering of the people. For him books were not “mirrors in which to look at himself” or walls that separated him from those who were starving. On the contrary, study opened his eyes to what many others had not seen or did not want to see. This was not an isolated episode, for up to the end of his life, his search, his Faith inspired gaze and his apostolic zeal impelled him to set out many times, to discover many other geographies: Osma and, beyond his native Castile, the Languedoc, the Marches, Prouilhe and Fanjeaux, Toulouse, Rome, Madrid, Paris, Lombardy, Bologna or, more distant still, the land of the Cumans, a desire that matured in his heart.

In the 15th century, the Order participated in the fruits of the Reform promoted by Blessed Raymond of Capua, as happened in Spain and in many other places in Europe. Among the reformed convents we find those of Avila and Salamanca, from where the first Dominican missionaries would leave for the “New World”.

Let us return to the Magi from the East. They search and watch, study and contemplate the sky. Along the way they try to focus their thoughts on the historical and real fact of the birth of the Messiah. When they watched the infinite spaces and nature, and when they studied the sciences they found signs that showed them the way.

They dedicated their time, sacrificed their tranquillity and set out on a journey, as we do when we apply ourselves to study. Along the way, they did not hesitate to search for help from among human voices in order to understand something that was beyond them (the light from above, the divine). They did not give up when, along their journey they faced the challenges

posed by the alternating rhythm of heavenly light and human teaching. Even more, they were not afraid to explain the reason of their travels. They did not complain that they had no precursors, nor disciples to prepare their way or to make things easier for them, people that had more information. Their long journey led them to the joy of meeting the Child, in simplicity, poverty and humility. **They searched for and found the Child whom they wanted to adore and to offer gifts. They were happy to leave their gifts and, eventually, disappear!**³

Before God, who even when revealing Himself seems to be hiding in His mystery – a child wrapped in swaddling clothes – the Magi teach us that the good fortune of believing is a gift from God and it demands our cooperation. This means that it requires all the energies of our will, intellectual honesty, and that we cultivate this gift.

Do we search for God? John Paul II reminded the friars participating in the General Elective Chapter of 1983 that one of the guiding principles of the mission of the Order is the absolute primacy of God on intelligence, the heart and in the life of man. Our mission is to proclaim that our God is alive, that He is the God of life, and that the dignity of man who is called to life is rooted in Him.⁴

Ignorance, inertia, indifference, agnosticism, systematic doubt, annoyance or refined boredom (fruitless inactivity), certain spiritualisms tied up to one's own interior experiences, the limitation of knowledge solely to data that can be captured by our senses or to rational evidence, and many other expressions of today's culture provoke the human mind to abandon its first duty in life: to know God!

This is a responsibility we have to arouse in ourselves knowing that in order to do this we have to move: think, study, learn, listen, and ask for the gift of faith! (cf Sirach 6, 18-21. 32-37).

Indeed, the act of faith cannot exempt us from study (Theology), worship and love of the received truth (reading, meditation, prayer), or from being coherent in our life and faith (virtue, Christian life).

**II. “*Remain faithful to what you have learned...
you know from whom you learned it*”**
(2 Timothy 3, 14)

We were called to keep and deepen the Faith

Responsibility of faith is not limited to the search for the knowledge of God. Faith demands that it be accepted as a gift, treasured, kept and deepened, cultivated! Lived!

³ As last July 21 we celebrated the 40 years of man's arrival on the moon, I allow myself to put as a footnote this short story that could illumine this letter. On October 16, 1969, Pope Paul VI received in the Vatican the astronauts Neil Armstrong, Edwin Aldrin and Michael Collins, the crew of Apolo XI. They were the main actors in this event that until then was only a dream expressed in literature. At that time many compared it to the “Discovery of America”. On that occasion, when the Pope received his guests, in order to commemorate the event he gave them a ceramic sculpture representing the Three Magi from the East.

⁴ Cf John Paul II, Address to the friars participating in the General Elective Chapter (Castelgandolfo, 5.09.1983).

In Matthew's story (2, 1-12) the Magi lost sight of the star but they did not stop searching for the newborn king of the Jews. They did not forget what they had seen, the star, or what had prompted them to leave. A luminous sign had been given to them and they continued to believe in its importance. Faithful to what had been manifested to them, they persevered in their search.

At the beginning of the 16th century, in the "New World", the meeting of cultures started to present serious difficulties of integration. As a first solution to these difficulties outdated criteria that had been used in different cultures and places were applied. As could have been expected, those who were the weakest suffered the negative consequences; they always do.

In the General Chapter of 1508, the Order responded to the challenge of the new times and places of evangelization, as it has always tried to do all along its history, by sending missionaries. It was a time of profound reformation, and so the fervour of the friars impelled them to the mission.

Among those who welcomed the call we find Bro Pedro de Córdoba. He was born of a noble family in this city in 1482. In 1497 he started his studies in law in Salamanca, where his Dominican vocation was born. He joined the Order in 1502 and, the following year, made his profession. When he finished his six years of studies, he was assigned to the community of Avila together with Bro Antonio de Montesinos, Bro Bernardo de Santo Domingo and Bro Domingo de Villamayor – a co-operator brother – who joined the first group of Dominican friars in America. They arrived in the island of "Hispaniola" in September 1510. (It is indeed providential that our General Chapter will be meeting next September so that we could recall that event and renew ourselves in the same missionary spirit!)

These friars immediately started their apostolic task, albeit with limited resources, and in a short time they became aware of the great human potential the new cultures contained which made them apt to receive the Gospel. At the same time they saw the profound and not easy problems that the mission presented to them: the difficulties the Europeans had to integrate with these cultures, their claims to have just titles for domination and to justify slavery, and the methods other missionaries used for compulsory evangelization, etc.

These friar preachers accepted as a community the challenge to face the situation, with all its consequences. The history of the Order recalls as a real sacramental the sermon preached in Advent on 21st December 1511. Bro Antonio de Montesinos was asked to deliver it and it can be summarized in the famous cry "**Are these not human beings?**" referring to the natives who were subjugated and badly treated.

This question marks the beginning of a long process, painful but at the same time fruitful, of thought and action which later gave birth to the Charter of Human Rights and of a new approach to the evangelization of peoples. Bro Pedro de Córdoba was somehow the heart of this movement both in Spain and in America. He provoked intellectual work on the topic in Salamanca. He applied new methods of evangelization in America. He created a school of followers among whom Bro Bartolomé de las Casas stands out. He, like another Saint Paul, was transformed from an oppressor of the Indios into one of their most fervent defenders.

In recent years, Bro Vincent de Couesnongle, Bro Damian Byrne and Bro Timothy Radcliffe, Masters of the Order, in several letters and messages to the Dominican Family, insistently signalled to the fruitful dialogue that existed between the Dominican friars in the island of

“Hispaniola” dedicated from the beginning to preaching in eminently pastoral surroundings and the friar theologians in Salamanca who welcomed their enquiries as a real incentive for study and reflection. These, on the other hand, offered solid and profound doctrinal elements for prophetic preaching to those who, on the frontiers, **admonished** the presumptuous and oppressors, **comforted** the desperate and oppressed, and **encouraged** those who hesitated.⁵

Those friars who preached in the universities or in the small mud chapels still teach us the secret of the prophetic vocation: the responsibility of faith and the conservation of the patrimony we inherited when we read events in the light of the Word of God, and the deepening of our faith when we read the Word with a feeling to reality. The first one allows us, even today, to see from afar and beyond the events, more profoundly. In this way, fragmentation brought about by relativism, and paralysis which could cause endless analyses of cases, typical of a laboratory, are avoided. The preachers of the universities and those of the small chapels, also tried to read the Word of God keeping in touch with what was happening, with events, through which God Himself wants to tell us “something” (Events can become indications, clues, “signs of the times”!) The rigid and fruitless fundamentalist polarization proper to Manichean theology is thus avoided.

On the 23rd of May 2007, on returning from his journey to Brazil, after the inauguration of the 5th Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops⁶, Benedict XVI said: *“Certainly, the memory of a glorious past cannot ignore the shadows that accompany the work of evangelization of the Latin American Continent: it is not possible, in fact, to forget the suffering and the injustice inflicted by colonizers on the indigenous populations, whose fundamental human rights were often trampled upon. But the obligation to recall such unjustifiable crimes - crimes, however, already condemned at the time by missionaries like Bartolomé de Las Casas and by theologians like Francisco de Vitoria of the University of Salamanca - must not prevent noting with gratitude the wonderful works accomplished by divine grace among those populations in the course of these centuries. On the Continent, the Gospel has thus become the supporting element of a dynamic synthesis which, with various facets and according to the different nations, nonetheless expresses the identity of the Latin American People. Today, in the age of globalization, this Catholic identity is still present as the most adequate response, provided that it is animated by a serious spiritual formation and by the principles of the social doctrine of the Church.”*⁷

The experience of the Magi, as well as that of so many saints of the Order, men and women, teaches us a lesson: we should not reject what we have known to be true, rather to be faithful to faith.

We are witnessing certain religious indifference, the phenomenon of de-Christianization and certain manifestations of neo-paganism which impel us to see Epiphany as the feast of faith.⁸ The journey of the Magi from the East impels us to gratefully welcome the immense spiritual patrimony of which we are heirs, the treasure that has been handed down to us by those who preceded us in the journey of faith. It is true: we are responsible for the conservation and transmission of this same patrimony!

⁵ As an example one can mention two works: *Relección sobre los Indios* by Bro Francisco de Vitoria and *Del único modo de atraer a todos los hombres a la verdadera religión* by Bro Bartolomé de las Casas.

⁶ Celebrated in Aparecida (Brazil) on May 2007.

⁷ General Audience of 23-05-2007.

⁸ It is important to reflect again on the texts of *Gaudium et Spes* nos 19-21.

However, it is also true that it is not enough to simply keep the Faith. The chief priests and the scribes of the people convoked by Herod did they not do this? It seems that they knew the Scriptures and they answered correctly to the question – information requested by the Magi. Nevertheless, they were unable to discover the responsibility that such knowledge of the faith demands and promotes. They did not allow themselves to be questioned by this knowledge. They did not move, and they did not set out to search for the One who was announced by the prophets. They were satisfied with keeping their faith without living it.

For us who contemplate the mystery of the Epiphany, for us who follow in the footsteps of Saint Dominic and embrace as our own the history of the Order, it is not enough “to keep” the faith. It is necessary to study it, deepen it, according to the needs of our own life and that of those around us, the life of those to whom we have been sent.

The truth that is revealed to us by faith motivates us in another search: it opens a spiritual dialogue and arouses interior fervour. The fact that we are believers impels us to live according to our faith, to an ongoing study of truth, to inculturate it, to evangelize culture.

To deepen the Faith is to study in depth the reasons of Faith, as the First Letter of Peter exhorts us to do: “*Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.*” (3, 15), This cultivation of faith, a real “responsibility for faith”, cannot be separated from a vital relationship with the Church and for this reason it carries with it a profound need for catholicity, unity and apostolicity that makes its sanctity more visible (cf. LCO 21).

III. “*Make the preaching of the Good News your life’s work*” (2 Timothy 4, 5)

We have been called to be “responsible” for the faith of the others, and therefore, to be missionaries

The “responsibility of faith” opens itself to the infinite horizons of the world and of history. It is the lesson of the universal dimension of Epiphany, of St. Dominic’s ideal, of the courage of those who set out in mission because they were sent.

Matthew’s gospel tells us that **the Magi were overjoyed at seeing the star** (2, 10). Is not this one of the distinctive qualities of our saints? St. Paul exhorts us: “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!*” (Philippians 4, 4) This refers to the joy of faith, a happiness that has to be lived and manifested more in our communities, in our fraternal dialogue, in our liturgy, in our study and in our preaching. In this manner, faith is made more attractive, radiant and fervent, and those who see us and listen to us will want to know the Lord better. There are many who wish to come nearer to us – like the Greeks to the apostle Philip –and express their clear desire: “*We would like to see Jesus!*” (John 12, 20-21)

Epiphany manifests the strength of the message of Christ which is to be spread to all humanity and awakens in us this catholic, universal vocation. Christ is for everybody, for all men and women, for all times, for all nations. In the Gospel of Matthew the mission of the Twelve is directed to the “lost sheep of Israel” and not to the pagan regions or to the Samaritan cities (Matthew 10, 5-6). However, right after the Resurrection – the missionary call acquires **universal qualities**: “*Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, “All authority*

*in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of **all** nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe **all** the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you **always**; yes, to the end of time.”* (Matthew 28, 19-20).

This call invites the Order in a special way to renew its missionary vocation even with special universal, wide and generous qualities, for **by our profession we consecrate ourselves totally to God and we dedicate ourselves in a new way to the universal Church, fully committed to preaching the word of God in its totality.**⁹

The truth we preach speaks to us of the width, the length, the height and the depth of the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge and is a call for unity! Truth penetrates human history. It makes us brothers and sisters, builds bridges and brings down the walls of human antagonisms, inaugurates a current of peace, and calls all peoples, from all the families, races, languages and nations (cf. Revelations 5, 9).

Like Saint Dominic, “who was most desirous of the salvation of all men and of all nations” (LCO 98), this “truth” – a motto of the Order – impels us to a new missionary zeal in the face of the tremendous contrast that exists between the call to all men and women to the Christian faith and the fact that many do not know the Gospel.

Like the famous musician Antonín Dvořák, the Order is called to write and interpret a new “*Symphony for the New World*”, for “New worlds”! In fact, how many “worlds” are waiting today for our presence as we recall this important anniversary of the first Dominican community in the Americas and joyfully move towards the celebration of the 800 years of the confirmation of the Order?

We have to take into consideration our responsibility for the faith of the others. We will do this in obedience to the apostolic, missionary and evangelizing mandate, and by putting ourselves once again in the hands of those who will send us forth considering the needs of the Order and according to our abilities in the service of Christ, as we did on the day of our Dominican profession.¹⁰

By profession, in vital relationship with the Church, we have been constituted apostles, evangelizers and missionaries. Can we be content with a comfortable faith that is withdrawn in ourselves and enclosed in itself, once we received the same vocation of the Word?¹¹ Many, in many nations and regions of the world are waiting for us to share with them our profession of faith and our Dominican religious vocation; may both be an example, and offer consolation and encouragement. May the light of faith, contemplated and lived, shine and irradiate itself on those we meet so that they could find clarity, orientation and strength for their living. We know that those to whom we are sent would be for us an example, consolation and encouragement... and we are missioned by them!

Epiphany is the feast of those who are far away, the feast of the “missions”, “missionaries” and the “missioned”. It is the feast of the universality of the Christian message (which makes it “catholic”). It is the feast of the vocation “of the people”, the free invitation for all to

⁹ Cfr LCO 1§III; Honorius III, Letter to all prelates of the Church (4.02.1221), Cf. Honorius III, Bull of 18.01.1221 (MOPH 25, 144) cf *S.Theologiae II II q.186, a 1.*

¹⁰ Cf. Formula for the assignation of the friars of the Order of Preachers.

¹¹ Saint Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue* n.158

participate in the banquet of the gospel, the feast in which everybody may reign with Christ, for Him and in Him.

A life attracted by the light of Christ and enlightened by Him, knows how to attract others, and manifests the face of God who is love, mercy and forgiveness. May this year be an “Epiphany” for everybody. May it make our spirit burn with the zeal to carry Christ to the world. *“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring (the) good news!”*” (Romans 10, 13-15)

As I finish writing these pages, I treasure in my heart the memory of many missionary communities of the Order I visited, images full of colour and warmth. Special greetings go to the many missionaries, brothers and sisters from different Dominican Congregations. Indeed, how valiant our sisters are! How many things they teach us! I do not forget those monasteries situated in very poor places, in difficult situations. They are like lighthouses that illumine without dazzling, pointing the way... They are true signs of peace, *“for Christ is our peace”*. (Ephesians 2, 14)

It is beautiful to see that **“The star of Bethlehem still shines in the dark night, even today”!** (Edith Stein)

Happy Christmas! May the Lord give you all a New Year 2010 full of good things, true and beautiful, things that belong to God!

Fraternally in Christ, Mary and Saint Dominic

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Original: Spanish