



Friars of the Order of Preachers
General Curia

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Feast of Saint Augustine

Prot.50/10/785 Lettere Varie M.O.

“Intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart”
Letter to the Nuns of the Order

Very dear sisters,

On this feast of St. Augustine, a few days before completing my mandate as Master of the Order, and wishing to follow in some way in the steps of fr. Damian Byrne and fr. Timothy Radcliffe, I want to write a letter dedicated especially to you.

I speak of a desire which goes back even before the Jubilee Year which celebrated the eight hundred years since the foundation of the first contemplative Dominican community (Prouille). In fact, in October of 2004 at Santa Sabina, I met with the members of the International Commission of the nuns and asked their help. After thinking and talking about it, Fr. Manuel Merten – at that time promoter of the nuns-- together with the members of that Commission, decided to invite all the nuns and monasteries to reflect on their vocation.¹ The response of the monasteries world-wide was positive, enthusiastic, profound. The International Commission offered me in good time all the contributions, collected and put in order, and included an interesting synthesis.

I would have wished at last to weave together the richness of such reflections and, like John the Baptist, make of myself a “voice” for the “Word”² dwelling in you. But I must confess to you that I did not feel capable of writing a letter like that.

After a time, there was a second Retreat preached to the nuns in Caleruega (in June of this year). At meals, various texts were read: the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete in Domino* of Paul VI, on Christian joy,³ his “Meditation on Death or Spiritual Testament,”⁴ the catecheses of the Holy Father on St. Dominic, St. Albert, and St. Thomas Aquinas, and the letters directed to the nuns by my two immediate predecessors at the end of their respective mandates, in 1992 and 2001. Many of the nuns have asked me about those letters. (Eighteen years after the first and more than nine years after the second, some did not know about them or perhaps did not remember them!) Today, before writing you about other things, I adopt those pages as though they were my own, inviting you to turn to them again, and to meditate on them in your hearts.⁵

Also in these years, I have been able to meet many of you in your communities. Unfortunately I could not reach all the monasteries. But surely there has been a special page in our meetings: the retreats (“spiritual exercises”) I have been able to preach in different regions or federations. I assure you that for me those days are unforgettable. They have been some of the most beautiful experiences the Lord has given me in the nine years of my ministry as Master! I regret very much that I was not able to preach to the nuns of other regions (Asia, Africa, the East European region)!

I can say also that I have written various letters to Federations and monasteries on the occasion of the Nuns' Jubilee, a year which did much good to the whole Order. I mention especially the letters "*That they may have life*"⁶ and also "*Do you need anything?*"⁷

As an echo of the celebration of the eight hundred years since the founding of Prouille, and within the nine-year preparation for commemorating also the eighth centenary of the Confirmation of the Order, what could be better than to recall something which goes back to the origins of the nuns, to those who were in immediate relationship with St. Dominic. Blessed Cecilia says clearly that the sisters brought together at San Sisto were taken care of with great solicitude by the Father of the Preachers, and, using words which indicate great satisfaction, she assures us that he instructed them in matters pertaining to this new way of religious life, "*for they had no other teacher forming them in the life of the Order.*"⁸ This generous service that he offered to the first communities was matched by the religious sisters' full confidence, not letting themselves be dissuaded or discouraged by those who, to deflect them from their purpose, were trying to discredit St. Dominic – as happened in Rome.

Dominican life made a step forward in relation to medieval monasticism. The founder of the Preachers asked for "readiness [la disponibilidad para la itinerancia] for itinerancy, and for solidarity among the communities" when that would be needed. In this matter he asked the Pope to direct one same Bull to both the sisters and the brothers. Honorius III responded with his *Civita Castellana*, Dec. 17, 1219.⁹ He made clear in this document that he wanted "*to plant fruit-bearing trees*" in the paradise of the Church and "*take care of those already planted.*" He wanted both the one and the other (to continue the same image) to grow in a new foundation in Rome, near the venerable basilica dedicated to the martyred Pope St. Sixtus. For this he *commanded with apostolic authority* that the sisters at Prouille, if St. Dominic judged they were needed for this foundation, should be prompt in going to the new convent in accordance with his command, in order to consecrate themselves totally to the Lord in the Order.

Two years later, in the Spring of 1221, when St. Dominic showed once more his conviction that "*stored-up grain rots, but grain sown, fructifies*" and called at the door of the Prouille community, eight sisters took the road to Rome. One of them, Sister Blanca, was the first prioress of the Roman community. As St. Dominic wished, the sisters from the south of France "**taught the Order**" to the sisters gathered at San Sisto.¹⁰ The Pope wanted a renewed religious life in his diocese of Rome which would spread from there to the whole Church. St. Dominic wanted nothing but to collaborate in a broad ecclesial project which was being called to produce important fruit, far distant in time and in geographical limits from those familiar in his day.

With the reception into the Order of Blessed Diana d'Andalo, the bases were laid for a foundation in Bologna. That foundation, the Convent of St. Agnes, was brought into being in 1223 by Blessed Jordan, just a few months after his election as Master of the Order. Following in the footsteps of St. Dominic, Jordan saw to it that four nuns of San Sisto in Rome moved to Bologna. There they found the very young nun Cecilia as

prioress of the community.¹¹ (She was prioress in 1237 also.) Soon they attracted young Bolognese women to enter Dominican monastic life.

Not much later – still in Blessed Jordan’s day – the monastery of Alba (Cuneo) was founded. Nuns from St. Agnes’ in Bologna went to the Alba foundation also.¹² These experiences of giving life have been repeated throughout the nuns’ eight hundred years, in many monasteries and in various countries. Knowing the history of some communities we are surprised by their generosity, even in their poverty. Does not the Lord ask us today for a similar generosity? Was that not the desire of the Council when it invited contemplative communities to renew their “founding” spirit, and in joyful hope to extend into other corners of the world their first love?¹³

Is it not the moment to stir up collaboration among communities by foundation projects which give new life? These are not just unreal dreams; I speak of realistic projects, faithful to history and at the same time full of hope. We cannot limit ourselves to the goal of “having more people in the house” when we pray for, stir up, seek and attract more vocations. To celebrate the five hundred years since the first community of friars in the Americas, the whole Order must rediscover its call to their missionary spirit. In summary: Be faithful to Life!

As contemplatives of the Order of Preachers, you have kept in your hearts all that St. Dominic taught you. In this sense the contemplatives have to be like the reservoir [la reserva] of the patrimony that our Father wanted as the impulse for the preaching mission. Now I have the courage to ask that you “remind” us of that patrimony.¹⁴ Impel the friars to be truly men of the Gospel, Preachers of the Word studied, prayed over, contemplated. Offer your witness to the religious women of many Congregations, so that they may discover always and everywhere the contemplative and communitarian roots of their apostolic and missionary fervor, the ultimate meaning of their commitment to the poor and marginalized, and the anticipation of future realities. Invite our lay fraternities to be leaven in the world and the circles which they must evangelize: the family, the school and the university, the world of work and of workers’ associations, the world of factories and offices, of politics, of the economy, and so on.

Taking account of the dialogue which I have tried to maintain with you from the beginning of my mandate, I conclude this letter by an insistence, opportune or not: I urge you one more time to do as St. Dominic did, as the nuns of Prouille did for their sisters at San Sisto in Rome. Complete the task the brothers gave me nine years ago: **Form us in the life of the Order! Teach us the Order!**

I appeal to you to continue talking among yourselves about these matters in each monastery, in the different regions and in the federations. Dialogue helps us to share our joys and sorrows and also our sadness and distress. Dialogue widens our hearts. Dialogue increases our desire to keep growing, like Jesus, “**in age, wisdom and grace before God and man**” (Lk 2:52).

At the same time we entrust to God all our preoccupations, for he takes care of us (cf. 1 Peter 5:7). We pray for the light of the Holy Spirit to help us to know “**what is the will of the Father, what is good, pleasing and perfect**” (cf. Romans 12:1).

In view of the decisions of Lateran Council IV (canon XIII), Pope Innocent III invited Dominic, with his brethren, to choose an already-existing Rule of Life. The friars opted unanimously for the Rule of St. Augustine. What seemed at first an obstacle to the newness of St. Dominic's project, developed into being the institutional way for them to insert themselves canonically into the universal Church; that is to say: living an original charism which was at the same time dynamic and - from the heart of the Church - Gospel leaven in the world.

The Rule of St. Augustine precedes the Constitutions of the nuns as it does those of the friars. I invite you on this day when we celebrate the holy Bishop of Hippo to read them together as expression of a desire which has become a plea: ***“The main purpose for your having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart”***(Rule, 3).

Dear sisters in Saint Dominic, always be conscious of your contemplative life and mission, sensitive to the real and deep needs of all the men and women for whom you pray and sacrifice yourselves. Walk on – poor, free, strong, and loving - toward Christ, living your vocation faithfully, joyfully, simply, humbly, with courage and as the will of God, and doing the duty which comes from the circumstances in which you find yourselves. Do promptly, well and joyfully what the Church, the Order, and the world now expect of you, even when that immeasurably surpasses your strength and asks from you your life.

Grateful for your witness and prayers, which have so heartened me in these recent years, I say in St. Dominic a brotherly farewell. Until we meet again, at every Eucharist!



Fray Carlos A. AZPIROZ COSTA OP
Maestro de la Orden

¹ Do you remember the questions sent to all the monasteries? How do I contemplate? What do I contemplate? How has my contemplative life changed? What can I say to the Dominican Family about contemplation?

² Cf. St. Augustine, Sermon 293, 3 (see Third Sunday of Advent, Office of Readings).

³ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete in Domino* (March 9, 1975).

⁴ Paul VI, *Pensiero alla morte* (Ed. Vaticana, 1979). [Thoughts on Death]

⁵ Fr. Damian Byrne, Letter to the Nuns of the Order (May 1992), *Analecta* 100 (1992) 20-42; fr. Timothy Radcliffe, Letter, *A contemplative life* (29.04.2001) *Analecta* 109 (2001) 63-87; *IDI* 393 (May 2001) 123-142. Both letters have been published also in several editions of the book *Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare: Palabras de Gracia y verdad [Words of Grace and Truth]* (Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban, 2004; Les Editions du cerf (Paris, 2004); Dominican Publications (Dublin, 2004); Edizioni Studio Domenicano (Bologna, 2004).

⁶ This was sent to nearly all the monasteries, on several dates and in various languages.

⁷ A letter written on 25/02/2009 as a call for solidarity among the monasteries of the Order.

⁸ Blessed Cecilia of Rome, *Account of the miracles worked by St. Dominic in Rome*, n. 6; in L. Galmes and V.T. Gomez, eds., *Santo Domingo de Guzman, Fuentes para su conocimiento* [St. Dominic de Guzman, sources for getting to know him] (Madrid, BAC, 1987), 671.

⁹ Cf. Vladimir Koudelka, *Monumenta diplomatia Sancti Dominici* [St. Dominic's Documents of diplomacy] (Rome, 1966), 117.

¹⁰ Cf. Marie-Hubert Vicaire, *Historia de Santo Domingo* [History of St. Dominic] (Madrid, EDIBESA, 2003), 796-797.

¹¹ This was learned from the Chronicles of San Sisto in Rome, the content of which was edited by fr Raimondo Spiazzi in *Chronache e fioretti del monasterio de San Sisto all'Appia* (Bologna 1993). On page 55 there is an allusion to nuns from Rome going to Bologna.

¹² This date also comes from the Chronicle of San Sisto (ed. R. Spiazzi), 83

¹³ *Ad gentes* n. 40.

¹⁴ Cf. Code of Canon Law, c. 578