

The challenge of holding both aspects (i.e. the hidden life and outreach to the world) in creative tension

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Introduction

I have been asked to speak on the challenge of holding the contemplative/hidden dimension of our life in creative tension with the apostolic thrust of reaching out to the world. This challenge is not something new – indeed it is as old as the Church itself. We find it in the Gospel in the story of Martha and Mary,¹ in the Acts of the Apostles² and in our Order there always has been the challenge of preserving the balance between contemplation and apostolic works.

I certainly found the writing of this paper a challenge for I am very aware of the diverse cultures and languages of this region, which stretches across the northern part of Europe and dips down to Portugal on the west and Greece on the East. Each of our monasteries finds itself in a different life situation with many options and possibilities of reaching out to the people of surrounding areas who come flocking to our monastery doors. Nowadays we can even reach further afield via internet. All of this is good and the Church and the Order encourages us to be centres of prayer and hospitality in a world which is fast losing its sense of God.³ Since I lack personal experience of the individual circumstances of the majority of the monasteries in the region, I do not feel competent to address the question of particular ways and means of outreach – this is a matter for each community to discern. Instead I have chosen to focus on the broader spectrum of our vocation as nuns in the Order of Preachers. To focus too much attention on particular issues can sometimes be an escape from the real challenge facing us as Dominican Nuns today.

For the most part I have drawn inspiration from our Constitutions, the early sources of our tradition, letters of the Masters of the Order, the General Chapters, and Church documents of recent decades.

Above all I was challenged personally as I prayed and struggled for many hours and days with the subject of this paper which led me to reflect on my own vocation as a Dominican nun. I am aware that what I present here is a personal vision of our vocation. This may resonate with some of you but maybe not so with others. However I hope that it will motivate all of us to reflect more deeply on our Dominican vocation and our place in the Order and Church of the 21st century.

Personal Story

From a very early age – in fact for as long as I can remember – I cherished a deep longing to be a missionary sister. This desire grew stronger with each passing year until during my final year at school I realised that as a missionary I would be confined to one area of the globe and maybe after all I would not be able to do all that I desired to bring the Gospel to those who had never heard of Jesus. Simultaneous with this realisation I felt the Lord calling me to give myself completely to him in the contemplative life, so that through prayer and union with Him I could bring the knowledge of His love to the whole world. It took another year before I got in touch with the Dominicans but what a surprise and joy to discover that Dominican life and spirituality corresponded to this two-pronged desire which at this point consumed my heart – to give myself unreservedly to God in silence and solitude and precisely by so doing

¹ Lk 10: 38-42

² Acts Ch 6 ff

³ LCM No 14; 83; *Verbi Sponsa* 8; Letter of Timothy Radcliffe OP: *A Contemplative Life* 2001

to make Him known and loved throughout the world – two seemingly contradictory ideals but for us Dominicans – whether friar, sister, lay person or nun – the holding of these two together is the very essence of our identity.

As I see it: the apostolic thrust in the heart of a Dominican Nun is limitless – there is no boundary line – ideally we must reach out to the whole of humankind, irrespective of race, colour or religion – our hearts need to be constantly expanding to embrace the multitudes. It is equally true that our contemplative life demands of us to embark on a journey into a bottomless abyss – which is nothing other than the abyss of communion with the Holy Trinity – as St Catherine reminds us: “You eternal Trinity, are a deep sea: the more I enter you the more I discover, and the more I discover the more I seek you. You are insatiable, you in whose depth the soul is sated yet remains always hungry for you, thirsty for you.”⁴ The question remains: ‘How do I reconcile these two abysses within? Are they contradictory or complementary? I dare to think that in fact each complements and energises the other.

Example of Jesus

No doubt, Jesus himself experienced this tension for he was totally orientated to the praise and glory of his Father while loving us humans to the end. In fact this is what led him to the Cross where we see him emptied of all dignity - forsaken by friends and even crying out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The folly of the Cross is truly a great mystery! At the very moment when Jesus is most helpless and vulnerable, nailed to the Cross immobile

- a great hollow space is dug out, as it were, in His heart for us;
- he reaches out to embrace sinful humanity, taking every individual within Himself, not leaving anything outside His suffering and the transformation of that suffering into pure love
- He speaks out both His and our ‘yes’ to the Father
- as He commends His Spirit into the hands of the Father (Lk 23:46) He donates Him to us (Jn 19:30)
- and from His fullness we have all received.⁵

Jesus’ kenosis to the point of becoming a ‘nothingness’ out of love is the climax of God’s self revelation – the icon of the eternal love which is at the heart of the Trinity. This is what we, in our turn, are called to become - a ‘nothingness’ out of love for our brothers and sisters as we share in the self emptying of Jesus. As our Constitutions invite us “to bear the death of Jesus in body and soul that we may merit the glory of the resurrection for ourselves and others”⁶

Dominic and the early tradition of the Order

The Cross has always been central to Dominican spirituality – we are all familiar with Fra Angelico’s beautiful frescos of Dominic at the foot of the Cross. Cassian, whom Dominic studied while a Canon at Osma, describes the goal of monastic life as our transformation into the perfect nakedness of Christ – Christ on the Cross, in His vulnerability, weakness and poverty, without aggression, hostility or power. Dominic was steeped in this tradition and no doubt taught it to the first nuns whom the Blessed Cecilia says “had no other master to instruct them about the Order.” However, in addition to the ancient monastic tradition with its preoccupation with personal salvation, Dominic would also have communicated his own zeal and longing for the salvation of all people – the fruit of long hours of contemplating the Cross of Christ. There he learned from the ‘Book of Love’ the immense love of our Saviour which led Him to the Cross. Contemplating the suffering, forsaken Jesus, Dominic’s

⁴ St Catherine of Siena: *Dialogue* 167

⁵ Cf Thomas J Norris: *Living a Spirituality of Communion*, pg 142

⁶ LCM No 61

compassionate heart was torn apart with compassion, firstly, for Jesus whose love was being rejected by the very ones for whom he died, and secondly for his contemporaries and all those near and far who knowingly or unknowingly were rejecting the gift of salvation. Paul Murray notes that the “wound of knowledge that opens up Dominic’s heart in contemplation, allowing him with an awesome unprotectedness to experience his neighbour’s need, cannot be accounted for simply by his own natural sympathy. The apostolic wound Dominic receives is a contemplative wound”⁷ - no doubt the fruit of his ‘special’ prayer when, as a Canon at Osma, he asked God “to grant him true charity, which would be effective in caring for and winning the salvation of all; he (Dominic) thought he would only be a member of Christ’s Body when he could spend himself utterly with all his strength in the winning of souls, just as the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of us all gave himself up entirely for our salvation.”⁸ We can say that our Order was born at the foot of the Cross and it is there that each of us must draw our inspiration and zeal. This too is the source from which renewal will spring.

In his correspondence with Blessed Diana, Blessed Jordan speaks about the one love at the source of her “remaining in the quietude of her convent” and his “divers wanderings”.⁹ In letter 45 he exhorts her always to have before her eyes “the book of life, the book of the Lord’s perfect law which brings life back to souls”. And he continues: “this law is charity: you see it when you gaze on your Saviour Jesus stretched out on the Cross, as though a parchment, his wounds the writing, his blood the illuminations. Where, I ask you, my beloved, could the lesson of love be learnt as it is learnt here?” And according to St Catherine of Siena, Dominic wanted his children to “stand at the table of the Cross – to seek only the glory and praise of God and the salvation of souls”.¹⁰ As we take our place with Dominic and Mary at the foot of the Cross we begin to understand the meaning of our vocation and somehow the apparent tension between the contemplative and apostolic thrust is dissolved and becomes one great fathomless Love.

The Cross and *Veritas*

There is a very close link between the Cross and *Veritas* (Truth) - the motto of our Order. “The Cross verifies the truth about God and the truth about humankind”.¹¹

The truth about God: When we look at the Cross we are left in no doubt of God’s infinite love – the Cross is the epiphany of God’s infinite love for us sinful creatures - at the very moment when we are turned away from Him and lost in our own selfishness He turned as it were against himself in order to raise us up and save us. This is how God loves.

The truth about humans: the Cross reveals the dignity of every person – how precious we are in God’s sight that He should die for us!

But the Cross does not rob us of joy – the contrary is true as we sing in the liturgy: “through the Cross joy has come into the whole world”¹² and with it freedom. Jesus has taken the burden of our sin on Himself and has already achieved our eternal salvation. Our task lies not in anxious striving to achieve our own perfection but in opening ourselves to receive the gift. “At the very moment when he identifies with our sin, ‘abandoned’ by the Father, Jesus ‘abandons’ himself into the hands of the Father”.¹³ We in our turn can abandon ourselves and those we carry in our hearts to the loving mercy of our God in the sure hope that “all will be well”.¹⁴

⁷ Paul Murray OP, *Preachers at Prayer*, pg 30

⁸ Jordan of Saxony, *Libellus* 13

⁹ Letter 37 – Jordan to Diana

¹⁰ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue* 158

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI – homily March 26, 2006; cf *Encyclical Deus Caritas Est*.

¹² Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, 14th September.

¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 26

¹⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*

Intercessory Prayer

The following quotation from Jean Corbon challenged me when I first read it last year:

“The Cross of his Son is the place from which God seems most absent but in which He in fact gives Himself most completely. The place where His Christ is crucified is the place where His compassion is poured out, for it is the place where man is most deeply wounded by death. People today are surprised at the deep silence of God, but who is willing to enter into the silence of the compassion of Jesus, to follow him that far? It is only a stone’s throw between the slumber of the disciples and the agony of their Lord – to cross that space is to enter the struggle of prayer, intercession and compassion.”¹⁵

I asked myself how often do I stay comfortably in slumber heedless of the Lord’s invitation to cross the boundary line and engage in the struggle. Is this not the heart of our vocation? – for we do not come apart only to find a space of peace and quiet for contemplation, nor to exercise an apostolate from within the enclosure but in order to engage in the “struggle of prayer, intercession and compassion” –and thus to “perpetuate that singular gift which the blessed Father had of bearing sinners, the down trodden and the afflicted in the inmost sanctuary of his compassion.”¹⁶ As we struggle with our own weakness, sinfulness and wounds of sin we are united in a more profound manner with our brothers and sisters wherever they may be. Immersed as we are in a culture of ‘doing’, of feverish activity; wanting to see results and see them instantly; in the midst of a growing secularisation and a corresponding thirst among so many who are searching – very often in the wrong place - there is a great temptation to do something. As our hearts ache while we helplessly watch so many lose faith and walk away from the Church we feel the pressing need to seek solutions. Faced with the silence of God in the darkness of our own lives, we often feel numbed and even begin to lose faith in the efficacy of our way of life. We must resist the temptation to compensate for our emptiness by turning to external activity. It is then we need to remember Eckhart’s advice “Do not waver from your emptiness!” However, contemplation of the Cross teaches us another way! Jesus conquered sin by becoming sin for us. “He lived the reality of the other to the point where he carries the whole ‘baggage’ of the other”.¹⁷ Are we today called to experience the “loneliness, meaninglessness, abandonment, anguish and despair” of our contemporaries to the point of the darkness and forsakenness of the Cross? We need to encourage each other not to be afraid to go to that forsaken place within our own heart and there wait for the Lord’s mercy and healing for ourselves and others. For let us be honest, the big crosses which we imagine we could heroically shoulder do not often come our way – perhaps because the Lord knows that this would only foster our pride! – rather it is those little crosses which are part and parcel of everyday life and which we bear with so much distaste – disappointment, misunderstanding, hurt, crises and limitations – which are our ‘gold’ if only we had eyes to see!

It is when we have the courage to make this journey into silence, to the lonely place of our heart where we experience our own poverty and sinfulness, that we are most profoundly united to our brothers and sisters. It is here too that we experience the Risen Jesus calling us by name and we can say with Paul: “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me”¹⁸ - our prayer becomes the prayer of Christ before the Father asking that all be gathered into unity: “Father may they be one in us”.¹⁹ At the beginning of the 21st century Pope John Paul II proposed to the whole Church the challenge of living a spirituality of communion in order to make the Church more credible in our day and he goes on to explain what he means: it is “to know how

¹⁵ Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, pg 247

¹⁶ LCM 35

¹⁷ Thomas J Norris, *Living a Spirituality of Communion*, pg 81

¹⁸ Gal 2:20

¹⁹ Jn 17:21

to make room for our brothers and sisters, bearing each other's burdens and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy."²⁰

Communion in the mission of the Order

The unity of our Dominican family is analogous to the unity of the Church – a unity in diversity – when each part functions as it should the family builds itself up in love.²¹ When promulgating the 1971 revision of our Constitutions Fr Anicetus Fernandez wrote: “the integral purpose of the Order i.e. to give to others the fruits of contemplation cannot be attained in that fullness proper to it except through the cooperation of all the members of the family” and he continues: “the contemplative life of the nuns is of the greatest benefit to the apostolate of the Order ...because their contemplation and their life inasmuch as they are truly and properly Dominican are from the beginning and by their very nature ordered to the apostolate which the Dominican family exercises as a whole and in which alone the fullness of the Dominican vocation is to be found”.²²

‘Apostles of the Apostles’

So the contemplative life of the nuns is ordered to the apostolate which the Dominican family exercises as a whole. Earlier Fr Fernandez described the vocation of the nuns as ‘apostles of the apostles’ - not by “giving themselves up to the apostolate” but by “being with God in solitude, cloister, silence, fraternal love, liturgy and prayer” – and he continued: “in spite of your hidden life one can truly say you are witnesses – you share your vision first with us, friars, and then with the entire Church – in that sense you are ‘apostles of the apostles’. Dominic wanted the nuns at the very heart of his Order so that this loving presence, this incessant contemplation of Jesus Christ and that alone might constitute the strength of all.”²³ When speaking to the Spanish nuns earlier this year Fr Carlos asked them “Nuns, show us the Order!”²⁴

Nowhere in recent documents or letters from the Order or Church do we find any suggestion that we should engage in an external apostolate as such. On the contrary, *Verbi Sponsa* says: “cloistered contemplatives are not asked to be involved in new forms of active presence but to remain at the wellspring of Trinitarian communion, dwelling at the very heart of the Church”.²⁵ From our brothers at the General Chapter in Bogota we hear: “For 800 years you have sought, pondered and called upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in solitude so that the word proceeding from the mouth of God may not return to Him empty, but may accomplish those things for which it was sent. Your prayer, your life of contemplation, your world of enclosure and silence – without abandoning humanity as the place to meet God – your work, your seeking the truth of things, your belief in God’s faithfulness, your searching the Scriptures with loving hearts, your practice of penance – all of this is the way you share in the common mission of the Order.”²⁶

LCM

Last but not least, our Constitutions provide us with a clear vision of our vocation as nuns in the Order of Preachers. When working on the revision of LCM in 1970 Fr Fernandez wrote

²⁰ Pope John Paul II: *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 43

²¹ Cf Eph 3:16

²² Letter of Fr Anicetus Fernandez OP, General Chapter, Tallaght, July 1971

²³ Letter of Fr Anicetus Fernandez OP to the Nuns of Order, October 1970

²⁴ Cf *Monialibus* 19.

²⁵ *Verbi Sponsa* 6

²⁶ Acts of General Chapter, Bogota. 45

about his “anxiety to underline the fact that we are nuns and Dominican nuns”. This phrase “nuns and Dominican nuns” has impressed me very forcibly and I feel that this is the issue in question when we speak about holding in balance our ‘hidden life’ with its monastic values (nuns) and our ‘outreach’ to the world (Dominican nuns) – which implies an apostolic thrust. Even a cursory reading of our Constitutions demonstrates how well this balance was achieved. For example LCM 96 states: “the nuns while commissioned by God primarily for prayer are not for that reason excluded from the ministry of the word. For they listen to the Word, celebrate it and keep it in their hearts and in this way proclaim the Gospel by the example of their life.” The emphasis here is on the quality of our life which is a true preaching of the Word. According to Fr Simon Tugwell OP the friars preach redemption while the nuns are an experiment in redemption.²⁷ In Distinction I: Section I of our Constitutions we find several texts with explicit mention of the nuns providing a lived example of what our brothers and sisters preach - and so together we fulfil the mission of the Order.²⁸ Above all, our celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, while being the heart and wellspring of our whole life is also a true preaching - there the mystery of our salvation is present and at work - there God is glorified and humankind is sanctified.

Conclusion

At a time when the Order as a whole is facing the challenge of retrieving its contemplative character, and have explicitly appealed to the nuns to challenge their excessive activism,²⁹ it is vital that we the nuns not lose faith in the essence of our vocation or begin to seek ‘apostolates’ – all good and much needed in themselves but which would limit our horizons for we have been given a priceless gift and treasure in our contemplative way of life in the Order of Preachers but “we hold this treasure in pots of earthenware, so that the immensity of the power is God’s – not our own” (2Cor 4:2). Therefore we need to have the courage in our time ‘not to waver from our emptiness’.

In our modern world, where human effort and achievement are overemphasised, there is a great need for people who ‘say’ with their lives that God exists, that He has revealed Himself as love – even to the Cross – so as to bring us humans into a personal relationship with the Holy Trinity as Fr Timothy Radcliffe has so beautifully expressed it in his letter *A Contemplative Life*: “You are missionaries just as much as the brethren, not by going anywhere but by living your lives from God and for God. You are a preached word in your being. The life of the nun is hollowed out by emptiness. Your lives are empty of purpose other than to be there for God. You do not do anything especially useful. But that emptiness is a hollow space in which God dwells and where we glimpse his glory.”³⁰

If we are what we should be, we would set fire to the whole of Europe for “A city built on a hill cannot be hidden”.

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²⁷ Conference to our community in Drogheda

²⁸ For example: community life: LCM 2:II; 3:II; vows: LCM 18,19; 23,24,27,28 etc.

²⁹ General Chapters: Oakland

³⁰ Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP: Letter to the Order, *A Contemplative Life*, 2001.