

# On the 750th Anniversary of the Canonization of St. Dominic

Letter from the Master of the Order. September 1984

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This year marks the 750th anniversary of the canonization of St. Dominic. In the bull of canonization Pope Gregory IX speaks of St. Dominic's apostolic sanctity and of the fecundity of his spiritual family. Perhaps our most fitting celebration of this anniversary would be a consideration of these aspects of St. Dominic's life with reference to our own living out of his ideal today.

Like St. Dominic, we are called, through baptism, to be saints. The Gospel for Ash Wednesday, in calling us to renewal, reminds us of three essential elements of the Christian life: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The process of canonization of St. Dominic gives evidence of his living these elements with signal intensity.

**1. Prayer.** "...beyond all doubt he was very fervent and constant in prayer, more so than any man he had ever known." We notice that St. Dominic, while ever faithful to the obligation of choral prayer, had his own highly personal rhythm of private prayer. "He prayed. more than the other brothers who lived with him, and kept longer vigils". (John of Spain).

We need to be men and women of prayer in the sense of directing our whole lives to God and in our fidelity to community and private prayer, if we are to know God's will for us and to fulfill it in practice. This rhythm of prayer will be different for each branch of our family: the cloistered nun, the preacher, the active religious, the lay Dominican, and, indeed, will be different for each person within each group. What is important is that each individual, each group, realizes its need of prayer, establishes a suitable rhythm of prayer and is faithful to it.

**2. Fasting.** He was also frugal in eating and drinking, but particularly as regards any special dish.

Each of us needs to examine his or her life style - our eating, drinking, our holidays, our travel. We also need to broaden our outlook on penance in the way that Pope John XXIII did when he said that we must allow ourselves to be scourged, and to scourge ourselves a little, too.

There is a place for self-imposed fasts and penances, but it is the lesser penance. The most important penance comes from without, from the acceptance of the arrangements of others, the difficulties of daily life, the pain that is caused by envy, jealousy, gossip, selfishness, intolerance, and lack of forgiveness.

St. Dominic teaches us to care for others, for our companions - "He readily dispensed" others - for sinners. We must look to our own responses and not judge the response of others. "He never heard an evil, hurtful or idle word from the lips of Brothers Dominic."

**3. Almsgiving.** "Moved by compassion and mercy, Brother Dominic sold his books (which he himself had annotated) and other possessions and gave the money to the poor."

Our Lord teaches us (Mt 3, 5) that the ordinary everyday things are important in discipleship... you gave me food, you came to see me. There is a real and necessary service to others when we enable them to attack the root causes of injustice and oppression. There is a need to devote ourselves to the cause of justice and peace in the very best traditions of the order, but none of us is absolved from the obligation of personal service to others within and without our communities.

In this context, too, it is important that each community sets aside a percentage of its income for the alleviation of poverty as a normal allocation of our resources. We must also take much more seriously the injunctions of our constitutions with regard to sharing among ourselves, and provincial and general taxation must be clearly seen as part of this sharing among ourselves.

Our Christian commitment is lived out in the Dominican Family. We are inspired by the example of Dominic's gospel living and we are further inspired by his apostolic zeal.

"It seemed to the witness (John of Spain) that he was more zealous for the salvation of souls than anyone he had ever known" and this was shown particularly in his dedication and constancy "in preaching and hearing confessions".

Our family can never lose these characteristics of our apostolic outreach - St. Dominic wanted his Order to be called, and to be, Preachers. There will be other needs and other stated priorities, but for us everything must be directed towards the salvation of souls, our own and others, through preaching.

Recent general chapters have been very clear in putting Teaching/Research, Justice and Peace, Means of Social Communication and Reaching Out to the Unchurched as four priorities in our apostolic outreach today.

We are not called equally to devote all our energies to one or all of these priorities, nor are we called on to give up traditional apostolates, but we are asked, each of us, to bring something of each of these priorities to everything we do and to examine our present activities, as individuals and communities (convents, congregations, provinces) in the light of these stated priorities. This demands a great deal of listening on the part of each of us, a constant willingness to learn and adapt, and a readiness to avail ourselves of the gifts and insights of others.

In our family, accordingly, great emphasis is placed on community. St. Dominic's system of government and his own example of accepting the will of his brothers are pointers to the kind of community life we should be living. Normally, it means a group of brethren or sisters living together.

However, I have been present at fruitless discussions where the brethren tried to determine the "ideal" or minimum number for a Dominican community and been more than edified by the adhesion to community ideals of brethren living alone out of obedience for the sake of the apostolate.

But it does seem that the number of brethren, and of sisters, living outside community is getting greater. It asks questions of them as to their commitment to community living and of the rest of us as to the quality of our community life.

The difficulty that some houses and provinces have experienced in getting brethren to accept certain administrative positions as a service to the Order and to the Church is noteworthy and should lead to reflection on the part of us all as to the apostolic value of administration.

Finally, Pope Gregory IX spoke of the fruitfulness of St. Dominic's family. The list of our saints and blessed - religious and lay, men and women, married and celibate - is a varied and impressive one and shows how people of different gifts and of different nationalities, in every century, have found fulfillment and the means to holiness within our family. It is no different today.

However, there are two things that recent chapters and congresses have spoken about and that we must not neglect.

The first is the sharing by the whole family in the active apostolate and this entails the promotion and the giving of their rightful place to women and to the laity. The Chapters of Walberberg and Rome have many good insights in this regard.

The second is that we be faithful to the call to Mission that is so marked in the life of St. Dominic. The Congress at Madrid in 1973 marked a great advancement in our thinking on Mission and I hope that the General Chapter at Avila in 1986, when we mark the centenary of our missionary province, will further develop our thinking on Mission and increase our awareness of the missionary dimension of our family.