

The Challenge of Evangelization Today

Letter from the Master of the Order. October 1988

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As some of our congregations and provinces decline in number, there is a danger that we become rather inward looking, self-protective and insular and the impulse to evangelization weakens in us. Where this is so, it is important to set before ourselves - and those in formation - the challenge of Evangelization.

Speaking of the early Dominicans, Honorius III said: "The Brothers of this order are totally deputed to evangelization." A striking statement. But it is no less striking than that of Paul VI in 1970 when he reminded us that: "the Dominican order would undoubtedly sin against itself if it turned away from this missionary duty", or the assertion of fr. Vicaire that the Order was the "first truly missionary Institute in the history of the Church."

Our present understanding of evangelization has been transformed by the insights of Vatican II, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the intense reflection of recent years.

Before Vatican II the thrust of evangelization put emphasis on bringing the Gospel to the non-Christian, a movement from the center to the periphery. Today this 'movement has been enriched by another movement; from the periphery to the center in which the "new churches" give witness and in their turn help to evangelize "older churches". Europe now learns from Latin America, Africa and the churches in Asia. We have entered a stage of listening to one another, a coresponsibility of all for all.

Conscious of this movement and the challenge it presents we are also enriched by Dominic's original vision, his enthusiasm for evangelization.

Dominic's unfolding Vision

Dominic's burning passion for the salvation of all left a powerful impression on those who were his closest associates. The young William of Kontferrat tells us, that "Dominic was filled with a greater zeal for the salvation of all than anyone else I have ever met." "So both agreed and even promised each other that when Brother Dominic had organized his Order and I had studied theology for two years, we would go away together and do all that we could to convert the pagans, in Prussia and in other lands of the North."

Statements such as these are to be found in many of the depositions made at the process of canonization. Jordan of Saxony echoes them in the *Libellus* when he says: "... with all his energy and with passionate zeal, (Dominic) set himself to win all the souls he could for Christ. His heart was full of an extraordinary, almost incredible yearning for the salvation of everyone". Jordan also tells us: "He had a special prayer which he often made to God, that God would grant him true charity, which would be effective in caring for and winning the salvation of all; he thought he would only really be a member of Christ's Body when he would spend himself utterly with all his strength in the winning of souls.

Dominic never achieved his ambition to be a missionary to the non-Christian world but he directed the Order to this path. At the Chapter of 1221 it was decided to send bands of Dominicans to three different territories beyond the frontiers of Christendom. Those who were sent with Paul of Hungary asked to go to the Cumans thus fulfilling Dominic's ambition. It was the Chapter that made these decisions but the inspiration came from Dominic.

Dominic's Method of Evangelization

William of Montferrat tells us; "Many times we talked about the means of salvation for ourselves and others." Dominic developed precise convictions about the way in which evangelization should take place. As in so many other areas, these often ran counter to the accepted ideas about evangelization at the time.

1. Preaching in Poverty on the Apostolic Model : We know the exact moment when this conviction was first manifested and became his own personal way of preaching God's Word. It was June 1206 when Diego and Dominic met the Cistercian legates at Montpellier. Discouraged by the apparent failure of their preaching they turned to the bishop for advice. His comment was: "I do not think that you are setting about this in the right way. In my opinion you will never be able to bring these people back to the faith by talking to them, because they are much more inclined to be swayed by example." For the heretics a preacher of the Gospel was one who lived according to the apostolic model. Diego and Dominic made this their own personal way of preaching and Dominic continued to develop the method after Diego's death. His intuition came from the connection in the Gospels, between mission and the form of life enjoined by Christ. Dominic's principal commitment was to preach the Gospel. "His own personal vocation was something more definite still: to bring the Gospel to far-distant people who had not received it."

2. Itinerancy - Apostolic Mobility : Apostolic mobility was a key element in Dominic's evangelical method. In this too, he wanted to conform his life to that of Christ. Even in houses of the order he had no room that he could call his own. This mobility was an apostolic tool which enabled him to be with and among people. Fr. Vicaire is careful to note that "if his ministry was universal in the type of person addressed and in the immediate success he hoped for, his plan of action was precise. It was contact by preaching not by involvement in the localised pastoral activity."

3. The Role of Communion with the Church : When Diego and Dominic went to Rome in 1206 they requested the Pope to permit them to devote themselves to a mission among the people of Northern Europe. He refused. It must have been a painful obedience as it appeared to run counter to their apostolic inspiration. And yet without these acts of obedience there would have been no Order. Furthermore, had they received permission, they would probably have become part of the missionary movement current in Northern Europe at the time - a method based on conquest. It was not the model of evangelization envisaged by Dominic or the first Dominican missionaries. They wanted no support from any army. Dominic and the order could so easily have become a part of a missionary movement which tied evangelization to conquest. Obedience saved them from this. They rejected this form of evangelization in favour of a method based on that of the apostles - preaching in poverty, independent of the civil power.

In a letter to the order in 1970 Cardinal Villot described Dominic as being "stupifyingly free." For Dominic freedom of spirit was not an accident but a deliberate choice.

Dominic's convictions about evangelization are mirrored in what Paul VI says about the means of Evangelization in E.N. 40-48.

Mission to the World

Under Dominic's successors the frontiers of evangelization expanded to include the world. This occurred in two phases - that which followed Dominic's death and that which coincided with the great maritime discoveries of the 15th and 16th centuries.

On Dominic's death Jordan of Saxony established missions in North Africa and the Middle East. Raymond of Penyafort opened schools for the study of oriental languages and Islamic studies and a succession of Popes entrusted the order with new areas for evangelization.

The second phase began with the discovery of the Americas and the sea routes to Asia. It is a good story but it is not all good. On the 15th July, 1582, Paul Constabile, the then Master of

the order wrote saying that the Dominicans had fallen behind in their missionary activity. It was in response to this letter that the Dominicans of the Rosary Province began work in Asia. It is from among these early missionaries that the Japanese and Vietnamese martyrs were drawn.

The Japanese and Vietnamese Martyrs

On 18th October last year, John Paul II canonized Lorenzo Ruiz, a Filipino layman and fifteen companions. The Decree of Beatification in 1980 noted: "in one way or another all... belong to the Order of Preachers." They comprised two catechists, two women members of the Dominican Laity, two Lay brothers novices and nine priests together with Lorenzo who was a member of the Rosary Confraternity. Nine were Japanese, four Spanish and one each from the Philippines, Italy and France reflecting the international character of the missionaries.

As I write this letter, the canonization of the Vietnamese martyrs is about to take place. They include 10 members of: the Dominican Laity, 3 Tertiary Priests, 6 Dominican Bishop and 16 priests.

These events coincide with the celebration of the 4th centenary of the Rosary Province in the Orient. Thirty-two of the new saints were members of the province.

When Humbert of Romans appealed for volunteers for the mission in 1255 he noted that two things tended to inhibit the brethren from volunteering for the work of evangelization. "One is an ignorance of languages, the study of which, scarcely any brother will undertake, the majority preferring to exercise their intellects on all sorts of novelties rather than study what would be really useful... The other obstacle is love of one's country... " A noteworthy aspect of the canonizations this year is the insistence that was placed at the time on learning the languages of the people. Missionaries were given six months to learn the local language. If they did not succeed, they were sent home.

Another striking feature was their use of music and drama in evangelization - their dependence on the Word of God alone, and a refusal to be identified with the colonial power.

Fourthly, there was their opposition to slavery and all forms of injustice and greed and the insistence of men like Domingo de Salazar that those who had been enslaved should receive restitution.

Striking too was their closeness to the people they evangelized and their loyalty and support for one another during their imprisonment and trial. They made community with one another. When Magdalena of Nagasaki heard that Jordan Esteban had been imprisoned she immediately gave herself up to the authorities that she might share his martyrdom. Her only crime was that she had given them hospitality. We celebrated these men and women and we recognize that in these canonizations there is a message for us today.

At the same time we are aware that, today, we cannot work in precisely the same way, for the methods of evangelization change according to the times.

Before Vatican II, evangelization tended to have a geographical and juridical significance. The first Missionary Congress of Brothers and Sisters held at Madrid in 1973 passed several resolutions with regard to this which are now summed up in LCO 112.

Geographical and Juridical Models

These models identified evangelization with work in non Christian countries and certain countries were identified as mission territories. But the widespread growth of secularism which denies the place of God in human life has created the need for a second evangelization in many Christian countries. And indifference to the faith and the spread of unbelief among the baptized presents an urgent need for an evangelization directed to the baptized. Closely

related to this is the challenge of consumerism and the consumer mentality which tends to make the pursuit of pleasure the supreme value in human life, cf. E.N. 55.

Another weakness, is that those who worked in mission territories, irrespective of the work they engaged in, were termed missionaries. Evangelii Nuntiandi corrected this in stating that "there is no true evangelization, if the name, the teaching, life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth are not proclaimed", (E.N.22.). This is the criterion for judging whether we are truly evangelizers or not.

While conscious of the limitations of such models there is still an urgent need to proclaim the Good News to those who have not received it. Faithful to the memory of St. Dominic, we Dominicans should continue to seek to work in those countries which are beyond the borders of western culture. Asia, home to 60% of the world's population, immediately springs to mind, as does Africa and parts of the Americas.

New and Emerging Models of Evangelization

Evangelii Nuntiandi reminded us that "the methods of evangelization change according to the times..." (E.N.40). As a response to this, new models of evangelization have begun to emerge.

There is the realization that as we approach the end of the second millennium of Christianity the progress of evangelization over 2,000 years has been extremely limited. Catholics account for just 18% of the world's population. While the structures of the Church exist almost everywhere, the saving message of Jesus has not been universally, or indeed, widely accepted. Evangelization remains as urgent a task today as in the time of St. Dominic.

Building the kingdom involves a struggle with all those things that obstruct its growth - sin in all its forms. In one society, it may be characterized by a struggle with the unjust structures that oppress people, in another it may involve a struggle with the corrosive influence of a creeping materialism and consumer mentality. As a consequence, evangelization must necessarily develop different facets according to the circumstances in which it is conducted. The message of Jesus, the promise of salvation and the kingdom will be the same but the message will be contextualized in that it will respond in a specific way to the challenges presented by this or that situation. This discernment requires a sensitive awareness among evangelizers.

The complexity of modern society suggests that those who devote themselves to the work of evangelization need the assistance of those skilled in the social sciences to enable them to respond in a meaningful way. Not every vicariate, province or congregation is able to supply such skilled personnel. If we do not have such skills among ourselves, we should seek them from others, in the Church or the secular world. Our history instructs us in this new orientation. The Chapter of 1232 discouraged the study of pagan philosophers and the secular sciences among Dominicans. Within twenty years of taking this decision Thomas and Albert saw the need for such study and another Chapter reversed the decision. Today we need the help of those skilled in social psychology, cultural anthropology, comparative religions... to help us devise new methods of evangelization for today. A failure to avail ourselves of such skills will impoverish the work we do.

In this regard, I wish to state the need for on-going or permanent formation, the need for a sabbatical year for evangelizers. There is a marked difference between those provinces and vicariates who have accepted the need for such formation and have made the necessary sacrifices to implement such a policy and those provinces which have not done so.

In his work on the "Offices of the Order", Humbert of Romans remarks that it is the duty of the Master to have a "special care and fervent zeal" in promoting the work of evangelization. In this regard he adds that it is the duty of the Master to see that there is always some writing regarding the beliefs of other peoples. If I were to pick out one area in which the order has

fallen behind today in evangelization it is the lack of theological reflection on the whole question of mission in the Church and absence of a Dominican contribution, with a few exceptions, to the search for new methods of evangelization urged on the Church by John Paul II. The document on Mission from the Avila Chapter benefited greatly from the presence of a number of theologians involved in Evangelization.

Inculturation

Intimately connected with the search for new methods of evangelization is the question of culture. In the colonial era evangelization tended to be identified with the culture of the colonizer. The success of evangelization often appeared to bear a relationship to the success with which the culture of the colonizer penetrated and transformed the culture of the colonized. Where this process was successful the progress of evangelization was likewise numerically successful. But where the implantation of the colonizing culture was superficial, the numerical growth of Christianity was likewise limited. The rapid christianization of the Americas in the 16th century was in marked contrast to the progress of evangelization in Asia but as long as the relationship between evangelization and the culture of the colonist bore fruit there was little reflection on its side effects, in particular, the alienation of Christian communities from their cultural roots, and identification of Christianity with an alien culture.

Today, the relationship between the Gospel and culture has become the focus of intense reflection. Reflection focuses not only on the content of evangelization but, in particular, upon the way it is communicated (c.f., E.N.20).

While it is easy to speculate about inculturation, it is extremely difficult to put it into reality. There is no such thing as a disembodied Christianity. Wherever Christianity exists it is incarnate in a culture - either the culture of the people among whom the Christian community lives or that of the evangelizer: It presupposes a special sensitivity on the part of the evangelizer to evangelize in a culture other than his/her own.

What is certain is that the progress of evangelization has been hampered by a failure to appreciate other cultures. "Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion" says Kenneth Cragg, "is to take off our shoes for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on people's dreams. More seriously still, we may forget that God was there before we arrived."

Inculturation is a continuing challenge urged upon us by the Holy Father. If its implications are not as yet fully understood, we should nevertheless be a part of that ecclesial search.

To assist this process of inculturation provinces might consider the possibility of those destined for the mission pursuing part of their studies and formation in the countries where they will be working, (c.f. LCO. 119).

Collaboration in Evangelization

The decline in numbers throughout the Order over the past twenty years has been most severely experienced in the emerging churches. Provinces which once sent big numbers to evangelize in other countries are no longer able to do so. This has led to an acute shortage of key personnel in number of mission vicariates and provinces. In certain cases the addition of just two or three would alleviate a critical situation.

The great need of the order in some vicariates and provinces urges me to make a direct appeal to the brethren throughout the order. I urge you to discern in community those who are able and willing to engage in inculturated evangelization in the context of another country that as an order we may witness to the greater universality of the Church. The international character of the Japanese martyrs, drawn from five different countries, is a lesson for us. Today, there is a similar need for an international approach to the work of evangelization.

It is time, too to examine the possibility of more collaboration between entities who have small numbers.

If a small Province/Vicariate tries to have all its own formation it must ask itself several questions:

- (1) Has it sufficient and suitable formators?
- (2) Is it putting the needs of the formandi in the first place?
- (3) Are the studies sufficient to enable the students become good doctrinal and prophetic preachers open to the needs of the times?
- (4) Is it sufficiently appreciative of the international character of the Order?

Likewise I urge those working in the developed countries of the North to become evangelizing communities. The recent Acts of the Province of England state: "we regard all of our houses as mission stations from which we may exercise our vocation as heralds of the Gospel of Christ."

Collaboration with the Sisters and the Laity

In 1968 fr. Aniceto Fernandez wrote to the Dominican sisters throughout the world in response to enquiries concerning their place in the order. He wrote: "The time has now come to examine our relationships carefully. In this modern world where our Saviour has put us together to carry on his great work of salvation, we are called to embrace together the spirit and tradition bequeathed to us by St. Dominic, to search together and to build together our communities of brothers and sisters in the service of the Church." Fr. Aniceto speaks of the sisters as equals and invites them to search together with the brothers for the best way of carrying out their apostolate.

Much has been achieved in the intervening years - collaboration in formation, pastoral ministry, teaching at the University level, preaching, jointly run conference and retreat centers... The president of one of our finest faculties of theology is a sister. Wherever such collaboration has been realized, despite initial difficulties, there has been mutual enrichment. And we are only beginning.

Since 1968, successive Chapters and Mission Congresses have urged cooperation in formation, joint preparation of future missionaries, in the ministry of the word, retreats, promotion of vocations, in the work of justice and peace, common prayer, teaching.

Likewise I urge on you the need for collaboration with the laity in the work of evangelization. Again our history is instructive. The first efforts of Bartolome de Las Casas to evangelize the people of Venezuela ended in failure. Later in Guatemala in an area called "The Land of War" because of the ferocity of its people he evolved a completely new method of evangelization. He and his colleagues first mastered the language composing verses in the dialect of the people about creation, the fall and redemption and taught them to Christian Indian traders who penetrated the mountains, sang them and aroused the curiosity of the people to hear more. The laity were the key to the first evangelization of Guatemala.

To this day it is interesting to visit the shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico on the feast in December and see the people re-enact in song and drama the story of creation and redemption.

In conclusion, let me repeat once again what was stated at Quezon City: "What lies before us at this time is a challenge to become what St. Dominic had begun; a family joined in unity of

life and complementarity of service to the Church and the world.” This has particular application in the work of evangelization.