

# The Ministry of Preaching

Letter of the Master of the Order. September 1989

fr. Damian Byrne, OP

---

St. Dominic wanted his Order to be, and to be called an order of Preachers. This is the title he chose for himself and his companions, the title granted by the Church. It determined not only his mission but his entire way of life. While many are called to preach, there is a need for an Order of Preachers to remind the Church of its preaching mission. Just as there are Orders dedicated to prayer, missionary activity, the service of the sick and we are all called to these things in one way or another, we are a reminder to the whole Church of the importance of preaching. We should also try to excel in it.

How must we live, and what must we do, to fulfill our vocation as men and women who proclaim the saving message of Christ so that it becomes a burning reality in our own lives and in the lives of those to whom we are sent?

## Life and Witness

A key to Dominic's success as a preacher was his manner of life. He would certainly share the sentiments of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* "... the people of our day are more impressed by witness than by teachers and if they listen to these it is because they also bear witness" (E.N.41).

It is not so much what we say that wins people, as what we are. Our Lord converted sinners like Matthew with a word, Peter with a single glance. He ate with sinners. He challenged preconceived social roles by talking and eating with Publicans, tax collectors and prostitutes. In action and word Jesus proclaimed the compassionate love of God.

In Octogesima Adveniens Paul VI reminds us: "Today more than ever the Word of God will be unable to be proclaimed and heard unless it is accompanied by the witness of the power of the Holy Spirit, working within the action of Christians in the service of their neighbour, at the point in which their existence and future, are at stake", (51). Words are empty unless they are supported by witness of life, both individually and as a community. The common life is inextricably linked with our preaching mission. *Missio et communio* are two sides of the same coin both in the Church' and the Order: We cannot separate them. It is precisely here, through the witness of their lives that our contemplative sisters are at the heart of our, preaching family. But witness of life grows into a more profound witness.

## We want to see Jesus

In the Gospel Our Lord told the apostles: "You will be witnesses of me". The phrase 'we are witnesses' literally means offering an experience of a Christ who is alive, one whom it is possible to meet and to talk to: The appeal of those who approached Philip and asked: "We would like to see Jesus" is the cry of so many in the world. But how often do they discover him in the word that we break for them? With a certain anguish, Paul VI wrote :

We are continuously being questioned: Do you believe yourselves what you are saying to us? Is your life in accord with your beliefs? Is your preaching in accord with your beliefs? Is your preaching in accord with your lives? (EN., 76)

What the world is looking for is credible witnesses. People are tired of sham. They want to see Jesus and as Mother Teresa of Calcutta has pointedly reminded us: "People ought to be able to meet Jesus in us".

If we are preachers, we must be men and women who read, ponder and live the word of scripture. This meeting with the Jesus of the Gospels, reflected upon and pondered over becomes a living spring for each of us. It is from this table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist that we receive nourishment for our lives as preachers. We also need to renew our faith in the power of God's Word. "The Word of God is alive, it is life .. .", (Heb. 4:12) . When it is preached Christ is present. (cf. *Mysterium ridei*, No. 36). But the word must be pondered in this historical moment.

## **Relevance**

Our preaching will not be complete unless it relates the Gospel to people's lives. As Jesus made his message relevant to the lives of people in his day, we must make his message relevant to the people of ours. Faithful to the Gospel, our preaching must also address the questions they ask. This imposes upon us the obligation of listening and an alertness to the movements which are taking place in our rapidly changing societies. How can we speak to people's needs unless in some measure we share their joys and sorrows? As *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us :

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. (1)

Before we speak we must listen not only to peoples voices but to eyes and hearts. Then our spoken word each day from the altar, in the classroom, in the hospital ward, in the parlor will be a word of hope - the quality of preaching most insisted on by Pope Paul VI.

## **Prophetic and Doctrinal**

The best tradition of the order is seen when our preaching is prophetic. Preaching that is purely theoretical and abstract captures neither the spirit of St. Dominic nor the hearts of people. Prophetic preaching is not merely a sharing of knowledge but a joyous proclamation of the living, life-giving Word of God. But we must announce the whole gospel message.

In his *Commentary on the Constitutions*, Humbert of Romans writes:

"Study is not the end of the Order but it is of the utmost necessity to that end which is preaching and labouring for the salvation of souls, for without study we can do neither", (*Opera* II, p. 41). If we are preachers, we are also students. The day we stop reading and reflecting we will soon cease to be effective preachers. We cannot be consistently good preachers unless we continue to be students. Do we read?. Do we read widely enough? Real listening to the joy, griefs, hopes and anxieties, of the human family requires serious study and social analysis. It requires the learning of new languages and sensitivity to cultural differences if the Gospel is truly to take shape in new cultures: Most of all it requires time and presence among those to whom and with whom we would preach because it is most truly from their experience that we will hear the Gospel in new ways. We are called to receive and welcome the Word of God wherever we hear it. Dominic spent the night in dialogue with the innkeeper; Las Casas' attention to the cultural differences between Spain and the "New World" demanded a new form of prophetic preaching. Catherine's attention to the signs of her times sent her to speak a word of mercy to victims of the plague, but also to proclaim the truth as she saw it, not only to politicians, but to cardinals and popes.

Bishop Diego and Dominic saw the inability of the Church of their time to respond effectively to the Albigensian movement. By living among them, by learning and listening to them, they evolved a new catechesis. The Church needed to adopt the authentic values present in the Albigensian movement, while it also proclaimed authentic values that the Albigensians chose to ignore. This is what we mean by doctrinal preaching, the proclamation of the "whole truth"

of the Gospel. The challenge of the Albigensians evoked a creative response in Diego and Dominic. What are the challenges that invite a creative response in our preaching today?

In order for us to be sons and daughters of Dominic, we must insert ourselves in those areas of need, especially those areas in which the Church finds it difficult to respond. We insert ourselves in those areas first to learn from and listen to them. Then we engage in theological reflection and discernment as to our response both in what we do and say as well as in how we live. If we are not at the heart of a people's need, then we risk losing vision and run the risk of becoming irrelevant. To follow Dominic means to be for our period of history and our Church and society what Dominic was for his. This is always our starting point for our self-understanding and for renewing our lives. In fidelity to him and to our tradition, our own identity and spirituality must have its roots in our preaching mission. As early as 1965, Fr. Congar makes this rather startling observation: "I could quote a whole series of ancient texts, all saying more or less that if in one country Mass was celebrated for thirty years without preaching and in another there was preaching for thirty years without the Mass, people would be more Christian in the country where there was preaching." (Concilium No. 33).

What does it mean for us to be preachers, not at the beginning of the thirteenth century, but at the end of the twentieth. A specifically Dominican emphasis within the mission of the entire Church to preach the Gospel has been our focus on "proclaiming the truth." Where is the truth unwelcome or compromised today - in our countries, in our personal and communal lives and even in our preaching?

Like the world in which Dominic lived ours has its own forms of dualism which we must address: the deep divisions between rich and poor nations, between races, religions and ethnic groups between men and women, between, countries of differing political ideologies.

Fourteen years after *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, we might well ask the same three burning questions that Paul VI asked of the entire Church.

1. In our day what has happened to the hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on the human conscience?
2. To what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century?
3. What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect?

### **Word and Sacrament**

The priority of priorities for all Dominicans is preaching and a love of preaching should mark each one of us. I believe that in the spirit of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* there should be preaching at every public Mass, every day. Paul VI also points out the importance of preaching during the administration of all the sacraments and on the occasion of para-liturgical ceremonies. Addressing the General Chapter in 1983 John Paul II said: "You Dominicans have the mission of proclaiming that God is alive, that he is the God of life, and that in him exists the root of, the dignity and the hope of man who is called to life... Your Constitutions give priority to the ministry of the Word in all its oral and written forms and the link between the ministry of the word and that of the sacraments is its crowning." Preaching comes first but without bringing ourselves and others to receive the Sacraments it is incomplete.

It is important to realize the evangelizing power our preaching can have in the context of the daily and weekly Eucharist. Today we say that many people are sacramentalized but not evangelized. This sacramental dimension cannot only provide a place for evangelical proclamation, but the sacraments themselves are evangelizing symbolic words. As St. Augustine reminds us, the word is an audible sacrament and the sacrament is a visible word. While there are many calls to preach the Word outside the sacraments it would be a mistake

to ignore the opportunity which the celebration of the sacraments offer us to celebrate the Word.

We should never omit an opportunity of preaching: It is not only for the sake of our hearers. I believe that no one can constantly preach the Word of God without being transformed by the Word they preach.

Both Paul VI and John Paul II insist not only on the spoken word in the setting of Church services but also through individual contacts. "In imitation of St. Dominic who was full of solicitude for the salvation of all individuals and people, may the brothers know that they are sent to all people believers, and especially the poor..."

Is this the vision of the Church and the Order, the vision, the daily practice of each one of us? Paul VI in a general audience, (3rd December, 1975) remarked to a group of Dominican postulants and novices: "It is said that Dominicans are preachers. Nevertheless it is not often that one hears a Dominican preaching". The seriousness with which we should approach our preaching ministry is reflected in the new Ratio Formationis which states that an "aptitude for preaching is to be one of the elements to be considered for admission to Orders."

On a recent visit to Japan I was reminded of the powerful witness given by Dominican artists and I recalled the words of Lawrence of Rippafratta to Fra Angelico and his brother during a moment of doubt: "You will be none the less true Friars Preachers if, you cultivate your painting for it is not only by preaching that we persuade people, but also by the arts, especially, by music and painting. Many who will turn a deaf ear to preaching will be won by your pictures which will continue throughout the ages to preach." Indeed, they do preach, as do those who write and are involved in publications and all who are involved in the various forms of the media.

## **Collaboration**

I would like to refer to two forms of collaboration, one with its roots in our tradition, the other a newer form of collaboration.

On the Sunday before Christmas Day 1511 in a straw thatched chapel on the island of Hispanola, Antonio de Montesino preached a sermon on the text: "I am a voice crying in the wilderness". His condemnation of injustice caused a storm of protest. People rushed round to complain to the Prior Pedro de Cordoba. He explained to their astonishment and anger: "Antonio de Montesino did not preach, the community preached". The community decided that a stand had to be taken. They decided what should be said Montesino preached it.

How enriched our preaching would become if we could devise a method within communities of reflecting on the Sunday homily together and of reflecting on the key issues which challenge our various societies today and need to be addressed in our preaching. If such preparation includes the laity so much the better.

A second form of collaboration today is the recognition of the whole family, sharing our common preaching charism. It is not as if the women and lay members of the Order are called to live the Gospel life and the clerical members are called to proclaim the Word. Already in the 13th century Thomas Aquinas recognized that women as well as men have been given the charism for preaching, what he called "the charism for speaking words of wisdom and knowledge in the Christian community", (II-II. Q. 177, a.2 ad 2 and ad 3). Anyone endowed with a charism has the responsibility to exercise it I urge Dominican sisters, both active and cloistered, to take advantage of every opportunity to preach which is open to them and in accordance with the circumstances of their lives. There is no one who cannot preach by witness and through their personal contact "the other form of individual communication of the gospel from person to person must be encouraged and esteemed", (EN. 46).

There can be no question about, the call of the Order in our day to preach the Gospel and to do it together. Our very diversity and our honest struggles to grow as a family, to collaborate in our Gospel mission, are very real aspects of our proclamation in a world that has not yet discovered how women and men, lay and cleric, can join together in community as equals, respectful of differences, but united in faith.

## Conclusion

As I travel on visitation to different parts of the world, I have found that those who are in situations of greatest need proclaim the Gospel with the greatest power and live the evangelical life with the greatest clarity. Because of their situation, their preaching has a resonance and impact far greater than those who preach in situations of relative comfort and security. It may be that it is more difficult to produce great preachers among a people who do not suffer or are not oppressed. We must be struggling with significant issues for the Gospel to be powerfully proclaimed. The first world does have significant issues with which to struggle but self-complacency and a false security can easily blind the preacher to their urgency.

The Gospel is Good News to the poor. When we cast our lot with the poor and oppressed we become recipients of their Gospel. Preaching comes out of a deep involvement with people, an involvement which calls forth a word in response to their need. Our job is to proclaim the hope of the Gospel more frequently and preach to the limit of our vision even though we do not fully embody that vision. Like Dominic we are not prophets of doom or misfortune. Like Jesus, he did not announce bad news. He announced good news. He was a prophet of hope. He was not a moralist who threatened punishment and created feelings of guilt. Rather he is the spiritual master who gives back hope to all who are burdened with sorrow and feelings of guilt.

St. Dominic had no doubt about his mission. He knew himself to be a preacher. We must reclaim this sense of Dominic. Today we should understand ourselves not so much as "Dominicans" but as "Preachers".

I proposed the following question to the Chapter in July:

1. Is my life where my words are? Are Dominicans throughout the world recognized and known as the Order of Preachers?

2. As part of our ongoing renewal, should we not see ourselves more as Preachers? This is the title given us by Pope Honorius and St. Dominic.

What are the human experiences which form me and my words? How have I allowed the cry of the poor, those without social status, education or power to influence my understanding of the Gospel and my expression of it?

3. How do I preach? Is my preaching grounded in prayer and study? Have I made the Word of God my home? Am I preaching my own ideas (myself), or Jesus Christ? Do I evaluate what I do, allowing others to give me feedback? How have I continued my formation as a preacher? Do I seek to collaborate with my brothers and sisters and the laity in my preaching ministry?

4. How can our particular manner of living together directly promote the prayer, study and expression that comprise our preaching, and publicly identify us as "the preachers?"

We are preachers. Let us rejoice in our vocation, men and women entrusted with God. Word and God's vision for our world.