

# The Role of Study in the Order

Letter from the Master of the Order. 25 th May, 1991

fr. Damian Byrne, OP

---

When Dominic wanted to form his brothers as preachers he sent them to study". The importance of study runs like a thread through the entire text of the Primitive Constitutions and marks the way in which observances are lived.

"Our study ought to tend principally, ardently, and with the highest endeavor to the end that we might be useful to the souls of our neighbour."

The Law of Dispensation is introduced, "especially in those things which are seen to impede study, preaching or the good of souls." The daily chapter may be postponed or omitted "so that study may not be hindered." The Office is to be recited "briefly and succinctly lest the brothers lose devotion and their study be in any way impeded." The Novice Master is to teach those in his care "how they should be intent on study..." This we received from Dominic.

The originality of Dominic is in putting study at the service of preaching and giving study a significance, a specificity that is apostolic.

## Study Ordained to Preaching

Study ordained to preaching was an essential part of his plan for the Order. In his *Expositio Supra Constitutiones*, Humbert of Romans clearly states the Dominican attitude to study when he says:

"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."

He is also aware of the danger that study might become an end in itself:

"There are some who devote themselves to sacred writings, but if study is not directed to the doctrine of preaching of what use is it.

The Gillet Constitutions gave the impression that study was linked to the first years of Dominican Life, a necessary preamble to a life of preaching and ministry! Whole generations of Dominicans have been affected by this attitude. The River Forest Constitutions restored the tradition that study and reflection are an integral part of our religious tradition, yet the earlier spirit persists among many who see study as being confined to specialists, or a particular period of our lives as Dominicans.

## Pastoral and Academic

It has been said that "we must walk in the past to understand the present." An event occurred in 1221 which gave an added pastoral dimension to study within the Order. On the 4th February 1221, Honorius III, commended Dominicans as confessors. It focused the attention of the Order on the need to prepare the brothers for hearing confessions and counselling. While the scope of Dominican study expanded to include philosophy with the creation of the *Ratio Studiorum* of 1259, the commission of Honorius III to the ministry of confessions launched the Order into a system of education with a strong pastoral bias.

It was the genius of Thomas Aquinas to carry forward Dominic's fundamental orientation and to broaden; the basis of theological education in the Order through his study of Aristotelian philosophy, which enabled him to give an intellectual foundation to the theology of the

goodness of creation and the rejection of dualism. In 1265, Thomas began to write his Summa. Fr Leonard Boyle writes of this time in the life of the students and studium in Santa Sabina and the beginning of the Summa:

"... he was now in position to broaden the basis of their theological education and to break out of the tradition of the practical theology that had hitherto marked the Dominican educational system." He "attempted to set the regular training in practical theology in the Dominican Order on a more truly theological course."

Dominic and Thomas shared the same ideal. Thomas' dedication to study was in no way a neglect of preaching, he shared the same purpose as Dominic - salvation through preaching, formed by a life of prayer, contemplation, study and an apostolic community.

### **Study and Community**

The Chapter at Oakland reminds us of the intimate connection between study and community. "The common life is also the context of our study. First of all because no one can speak of the love of God unless he or she finds that love incarnate. Secondly, no one can be a theologian alone... a full theology must always be the fruit of communal endeavor." Dominican study is communitarian. The primary responsibility for study lies with the community just as the community has the primary responsibility for preaching.

In the Letter to Brother John, attributed to St Thomas, he replies to John's request on how to study by first suggesting, - how to live!

The climat of study is all important. He urges on John the importance of silence, the place of prayer - to make room in the heart for the Lord, the need for a tempered curiosity, and the need to cultivate fraternal charity. Those who live in centers of study know well how study is helped or hindered by human relations. The atmosphere for study is enormously aided by a good community spirit.

Victor White, in his commentary on the Letter, draws attention to the Second Part of the Summa, where Thomas reflects on the emotional problems experienced by students and their special need for recreation.

**Students have special needs.** They need encouragement. Have some of us forgotten what it was like to be young and to struggle ? The acquisition of real knowledge is a gradual and interior process. It is gradual because we are human and not angels. No one else can do our knowing for us. There are no short cuts. We need teachers to guide us but the best teacher cannot do our learning for us.

They need an atmosphere conducive to study and reflection. This is not the least of the purposes of having a studium, a master and teachers to guide us. When we study elsewhere, it is necessary to have a rhythm of life and accompaniment that enables us to pursue our studies in a fruitful way. For us, study is an observance which makes considerable demands. It requires a high degree of personal devotion, discipline and dedication. The habit of study is the result of personal endeavour and perseverance.

**Those who teach have special needs.** Your work involves the intense application of the mind. The work of investigation and critical reflection is not known for giving immediate gratification or guaranteed recognition. The results are at times so meager that they do not seem to justify the effort. The academic vocation is rare and those who, pursue it are constantly faced with the temptation to abandon it.

You cannot teach students everything and sometimes there is little thanks. Perhaps your greatest gift to them, is to equip them with the tools of critical reflection. Do we need to be reminded once again of the plea in the Acts of the General Chapter of Walberberg ?

"We would say one word to the Brothers: Read Thomas; give this formation to our students so that they are able to read the text of Thomas for themselves."

Yves Congar described the work of scholarship and research in these words: "The scientific study of philosophy and theology, with all this demands: meticulous documentation, reflection, publication... all these are integral to the Order's mission. Should it ever neglect them the grace would be given to others... In Biblical science, in historical matters and in the knowledge of sources, there are today, resources at our disposal, which no theologian would ignore or neglect to use in research work."

### **A demanding vocation**

Our motto is truth. If it meant that we possess the truth, we would be guilty of arrogance. If we understand that we are pilgrims in the search for truth, we have begun to understand our vocation.

Gilbert of Tournai wrote: "We will never discover the truth if we are content with what we have discovered. The writers who went before us are not our masters but our guides. The truth is open to everyone. It has never become the sole possession of any one person."

In the Office of Readings, we find this comment of Vincent of Lerins: "Is there to be no development of doctrine in Christ's Church ? Certainly there should be great development. Who could be so grudging towards his fellow men and so hostile to God to prevent it ?"

Dominican study is the study of theology. If our study is dedicated to preaching and moreover doctrinal preaching, then our study has to be theological. Because it is specifically theological does not imply a disregard for other areas of knowledge. If it is theological, it is likewise interdisciplinary.

### **Pilgrims of Truth**

We have a tradition in research and scholarship. How faithful are we to this aspect of our vocation ? It has to be said, that Brothers are more drawn to pastoral involvement than to lives dedicated to study and research. Yet the Church and the time we live in, needs men and women who will dedicate themselves to study and research and to creating a philosophy and theology which speaks of God to the people of today. Are we creating in the Order the conditions for them to emerge and support them when they do ? How few of the topics chosen for doctoral theses address the problems of today!

Addressing the General Chapter in 1983, John Paul II reminded us:

"You Dominicans have the mission of proclaiming that our God is alive... The Prophetic charism within your Order has received the particular seal of theology... Be faithful to this mission of theology and of wisdom in your Order, no matter in what form you are called to exercise it, whether academic or pastoral."

This tradition of study and theological reflection for the purpose of salvation, continues to challenge us. It does not mean that a Dominican is more learned than others, or that every Dominican must be a specialist in philosophy or theology; but it does mean that the pursuit of truth is an intimate part of the life of every Dominican.

Is the search for truth still valid ? Some say no. Words and language have been so devalued that they no longer mean what they originally sought to convey. On the other hand a preoccupation with subjectivity suggests that the truth is - how I feel. A widespread pluralism suggests that everyone's opinion is right - truth is relative. On another level we live at a time when society is so busy trying to solve the urgent and concrete problems of our time, a preoccupation with survival, that the study of philosophy is considered irrelevant. Yet the

pursuit of truth is our vocation. We believe in God's gift to every human creature - the ability to discover, to live and communicate truth.

### **Fidelity to our Tradition, Doing Theology Today**

It raises the question of how we do theology. The Chapter at Oakland reminded us: "We have been most theologically creative when we have dared to let ourselves be interrogated by the problems that have burdened, people," as indeed Thomas was. In the *Questiones Disputatae*, Thomas addressed the problems of his day as Dominicans must address the problems of ours.

Theology flourished in Salamanca, precisely because Vittoria and his companions addressed the actual questions which came to them from their Brothers in the Americas and dedicated themselves to a theological reflection on these questions. It is, perhaps, the finest example of collaboration between missionaries and teachers.

Fidelity to our past is only possible by addressing the problems of today. We are not being faithful to our past by assuming a defensive or triumphalist attitude or by repeating or mimicking what our brothers wrote, or by a servile interpretation of ancient texts: To study tradition out of curiosity is sterile, to study it in a defensive or triumphalist way is harmful. It is necessary to study it critically. The time we live in and our changed circumstances require answers to the questions of today. These challenges are formulated in the Four Priorities. They are the most critical areas of concern today, while at the same time being deeply rooted in our tradition. The most creative scientific contributions of Dominicans in this century were made by men who addressed the problems of their time: Lagrange, Chenu, Lebreton...

Setting the achievement of Thomas before us as an example for our time Paul VI wrote:

" he found a new solution for the relation between faith and reason consists in his harmonizing the secularity of the world with the austere demands of the Gospel."

"He showed in his teaching and in his life that it was possible to harmonize fidelity to the word of God with a mind completely open to the world and its genuine values, to combine zeal for renewal and progress with the aim of building a system of doctrine on the firm foundation of tradition."

He also reminds us that Thomas:

"kept abreast of the new knowledge of his time in dealing with new problems to which it gave rise and in studying arguments from human reason both for' and against the faith... His mind was open to every advance of truth from whatever source it came."

He also warns against a slavish following of Thomas:

"It is not sufficient to take this doctrine up again with a literal repetition of formulas, with the same group of problems and with the once customary manner of treating questions." "We have no doubt that today he would eagerly seek to discover the causes of the changes effecting man, his circumstances, his mentality, his behaviour."

We are challenged to be equally creative. Fidelity to St Thomas means a theological reflection on the "disputed questions" of our time.

In an article entitled "El Estudio En La Orden De Predicadores", to which I am indebted in writing this letter, Felicísimo Martínez writes:

"To really get theological reflection going in the Order, the first task is to reconcile missionaries and professors; pastoral activity and intellectual activity; the missionary tradition

and the monastic tradition. The existence of these two traditions in Dominican history is not an impoverishment but a richness. To oppose these two traditions is an impoverishment. A divorce between theological reflection and preaching has been one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Order because at the same time it devalues theology and preaching. The division of Dominicans into groups of professors and preachers impoverishes the ideal of study and evangelization, because pastors and evangelizers will consider themselves dispensed from study which is considered the territory of specialists and professionals; and the professors will consider themselves dispensed from pastoral work and evangelization."

The tension between the pastoral and the academic should be creative for both. When it is not, we are all diminished.

### **Some Dilemmas with Regard to Study**

Most provinces and vicariates believe that students should pursue their studies in their own country. Experience has shown that sending students in institutional formation abroad, has had disastrous consequences in many cases. Yet the small number of students in some entities makes it impossible to have a Dominican studium. As a consequence students must be sent elsewhere for their studies. Where the number is small they need the company and stimulation of larger numbers.

The solution in many instances is to send students to an institution in their own country - diocesan seminaries or institutes established by religious. Some are good but this is not always the case.

As far as possible, we must ensure that their studies pattern those of the Ratio Studiorum and ensure a graduated introduction to philosophy and theology. There is a value in a sequential order of studies for students rather than a haphazard series of unrelated courses. The Primitive constitutions describe a form of tutorial system which provided a forum in which students could tease out the more difficult problems relating to their studies. There is much to be said for some form of tutorial system to enable students to assimilate the material they receive in their lectures.

In some entities there is an indifference to studies and intellectual formation. Little importance is given to the academic ability of the candidates seeking admission to the order nor is sufficient effort made to bring them up to a required standard. The lack of emphasis on study is then reflected in an indifference to study among the students themselves.

An option for the poor cannot be lived in opposition to Dominican studies. The problem is how to give students the conditions for formation without at the same time, making them into comfortable middle-class people.

Some entities clearly do not put enough thought into the solution of the real problems that confront them in the education of their students.

Everything we do in ministry will be coloured by our academic formation. If we are to be good media people we must first be good theologians : if we work in justice likewise. We have the example of the first brothers in Latin America. Their success as preachers was precisely because they were recognized as good theologians. They themselves realized their own limitations and had recourse to their professors in Salamanca.

### **Collaboration**

We are short of men trained in philosophy, theology and the kindred sciences. In some areas joint planning and sharing of personnel would help to relieve this problem. In developing countries economics is one of the factors which inhibits the sharing of personnel. With this in mind, a fund has been established to assist such collaboration and formation. The details have been sent to provincials.

Whether a province decides to send its students elsewhere for part or the whole of their studies, each province should train some men in philosophy, theology and the kindred sciences. The doctrinal mission of the Order cannot be fulfilled unless each entity endeavours to train men who will work together as a team in a center of studies, men who are willing to try and work on the frontiers of learning.

Where there is collaboration between entities each entity must supply someone to accompany their students to this teaching center as part of the formation team or as teachers.

If we are preachers we are also students. Study is an obligation that goes with being a friar preacher.