

A plea for Itinerant Preaching

Letter from the Master of the Order. September, 1978.

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It is obvious that Francis Coll's beatification will be an inspiration and a source of renewal for the congregation he founded (In 1875 he founded the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Annunciation). But will it be the same for his brethren? In what way did he live our life in the troubled period his country then experienced? Choral office common life, regular observance, religious obedience and poverty: he probably lived all these, at least in his heart. But is that enough for him to become a model for us? As we approach his beatification I think that Francis Coll does teach us two very pertinent lessons.



A plea for itinerant preaching

During the life-time of Father Coll, most religious, as they were forced to live outside their houses, offered their services to a bishop and ran a parish while they were waiting, most of them, to be incardinated into a diocese. Thus Francis though he still remained a Dominican was a curate in two parishes in the space of ten years.

In this situation, proud of his title of "friar preacher", he spent as much time as possible preaching. But this did not satisfy him. As soon as he could find a replacement, he left the parish, gave up all his pastoral commitments and spent the remaining twenty-five years of his life engaged in "itinerant preaching". In the life which he then led, poor according to the Gospel, and going from village to village preaching, he saw the very life of Saint Dominic, and delighted in it. This is the "friar preacher" whom the Holy Father is going to bring to the attention of the faithful by declaring him "blessed".

Far be it from me - and from Father Coll - to criticize existing Dominican parishes, or other stable ministries such as the activities and engagements so widespread in our days, which demand the continual presence of brothers in the same place. Situations also, and the needs of the Church differ from country to country. But the question put to me by the soon-to-be-beatified Father Coll is the following: What importance is attached to itinerant preaching in the Order to-day?

Nobody can doubt the part it has played in our history. Our greatest preachers - for example Saint Vincent Ferrer amongst many others - became famous as itinerant preachers. Yet still, three years ago, on 3rd December 1975, during a general audience, Paul VI said to a group of Dominican novices and postulants: "Dominicans are said to be preachers, but you rarely hear a Dominican preaching". Is this true?

It is often said that parish priests no longer look for us. During my visitation of the provinces I met religious who were engaged full time in preaching, and what struck me was, usually, they were unable to take up all the invitations they were offered. Which goes to show that itinerant preaching is more alive than is sometimes imagined, and also that if one can preach in a way that shows one understands men and women today, their difficulties, their social situation, the problems of their professions, one will be listened to and appreciated. Are we sufficiently aware of the present day world and its various milieus? Do we take enough care to make our preaching relevant and interesting? I was also struck by the fact that these not-so-young brothers who are in constant demand, regularly took refresher courses.

"Nobody looks for us any more". But do real apostles wait to be asked? They hear for themselves the appeals that others do not hear, and know how to set about getting in touch with these people. In keeping with our modern technical and scientific world, specialists in one or other kind of apostolate are becoming more and more common in the Order. And this is a good thing. But how many "specialists in preaching" have we? Research should be done on this and statistics drawn up.

The Quezon City chapter speaks of "new preaching places". We no longer preach just from a pulpit inside a church. These "new preaching places" can be of many kinds: for example a hall where people can be assembled whom you would not meet anywhere else; and also places where men and women meet of their own volition and where one could preach without intruding: film or television clubs, recreation centers, and other informal groups. It would be interesting and indeed very useful to hear from any of our brethren who are experienced in this field. They could tell us especially how their preaching. To-day deals with the points stressed in that same chapter of the Acts of Quezon City: the problem of dechristianisation, socio-cultural trends, young people, new countries. Of course here also situations will vary considerably from country to country, but surely the Order has some part to play in bringing about a renewal of preaching?

Our world which is continually expanding continues also to reveal stratas of society where apparently God is not recognized. To deal with this the Church needs priests who are free enough and unhindered by other ties or obligations to answer calls as soon as they make themselves heard. When Saint Paul said: "they cannot chain up God's news" (2 Tim 2 : 9), did he not mean this too ? Such availability was something Saint Dominic wanted, something he lived.

Naturally such a life has its own difficulties and problems, especially in the economic order, problems which more stable forms of the apostolate such as parishes, chaplaincies, teaching religion in schools, etc., do not normally experience. But people like Father Coll accepted and embraced difficulties and risks like this. (quite deliberately and in the name of his Dominican profession he chose to give himself entirely to itinerant preaching living a life of evangelical poverty such as that practiced by Saint Dominic and his companions. For two thousand years poverty and preaching have very often gone hand in hand and surely to accept certain risks today in this order of things is just one aspect of evangelical and Dominican poverty in our time.

When all is said and done there is something fascinating about this apostolate of the Word: large audiences of all sorts, new situations, the need to adapt, the thrill of preaching a message bringing new graces. And besides, up to date Dominican preaching of this sort will surely foster vocations among young people by leading them to get a better grasp of one of the most characteristic aspects of the Order.

I have been making a plea for itinerant preaching. Here then are a few questions which may help us to reflect.

In our houses and provinces how many full time itinerant preachers are there, compared with those working in other apostolates ?

2. What place has preaching in the plan for the future which our Constitutions ask us to make (LCO 106-107) ?

3. In practice how do we rate religious who specializes in preaching in comparison with those who specialize in other fields ?

Committed to the Dominican vocation

Father Coll was completely committed to the Dominican life: This seems to me to be the second message he gives to his brethren today. The fact that he knocked at the door of the convent in Gerone although he had already been refused in Vich is not what is most remarkable here. It is the years that followed after this that are remarkable. We must remember the anti-clerical atmosphere widespread in Spain in those times to appreciate Father Coll's deep faith. He was quite untouched by such pressures, and once he took up that itinerant preaching which fulfilled all his ambitions, he had no more problems about the kind of life that was his. No longer did he wonder about joining a diocese, or leaving the country, or going on the missions. He just went straight ahead and as far as he was able he did his best to live up to his religious profession, giving himself full time to what is its most fundamental aim: itinerant preaching to the poor according to the Gospel. And this is where Father Coll gives us food for thought.

Living in a difficult world

He lived in a "hard world", and ours is very different from his, though just as hard, indeed even more so. And without being pessimistic or playing the prophet, it could be said that remaining faithful to one's Dominican life, as to religious life in general, is going to be harder still in the years to come. This follows from the very notion of changing cultures and civilizations.

One of the major difficulties of life today is surely the abundance of material objects which overwhelm us: comforts, commodities of all sorts, cars, means of relaxation and amusement etc. If we were always able to use these things so as to be more available to the service of the Word of God, we could simply give glory to God for them. But is this really the case ? Do we not often become their slaves ?

And then there is that virus which slips in from every side and attacks, almost unknown to us, the very marrow of our religious lives, our Christian values, and sometimes even the fundamentals of our faith. And this difficulty is all the greater because, if we are to remain true to our vocation as preachers of the faith, we have no right to close our eyes to facts. A biologist who is preparing a new vaccine can fall victim to the disease he is trying to cure, and it can be the same for us. So the greatest danger is a lack of conviction and of religious vitality, because by profession and the grace of our state, we should be able to face up to these difficulties without the risk of destroying ourselves.

Questions about our Dominican life

How convinced are we ? Have we that strength, perseverance and commitment, without which our Dominican life can only drag itself along, leaving us in a state of dissatisfaction ? The changing world continually questions us about the way we live as Dominicans. However, without burying our heads in the sand, we should bear in mind that some questions, which come easily into our minds, hinder rather than help us to shape our Dominican identity. Genuine married people do not spend their time at an unhealthy examination of the "identity" of their love. They simply live it.

And we should do the same.

And this leads to another question. Are we sufficiently attached to, or should I say possessed by, the apostolate we are engaged in ? I would like to speak here of the "apostolic hope" of provinces, houses and religious, meaning by that the interest and enthusiasm, coupled with the feeling of doing "something" for the Kingdom of God, which should inspire us. Our own personal work must fit in to the general plan for the province. We hear a great deal nowadays about planning, and I am very glad about this, but I must admit that the people who speak most about it are not always ready to accept the sacrifices which planning inevitably presupposes. Thus they do not want to be changed from one house to another, or give up work that they have become attached to or accept responsibilities . . . There is no point in talking about planning if you just mean planning for other people and not for yourself. This would be to rule out religious obedience and to do so in something that affects the very heart of our apostolic life.

Except at the beginning of his religious life Father Coll never lived in a Dominican house. This should lead us to reflect once again on the advantages and the grace that come to us from life in community. But in our convents and houses are there not "exclaustrated community members", i.e. religious who take their board and lodging but play no part, or practically so, in community life ? And though the case is not quite the same, I am thinking also of those of the brethren who habitually live outside their religious house. To what extent is this necessary for apostolic reasons ?

Our constitutions have been changing during the last hundred years and more, and we have all accepted the new constitutions which have been introduced since the Council and are in conformity with its directives. But the question I ask myself all the time is whether we accept their spirit and radical demands.

We have new structures which we are still inclined to look on with some suspicion, such as community meetings, regular renewal chapters, continuing formation, a "ratio studiorum" which is special to a province, etc. Regulations about silence, mortification and other points of our regular life are now left to provincial or conventual chapters. But what does this mean in practice ? Other important things like mental prayer have been left to the responsibility of the individual, and it was with reason that the 1977 General Chapter made a declaration on this point. I also wonder whether the way in which the apostolate has developed has not given rise to that "private life" which did so much damage in former times. I will do no more than suggest these points, which themselves suggest many others.

A word about formation

It is very important to choose carefully those in charge of formation: novice and student masters, and others who help them as part of a council of formation or whatever. Provinces should be prepared to make any sacrifice for this reason, and the right choice of the house of formation is not the least of considerations. It is better too to defer entry into the novitiate if there are doubts about the maturity of candidates. Otherwise brothers will leave the Order in greater or lesser numbers during their first years of formation, and this is good for nobody, because the fervour of the novitiate or studentate will inevitably suffer.

Lastly we must try to give people convictions. We must try to give them deep and personal motivations which will be rooted in what is deepest in them. And this can only come about and grow stronger when one is completely caught up in the living presence of God, the light and strength of all life.

Itinerant preaching and commitment to the Dominican life, these are the two messages Father Coll gives us on this day of his beatification. They are very relevant because they are linked with the two fundamental questions which force themselves on our attention today: the question of our Dominican identity, and the question of our apostolic work. May Blessed Francis Coll obtain by his prayers the grace for us to listen to the life-giving words he speaks to us, and to carry them out in our lives.