

Confidence in the Future

Letter from the Master of the Order of Preachers. January 6, 1975.

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In this letter addressed to all the brethren (6th January 1975) I would like to invite each one of you to reflect with me on the ideal which we are aiming at together during the years to come. To make the Order more alive, better able to carry out its mission of "preaching the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to the whole world" : this must be our burning ambition.



I. The Order today

The Order is a living thing, and the Chapter of Madonna dell'Arco (1974) laid great stress on the vital forces that are still present in it and working through it. Like every other contemporary institution, the Order is going through a serious crisis, and it would be silly and untruthful not to face the facts. We cannot hope to build on the shifting sand of illusion and self-deception.

The figures are well known. In 1964, ten years ago, we numbered more than 10,000; today we are somewhat fewer than 8,000. Ten years ago, we had 367 clerical novices and even that represented a falling off; today we have 167. During the last ten years 700 Dominican priests have left the Order and the priesthood, while it is common knowledge that some of our brethren today are searching for their identity or feel unsettled. And are we not all tempted at times to put to these brothers the question Jesus asked after some of his disciples left him : "Do you want to go away too ?"

It would be well worth while to isolate the causes of some of our difficulties.

Every influence today seems aimed at proving to us that even our deepest held convictions have only a relative value. The framework of our lives seems less solid, and the pluralism, which has sprung from the diversity of situations and the rate of change which has affected everything, has caused the Order to lose something of the unity which, not so long ago, made it a source of security, sure of itself, in which one felt oneself supported.

But especially, there is the ever increasing secular spirit which makes less real - and at times almost blot out - one's living relationship with God without which it is impossible to live like the Apostles did. With its visual images, its noise, its newspapers, its amusements, its attractions of all kinds, its mania for efficiency and speed, the last quarter of the twentieth century makes it very difficult, indeed impossible for some people, to pray a prayer that it is something more than noisy words : a real encounter with God. "Does any of us really pray ?" This question used to be asked twenty years ago. What answer would we give to it today ?

When I describe some of our present-day difficulties in this way I am not being indiscreet, pessimistic or complacent in the face of what we all know only too well and regret very much. It is good for us to take stock together of the challenges that face us all. I think this is a healthy sign which should be a source of common renewal. And anyway we must not exaggerate the gloomy side, and forget everything else. After all there are many wonderful things in the Order these days. I will mention just a few that come to mind.

There is, for example, the immense effort made by so many provinces to carry out the work of preaching, teaching, the intellectual life, and missionary activity etc

And we cannot forget the little groups of brothers who work with and share the lives of the marginalized and other disadvantaged people in the poorer districts of the cities of the world or elsewhere, and show them how to fight against hunger and ignorance. There are so many examples of this sort. Then there come to mind the opportunities offered to us in certain sectors and in various places. I wonder if it is generally, known, for example, that more than 1,200 Dominicans are working in Latin America, 1,200 out of a world total of 8,000 : surely this represents a serious commitment to a rapidly expanding continent ? Then there are those new forms of life which I have noticed in more than one place, and whose only wish is to develop and grow. I am thinking especially of the young people who are coming to us in provinces where, until recently, the novitiates were empty or practically so. How impressive they are, how serious, and how deeply attached to everything essential to Dominican life. And finally we cannot forget - though this is God's secret - those who, in a world where so many things pull in the opposite direction, or perhaps on account of this, live a life where prayer comes first, as they seek constantly for God.

Whatever our situation is within the Order, and in the light of God's call to us all, we must face up to the crisis which today threatens the Church and every religious institution. Our life cannot be an easy one.

What we need most is confidence, confidence of a special kind, the confidence which is obvious in Saint Dominic's life. The confidence of the canon of Osma who leaves his chapter and follows his bishop into the unknown. The confidence of the apostle who comes to settle in Fanjeaux in the heart of hostile territory. The confidence of the founder who on 15th August 1217 in Toulouse scatters his handful of brothers. The confidence of the missionary who, when the foundations of his Order have been firmly laid, feels drawn to spend the remainder of his strength working among the Cuman Tartars. In a word it is the confidence of an "evangelical man" who lives a life of faith, filled with boundless hope.

Saint Dominic's confidence, then, is the confidence of a person who, far from clinging to the past because it is the past, seeks out the essential and permanent values contained in the past, so that he may look ahead and go ahead : it is confidence in the future. These words which are linked to the notion of "strength of mind" mentioned by our fundamental Constitution (paragraph VIII), came to me at the start of our general chapter. I would like very simply to tell you what they mean to me at the beginning of a new era which we are called to live together.

II. Confidence for the futur

I think that the essential characteristics of "confidence for the future" can be reduced to vision and openness to change, to which must be added hope in God as their source.

I. Vision

To have confidence in the future means first of all to be able to look at everything afresh. Habit forces us very quickly to see things, not as they really are, but in the closed categories in which we have put them . . . and it does not take us long to organize our own little world and our scale of values . . . This way of looking at things is probably the major cause of growing old, though this new kind of 'cataract' can affect a person at any age.

Christ, after all, taught us to see things, people, events in a new way, different from what we were used to. He preached a kingdom where things are turned upside down, in which the last become first, the sinful woman is preferred to the Pharisee and the thief goes straight to heaven !

Christ reveals the true face of everything. We must go beyond appearances, masks and facades. It is not often that people, and everything that affects them : love, hope, challenge, joy, grief, suffering, are seen in their real true colors, in the raw, as it were.

Anyway we must go beyond what we can see with human eyes. Things are more than they seem to be. They are also signs of the times, paths towards God, the presence of God, the word of God. We must see the grace of God at work in the 'better world' which is striving to come into being. Behind all reality there is an "ultimate truth" which we find very difficult to grasp but which will inevitably bring us to God in some way or another.

We must take a new look first of all at ourselves. I said yes to the Lord when he called me to "the service of his Word"; what I have done with this yes throughout my life ? A new look at the Order. What are my feelings about it ? All negative ? A new look at other people, my neighbors : so close to me sometimes that they annoy and upset me and shatter the cozy world I built for myself; so far away from me too that I never meet them, though they sit next to me at table. A new look at the world. The letter drawn up by the Chapter of Madonna dell'Arco on contemporary problems tried to lead us to look afresh at the world. What effect has it had on each one of us ?

This new look is the vision of a prophet. The same eyes, but they see farther. But does not our very vocation make us prophets of a new world, which is in the process of developing ? (LCO n 1, par v; n 99, par 1). If we had this vision, the words which we speak would not fall on empty ears, they would not be readymade - made .for everybody, in other words, for nobody. They would touch people, communities, real institutions. We would be able to communicate with others and help them to hear a message which would echo in the very depths of their being. Real dialogue would become possible. For is this not much more a question of vision than of speech ? Before a word is spoken dialogue must spring from a vision that is sharpened by love.

"It is amazing how our ideas change when we pray over them". To pray over one's ideas means to think over them in the light of God, under his gaze. Our own outlook would certainly change and become closer to God's point of view if only we learned to pray over things in this way . . .

2. Openness to change

Creativity is all the rage in our world today. This is not just fashionable jargon but one of the key words of our times. No one can escape it. And what is true for all and sundry is especially true for the friar preacher who, when he preaches the eternal Word of God, must remain the 'contemporary' of those he is addressing. Thus he must keep up with the "tempo" of the evolving world, and consequently if he is to be true to his vocation, he must show creativity in his preaching apostolate.

Besides, a friar preacher should feel at ease in this great movement which is sweeping through humanity, since the

Order sprang up at a time when the cultural life and social structures of the West were changing profoundly. All our history shows how much we have been affected by all that is new and beginning to develop. Have not all the greatest Dominicans been faced with apparently hopeless situations which demanded this very spirit of creativity ?

Creativity, openness to change, confidence in the future, all go together. To face up to the future we must be able to have a clear picture of the limits within which we work. We must be warned about doing more and doing better, and be aware of our helplessness. After all, whatever we succeed in doing is puny when compared with the enormous task that faces us. Then we must be filled with a spirit of urgency as the time is ticking by for those who have never heard the Gospel of salvation.

It is not that there is not enough work to do in most of our houses and provinces. What matters is that certain questions are continually springing to mind : Should I not be working at something better ? Are there not more urgent needs to be attended to ? Should I not leave this ministry to other people who would do it just as well - or perhaps better - than me, and take up another apostolate which nobody is working at and which is more in keeping perhaps with the purpose of the Order ?

These feelings of dissatisfaction and impatience, though at times they are the cause of great distress, are basically good. The fear of allowing our apostolic zeal to cool down, coupled with a sense of urgency, should be for each one of us and for our communities a continual source of renewed energy. But let us not conclude from this that the ideas and plans suggested to us by this sense of dissatisfaction should be given absolute value, that we should try to follow them through whatever the cost. For many reasons which are related to - the concrete conditions of our vocation in the Church, it is not always possible or desirable to carry out these plans. But this dissatisfaction should be for us and for our brothers - especially when we become aware of it - a driving force which will stir up our apostolic zeal and help us to give ourselves more fully to the work which obedience demands of us in practice.

The place of the Order of Preachers in the Church is in the front lines, on the frontiers, where one has to adapt, open up new paths, set off on reconnaissance, show proof of daring. Immense and important areas of human life, real "new worlds" have come into being and are developing, cut off from any contact with the Gospel. Surely our vocation is to preach the Word of life there ?

We can see this dissatisfaction, this constant searching, this driving force in the life of Saint Dominic. Surely it was anguish and longing that made him cry out during his sleepless nights at the foot of the altar : "O God of mercy, what will become of poor sinners ?" Let us make no mistake about it, this was more than a prayer of intercession, it was also a searching, a question asked by an apostle looking for an answer, beseeching God to tell him the best way of preaching salvation.

3. Fortified in hope

Is it possible for us to have this new vision, this openness to change without which there can be no "confidence for the future" ? Left to ourselves, with purely human motivation, surely not. But we are strengthened by the very strength of God and the power of "Christ, our hope". Spe roborati, fortified in hope.

Just as our faith is a sharing in the faith of the Church, so our hope must be based on the hope of the Church. With Abraham, the prophets and all those sent by God to his people, and through all the principal events that mark the history of the Chosen People, the Old Testament proclaims the presence of God, faithful in his mercy and all-powerful. This hope culminates in Christ the power of whose resurrection is always at work : "And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Matt 28 :20). This is where the Church's hope springs from. After his departure Jesus sent, as he had promised, the Holy Spirit to renew and recreate all things. The Spirit is still with us nourishing and building up the Church's hope. The "little maid hope" of whom the poet sings, is the Church, the young mother who continues to bring forth in pain a new humanity, united in the charity of Christ.

It is in this great movement of the Church that our own personal hope and the Order's too, our "Dominican hope" must be implanted.

The first friars of Saint Dominic were quite ordinary people. The scattering of 15th August 1217 was a moment of crisis and worry for them. But they did set off, comforted by the reassurance and words of their father. He died shortly after, but we know all that was accomplished by the Order during the 13th century. These were our ancestors, and we are their heirs. Are we not aware of the ever present vocation, perhaps more urgent than ever, of the Order in the Church ? Let us imitate Saint Dominic, in his purity of heart, his poverty, his awareness of God, his burning desire for salvation. He would give up everything for the good of souls, even his books. And what do we ourselves do about it, we who are so ready to wax eloquent about these and many other of his characteristics ? The world of our days is not looking for words, but for brave men, fully committed, who dare to preach about God.

Let us imitate them. Let us throw away the props and other inessentials which ensure we are comfortable and satisfy us too easily. Even when we do not realise it, we do our best to shape a future to suit ourselves but which we shall never achieve because it is not God's way of things. How often the "Lord of the impossible" brings our schemes to

naught. True servants of the Lord cannot escape a certain darkness in their lives, so let us not try too hard to find out exactly where God is leading us. What must count more than anything else must be the strength of our faith, which is always at work in us and which allows God to have the initiative.

Let our confidence be strong and contagious and let us pass it on to others. Courage is always contagious; like fear, or doubt, or defeatism, unfortunately ! Let us share this hope we have with others, beginning with the members of our community. Let us all be aware of the great responsibility we have towards our brothers in this field. Just because the world today is full of noise does not make God's call less urgent ? If sin abounds does that prevent grace from being more abundant ? Has the Holy Spirit suddenly become sparing with his gifts ?

III. Some more pressing needs

The 'confidence for the future' which we see in Saint Dominic's life, and which he expects from us is not a blind impulse aimed at a vague future. I would like to bring before you some of the demands it makes on us today.

I. In touch with modern life

I have already spoken of the need to have a fresh look at everything, and I must insist on this.

To keep in touch with the world of today implies technical knowledge : study methods, statistics, sociology, anthropology, etc. A true preacher has no right to ignore these, and much less is he entitled to look down on them. On the contrary he must master these new sciences and be able to use them in a discerning way.

If you think that everything has been said and that it is sufficient to repeat it again, you are out of touch with the age. To be aware of people's hopes and difficulties is by no means an optional extra, or a blameworthy escape; it is part and parcel of the Dominican vocation. It is all the more necessary in that the world is changing so rapidly. For all of us this keeping ourselves up to date is something that demands continual effort and perseverance.

There is a real danger of contamination here and we know the damage it has caused. But some ghosts must be laid, I mean that almost paranoid fear that some people experience at the idea of coming closer to the world. Did not God become incarnate to save the world, and did he not share the lives of the people we see described in the Gospel ? In so far as we become one with Christ - and this identification is the only true basis of our own identity - we shall find, instinctively, how to relate authentically with our world.

2. Pluralism and unity

In Madonna dell'Arco it was very remarkable how the different provinces of the Order wanted to stress their own originality. And a month later at the Synod of Bishops (1964) the same feeling was evident in the diversity of the problems of local Churches according to their geographical location.

There is a very positive element for the Order in all this. The pluralism of our provinces is proof of a desire to be in the thick of things wherever it finds itself, and this as the very condition of its presence and its activity. But now that the pluralism of our styles of life and activity is being stressed, it is more essential than ever to have a firm appreciation of the Order's fundamental unity.

Our sort of government explains in large measure the unity which has bound us together throughout the centuries. In the same way the basic elements of our life listed in paragraph IV of the fundamental constitution (apostolic mission, common life, evangelical counsels, common celebration of the liturgy, private prayer, study, regular observance) and which knit our life together, also contribute to form that spirit from which unity results.

However, should we not go further and look for the basis of this unity on the intellectual level ? The approach to problems, sensitivity to the relationship to truth found in each individual, methods of thought, care and discernment of source material, recourse to the fundamental principles on which a question is based, etc. Then, for Dominicans, intelligence is the guardian of the spiritual; our spirituality is first and foremost theological. It is not that every Dominican is a great intellectual or a genius but that we all share a certain way of approaching people to preach the Lord Jesus to them.

Our responsibility in the field of intellectual formation - basic and on-going - is all the greater in an age where the most firmly held intellectual convictions are openly questioned. All sorts of questions spring to mind : The organization of studies ? The role of the provincial promoter in this field ? How to approach Saint Thomas ? Openness to modern ideas ? And many others . . . The fact that the last chapter decided that an assistant general should be appointed to deal exclusively with this task shows that the Order is convinced that there is a nerve point which will affect its identity and its unity for the future. If "confidence in the future" is to be a reality in our lives, it must be so here. But that brings up another question.

3. One of the Order's essential tasks

In the address he gave during the audience granted to the capitular fathers, the Sovereign Pontiff stated that "fidelity

to Saint Thomas was an integral part of the mission given by the Church to the Order". Two months later in the letter he sent to the Order on the occasion of the anniversary of Saint Thomas' death, he repeated the same theme more forcefully, stressing the courage and clear-sightedness with which Saint Thomas faced up to the crisis which the Church had to go through in his time (Cf Paul VI, *Lumen Ecclesiae*, Letter for the Seventh Centenary of the Death of St Thomas Aquinas [20 Nov., 1974]. AAS, 64, 1964).

In this double exhortation I see more than a pressing invitation to study Saint Thomas. I think that we should see in it a mission explicitly given to the Order to face up to the serious crisis of contemporary thought, both human and Christian, to face up to it with the same zeal and the same respect for the teaching of the Church, which characterized Saint Thomas. He worked hard to distinguish truth from error in the Greek, Arab and Jewish systems of thought whose influence broke over the Western world of his day like a flood. We must follow his example today, and using the still valid methods which he has passed on to us, we must discern what is true or false in what modern ideas and scientific discoveries and the evolution of the world tell us about humankind, about life, about the universe, with all that this implies for the faith and for morals.

It is to be hoped that pioneers will be found amongst us, who with youthful vigour and energy will devote themselves enthusiastically to this comparison between the thought of Aquinas and everything that is new in modern thought. The celebration of his centenary showed that after seven hundred years, he is still being studied, even by students and researchers who are not Catholics.

During its 1973 session the permanent commission for the promotion of studies considered the problem of fostering the vocation of being a professor or a research student, among our younger brethren. We should all think about this question. Are we really convinced of the importance of this work for the Church ? Does the general atmosphere of our provinces and houses help to suggest and foster such a vocation ? What do we do to prepare such people, to free them from other work and be aware of their needs ?

So as to remain faithful to itself, the Order has always been very careful to preserve the balance between those who announce the saving word directly, and those who study it and prepare tomorrow's preachers. This balance, which is of such benefit to both, must not be destroyed for the sake of an apostolate aiming at more direct contacts. The existence of a special assistant general for the apostolate, along with the assistant general for the intellectual life, is a sure guarantee of keeping this balance.

4. A firm faith

The crisis in the Church today is a crisis of faith. Throughout their history the sons of Saint Dominic have consistently tried to bear witness to the faith and to be its privileged preachers. Today's crisis must find us strong and clear in our own faith.

In these days of cultural, technical, economic and political upset, people are taking a long cold look at the faith. They are thinking it over - and rightly so - the better to grasp its meaning. They try to express it in a more meaningful way, and to come to a better understanding of its demands in the moral Order. But there is all the difference in the world between asking questions about the faith, and questioning the faith.

In our days especially there is an ever growing tendency to put dogma and moral in line with what happens to the fashionable at the moment, and the spirit of relativity and secularism to which I have already alluded has weakened our strength to resist. It is particularly true nowadays that we carry the treasure of our faith in 'fragile vessels'. But are we sufficiently conscious of this ? Are we sufficiently aware of the humanly speaking vulnerable nature of our faith : my own and other people's ? Are we always able to avoid a kind of levity when dealing with questions which we cannot answer, but which run the risk of upsetting the convictions of those listening to us ? Naturally all this depends on the individuals involved and the circumstances. However these are questions - and there are many others - which we must ask ourselves.

Faith is strengthened and grows especially through prayer, so long as we really meet Christ in prayer. Do we ? What is our prayer in common like ? Just an obligation ? A true shared meeting with the Lord ? Do we know how to share our faith on such an occasion ? We know, however, how much we can draw from this when we go out later on to speak about Jesus to those committed to our care. Do we share our faith spontaneously in this way ? And then what about our private prayer ? During the last number of years young people from all parts of the world have amazed everyone by their desire to pray, and is not this a "sign of the times" ? Can we ourselves speak about prayer if we do not know how to pray, or if we pray very little ? Is it any wonder that that our faith is weak ?

If we are to face up to what the Church and the world expects of the Order at the beginning of this last quarter of the century we will certainly have to reconsider some of our apostolic commitments. We have no longer got the necessary numbers. Even to keep going as we are, is presenting serious problems in many places; and we will have to plan for the future before it is too late. But in other places new and more urgent apostolates are already making their claim on us. Decisions must be made and sacrifices will be necessary.

Now, we must not be discouraged by all this. The history of the order shows that small well-prepared groups do an amazing amount when the work is carefully chosen. The constitutions ask us to cast a cold eye periodically on our apostolic activities (LCO n 106 par III and IV). If we all did that this year as a way of bringing about renewal and of helping to show a sense of purpose and vitality to young people thinking of joining the Order, would it not be one of the first signs of the "confidence for the future" of which I have been speaking ? I hope every province, every house and every brother will examine its activities and reflect on them. How am I using my time ? In what way does my work help people to know God and to find in him the meaning of life ? Should I keep going the way I am ? Should I get more deeply involved ? What should I remove from my lifestyle ?

We must also examine ourselves on new ways of preaching and on how to reach certain types of people. What do we do for non-believers, for Christians of other denominations, for non-Christian believers ? Then there are all the problems posed by poverty, injustice, lack of understanding, conflicts and tensions of all kinds, war. To what extent are we involved in those problems on which the Church insists so much today, because they are an essential part of preaching the Gospel in its integrity ?

These necessary changes which I am suggesting imply changes in our communities too, because the questions are put to each of us individually, but also to the communities to which we belong. The quality of our discussions on these questions, as indeed on everything which makes up our life, will depend on the quality of our community life. And what is this like ? Within our houses what do we do to help one another to grow in the fullness of Christ ?

At the beginning of this letter I recalled the problems and the crises which have affected us, the difficulties we are still experiencing, and what we are suffering as a result. But the most serious thing is not the fall off in numbers : The most serious thing would be if our faith in the Order, our confidence - in ourselves and in our brothers - our vitality were to be affected, even in the slightest way.

My dear brothers, I am appealing to you all to renew your confidence and your hope.

To realize Saint Dominic's ideal in our modern world is not to allow oneself to be overcome by the crisis affecting the world and the Church. Rather is it to be present to help our brothers and sisters to overcome this crisis and to discover what God wants us to learn about the world today and of tomorrow.