

# Some Aspects of Dominican Life

A letter sent to the Order for Christmas 1975

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The festival of Christmas brings us closer to the mystery of the manifestation of God to humankind. It also reminds us of our Dominican vocation: to live the Word of God together, to pray over it, to study it, to celebrate it, so that we can announce it in countless different ways.

During this first year of my term of office I have visited more than half our 41 provinces and a certain number of our African and Latin American vicariates. During the same time most of the Assistants to the general have spent shorter or longer periods, on the invitation of the provincials, to their respective regions.

During these visits, which enabled me to come into personal contact for the first time with the more important centers of the Order, I listened especially to the brethren, hearing about their apostolic work, their difficulties and their hopes. I also had many discussions with the brethren, as with the nuns and sisters too, on my three major preoccupations with regard to the Order, as I see it to-day. I do not mean these three points to represent a scale of values but rather a priority in urgency for our days.



## Three preoccupations

### First preoccupation: the intellectual life

At the present time two thirds of our provinces have no house of studies of their own, no studium, which means that our students are studying philosophy and theology in colleges of widely differing quality. There is one easy solution to this, which is to send our students to other countries which still have a Dominican studium. However people are very conscious today of how important it is for students to carry out their course of studies in their own country, within their own culture and background. All the same I remain convinced that young people need a balanced methodology if they are to learn to think in a critical fashion.

We must make a serious effort to match, for their mutual benefit, the conclusions of modern science and philosophy, with Saint Thomas' ideas (cf LCO, n. 82, end). We used to have men well acquainted with modern thought and also with Saint Thomas' system in its historical perspective. But too often the attempt to match the two was left to students, and it was a difficult task which they were rarely able to accomplish. Nine years ago, before coming to Rome I realized that I would have to change my way of teaching, and I am convinced that this "matching" must be made, if our intellectual heritage is to survive.

Our brethren also urgently need ongoing formation. In this respect some of our provinces are good, while others are very weak. We cannot be content to wear the habit of Saint Dominic and sing the praises of Saint Thomas. More is asked of us today in a world which is evolving and changing so rapidly. We must not put on superior airs as if we had all the answers and act as if nobody could tell us anything. In fact there is a great deal we can learn from others, especially in the pastoral field and in specialized apostolates.

### Second preoccupation: Dominican presence in the world to-day

We are working at all sorts of different things, and in a general way, we are doing them well. But it seems to me that we are doing the same things as we did 5, to and 20 years ago, and doing them in the same way. We should put this question to ourselves and ponder over it seriously.

Where is tomorrow's world in the process of evolving ? What are we doing to reach and to influence young people, professional groups, couples, students, and various other milieus and groups ? What vital, influential and authentic role is played by parishes, schools and chaplaincies ? Do these not provide a too ready answer to our apostolic ideals ? Do they lead us to spend our time preaching to a chosen few, and converting the converted ? Whatever we do the year 2,000 will be completely different, and what then will be the place of the Order of Preachers ?

In my conversations with the brethren and the sisters and the nuns I expressed my surprise at the small number of brothers working in the fields of social justice and the mass media and I insisted on the need to designate religious for this work and to prepare them for it.

Various possibilities of helping . the poor and the oppressed are open to us: 1. direct help; 2. instruction in ways of helping yourself; 3. research into the causes of poverty and injustice. I firmly believe that, as Dominicans, and without neglecting the first two of these, we should concentrate on the third of these possibilities which necessitates

professional competence in many different fields: economics, sociology, politics, philosophy, theology and others. History gives an example of this in the attempts made by people like Vittoria and Las Casas to defend the cause of oppressed Indians.

### **Third preoccupation: prayer**

Since Vatican II our prayers have been reduced in quantity, though I think they have improved in quality. But what about the intensity of our own private prayer ? An increasing desire for a deeper life of prayer has been remarked among young people. Are we able to give them what they want ? As a result of brief contacts with some houses of formation I have a distinct impression that many novices and students have a deep appreciation of prayer and the contemplative life. In some places I have heard of growing antagonism between the "charismatics" and the "politically-minded" - under-stood in the wide sense. The latter accuse the former of slowing up social change. Have we considered this problem seriously enough to be able to give an intelligent answer ? And there are many other aspects of prayer we must reflect on.

During the last two or three years I have noticed a change in the type of men who are thinking of joining us, an impression that has often been confirmed during my recent travels. They want to lead a life of dedicated study, deep prayer, lived in common with others who share the same faith. I have at times referred whimsically to these young people as the "new race". But I still have some reservations about the kind of welcome we give them. Are we able to accept them without disappointing them ? Can we offer them the rich interior spiritual life for which they are looking ? They come to us without any preconceived notions for or against the traditional ideas that took such a hammering immediately after Vatican II.

While taking part in the meetings of the Inter-provincial Conference of Latin American Dominicans, CIDAL (Conférence Interprovinciale Dominicaine d'Amérique Latine) in Quito this summer, I was very impressed by the deeply serious approach of the brothers and sisters to the problem of evangelizing their countries. And what moved me especially was our prayer in common - two hours every day. We simply had Lauds, Vespers and concelebrated Mass, but these were moments of sharing and reflection on the Scriptures, of intercession in common, of silence: something simple and profound. I think that what made the experience so rich, was the presence of the sisters, both with regard to the authentic fervor of our prayer life and also the awareness the sisters had, on account of their natural sensitivity, of the down-to-earth daily problems of the poor and their condition of life.

I am encouraged by the cooperation and collaboration I find between the brothers and the sisters of the Order. I hope we will be able to continue in this line because we have much to offer one another, and together we can become a force in the Church and the world. However up to the present I have found very little real cooperation between brothers and sisters on the one hand and the members of lay fraternities of Saint Dominic on the other. However these latter, in the context of an evolving world, should be an immense help to us and an inspiration that is second to none. Without them would it be possible for us to give to our world today the new soul it needs; and which it can only find in the Gospel of Christ ?

And now that I have told you about my three preoccupations, I would ask every brother, every sister, every nun, each convent, each monastery, each province, each congregation, each lay fraternity with all its members, to reflect and discover how together, you and I; in a spirit of solidarity, and sharing the same hope which springs from prayer, can prepare the Order of Preachers to-day so that it can play its part and find its role in tomorrow's world, the world of the 21st century.