

The Song Continues: Dominican Monastic Life in Light of the Jubilee

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Eight hundred years have passed since the founding of the Order and we are coming now to the conclusion of a nine-year period of preparation in celebration of this blessed event. Go and preach! we are commanded by our Master. Take up once again the staff of Peter, the book of Paul – the staff of itinerancy, the book of the Word – and allow the fire of the Gospel to set us alight once more!¹ This is as true for us, the nuns, as it is for the friars, albeit in our own way, very distinct from that of our brothers.

I have great hopes for our Order and, God willing, we may look forward to another eight hundred years and more of Dominican life and mission. To conclude this special period of grace I would like to offer my own reflections on what it means to be a Nun of the Order of Preachers. I do so with humble joy and a heart filled with gratitude for my own vocation and for those of so many brothers and sisters that I have been privileged to meet, to live and collaborate with over the past fifty-some years. “May God bless us and keep us. May God look upon us kindly and grant us peace,” I pray.

What is Dominican Monastic Life?

Let us begin with the question uppermost in our minds: What is Dominican monastic contemplative life? How does it – or even, does it – fit into a more generic pattern of universal monasticism? And how do we differ?

Modern anthropological and psychological studies have located what may be called the ‘archetypal character of the monk (or nun).’² The roots of monasticism are embedded deep within the human psyche; every human person – consciously or unconsciously – is in relation with the Absolute and is destined to an existence that extends beyond what this world has to offer. Instinctively realizing this magnetic force intrinsic to humanity, forms of monastic life have sprung up across cultures since the beginnings of time.³ We learn that a universal pattern or psychic paradigm of spirituality informs every human person in his or her human struggle towards one’s own full humanity.⁴ We, then, who have heard this call more distinctly or perhaps more loudly – as St. Augustine said, ‘You called, You shouted, and You shattered my deafness’ – and have responded to a call to an institutionalized form of monastic life, bear a profound responsibility to our fellow men and women in the broader culture. Ours may not be, it cannot be, a life of ease and comfort, or complacent and self-absorbed. To us has it been given to carry the torch of the God-quest in the name of and in the forefront of the whole of humanity. And all the more now, as the world has become more

¹ Bruno Cadoré, O.P., *Letter for the Jubilee Year of the Order of Preachers*, Rome, January 1, 2016.

² Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Religious Life in the Human Context*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 6. Schneiders is referring to a presentation of Raimundo Panikkar at Symposium on inter-religious dialogue in November 1980.

³ Every major world religion has expressed this truth with its own unique monastic form. There were the Essenes in former Judaism; Islam has its Sufis. Monasticism exists as well in both Hinduism and Buddhism.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 6.

and more de-Christianized, more and more fragmented and lost, in its substitution of power and control for Truth.

The question is – beyond the value of contemplative life in itself – how do we carry the torch of truth as *Dominican* contemplatives? What unique gift have we to offer the Church and the world? And, if we fall short, what particular jewel will be lacking to the splendor of the Church, and even to the fullness of humanity itself? The question is two-fold: What is our role within the Dominican family? And what sets us apart from other contemplative Orders? The challenge of the moment is to grow into the full measure of all that we are called to be, not as contemplative women only but as Dominican contemplatives.

“To be or not to be [Dominican]; that is the question”

It seems so long ago that Vatican II mandated a fresh look at religious life, a directive that all of us took very seriously in 1965 and the years following. “The up-to-date renewal of the religious life comprises both a constant return to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the institutes, and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.”⁵ This grand charter remains in force, now after more than 50 years have passed. The challenge is to continue the process of renewal, never settling in as ‘having arrived.’ In the spiritual life one never finally reaches the ‘goal;’ there is always another good step to take. “For here we have no permanent city” (Heb 13:14).⁶ It is true, there are resting places along the way, partial goals, times to take stock of progress made and plateaus reached, moments of satisfaction and contentment. But it will not be long before the next stage of the journey opens before us, a new goal to be reached, another challenge to be taken up. Dominican life, as for the Gospel, must be re-interpreted and re-embraced anew by each generation if it is to retain its strength and relevance. I believe that, as we conclude this jubilee celebration, another significant Dominican moment is upon us. And so we ask, what is it, then, that specifically makes us Dominican contemplatives? And what does the Dominican family expect of us; what part do we play? The Church herself expects this of us, as she reminds us, “It is for the good of the Church that institutes have their own proper characters and functions.”⁷ What, then, is proper to us? And how may knowledge of that lead us forward?

A *Dominican* monasticism

Several years ago, Timothy Radcliffe, then Master of the Order, addressed a Letter to the Nuns in which he posed the question: “What does it mean to be a nun in a missionary Order?”⁸ To locate our specific place among the Church’s great monastic Orders, I would like to re-phrase and turn Timothy’s question inside out, as it were, then add two further questions: First, what does it mean to be itinerant (or missionary, as Timothy suggests) in a setting that is meant to be unchanging? The very question sets us apart from every other monastic group for even the image evoked by the word ‘monastic’ suggests permanence,

⁵ Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, promulgated October 28, 1965. This translation taken from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1975), n. 2, p. 612.

⁶ Biblical quotations are taken from The New American Standard version, found on line at biblehub.com.

⁷ *Ibid.* n. 2 (b), p. 612.

⁸ Timothy Radcliffe, OP, “A City Set on a Hilltop Cannot Be Hidden: A Contemplative Life” Santa Sabina, April 29, 2001, n. 2.

stability, constancy. A quiet way of life. We do not go out on mission; we are not sent. We (ordinarily – sometimes circumstances dictate otherwise; quite frequently in fact, of late!) enter a monastery for life and expect to live with the same group of companions until we die. In eight centuries there have been only two major changes in our Constitutions.⁹ The monotony of the daily horarium lends itself (rightly) to a rhythm of prayer and repose. And yet we insist, as Dominican Nuns, itinerancy, one of the major features of our Order, leaves its mark on us as well, even if we never actually leave our monastery. We too are called to the ‘frontiers of humanity,’ as Fr. Carlos tells us: “It is the responsibility of the whole Dominican Family, ‘men and women together in mission,’ to realize that project and to set in motion the specific mission of the Order in the world.”¹⁰ Our mission, as Dominican Nuns, shifts our gaze ‘to history and the world of humanity since that is where salvation is achieved.’ This demands a missionary spirit, an itinerant heart, an aspect of monasticism that is not necessarily shared by other major monastic Orders. Their prayer, their contemplation and search for God are, of course, just as efficacious as ours in obtaining grace for others but they are not specifically ordered in that direction. We are. And that affects the whole tenor of our life.

We, as Dominicans – fellow travelers with the entire human family – are on a journey. Understood immediately as geographical, for us the journey ought also to be embraced spiritually, as radical renunciation.¹¹ “It is an aspect of Dominican spirituality that must inform the whole of our lives and that is nurtured from diverse biblical experiences from the Hebrew Scriptures as well as those of Jesus, *The Way* whom Dominic longed to follow as a true evangelical son.”¹² This is as true of the nuns as it is of the friars, to whom this Letter was primarily addressed. In the monastic life, even though we have been allowed the better part to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to His word, that listening is a call to – actually – change, be transformed, grow, shift from place to place, interiorly if not geographically. We are itinerant; the journey never ends. Rather, the road opens ever more before us the further we advance. This is the first mark of Dominican contemplative life that must be realized among us. Itinerancy.

Active contemplatives?

The second question I ask in seeking to differentiate Dominican monasticism within the life of the Church is: What does it mean to be active in a life wholly dedicated to contemplation? By ‘active,’ of course, I do not mean the busy-ness that, unfortunately, sometimes infects our monasteries. (“Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but *only* one thing is necessary;” Lk 10:41-42). Nor do I mean the many tasks and duties that necessarily fill the hours not dedicated to prayer. I refer rather to action in the theological sense of the word – an active apostolate.

Too often, the formula ‘To contemplate and give to others the fruits of contemplation,’ is severed in our minds: The nuns ‘contemplate’ and the friars ‘give to others.’ But in Dominic’s vision, the entire mission belongs to both the friars and the nuns; only the manner of approach differs. “Both friars and nuns press onward to that perfect love of God and

⁹ The first was 1930, promulgated in recognition of the 1917 revision of Canon Law; the second was our present Constitutions, issued in 1987 in response to the mandate of Vatican II.

¹⁰ Carlos Aspiroz Costa, O.P., *Proclaiming the Gospel in the Order of Preachers*, Rome, November 7, 2002.

¹¹ Carlos Aspiroz Costa, O.P., *Letter to the Order*, May 24, 2003.

¹² *Ibid.*

neighbor which is effective in caring for and procuring the salvation of all people [...] They [the nuns] spend themselves totally for souls.”¹³ Nor are these two arms of the Dominican motto sequential; they are simultaneous; one cannot exist without the other. Preaching for the friars *necessarily* flows from contemplation – if it is to qualify as Dominican. The issue of bearing fruit is simpler for us nuns: Contemplation, because of the inter-connectedness of all things, is of its very nature apostolic. In the spiritual order, what is given to one is unfailingly a gift to all.

But as Dominican nuns we go further. The gift of ourselves to God is at the same time a gift of ourselves to our brothers and sisters. With St. Dominic as we fix our gaze upon Jesus, that Book of Charity which teaches everything, we are ever mindful of sinners whom ‘we carry in the compassion of our hearts.’ Intercessory prayer is a hallmark of our tradition; countless Dominican treatises on prayer give it a place of prominence. Our model is St. Catherine of Siena, mystical doctor of the Church, who knew well how to bring together the prayer of contemplation with active prayer. Her passionate prayers of petition, her tears (as did the tears that first fell from the face of St. Dominic), and her untiring ‘care for the churches’ can teach us the critical difference Dominicanism can make to Christian monasticism: a monasticism that can weep with the world.¹⁴ This is the second unique characteristic of Dominican contemplative life to which I want to draw attention.

Silent preaching

My third question is similar: What does it mean to ‘preach’ when our entire life is hidden and we are dedicated to silence and stillness? What voice do we have, from what pulpit do we speak, as we must if we are to be “truly Nuns of the Order of Preachers” (LCM 74.IV)? Preaching is the keynote of our Order; it is the central fact of our existence, its *raison d’être*. Obviously so when we look to the friars but uncertain as to how it pertains to the nuns – until we understand what is meant by Dominican preaching. From a Dominican perspective preaching is not simply something to be done but a way of life. It means to live a life which in itself is a preaching, a way of life that preaches.¹⁵ The ‘Holy Preaching,’ we call it, is as true for the nuns as it is for the friars – and perhaps more so, in that we are to be the visible expression of that holiness envisioned by St. Dominic as the fount from which the apostolate was to flow. We nuns, deprived of an external apostolate, are all the more called upon to preach by presence, simply by ‘being,’ by becoming, in God, all that we are called to be. It belongs to us, as Dominican nuns, to hold aloft the torch of Truth, “to proclaim prophetically that in Christ alone is true happiness to be found, here by grace and afterwards in glory” (LCM 1. VI). In this way we return to the essential and primary meaning of all monasticism: the search for God in the depths of one’s own soul.

We are literally to be that ‘city set on a hill’ that cannot be hidden, the light of the world set upon a lamp stand to give light to all in the house so that all may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven (cf. Mt 5:14. 16). According to Fr. Aniceto Fernandez, OP, we, the nuns, ‘play the highest part,’ ours is ‘the noblest part’ of the Order and we bear a great responsibility not only for our own personal sanctification and salvation but also “to bring forth all [the gifts we have received] for the benefit of the Church and the

¹³ Fundamental Constitutions of the Nuns, 1. II.

¹⁴ Sr. Grace Mary Snow, O.P., et. Al., *Rethinking Dominican Monastic Life: A Proposal*, 2001.

¹⁵ Cf. *Ministry of Preaching*, Acts of the General Chapter, Rome, 2010, n. 51.

spread of God's kingdom in the world, thus cooperating with the brethren in the way proper to [us]."¹⁶

There is no doubt whatever that Dominican Nuns are the recipients of a very beautiful and unique charism, not taken up by other monastic Orders, or at least not in the same way. It belongs to us to grow in understanding and appreciation of this singular gift of God that has been granted to us. Without our contribution to the full spectrum of spirituality, the splendor of the Church would (it seems to me) be greatly diminished. Carmelites have been entrusted with the patrimony of profound insight into the contemplative journey into God as set forth by Sts. John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus (Avila); Poor Clares with the love of simplicity and poverty; Cistercians and Benedictines with the beauty of liturgy and the balance of work and prayer. Each gem more beautiful than the other; but ours, too. We bear the beacon of light granted to our Father Dominic for the salvation of the world. And it is only by following the path marked out for us that we may reach the fullness of life and joy that is our destiny.

A polyphony of voices

The ship of our Father Dominic is "very spacious, gladsome, and fragrant, a most delightful garden."¹⁷ A chorus of voices coming from every walk of life, men and women, young and old, each offering a nugget of truth, the fruit of grace, and united in the one ideal of proclaiming God's Love, God's Mercy, God's Truth to the world. There is but one body, St. Paul tells us, though not all the members have the same function (cf. 1Cor 12:12; Rm 12:4). "A variety of gifts but the same Spirit" (1Cor 12:4).

The place of the nuns in the Order is counterpoint. All the other members of the Order – friars, sisters, laity – without losing their bearings in contemplation – are visibly engaged in the ministry of the Word. We nuns, if indeed we have 'the highest part, the noblest part,' as Fr. Fernandez insists, are at the same time the most obscure. Since we do not have an external apostolate, we are harder to define. Our place in the Order, clearly given us by St. Dominic himself, clearly manifest in the unique beginnings of our Order, has not yet come into the fullness of its being, its full stature. We have not yet fully understood – neither ourselves, the nuns, nor our brothers and sisters – who we are and what it means to have contemplative nuns at the very hub of the apostolate. What will happen in our Order if we do come to full light, if we do take our rightful place?

For many years now as the Order seeks to renew itself, the emphasis, coming from many directions, has been on contemplation. Letters of the Masters and Acts of the General Chapters – all have drawn attention to the need to renew the contemplative aspect of our Dominican lives. Further, the last three Masters have written Letters specifically addressed to the nuns; Fr. Carlos, in particular, went out of his way to visit us and preach retreats. Several of the recent Chapters of the Order have also had a specific message for the nuns,¹⁸ drawing us more closely into the mission of the entire Order.

¹⁶ Aniceto Fernandez, O.P., Master of the Order, *Letter of Promulgation of the Nuns' Constitutions*, July 22, 1971.

¹⁷ *Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*, translation and introduction by Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p.339.

¹⁸ Providence (2001) in particular devoted a full commission to the life of the nuns and our place in the Order, ACG 308-345. Bogota (2007), ACG Appendix 7 and Trogir (2013), ACG 117 and perhaps others also made special mention of us.

Contemplation is the heart of Dominican life, the gem beyond all price set among the many active works that make up the Order's life and mission. Contemplation, that bridge extending from heaven to earth, drawing down God's blessing, lifting humanity up, is the pulsing energy that makes preaching fruitful. Without that contemplative union with God the preacher's words would have no meaning, all efforts would be futile. What, then, is the place of the nuns in the Order, we who have been given, in an intensified way, this treasure to shelter and keep alive, ensuring its vitality, so often endangered amidst the worries and cares of the apostolate?

We already know who we are, we already love our vocation. What may be lacking is the full consciousness of its implications. Ours is the role of Mary, pregnant with the Word, bringing the Word to birth. Ours is the role of Elizabeth, barren years of waiting until the sacred encounter with Christ in Mary releases the graciousness of God upon the world (Providence, 2001). Ours is the role of Mary Magdalen and the other women of the Gospel: "Go and tell my brothers...." (cf. Mt 28:7; Jn 20:17). How can we bring the voice of our contemplative presence into greater prominence?

Ours is not the main melody; preaching is the purpose of the Order. Yet, our voice too must be heard, not loudly, perhaps, but firmly, confidently. Maybe like a descant, sweetly lifting above or sometimes below and always intermingling with the principal tones of the music. As I listen to the Masters and Chapters of the Order supporting and encouraging us, I hear a call to allow the inner power of our Dominican contemplative identity to come out from the shadows and into the full light of day. We must bring the specific accent of our prayerful presence to reverberate throughout the entire Order if the Order is to flourish. How may we do this?

The answer rests, I believe, within ourselves and, led by grace, simply by coming to greater and greater conscious awareness of the meaning of our vocation. Just as the Presence of God dwells within us whether we are aware of it or not, so is our vocation, essentially and in principle, efficacious. Yet again, just as becoming mindful of God's Presence changes, not God who dwells within, but ourselves; so too, our vocation, adhered to more intentionally, enables us to allow our light to shine more brightly before all who are in the house.

Dominican Family

It is not, perhaps, by accident, that accompanying an increased awareness of the role of the nuns of the Order is a growing appreciation of the Dominican Family. The General Chapter of Tallaght (1971, ACG 122) established definitively 'the universal Order of Preachers,' comprised of clerical and cooperator brothers, nuns, sisters, and laity. At Quezon City (1977, ACG 64), the terms 'First, Second, and Third Orders' were abolished and the women of the Order (nuns and sisters) were declared indispensable in a true, equal, complementarity. Any number of directives, too numerous and time-consuming to cite here, could be mentioned.

But these two concepts, the role of the contemplative nuns, and the rise of the Dominican Family, running parallel, are together an indication of a certain prerogative of the grace of the present moment among us. The image of the Church as a 'body' with a 'differentiation of members' is as old as Christianity itself (cf. 1 Co 12; Rm 12). But we may also look to St. Thomas for a theological explanation of what this means. Speaking of creation in general Thomas declares: "The perfection of the universe [...] consists of the

diversity of things.”¹⁹ With his usual logic, he goes on to say why: Because God who is Perfection Itself cannot be imaged perfectly in any one being; thus, a variety of beings are needed so that what is lacking in one may be supplied by another. “The whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.”²⁰

We find the same echo in St. Catherine. God the Father, speaking to Catherine in *The Dialogue*, teaches that the virtues and other spiritual and bodily gifts have been distributed in such a way that no one person has all of them. The reason: for the practice of mutual charity, so that all would be dependent one upon the other, in recognition of the many rooms in God’s house.²¹

These are truly Dominican concepts, perfectly aligned with our Dominican spirituality and instinctively understood and operative among us. But if the recognition and appreciation of the function of each individual segment of the Dominican body has become more apparent in recent years, perhaps the challenge now is to discover how best to bind ourselves together more intimately so that each branch of the Order, “according to the proper working of each individual part [may cause] the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Ep 4:16). This challenge may be met, I believe, by a continuously deepening espousal of authentic Dominican spirituality.

The way forward: A spirituality of the Word

We could say that the several characteristic marks of Dominican life already mentioned – itinerancy, care for others, and the witness of a holy life – are, as it were, the fruits or flowering of St. Dominic’s tree come to full maturity. But the root, the sub-structure of it all is the vision of God’s love for the world as revealed in the Word made flesh. Dominican spirituality is at its core ‘a spirituality of the Word’ – in all the rich facets of meaning that we may apply to it. It is first of all, an embrace of Jesus, *the* Word of God, incarnated in our created world, in matter. Even to say only this much opens to us an astounding panorama of wonder and beauty.

If we say Truth is our focus – Veritas – we are challenged to bring the secret fact of God dwelling among us out into the open, to be messengers of God’s plan of salvation in Christ Jesus to the ends of the earth. Or we may refer once again to our motto, “Contemplate and give to others the fruits of contemplation,” and its embodiment in another formula of the Order: “To praise, to bless, to preach.” Each of these avenues of approach stem from a central encounter with The Word.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God [...] And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (Jn 1: 1.14). Here is the lodestone we Dominicans continually return to; it says all that needs to be said. It opens to us the immensity of Who God is and who we are, in God. It speaks to us of the splendor and goodness of this created world and the dignity and value of each human soul within it.

We may ask with the five-year-old Thomas, ‘What is God?’ and spend our entire life probing the answer only to conclude, as he did, that all he had written was as straw

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1. 47. Art. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *op. cit*, p.38.

compared to the reality. Or we may ask, more personally, with Catherine, 'Who is God?' and receive the answer, 'I am He Who Is, you are she who is not' and be caught up in an ever waxing encounter with the living God. In either case – or in any of the cases we each experience in our own lives – we are always brought back face to face with The Word. For Thomas it was the immensity of reality, expressed most perfectly and fully in Jesus. For Catherine it was Christ the Bridge weaving together earth and heaven. And if we go back farther to our Father Dominic, he learned 'everything from the Book of Charity – Christ the crucified One; it teaches everything.'

We, the nuns, are also enamored of the Word – in the Liturgy first of all with its daily immersion in the scriptures. Day in and day out, we are continually fed with the sacred bread of God's Word as spoken throughout the centuries of salvation history. This is our food for the journey as we pray: the psalms – all of theology, every human emotion contained therein; our own life's journey mapped out for us as we leaf through the historical and prophetic and wisdom literature of the Old Testament; and of course, the final significance of human life revealed in the New Testament.

We encounter the Word in our personal prayer. With the scriptures always at hand, we 'learn Christ,' we 'put on Christ,' and store God's Word in our memory, reflecting on it in our heart, bringing forth the Word like Mary in the actions of our life.²² It is by the Word that pierces and divides 'soul and spirit, joints and marrow, judging the thoughts and purposes of the heart' (Heb 4:12) that we are transformed into the likeness of Christ.

We encounter the Word 'in the voice of the Church, the sacraments of faith, the teaching of our shepherds, the example of the saints, and when the world and our brothers and sisters cry out for our love (cf. LCM 97. II). In other words, God's Word is omnipresent. We need only become accustomed to listening for it, seeking it, searching it out. The question remains, however, how the richness of God's Word, alive in us, may overflow to the other members of the Dominican Family, and theirs to us in a communal embrace of the Preaching mission.

The Word calls us to friendship (cf. Jn 15:15)

A word by its very nature is a carrier of meaning; it is by words that we express our inner thoughts and communicate with others. Words are relational, they bind us together, they are symbolic of friendship. We then, rooted in God's Word, are called to friendship – friendship with God first of all, friendship with one another in God. Friendship is at the very heart of Dominican spirituality²³ because it emphasizes relationships. Ours cannot be a solitary spirituality; it is rather inclusive and appreciative not only of our fellow travelers along life's way but of the entire created world.

I believe that when Dominic gave us into the care of our brothers, it was meant to be a mutual caring, one for the other. In the early days of the Order the friars were responsible for the temporal needs of the sisters, a necessity in the 13th century when women had little means for their own provision. This is no longer the case; but the mutual sharing of a common heritage remains perennially essential to all of us: friars, nuns, sisters and laity. The many marvelous examples of friendship in the Order can speak to us now of our own call to

²² Providence, 2001, ACG 297: The nuns' existence is to be "a lived *lectio divina*, a discovery of the Word's advent not in texts only but in the realm of the heart."

²³ Donald Goergen, O.P., *The Spirit of Dominic: The Pillars Revisited*.

be brothers and sisters and friends: Dominic and Diego in the founding of the Order, Dominic's affection for the first women converts with whom he shared his passion and mission for souls. There were the evening hours spent in conversation, the sharing of new wine, and the gift of the wooden spoons.²⁴ Then there was Jordan and Diana, Catherine and Raymond, Thomas and Albert. We could mention Bl. Fra Angelico and St. Antoninus, Sts. Juan Macias and Martin de Porres. All of these, hearts filled with love of God and zeal for souls, found encouragement, support, and joy in their friend.

We too must enter this wonderful stream of grace that flows through our Order. We may not actively share in the common apostolate of the friars, the sisters, and the laity but this need not prevent us from offering our own unique gifts to the conversation: a 'descant,' perhaps, as alluded to above. Some of us may be on an academic level comparable to that of our brothers but with or without that advantage, our less formal perspective, a simple wisdom learned by observation and lived experience may, at times, offer a healthy balance to a more scholarly approach. We may not remain passive, expecting to be recipients only of the knowledge and skill of our friars. We too have gifts to bring to the table – gifts of another order sometimes but just as valuable, just as beneficial. We offer the gifts of hospitality, of encouragement and support, of interest in the apostolate. We offer the witness of our zeal, of our fidelity and devotion, our goodness and love of Truth. We, the nuns, must bring ourselves up to a level of converse by our own immersion in the study of the Word. We must do our part so that this shining lamp of the beautiful friendship that characterizes our Order may be spread abroad. We too must pour our own waters into this stream of grace to refresh and be refreshed in the mutuality and equality of our common mission.

The Word preached: Dominican government

One particular expression of the friendship that is stamped on our Order is our form of government. We seek God's Will together, striving for the harmony born of consensus. Every voice is included, some with major parts, some less prominent but every voice in tune; or, if there is a certain dissonance at times, it too may serve to heighten the beauty of the melody. Our prioress is exactly that: a 'prioress,' 'first among equals,' not a mother or an abbess; she does not hold office for life; she is not above the others, she is not the 'center.' She does hold authority and in that sense a certain hierarchical element of obedience remains in place among us. Essentially, however, her role is to animate the Chapter, to be the 'first' to draw out the promptings of grace among us. Her role is that of sister, leading us in the common search for what is best for all.

Chapter is a gathering of sisters, of friends. It is not enough in Dominican life to conform to external norms. Our inner journeys need also be shared – our struggles, our joys, our hopes, our dreams, our fears even – if we are to *build up* community integrally among us. This is a mark of friendship; a sharing of life, a journeying together. This sharing of values, our own personal way to God, is an essential element in Dominican life.²⁵ Without sharing at this deeper level, our community life will remain unproductive, fallow, and our friendships shallow.

One form of Chapter is to examine together the quality of our lives. It is a time set aside for this sacred activity, a time to allow the light of one's own truth to shine. As friends,

²⁴ Tradition has it that St. Dominic brought a gift of wooden spoons to the sisters at Prouilhe, a tradition that for many years was faithfully kept in our own monastic refectories in memory of this event.

²⁵ Cf. Fr. Damian Byrne, O.P., *Letter on Common Life*, 1988; and *Letter to the Nuns*, 1992.

we want to make our life together as beautiful and God-centered as possible. This includes the necessity of offering and accepting sisterly correctives among ourselves, always in charity, mercy, and humility. All of us fall short, all of us need the encouragement and support of each other. And it is only by this mutual support that we will be able to advance together in the 'renewal and development of our life' (Cf. LCM 68).

The second form of Chapter is – equally important – to examine the externals of our life together: temporalities, structures, and forms. This too demands a baring of our inner selves. It is not enough to argue on behalf of the practicalities that uphold our life without a sharing of the values that have formed our thinking. We all bear responsibility for the common good and we all must speak our 'truth.' We must have the courage to 'preach' to one another and, with the humility to listen, trust God's grace to form one body among us, in Christ.

Truth is as operative in Chapter as is community life. The objectivity of the Truth we seek in the common good brings us back to a spirituality of the Word and points ahead to the necessity of study with its own ascetical and formative demands. Each of us is a very small and insignificant yet vitally important 'word of God,' a single particle in the grand schema of things, a human expression of the particular grace God has called into being in this particular time and place. That kernel of Truth dwelling within us must be brought into the light and shared if it is not to remain dormant within us.²⁶ Can we meet the challenge of monastic preaching at Chapter that, once again, we prove to be "truly nuns of the Order of Preachers" (LCM 74. IV)?

Veritas – the Word is Truth

Truth, Pilate asked. "What is truth?" (Jn 18:38). Pilate's question was that of a cynic. We ask the same question but for us it is the driving force of our life. Truth refers to all that *is*, Reality, the essence of Beauty, Goodness, Life, Being Itself; in a word, God. It is God we seek, God in Himself, God in the revealed Word of Scripture, God in creation, in human history, in the providential mysteries of our own personal lives.

Truth: What is Truth? "Open your mind's eye [it is the Eternal Father speaking to Catherine] and look within Me, and you will see the dignity and beauty of My reasoning creature."²⁷ This is the truth we seek: Who is God? And who are we? And why does God love us so?

Study in the Dominican tradition does not refer only to academic activity – although, for some sisters and especially for the friars – it may include academia. It is instead, in first place, a religious observance, a way of life, indispensable in a spirituality steeped in the Word.

Let us say exactly what we mean when we refer to study as an observance. According to our Constitutions (101. I), "the light and source of our study is God." In other words, we may say that we see study as a form of prayer; it leads into prayer, it flows out of prayer; it cements our relationship to God. Then again, alternately, LCM 97. II delineates the multiplicity of ways in which that encounter may take place: "in the sacraments of faith, in the

²⁶ We make note of the condemnation laid on the man in the Gospel who because he had only received one talent, went and buried his master's money (cf. Mt 25:18).

²⁷ *Dialogue, op. cit.* p. 26.

teaching of our shepherds, in the example of the saints [...] when the world and our brothers and sisters cry out for our love.” Study for us is an activity of both the mind and the heart which ‘tunes us in’ to find God everywhere (cf. LCM 46. I and 97. II). Truth is reality and can be found in every circumstance. We need only open our eyes to see. It is not possible to be excused from this fundamental orientation in Dominican life.

But we need to go further. Study – an intellectual grappling with truth – is also a very practical form of asceticism (cf. LCM 100.II).²⁸ It can be difficult; it does make demands: Can we find the time for it? What can be set aside so that we will have the freedom and energy to devote ourselves to it? Once the initial ‘thorn of the will’²⁹ is passed, we will find that the benefits reaped are more than worth the effort, most of all in the quality of life it will promote: an aid to maturity and unanimity of mind, support for the practical judgment, an enlightened fidelity in the approach to observances. Nor need anyone fear that the demands will be too great because, as our Constitutions tell us, it is always “according to individual capacity” (Cf. LCM 100). Each of us may proceed at our own pace. There are no tests and the goal is to be led by each one’s thirst for knowledge and understanding.

We ask: Why did Dominic give doctrinal study the status of an observance, on a par with prayer and communal life? Why is it one of the pillars of Dominican life, holding up the entire edifice? It is not only for the friars’ use, in the practicality of passing on the faith. There is also, and more profoundly, a theological reason. Study is an observance because it represents the gift of one’s intellect, one’s highest faculty, to God in the human effort to understand and articulate the faith. Theology as a religious act is meant to lead the mind into the fullness of its own potential and beyond.³⁰ According to Fr. Carlos, there is an intellectual as well as a spiritual itinerancy proper to the Order which draws us ever deeper into the search for truth.³¹ Here, too, the journey never ends.

We learn from the *Dialogue* that the Dominican Family is “governed by a perfect rule and founded on the light of learning for [God’s] honor and the salvation of souls.”³² The light of learning is, therefore, one of the characteristic features of our Order. How can we embrace it, give it the status it deserves? As exemplified by Catherine herself, it is not academic knowledge that is needed but a knowledge that is born of wisdom, of love for God, for Truth. For us as Dominicans, the search for understanding, and the use of the mind predominate. Can our thirst for understanding, for Truth, be one more beautiful and humble offering that we Dominicans bring to share with other monastics at the table of the God-quest so needed today? And further, is it not the marrow of the friendships that bind us together as one?

The Word enfleshed: Nature and grace

Any reference to Dominican life and mission, monastic or apostolic, would be grossly incomplete without touching on the relationship of nature and grace. Dominican life is

²⁸ The call for ‘new forms of penance’ (cf. LCM 62.I) may be better served by embracing our constitutional obligation to study (cf. LCM 61. II) than the bodily penances that prevailed in the past.

²⁹ The thought is derived from St. Catherine. She names the will as the seat of all suffering and calls suffering itself ‘thorns.’ Once we embrace whatever difficulty we face in God, the pain may remain but the suffering is gone (Cf. *Dialogue, op. cit.*, 98-99; 263).

³⁰ Franz Josef van Beeck, S.J., *God Encountered* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985, vol. 1), p. 36.

³¹ Carlos Aspiroz Costa, O.P., *Letter to the Order*, May 24, 2003.

³² *Dialogue, op. cit.* p. 337.

‘integral,’³³ balanced, wholesome, holistic. So often in our tradition we see a relationship of opposites: contemplation and action; men and women, faith and reason. We were founded at a moment in time in which the newer tools of discursive reasoning were overtaking the traditional monastic *lectio*. St. Dominic found a way to synthesize the two, in himself first of all, and handed on as a legacy to the entire Order. He himself manifested a remarkable array of opposing traits: gentleness and humility with firmness and strength; intense zeal and tireless activity as well as given to prayer. But perhaps the most significant – because it was in direct response to the heresy that awakened Dominic’s compassion – is the synthesis of nature and grace.

We Dominicans have a positive view of nature. We see no radical disconnect between God and human nature or the material world. Infinitely distant, yes, but bridged by grace – charity (St. Thomas); by Christ – God’s Word Incarnate (St. Catherine). Ours is a creation-impressed, Incarnation-inspired, and grace-centered spirituality.³⁴ We look for and see God’s Goodness, God’s Truth and Beauty everywhere, making our spiritual outlook positive, ‘worldly.’³⁵ Our charism, rooted in Divine Revelation – the Word of God – is dogmatic in character (therefore demanding of study); and we understand contemplation as a loving engagement with God on every level of our created being (mind, will, body, emotions). What difference does this make among us, in our personal lives?

“Grace perfects nature,”³⁶ we say, it elevates it, brings it into the realm of the divine. Asceticism for us is not a denial of nature but a disciplining of it, bringing our natural goodness to perfection under the guidance of our reason, a reason inspired by faith. Grace perfects nature – but it does not eliminate it, much less destroy it. In the Dominican view, our efforts are essential and so we are challenged to bring ourselves to the highest human perfection possible; but at the same time, we realize that every good deed is accomplished only by God’s grace and so we can take no pride in it. Nor are our gifts and talents for oneself alone; what is given to one is given for the sake of all.

We remember with St. Irenaeus that ‘the glory of God is man fully alive,’ so the goal of monastic life in its search for God has as result human flourishing, in grace. Human flourishing – not as an end in itself but as a stepping stone to that transcending gift of one’s self given over, for the building up of the body, for the common good of all. Beauty and culture are important to us – they are the peaks of human achievement – as are the arts and family and friendship; not as ends in themselves but as celebration of God in the goodness and joy of creation. This attitude of overflowing super-abundance must surely impact the way we view monasticism, our own unique expression of Dominican monastic life.

Conclusion: “The Word was God [...] The Word became flesh (Jn 1:1. 14)

Eternity itself will not be long enough to fathom what it means to say that God in Person has entered our material world and lived among us, sharing our humanity and divinizing the whole of creation. But this is the Truth we seek to probe and enter into, journeying hand in hand with our brothers and sisters along the journey of life in this twenty-first century.

³³ Cf. Goergen, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Snow, *op. cit.* Many of the following thoughts are also borrowed from Snow.

³⁵ Phrase borrowed from Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. By Richard and Clara Winston, The New American Library, 1962.

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1. 1. Art. 8.

To us, as monastic women, has been given the immeasurable grace of answering the call, too often choked by the falsity of riches and pleasure, of pure joy and fullness of life, in Christ. It belongs to us now, to bring the wealth of our own Dominican tradition into the full measure of what has been allotted to us. Can we embrace the expressions typical of Dominican life – a pilgrim’s heart in itinerancy, contemplation spilling over into compassion, and allowing our little light to shine by the witness of our lives?

Once we become enamored of the mystery of God dwelling in the midst of us, every other aspect of Dominican life falls into place: the gift of God’s friendship overflowing into love of all others; prayer fueled by the search to understand; a creative asceticism that up builds and fortifies. Our spirituality is positive, empowered by the knowledge that everything God made is holy, sacramentalized by the presence of the Word among us – that Word which we praise together, that Word which blesses us and all humankind, that Word which we preach and spread abroad to the ends of the earth.

The Order as founded by St. Dominic in the years between 1206 and 1216 consisted in its embryonic form of only a handful of men and women followers. But that small seed, once planted, has grown “larger than the garden plants and [become] a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (Mt 13:31-32). This is my prayer, now as we come to the end of the Order’s jubilee celebration: May our branch too, the branch that holds aloft the Order’s jewel of contemplation, continue to grow into its full understanding of our own specific place in the Order of Preachers.