

DOMINIC AND THE EARLY MONASTIC TRADITION

Sister Jean Marie, OP
Langley, BC

INTRODUCTION

We have all read that Dominic treasured three books as particularly influential for his spiritual life: *The Conferences of Cassian*, The Gospel of Matthew and the Letters of St. Paul; we need to include also the book of psalms which formed the wellspring of his liturgical prayer. These books are listed as the sources of inspiration for St. Dominic. In this paper I would like to reflect on how these sources, especially the teaching in the Conferences, are replicated in the example of Dominic's life.¹

St. Dominic's holiness has the stamp of the desert spirituality. At Osma, *The Conferences of Cassian* were his guide in the spiritual life. He learned from them the struggle with sinfulness and weakness and the life of virtue which leads to perfection. Blessed Jordan writes:

He loved to read the book called the *Conferences of the Fathers*, which deals with vices and with all matters of spiritual perfection. The paths of salvation outlined therein he carefully studied and tried to imitate with all the strength of his soul. Along with the help of grace, this book refined the purity of his conscience, intensified the light of his contemplation, and raised him to a high level of perfection²

Certain characteristics stand out as we study some of the great figures of the early monastic movement, as recorded in Cassian and in other sources. Outstanding among these characteristics: asceticism, separation, renunciation, total surrender to Christ, all of which are means to the goal of purity of heart and the reign of God.

What strikes one is the seriousness, tenacity, and unflagging dedication with which these men and women of the early desert tradition undertook the task of purification and transformation. When one or another flagged they were encouraged by the abba, and their brothers and sisters, predominantly through example, and by the Word of God, read, memorized and mediated through the men and women of experience and wisdom.

The literature of the desert is about living the Christian life in its essentials, stripping away all but the basic principles of living a Gospel life; seeking God and losing the self in order to be redeemed and transformed.

The central teaching of the desert is the theme of reality, the stripping of illusion, the continuous life-long struggle to see God, to become the friend of God.

All ascetic effort, personal relationship, life in all its aspects was to be brought into the central relationship with God in Christ. The great virtues of the desert are: humility, discretion, realism, the 'single eye' of a life directed to God.

Dominic burned with this same zeal for holiness and unflinchingly sought transformation through renunciation and poverty, so that he might 'see God.' Jordan writes of his zeal:

Because he embraced the Lord's commandments with such burning love and listened to the Spouse's voice with the very pious approval of his good will, the God of the sciences increased his grace, so that he became able, not only to receive the milk of doctrine, but also to make a deep penetration of difficult questions through the humble understanding of his heart and consume the more solid food of mystery with sufficient ease.³

FOLLOWING OF CHRIST

The *Conferences* are perhaps best seen as maps of the spiritual life. Cassian's Spiritual Theology is Christocentric. Christ pervades Cassian's teaching on contemplation, chastity, prayer and spiritual knowledge. The Christological foundations of his work are firm, as is his eschatological foundations.

In the *Conferences* there are numerous citations of the Gospels and the teaching of St. Paul, with reference to the following of Christ and imitation of his example and virtue. For Cassian, "everything which concerns salvation was given... by the Lord."⁴ There is a dynamism inherent in the ascetic life that drives one forward. Radical simplicity and integrity is the principle aim of the desert dwellers. Their radicality centered in the daily seeking to lay aside everything to be transformed in Christ.

Dominic was moved by his love for Jesus Christ, as one who wanted to put on Christ and to become one with the Savior for the sake of all men and women. Catherine of Siena described Dominic as taking up the task of the Word.⁵

THE SCRIPTURE

St. Dominic's love for scripture found a profound support in the desert tradition. The Psalms were used by the early monks both for the weekly *synaxis* and for their prayer alone in their cells. The psalms were in their hearts and on their lips as they sought perfection, cried out for salvation. The repeated words of the psalms were a means to fix their minds in the continual remembrance of God. The rhythm of scripture verses and especially the psalms formed the life of unceasing prayer for which the monks strove.

For St. Antony, the archetype of the early desert tradition, scripture played a prominent role in his call. The words of Jesus in the Gospel started him on his journey. The first part of Antony's journey is evangelical—hearing and heeding God's call to live a gospel life. The second is leave-taking, separating oneself from those things that pull us away from God. The monk is pre-eminently the one who seeks to live by the Word of God. The great authority of scripture and its centrality in the quest for salvation is reflected throughout the Sayings of the Fathers.

The value of scripture was almost always seen in very practical terms relating to salvation and self-knowledge. The Word aided in the battle with the demons; brought healing, and encouragement, it was used to conquer thoughts (those movements of the mind and heart which distracted the monk from the one thing necessary). The Word of God brought salvation and transformation.

Jordan writes of Dominic that he was drawn to savor the word of God. In his studies at Palencia Dominic broke open the Word, studied with "continual eagerness, to drink from the streams of Sacred Scripture."⁶ The study reverberated in his innermost being and prepared him, like Antony, for his future call as founder and preacher. Dominic was called by the Word to be a 'doer of the word' for God's glory and the salvation of all.

For the men and women of the desert hearing the word was insufficient if the word did not enter into the heart and transform them. To 'hear' carried the connotation of completion in transformation. Hearing the word was a process into which they entered. There are numerous examples of one word being heard and lived with, for a year or more, until it entered into the heart and became a lived reality, only then was another word sought from the Abba and the process began again. Jordan of Saxony takes up this same theme when he writes:

...there are two ways of keeping God's word, namely, one whereby we store in our memory whatever we hear, and the other whereby we put into practice what we have heard (and none will deny that the latter is more commendable, inasmuch as it is better to sow grain than to keep it stored in the barn), this happy servant of God failed in neither.⁷

To be a 'doer of the word,' or rather the deep faith that the Word was alive and could transform, was essential to the spirituality of the desert. The monks staked their whole life and endeavour on this truth. The Word of God for them was not a book one read, it was 'active and alive', transforming mind and heart; thus could a monk ponder and remain with a single word or phrase of scripture until its teaching was absorbed into his life.

The Word of God had this same living reality for Dominic. He was a man obedient to God, one who listened attentively to the Word, one directed by the Spirit of God, and

one transformed by the Word he heard. The Scripture was the word of Christ; and the work of the Holy Spirit was to teach and make real in the heart of the disciple Jesus' word. The Gospel, for Dominic was the book of life.

His principle commitment was to preach the Word of God. His was a missionary vocation and his task to bring salvation to all men and women. Dominic's appropriation of the Word defined his vocation and separated him for all that was not God's will for him. He sought no lasting city in this life and became a stranger for Christ's sake. His vocation entailed proclaiming the gospel in all its fullness and to teaching its truth.

COMPUNCTION

Compunction, a tremendously important virtue in the early tradition can be defined as a condition of the heart; a heart seeking God, profoundly aware of its sin, and the need of God's infinite grace and mercy. Compunction is seen as sorrow at the prospect of losing eternal salvation for oneself or others.

The experiential knowledge of ones own insufficiency and sinfulness, ones inability to attain salvation without grace, gives the monk a heart of compassion for the struggles of others, especially in the light of forgiveness, healing and conversion. In Conference 11, we read:

When then any one has acquired this love of goodness of which we have been speaking, and the imitation of God, then he will be endowed with the Lord's heart of compassion, and will pray also for his persecutors, saying in like manner: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' (Luke 23:34). But it is a clear sign of a soul that is not yet thoroughly purged from the dregs of sin, not to sorrow with a feeling of pity at the offences of others, but to keep to the rigid censure of the judge: for how will he be able to obtain perfection of heart, who is without that by which, as the Apostle has pointed out, the full requirements of the law can be fulfilled, saying: 'Bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ,' (Gal. 6:2. Gal. 6:2).⁸

When one reflects on the whole theme of compunction in the early tradition, its importance recorded in the sayings of the fathers and mothers, Dominic comes strongly to mind. What effect did these words have on Dominic, whose outstanding characteristic was compassion, so frequently witnessed to by those who knew him? The witnesses at the Canonization process speak of his great love and compassion, principally for those in need. We are told that he was always cheerful, except when moved to compassion at the sight of someone's affliction, yet he always remained at the same time a man of joy. One of the witnesses remembers Dominic as:

Filled with compassion, he most ardently desired his neighbor's salvation. He himself preached constantly and frequently, and, in every way he could, exhorted the brethren to preach. He sent them out to preach, begging and urging them to be solicitous for the salvation of souls.⁹

Dominic experienced profound humility at the remembrance of his sins and deep compassion at the knowledge of the sin that bound others. When at prayer during the night hours Dominic often manifested the intensity of his feeling with loud groans and supplication, accompanied by copious tears.

In the desert, tears flowing from the inner depths of a person were a sign of true compassion.¹⁰ When Dominic wept, which was frequently, he moved others to tears. He often wept when preaching; those listening were stirred to tears and conversion.

PURITY OF HEART/UNCEASING PRAYER

A basic requirement of the quest for holiness is intensity of purpose, an unwavering focus to which the monks continually returned. Cassian speaks of the importance of knowing the goal and keeping it ever before us on the spiritual quest. Cassian teaches that the near or proximate goal of the monk is purity of heart.

Purity of Heart is the centerpiece of Cassian's monastic theology. Purity of Heart, equates with an inner openness, emptiness, a transparency toward God and the things of God. It's attainment, the highest perfection in this life and a preparation for the ultimate goal of eternally sharing in the life of the Triune God. The early literature presumed that purity of heart could be realized by obedience to God and through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Of supreme importance in the desert tradition was personal integrity before God, without any disguises or pretensions. Integrity is the mark of holiness. In a person of integrity there is no duplicity between the inner life of mind and heart and the outer life of word and actions. The words and actions of the person of holiness reflected the inner life of the heart. Jordan writes of Dominic's that his memory "was a storehouse of divine things . . . and his external words and character clearly bespoke what lay hidden within his sacred breast."¹¹

It is abundantly clear by what was written of Dominic, his holiness, his transparency, his immense freedom, that he had attained purity of heart. He stood before God in every situation, attuned to God's will. Everything flowed from his union with God in Christ. The attainment of such union the early tradition considered the angelic life.

Dominic knew well his goal and never lost sight of it. He has been described as perspicacious, one who is insightful and astute. Dominic was characterized by breadth of vision, clear sightedness and great-heartedness. He balanced all the observances of the Order in the light of the immediate goal: preaching the Word for the salvation of all men and women. His immediate goal for the Order found fruition only in the ultimate goal of eternal life.

Purity of heart and a life of unceasing prayer are synonymous. Dominic was a man of unceasing prayer. The diverse elements that made up Dominic's day found their unity in his union with God. A man of intense prayer, his prayer was an almost unbroken conversation with our Lord Jesus Christ. Humble of heart, Dominic was a man of continual prayer, both by day and by night. Jordan of Saxony gives us insight into his prayer when he writes:

It was his custom to spend his night-watches in prayer and, having shut the door, to pray to the Father in secret . . . His frequent and special prayer to God was for the gift of true charity capable of laboring for and procuring the salvation of men, since he deemed that he would be a true member of Christ only when he could devote himself entirely to winning souls, like the Lord Jesus, the Savior of all men, Who offered Himself completely for our salvation.¹²

RADIANT PRESENCE

In the Old Testament, the radiance of Moses' face gave testimony to his encounter with God. St. Paul speaks of Moses' veiled face and teaches that "the ministry of the spirit" in the Christian dispensation will be even more glorious (2 Cor. 3:8).

How does one explain the immense radiance and attraction of these desert dwellers? In the desert, tenacity and firmness to the 'discipline' of life blossoms in joy; and dying, into the radiant sharing of the resurrection anticipated now and possessed fully in the reign of God for all eternity.¹³

Think of Antony emerging from his fort after 20 years of confronting the demons and living an extreme ascetic life, healthy and radiant with the reflected glory of God's inner presence and tremendous love for his neighbor.¹⁴ Antony's overriding virtue in later life was not fasting/asceticism but his sociability: a magnetic charm, openness to all, such that he drew disciples and crowds of visitors. He was recognized as one whose heart had achieved total transparency to others. Charity was the aim of the monastic life. This transparency is not possible without self-denial and losing the self.

Jordan describes Dominic as one truly filled with the spirit of God. Sister Cecelia, a Dominican nun who knew St. Dominic writes: "From out his forehead and between his eye brows a radiant light shone forth, which drew everyone to revere and love him."¹⁵

From his brow and eyes emanated a kind of radiance which drew everyone to revere and love him. Dominic was genial in his relationship with others. The impression he made was one of strong magnetism, a unique charm which radiated from his person. He was pleasant and affable. He was friendly to all, peaceable.¹⁶

A contemplative by night, he was an apostle during the day. We are told that his countenance was always open and joyful, a man wholly turned outward to others. Joy, true inner joy, radiance, overflowing in goodness and love are certainly gospel characteristics. Dominic, like Antony radiated the presence of God, one who had been 'Christed' and a 'Word' of salvation for others.

CONCLUSION

The desert tradition is part of our heritage as Dominican nuns. LCM tells us that our observance "adopted by St. Dominic from tradition or newly created by him, fosters the way of life of the nuns by helping them in their determination to follow Christ more closely and enabling them to live more effectively their contemplative life in the Order of Preachers" (35. 1).

Dominic wanted this tradition, formative of his own life and holiness, to be decisive for his followers. He wanted us to take seriously and to enter into the way of 'discipline' in such a way that we too would be transformed. Along with the early monastics and Dominic let us enter whole-heartedly into the rhythm of our Dominican monastic life, not as observers but as involved and active participants whose lives are focused on the task of holiness and seek with intensity of purpose 'to see God'.

ENDNOTES

For Reference, cf., Guy Bedouelle, O.P., Saint Dominic: The Grace of the Word, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982, Pp. 89-103; 215-220.

²

Saint Dominic: Biographical Documents, ed. Francis C. Lehner, O.P., (DC: The Thomist Press, 1964), Jordan of Saxony, *Libellus*, #13.

³ Ibid, #7.

⁴ The Conferences of Cassian, ed. Boniface Ramsey, (New York: Paulist Press, 1997, Conference III Chapter 16.

⁵ The Dialogue of St Catherine, ed., Suzanne Noffke, OP, (NY: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 337.

⁶ Biographical Documents, *Libellus*, cf. #6, 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ramsey, Conference 11.

⁹ Biographical Documents, *Canonization at Bologna* #26, p.115, Brother John of Spain Bologna.

¹⁰ George A. Maloney, S.J., *Penthos—A Forgotten Necessity*, Monastic Studies 7, (1969): 149-159.

¹¹ Biographical Documents, *Libellus*, #7.

¹² Ibid, #13.

¹³ The term ‘discipline’ was used in the early desert tradition to mean all the observance of the life undertaken by the monk which lead to union with God in Christ.

¹⁴ The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus, , Trans., Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).#14.

¹⁵ Biographical Documents, *Miracles of St. Dominic*, #15, pp. 183-184.

¹⁶ Cf. Bedouelle, p 95. Bedouelle puts together several references from the Canonization process of St. Dominic