

# **PEDRO DE CÓRDOBA'S COMMUNITY: DOMINICAN PREACHING AND THE ORDER'S PRESENT MISSION**

**What form of preaching did that kind of community produce?**

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## **0. FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AWAY**

On the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus' death, and some years in advance of this 500<sup>th</sup>-year celebration, we held a conference in Ávila whose topic was *Historical Responsibility: Questions from the New World to the Old One*. We began it with a dramatization of Montesinos' sermon, prepared by the playwright Juan Mayorga and performed in our Saint Thomas' Priory (monastery), from where some of the members of that original community had departed. The play was highly acclaimed; the impact of the questions that arose during the conference was also remarkable.

A year later we repeated the same event: both the dramatization and some of the conference's talks, in Havana, with the participation of important Cuban cultural figures. There the resonance was even greater at national level, perhaps because of the importance that the chronicler Bartolomé de las Casas has in Cuba, as well as the highly topical subject that the denunciation of Montesinos' sermon still represents and for the anger with which some of the questions are still hurled at the old world from the new one.

Today we have the opportunity to celebrate this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary no longer looking outwards, but inwards into the Dominican family. This is the moment to construct a form of self-criticism, self-examination, historical memory ... to enable ourselves to face the challenges to the Dominican life and mission, in this globalized world and on this Latin American continent.

It is our responsibility to listen to the questions flung by the community in Hispaniola at us Dominican brothers and sisters of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I believe there are two main questions. One historical, but highly illustrative: What type of community produced that kind of preaching? Or, what type of preaching did that kind of community produce? And a second question, of a more historical and even ethical nature: In what aspects do both that community and that preaching enlighten us today, and how do both challenge the Dominican family in this global world and on this continent?

I am not a historian, nor can I speak about the small details of that community. But I have always been impressed by all things related to the sermon delivered by Montesinos, because I think it represents a real parable or metaphor of what the relationship between Dominican community and Dominican preaching should be. This is the subject I would like to reflect on, in order to see how it can illuminate our communities and our preaching.

## **1. MEMORY OF THE ORIGINS: THE FUNCTIONS OF THE DOMINICAN COMMUNITIES CONCERNING PREACHING**

If we look back at Dominic's foundation project, we find an essential link between Dominican community and Dominican preaching. And the first element to observe is that the primary motivation for the Order's foundation project is not the community, but preaching. The former is in service of the latter. This is not to say that the community does not have great importance, but that it has great importance because if the community fails, the preaching will also fail or will not offer or retrieve Dominican charisma in all its richness. Furthermore, because the community is in the service of preaching, and not vice versa, preaching offers a wide margin of freedom and flexibility at the onset of organizing communities. What matters at the end is preaching.

Assuming this inherent relationship between community and preaching, let's present now the three basic functions that Dominic attributed to the community in relation to Dominican preaching:

First: To ensure the permanence of preaching in such a way that this essential ministry within the Church should not depend on the hazardous life, the free will or the mood of individuals, but guaranteed by the community as a whole. If one individual is missing or relinquishes the preaching ministry, the community is there to continue that said ministry. (Although Montesinos had the grace of preaching, the community took responsibility for the permanence of preaching). Christian communities have frequently complained that some projects run by Dominicans are too individualistic or too dependent on the will of the individual who made them possible, in such a way that once this person has gone by his own will or by the decision of the Prior Provincial, the project disappears and the Christian communities are left with the feeling of having been left alone and abandoned, not taken into account at all. They have the feeling that they are mere experimental objects in the hands of pastoral agents.

Second: To back up and support the preacher in his/her ministry. This support includes: cultivation of his/her evangelizing zeal in communal life, encouragement in the course of preaching, moral support when

going through crises or discouragement, and, when needed as a result of preaching, communal support. (In all these, Pedro de Córdoba's community is an unrivaled example.) Certainly, communal support not only guarantees the continuity of preaching, but also the permanence of the preacher in his/her mission, despite crises and discouragement. Naturally, this function requires two previous conditions: in the first place, the existence of a Dominican community with all its essential elements; in the second place, the preacher should feel that he/she is part of it and is fully integrated in communal life.

Third: To back up the ministry of the Word with the testimony of an evangelical life. The most remarkable aspect of evangelical life is, of course, fraternal or sororal life and love, like those of the apostolic community described in the Acts of the Apostles. This is the first and the most efficacious practical announcement of the Gospel. For this reason, from its origins, all Dominican communities, including cloistered and silent nuns, were called "houses of preaching". This is why when the community lacks the testimony of evangelical life, the effectiveness of preaching is diminished. And if the Dominican community is wrapped up in scandal, the evangelizing ministry and the preached message are discredited. Paul took great care so as not to discredit ministry. In Dominican communities, all members are free and democratic, and we all do what is most suitable to us, but no one has the right to discredit the evangelizing ministry of friars and of the community (bitter memories).

These are the Dominican community's three basic functions in relation to the ministry of preaching. How did the Community of Pedro de Córdoba carry them out?

## **2. THE COMMUNITY OF PEDRO DE CORDOBA AND DOMINICAN PREACHING**

The Dominican community in Hispaniola is a parable of the relationship between Dominican community and preaching; of what Dominican preaching was intended to be in the foundation project and of what this preaching should be today.

Following the abridged and probably filtered account that Las Casas drafts in his *History of the Indies*, it is accurate to assert that, although the famous sermon on the third Sunday of Advent in 1511 was delivered by Montesinos, in reality it is the sermon of the community. We need only to study how the community was involved in the sermon.

### **a) At the beginning of that preaching: reading the sign of the times**

The beginning of that history that led up to Montesinos' preaching was not divine inspiration. It was, instead, a serious reading of the signs of

the times (be that anachronistic) and a considerable boost of compassion, two features that are very old and very present in Dominican spirituality.

That wise and conscientious reading of the signs of the times came as a result of seeing and hearing, in all its harshness, what was then happening.

Seeing and looking at the signs of the times. Las Casas' text refers constantly to this gaze: "Considering the sad life and extremely rough captivity that the natural people of the island suffered and how they became exhausted, with no attention from the Spaniards who possessed them and treated them as if they were beasts with no benefit ...". (History III, 3) "Taking account of all this and seeing and looking for a long time at what they were doing to the Indians, the friars considered that they were not looked after neither in their corporal nor spiritual health ...". (III, 3)

Hearing the witnesses and listening to the victims' clamor. For sure, those who were religious heard the overt outcry of the victims, but they also listened to the witnesses of so much injustice and so much cruelty. The most horrifying testimony comes to them from Juan Garcés, who after murdering his wife, did penance in the bush for three or four years. "This, whom they called friar Juan Garcés ... recounted to the friars, as a first-hand witness, the particularly abominable cruelties that he and all the others had committed against those innocent peoples, in war and in peacetime, if there had been at all any peace. The friars, shocked to hear of such acts so contrary to all human and Christian behavior, challenged, with greater zeal, the principle, means and end of that atrocious and new form of tyrannical injustice ...". (III, 3)

After seeing and hearing all of this, the religious began "to join reality and righteousness". (III, 3)

At the outset of Dominican preaching there is, then, the need to see and hear the signs of the times. Otherwise the preaching falls into a vacuum, the Word of God does not respond to any human necessity. Only when we contemplate the signs of the times, the contemplation of the mystery of salvation acquires all of its importance. This is the only way in which reality and righteousness are not divorced one from the other. Given that the Gospel is the same in all continents, places and cultures—can the preaching be the same? What is the significance of enculturation? What is it revealing within the Christian gospel message that we preach if it does not bring light to the black holes and obscurity of people's and communities' lives?

An essential quality of the prophet is the capacity to look at the signs of the times and to listen to the victims' clamor.

**b) At the beginning of that preaching: an exercise of faith-filled compassion**

The contemplation of “that atrocious and new kind of tyrannical injustice” was not an exercise of academic curiosity or of scientific interest. Not even a momentary emotional reaction. That contemplation was born of an exercise of faith and ended up being an exercise of compassion, a reactivated compassion.

As Las Casas says, those friars were “spiritual men and friends of God” (III, 3). The same Juan Garcés knew “of the fragrance of sanctity that came with that Order” (III, 3). Here lies a key for understanding the apostolic zeal of this community, the force of that sermon and the specific identity of Dominican preaching. It is only from the experience of faith, from our experience of God, that it is possible to read reality faithfully, a faith-filled reading of the signs of the times. Herein lies the clue to the strengths and weaknesses of Dominican preaching. That it was a reformed community, as were the majority of the first missionary communities of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

I believe that a serious challenge, very serious, for Dominican preaching today is to obtain, personally and communally, various levels of the experience of God, of the experience of faith that delivers a true evangelical preaching. That, as Humbert of Romans says, is not the same as tossing out sermons that preach. And, as Father Damian said, one should not take for granted faith in Dominican communities. And, as we hear more and more, it is not the same to be religious as to be a believer. In order to be a better preacher, one does not need to become more pious, but to be more believing.

Compassion was present in the origin of that preaching, as it should be present in the roots of all Dominican preaching. “The friars, shocked to hear of such acts so contrary to all human and Christian behavior..., inflamed with zeal and divine honor set themselves to challenge the abuses committed against God's law and commandments ... deeply pitying the suffering of such a great number of souls that without anyone noticing have died and were dying at any one time ...”. (III, 3)

Without compassion, preaching is made into a profession, learned with training and part of a routine. With compassion, preaching is a vocation and is delivered with passion. Poor me if I do not preach the Gospel! The witnesses of the canonization of Dominic say that they never saw someone like him with such a zeal for the salvation of souls.

Compassion and apostolic zeal or the urgency of preaching always travels together. Today as compassion is considered a specifically Dominican virtue, we must ask ourselves: Is this supposed Dominican compassion reflected in a growing zeal for the ministry of preaching? Where does the much-trumpeted Dominican compassion take us? If we are not taken anywhere, it is fitting that we doubt its authenticity.

### **c) At the beginning of that preaching: communal deliberation**

This is perhaps the most unique feature of that community and of that preaching. And perhaps, it is the most serious challenge the Dominican family faces today: restoring our preaching with its essential communal character, which is much more than preparing the homily together, although this also is important. Let us make some observations on this issue.

The preacher was Montesinos, but the preaching was the result of communal deliberation. Montesinos was the voice of the community, the spokesperson of the community, the mediator of an essentially communal preaching.

Las Casas recounts the story in this fashion: "The friars, shocked to hear of such acts ...; inflamed with zeal and divine honor ...; ... deeply pitying ... pleading and entrusting themselves to God with prayers, fasting and vigils, asking to be enlightened in order not to err in such an important matter given that they considered that it would be new and scandalous for people who were sleeping to be insensitively woken up from the slumber. Finally, having matured and verified their views, they decided to preach them from the pulpits and to denounce our sinners for the way they were oppressing their Indians, who were dying because of the Spaniards' inhumanity and greed, despite the fact that the latter were being celebrated. The friars agreed, among the most learned of them, on the advice of the most prudent of God's servants, father friar Pedro de Córdoba, vicar of them all, on the sermon that needed to be preached for the first time and that all of them would sign it with their names, so that it would appear that not only was it the preacher's but that the sermon was the result of the deliberation and consent and approval of them all. The abovementioned vicar determined that the sermon would be delivered by the most important preacher after himself, father friar Antón Montesinos who would do it out of obedience ...". (III, 3)

This is an excellent text which all Dominican communities, committed to the preaching ministry, must meditate upon daily. In this text we find the perfect account of what a communal preparation of preaching —of homily, catechesis, and evangelization— is. This is a highly

recommended topic for all of our Dominican assemblies, although very seldom is it taken on by the communities.

In the communal preparation of that preaching various elements are involved that we need to keep in mind:

1) The community prayed, fasted, held communal vigils, implored and entrusted themselves to God, in order to be enlightened so that they would not err. The salvation of Spaniards and Indians was an important matter. This is a significant feature of that community.

Praying for the preaching is to pray, to meditate, contemplating for a while the signs of the times and the Word of God. The experience of God is not a communal matter, it is an individual matter; but the community is the space in which brothers and sisters may cultivate the experience of faith, the experience of God. Without this experience, Christian preaching is absolutely impossible.

2) The community met to discuss the situation, the moment, the content and the form of the sermon. They deliberated and reflected together. This is another feature worth highlighting.

In the Order, study is in the service of preaching and this cannot be forgotten. Study and the search for truth is a personal task, but it is also a task for the community. Study and deliberation guided the community of Pedro de Córdoba in two directions: a) In the first place, study led them to an analysis of the reality or to the critical consideration of the Spaniards' actions and the Indians' suffering; analysis of "reality and righteousness"; analysis of reality, of the signs of the times. b) In the second place, study led them in search of the sacred truth within that concrete situation, a faith-filled analysis of those situations, to appropriately announce the Gospel and to prophetically denounce situations contrary to Gospel. Study of the Word of God actualized and contextualized: what does it tell us today, here and now?

It was a community of learned men, who had come from Salamanca and Ávila. While they lived poorly, they had brought with them the books needed for the evangelization (30 Grammar works, 2 Biblical concordances, works of St. Augustine, Decretals, Clementinias, three small bibles, the works of St. Tomas together with the Tabula Aurea, St. Anthony's Doctrinal Summa, Angelic Summa, Catholic Vocabulary, 6 Triumphs of Faith...).

It was a community of learned men, they tell us, but not foreign to apostolic sensitivity; perhaps it was an example of reconciliation between the figure of doctor and of missionary, reconciliation of the kind so pressing upon us today. It was a community of prayer and at the

same time a community of study, all of it in service of preaching. Judging from the writings of Friar Pedro de Córdoba and, above all, from the previous writings of Las Casas, perhaps their text book was the Summa Theologica. This is why this preaching is so sensitive to issues of justice. Like Domingo de Guzmán and Diego de Acebo did when they sent their belongings to Osma, keeping with them prayer books and other books to study, the Hispaniola missionaries, in the midst of their poverty, brought with them prayer and other books. What books did they have in their library?

3) Another feature makes community deliberation a truly Dominican exercise. The friars interpret the Spaniards' actions as if it were a case of "blindness", of a "profound slumber". This matter or topic is very Dominican and must inspire Dominican preaching. One must not moralize too much, and explain every anti-evangelical and inhuman action as blatant malevolence or evil intent. From a Dominican point of view, it is more accurate and more evangelical to attribute this to blindness, lack of light. (The first time I understood this was in Venezuela, when working with a group of Alcoholics Anonymous, and then many times meditating on Saint John's writings). The insistence on the subject of blindness strikes me as it appears once and again in Las Casas' account. To repeat myself again, this is a very Dominican issue and very much present in Dominican preaching.

4) The communitarian character of this preaching was sealed with the signing of the sermon, something that everybody did: they signed their names to make clear that not only was it the preacher's but that the sermon "was the result of the deliberation and consent and approval of all of them". (III, 3) The result of the whole process is that what Montesinos preaches is not his sermon, but the whole community's; it is not his message, but the evangelical message that was the product of the community's prayers, study and judgment.

#### **d) And they entrusted the sermon to the friar who had the "grace of preaching"**

Once the community had been prepared for the preaching, they responsibly entrusted the sermon to the friar who had the "grace of preaching". "The abovementioned vicar determined that the sermon would be delivered by the most important preacher after himself, father friar Antón Montesinos who would do it out of obedience ... This father friar Antón Montesinos had the grace of preaching; he was very harsh in reprimanding vices and, above all, in his sermons and words he was choleric and very efficient, and his sermons bore fruit. This lively (friar) was entrusted with the first sermon on the subject, so new for the Spaniards on the island and the novelty was no other than to state that killing these peoples was a sin more serious than killing bedbugs." (III, 3)

This is a gesture of communal responsibility: to entrust such an important and decisive sermon, without any jealousy from the rest, to the brother who was able to bear more fruit, as he had the grace of preaching. They were not interested in excelling at a personal or institutional level, but wanted to bear fruit in order to be able to convert the people.

This gesture by the community takes us to a problem present in Dominican origins: entrusting sermons to those brothers that had received the grace of preaching, *gratia praedicationis*. A lot has been written and discussed about this subject. I am not going to talk about it. I am only collecting some conclusions that are quite clear: the expression *gratia praedicationis* already appears in the First Constitutions, written with Dominic's own hand. The General Chapter is entrusted to judge on this charisma and to invest, as preachers, those who have the grace of preaching. (Were there friars in the Preachers Order that did not preach? What did the Preachers Order do?) Given the difficulty in judging and the fact that some friars boasted and took advantage of having the grace of preaching (Juan de Vicenza), the 1249 General Chapter removed the expression from the Constitutions. Nevertheless, the conviction remained in the collective consciousness that preaching is a grace, a charisma. Humbert of Romans stated it wholeheartedly in his manual for preacher's education: preaching is a vocation whose only master is the Holy Spirit; a profession that cannot be learned like other arts or professions through study and training; it is the Spirit's gift. That doesn't mean that the preacher doesn't need to prepare himself thoroughly by studying, praying, preparing sermons ... in order to responsibly preach. (It is important to carry a small outline in case we don't get the inspiration from the Holy Spirit, was the recommendation given to an inveterate charismatic friar). Moreover, from the beginning, Dominican preaching not only required the grace of preaching, but also demanded that it be preaching of grace.

To entrust the sermon to Montesinos, who had the grace of preaching, was that community's gesture of responsibility. It was a way of strengthening the communal character of Dominican preaching.

### **e) The evangelical testimony of the community on the basis of that preaching**

From the onset of the Dominicans, it was believed that the first preacher was the community itself, precisely because this showed in practice what is an evangelical life. This is why the whole Dominican community was considered *domus praedicationis*.

The testimonial backing of preaching took place also in that Dominican community in Hispaniola. Their preaching is accredited and supported not only by the moral goodwill of its members (no small achievement), but also and above all by the evangelical life of the whole community. We should not forget that those friars belong to the religious life of the reformation. It was precisely the internal reformation of the Order what delayed the arrival of the Dominicans to America, as they were not sent until the reformation was secured. And this reformation had worked hard on two fronts: discipline or religious observance and intensive study of the sacred truth. Therefore, Dominicans of that community were well prepared for the ministry of preaching.

This evangelical life that proves the preaching of the community is fulfilled in this case by three important features:

1) Cultivating the experience of God. Las Casas says about them that they were “spiritual men and friends of God”. The natives knew of “the fragrance of sanctity that came with that Order” and that they “lived in hardship and under religious strictness” and that they “pleaded and entrusted themselves to God with prayers, fasting and vigils”. (III, 3) It was, therefore, a religious community, not a residence. It was a convent of brothers summoned by the same faith and the same vocation. Their preaching was the expression of their experience of faith.

2) Evangelical poverty. One of the features of the reformation communities was radical poverty. This significant feature holds true in the 16<sup>th</sup> century missionary communities. We can see this in the first communities in America and in Asia. Of the former, we read that, for example, they “lived in thatched houses”; that they “lived in hardship and under religious strictness” (III, 3); that “their treasure was their habits of a very coarse fabric and some blankets of the same fabric that they used to cover themselves at night; their beds were prepared on forks where they laid sticks and bunches of straw; besides this, they had what implements were needed to celebrate mass and some books; everything might have fit into a couple of chests” (III, 4); after the sermon was preached, Montesinos and his brothers went back to their thatched houses “where by chance at times they didn’t have anything else to eat but cabbage soup without fat” (III, 4); when they determined to send Montesinos to Court to defend the truth in their sermon y their denunciation they started to beg in the town in order to collect food for the trip” (III, 6); and they fasted from the festivity of the Holy Cross to Easter. For those preachers, the testimony of an evangelical life was the source of moral authority.

3) Fraternity. We don’t know for sure what kind of cohabitation there was among the brothers of the community. But there are two details that allow us to state that fraternal life was part of the testimony

that their preaching accredited. In the first place, historians tells us that friar Antonio Montesinos preached at friar Pedro de Córdoba's funeral and that he used the motto "*Ecce quam bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum*". He might have used this as it evokes for everyone times of true fraternal life in the community. In the second place, the preparation of the famous Advent sermon and the further support given to the preacher highlight the consensus and harmony of the whole community. This is fraternity in action or capacity to form an apostolic team, something that today we are short of. In preparing the sermon: "They started to discuss among them the ugliness and enormity of an injustice never heard of before" (III, 3); "having matured and repeated their views, they decided to preach them from the pulpits ..." (III, 3); "and everybody gave their consent with good will" (III, 3).

In the support given to the preacher: "The father vicar replied (to the authorities who were demanding the presence of friar Montesinos) that what the father preached expressed what he and all the rest thought and that it had the consent of them all ... (III, 4); "they also determined (not without many more emotional prayers and tears) that the same father friar Montesinos should be the one sent to Castile, as he had been the preacher ... (III, 6); (and he left), "trusting in God as those who stayed were praying" ... (III, 6) These are testimonies of the fraternity that sustained and accredited preaching, as the first preacher is the practice of charity among brothers and sisters.

#### **f) The tone and content of that preaching**

What kind of preaching resulted from all that involvement from the community? It is important to highlight some features of the preaching that are very Dominican.

In the first place, the assumption that not everything denounced, despite the fact of being a sin and a very serious one, is due to evilness or malevolence, but on the contrary to blindness. This word or synonyms are repeated constantly in Las Casas' account. We are not going to discuss here whether ignorance is to be blamed or not. However, the insistence in the blindness of those who are oppressing the Indians is surprising. This is what they believed while preparing the sermon: "they considered that it would be new and scandalous for people who were sleeping to be insensitively woken up from the slumber." (III, 3) This is what the preacher says in the sermon: he starts stressing the blindness in which they live and he insists over and over again on the same blindness: "Don't you understand this? Don't you feel this? Why are you in such a deep slumber, in a certain way, lethargically asleep?" (III, 4) And this is how they interpret the pertinacity of those who come to protest against the sermon: "And that they were so blind that they told them that if they didn't react to everything that was preached, they could start getting

ready to leave, to embark for Spain." (III, 4) That Dominican sermon is addressed to the blind, not to the evil or spiteful, which is something completely different. Those people are ill, these are delinquents. This is why Dominican preaching is more doctrinal than moral, as it hopes for illumination because this is the only way to guarantee conversion.

In the second place, if we go by the community's previous reflection and the summary of the sermon as transmitted by Las Casas, we need to highlight issues of importance in the tone and content of the sermon:

1) The preacher does not talk on his behalf or even on behalf of the community; he talks on behalf of Christ. "I'm the voice of one crying in the wilderness and I'm here on this pulpit to let everyone know of the sins (all very serious) they are living in." (III, 4) The message is not one proper of a preacher and he does not preach on his own behalf. Confronted with so much injustice, the friars feel compelled to preach the law of Christ: "Aren't we supposed to preach to you the law of Christ?" (III, 3)

2) What is at stake, at the end, is the eternal salvation of both Spaniards and Indians, but the salvation of those guilty and less so that of the Indians who were not evangelized. This is why the Dominicans are compelled to preach. While preparing the sermon, the community is clear about this: "After careful consideration and having conferred among them, with considered deliberation, they determined that the sermon would be preached as evangelical truth and a necessary element for the salvation of all Spaniards and Indians of the island, whom they see perish every day with no care, as if they were beasts of burden; to this they are divinely required because of baptism's profession of faith and because they were friar preachers of the truth." (III, 4) The preacher "warned his audience about the great upheaval of condemnation they were in ..." (III, 4) "This voice is telling you that you are in mortal sin and live and die in it, because of the cruelty and tyranny you practice among these innocent peoples ... You would not be saved, this should be clear for you, nor will the Moors or Turks who lack and reject the faith in Jesus." (III, 4) And, in the following Sunday's sermon, when the authorities were counting on a retraction, the preacher insisted on the same line of thought: "the Spaniards could certainly not be saved in the state they are in, and therefore, in time, should heal themselves. He made them know that the friars would not confess a man of them, any more than they would confess robbers ... (III, 5) The motivation and purpose of preaching is above all theological: at stake is the cause of God who is the full realization of Creation, the salvation of his children, especially those weaker and poorer. But, precisely because the cause of

God is a human cause ... this is what distinguishes Dominican preaching from any other moral and pious exhortation.

3) That sermon links essentially the cause of salvation to the cause of justice. And this is why the denunciation materializes from the unprecedented and unjust way the Spaniards were treating the Indians. This is the political or public dimension of the evangelical message. This community is compelled to compassion and preaching because of the injustice perpetrated on the Indians. "The friars, shocked to hear of such acts so contrary to all human and Christian behavior, challenged, with greater zeal, the principle, means and end of that atrocious and new form of tyrannical injustice (against God's law and commandments)." (III, 3) The questions addressed in the sermon are a direct denunciation of the acts of injustice committed and a challenge to gather together law and facts, Christian faith and commitment to justice: "Tell me, by what right of justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged such detestable wars ...? Why do you keep them so oppressed and exhausted without giving them enough to eat or curing them of the sickness they incur from the excessive labor you give them, and they die, or rather, you kill them, in order to extract and acquire gold every day? ... Are not they human beings? ... Are you not supposed to love your neighbor as yourself? ... (III, 4) The main sin that closes the door to salvation is injustice. Outside humanity there is no salvation. This is what makes Dominican preaching indeed a prophetic preaching.

These harsh denunciations are not the political side of the sermon standing next to the theological side. They are the logical consequences of Christian faith. The denunciations only reveal the political or public dimension of Christian faith. They are faith's incarnations. It is faith with deeds, not because of the deeds in themselves, but faith's dynamics. If preaching does not take us anywhere, to any practical consequence, to any change in perspective (law) or action (facts), it is not a true Christian preaching, even if it refers to the highest mysteries of Christian doctrine or, at the least, it is not a complete Christian preaching.

From this public and political dimension in preaching one needs to highlight in that community not only the verbal denunciation in the sermon, but the subsequent commitment to defend once again, the following Sunday, the cause they consider evangelical, despite the authorities' pressure and to defend the Indians' cause in Court against the conquerors' lies and abuses.

**g) The community's unrestricted support to the preacher and to the message delivered**

This analysis is about to finish.

As was foreseeable, the island's authorities were enraged and encourage people to go to the convent complaining. Friar Pedro de Córdoba, on behalf of the community, took all the responsibility for the sermon and only agreed that father Montesinos would return to preach the next Sunday to repeat the same denunciations. Preaching is communitarian when the community takes responsibility for the preaching to its conclusion.

In the second sermon, both friar Montesinos and the community maintain the same denunciations. They are not worried about being accused of "preaching things in such disservice to the King and so harmful to the whole city and to the island." (III, 4) They are not concerned with the consequences of the sermon within the community. Civil authorities and even the Father Provincial, ill-informed, threatened them to send them back to Spain.

Support for the preacher and for the message went even to the Court. While civil authorities sent friar Alonso de Espinal to misinform the King, Dominicans decided to send friar Montesinos to report in Court the truth of the facts and therefore, the truthfulness of the sermon ... They needed to beg in the town in order to be able to afford the trip and it was hard for Montesinos to be allowed to see the King ..., but in the end he managed to achieve it and it was worth it. This is what entails giving communal support for authentic Christian preaching to its conclusion, disregarding who the preacher is. This makes preaching more communal and more Dominican. (We leave the rest for the historians to be conscious of.)

### **3. DOMINICAN PREACHING IN THE CONTINENT AND ITS CHALLENGES TODAY**

Everyone of you would know better than I which are the main challenges for Dominican preaching in their own mission fields and in the human, social and political context that each of us face in the diverse ways of ministering evangelization.

This is why I am going to focus on a reflection on the general challenges that in my view are in need of being prioritized today in the Order and in the Dominican family in general. I will make few general references to the relevance of these challenges on this continent. They all have to do with the lessons that Friar Pedro de Córdoba's community left us.

#### **a) The experience of faith or the experience of God as the Christian preaching's assumption**

Sometimes we hear from someone pious that neither it is possible to preach well nor would the preaching bear fruit unless a lot of devotion is involved. However, it is not the same to be a pious person that to be a believer.

Humbert of Romans, who spoke with a deeper sense of realism and more experience, said that "it is not the same to deliver a sermon than to preach". This has the following meaning. Anyone can deliver a sermon, even if this person is not a believer, because he or she could have taken it from another author, or because he or she prepared it after studying (a co-worker reads several books to prepare the week's homily, but he keeps on forgetting the main idea as this does not depend on the books), or because he or she reads it or recites it by heart. On the contrary, preaching is only possible if it comes from a believer, a person that has been touched by faith, a person that believes and this is why speaks, speaking from his or her own experience of faith, from a faith-filled reading of reality.

Speaking with a deeper sense of realism today, I need to say that if in a Dominican this experience of faith or experience of God is lacking, the preaching is not Dominican or Christian. This is the theses and this is the first challenge for preaching in the Order today, both on this continent as on any other: faith cannot be confounded with devotion or with religious sentiment (which are altogether different).

I would only add to these a few remarks.

I belong to the so-called "liberal generation" of religious life. This is to say, the generation that came after the Second Vatican Council and has witnessed or participated in the process of "secularization" of our style of life (clothes, schedules, communal life, work, holidays ...). This is not the moment for further analysis. But if we are to do a critical evaluation of what we have done so far, in order to learn by trial and error, we should not ignore all the great achievements of religious life in this period (awareness of people's dignity, autonomy and people's responsibility, more democratic habits, obedience with dialogue, human rights, dialogue and closeness to the world ...). But there are a couple of aspects that deserve a special critical evaluation. These two aspects are directly related to the issue of the experience of God and preaching.

The first one is the issue of secularization. Ours has been, of course, a period of secularization, with light and shade. The autonomy of worldly realities has been affirmed and many aspects of life have been conveniently demystified. But also we can find a kind of weakening of the believing gaze and of the experience of faith. Secularization is compatible with everything except the abandonment of praying, contemplation, celebration of faith, the faith-filled reading of the secular realities of life. If the secularization of life weakens this faith-filled reading of life and history, this experience of God, we are left incapable of genuine preaching.

The second issue is that of ideological contamination. It is beyond doubt that ours has been a generation generous in their work and activism, in our commitment to very noble causes. But it is also true that in the clamor of battle many ideological contaminations—from the right-wing and left-wing, some fundamentalist and other liberating—have stuck to our skin. After all, all of these ideological contaminations have frequently weakened the strength and vigor of the evangelical motivations in these activisms (militancies) and have sometimes emptied the evangelical content from our own preaching. We might have lacked enough contemplation for discerning, or a critical reflection and enough studying to be able to fight against these contaminations and allow ourselves to be guided by the Word. I know that no one is ever completely free of ideological contaminations, but it is the obligation of those who profess the ideal of the true, at least, to fight to be aware of these.

A fundamental problem in Dominican life today is to determine whether there is enough experience of faith to sustain and enrich our preaching. Father Damian was courageous enough to state in one of his letters that we do not have to take for granted faith in Dominican life. In a meeting of the Superiors General years ago, I heard a questioning presentation about “The lack of faith in religious life”. It is not a moral problem that should lead us to guilt. It is a theological problem, because it is about finding in faith the sense of our life and the motivation of our evangelical mission, and also the ultimate content for our preaching. Faith is a gift, it is not a conquest; but we can ask for it in prayers and cultivate it in the stillness of contemplation and in the struggle of apostolic commitments.

### **b) Rebuilding the communal fabric and recuperating the communal dimension of Dominican preaching**

We entered the period after the Second Vatican Council with the legitimate ideal of modernity and then post modernity: the person's autonomy and the sacred value of liberty. It is an ideal completely legitimate and compatible with Jesus' Gospel. From then on a number of aspects of religious life were reinterpreted and re-orientated, especially the exercise of authority and obedience.

But then we realized that autonomy and people's freedom had slid into individualism. An autonomous person is someone connected and in communication. An individual is only that, an isolated individual. We have not invented individualism and it is not a sin. It is a cultural feature that we have acquired in living in modernity and post modernity. Perhaps we lacked discerning capabilities.

The result of this sliding into individualism has been twofold.

In the first place, it has thrown many brothers and sisters into solitude, isolation, freelance work and even monastic sorrow (a kind of sadness entrenched in the soul). This is because the individualistic road is sweet at the beginning and sour at the end.

In the second place, it has weakened Dominican communal life's fabric. Together with this, our capacity to sustain the communal character of Dominican preaching has also been weakened. If we add to that the fact that even as a faulty trademark, at least we Dominicans have always been a little reluctant towards apostolic teamwork, we then find the conditions for preaching becoming something of an individual issue and depleted of a communal dimension. (I cannot refrain myself from introducing here something to invite reflection: the Pedro de Córdoba Institute, which was a matter of concern for the whole continent's Dominican family, ended prematurely; the Bartolomé de Las Casas class in Havana and the San Juan de Letrán Centre have been run only by one friar for years and more to come. What is the matter with Dominicans that we are incapable of teamwork?).

I don't know how the Dominican communities should be, whether small or large; I don't know how they will be in the future, whether more monastic or more integrated. I only know that a fundamental challenge for the Dominican family today in this continent is reconstructing our communities.

First of all, each Dominican community would be a lighthouse for the societies on this continent, which are still communal, but where individualism and solitude are making inroads rapidly. If communities were a place of reception for lonely people that are looking for some contact and human warmth, we would have achieved what J.B. Metz called the political dimension of the chastity vow: a choice for those who are alone because of exclusion. CLAR has been insisting, for a long time, on this dimension of chastity and the religious community.

Then, it is important to rebuild Dominican community in order to revitalize Dominican preaching. The relationship between the Hispaniola community and the preaching of those Dominicans is an authentic parable and a challenge for us today. At stake are many aspects of our preaching.

The first one is the permanence and consistency of our apostolic projects. If everything is reduced to individualistic projects and chance, apostolic projects would survive until the last of the individuals dies, gets tired or is assigned to another place by the Provincial. In the meantime, people would remain with the sensation that they are the object of experimentation and nothing else. This is why it is important that apostolic

projects are accepted and have communal support and, when possible, are carried out by the community.

The second one is preaching communal preparation. It can be at a distance through the cultivation of studies, communal dialogues, permanent training on subjects and issues of interest to the preaching ministry. Nearby training through the communal preparation of homilies, teaching of the catechism, evangelical exercises. It is a wonderful opportunity to share God's Word and our own experiences of faith and life.

The third one is support to the brothers and sisters in the preaching ministry. There are moments that we feel downhearted or discouraged, disoriented and perhaps we have lost good judgment and are tempted to abandon everything. It is precisely then that communal support and the help of the community for discerning this are needed.

The fourth one is the fundamental nature of the community's evangelic testimony to confirm the preaching of each and every one of the brothers and sisters. But this we should discuss on its own.

Because of all this and more, but above all because of the demands of Dominican preaching, it is urgent on the continent today to rebuild the communal fabric.

### **c) Community (and its members) evangelical testimony for confirming preaching**

This was probably Dominic's key for obtaining success and effectiveness in preaching: confirming it with an evangelical life, with the *vita vere apostolica*, so much needed and looked after in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Dominican preaching success lasted as long as evangelical (not so angelical) life lasted in communities and Dominican family.

In general, we Dominicans, and perhaps the sisters as well, are democratic, liberal, autonomous, self-sufficient, individualistic ... and I don't know how many other things. This is something that make us are very free, but barely efficient, and promotes in our communities that more and more the individual is strong and the community weak. It is up to you to judge the advantages and disadvantages of this situation.

But there is one aspect of this matter that affects directly the credibility of our preaching and on this issue there is no room for concessions, as what is at stake is the credibility of God's Word, of preaching, of our own ministry. Any Dominican is free to do what he or she pleases at any moment and place –it is his/her problem or his/her responsibility--, but nobody has the right to discredit the preaching of the

community or its members. This is why, even if this is the only reason, that nobody has the right to display anti-evangelical behavior. Weakness is understood, but cynicism is not allowed.

Here the problem is no longer a personal one; it becomes a communal one, a problem that affects the Gospel directly. This is why in Paul's pastoral letters there frequently appears this warning: "in order not to discredit our ministry". This is why the community of Pedro de Córdoba was so careful in confirming preaching within an evangelical life. It is true that frequently what we find in many cases is blindness, our own blindness. This is why brotherly and sisterly correction, communal judgment of behavior and of personal plans is so urgent. (A strong personal experience has taught me this).

But what it is most conclusive is the whole community's testimony that involves several issues.

The evangelical quality of the coexistence between brothers and sisters is the first. The end purpose of Christian life is to practice fraternity or sorority. This is why the main virtue is charity, although with a certain realism, one has to say that a fundamental version of charity among sinners is permanent forgiveness and constant reconciliation. Something that we have to be sure about is that what happens within our internal coexistence is transferred to the people, although no one talks about anyone. And if we fail in this fraternity, our preaching could become sterile at the roots. The ideal of the apostolic community of Acts has always been a lure for the religious community. In this field we have a lot to do to restore the fabric of the community for the good of our preaching.

The problem of poverty is the second, although we almost do not dare talk about it without flushing. This has two fundamental dimensions.

The first has to do with our life style, our consumer habits, our comfort, and so on ... frequently much higher than those of ordinary people. Dominic's strongest words were pronounced in his deathbed condemning those who would besmirch the Order by failing to comply with evangelical poverty. I'm not going to say another word about this issue as I have always been told that I'm too obsessed with poverty. The poverty of the preacher is what gives credibility to his/her ministry, what gives him/her authority to talk about the truth and strength of the Gospel.

Poverty's second dimension is as important or more than the first and both are related. It has to do with the following questions. Which are our main alternatives in our ministry? Who do we relate with in a more spontaneous way? Which are our real sympathies and loyalties? To

whom is our material, cultural or spiritual patrimony in the service of? You could consider me an idealist, but I continue to believe that it is urgent for us today to face the challenge of recovering evangelical poverty in these two dimensions, everywhere but especially on this continent where the preachers' wealth constitutes an affront and a scandal for those to whom we preach.

And this takes us, in third place, to the evangelical urgency of the option for the poor, a problem that is so burning and that has been debated for such a long time. It has been so developed that no more comments are necessary. I'm only going to state here that, despite all the ideological contaminations that have fallen on this option, following the Gospel is an obligation and a need for every follower of Jesus. And, above all, I will state that if anything accredits today the Church, it is precisely this emotional and effective option, its presence and activism on behalf of the poor and the excluded from the world market. On the contrary, if anything discredits the Church, it is forgetting the poor and making alliance with the powerful. We can be present and active among the underprivileged through our insertion, teaching and reflecting from a philosophical and theological perspective, in any kind of activism ... But we need to do this. If anything accredits the ministry of evangelization, it is once again the option for the poor, especially on this continent.

#### **d) The challenge for justice, peace, human rights ... and Dominican preaching**

The issues of justice and human rights are fundamentally related to the option for the poor or perhaps it is the best adaptation of an effective option for the poor. I strongly believe in the importance of compassion and emergency help. But, if the option for the poor does not result in the defense and struggle for justice, it might end up turning against the cause of the poor.

In this particular matter, Saint Thomas went beyond Saint Dominic when he wrote his treaty on justice. (We don't know exactly how Saint Dominic treated the subject of justice, as he didn't leave behind anything in writing. Between crusade and evangelization, he certainly chose the latter. This is already a way of siding with justice.)

Also in this issue, Pedro de Córdoba's community went beyond that of all its predecessors. His denunciation changed the character of the colonization and evangelization on the Continent. However, the empire's interests made it insufficient. The members of that community, driven by the responsibility in the ministry of preaching, were not frightened by the civil and military authorities' threats (even to be returned to Spain). They preached justice and denounced injustice once

and then, in the second sermon, reaffirmed their position after being threatened and they even went to the Court for the truth to be known and to change the system of conquest, colonization and evangelization. They involved the brothers of Salamanca and Ávila in the cause of justice, in favor of the Indians. (We follow an interesting version of the ideal: together in mission).

Today, to achieve a truly Dominican preaching, the Order's challenge and that for the entire Dominican family is to incorporate into our ministries the causes of justice, peace and human rights for those majorities and minorities that suffer their violation. To join these causes is not to get involved in politics; it is to get involved in the Gospel, it is to extract the public and political consequences from the evangelical message that we preach. Paul VI sensed it: justice is today the name of universal charity.

It is in this field where we have to join reality with righteousness, as the Pedro de Córdoba community did. Especially in the realm of justice and human rights, it is not sufficient to defend the cause while teaching or preaching. It is important to add or put together at the same time our commitment on as many fronts as necessary and in the forms demanded by the conditions of the moment. Our brother Henry Desrossiers is an example, among others, of "preaching outside preaching", as Humbert of Romans used to say. (He said that one has to preach outside preaching and that in preaching one has to use the whole body.) Our brother is an example of the commitment to justice as he defends those without land beyond the pulpit. (From here, we wish him a complete recovery.) In order to understand this presence, these causes and commitments, and to be firm and constant in them, despite difficulties and even death threats, the community's judgment and support is also very necessary.

On the issue of justice and human rights, it is one thing to say something and another to actually do it, so the first challenge would be to go from rights to their fulfillment. We Dominicans, and I could be the first one to do it, for I cannot speak on behalf of the sisters, we are prone to resolve everything rationally, through words, explanations ... And when it comes to justice and peace, not belittling discourse and scientific and critical explanations, the practical solutions and facts are urgent. In other words, the liberating praxis that has been defended on the continent for decades. In any case, I believe that courage and resistance in the causes of justice and human rights—despite all the risks and threats—can only be guaranteed when there are genuine evangelical motivations, enough experience of faith and an abundance of theological resources. On the contrary ... it is possible to opt for abandonment or to take the wrong direction in our activism.

In any case, we need to know that if our preaching is not supported by an option committed to justice and human rights, the preaching itself can end up discredited. And in order to be sure that the option is for justice and peace, a good indication is to place oneself on the side of the victims.

### **e) The challenge to study and Dominican preaching**

Sometimes in the Order we hear complaints that there are no longer famous teachers like Chenu, Congar, Duquoc ... Well, we still have Schillebeecks, but he is quite old and about to take leave ... I have also heard in some places that this is not a time for great individual geniuses, as in the last century, but that this is the time for teams. But, are there true teams for reflection and study in the Dominican Order? The lack of teachers and the scarcity of teams might result in a kind of low period for studying.

In Spain, before friar Pedro de Córdoba and his colleagues came to America, the two main fronts of the reformation for the Order were the cultivation of mysticism and the intense dedication to study. This is why the community brothers were learned and came equipped with a good library, in order to fulfill the ministry of evangelization in a competent manner. (In parentheses, it was never considered a sin against poverty in the Order to have many books and good libraries. What was considered a serious offense in the first Constitutions was to mistreat books. This is quite a sign of the importance of study in the Dominican project.) This explains the fact that, before Montesinos delivered the sermon, the Pedro de Córdoba community had deliberated so thoroughly on the situation, the sign of the times, and the evangelical message and its implications.

Within the Dominican family it should not be necessary to argue a great deal on the importance of study for competent preaching and evangelization. Humbert says that the only preacher master is the Holy Spirit and that this skill is God's gift and cannot be learned through training as other trades. But, immediately, he adds: despite the fact that preaching is God's gift, a prudent preacher must prepare himself/herself by studying and praying, but not to say clever things, to twist words around, to multiply the number of anecdotes, but instead to transmit the true message (p. 52 and 53). A preacher must know the Gospel, God's creatures and history (p. 62). That is to say that the grace of predication does not exempt anyone from studying and preparing sermons. (Some advice from a charismatic brother: take with you an outline in case the Spirit doesn't come.)

I don't know if I'm supposed to evaluate the situation of study among Dominicans on the continent, in both male and female

communities ... In the Order's higher spheres it is common opinion that study is in poor form. I don't affirm or dispute this.

I only know that for Dominicans, brother and sisters, study is not a simple and regular observance, it is a moral obligation linked to the profession in the Preachers Order, in the Dominican family. And this is so precisely because the ministry of preaching or of evangelization is too serious and demanding to be left to the arbitrariness or occurrences of the day. And we have many such sermons.

I don't know why we are going through a kind of low period for studying in the Dominican family. If there are many activities and a lot of administrative work, it would be necessary to go through deeds and ministries to be able to give room for Dominican contemplation, which is a part of the study. If it is for lack of encouragement or for fear of exerting oneself and due to *studiositas* (quoting Saint Thomas), one should overcome these and correct oneself. If it is for fear of truth or for fear of entering into a dialogue with the present world, more and more complex and less confessional, less familiar with our thinking and way of life, one should pluck up courage and help one another in order to tackle the issue of the truth in this so very pluralistic world. And if it is because the mission is light or is so dead that no study or reflection is demanded from us, we had better close down the mission ...

Allow me to make reference to a very recent experience of mine. A brother was telling me that in his community he is, in recent times, the object of sarcastic remarks and jokes because he still believes in study and spends many hours studying. He is being tempted to abandon his studies in order to stop being considered by the rest as the intellectual, one who believes he is so clever; one who might save the world ... This reminds me of a problem in the Spanish educational system. There students who excel are afraid of standing out in knowledge or grades, as this goes against those who do not achieve or are not interested in learning. In order to avoid some students feeling bad about their performance or left out, it is thought better to bring down students levels and condemn them to mediocrity. I wish that the case of this brother would be an isolated one and an exceptional anecdote.

If we really believe that preaching is the essential ministry of the Dominican family, whatever the situation of study in the Order and whatever the reasons for this low period in this matter, study is a priority at both a personal and communitarian level. And as Humbert says, one would need to know the Gospel and God's creatures, as well as history and society, and the sign of times and the ruling ideologies, and the structural causes for poverty, injustice, violence ... and the immense problems raised today by bioethics, ecology and economy ... so many, many areas that should not be foreign to our preaching.