

Monialibus

*Nuns of the Order of Preachers
International Bulletin*



N° 21 July 2009

ST. DOMINIC



PREACHER OF GRACE

*"The more grace is multiplied among people,
the more thanksgiving there will be, to the glory of God."
(2 Co 4, 15)*

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Letter of fr. Brian, op

My Dear Sisters in Christ and in St. Dominic, Preacher of Grace,

I am writing to you from my parents' home in the United States, where I have been resting for a few days after attending the Assembly of the Dominican friars of my province of origin, the Province of St. Martin de Porres (in the southern part of the United States). In two days my parents will celebrate their 53rd wedding anniversary, so I send to you their greetings and the witness of their many years of faithful love. During the past three years, ever since the celebration of my parents' Golden Wedding Anniversary, I have become more and more aware that the fundamental image or experience of God's faithful love has come to me through the witness of love that I have seen and learned from my parents. Many of you, sisters, have experienced this in your own families or through the witness of the older sisters in the monastery. I am grateful for this gift of faithful love in my life.

During the Assembly of my province, we had the privilege of a couple days of retreat under the spiritual accompaniment of our brother, fr Donald Goergen, OP, former provincial of the Province of St. Albert the Great in the U.S.A. The theme of the retreat was "Contemplation and Mission." In his conferences, fr Donald reminded us that the Dominican "blend" of contemplation and mission is different than other religious institutes. Whereas the Jesuit way can be described as "contemplation in the midst of action," the Dominican way could be better described as "action in the midst of contemplation." In other words, our Ground is contemplative; it is God's life in us. We move out from this base, this Ground into action and mission. How is this profound intuition lived out in your monasteries? I think we friars too often try to "fit" our contemplative life into our busy life of mission. It is often what I experience when I try to "fit" all my belongings back into my suitcase after a long trip! It isn't easy (and sometimes requires a minor miracle!). How can we reverse the starting point? How can we live our contemplative life as the fundamental starting point of all that we are and do, and from there, move out in action and mission? "Contemplation," said fr Donald, "is not just prayer; it is a way of *being* in the world."

The month of July always brings with it one of my favorite celebrations: the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene, one of the patronesses of our Order. When I try to imagine Mary Magdalene waiting through the long, dark night of the crucifixion and painful absence of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemani, I see the face of a true contemplative, a woman of prayer and perseverance. The mystical and contemplative life was Mary's Ground; her preaching, her activity, her service to the community all flowed from that ground. We Dominicans celebrate and remember her as the first preacher of the resurrected Christ, and in this she is a true model for us of Christian preaching. She, like Mary of Nazareth, did not *understandfully* the paschal mystery, but she was able to go out in mission to preach because of her mystical experience of Christ. Her mission flowed from her contemplation. Like St. Paul, Mary Magdalene's entire being proclaimed, "I live, yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). She had awakened to the Risen Christ present in the very Ground of her being. When our entire being becomes a preaching, then I think we have begun to live what we speak of when we call our holy father, St. Dominic, a "preacher of grace." A preacher of grace first *lives* the experience of God's gratuitous love – God's grace – and then allows that love to flow out into the world as "a holy preaching."

This year has been a very busy year, and one with much travel. I want to learn better how to be a "contemplative promoter of the nuns" who goes out in mission, and not a world traveler who visits monasteries and "fits" his prayer into a busy schedule. I ask for your prayer for this intention.

After Christmas I began a long trip through Latin America, beginning with a visit to the monastery of the Rosary on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. From there I visited the monastery in Venezuela, the two monasteries in Lima, Peru, the three monasteries in Chile, and two of the monasteries in Argentina (where we had a wonderful eight day workshop on *Lectio Divina* and contemplative spirituality with nuns from almost all of the country's monasteries). From Argentina I went to visit the new foundation in Bolivia. This new shoot of Dominican monastic life is a sign of great hope for the continent of South America. I will visit Mexico in the month of July.

During Lent I had the privilege of visiting the monasteries of Herne, in Belgium and Pratovecchio and Monte Mario, in Italy. We gathered for two workshops on *Lectio Divina* and the Synod on the Word of God in Spain during March. Both of these workshops (one in Bormujos, Seville and the other in Torrent, Valencia) were attended by nuns from several monasteries from two different Spanish Federations. April took me to the monasteries of Nicaragua and Cuba, where we celebrated Easter and continued our reflections on the Synod on the Word of God. In May, besides being back in Rome for the bi-annual Plenary meetings, I participated in the gathering of the prioresses and delegates of the Italian monasteries.

July will include visits to three monasteries in the United States. In August I will visit the three monasteries in Portugal (along with a two day participation in the International Dominican Youth Assembly in Fatima). After Portugal, I will visit to the nuns in Oslo, Norway (where we will celebrate the Feast of St. Dominic) and in Holland. September will be my introduction to Eastern Europe, with visits to the monasteries of Lithuania, Poland and the Czech Republic (Come, Holy Spirit! I do not speak any of these languages!). And finally, during the month of October, fr Kevin Thomas Kraft, OP (novice master in Kenya) and I will be giving two seven-day workshops on St. Paul, *Lectio Divina*, and Dominican Spirituality to nuns from several African monasteries, gathered in the monasteries of Bambui, Cameroon and Karen, Kenya.

Sisters, you may notice that I have participated in several workshops and courses during this past year in which nuns from different communities gather in a monastery of their region for some days of prayer and study on different topics (this year we have done this in Argentina, Spain, and Mexico, and soon will also do the same in Portugal and in two monasteries in Africa). I mention this because, in conversations with the Master of the Order, and following his example of giving regional retreats using this model, we have both discovered that these regional retreats and courses offer a marvelous opportunity for renewal and the strengthening of the relationships *between monasteries*. And on a very practical level, with 240 monasteries in the world, it is a better use of time and resources for both the Master and the Promoter to visit the nuns regionally (visits that include quality time for prayer and study) than to try to run around the world making short, 1-2 hour visits (what I call "hug and coffee" visits!). As your regions plan for visits in these coming years, I would ask you to please keep this in mind (unless St. Martin de Porres shares his gift of bi-location with me!).

The meeting of the International Commission of Nuns (to whom I am always grateful for their help with so many tasks, especially with all that pertains to communication with the monasteries of the world) will be held in the Monastery of the Santo Rosario in Azzano San Paolo (Bergamo), Italy in September. The Master of the Order, fr Carlos, met with the Commission last year in Santa Sabina, and from time to time asks the nuns of the Commission to help him with certain duties and tasks.

The Master, fr Carlos, also asked me to send his greetings and blessing to all of you for the upcoming Solemnity of our Holy Father, St. Dominic. I join him in wishing a torrent of blessings and peace for all of you as we try to live ever-more-deeply, in the spirit of Dominic, our call to be contemplatives who preach the grace-filled, gratuitous love of God.

your brother in the Word who is life,
fr Brian Joseph Pierce, OP

"Seek my face"

(Psalm 26)

We would like to share the experience of three Catalan Dominican monasteries. Until 2008 this has been a new experience in our federation of the Immaculate –Aragón (Spain). It is a pleasure for us to write a brief account of it.

For obvious reasons, the number of nuns in the monasteries is decreasing while their age increases and the cost of living is also increasing with the resulting difficulties in fulfilling the specific characteristic of the contemplative vocation to which the title of this article refers.

"Yahweh I do seek your face", and we will try to compensate the casting aside of Your Name, your Image and your Love which the present-day society demonstrates so often to the extent of renaming Christmas as days of shining Winter feasts, Holy week as Spring Holidays and so on...

And as human beings do not need any champagne or confetti in December nor travelling or comfortable hotels in Spring but to find the Face of the One who has been loving them from eternity, we, the three monasteries mentioned below, decided to look for Him, but united, so that it would be less difficult for us to be before His Face and show it forth in all directions. Being few in number while the average age was high, the multiplicity of work was becoming unbearable and for many hours during the day, even during the Liturgy of Hours the beloved Face remained in brackets because of so many distractions.

Our Federation proposed a meeting for the six monasteries of Cataluña and Mallorca – which was attended by all the nuns who wished. Afterwards another meeting was proposed for the monasteries of Zaragoza and Teruel. Later another meeting for the monasteries of Valencia has been proposed. In the first meeting, which I mentioned above, everything developed in a relaxed and realistic way. We took some steps according to aims we wished to fulfil. One of the steps was the decision that the Monastery of Our Lady of Angels (San Cugat), St. Claire (Vic) and St Catherine of Siena (Mallorca) would unite and become a new foundation, with the new name of St. Dominic of Guzmán. All this began on the 11th of July 2007, the year we were celebrating the Jubilee Year of the foundation of the Dominican Nuns by St. Dominic 800 years before.



So for us a time of difficult procedures was set in motion. The intention was that the three communities should disappear, even their title deeds and the legal and fiscal entails. Then the 25 nuns who composed the new community would form the new foundation in the monastery which was considered to be the most suitable from the point of view of its functional and modern character. We would bring all our belongings and to avoid any prevalence of any community upon the other it was decided to look for a Prioress who didn't belong to any of the three communities.

There was not any jurisprudence for a project like this for contemplative life in the same Order. The adviser of the federation was so competent that what was proposed on the 11th of July 2007 became a reality on the 2nd of October 2008: the feast of the Guardian Angels. Psalm 90 comes to mind "...under his wings you will find refuge..." That day the last nuns from Mallorca arrived on the plane. And the life of the new monastery began. Its address is: Saint Dominic de Guzmán, Carrer de la Mare de Dèu del Roser, 2, -08174 Sant Cugat del Vallés. Barcelona (Spain) telephone number 93.5831146- E-mail: domincassancugat@yahoo.es

During this short period of time and after choosing this monastery for its modern functional character, a few geriatric cells were equipped. All the goods of the three monasteries were collected then

we made some sales to pay the expenses of the repairs and the transport of our belongings. The diocesan Bishops carried out the canonical suppression of the monasteries which amalgamated.

We suffered the emotional impacts of the closing of the monasteries that were 400 and 500 hundred years old, a lot of friends and benefactors lamented this event. It was hard work to pack, transport, then unpack and arrange all which we brought to the new community. How could we face all this? What a lot of moments of discouragement and weariness! But ah! There was a "leading wire" which was giving us its energy... the same one which on Pentecost Day transformed a few poor men into leaders of Christianity which spread like wild fire first in Asia and then to all the continents.

It has always been like this. What a lot of wars, invasions plagues and expropriations the monasteries have suffered during eight centuries and when the danger diminished then their communities reassembled again to carry on. This is a sign which shows that the Face of Christ longs to be gazed upon, loved and manifested by the hidden life of a nun so that many other people from far and near may come to knowledge of Him and love Him.

Now, the first satisfaction we found was the dignity of the Liturgy in which everybody participates and it "charges our batteries" to seek His Face at work and throughout the day. Our work is book-binding and to attend to our Retreat House which is situated in one wing of the monastery but is independent of the community, both the building and the forest. Frequently many groups such as: "the European group of guitarists", the community of Buddhists and "Italian and Austrian College" attend for retreats even for long periods of time to improve their Spanish. All of them are very respectful to our rule. Evangelisation is a consequence of this contact but the nuns are only in charge of the housekeeping because some employees are in charge of the meals and the cleaning outside the enclosure.

Channel 2 TVE (Spanish Television) connects with the Catalan channel TV3 to broadcast our Eucharist at 10:30 a.m. every Sunday and on feast days. We, the nuns, are just a silent presence that shares because the television brings selected choruses from different cities. Sunday after Sunday the nuns facilitate contact with God for the thousands of viewers. During the weekdays the Eucharist is very early, at 7:30 a.m. This timetable was requested by many people who wish to attend Mass before starting their work.

We are very grateful to God and to many benefactors for having helped us to support what the psalm says: "with you I can break through any barrier" ... The year before the union was a very difficult one for us but it has been worth all the effort.

We finish with greetings and the daily union in love, truth and prayers with all the brothers and sisters in Our Father St. Dominic.

Monastery of St Dominic of Guzmán
Sant Cugat del Vallés- Barcelona- Spain

Original: Spanish

I am going to lead her out into the wilderness of Atacama and speak to her heart.

An Itinerary marked by the grace.

Dear Sisters I greet you with my heart filled with joy as everyone who has been called by God to consecrate her life until death.

Many months have passed since the 25th of January and I still have very clear memories, filled with emotion. The celebration - which was presided over by our Bishop Gaspar Quintana Jorquera, C.M.F. and concelebrated by the Promoter of the Dominican Nuns, fr. Brian J. Pierce, OP, and some priests from the local Church - was marked by joy and gratitude. Our diocese is not



distinguished by having a large number of clergy or by a renewed movement of masculine or feminine vocations. That is why this celebration was like a small spring of hope or like a small oasis in the middle of the wilderness. Many of you might remember the day of your Solemn Profession as one of the most significant moments of your life. Well, for me this moment has meant experiencing once again the infinite fidelity of God which has been marked not only with the attendance of my family and a large number of faithful, or with the preparation of all the details, or with the receiving of the ring and the veil, or with the reading of the formula but also with the attitude I lived that day.

All of us have experienced being invited to walk between light and shade, a path marked by a Man who, "not by chance" is the "Son of God". He is the One who has given meaning and value to this itinerary; He is the One who has left us His 'footprints' by which we, like so many others, follow between success and failure this adventure of discipleship.

It is nearly impossible for me not to look back and remember the first day I knocked at the door of the Monastery, the first years of the novitiate, the integration in the community the year before the Solemn Profession. All this time of initial formation which seemed endless until yesterday but today becomes a very short time and at the end (all of us have experienced this) one realises that the Lord was, is and will be the eternally faithful One. My family, who were present in large numbers in spite of the 18 hours' journey, also remembered the difficult beginning of my vocation....many physical problems which cause one to waver or get discouraged - but in those moments very dear sisters, priests and friars appeared like big bright stars or lights to guide and put me in the providential reality of God. Thanks to all of you for your accompaniment and prayers!

I wouldn't like to delay on some details of the celebration such as: the songs, the beautiful ornamentation, the large number of faithful who attended etc... because more or less this is the same in everywhere. All our communities do their utmost for the bride. But I would like to share two things, the first is something personal, it is one of those experiences which makes one vibrate each time one remembers it and the second is Fray Brian's homily in which many things that both of us have shared for some time are reflected. Thank you, Brian, for your kind and close presence in my Dominican contemplative life!

The Federation of the Immaculate Conception (one of the three federations in Spain) to which I belong, has as a custom to give, among the insignias, a ring. I make this qualification because in other places instead of giving the ring and the veil it is the veil and a crucifix which are given but not a ring. This detail is not very relevant from the materialistic point of view but it is important if we take into account the commitment we acquire freely and voluntarily. This ring is usually engraved on the inside with a date or a word which define the course of one's vocation. Well, I know you understand me, but I don't really wish to speak about this but about the moment I received the ring. As the Bishop was presiding at the celebration it was he who put the ring on my finger meanwhile he was pronouncing the formula. This moment was very brief but for me it seemed endless. From the moment I stretched out my left hand until the Bishop held it I felt an unusual loneliness, for a few seconds I was lonely before that commitment, I was stretching out my hand but nobody came to me, it was like as if the bridegroom refused to engage with me. You might be thinking that I am exaggerating but in that moment I know I was there but what about God, was He with me? In a flash I was put the test by That One who has been beside me unconditionally, with an infinite patience and now He was demanding a true "yes". Inside me I could hear: "Jezabel, where have you been each time I have been knocking at your door? "Now you are coming to me and do you expect that I should forget everything...?"



This sentence might sound extreme but I think it is the best way of telling you what I experienced. When the Bishop held my hand my soul returned to my body and I said to myself:

"Thanks, Lord, in spite of everything... You are God!. You will always be present giving me your hand a thousand times to raise me up and a thousand times I will catch His hand to begin again.

During my eight days retreat I mainly meditated on the fidelity of God. At the end of each day I used to write down all the impressions the Holy Spirit suggested to me. This might be the cause of this outstanding experience.

As you see my profession is not so particular or exceptional to be published, this is just a fraternal sharing from a country which is "at the end of the earth". It consoles me to think that in some corner of the planet there may be a sister who understands me or that at least what I have shared may produce an echo or response in her heart. This is one of the many experiences I lived that day... Of course our father St. Dominic was very happy because one of his daughters was making her solemn profession in the company of St. Paul, the untiring preacher of grace, and whose example St Dominic followed.

In this Jubilee Year whose motto is "Dominic, preacher of Grace", a daughter of the Order of Preachers goes on stretching out and engaging with the only Truth which gives life to the full... "JESUS".

Will I be able to? Will I be capable? Will I find it difficult? Will I always be able to keep a begging attitude? If I answer these questions from what I am: "a fragile woman", then I am lost and it would be better to abandon this company. Humanly it is not possible to fulfil this vocation or any other vocation but if I try and walk confident that God is and will continue to be the eternally faithful One and if I believe that Jesus is and always will be with us as the Scripture says: "... always... to the end of time" (Mt 28, 20), then the itinerary will be different... This is the invitation to which I listened and which each one of us has received and which day by day we are called to renew with a generous 'Yes' – with a 'Yes' until death.

Sr Jezabel Guerrero Garrido, OP

Original: Spanish

Homily Solemn Profession – Sr. Yezabel, op



The path of life... life is a journey. We are all on the way. If we take a look at the many pages of the Bible, we will find many people walking on a journey.

Abraham and Sarah left their country because God said to them: "I have another land chosen for you" ... and so they began to walk, without understanding exactly where they were going or why they had been told to go.

Moses – One day in the desert he found himself standing before a burning bush and heard a voice that said to him: "Moses, go and take my people to the Promised Land; I will show you the way."... and this was no short flight from Santiago to Copiapó. It was 40 years of walking – a very long journey.

Elijah walked 40 days and 40 nights to arrive at Mount Horeb for his own encounter with the Lord.

Ruth made the journey with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to a land that was not hers, not knowing exactly what was waiting for her. She had no idea she would be the great-grandmother of King David... a journey full of surprises!

Jesus himself – his whole life was a journey, and in the end a journey toward Jerusalem. Jesus knew, and in fact told his disciples, that Jerusalem was the city that kills the prophets... Even so, he continued walking, faithful to the journey.

Today's Gospel speaks of a road, and we hear the words, "Go out to the entire world"... And in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles we meet up with Saul who is walking on the road to Damascus. Saul walks with great confidence, with clarity and certitude. He knows very well what he's

about... He's persecuting and imprisoning the followers of Jesus. He sees everything with perfect clarity... until a so-called Jesus appears to him on the road: "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?" And there, that very moment, the lights go out for Saul. "Who are you? I cannot see."

"I am Jesus, the one whom you are persecuting."

In that very moment Saul's certitude disintegrates. The whole world becomes dark, so much so that he becomes a child again. Other people have to take him by the hand and guide him, like a little child, into Damascus. The one who saw everything with such clarity, the one who knew the truth fully, is now blind. From one moment to the next, truth seemed to disappear. Life became very dark and Saul had to learn to walk in the darkness.

The curious thing is that on the other side of the road, in Damascus, there was another man who was also on a journey: Ananias, a disciple of Jesus. Yes, Ananias was a disciple, and Saul was the great enemy! But Ananias also thought that he knew what the path was all about; he had already accepted Jesus. But the great surprise was that he also would have to set off on a path in the darkness. "Ananias, you must go to Saul and welcome him."

"Welcome Saul? But Saul is our enemy! Saul kills Christians! Welcome Saul? Lord, you don't know who this man is!"

Ananias, like Saul, thought that he knew the truth... How curious, brothers and sisters, that in Damascus that day two "blind men" met each other in darkness. Neither of the two knew what was happening. Both were being guided along a path that they could not see. Saul was completely blind, all his plans having gone down the drain. And Ananias, not much different, was now shaking with panic: "How is it that the Lord is asking me to embrace this evildoer?"

And then the two of them meet: Saul cannot see, and Ananias doesn't *want* to see. But from somewhere in the depths of his heart Ananias opens wide his arms and embraces Saul, and as he does so he speaks of few words that changed the history of the world... Ananias says, "Saul, my brother." The very same Saul who stood by as Stephen was stoned to death is now called by Ananias, "my brother." Yes, we can truly say that the history of the world changed that day. In the midst of the darkness of Saul, and the darkness of Ananias, there shone a light that changed everything – the light of the Risen Christ, the very same light that we received one day at the time of our baptism.

"Receive the light of Christ" were the words we spoke yesterday to Martina (sister Yezabel's niece, baptized the day before). Saul and Ananias received the light of Christ, and this is the central point for us – and for you sister Yezabel: That light, through some mystery of God, seems to always appear in the very moment in which we do not know where we are going. That is the mystery. The light of the resurrection only appears after the dark night of the cross. The light, for Saul, comes after a terrible dark night. And if we look at the life of any saint in the history of the Church we will find this same ministry. Read, for example, the recently published diaries of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. There is no light without darkness, no journey of faith without darkness. This is a truth we must remember. Jesus did not promise us a life without darkness. The light of Christ penetrates the darkness, shines in the darkness, but it does not erase the darkness.

And so our life is a journey... we all walk the path. The very same Jesus who walked to Jerusalem and then on to Mount Calvary, appears three days later walking with the two disciples on the road to Emaus. Jesus walks with them as a light that penetrates and shines in the darkness.

If we do not set off on the journey, if we do not risk walking, we will never discover the light of Christ. The two go together. To follow Christ means setting off on a journey that brings with it moments of darkness. And from time to time, in those marvelous moments of God's surprises, the light appears – shining into and transforming everything. This is precisely what happened to the disciples on Mount Tabor, at the Transfiguration... It was a moment of brilliant light along the way. But after that, once they came down from the mountain and continued their journey, life got dark again. And the greatest darkness was yet to come.

Sister Yezabel, you are on a journey! One day, just as we did with your niece Martina, the Church, in the name of Christ, handed you a Candle and baptized you. On that day, without knowing it, you began a journey, a journey of faith. It is a journey that has brought you to the desert... Hmm! Deserts are places where we encounter God, though they are not always places filled with light. As the Lord says to the prophet Hosea, "I have brought you to the desert to speak to your heart."

My sister, whether you planned it or not, the Lord has seduced you to this place to speak to your heart. Will it be a feast of light? I doubt it. But will there be moments of brilliant light that transforms everything? Yes, I believe there will be. The important thing for you, Sister Yezabel, and for all of us, is to be faithful to the journey, to know that even though at times it seems like lonely, if we continue walking we will find ourselves face-to-face with Ananias! That is the beauty of community life! As we journey forth as God's people, God always puts an Ananias on the path, an Ananias who draws near to us, embraces us in the midst of our darkness, and says: "Yezabel, my sister! Saul, my brother!" And in that very moment everything is transformed. In the end, it is Christ himself. But if we do not risk the journey, we can never see the light.

Sisters, St. Dominic founded an itinerant order. In other words, he said to us from the very beginning, "Don't set up a permanent camp. If you do not walk you will never see the light... If we stop journeying, we die. You, sisters, who live in the monastery, journey in a way similar to the rest of us who travel throughout the world. It isn't that the friars are on a journey and you are not. The itinerant path is the only path for a Dominican. Dominic told us to cling to no place, but to journey, to walk the path. That path, of course, is here in the depths of our heart.

I end, sisters, with the words of the Gospel: Go, go out to the world! Yes, you too, sisters! Journey deep into your hearts. The world needs your presence, your light, your darkness, your struggle to see... If you do not set off on your pilgrimage into the world, and with the world, what will the rest of us do? The itinerant journey of the contemplative nun gives strength to all of us to keep on walking. When you walk your path, you help us to walk ours, as well. When you walk in the darkness, we will be able to walk, also. And one day, at the moment least expected, we will experience the great embrace, the embrace of a brother, or a sister, which in the end, is always the embrace of Christ.

Fr. Brian J. Pierce, op
25 januari 2009 The Solemnity up the Conversion of St. Paul

Original: Spanish

Course given by fr. J. Brian Pierce, op
(Bormujos, Sevilla (Spain) from 24th to 27th March 2009)

Last March, from 24th to the 27th, on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the foundation of our monastery, Santa María la Real, our brother fr. Brian J. Pierce, OP, General Promoter of the nuns of the Order of Preachers, gave a course to our community, at which some sisters from the monasteries of our federation attended.

On Tuesday the 24th, at the Eucharist, fr. Brian penetrated deeply into the Word, taking as reference the gift that God was giving us, that is, the rain which coincided with the "water" which was the theme of the first reading and the Gospel of the Mass. In the Gospel according to John, the paralytic has no one to put him into the pool. Then Jesus appears and it is He who submerged the paralytic into Himself who is the living water. In his preaching, fr. Brian told us that our life is continually immersed in the Word and we should allow ourselves to be soaked by it. From that first moment the Word was

received by each sister. As Monsignor Oscar Romero used to say: "The word remains in the heart of those who desire it".

That morning we began the first lecture by praying to our father St. Dominic and giving thanks for our vocation. We also had a special memory of the anniversary of Monsignor Oscar Romero's martyrdom. In the Eucharist fr. Brian mentioned him and read a beautiful poem about Monsignor Oscar Romero's martyrdom written by our sister Sr. Miriam Gómez OP from the monastery of Viveros, Galicia, in the federation of St. Dominic.

At the beginning of each talk fr. Brian invited us to do *lectio divina* so that we could feel that we were a praying community beside Mary. We all listened together to the Word of God because our listening is communitarian rather than individualistic. **"My life is listening, His life is speaking"** (Thomas Merton).

The first topic mentioned was the homily of the Holy Father at the Synod of Bishops was. *"To draw nourishment from the Word of God is the Church's first and fundamental task. In fact, if the Gospel proclamation is her raison d'être and mission, it is indispensable that the Church know and live what she proclaims, so that her preaching may be credible despite the weaknesses and poverty of the people of whom she is comprised... It is, therefore, becoming indispensable for Christians on every continent to be ready to reply to those who ask them to account for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pt 3: 15), joyfully proclaiming the Word of God and living the Gospel without compromises."*¹

We worked on the document of the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God. Our brother showed us how to perceive the gratuitousness of the Word of God, being aware that He always takes the initiative in giving His word, reflected in all of creation. The Word guides us in our way, it exists from the beginning forming us as part of it. God communicates His word to us in different ways. Preaching is that Word which is communicated, transmitted, listened to, and deepened.

How can we live all day in the expectation of the Word? Shall we listen to it? Mary is our best teacher in that listening and in that encounter - both personal and communitarian. She is our best guide to lead us to the heart of the Word, to know how to keep it and care for it with love. In fact the following day we celebrated the mystery of the Incarnation - the mystery in which Mary opens herself and trusts in the Word which becomes FLESH of Her FLESH.

In the afternoon we continued with the document of the Synod of Bishops: Message to the People of God. Fr. Brian led us on a spiritual journey in four steps in which we listened to the VOICE OF THE WORD. *"It is a voice which entered the scene at the very beginning of creation, when it tore through the silence of nothingness: 'In the beginning... God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light... Creation is not born of a battle of divinities, as taught by ancient Mesopotamian myths, but of a word which defeats nothingness and creates being."*²

In this journey we could see THE FACE OF THE WORD: JESUS CHRIST. *"We would like to see Jesus"* (Jn 12, 20-21). Words without a face are not perfect because they do not bring about an encounter, as Job reminded us: *"I knew you then only by hear say; but now, having seen you with my own eyes"* (Job 42, 5) It is in Christ that we can see the Word, because He is the Word who is with God and is God.

We reached the HOUSE OF THE WORD: THE CHURCH. The Church is where we learn, through the apostles' teaching and where the Word is proclaimed and preached to us. There we have an intimate dialogue and share the table, living Christian love in fraternal communion.

And leaving the House we were on THE WAYS OF THE WORD: THE MISSION. Christ goes out on to the road to meet us. He comes to our houses, to our monasteries. *"Look, I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him."* (Rev. 3, 20). Jesus wants to come into our communities so that we can be the living word.

On the 25th, Solemnity of the Incarnation, the whole community was filled with joy because it was the opening of a Jubilee year for the 600th anniversary of the foundation of our monastery of Santa María

¹ Homily of the Holy Father Benedict XVI at the Opening of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

² Message of the Synod of Bishops to the People of God

a Real. The best beginning was the Eucharist shared with our brothers: the friars, some priests, some friends of the community and a deacon from the Parish to which the monastery belongs. The celebration was presided over by our brother Brian. Fr. Brian's preaching was very beautiful; we could meditate and contemplate how the Word of God comes into the world, into the history of salvation, into the history of each person, into the history of the community.

In the midst of darkness and of uncertainty, our response must be like the Word's, Mary's and so many others: "HERE I AM". Mary, who was always aware of her littleness and poverty, was called to heal the wounds of many centuries: one thousand questions which are not yet understood. She always says: "Let be done to me" and she was present in her Son's life even until his death on the Cross. She could have refused and have run away but she remained faithful to the end. Fr. Brian talked about the Bishop of Algeria, Pierre Claverie, OP, who was advised to return home because he lived in a difficult and dangerous situation but he decided to stay there as he realized that in that place Christ Crucified was suffering. He stayed there, as Mary and John stood near the Cross, to the extent of giving his life. In the course of the past 600 years, how many "here I am" there have been, giving light and life even in dark and painful moments.

The celebration was very moving and at the end one of the sisters read a beautiful thanksgiving. Then all the nuns holding a lighted candle in their hands went to the sanctuary in procession. We stood at Mary's feet singing the Dominican Magnificat which resounded with a special strength coming from the heart; afterwards returning to the choir we sang "O lumen" in honour of our father St. Dominic.



When the celebration was finished, we went to the parlour where we invited our brothers and friends to have some chocolate and cakes. When everybody left we continued with the course, particularly with the topic: "here I am" which was mentioned at the beginning of the day.

The last three days of the course focused on St Dominic following in St. Paul's footsteps. St Paul was preacher to the gentiles and St. Dominic was preacher of grace. The mission was: "GO AND PREACH" St. Paul's great passion: preaching to the pagans and St. Dominic's: preaching the Truth.

First fr. Brian talked briefly about St. Dominic's beginnings, events that you already know. Then we discussed how we must be disposed to accept others and open our doors to them even though there may be tension or darkness. St. Dominic had the experience of darkness. During the first 10 years that he spent in the South of France he didn't have clarity, he did not know the end of his project. He just trusted God and abandoned himself to His hands. For Dominic this was enough to embark on his journey towards the truth.

St. Paul's experience on the way to Damascus was very instructive for us - actually fr. Brian helped us to live it deeply. Paul, who knows everything, has a dazzling meeting with Jesus who plunges him into the blindness of his nothingness. In the same way, Ananias, blind from his prejudices, is urged by Jesus to open his heart and welcome Paul. The blindness of both is broken in their meeting: "Brother Saul..." The word BROTHER, lived and experienced from God, is the key which gives us back the LIGHT. Fr. Brian invited us, in our blindness, to allow ourselves to be carried by our sisters, holding hands and not holding on to our other securities.

It was very exciting to study in depth the figure of St. Paul. His passion for making Jews and Pagans one, the new people of God, the new covenant that Jesus made through his blood. Jesus has broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart.

We must also live that passion for unity. There is just one room which is the Heart of Christ, with no walls, open through the Cross so that everybody can go in indiscriminately. Christ and Dominic

called us to be free, serving the only law, that is, the law of love. Trying to do this the community grows more and more each day.

At the recreations, especially at night, we shared and had fun, filled with the joy which characterised Dominic; we enjoyed our time dancing traditional dance from different parts of the world as there were sisters from different regions of Spain and from different countries and continents such as: India, Africa, Latin America.

When the course finished, the farewells began but with the hope of meeting again. These meetings are necessary for us to share and live with the sisters from other monasteries for a few days; they are good in order to grow together fraternally and they help us with the common problems of our communities. We share the light with each other so that all of us may truly give light to the Order, the Church and the world.

May our father St. Dominic help us to be faithful to our vocation and to the charism that he dreamt for us and may we be courageous in making his dream come true each day so that the Word of God continues to take root in human hearts.

Your sisters from the Monastery of St. Mary la Real, Bormujos, Sevilla (Spain)

Original: Spanish

The challenges of the hidden life of the nuns

s. Zdzisława Szymczyńska OP, St. Anne's Monastery, Poland



A year ago I happened to go to the cinema and see a film "The Great Silence" – a reportage on the life of the monks at the Grande Chartreuse. The cinema was packed but during the three hour show not even a chair creaked. A film about the hidden life of monks. People were leaving the cinema in silence; and also, when the show was over they did not rush out at once.

Going through the hall one saw colourful posters advertising various films; they seemed even brighter than ever. The film was on in Warsaw for a long time and there were always spectators. So the film must have appealed to people – to ordinary people of a modern city. What did they see in this film? In the simple, ordinary life of a monastery, they saw people who were happy with their faith, who were transformed by prayer, aware of the presence of the Living God that they sought because they had found Him.

I think that each contemplative monastery is to address the modern man – not in a film-style manner, but not less unequivocally and clearly. To be a sign and a challenge to see deeper what the desire for happiness and the need for the sense of life are, that are written in the heart of each man. Such monasteries have never constituted a great percentage of the population; people devoting their lives to God in contemplative orders constitute a small part of the Church. But still, they are to be the "yeast" that is essential for the mission of the Church. And although our numbers are small, and our life is hidden, we are seen. Believers and unbelievers look at us – some out of curiosity, some with respect, some critically, and others with annoyance. They are demanding. The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life organized, in 2005, a symposium on "Perfectae caritatis". One of the talks was on the results of the research into the way people see the religious life today. It turns out that people's opinions center not so much on what we do, but on the quality of our life. The more the testimony of our life is trustworthy, the more it is redemptive and salvific for the world. The only necessary thing in our religious life is the Gospel. We are to faithfully follow, to make present, the Gospel life of Jesus Christ Who also today saves the world. He acted through that Who He was and how He lived. People asked Him for signs and miracles, but the closer He was to death, the more He gave up signs and pointed to

Himself – the One Who was obedient to the Father to the end. In the Gospel, there is the redemptive and sanctifying power – we are to remind the world of that. The life of Jesus that we prolong in the Church has that power. We are to be a testimony that God is, that He is Love, Truth and Beauty – that is what people long for, whether they know it or not. He can be likened to the sky spreading over the world. Many people cannot see stars in the sky because their eyes are blinded by lights that are much closer; the bright and passing glare of supermarkets, places of entertainment, advertisements, the light of the city that people cannot leave.

In our vocation, we have been given a possibility of going out to a field, as it were, where nothing obstructs the view of the sky. We can see the light of the stars, we can find out that the more we look at the sky, the more it is spangled with stars. That gift is not only for ourselves! We are to be a challenge to everybody; after all, the sky spreads over everybody. To be a testimony that God really is, that it is worth-while seeking Him. That is the sense of our enclosure. Silence is an expression of our hidden life. Silence which is “the other face of the enclosure”, as it were; it makes it possible for us to learn the weight and power of the word. The Word of God and the word of man. The world, flooded with masses of various bits of information, often misses the most important news item – that God is, that He speaks to man, that each man is beloved, called to happiness, to the fullness of Life.

“The nuns seek God by observing the norms of the purely contemplative life, by maintaining their withdrawal from the world by enclosure and silence”; leading this kind of life, we do not so much keep wise precepts that have been tested over the ages, but we open up to the word of Truth that can transform and cleanse us, that can make us more and more the way God wants us to be. They say that travelling is instructive, but here, in the monastery, we are at the wellspring. I think we are like the ground where the spring of the Word of God has sprung. It has power. Its water flows channeling the bed of a stream that gradually turns into a river. The spring is shaped by the living water. We are to be a stream channeled by the Word of God. To let the Word of God shape us, so that It can flow into the world. And we will be shaped after Him. How long and in what way this process of shaping will go on remains a mystery of God’s artistry. When He achieves His goal, we will become, even not realizing it, His witnesses. We will radiate peace.

Our hidden life is to be a challenge for people tired of all the hurry and commotion, tormented by fear and anxiety – a challenge to see that it is possible to pause, to enter into oneself; that it is possible to see and hear more than it is thrust upon us by the life of the modern world with all its wonderful technological progress.

The instruction *Verbi Sponsa* says that one should not diminish the forms of contemplative life “with which the Church manifests to the world the preeminence of contemplation over action, of what is eternal over what is temporal” (cf. *Verbi Sponsa*, §).

“The monastery represents what is most intimate to a local Church – its heart where the Spirit always groans in supplication for the entire community and where thanksgiving rises unceasingly for the Life which He sends forth each day”. (*Verbi Sponsa*, §) In his address to Benedictine abbesses in 1980, Pope John Paul II said: “Monastic prayer (...) is, as it were, a shining sign in the night, an oasis in the desert of disillusionment and dissatisfaction (...). By her prayer, coming from the faith that has been maturing for a long time and which is lived out profoundly, the contemplative nun (...) seems to be saying to the whole world, modestly but firmly: ‘I know that God exists, that he is the almighty and caring Father, and I strongly believe in this. I know that God has revealed Himself in Christ, the Incarnate Word, and I love Him tenderly. I know that Christ is present in His Church and I follow Him faithfully!’”

Many people, particularly when they are in difficult situations, ask us to pray for them. They discover the power of prayer. Many begin to see the need for prayer, many want to learn it. And then, the monastery becomes a school of prayer, as it were, whose extern students learn to trust God, Who hears our every sigh, Who is good and merciful. Our love of God is translated into compassion for our brothers and sisters in solidarity with them, in being close to them, in receiving other people and

accompanying them. Our misión is to try and convince people that Jesus comes to them with tenderness and mercy, forgiveness and hope. We are called to be the human and compassionate face of the Church. "We ourselves have known and put our faith in God's love toward ourselves". This is the principle of our answer to our vocation. Our whole religious life is about returning this love. Mutual love – only such love – is happiness. And it is a convincing testimony. In order that the monastery may be a testimony and a challenge to seek God, Who is Truth and Love, we ourselves must take up the challenge that the hidden life is for us. Point 5 of the Fundamental Constitution defines the way of our life. It reminds us that "seeking God in the purity of conscience and the joy of sisterly concord, in freedom of spirit" takes place in ordinary, everyday life, often over many years, when we experience our weakness and learn to bear it patiently. Is it not an everyday challenge – "working diligently, searching the Scriptures with ardent heart, praying intently, willingly practicing penance, pursuing communion..?" I All that is in order not to fall into a trap of mediocrity. The nuns are called, in all their life and with all their strength, to seek "God who now makes them dwell together in unity and on the last day will gather into the Holy City a people acquired as his own. In the midst of the Church their growth in charity is mysteriously fruitful for the growth of the people of God. By their hidden life they proclaim prophetically that in Christ alone is true happiness to be found, here by grace and afterwards in glory" (LCM, 1 V)

Original: English

The challenge of reaching out to the world.

Sr. Maria Magdalena OP, Rieste-Lage



Our preparation team conducted all of the planning in English. Thus the English title for our meeting is, so to speak, the original: "The hidden life of the nuns - and their outreach to the world". It took us quite a time to arrive at the formulation "outreach" and to determine to adopt it.

Just as it was so difficult to put a name to the opposite pole to our hidden life; it was likewise not easy to find a German equivalent for "reaching out to the world." Outreach, translated literally means "to strive after something", "to grasp something". This doesn't quite correspond to the meaning intended in our English formulation.

So I continued to mull over it and I remembered that at one point during our discussions, Fr Manuel had tried an explanatory gesture, in which he stretched out his arms and hands and opened them wide. To open oneself up, to give of oneself, this is a movement towards making contact and establishing a relationship. "Outreach to the world" which is how I like to describe it, begins in an inner disposition of attentiveness and a lively interest in world events and developments concerning the fate of mankind. Starting from such an inner disposition, a community can be made aware that events, requests, encounters that arrive from outside of the monastery, may be calls from God, that require not only our prayerful response, but perhaps also seek to change the way we think and the way we live.

I would like now to give an example of this, and relate how thinking and living in our community have changed, after we were challenged by quite external and apparently worldly circumstances.

Our old, dilapidated, dark and cramped home in Klausen was enclosed in accordance with all the Roman prescripts, down to the thick stone wall around the property that had broken glass set in the top.

In our last five years there, during which we looked around in Klausen for a larger, more suitable and habitable monastic building nearby in the same diocese, and even thought about building,

for us it went without saying that a new monastery would naturally have the enclosure clearly and separately marked out.

And so when we received an offer "as if dropped down from heaven" from another diocese in the North of Germany, and were invited to take possession of an old monastic site, it was not just in favour of a removal that we had to decide, but also whether, through these circumstances, we wanted to let ourselves be challenged and changed by radically different living conditions.

Our old monastery was fit for demolition, so unfortunately the land and the buildings could be sold only for less than their true worth. From the proportionately meagre proceeds, our community had once again to shelve the question of provision for the elderly, which is a legal requirement in Germany.

This was the first great change: We no longer owned any property, neither house nor plot of land. Our present, beautiful monastery does not belong to us, but to the diocese, and we have become modest tenants of the site and its buildings.

The old 13th century commandery of the Knights of St John, that we now live in, was not conceived or built as an enclosed monastery. In order to meet the requirements of the relevant Roman regulations governing enclosure, that is, to install a visible and significant material separation from the world, the inside of this beautiful, old and intact monastic site would have had to be completely rebuilt (i.e. the disposition of rooms, the staircases, halls etc.). Not to mention that this would have cost a great deal of money, and that the character of the building would have been completely lost.

So, for example, our chapel is installed in the large, light square room, that the crusaders of St John used in former times as a "confession and communion hall", as can be seen on the old plans. Already on architectural and conservation grounds, it would have been unthinkable to want to divide up this space with barriers or grilles into a nuns' chapel and a chapel for the faithful. We the sisters sit in a semicircle around the altar and the faithful immediately behind us, together with us in this same beautiful space.

This structural reality in the chapel and the whole of the entrance area leads to direct contact and personal encounter with the people who like to come to our liturgy on a daily basis, and are particularly numerous on feast days.

Also our monastery does not have a separate guesthouse, but we have adapted the attic of one of the wings as guest quarters. Guests, who spend the night with us, can reach their rooms only via the hall and staircase that strictly speaking are inside the enclosure. So it is unavoidable that we encounter guests and exchange the odd friendly word with them.

This is the second and very significant change: The enclosure has lost an exterior, material meaning and has simultaneously become more important for our personal inner life. The exterior material enclosure offers protection from the many influences of daily activity in the environment. It can help to concentrate on the essential, on prayer. However this material separation can also make one spiritually lazy and sluggish. For when I am automatically protected from outside disturbance and demands, I no longer make the inner effort for recollection. I neglect the interior effort for calm, while I have external peace apparently for nothing. There is then the great danger, that even inside the strictest enclosure I abandon and forget the true prayer of the heart.

If this exterior, material separation now becomes permeable to the world, I will be entirely responsible for my own enclosure. The morning greeting and leave taking of the visitors to our liturgy is personal and friendly, but also sober and short. It should be completely clear to people as they pass by me that I am not a private individual, but rather that I also belong to another, different sphere of existence. In contact with visitors and guests, I myself have to develop an inner sign that I belong completely to God and assiduously cultivate my inner enclosure – with no grille or wall to spare me this responsibility. In this way, the spiritual value of enclosure has become clearer for me.

We had neither sought nor planned these changes in the exterior enclosure. The change in our understanding of enclosure stems from the fact that we were confronted with a new situation. The external circumstances had changed, and so we came face to face with this challenge. In many intensive

discussions in Chapter, we exchanged with one another about these alterations in the conditions of our enclosure and we came to the conclusion that this challenge was also a call to us from God.

But why had God led us along a path, on which we must open widely not only our entrance and chapel areas, as well as meeting rooms, but also our hearts?

Since the Reformation, Catholics are in a diaspora situation in Northern Germany. As in the whole of Western Europe, this area too is markedly post-Christian. The federal state of Lower Saxony, in which we now live, has approximately 8 million inhabitants. About 30% of the population of our federal state still are Protestant Christians. Only 18% of the inhabitants are Catholic (about 1.5 million). Of this 18% only about 14% (approximately 210.000 !) are actually practicing Catholics; attending mass and participating in the life of the parish community. This is a very small flock! This already means that a majority has grown up without any knowledge concerning the Christian faith, or has only superficial and vague notions of it. And so in our surroundings we can no longer assume or expect any understanding of our contemplative life. In our area there is no living or lived Catholic tradition or popular piety, in which knowledge about "praying sisters" behind walls and grilles could be taken for granted. To the extent that religious life is still a concept, here people associate it with the active, good works of an apostolic congregation.

Contemplative life is unknown, exotic, and foreign.

The bishop had publicised the foundation of our monastery through the media, and this had made people curious. And so many many groups came, wanting to know what was going on in Lage these days. In the first four or five years we had about 60 such groups per year. In concrete terms that means conversations and meetings with around 1,000 to 1,500 people a year. With such groups, we also sit in a meeting room in a circle together, without separation by means of a grille or barrier.

In these often intense encounters, we have found answer to the question as to why God wanted to found our monastery:

Maybe people don't know about the Christian faith any more, but they are seeking, seeking often in doubt and they know not what. They are ill at ease and experience spiritual hunger, but they don not know what it is they are yearning for.

As for us believers, the living relationship with God is indispensable and everything stems from the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, so the living witness to our faith, today more than ever begins only through human contact, personal relations. Encounters play a central role.

Perhaps here lies a possible answer to the question as to why God has led us into a different understanding of enclosure, why we should open the door and our heart to real contact with people.

For many visitors to our monastery, meetings and conversation with us are the first time in their lives (!!!) that they have had any close contact or talk with a person who believes in God, who prays and sets prayer, the relationship with God, in the centre of his or her life. Here direct, personal human contact is indispensable.

When we take leave of a group of visitors and accompany them through the cloister to the gatehouse, many ask another personal question or make a remark about what they had noticed or felt: "Do you always wear that white dress?" , "The silence here does me good." , "What do you do if you have quarrels and fall out?" , "You are so happy."

After one group conversation a young woman burst into tears and then said that her concept of life had now all fallen into place. Another visitor remarked personally to me: "I can afford what I like, and I only do what I want to do. But to live as you do requires courage. Perhaps you are indeed freer than me."

Such experiences have given us food for thought. Obviously it is just as important today as in Biblical times for believing Christians to be actually visible, approachable and speakable to.

Our monasteries always used to be in a living relationship with the surrounding area. It went without saying that people knew what a monastery was, they could be certain of being prayed for there, they came to the door bringing offerings and supported the community. Thus the sisters knew the

people of their neighbourhood and knew about their troubles and needs, their hopes and joys. But people, who no longer have any knowledge of faith, no longer have any notion of what a religious community is either, have very little inclination to approach a building that calls itself a "monastery".

If we were to continue to live in Lage in the traditional way – enclosed with walls and grilles concealing us completely from the world – people would not miss us, they would not ask about us. Two worlds, - one enclosed inner world oriented towards heaven behind the wall and one outside the wall, getting along without God -, would lead parallel lives that never meet!

This is only by way of an example of many possibilities, as to how opening up to the world and encounters with people can be achieved in our time. Our enclosure has not been abolished, more than ever we value and need the space into which consciously withdraw, and where we lead the common life, pray, work and study. But enclosure is only one of the means, with the help of which we pray, conscious of our post-Christian times that we may learn to discover new possibilities and occasions of contact with people.

In the course of work on this subject, I gathered together a few quotations from our Constitutions and tried to draw the structure of the contents of the first section together into a diagram. In this diagram, the real value of enclosure, set in context in the overall scheme of our form of life, is clearly visible.

LCM No. 7 : ...participation of all in the ordering of the life of the monastery is of great importance...

LCM Nr. 14 : In the various dealings of the monastery with neighbours, guests and others, the nuns should manifest a charity which, despite their hidden life, will form a bond of unity with them...

LCM Nr. 35/I : ...In the cloister the nuns devote themselves totally to God and perpetuate that singular gift which the blessed Father had of bearing sinners, the down-trodden and the afflicted in the inmost sanctuary of his compassion.

LCM Nr. 97/II : Christ is the Word of God. We hear him in the Sacred Scriptures... We hear him in the voice of the Church... in the sacraments of faith... in the teaching of our shepherds, in the example of the saints. We hear him when the world and our brothers and sisters cry out for our love. For there is one Spirit of Christ who intimately attunes our inward ear to his inspiration.

LCM Nr. 181 : According to the mind of our holy Father Dominic, it is fitting that the nuns, like the friars, should have enlightened participation in their own government... This responsibility... is to be fostered among the nuns by an awareness of their genuine vocation and special role within the Order as well as by a solicitude for Dominican contemplative life promoted according to the conditions of each new age.

Constitutions of the Nuns (LCM) Distinction I - Section I

The Following of Christ

(LCM, Sect. I: Chapter I - IV: the elements of our Dominican way of life)

Religious Consecration Prayer Study Work

- Common Life
- Obedience = *(LCM 35 /II: the means towards the*
- Poverty *fulfilment of our Dominican way of life)*
- Chastity
- Regular Observance / Religious Observance

Enclosure. Silence. The cell. Meals. The habit. Penance. Chapter

Original: English

Study the history of dominican women and their place in the order

The Association of Sister Historians in Fanjeaux—St Dominic’s village—are pleased to announce the launch of a distance learning course in Dominican history. This course is designed with the needs of Dominican nuns, sisters and lay women in mind. It aims to enable them to deepen their sense of their own identity in the Dominican Order through the study of their own history, the history of the friars, within the context of the history of the Church and the world. The structure of the course is modular and the units are self-contained. That is, each module can be followed singly or as part of a wider programme of study. Students can work at their own pace, as there are no externally imposed deadlines. Course materials and bibliographies are provided. A certificate of course completion is delivered to students who complete the course. The course will be available in English, Spanish and French.

The course can be followed in a number of ways:

- For private study only
- As a group
- With or without written assignments submitted to a tutor
- By Internet or by regular mail
- Optional video conferencing or Skipe

In the first instance, the emphasis is placed on the history of Dominican nuns and their place in the Order, but this is by no means exclusive, and the scope of the course will be progressively broadened.

COURSE CONTENT

I The beginnings of the Dominican Order

- a) Diego, Dominic and the preaching campaign
- b) The foundation of Prouilhe
- c) The founding of the Friars Preachers

II The history of Dominican nuns in the early centuries of the Order

- a) Rapid expansion of the monasteries
- b) Curia monialium

These first two units are scheduled to be on offer in English and Spanish from January 2010. In future years, additional units will be added progressively:

- History of the constitutions of Dominican nuns and the evolution of the form of profession of Dominican nuns
- Study in the early life of the Order
- The missionary life of the Order before 1500.
- The beginnings of Dominican life in the New World, including the early monasteries of Latin America
- Dominican reforms: 15th -17th centuries
- The fate of the Order in the turmoil of European Revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries
- The restoration of the Order in the 19th century – Lacordaire and others.
- The arrival of Dominican nuns in North America
- The beginnings in Asia, and Africa

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Suggested model for visitation of monasteries

Purpose of visitation:

Normally, the visitation is a creative opportunity for a monastery to examine its strengths and weaknesses. Affirming its strengths, the community is helped to recognize areas of needed growth and to develop a process of addressing those areas of concern. With the help of a priest of the Order, through interviewing each sister individually, an objective view of the state of the monastery is reflected back to the Chapter. The visitor facilitates Chapter discussions on the more important issues helping the nuns arrive at their own decisions. Of course, concerns of confidentiality are always respected.

By way of exception, in a monastery where there are some serious difficulties, it is understood that the visitor may need to make some, carefully considered decisions of his own. However, even in this situation, it is desirable that the Chapter express its opinion and be directly informed of the decisions with accompanying rationale, if at all possible.

Process of the visitation:

A. Preliminary to the visitation

1. The Chapter conducts a discussion on what it hopes the outcome of the visitation might be. This is forwarded to the visitor.
2. The visitor asks each sister to be prepared to share with him her response to the following questions:
 - a) What are the strengths of this monastery?
 - b) What do you see as the three major issues facing the community?
 - c) What would you propose as a response to these concerns?
 - d) Where do you see the community going in five years?

B. The visitation itself

1. The visitor begins the visitation with a community meeting. He explains the process to the nuns assuring them of anonymity and encouraging them to speak frankly for the sake of the common good. He responds to any questions the nuns might have.
2. Each sister is interviewed individually, responding to questions previously submitted as well as to any other concerns she might have.
3. The visitor collates the information and prepares for a series of community meetings addressing the issues that surfaced. The first section of the meeting should be an account of the strengths of the monastery.
4. Then each of the major issues should be frankly discussed and an action decided upon by the Chapter which addresses that issue. (Note: personalities are not discussed, but concerns are.)

5. The visitor reviews this with the prioress and assists her in whatever way would be helpful. Also, concerns affecting individuals or issues of real delicacy that cannot be dealt with by the Chapter are worked through with the prioress and possibly, the council. However, the more the Chapter can deal with concerns, the better ownership of the decisions.
6. When this process has been completed, the visitation is adjourned for approximately six months while the nuns implement the decisions made.

C. Follow-up meeting of the visitation

After an agreed upon period of time, the visitor returns to the monastery for a follow-up discussion, assessment of progress made, or adjustment of decisions. Again it is desirable to see each sister individually and conduct the necessary community meetings. If the Chapter is satisfied, the visitation is formally closed

- D. The final report on the visitation should be made public to the entire community, again without jeopardizing confidentiality. It is also sent to the Master of the Order and the Ordinary of the Diocese.

Conclusion:

This is only a suggested process that some of the monasteries have found helpful. It is meant to be adjusted to each situation. The principle that underlies this approach is the involvement of the Chapter in addressing issues of the monastery. At the same time, it allows the sisters a certain anonymity as they present their concerns to the visitor. It is he that reports back to the community what he heard from the community and he provides facilitation as the community deals with the concerns. In addition, the follow-up session holds the monastery Chapter accountable for the implementation of their decisions.

fr. Edward Ruane, OP
Original: English

Open Forum

The section Open Forum will continue with the topic of Visitations. Fr Edward, OP has suggested a sample but surely in our communities there are very enriching experiences which can help everyone.

We are very grateful to all the sisters for their contributions to the Open Forum. Due to the lack of space, it is not possible to publish the whole of each comment. For the future we suggest that comments be short.

Contributions:

Sharing of views

"I was passing... and I said to you: LIVE" (Ezekiel 16, 6)

Dear Sisters:

I am glad about this initiative of "Open Forum" in the bulletin *Monialibus* which permits us to dialogue even at a distance, to share and to enrich our common realities.

I think that it is an interesting and challenging idea to be able to communicate with simplicity and without too many fantasies regarding our journeying. This could be effective to expand our flat

horizon and to oxygenate our hope. For this reason I believe that the best way to show our appreciation is by cooperating by sharing our own opinions.

I read the last issue of *Monialibus* very carefully and I must say that I was happy for the presence of new communities in Africa and Latin America, -CONGRATULATIONS- and for the successful meeting of the communities of Central and Eastern Europe. Besides I liked that the topic of the canonical visitation was discussed.

In my opinion one of the most beautiful characteristics of the Dominican Charism is the ability not to avoid the topics which are confused or cause friction but on the contrary to have them discussed which illuminates and orientates them so that they may become a source of life and growth.

I am very grateful to the sisters of the International Commission for the initiative to talk about this topic and also to our brother Eduard Ruarne, O.P., for his exposition which was very clear. The most important thing in the exposition is "how" because it provides a protocol with regard to visitations about which I have never heard before

I think that a visitation must be a agreed choice on both sides: the one that asks for it and receives it and the other who accepts the invitation. Therefore the setting is never something imposed and this is a good background for a true meeting.

Good will or to obviate the things is not enough, the contexts in our communities look simple but they are complex and the stability of our option increases the difficulty because the tensions are concentrated and if they are not managed well they can cause hurt and conflicts.

It is not sufficient that the person in whom we trust for the visitation is good and suitable but she or he must be also skilled and competent in the guidance of groups of people.

The process that our brother Edward outlined was something new for me; he indicated that the community should suggest to the Master suitable people for this mission. I consider that this is important because we pass from something legal to lively meetings which strengthen us in our option of life and help us as an incentive and motivation in our following of Christ.

Moreover, I think that the visitation should have a continuity so that it is not a mere requisite or something tangential or sporadic in the life of the communities but something that encourages people's life and not leave one with the feeling that one has confided in someone and now all has fallen into oblivion leaving one's heart disconsolate.

To avoid this, a gradual process of accompaniment which strengthens the links between the communities and the Order should be initiated; furthermore this process would improve the relationship between the friars and the nuns. This is not only a challenge for the communities but also for the brethren and sisters who can offer this service.

My personal experience with regard to the Canonical Visitations has been traumatic and disappointing; however this doesn't cloud my vision, on the contrary I appreciate them as valuable and positive instruments which can be useful to join the different realities of the Order and especially to establish brotherhood links sharing difficulties and dreams. But we have to take care of the way we do this because it will mark the differences between what might be an obstacle or something that can be source of life.

I am convinced of this because I have suffered what the canonical visitations should not be but I still believe what they can become.

I know for sure that the Master of the Order, Carlos Azpiroz and his collaborators have had and have a big interest and persistence for the nuns, so with gratitude we are indebted to him for his concern and fraternity. There is a long road ahead in order to make credible the words dedicated to the nuns in the Chapter of Bogotá.

Of course, we rely on the help of Grace and on the determination of our lives.

Sr Mirian Gómez, op
Original: Spanish

Canonical visitations by Sr Susanna OP, Lage, Germany.

These are the thoughts that come to me when reflecting on the subject of visitations. In the course of time I've had a lot of experience with visitations, good as well as otherwise – first as Regional Prioress of the Dominican Sisters in Germany and more recently as a Dominican Nun. As long as a community is more or less in “good running condition”, no one will ask questions. But when instability and tensions arise, then these have to be made the subject of attention.

As a Dominican sister, the important question of each visitation was: how can religious life be maintained by whatever work was being undertaken? If this was not the case, then the sisters were good “workers” who in fact were nothing more than cheap labour. Fr. Koudelka said once, “We have to take care that our religious life doesn't end with working women.”

When I became a nun I was confronted with a completely different approach to visitations. Now a visitation was held only before a prioral election. However in the course of time it became more and more clear to me that this was not at all right or helpful. So I reflected and discussed with my community and with others outside the community the topic of how should visitations be held in the future?

The external course of procedure

- Everyone is to be informed of the visitation in good time.
- Any special circumstances surrounding the visitation need to be named and all sisters are to be involved in prayer and in preliminary talks.
- During the visitation each sister is given sufficient time to speak about her situation, her difficulties and concerns, not to mention her vision of how things should be.
- After all the sisters have had opportunity to speak individually, there would be a common exchange of thought. It might be good to insert a reflection day between the “individual talks” and the common “exchange”, during which each sister can go into prayer and reflection about that which she said or divulged.
- The same would apply regarding the common exchange of thought. Reflection that takes place with the Holy Spirit can begin to clarify and qualify things and situations which once seemed to be insurmountable, humanly speaking. This can pave the way for a new beginning.
- If necessary, the visitor may give concrete directives and make requirements that are to be explored or experimented with for a period of time.
- After a trial period, the visitor would speak with the community and individual sisters once again.
- It might be the case – especially with regard to major decision-making or the like – that the visitation be process-oriented and then extend over a longer period of time.
- In one community the visitation process extended over the course of a full year.

The spiritual aspect

It was a matter of heartfelt concern for our father Dominic, that the sisters he led into community life were meant to live their lives for God alone and for “holy preaching”, which they were to support and foster by prayer and penance. (cf. LCM 1,*1). Furthermore “It is the vocation of the nuns to seek HIM in seclusion, to ponder and call upon HIM, so that the word, which comes from the mouth of God, does not return to HIM empty until it has reached everything for which it was sent out to do. (cf. Isaiah 55:11).”

In this case we will do well perhaps to follow the advice of Fr. Vladimir Koudelka, OP and observe: "To remain faithful to our vocation we need to hold in high esteem the observances of the Order, to love them from the heart and to seek to fulfil them in deed (meaning factually)..."

To the observance of the Order belong all those elements, which substantiate Dominican Life (in our case the contemplative Dominican life) and give it form with a common discipline - community life, the celebration of the liturgy, personal prayer, the fulfilment of the vows and the unremitting study for truth.

Obedience takes a particular ranking in this entire context. It might be of great benefit for an entire community for example to make this the theme of a whole visitation. What is our obedience? What does it mean for me, for us, for the Order, for the Church, for the world? The depth of insight and above all a conversion to the faithful meaning of obedience could lead to a new dawn. Accountable obedience is something completely different than "having to do what the superior wants."

These spiritual aspects challenge us to ask questions of and about our communities and each individual sister, above all about our presence in the world of today. It would make sense at a visitation to put this question to everyone, depending on the monastery and the composition of the individual community, as to the good and bad experiences made in this regard, the pressing necessity for possible decisions, with regard to concerns and problems, perhaps spiritual half-heartedness or laggardness, interior or exterior decay.

What place does liturgy have for us; how is it celebrated; is it the most important part of our spiritual, our contemplative life or is it merely "taken care of", because it is prescribed for us or hectically got through because so many other things demand our strength and energy?

We can't close overnight all the monasteries that have become too small. Often it is the small and almost pathetic communities that become a positive sign of the times when they peacefully and lovingly live together and say to our contemporaries, who prefer to push off the old and sick, that such togetherness, despite its paltriness, is possible and worthwhile.

The question therefore is: does the liturgy need to be adapted to the capabilities and the energies of a specific community? A visitation cannot command what can't be carried out. The visitor has to be open and sensitive to that.

Another point, an extremely important one in my estimation, is: what value does REVERENCE have in our monasteries? How considerate are we of one another?

It isn't so important during a visitation to look at what and how much the sisters eat, what kind of expectations do they have on everyday things etc., do they have all kinds of material things and are they allowed to make telephone calls. It is more important to ask how "one heart and soul in God" is lived out and how high we esteem the command to "honour God in one another for you are God's temple" (cf. Rule of Augustine).

In closing, I would like to place the question that should be posed before and after each visitation: Are we HOLY PREACHING? We preach through our presence. In that way we give witness to the world, to people, to the church, to ourselves and to the order.

It isn't necessary to pose as a "super group" that can present itself beautifully in the internet. We have to be a sermon for people, whether we are a large, vital community or a small and paltry one, which can preach just as eloquently, one, as Madeleine Delbrèl says, is able *"to experience in us God as love and allow others to experience this love."*

This would have to be the result of every visitation in my opinion:

Are we holy preaching?

Are we an island of God's presence?

Are we one heart and one soul in God?

Do we honour God in each other, whose temples we are?

Or:

Are we occupied during visitations with trivia and insignificant things, which can be solved and has to be solved by each community by itself?

There is another existential question that might possibly have to be raised at an apostolic visitation and carefully examined:

When has the time come when a monastery has ultimately fulfilled its purpose and reached its goal and hence has to be dissolved or fused with another community? This is certainly easier to write down than it is to experience in reality. Nevertheless, we should bear to mind that it is a reality that a monastery once was a source of blessing, perhaps for centuries and that it has now completed its service in building on the Kingdom of God. The positive retrospection of such a "history" gives the needed strength to make such a hard decision. That too can be a witness for the world.

Original: English

Response to Open Forum on the subject of Visitations

We are one of those monasteries for whom according to LCM 227: I the Master of the Order appoints a vicar – usually a friar of our Province, as our regular superior. We have been very fortunate that, in the living memory of our community, these vicars have been wise and prudent friars who have encouraged us to take responsibility for the internal government of our community life. We have always adhered to the LCM 227: III (3) of having a visitation very two years (according to the old constitutions it was every year!).

We experience the visitation as a moment of grace and renewal giving us fresh impetus and enthusiasm to live our Dominican contemplative vocation with greater generosity and fervour. So to those communities who may still be fearful of a visitation we would like to encourage you to give it a try! You will be surprised at the benefits you will reap both personally and as a community!

Your sisters,
Monastery of St Catherine of Siena
The Twenties, Drogheda
Ireland

Original: English

About the visitations

Dear Sisters,

Through this "Open Forum" I have decided to be in communion with you and to share my point of view and my opinion about the canonical visitations.

I spoke to a friar who is a canon lawyer and I told him that the Bishop's canonical visitations were just useless formality and a mere fulfilment of the letter of the law. In reply the canon lawyer said that the Bishop's behaviour with regard to the visitation was correct because he is only in charge of overseeing the observance of the enclosure and of checking the accounts books. He also mentioned that any problem related to the internal government is the concern of the Regular Superior, whether it is to examine the spirit or to correct abuses in the observance.

Then I asked him the difference between both visitations and the aforementioned friar told me that both the Bishop's and the Regular Superior's visitations are canonical and necessary; they are legislated in Canon Law very seriously, I mean, that the canonical visitation is not optional for the

Bishop nor for the Regular Superior; nor it is something which the monastery can decide to have or not have because "autonomy does not give us power to decide to dispense ourselves from the visitation but to regulate it with autonomy"-Domingo J. Andrés-

Personally I consider that the canonical visitation of the Order is very important, especially in order to identify the Dominican spirit in the monasteries. It is the Master's task to "examine" and see if the monasteries are living according to the mind and spirit of Our Father St Dominic. It is his task to ensure that each Dominican community is keeping a living tradition: in the spirit, customs and charism of the Order; the canonical visitation is the best means to carry out this mission.

I think that the visitation can be made by the Master of the Order or by his delegate, by someone of the family who knows our Constitutions and tradition, especially someone who is interested in our life.

I do not wish to write at length but I would like to remind you of the letter which the Master Damian Byrne wrote: "LETTER TO THE NUNS OF THE ORDER OF PREACHERS" MAY 1992. In this letter you will find the Dominican key regarding the aim of a canonical visitation and some interesting proposals.

Importance of the canonical visitation: you could ask the Bishop for it every two years and even to suggest names of Visitors.

Aim of the visitation:

- To help the community to function better in its three levels of authority: Prioress, Chapter and Council.
- It is important that each member of the community can talk in complete freedom to the Visitor every two years.
- "Would it be possible to ask each Provincial to provide one Visitor for all the monasteries in the Province every two years?" (letter to the nuns of the Master Damian Byrne)

I like the last proposal very much because it would guarantee the frequency of the visitations. I have read that in order to get the maximum benefit from the visitations it is important that they take place at least every two years.

Both the Bishop's visitation and that of the Master are canonical but there is no doubt that they don't have the same competence because the Master's visitation, regarding the internal government and the disciplinary laws of the Order, embraces the whole life of the nuns.

Greetings to all in communion with Christ and Dominic.

Sr. Mary Victoria of the Church, OP
Monastery "Saint Dominic the Real" (Madrid)

Original: Spanish