

# Letter to our brothers and sisters in initial formation

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fr. Timothy Radcliffe, OP

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**Dear brothers and sisters in St Dominic,**

You are a gift of God to the Order, and we honour the creator in welcoming his gifts. This we must do by giving you the best possible formation. The future of the Order depends upon it, which is why every General Chapter of the Order spends so much time discussing formation. Over the last few years the Order has produced excellent documents about formation, and so rather than write a long letter on formation and repeat all that has been said, I have thought it better to collect these documents together so that you and your formators can easily study them. But I do wish to share just a word addressed directly to you, my brothers and sisters who are at the beginning of your Dominican life, knowing that some of your formators may be looking over your shoulder. I shall talk in terms of the formation of the brothers, since that is what I know about more. I hope that it will also be relevant to the experience of our sisters.

One of my greatest pleasures during my visits to the Order has been the meetings with you. I have been moved by your enthusiasm for the Order, your desire to study and to preach, your true Dominican joy. But formation will also entail moments of pain, disorientation, discouragement, and a loss of meaning. Sometimes you will wonder why you are here, and whether you should remain. Such moments are a necessary and painful part of formation, as you grow as a Dominican. If they did not happen, then your formation would not be touching you deeply.

Formation in our tradition is not the moulding of passive matter, so as to produce a standard product, "A Dominican". It is our accompaniment of you as you freely respond to the threefold call that you receive: from the Risen Lord who invites you to follow him, from the brethren and sisters who invite you become one of them, and to the demands of the mission. If you respond fully and generously to these demands, then you will be changed. It will ask of you death trusting in the Lord who gives resurrection. This will be both painful and liberating, exciting and frightening. It will form you as the person whom God calls you to be. This is a process that will continue throughout your Dominican life. The years of initial formation are just the beginning. I write this letter to you to offer some encouragement on the journey. Do not give up when it is hard!

I shall take as my text to explore this theme the meeting of Mary Magdalene, the patroness of the Order, with Jesus in the garden (John 20: 11 – 18)

## **"Whom do you seek?"**

When Jesus meets Mary Magdalene, he asks her: "Whom do you seek?". Our life in the Order begins with a similar question, as we lay stretched out on the floor: "What do you seek?" It is the question that Jesus put to the disciples at the beginning of the gospel.

You have to come to the Order with a hunger in your heart, but for what? Is it because you have discovered the gospel recently and wish to share it with everyone? Is it because you met a Dominican whom you admired and wish to imitate? Is it to run away from the world with all its complications, from the pain of forming human relationships? Is it because you have always wished to be a priest, and yet feel that you need a community? Is it because you wonder about the meaning of your life, and wish to discover it with us? Whom do you seek? What do you seek? We cannot answer that question for you, but we can be with you as you face it yourself and help you to arrive at an honest answer.

During our Dominican life, we may answer that question differently at different moments. The reasons that brought us to the Order may not be the reasons why we stay. When I joined the Order I was drawn above all by the hunger to understand my faith. The motto of the Order, "Veritas", attracted me. I doubted whether I would ever have the courage to preach a sermon. Later I stayed because this desire caught hold of me. Sometimes we may not be at all clear why we are still here and for what we long. We may cling to no more than a vague feeling that this is where we are called to be. Most of us stay in the end because, like Mary Magdalene in the garden, we are looking for the Lord. A vocation is the story of a desire, a hunger. We stay because we are hooked by love, and not by the promise of personal fulfilment or a career. Eckhart says, "For love resembles the angler's hook. The angler cannot get the fish till it is caught on the hook. .... He who hangs on to this hook is caught so fast that foot and hand, mouth, eyes and heart, and all that is this person's belongs only to God. Just watch for this hook, so as to be blessedly caught, for the more you are caught, the more you are free."

Perhaps you will discover that you are indeed searching for the risen Lord, but that you are called to find him in another form of life, perhaps as a married disciple. Perhaps God called you to the Order for a while, to prepare you to be a preacher in another way.

The joy of this Easter meeting is at the heart of our Dominican life. This is a happiness which we share in our preaching. But we grow in this happiness only by passing through moments of loss. The one whom Mary Magdalene loves has disappeared. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away". She grieves for the loss of the person she loves. Sometimes entry into the Order may be marked by that same experience of desolation. Perhaps you joined full of enthusiasm. You were going to give yourself to God, have hours of ecstatic prayer. But God appears to have slipped away. Praying becomes the tedious repetition of long psalms at the wrong times, with brethren who sing badly. We may even think that it is the brethren who are to blame for God's disappearance, with their lack of devotion. Why do they not even turn up to office? Their teaching may seem to undermine the faith that brought me here. The Word of God is dissected in their lectures, and we are told that it is not literally true. Where have they buried my Lord?

### **"Jesus said to her, 'Mary'. She turned and said to him in Hebrew 'Rabboni' (which means Teacher)"**

We have to lose Christ if we are to find him again, astonishingly alive and unexpectedly close. We have to let him go, be desolate, grieve for his absence, so that we may discover God closer to us than we could ever have imagined. If we do not go through that experience, then we will be stuck in a childish and infantile relationship with God. It belongs to our formation that we may become disorientated, like Mary confused in the garden, not knowing what is happening. Otherwise we can never be surprised by a new intimacy with the Risen Lord. And it must happen again and again as the angler reels us in. The lost Lord appears and speaks to her, and then tells her to let him go again: "Do not cling to me".

When they seem to have taken away the body of the Lord, do not give up and go away. When Jesus disappeared, then Peter, like a typical man, went back to work. That may be a temptation, to go back to take up again our old lives. Mary did not give up but went on looking, even if only for a dead body. If we endure then, like her, we shall be surprised. I remember a long period of desolation, during the years of simple profession. I did not doubt the existence of God, but God seemed unimaginably distant, and nothing much to do with me. It was years later, after solemn profession, in the garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem one summer, that that the void was filled. I may have to endure that absence again one day, and then maybe it will be you, my brothers and sisters, who will help me carry on until the next surprise encounter.

Jesus says to her just one word, her name: "Mary". God always calls us by name. "Samuel", God called three times in the night. Who we are, our deepest identity, we discover in responding to the call of our name. "The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name" (Isaiah 49:1). So our Dominican vocation is not a matter of finding a job, or even a useful service of Church and society. It is my "Yes" to the God who summons me to be, "Yes" to the brethren with whom I live, and "Yes" to the mission upon which I am sent. I am summoned into life, like one who was called out of the tomb by a voice shouting "Lazarus, come forth".

So we can say that the fundamental goal of formation is to help us become Christians, to say "Yes" to Christ. If it does not do that, then we are playing games. But does that mean that becoming a Dominican is unimportant, a mere incidental? No, because it is Dominic's way of following Christ. Perhaps the earliest name for Christianity was "The Way" (Acts 9:2). When Dominic took to the roads in the south of France, he discovered a way to the Kingdom. The Order offers us a way of life, with its common prayer, its form of government, its way of doing theology and being a brother. When we make profession, then we trust that this strange way of life can lead us to the Kingdom.

So I do not wait to be a good Christian before I become a preacher. Sharing the word of God with others is part of my search for the Lord in the garden. When I struggle to find a word to preach then I am like Mary Magdalene begging the gardener to tell me where they have put the body of my Lord. If I can share my wrestling with the word, then I can share also that moment of revelation when the Lord speaks my name. I must dare to look into the tomb and see the absence of the body if I am also to share the subsequent encounter. To be a preacher is to share all the moments in that drama in the Easter garden: desolation, interrogation, revelation. But if I speak as someone who knows it all, untroubled by doubt, then people may be very impressed by my knowledge, but they may feel it has little to do with them.

### **"Go to my brethren"**

Jesus calls Mary Magdalene by name, and sends her to his brethren. We respond to God's call by becoming one of the brethren.

Becoming a brother is more than joining a community and putting on a habit. It implies a profound transformation of my being. Being the blood brother of someone is more than having the same parents; it implies relationships which have slowly formed me to be the person that I am. In a similar way becoming one of Dominic's brothers will ask of me a patient and, sometimes painful, transformation of whom I am. There will be times, perhaps prolonged, of death and resurrection.

It is true that most Dominican brethren are priests, and that we belong to "a clerical institute", but ordination does not make us any the less brethren. During my years of formation I came to love being one of the brethren. I wished for no more. I accepted ordination because my brothers asked it of me, and for the sake of the mission. I came to value being a priest, because the communion and mercy that are at the heart of our fraternal life found sacramental expression for the wider Church. But I was just as much a brother as before. There is no higher title in the Order. This is one reason why I believe that the promotion of the vocation of the co-operator brethren - a term that I have never liked - is so important for the future of the Order. They remind us of who we all are, Dominic's brothers. There can be no second class brethren in the Order.

When I was a student, I remember the visit of a priest from another Province to our community in Oxford. When he arrived, there was a Dominican sweeping the hall. The visitor asked him, "Are you a brother?". "Yes" he replied. "Brother, go and get me a cup of coffee". After his coffee, he told the brother to take his bags to his room. And finally the visitor said, "Now, brother, I wish to meet the Father Prior". He replied, "I am the Prior".

### **Different visions of being a brother**

To be a brother is to find that you belong with us. You are at home with the brethren. But we Dominicans may have many different conceptions as to what it means to be a brother.

One of the shocks of joining the noviciate may be to discover that my fellow novices may have come with very different visions of the Dominican life than my own. When I joined I was powerfully attracted not only by the search for Veritas, but also by Dominic's poverty. I imagined myself in the streets begging for my bread. I soon discovered that most of my fellow novices considered that to be foolish romanticism. Some of you will be drawn because of a love of study; others because of a desire to struggle for a more just world. You may be scandalised to see other novices unpacking enormous quantities of books or a CD player. Some of you may wish to wear the habit for twenty four hours a day and others will remove it as soon as possible. We easily trample on each other's dreams.

Often there is such a tension between generations of brethren. Some young people who come to the Order these days value highly the tradition and the visible signs of Dominican identity: studying St. Thomas, the traditional songs or anthems of the Order, wearing the habit, celebrating our saints. Often brethren of a previous generation are puzzled by this desire for a clear and visible Dominican identity. For them the adventure had been to leave behind old forms that seemed to stand between us and preaching the gospel. We had to be on the road, with the people, seeing things through their eyes, anonymous if we were to be close. Occasionally this can lead to a certain misunderstanding, even a mutual suspicion. The Provinces which are thriving today are often those which have succeeded in getting beyond such ideological conflicts. How can we build a fraternity which is deeper than these differences?

First of all, we may come to recognise the same deep evangelical impulse in each other. In the habit or out of the habit, we preach the same Risen Lord. I have always found myself at home with the brethren, whether sitting with a few brethren by a river in the Amazon reciting the psalms in our shirtsleeves, or celebrating an elaborate polyphonic liturgy in Toulouse. Besides the objective demands of the vows and the Constitutions, one recognises certain family resemblances: a quality of joy; a sense of the equality of all the brethren; a passion for theology, even of quite contradictory tendencies; a trust in our democratic tradition, a lack of pretension. All these hint at a way of life we share, however great the superficial differences.

Secondly, our different visions of the Dominican life may be formed by different moments in the history of the Church and the Order. Many of us who became Dominicans at the time of the Second Vatican Council, grew up in a confident Catholicism, sure of its identity. Our adventure was to reach out to those far from Christ by overthrowing the barriers. What drives brothers and sisters of that generation is sometimes the desire to be close to the invisible Christ who was present in every factory, in every barrio, every University. Visible identity was suppressed for the sake of the preaching. Our worker-priests, for example, were a sign of the God who is close even to those who appear to have forgotten his name.

Many who come to the Order today, especially in the West, have made a different pilgrimage, growing up far from Christianity. Perhaps now you wish to celebrate and affirm the faith you have embraced and come to love. You wish to be seen as Dominicans, for that too belongs to the preaching. It can be just the same evangelical impulse which leads some brethren to put on the habit and others to take it off.

This tension is ultimately fruitful and necessary for the vitality of the Order. Accepting the young into the Order challenges us. Just as the birth of a child changes the life of the whole family, so each generation of young who come to us change the brotherhood. You come with your questions to which we have not always got the answers, with your ideals, which may reveal our inadequacies, your dreams which we may not share. You come with your friends and your families, your cultures and your tribes. You come to disturb us, and that is why we need you. Often you come demanding what is indeed central to our Dominican life, but which we may have forgotten or belittled: a more profound and beautiful common prayer; a deeper fraternity in which we care more for each other, the courage to leave behind our old commitments and take to the road again. Often the Order is renewed because the young come to us and insist on trying to build the Dominican life that they have read about in books! Go on insisting!

It is easy for us who came before you to say, with some irritation: "You are joining us; we are not joining you." This is indeed true, but only half so. For when we joined the Order, we gave ourselves into the hands of the brethren who were still to come. We pledged obedience to those who were not born. It is true that we do not have to reinvent the Order in each generation, but part of Dominic's genius was to found an Order that has adaptation and flexibility as part of its being. We need to be renewed by those who have been caught by enthusiasm for Dominic's vision. We must not recruit you to fight our old battles. We have to resist the temptation to box you into the categories of our youth, and label you as "conservatives" or "progressives", just as you have to refrain from dismissing us as relics of "the seventies".

You too will be challenged by those who came before you, or at least I hope so. Accepting that there are different ways of being a Dominican does not mean that anyone can just invent his own

interpretation. I cannot, for example, decide that for me the vows are compatible with keeping a mistress and a sports car. Our way of life includes certain inescapable and objective demands, that ultimately must invite me to undergo a profound transformation of my being. If I avoid that, then I will never become one of the brethren.

Above all different conceptions of being a Dominican should never really divide us because the unity of the Order does not lie in a common ideological line, even a single spirituality. If it had then we would have splintered long ago. What holds us together is a way of life which allows for great diversity and flexibility, a common mission, and a form of government that gives a voice to each person. The Dominican lion and the Dominican lamb can live together and enjoy each other's company.

At the beginning of the life of the Order, "The Lives of the brethren" was written to record the memory of the first generation of our brothers. We are bound together as a community by the stories of the past as well as by the dreams of the future. Visible signs of Dominican identity do have their value and say something important of who we are, but they should not become the battle standards of different parties. The Dominicans whose memory we rightly treasure were often those who were so caught up in the passion for preaching that they did not have time to reflect too much about their identity as Dominicans. As Simon Tugwell wrote, "throughout the whole story, when the Order has been most true to itself, it has been least concerned with being Dominican." .

Formation should indeed give us a strong Dominican identity, and teach us about our history and our tradition. This is not so that we can contemplate the glory of the Order, and how important we are, or were, but so that we can take to the road and walk together after the poor and itinerant Christ. A strong sense of identity frees us from thinking about ourselves too much, otherwise we will be too self-preoccupied to hear the voice which asks us: "Whom do you seek?".

So brotherhood is based on more than a single vision. It is built patiently, by learning to listen to each other, to be strong and to be fragile, learning fidelity to each other and love of the brethren.

### **Talking and listening**

We know that we are at home when we can talk easily with each other, confident that our brothers will at least try to understand us. This is probably our expectation when we join the Order. Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my God and your God, to my Father and your Father" She is commissioned to share her faith in the risen Lord, even though her brothers may regard her as deluded. So we build a common home in the Order by daring to share what brought us here. Sometimes it will be hard. We probably came expecting to find like-minded people, with the same dreams and the same way of thinking. But we may discover that others have come to the Order by such different paths that we cannot recognise ourselves in what they say. We may hesitate to expose what is most precious, our fragile faith, to criticism and examination. Sharing our faith demands of us great vulnerability. Sometimes it may be easier to do so with people with whom we do not have to live.

One of the main challenges for the formators is to build up trust so that you may dare to talk freely. Martin Buber wrote that, "The decisive thing is whether the young people are ready to talk. If someone treats them with trust, shows them that he believes in them, they will talk to him. The first necessity is that the teacher must arouse in his pupils that most valuable thing of all – genuine trust" . Just as important is that you trust each other. You may even at times have the courage to share your doubts.

Contemporary western culture systematically cultivates suspicion. We are taught to probe beneath what others say to what is not acknowledged, concealed and even unconscious. In the Church this can sometimes take the form of hunting for error, scanning statements for heresies. Is this brother a true disciple of St Thomas Aquinas or of liberation theology? Is he one of us? It is easier to discover how a brother is wrong and has denied a dogma of the Church, or some ideology of my own, than to hear the little grain of truth that he may be struggling to share with us. But such suspicion is subversive of fraternity. It comes from fear and only love casts out fear.

Learning to listen to each other charitably is a discipline of the mind. Benedict Ashley wrote, "There has to be a new asceticism of the mind, for nothing is more painful than to maintain charity alive in the midst of genuine argument about serious issues." Loving my brother is not just a pleasant warm emotion, but an intellectual discipline. I have to restrain myself from dismissing what my brother has said as nonsense before I have heard what he is saying. It is the mental asceticism of opening one's mind to an unexpected insight. It will involve learning to be silent, not just while I wait for him to stop speaking, but so that I may hear him. I must still the defensive objections, the urge to stop him before he says another word. I must be quiet and listen.

Conversation builds a community of equals, and that is why we must build the community of the Dominican Family by taking the time to talk with our sisters and lay Dominicans, and discover the pleasure of it. Conversation builds the larger home of Dominic and Catherine. It "demands equality between participants. Indeed, it is one of the most important ways of establishing equality. Its enemies are rhetoric, disputation, jargon, and private language, or despair at not being listened to and not being understood. To flourish, it needs the help of midwives of either sex.....Only when people learn to converse will they begin to be equal." One of the challenges for us brethren is to let the sisters form us as preachers. The most profound formation is always mutual.

### **Being strong and weak**

We belong and are at home when we find that we are stronger than we ever believed, and weaker than we dared to admit. And these are not contrary qualities, for they are signs that we are beginning to be conformed to the strong and vulnerable Christ.

We are formed in the first place as Christians. In our tradition this means not so much the progressive submission to commandments, to tame our unruly natures, as the growth in virtue. Becoming virtuous makes us strong, single hearted, free and able to stand on our own two feet. As Jean Luis-Bruguès OP has written, virtue is an apprenticeship in humanity. "It is in the passage from virtuality to virtuosity" ( for the French text "ce passage de la virtualité à la virtuosité ")

Becoming a brother means that we receive our strength from each other. We are not soloists. It is a strength that makes us free, but with each other not from each other. In the first place we become strong because we have confidence in each other. At the origin of our tradition is Dominic's endless confidence in the brethren. He trusted the brethren because he trusted in God. As John of Spain wrote, "He had such confidence in God's goodness that he sent even ignorant men to preaching saying, 'Do not be afraid, the Lord will be with you and will put power in your mouths.'"

So the first task of your formator is to build up that trust and confidence. But it is also the responsibility that you have for each other, for it is usually those in formation who form each other most. You have the power to undermine a brother, sap his confidence, make fun of him. And you have the power to build each other up, to give each other strength, to form each other as preachers of God's strong word.

It is said in our Constitutions that "the primary responsibility for his own formation lies with the candidate himself" (LCO 156). We should not be treated as children, incapable of making decisions for ourselves. We grow into brethren, equal members of the community, by being treated as mature adults. In Dominic's day, there was no sign of the traditional monastic circator, whose job was to go around snooping, seeing whether everyone was doing what they ought. But this is a responsibility that we do not exercise alone. If we are brothers, then we will help each other into the freedom to think, to speak, to believe, to take risks, to transcend fear. We will also dare to challenge each other.

As we grow as brethren, then we will be strong enough to face our weakness and fragility. This is in the first place what a friend of mine has called "the wisdom of creatures" . This is the knowledge that we are created, that our existence is a gift, that we are mortal and live between birth and death. We wake up to the fact that we are not gods. We stand on our own two feet, but our feet are a gift.

We will also discover that we have not joined the communion of saints, but a group of men and women who are weak, irresolute, and who must constantly pick themselves up after failure. I have

written elsewhere about how this can be a moment of crisis in a brother's formation . The heroes whom a novice had loved and admired turn out to have feet of clay. But this has always been so. That is one reason why we have as Patroness of the Order Mary Magdalene, who according to tradition was a weak and sinful woman, but who was called to be the first preacher of the gospel.

More than five hundred years ago Savonarola wrote a letter to a novice who had clearly been scandalised by the sins of the brethren. Savonarola warns him about people who join the Order hoping to enter paradise right away. They never last. "They wish to live among the saints, excluding all wicked and imperfect people. And when they do not find this, they abandon their vocation and take to the road.....But if you wish to flee from all the wicked, then you must leave this world." This confrontation with fragility is often a wonderful moment in the maturing of a vocation. This is when we discover that we are able to give and to receive the mercy which we asked for when we joined the Order. If we can do this, then we are on the road to becoming a brother and a preacher.

One of the fears that may inhibit us from trusting in this mercy is the worry that if the brethren were to see what we are really like, then they might not vote for us for profession. We may be tempted to conceal who we are until we are safely and securely inside, professed and ordained and invulnerable. To accept this would be to settle for a formation in deceit. Formation would become a training in concealment, and this would be a travesty for an Order whose motto is "Veritas". We must believe in our brethren enough to let them see who we are and what we think. Without such transparency there is no fraternity. This does not mean that we must stand up in the refectory and proclaim our sins, but we cannot create a mask behind which we hide. We dare to embrace such vulnerability because Christ has done so before us. It prepares us to preach a trustworthy and honest word.

### **Fidelity and love of the brethren**

Finally, there is a quality to brotherhood which is elusive and hard to describe, which I shall call fidelity, according to Peggy "the most beautiful of words". At the heart of our preaching is God's fidelity. God has given his word to us, and it is a Word made flesh. It is a word in which we can trust, and which makes of the history of humanity a story which goes somewhere rather than just a succession of random events. It is the strong and solid word of the one who said "I am who I am". That is a fidelity which we must seek to embody in our lives. The married couple is a sacrament of God's fidelity, who has joined himself irrevocably to us in Christ. It belongs also to our preaching of the gospel that we are faithful to each other.

What does that mean? In the first place, it is fidelity to the commitment we have made to the Order. God has given us his Word made flesh, even though it led to a senseless death. We have given God our word, even when our promise may appear to ask of us more than we may think possible. I remember, when I was Provincial, talking with an old brother who came to tell me that he was dying of cancer. He was a loveable and good man, who had lived through difficult and uncertain moments in his Dominican life. He told me, "It looks as if I am going to fulfil my ambition of dying in the Order". It may look a small ambition, but it is an essential one. He had given his word and his life. He rejoiced that, despite everything, he had not taken back this gift.

Secondly it means that our common mission has priority over my private agenda. I have my talents, my preferences and dreams, but I have given myself to our shared preaching of the good news. This common mission may require of me that I accept some unwanted burden for a while, like being a Bursar, a Novice or Student Master, or Master of the Order, for the common good. A bus may look much like a common room. It is filled with people who sit together, talking or reading, sharing a common space. But when the bus route departs from the direction of my own journey, then I will leave that bus and continue on my own way. Do I regard the Order as much like a bus, on which I stay only as long as it carries me in the direction I wish to go?

Fidelity also implies that I will stand up for my brethren, for their reputation is mine. In the Primitive Constitutions, and until recently, one of the tasks of the novice master was to teach the novices to "suspect the good" . One must always give the best possible interpretation of what the brethren did or said. If a brother comes back regularly late at night then rather than imagine the terrible sins he may have committed, one must assume that, for example, he had been out visiting the sick. Savonarola writes to that judgmental novice: "If you see something that does not please you, think that it was

done with a good intention. Many are, in themselves, better than you imagine". This is more than the optimism of the unworldly. It belongs to that love which sees the world with God's eyes, as good. St Catherine of Siena once wrote to Raymond of Capua, reassuring him that he must trust in her love for him, and when we love someone we give the best interpretation to what they do, trusting that they always seek our good: "Beyond the general love, there is a particular love which expresses itself in faith. And it expresses itself in such a way that it can neither believe or imagine that the other could want anything except our good."

If my brother is condemned as bad or unorthodox, then fidelity means that I will do everything I can to stand by him, and give the best possible interpretation to his views or actions. It was because of this mutual fidelity that the foreword of the Constitutions of 1228 ruled, as to be observed "inviolably and unchangeably in perpetuity", that one never can appeal outside the Order against the decisions that the Order made. It should be virtually unimaginable, therefore, that a brother might publicly accuse or disassociate himself from one of his brethren.

This fidelity implies that I will not only stand up for my brother but to him. If he is my brother, then I must care what he thinks, and dare to disagree with him. I cannot leave it just for the superiors, as if it were not my responsibility. But I must do so to his face and not behind his back. We may fear to do this, expecting hostility and rejection. But, in my experience, if one makes it clear that one is speaking out of a love of the truth and of one's brother, then this has always led to a deepened friendship and understanding.

So these are some of the elements of being formed as a brother: talking and listening to each other; learning to be strong and weak; growing in mutual fidelity. All this belongs to what is most fundamental, which is learning to love the brethren. We Dominicans, with our robust approach to each other, may hesitate to use such language. It may sound sugary and sentimental. Yet it is the ultimate basis of our fraternity. This is what we are required to do by the one who calls us: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 16:12). This is the fundamental commandment of our faith. Obedience to it forms us as Christians and as brethren. St Dominic said that he had learnt "more in the book of Charity than in the books of men". It means that ultimately we see each other as a gift from God. My brother or sister may irritate me; I may be totally opposed to their opinions, but I come to delight in them, and see their goodness.

There is a fundamental relationship between love and vocation. It has brought many of you to us. Jesus looked at the rich young man and loved him, and called him to follow him, just as he looked at Mary Magdalene and called her by her name. Stephen of Spain tells us that he went to confession to Dominic, and "he looked at me as if he loved me." Later that evening Dominic summoned him and clothed him in the habit. Love is, as Eckhart said, the angler's hook that catches the fish and will not let it go. I must confess that I decided to join the Order before I ever met a Dominican, drawn by the ideal that I had read about. Perhaps that also can be a blessing!

There is nothing sentimental about this love. Sometimes we have to work at it, and struggle to overcome prejudice and difference. It is the labour of becoming one of the brethren. I remember that once there was a brother with whom it was hard for me to live. Anything that either did or said appeared to irritate the other. One evening we agreed to go out to the pub together, a very English solution. We talked for hours, learned about each other's childhood, and struggles. I could, for the first time, see through his eyes and see myself as I must appear to him. I began to understand. That was the beginning of friendship and fraternity.

### **"I have seen the Lord"**

Mary Magdalene goes to her brothers and says "I have seen the Lord". She is the first preacher of the resurrection. She is a preacher because she is capable of hearing the Lord when he calls, and of sharing the good news of Christ's victory over death.

So becoming a preacher is more than learning a certain amount of information, so that you have something to say, and a few preaching techniques, so that you know how to say it. It is being formed as someone who can hear the Lord, and speak a word that offers life. Isaiah says, "The Lord called

me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me.”(49.1f). All of Isaiah’s life, from the very beginning, shaped him as someone who is ready to speak a prophetic word.

The Order should offer you more than a training in theology. It is a life that forms you as a preacher. Our common life, prayer, pastoral experiences, struggles and failures, will make us capable of attention and proclamation in ways that we cannot anticipate.

One of my predecessors as Provincial was a brother called Anthony Ross. He was famous as a preacher, a historian, a prison reformer, and even a wrestler! One day, shortly after he was elected Provincial, he suffered a stroke and was reduced almost to silence. He had to resign as Provincial and learn to speak again. The few words he could manage had more power than anything he had said before. People came to confession to him, to hear his simple healing words. His sermons of half a dozen words could change people’s lives. It was as if that suffering and that silence formed a preacher who could give us life-giving words as never before. I went to see him before I left for the General Chapter of Mexico, from which, to my great surprise, I did not come back to my Province. His last word to me was "Courage". The greatest gift we can give to a brother is such a word.

### **A Compassionate word**

Mary Magdalene announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”. This is not just the statement of a fact, but the sharing of a discovery. She has shared their loss, their puzzlement, their grief, and so now she can share with them her encounter with the Risen Lord. She can share the good news with them because it is good news for her.

The Word that we preach is a word who shared our humanity, and is “not a high priest unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4.15). Preaching will demand of us that we became incarnate in different worlds, whether that of the contemporary youth culture or a Micronesian island, the world of drug addicts or business managers. We have to enter a world, learn its language, see through its inhabitants’ eyes, get under their skin, understand their weaknesses and their hopes. We must, in some sense, become them. Then we can speak a word that is good news to them and to us. This does not mean that we must agree with them. Often we may need to challenge them. But we must feel the pulse of their humanity before we can do so.

It is the tradition of the Church to sing the praises of God at dawn. We go on being watchmen waiting for the dawn, so that we can share our hope with others who see no sign of the sun rising. It is because I have somehow glimpsed their darkness, and maybe known it as my own, that I can share a word about the “loving kindness of the heart of our God, who visits us like the dawn from on high”.

Often we can do this because of who we are and what we have lived. Mary Magdalene searched for the body of the Lord with a tenderness which she had learned in a life that was marked, according to the tradition, by its own failures and sins. It was this life that prepared her to be the person who searched for the man she loved and recognised him when he called her by name. One of the most precious gifts you bring to the Order is your life, with its failures, its difficulties, its dark moments. I can even look back at some sin and see it as a *felix culpa*, because it has prepared me as someone who can speak a word of compassion and hope for others who are living the same defeat. I can share with them the rising of the sun.

In other areas we need a formation in compassion, an education of the heart and the mind that breaks down everything within us that is stony hearted, priggish, arrogant and judgmental. One of the most useful things that I ever did in my rather unusual noviciate, was to visit regularly the sexual offenders in the local prison. They are perhaps the most despised people in our society. The revelation was that really we were no different from each other. We can listen to the gospel together. So our formation should wear down our defences against those who are different, and unattractive, those whom our society despises: the beggars, the prostitutes, the criminals, the sort of people with whom the Word of God spent his time. We learn to receive the gifts that they can give us, if our hands are open.

The ideal preacher is the one who is all things to all human beings, perfectly human. No Dominican that I know is that, and we will be faced with our limitations. For years I went one night a week to a refuge for the homeless in Oxford, to prepare the soup and to talk with them. Yet I must confess that I dreaded it. I hated the smell, and was bored by the drunken conversation; I knew that my soup was not a success and I longed to be home reading books. Yet I do not regret those hours. Maybe the wall between me and my brothers and sisters on the street was somewhat eroded.

Compassion will reshape our lives in ways that we never planned. When St. Dominic was a student at Palencia he let himself be touched by compassion for the hungry and sold his books. He only stayed in the south of France and founded the Order because he was moved by the plight of the people caught in a destructive heresy. The whole of his life was moulded by response to situations he never anticipated. This merciful man was at the mercy of others, vulnerable to their needs. Learning compassion will wrestle from our hands the tight control of our lives.

### **A word of life**

"I have seen the Lord". This is more than the reporting of an event. Mary Magdalene shares with her brethren the triumph of life over death, of light over darkness. It is a word that brings the dawn that she witnessed "very early in the morning".

Catherine of Siena tells Raymond of Capua that we must be "doers rather than undoers and spoilers" We are formed as preachers through the ordinary conversations that we have with others, the words that we exchange in the common room and the corridors. We discover how to share a word of life in our preaching, by being formed as brethren who offer each other words that give hope, encourage, build up and heal. If we are people who habitually offer words to other people which hurt, undermine, sap and destroy, then however intelligent and knowledgeable we may be, we can never be preachers. There is a Polish saying, "Wystygl mistyk; wynik cynik", which means : "The mystic has cooled down; the result is a cynic." We may be the "dogs of the Lord" but we can never be cynics .

The word of the preacher is fertile. It fructifies. When Mary Magdalene meet Jesus she mistook him for the gardener. Only it is not a mistake, because Jesus is the new Adam in the garden of life, where death is defeated and the dead tree of the cross bears fruit. So the natural allies of the preacher are the creative people in our society. Who are the people struggling to make sense of contemporary experience? Who are the thinkers, the philosophers, the poets and the artists, who can teach us a creative word for today. They too should help to form us as preachers

### **A word that we have received**

How are we to find this fresh, compassionate creative word? I confessed at the beginning of this letter that when I joined the Order I feared that I would never be able to preach. This is a fear that often is still there. It is embarrassing for a Dominican to confess that when I am asked to preach my first reaction still is often: "But I have nothing to say." But what is to be said will be given, even if sometimes at the last moment. To receive the word that is given, we have to learn the art of silence. In study and in prayer, we learn to be still, attentive, so that what we may receive from the Lord what he gives us to share: "What I received from the Lord, is what I also delivered to you."(1 Cor. 11:23)

Being still is for many the hardest part of formation. Pascal wrote that "I have discovered that the unhappiness of human beings comes from just one thing: not knowing how to remain quietly in a room." Ultimately the preacher must love "the pleasures of solitude" because that is when we receive gifts. We have to nail ourselves to our chairs, not so that we may master knowledge, but so that we may be ready and alert when it comes unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. Finally we may come to love this silence as the deepest centre of our Dominican lives. It is the time of gifts, whether in prayer or study.

It demands discipline. "Truly, you are a God who lies hidden"(Is 45: 15).To detect God's coming, we need ears that are acute, like those of a hunter. Eckhart asks: "Where is this God, whom all creatures seek, and from whom they have their being and their life? Just like a man who hides himself, and who coughs and so gives himself away, so is God. No one is capable of discovering God, if he did not give

himself away." But God is there, discreetly coughing, giving tiny hints to those who are able to hear, if we are silent. Often, later in your Dominican life, you will be overwhelmed by demands on your time. Now is the time to establish a habit of regular silence in the presence of God, to which you must cling all your life. It can make the difference between mere survival and flourishing as a Dominican.

Often people come to the Order with a newfound enthusiasm to share the good news of Jesus Christ. You may wish to take immediately to the streets, to storm the pulpit, to share your discovery of the gospel with the world. It can be frustrating to join the Order of Preachers and then find that for years you are tied to hours of boring study, reading dry books written by dead men. We yearn perhaps to be on the road preaching the gospel, or sent on the missions. We may be like those young men of whom Dostoyevsky wrote in *Brothers Karamazov*, "who do not understand that the sacrifice of one's life is in most cases perhaps the easiest of all sacrifices, and that to sacrifice, for instance, five or six years of their life, full of youthful fervour, to hard and difficult study, if only to increase tenfold their powers of serving truth so as to be able to carry out the great work they have set their hearts on carrying out – that such a sacrifice is almost beyond the strength of many of them."

It is right that from the beginning we find ways of sharing the good news with others, but the patient apprenticeship of silence is inescapable if we are to communicate more than just our own enthusiasm. Dominic's memory was a "kind of barn for God, filled to overflowing with crops of every kind". We need the years of study to fill the barn. It is true that Matthew 10:19 tells us that we must not think beforehand what we are to say, but Humbert of Romans informs those in formation that this text only applied to apostles!

### **A shared word**

A year ago I was walking through the tiny back streets of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, when I came across a little square, dominated by a statue of St Vincent Ferrer. Standing on his pedestal, he looked the model preacher, the solitary speaker lifted up above the crowd. We may wish to be preachers like that, individual stars, the focus of attention and admiration.

The word of the preacher is not his. It is a word that we have received not only in the silence of prayer and study but from each other. And so a community of preachers should be one in which we share our deepest convictions, as Mary Magdalene shared her faith in the Risen Lord with her brethren. In the General Council we gather every Wednesday to read the gospel together. Our sermons are the fruit of our common reflection. Modern conceptions of authorship may make us possessive of our own ideas, and we may think that any brother who uses them is committing robbery. But it is the rich who believe firmly in private property. We share what we have received and as mendicant friars we should not be ashamed to beg an idea off anyone.

Our formation should also prepare us to preach together, in a common mission. Jesus sent out the disciples two by two. It is tempting to claim an apostolate as my own and to guard it jealously from the other brethren. This is my responsibility, my care, my glory. If I do that, then it may be that all that I preach is myself. Humbert of Romans tells us to beware of people "who realise that preaching is a particularly splendid kind of job and set their hearts on it because they want to be important." If we give in to this temptation we may come to think that we are the good news for which everyone is hungering. The most enjoyable teaching that I have ever done was when I taught doctrine at Oxford with two other brethren. We prepared the course together, and went to each other's lectures. We tried to teach the students by introducing them into our discussions. The idea was that by entering our conversation they could discover a voice of their own, rather than be passive recipients of instruction.

Each brother speaks for the whole community. The most famous example of this was in the early days of the conquest of the Americas. When Antonio Montesino preached against the injustices done to the Indians, the city authorities went to the Prior to denounce him. But the Prior replied that when Antonio preached it was the whole community who spoke..

All this goes against the grain of an individualism which is characteristic both of modernity and often of Dominicans. Indeed individualism is often claimed with some pride as a typically Dominican characteristic. It is true that we have a tradition which cherishes the freedom and the unique gifts of

each brother. Thanks be to God. Planning common projects in the Order can be a nightmare. But we are preaching brothers and our greatest brethren, though often pictured alone, usually worked in the common mission: Fra Angelico was not a solitary artist but trained brethren in his skills; St Catherine was surrounded by brothers and sisters; Bartolomeo de Las Casas worked with his brethren in Salamanca for the rights of the Indians. Congar and Chenu flourished as members of a community of theologians. Even St Thomas needed a team of brothers to write down his words.

So our formation should liberate us from the debilitating effects of contemporary individualism, and form us as preaching brothers. We will be much more truly individual and strong if we dare to do that. In some parts of the world, which have been more affected by this individualism, this may be the great challenge for your generation: to invent and launch new ways of preaching the gospel together. This you can do. There are many young in formation, one in six of the brethren and over a thousand novices this year for the nuns and sisters. Together you can do more than we can begin to imagine now.

## **Conclusion**

In 1217, shortly after the foundation of the Order, St Dominic scattered the brethren, because “stored grain rots”. He sent them on their way without money, like the apostles. But one brother, John of Navarra, refused to leave for Paris unless he had money in his pocket. They argued, and finally Dominic gave in and gave him something. This incident scandalised some of the other brethren but perhaps it is a good image of our formation. I am not suggesting that your formators should give in to your every request but that our formation should be both exigent and compassionate, idealistic and realistic. Dominic invites John to be confident, not with an arrogant self-confidence, but confident in the Lord who will provide for him on the journey, and in his brother who sends him. When he sees that he has not got that far as yet, then he has mercy on him.

I pray that your formation may help you to grow in Dominic’s confidence and joy. The Order needs courageous and joyful young men and women who will help us to found the Order in new places, refund it in others, and develop new ways of preaching of the gospel. Sometimes, like brother John, your confidence may falter. You may doubt your strength to set out on the journey, or even whether it is worth while to do so. May such dark and uncertain times become part of your growth as Christians, preachers, brothers and sisters. When you feel lost and unsure, may you hear a voice, unexpectedly close, saying, “Whom do you seek?”