

# “A city set on a hilltop cannot be hidden”

## A Contemplative Life

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THIS LETTER IS ADDRESSED in the first place to the nuns, because it is about your life. I wish to give thanks to God for your presence at the centre of the Order. Often during hectic visitations, my visits to the monasteries have been times of joy, laughter and refreshment. I am not a nun and so what have I to say about your life? I too, like you, am a Dominican called to contemplation. You have openly shared with me your hopes for the renewal of this contemplative life at the heart of the Order, and the challenges that you face. So in this letter I wish to share with all the nuns the fruit of our conversations. If ever I appear not to have understood your vocation, then forgive me. The Order will only flourish if we dare to speak what is in our hearts, confident in that forgiveness.

I also wish to share this with the whole Dominican Family. Before he died St Dominic “entrusted the nuns as part of the same Order to the fraternal concern of his sons” (LCM 1 § I). The first Dominican community that he founded was for the nuns at Prouilhe, and one of his last concerns was the building of the monastery at Bologna: “It is absolutely necessary, brethren, that a house of nuns should be built, even if it means leaving off for a time the work on our own house.” So the monasteries are entrusted to us all. And we are entrusted to the prayer and the care of the nuns. This mutuality is at the heart of the Order. So even though I address myself directly to the nuns, I hope that all Dominicans will eavesdrop.

### 1. A contemplative life

The monasteries are not the contemplative branch of the Order. We cannot leave contemplation to the nuns. We are all called to be contemplatives, and the renewal of the contemplative life is one of the greatest challenges the Order faces. I hesitate to give a definition of “contemplation”, but let’s be bold! By contemplation I mean our search for God, which leads to our encounter with God who is searching for us. We look for God in silence and in prayer, in study and in debate, in solitude and in love. With every gift of the heart and the mind, we seek the traces of God. But God finds us when we least expect it. Mary Magdalene, the first Patron of the Order, is the true contemplative, searching for the body of Jesus, only to be astonished to hear her name called by the Risen Lord. Our prayer springs from this deep desire. As Catherine said, “Desire itself is prayer”.

fr Vincent de Couesnongle talked of “the contemplation of the street.” The Word has become flesh and dwells among us, in the least of our brothers and sisters (Mt 25), in our families, in the places we work, in our friends and our enemies, in the times of delight and of desolation. The Word is there, if we can but open our eyes to see. Eric Borgman, a Dutch lay Dominican, wrote, “Dominicans are convinced that the world in which we live, turbulent and restless, often violent and terrifying, is at the same time the place where the holy comes to light, the place where we encounter and listen to – ‘contemplate’ – God.” So every Dominican is called to contemplation, whether we are lay Dominicans, sisters, friars or nuns. Our greatest contemplative, St Catherine of Siena, was a lay woman.

Preaching is a contemplative act. Don Goergen wrote, “In preaching the seeker and the sought come together, the lost and the found. God finds us in the midst of our very own words attempting to bespeak him. God never lets go of us.” Preaching is not just opening one’s mouth and speaking. It begins in silent attention to the gospel, the struggle to understand, the prayer for illumination, and concludes in the reactions of those who hear. As a young friar, I remember a visiting Bishop, who was due to preach, saying to one of the brethren one minute before Mass, “If you are a good Dominican, you should be able to preach now without preparation”. The brother replied “It is precisely because I

am a Dominican that I do not believe that preaching is just saying the first thing that comes into my head.”

If all Dominicans are called to be contemplatives, what then is special about your life? Your life is entirely shaped by the search for God. The vocation of the nun “is a reminder to all Christian people of the fundamental vocation of everyone to come to God” (Verbi Sponsa 4). As fr. Marie-Dominique Chenu wrote, “the mystical life is not basically other than the Christian life” . You do not escape from the dramas and the crises of ordinary human life. You live them more nakedly, intensely, knowing the joy and despair of every human life, without the shelter of many of the things that give meaning to most human lives: marriage, children, a career. The monastery is the place where there is nowhere to hide from the ultimate question of every human life. One nun wrote, “I entered the monastery not to flee from the world, to forget it or ignore its existence even, but in order to be present to it in some more profound way, to live at the heart of the world, in a hidden way, but that I believe to be more real. I came here not looking for a quiet life or security, but to share, to take on board the suffering, the pain, the hopes of all mankind.”

Your lives make sense only if the search for God does lead to the meeting in the garden and the hearing of one’s name. Your lives have no intermediate purpose to get you through the days and the years. The monastery is like the queue at the bus stop, a sign of hope that the bus will come. This is true of all those who live the monastic enclosed life. In a conference to the Congress of Benedictine Abbots , I maintained that God often shows Himself in absence, in the void: the empty space between the wings of the cherubim in the Temple, and ultimately in the empty tomb in the garden. The life of the nun and the monk is hollowed out by emptiness. Your lives are empty of purpose, other than to be there for God. You do not do anything especially useful. But that emptiness is a hollow space in which God dwells and where we glimpse his glory.

You do this as nuns of the Order of Preachers. The Church calls on the contemplatives of different religious families to live from the richness of their own traditions and charisms – Benedictine, Carmelite, Franciscan or Dominican – which “constitute a splendid array of variety” . What does it mean for a monastery to be Dominican? I will share what I have learned from you, by looking at how your lives are marked by the Mission of the Order, by Dominican community life, by the search for Truth, and by belonging to the whole Order. There are many other aspects of your life that I will not touch, just these that are central to your Dominican identity.

## **2. Mission**

What does it mean to be a nun in a missionary Order? How is it possible to be an enclosed contemplative and a missionary?

### **Being sent**

To be a missionary is literally to be sent. The brethren and the sisters can be sent on mission to the ends of the earth, as Jesus sent the disciples. You may be sent to found a new monastery or to reinforce a monastery that is weak, but usually you stay where you are. In what sense are you sent? For Jesus to be sent by the Father was not for him to move from one place to another. He did not set out on a journey. His very existence was from the Father. You are missionaries just as much as the brethren, not by going anywhere but by living your lives from God and for God. As Jordan said to Diana, “you remaining in the quietness of your convent and my many wanderings in the world are equally done for the love of him” . You are a preached Word in your being.

The seventh way in which Dominic prayed was by stretching “his whole body up towards heaven in prayer, like a choice arrow straight up from the bow” You point to God like an arrow, just by being there, for no other purpose. You are a word to your brethren, sisters and lay Dominicans in your life, and a word for the place where your monastery is. I have seen this most clearly in places of suffering, like Angola, Nicaragua, in the slums of great cities like Karachi, or in the Bronx in New York or the suburbs of Paris. In such places a monastery is a Word that becomes flesh and blood, “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1.18).

Mary Magdalene goes to the apostles and says to them, "I have seen the Lord". Some of you may be called to preach through writing. Many of the greatest theologians have been monks and nuns, and this would be especially appropriate for a Dominican nun. LCM 106 § II is explicit that the work of the nuns may also be intellectual.

You may also be sent to make new foundations. Olmedo is an inspiration, with its eight foundations in four continents. The Order is growing in many parts of the world, especially in Asia, and we are incomplete without you. Sometimes you have gone before us. It may take great courage to send nuns to found a new monastery, especially because it is the ones who give most to their communities who will be capable of such an adventure. Remember the courage of Dominic, who dispersed the brethren as soon as the Order was founded, so that the seed would bear fruit.

## **Compassion**

Compassion is part of your mission, sharing Dominic's gift "of bearing sinners, the down-trodden, and the afflicted in the inmost sanctuary of his compassion" (LCM 35. § I,). Dominic's God is a God of mercy. Compassion means unlearning that hardness of heart which sits in judgement on other people, shedding the armour that holds others at bay, learning vulnerability to another's pain and confusion, hearing their cry for help. We learn this first of all in our communities. Do we dare to be touched by the suffering of the sister next door? Do we dare to take the risk of hearing her half-expressed requests for help? If not, then how can we embody Dominic's compassion for the world?

Compassion is more than feeling, but opening one's eyes to see Christ among us suffering still, as Las Casas saw the crucified Christ in the Indians of Hispaniola. It is an education of the heart and the eye, which makes us attentive to the Lord who is with us in the crushed and wounded. Compassion is thus truly contemplative, clear-sightedness. As Borgman says, "To be moved and shocked at what happens to people and what this does to them is a way of perceiving God's presence. Compassion is contemplation in the Dominican sense". Contemplative compassion is learning to look selflessly at others. As such it is deeply linked to the hunger for a just world. The Order's commitment to justice easily becomes ideological if it is not born of contemplative compassion. "A society that doesn't understand contemplation won't understand justice, because it will have forgotten how to look selflessly at what is other. It will take refuge in generalities, prejudices, self-serving clichés."

Compassion draws us beyond our own divisions. The monastery at Rweza in Burundi is surrounded by war. The sisters themselves come from the different ethnic groups that are fighting, and all have lost members of their family. When they were asked what kept them together, they said that unity was a gift from God for which they could never give enough thanks. They also said that they listen to the news on the radio together, even though this was painful. The sharing of that pain makes them one.

Compassion therefore implies a knowledge of the needs of the Order and of the world. I have seen that in flourishing monasteries there is often a desire to know about the Order and its needs, just as Diana pestered Jordan for news of his missions. "For what do you want us to pray?" There is a thirst to understand what is happening in places of war, such as Algeria and Rwanda. So the monastery needs to have access to information and real analysis, rather than news that just entertains, so that you may bring the needs of the world to God.

## **Prayer**

Compassion overflows into prayer. The early brethren were always asking the nuns to pray for them because they had little time themselves. Raymond of Peñafort complained to the Prioress of Bologna that he was so caught up with the business of the papal court, that "I am hardly ever able to reach or, to be quite honest, even to see from afar the tranquillity of contemplation.....So it is a great joy and an enormous comfort to me to know that I am helped by your prayers." Jordan writes to Diana, "Pray for me often and earnestly in the Lord; I am much in need of prayer because of my faults, and I pray but seldom myself".

This may give the impression that the brethren and the nuns are involved in two quite different activities, the brethren preaching and the nuns praying, just as in a home the wife may do the cooking

and then leave the husband to do the washing up, if she is lucky! But in preaching we share the word that is given to us. And so praying for that word is part of the event of preaching. It does not just precede preaching, as cooking precedes washing up the dishes. It is part of the coming of the Word, and so the nuns are most intimately involved in the act of our preaching. "The nuns are to seek, ponder and call upon him in solitude so that the word proceeding from the mouth of God may not return to him empty, but may accomplish those things for which it was sent" (LCM Fund. I §2). For Jordan, it is the prayers of Diana and her community that make his preaching powerful and that bring the flood of vocations.

The most typical form of prayer for St Thomas Aquinas is intercession and thanksgiving. We ask God for what we need and we give thanks when it is given. This may suggest an infantile way of being in the world, as if we were incapable of doing anything for ourselves. In fact it is the maturity of those who realise that everything is a gift. In the world of consumerism, where everything can be bought for a price, then to ask is seen as a failure. But if we live in the real world, made by God, then asking for what we need is being truthful, the recognition that God "is the source of all that is good for us". But more than this, it is through answering our prayers that God sometimes acts in the world. God wishes us to pray, so that he may give in response. Prayer is not twisting God's arm, so that he may change his mind. It is part of friendship that God gives to us what we ask. So your prayers are a participation in God's action in the world.

### **The Celebration of the liturgy**

Another way you preach is through the public and beautiful celebration of the liturgy, as urged by Venite Seorsum. In our society there is hunger for God, but often a suspicion of teaching. As I know from experience, the moment that one begins to preach, some faces will turn off. But beauty can touch the deepest springs of our longing for God. Beauty summons us without bullying. It has its own authority, which is more profound than argument.

Dominican liturgy should be joyful. Dominic sang with joy. Jordan tells a story about a gloomy Waldensian called Peter, who did not think much of the Dominicans because "the friars were too cheerful and showy" He believed that religious should be serious and sad. And then he had a dream of a meadow. "In it he saw a crowd of Friars Preachers in a ring, with joyful faces raised towards heaven. One of them was holding the Body of Christ in his upraised hands." He woke up "his heart filled with joy" and joined the Order. The joy of the liturgy is a part of our preaching the Good News. I shall never forget the joy of the nuns in Nairobi, dancing to the altar with the gospel. The joy of the good news was visible in their movement. I could not resist dancing myself!

## **3. Community**

All monastic communities should be places of mutual love in which God makes his home. "Because of the mutual love involved, fraternal life is a God-filled space" (Verbi Sponsa 6). But the Dominican tradition has a particular understanding of the common life. You too take your vows on the Rule of St Augustine, remembering that the end for which we are called "is to dwell in unity in the house and be of one mind and one heart in God". Jesus called the apostles to be with him before they were sent out to preach. For you, too, the common life is part of your preaching.

### **Community and Friendship**

The Dominican tradition of community is deeply marked by how we understand our relationship with God. In the Church there are two major traditions. One sees our relationship with God in spousal terms, the love of the Bridegroom and the Bride. The other sees it in terms of friendship. Both are found in the Order, but we have especially kept alive the Johannine theology of friendship, which has often been neglected. For St Thomas Aquinas, the heart of God's life was the friendship of the Father and the Son, which is the Holy Spirit. In the Spirit we are God's friends. And so praying is talking to God as to a friend. According to Carranza, a sixteenth century Spanish Dominican, prayer is

“conversing familiarly with God.... discussing all your affairs with God, whether they are exalted or lowly, of heaven or of earth, to do with the soul or to do with the body, great or small; it is to open your heart to him and pour yourself out entirely before him, leaving nothing hidden; it is to tell him your labours, your sins, your desires, and all the rest, everything that is in your soul, and to relax with him as one friend relaxes with another.”

The spousal tradition is also found in the Order, for example in Jordan of Saxony, Catherine of Siena and Agnes of Langeac. But for them this love is not a private relationship with God, but is embodied in love of the brethren and the sisters. “How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your brother whom you see?” (1 Jn. 4.20). Jordan writes to Diana, “Christ is the bond whereby we are bound together; in him my spirit is knit fast with your spirit; in him you are always, without ceasing, present to me wherever I may wander.” “Let us love one another in him and through him and for him.” Catherine is clear that her love of Christ the Bridegroom is the same love that she has for her friends. The Lord says to her, “Love of me and love of neighbour are one and the same thing” This means that our contemplative life should open our eyes to our sisters and brothers. When we say the Rosary, we follow the mysteries of Christ’s life, moments of joy, sorrow and glory. Are we awake to the “mysteries” of the lives of the members of our community, which are not always joyful and glorious?

Our friendship with God becomes flesh and blood in the texture of community life. I have seen the fruit of this in the joy of so many recreations with you. Sr. Barbara from Herne wrote, “It is there in the recreation that the nuns express their joy at being together, they laugh a lot, even to the point of surprising retreatants in the guest house who overhear these signs of merriment for half an hour or so each evening.” These nuns are the heirs of a long tradition. Once when Dominic came back to S Sisto late, he got the nuns up so that he could teach them and then relax with them over a glass of wine. He kept encouraging them to drink more, “bibite satis” . In my experience it is usually the nuns who say that to the brethren! That joy is so much part of our tradition that Jordan even interprets the phrase “enter into the joy of the Lord” as joining the Order, where “all your sorrows shall be turned into joy and your joy no one can take from you” .

This friendship with the brethren and sisters has been one of the greatest joys of my life, but it can also be hard. And the joy and the hardship must be even more intense for you, since you will probably live with the same sisters all your life. At least if some brother finds me intolerable, he can hope that I will be assigned elsewhere one day. He will not have to put up with me until I die. Cardinal Hume told me that when he was young, his Abbot said to him, “Basil, remember that when you die, there will surely be at least one monk who will be relieved” So for you community life is an especial joy and also a challenge which is impossible without mercy and generosity. Tauler says that when a brother is intolerable, then say to yourself, “He probably has a headache today” . Some sisters may appear to have very frequent headaches!

When we make profession, we ask “for God’s mercy and yours”. To be a Dominican is to promise to offer and receive that mercy. Each day we call upon God “to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”. Each sister is given the liberating power to forgive, a share in God’s ability to make all things new. It is the freedom to open the doors of the prisons which each of us builds, to summon each other out of the tomb into new life. Each of you has a ministry of reconciliation in the community. Each of you can speak a word that heals.

## **Enclosure**

This idea of friendship may help us to a Dominican understanding of enclosure. There are intense discussions about enclosure in some monasteries: How often should the nuns be allowed to leave the monastery and for what reasons? I will not enter into these questions. First of all, it could be divisive to do so, and the Master of the Order must above all have a care for unity. Secondly there can only be consensus on these practical questions if we have first clarified the nature of enclosure. Verbi Sponsa says it “is a special way of being with the Lord” (3) It is concerned with building a home with God rather than with rules. It is about love rather than law. It is not a flight from the wicked world so much as building a space in which we learn not to flee from God’s friendship and from each other and even ourselves. What matters is not the enclosure as an exclusion of the world, but what it contains, a life with God, just as a glass can be filled with wine.

In the beginning, the monasteries were literally homes for the brethren. Prouilhe and later San Sisto were the brethren's homes, from which they went to preach. As the number of brethren increased, this could not continue. No doubt the brethren ruined the peace of the monastery, coming back late at night and demanding to be fed, arguing with each other when the sisters longed for silence! We each needed our own homes. But the monasteries remained homes for the brethren in a more profound sense. For Jordan of Saxony, the monastery in Bologna was the home of his heart, even though he was rarely there. He writes to Diana, "Am I not yours, am I not with you? Yours in labour, yours in rest; yours when I am with you, yours when I am far away". The monastery is home because it is a place where the nuns live with God (LCM 36), and so it is there that others can glimpse the true home we all seek, where we will rest in God, our eternal Sabbath. That is why so often monasteries are at the heart of the Dominican Family. Often the Dominican Family gravitates to the monastery as the place where we are all at home. That is why welcoming guests to a monastery, wisely and so as not to disturb the rhythm of your life, can be a way of sharing the fruit of your enclosure.

"It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10.31). It can be hard to live with God. We find ourselves in the desert, awake at Gethsemane and watching at Golgotha. Sometimes the contemplative must live in the dark but, as the Cloud of Unknowing says, "Learn to be at home in this darkness". The temptation is to run away from God and to find refuge in small consolations, and tiny desires. We can be tempted to fill our life with little projects, hobbies, and gossip, just to fill the emptiness. We must leave that emptiness there for God to fill. The monastery is a home not because you have fled the world, but if you dare not to run away from God. Dare to abide in darkness and to be at home in the night without fear. As the English poet D H Lawrence wrote, "It is terrible to fall into the hands of the living God, but it is even more terrible to fall out of them".

We may also be tempted to flee from our brothers and sisters, and evade the challenge of building a loving home in which God may dwell. Above all we may be tempted to flee from ourselves. In the monastery there is no hiding place. Here we learn, in Catherine's words, to "dwell in the house of self-knowledge" (Dialogues 73), seeing oneself without fear "in the gentle mirror" of God, and knowing oneself as loved. When we are at home with ourselves then we shall be at home with God.

Clear rules about the enclosure are needed, but if they become a source of conflict and division, then they undermine the ultimate purpose of enclosure, to find a home in the infinite love and mercy of God. It is vital that discussion about the enclosure is carried on with charity and the search for mutual understanding. If it produces anger and intolerance, then we shall undermine the enclosure more completely than if the nuns were slipping out of the monastery each day.

However small the enclosure may feel, dwelling with God opens out an immense space, of "the breadth and height and depth of the love of God" (cf LCM 36). Sr Margaret Ebner says how when she received the Eucharist sometimes "my heart was so full that I could not comprehend it. I thought that it was as wide as the whole world" This "expansion of the heart" (*latitudinem cordis*), of which Thomas speaks, opens us to the immensity of God. If we dwell with the Lord then he will lead us into wide spaces even in a little enclosure. If the enclosure is lived well then its fruit is magnanimity, largeness of heart, in which all pettiness is transcended.

## **Government**

The Dominican spirituality of friendship finds expression above all in our system of government, which is based on the dignity of each sister and the equality of all. Government is not the task of a few sisters, but the way in which all share in the responsibility for the life of the community.

At the heart of good government is obedience, "not like slaves under the law, but like free women under grace" (cf LCM Fund. VI). As fr Damian Byrne wrote in a letter to the Mexican Federation, "The word obedience means to listen. In the Dominican tradition you have to listen in your monasteries to the Prioress, the Council and the Chapter. Each has its own authority which must take into account other legitimate authorities. No authority can dominate on its own." So monasteries will flourish and be happy if the nuns listen to each other. Above all, the Chapter is where this mutual listening happens. "In order that their contemplative life and sisterly communion may be more abundantly fruitful, participation of all in the ordering of the life of the monastery is of great importance: 'A good which meets with general approval is quickly and easily achieved.' (Humbert of Romans)" (LCM 7).

In my experience of the brethren, Chapters are life-giving when we have the confidence to speak and the confidence to listen. To speak in the Chapter can be frightening. It took me almost a year to open my mouth, and I used to write down what I wished to say on a piece of paper and scrutinise it several times before I dared say a word. Usually by then it was too late! The superior has the role of building up the community by encouraging all to speak, especially those who hesitate or disagree with the majority. Disagreement does not mean disloyalty or disunity.

We also need the confidence to listen without fear. Listening is a fruit of that silence in which we open our ears to God. The contemplative life should be a formation in listening. A Polish nun said to me "Everyone is talking today but no one is listening. We nuns are here to listen." The fruit of listening to God in silence should be attentiveness to what one's sisters really say, and not what one fears that they might say or expect them to say. True listening is only possible if one is at peace. Often when a sister tries to articulate a doubt or a question, she will not find the right words. She will fumble and sound confused or strident, and it would be easy to crush or dismiss her. But if we listen attentively and intelligently, then we catch the grain of truth that she has to share. This means always putting the best interpretation on what she says, listening with a charitable ear. The whole of the *Summa Theologica* is founded on the principle of taking the objections seriously. The search for consensus may take time. If the community does not reach consensus, then a minority will more easily accept the final decision if it knows that it has been heard.

It can be frightening to discuss the real issues. We may not be sure where the discussion will lead us. But fear is the greatest enemy of religious life. If we have confidence in the Lord, then the waters of chaos will not overwhelm us. If we let fear rule us, then community has not made a home in God who is a rock. Above all it is the role of the superior to lead the community beyond fear.

Communities are usually without fear when the institutions of government – the Chapter, the Council and the Prioress – are mutually supportive instead of being in competition. The Prioress is the guardian of the dignity and voice of every member of the community. But the Prioress should receive the support of the whole community too. As Damian wrote with his customary wisdom, "It is necessary to accept that there are persistent complainers and disruptive members in communities. A Prioress has to be assisted by her community to enable these sisters to see themselves as they are and not to allow them to damage the community. And I make a plea that the mercy and consideration we should extend to each, should it not most of all be extended to our superiors?" Free discussion is different from being in opposition. If we are truly a community, then even if I did not vote for the superior, we did. If I am truly a brother or sister of a community, then I must accept that vote as my own.

A Dominican monastery has no Abbess, but a Prioress, who is *prima inter pares*. This expresses the friendship between equals which is our life. If the community is strong, then the transition to a new Prioress should be undramatic. Postulations should be rare. But if she has gathered around herself a group of similarly-minded nuns, who dominate the community, then the election either will be a continuation of the dynasty or a coup d'etat! A superior needs the courage to take the decisions that are properly hers, while so strengthening the whole community that the transition to her successor is painless.

#### **4. The Search for Truth**

You are nuns of the Order that has *Veritas* as its motto. Dominicans have always been known for our passion for study. Some nuns have shared with me that this is an element of Dominican life from which they feel distant, either because they have never studied or because they feel incapable of it. And it is tempting to think that it is the brethren who study and the nuns who pray; it is the brethren who talk and the nuns who listen. This is to misunderstand the nature of our commitment to the Truth. It is a way of being in the world truthfully. Each of us is called to this, regardless of whether we have a gift for academic study or not.

#### **Living in the truth**

*Veritas* summons us to be men and women who live truthfully, speak truthfully, and listen attentively. Often communication in religious communities can become deformed. Innuendo, allusion and

suspicion may muddy the clarity of our conversations. Fear or a lack of trust may make us resort to hints, nudges, and winks. It belongs to our Dominican life that we dare to speak truthfully, with discretion and sensitivity and respect. This has nothing to do with being a scholar. It is seeking to live with the clarity of Dominic. "He who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God" (Jn 3.21). Seeing clearly means seeing what is central and essential and not being distracted by details.

fr. Simon Tugwell OP wrote that "it is, in fact, most typical of Dominican spirituality to view God, not primarily as the object of our attention, but rather as the essential subject, with whom we are united as co-subjects, co-operators with him (1 Cor. 3.9) in his work of redemption." That is to say that as God's friends we do not so much look at God as with him. We are invited to see the world through God's eyes, and that is to see its goodness. Eckhart writes, "God enjoys himself. His own enjoyment is such that it includes his enjoyment of all creatures." To see with God's eyes is to share his pleasure in all that God has made, including our brothers and sisters! Thomas Merton tells of how, after seven years of life in monastery, he went to the dentist and he saw the world differently. "I wondered how I would react at meeting once again, face to face, the wicked world. Perhaps the things I had resented about the world when I left it were defects of my own that I had projected upon it. Now, on the contrary, I found that everything stirred me with a deep and mute sense of compassion.... I went through the city, realising for the first time in my life how good are all the people in the world and how much value they have in the sight of God." Seeing with God, we come to share God's love. If we learn that truthful way of being in the world, then we can face anything with joy: our failures, our mortality, the true state of the monastery, our fears and hopes. We can be joyful even in the dark.

### **The Study of the Word of God**

LCM 101§ II says that the nuns are especially to study the Word of God. This is not a dry activity. Jordan tells Diana, "Read over this Word in your heart, turn it over in your mind, let it be as sweet as honey on your lips, ponder it, dwell on it, that it may dwell with you and in you for ever." If the Word is to touch and change all that we are, then we must bring to it every aspect of our humanity: our intelligence, our emotions, our sense of beauty, our experience, our difficulties and hopes.

Every week in the General Council, we read the Word of God together. Some of us will bring an analysis of the original language, others will share how it touches them or illuminates some recent experience, or provokes them or puzzles them. All these are valid ways of reading the Word, and we need them all. That is why it is good that we ponder it together, and let it transform our communal lives. Each nun may have insights of her own to offer. The Lord says to Catherine, "I could have made all people in such a way that they all had everything, but I preferred to give different gifts to different people, so that they would all need each other" . This is true especially in understanding the Word of God.

The exegetical study of Scripture can be hard at the beginning. We may fear to read what the scholars say, lest our deepest convictions be shaken. When one begins to study, one must pass through the alarming experience of discovering that we never before understood the text. But this is our humility in the face of the Word, which we do not own and which invites us to set out we know not where. We must dare to be like Mary who hears the message of the angel, and who "is greatly troubled in the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1.29). We must learn to be surprised by the Word, which always means more than we could ever have imagined. That is why it is good that in every community there are nuns who make a serious study of scripture, if possible in the original languages. I confess that my several attempts at learning Hebrew were a disaster!

In every enclosed community, there lurks the dread of boredom, living in the same place, with the same people, listening to the same jokes and eating the same food. But the Word is always new and fresh with God's eternal youth. Periodically we need to recapture the excitement of the disciples on their way back to Emmaus, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24.32). The study of the Bible renews our capacity for wonder.

### **The Study of Theology**

During my visits to the monasteries I often ask the nuns about what theology they like to study. Usually there is silence and the subject is quickly changed. Theology is usually seen as academic and incomprehensible. LCM 101§ III exhorts the nuns to study St Thomas, but I suspect that often the Summa gathers dust on the shelves of the library. One might be tempted to think that the friars study theology but the nuns study spirituality. This is a modern opposition that would have been incomprehensible to Dominic and Catherine. Theology is not just an academic discipline. It belongs to our searching for our Lord in the garden, our hunger for meaning, our entry into the mystery of love. Through knowledge we draw near to the one whom St Catherine called *la prima dolce verità*, the first sweet truth. One of Dominic's ways of praying was to study a book, and he would argue with it, disagree, nod his head, exclaim. And when Thomas was writing the Summa, he would sometimes send away the secretaries and throw himself on the ground and pray until he received understanding. Theology and spirituality are inseparable.

Much theological writing is profoundly boring, but this may be because it is bad theology. We need to be introduced to the Summa as it is, a contemplative work that tells of our journey to God and to happiness. Its teaching liberates us from the traps that would hold us back from the pilgrimage. So many people are trapped in idolatrous conceptions of God, as a great powerful and invisible person, controlling everything that happens, and keeping us in perpetual immaturity. So much anger in religious communities comes from resentment at this image of God, which is an idol. But Thomas explodes this view in the Prima Pars, opens the door of this spiritual prison, and sets us off towards the mystery of the God who is as the eternal spring of freedom in the centre of our being. So often people are caught in a small vision of holiness as the obedience to rules. But in the Secunda Pars, Thomas shows us that the way to holiness is through growth in the virtues, through which we become strong and share in God's own freedom. So often people are trapped in a view of religion that is magical. But in the Tertia Pars Thomas shows us how in the Incarnation and the sacraments, God embraces and transforms the whole of our humanity. The test of good theology is that it overflows into praise and worship and happiness and true inner freedom. There is little theology which is that good. Maybe some nuns are called to write it. "In the field of theological, cultural and spiritual studies, much can be expected from the genius of women, not only in relation to specific aspects of feminine consecrated life, but also in understanding the faith in all its expressions" (*Vita Consecrata* 58).

### **Formation for Veritas**

It follows that an essential part of the formation of a Dominican nun is in the study of scripture and theology. This is not a mere addendum, like learning to sew or to cook. It belongs to growth in love, for "knowledge follows love. And loving, the soul seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it."

The study of theology should be happy. We learn about the great things that God has done for us. Thomas said "Those who devote themselves to the contemplation of truth are the happiest anyone can be in this life" And for him contemplation largely meant study. We learn to love the Word of God, and be "nourished by its charm (*dulcedo*)", as Albert said. Like the initiation into all profound happiness, rather than mere entertainment, it will have moments of boredom, when we will feel incapable of remaining in our rooms. We must learn confidence, the confidence to think, to question, to search. For Thomas, the teacher must above all teach the pupil to think for himself, to realise his potential for knowledge. This means that when we learn to study we must not be afraid of making mistakes. The formators must not watch their students fearfully. We must dare to try out ideas, and not worry if we get it wrong at first. Of course, orthodoxy is dear to Dominicans, but if we believe the teaching of the Church that the Holy Spirit has been poured upon us, then we will not easily get stuck in error.

The nuns need the tools to study: a good library, periodicals and time. Many monasteries are poor and to buy books is a real sacrifice. But we can no more starve the nuns of books than we can of food. Internet offers the possibility of following theological formation without ever leaving the monastery. The community needs to build into the rhythm of its life times of study. Chalais in France has an annual calendar that includes times for intense study, for silence, and for recreation. We brethren must also respond to the needs of the sisters for formation. When St Dominic came back to S Sisto, exhausted after a day of preaching, then he would teach the nuns, "because they had no other master to do this." The flourishing of the Dominican Rhineland monasteries in the fourteenth

century was partly because Herman de Minden, the Provincial of Teutonia, sent some of his best theologians to teach the nuns.

The monasteries need sisters who have received a deep theological and biblical formation so that they can teach the young. This is especially so today when many nuns come to us from University. They need a theological formation that will stretch their minds and answer their questions. Ideally each monastery would be able to offer a complete formation, but if this is not so then the collaboration between monasteries, especially when there are federations, is vital. Sometimes there is a fear that if the young study in another monastery, then they may lose their attachment to their original community, and ask for transfiliation. This rarely happens, and it cannot be an excuse for not giving a sister a full and true Dominican formation. If the young are well formed, then the whole community will eventually be renewed. The formation house of the Federation of monasteries in Mexico is a wonderful example of how a federation can help each monastery to grow stronger.

## **5. The Unity of the Order**

You are nuns of the Order of Preachers and are part of Dominic's large family. Each monastery has life in itself, and yet is in contact with other monasteries, often belonging to a federation. You often are a centre of life for the Dominican Family. You make your vows to the Master of the Order. What does it mean for a monastery to have care of its own life and yet to belong to the Order?

### **A service of Unity**

Dominic wished his Order to be one. The Order has always fought to preserve its unity. When other Orders have split we have clung on to our unity, but sometimes only just! This is because our unity belongs to our preaching of the gospel. We preach the Kingdom of God, in which all humanity will be reconciled in Christ. Our words have authority if we are united ourselves. The Order has an especially important role to play in a Church that is often split between different and competing ideologies. Also political conflict, ethnic tension and even war often divide our countries. We must embody that peace that we preach.

Each monastery embodies this unity in itself but "it transcends the limits of the monastery and attains its fullness in communion with the Order and with the whole Church of Christ" (LCM n2 §1). And so you, as Dominican nuns, have care for the unity of the whole Order. Through your prayers and in all that you say and do, you have a responsibility to promote that unity and peace. Contemplatives should especially be able to do this because closeness to the mystery of God draws us beyond all division, and beyond all the pretensions of any party to claim absolute wisdom and knowledge.

### **The nature of autonomy**

Each monastery is autonomous. This belongs to the nature of your lives, as monastic communities. It is an autonomy that you rightly rejoice in. What does it mean? Literally it means that each community is self-governing, and has a responsibility for its own life. Each monastery has responsibility for building a community that is a sign of the Kingdom, in which there is mutual love and an abiding with the Lord. Autonomy is your free responsibility for your contemplative lives, rather than isolation.

In contemporary Western culture, there is a tendency to see autonomy as meaning separation. An individual is seen as free in so far as he or she is free from interference from the outside. But the Catholic understanding of what it means to be a human being offers another model, which is that it is in communion with each other that we find true freedom and autonomy. Autonomy does not mean being autosufficient. This is why the Church welcomes federations of monasteries, because the mutual support of the federations can help the individual monasteries to "safeguard and promote the values of the contemplative life" (Verbi Sponsa 27). Collaboration can help the monastery to be free and to take responsibility for its own life. I have often visited monasteries where the nuns are overwhelmed with the care of the sick, with cooking, with earning an income, with looking after the building. There is no time for prayer. Such a community may have complete independence but have lost its true autonomy, its freedom and responsibility for its own life. When monasteries help each other in formation, the care of the sick as at Dax in France, or economically, then they do not lose

their autonomy, but gain it in a more profound way. Often this mutual help will be costly and a sacrifice. It is the nuns whom a monastery most needs who will be the ones who could offer that help for another community.

A time may come when a monastery must face the prospect of closure . If this happens, then there is no need for the nuns to feel guilt or failure. Maybe the monastery has fulfilled the purpose for which it was founded. As Dominicans it is good if we can face the prospect of closure truthfully. Sometimes I am told that if only one or two vocations were to come, then maybe the monastery could survive. Might it not be possible to look for vocations from another country? The determination to survive can lead to the acceptance of unsuitable vocations. But survival for us, who preach the death and resurrection of Christ, is not an absolute value. If we trust in our Father who raised Jesus from the dead, then we can face death, our own or that of our community, with hope and joy. As Provincial of England, I had to go to Carisbrooke to drive the last four nuns to their new home. The oldest nun, in her nineties, appeared to change her mind at the last minute, but finally we all went. The local people came to wave goodbye, singing and crying. This departure was perhaps the most eloquent preaching of the gospel the nuns had ever made. If the monastery is truly a place where you make home with God, then leaving it does not make you homeless.

In a region or a federation in which there are many monasteries and few vocations, then it is wonderful if the nuns dare to think together about the future. Should all the monasteries seek vocations, or should candidates for the Order be sent to just those who have a good chance of flourishing? This is not to deprive the right of any monastery to take decisions about its own life and to accept vocations. It is rather an invitation, in hard times, to seek what is more important than the survival of any individual monastery, which is the flourishing of Dominican contemplative life in the region.

Visitations are central to our tradition. Sometimes they are regarded with apprehension by monasteries because they can be seen as interference from outside. Blessed Hyacinth Cormier said that the purpose of a visitation is to encourage and encourage and encourage. Its concern is above all with “the internal government of the monastery” (LCM 227 § III cf. 228 § III) and thus to help the monastery to be effectively responsible for its own life and to be free to face its challenges. A visitation should therefore help a monastery to become autonomous in the true sense of the word. The LCM suggest that there should be a visitation “at least every two years” (227 § III).

Some monasteries continue to express a concern about the International Commission of Nuns, established by the General Chapter of Oakland in 1989. This is not a juridical body that has any powers to make decisions or to come between the Master and the monasteries. It is a “think tank” which advises the Master, like the many other Commissions of the Order, for the Intellectual Life, for Justice and Peace, and for the Mission of the Order. It is there to promote monastic life and especially to support the monasteries that are isolated. This it has done well. Its term ends in the next few months, and you are welcome to write to my successor or the General Chapter if you have any suggestions about its future. How might such a Commission help the Master in promoting authentic Dominican life in all its beauty and importance?

### **Relationships with the brethren**

The friars and the nuns share a long history. Our friendship has been at the heart of the Order's life for almost eight hundred years. It has not always been easy. In the early days the brethren often wished to escape from any responsibility for the monasteries, and sometimes still do not take that responsibility seriously. The nuns must surely sometimes have wished to escape from the interference of the brethren! But like an old married couple, who have lived through so much, we can be confident that nothing will destroy the bond. As Dominicans, truthfulness and transparency should mark our relationship. Above all we must be confident in each other, and without suspicion. Jordan wrote to the Provincial of Lombardy that he had been “startled and frightened by a mere rustle of leaves” , when he was disturbed by rumours that the General Chapter had taken decisions against the monastery in Bologna. There are still occasional moments of panic at “mere rustles of leaves”, suspicions about the role of the International Commission, rumours about what the intentions of the General Chapter are. We must have confidence and be without fear. When there is uncertainty, then

be without suspicion, give the best interpretation to what you hear, and ask for clarification. With transparency and trust we can build the unity of the Order.

The lives of the monasteries may be complicated by the many men who may claim some authority over you. Some of you have chaplains, assistants, vicars, Provincials, and Bishops; there is the Master of the Order and the Holy See. All of these should be there to strengthen you and not to interfere in your lives and control you. Above all your relationship with the brethren should be mutually strengthening. The service of the brethren must be to support you in your own responsibility for your lives. So many brethren are strengthened by their contact with the monasteries, where we are renewed in that silence from which the preached word springs.

## Conclusion

“A city set on a hill top cannot be hidden” (Mt. 5.14). This phrase evokes so many monasteries set on hill tops: Chalais, Orbey, Los Teques near Caracas, Rweza, Drogheda, Vilnius, Perugia, Santorini and others. But whether the monastery is on a mountain or in the plains, in a jungle or a town, if you live your life with joy, then its light cannot be hidden. As Pope John Paul II wrote, this consecrated life exists, “so that this world may never be without a ray of divine beauty to lighten the path of human existence” Be confident in your monastic way of life. It is a gift from God.

For Christmas 1229, Jordan wrote to Diana to celebrate the birth of “a very little word” born for us. He also sends another word, “small and brief, my love”. Alas, this Letter is not small and brief, but it expresses my love and gratitude for your place at the heart of the Order. Pray for the whole Dominican Family, which is entrusted to your care. Pray for fr Viktor Hoffstetter, the previous Promoter of nuns whom so many of you love, and for his successor, fr Manuel Merten, whom you will come to love. Pray for me and for my successor too.

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  2. Ed by Simon Tugwell, Early Dominicans: selected Writings. Ramsey 1982, p. 396
  3. “The Contemplative Dimension of our Dominican Life” IDI March 1983
  4. From the ms of Dominican Spirituality:An exploration, shortly to be published by Continuum Press, London 2001.  
“Preaching as Searching for God” in Dominican Ashram, March 2000, p.17
  5. “Une théologie de la vie mystique”, in La Vie Spirituelle, 50, (1937) p. 49
  6. Quoted by Sr Barbara Estelle Beaumont OP, “What makes a Monastery a Dominican Monastery?” Dominican Ashram, September 1999, p.115f
  7. ‘The throne of God’, published in I call you friends, London 2001.
  8. Venite Seorsum VI
  9. Gerald Vann OP, To heaven with Diana, Chicago 1960 p.123, Letter 37
  10. Early Dominicans, op cit., p.99
  11. op. cit.
  12. Rowan Williams, Open Judgement London 1994 p.244
  13. Early Dominicans, p. 409
  14. op cit. P.104 Letter 25
  15. ST II II 83.2
  16. cf. the wonderful article by Paul Murray OP, “Dominicans and Happiness” Dominican Ashram September 2000, pp 120 - 142
  17. Early Dominicans p.138
  18. Bartolomé Carranza Comentario sobre el catecismo cristiano ed J.I. Tellechea Idígoras, Madrid 1972, II, p 360
  19. op.cit p.110
  20. op cit. p.149
  21. Dialogues 7, c.f. 17

22. Miraculis 6, quoted in Simon Tugwell OP, *The Way of the Preacher* London 1979, p.62
23. op.cit, p.80
24. ibid. p. 121 letter 35
25. quoted by Paul Murray, op.cit, p.130 from *The Revelations of Margaret Ebner*, ed Leonard Hindsley OP, New York 1993, p.89
26. Quoted in Letter to the Nuns May 1992 p.6
27. Ibid p.9
28. *The Way of the Preacher* ibid. p.29
29. Sermon 217: Nolite timere eos. Meister Eckhart: a modern translation, trans Raymond B. Blakney New York 1941 p.225
30. Quoted in Monica Furlong, *Merton: A biography* London 1980 p.184
31. op. cit p.112 letter 31
32. Dialogue 7
33. St Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* 1.
34. *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* X, 1177 b 31
35. RTAM 36 (1969) p.109
36. *The Miracles of St Dominic* by Bl. Cecilia, *Early Dominicans*, ibid, p. 391
37. The criteria for deciding on closure are clearly set out in fr. Damian Byrne's Letter to Nuns, ibid., p.20 and where he gives the norms set out by the Holy See.
38. Op.cit p.143
39. *Vita Consecrata* 109