

The Wellspring of Hope

Study and the Annunciation of the Good News

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When St Dominic wandered through the south of France, his life in danger, he used to sing cheerfully. "He always appeared cheerful and happy, except when he was moved by compassion for any trouble which afflicted his neighbour". (1) And this joy of Dominic is inseparable from our vocation to be preachers of the good news. We are called to "give an account of the hope that is within us" [I Peter 3:15]. Today, in a world crucified by suffering, violence and poverty, our vocation is both harder and more necessary than ever. There is a crisis of hope in every part of the world. How are we to live Dominic's joy when we are people of our time, and we share the crises of our peoples and the strengths and weaknesses of our culture? How can we nurture a deep hope, grounded in God's unshakeable promise of life and happiness for his children? The conviction which I explore in this letter to the Order is that a life of study is one of the ways in which we may grow in that love which "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things". [1 Cor 13 :7]

The time has come to renew the love affair between the Order and study. This is beginning to happen. All over the world I see new centres of study and theological reflection opening, in Kiev, Ibadan, Sao Paulo, Santo Domingo, Warsaw, to name a few. These should offer not just an intellectual formation. Study is a way to holiness, which opens our hearts and minds to each other, builds community and forms us as those who confidently proclaim the coming of the Kingdom.

The Annunciation

To study is itself an act of hope, since it expresses our confidence that there is a meaning to our lives and the sufferings of our people. And this meaning comes to us as a gift, a Word of Hope promising life. There is one moment in the story of our redemption which sums up powerfully what it means to receive that gift of the good news, the Annunciation to Mary. That meeting, that conversation, is a powerful symbol of what is meant by being a student. I will use this to guide our reflection upon how study grounds our hope.

First of all it is a moment of attentiveness. Mary listens to the good news that is announced to her. This is the beginning of all our study, attentiveness to the Word of Hope proclaimed in the Scriptures. "Orally and by letter brother Dominic exhorted the brothers to study incessantly the New and the Old Testament ".(2) We learn to listen to the One who says "Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail. " [Is 54:1] Do our studies offer us the hard discipline of learning to hear the good news?

Secondly it is a moment of fertility. There she is, as Fra Angelico portrays her, with the book on her knees, attentive, waiting, listening. And the fruit of her attentiveness is that she bears a child the Word made flesh. Her listening releases all her creativity, her female fertility. And our study, the attentiveness to the Word of God, should release the springs of our fertility, make us bear Christ in our world. In the midst of a world which often seems doomed and sterile, we bring Christ to birth in a miracle of creativity. Whenever the Word of God is heard, it does not just tell of hope, but of a hope that takes flesh and blood in our lives and words. Congar loved to quote the famous words of Péguy "Not the Truth, but the Real ... That is to say, the Truth historically, with its concrete state in the future, in time. " This is the test of our studies: Does it bring Christ to birth again? Are our studies moments of real creativity, of Incarnation? Houses of study should be like maternity wards!

Thirdly, in a moment when God's people seem deserted and without hope, God gives his people a future, a way to the Kingdom. The Annunciation transforms the way in which God's people could understand its history. Instead of leading to servitude and despair, it opens a way to the Kingdom. Do

our studies prepare the way for the coming of Christ? Do they transform our perception of human history so that we may come to understand it, not from the point of view of the victor but of the small and crushed whom God has not forgotten and whom He will vindicate?

Learning to Listen

And he came to her and said "Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you. "But she was greatly troubled at the saying and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. [Lukel:29 30J

Mary listens to the words of the angel, the good news of our salvation. That is the beginning of all study. Study is not learning how to be clever but how to listen. Weil wrote to fr Perrin that "the development of the faculty of attentiveness forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies. "(3) This receptivity, this opening of the ear which marks all study, ultimately is deeply linked to prayer. They both require of us that we be silent and wait for God's Word to come to us. They both demand of us an emptiness, so that we wait upon the Lord for what He may give us. Think of Fra Angelico's picture of Dominic, sitting at the foot of the cross and reading. Is he studying or praying? Is this even a relevant question? True study makes mendicants of us. We are led to the thrilling discovery that we do not know what this text means, that we have become ignorant and needy, and so we wait, in intelligent receptivity for what will be given.

For Lagrange, the Ecole Biblique was a centre of scriptural studies precisely because it was a house of prayer. The rhythm of the life of the community was a movement between the cell and the choir. He wrote "I love to hear the gospel sung by the deacon at the ambo, in the middle of the clouds of incense: the words penetrate my soul more deeply when I meet them again in an article. "(4) Our monasteries should play an important role in the life of study of the Order, as oases of peace and places of attentive reflection. Study in our monasteries belongs to the asceticism of Dominican monastic life. It cannot just be left to the brethren. Every nun deserves a good intellectual formation as part of her religious life. As the Constitutions of the Nuns say, "The blessed Dominic recommended some form of study to the first Nuns as an authentic observance of the Order. It not only nourishes contemplation but also removes the impediments which arise through ignorance and forms a practical judgement. " [LMO 100 II]

Mary listened to the promise spoken to her by the angel, and she bore the Word of Life. This seems so simple. What more do we need to do than to open ourselves to the Word of God spoken in scripture? Why are so many years of study necessary to form preachers of the good news? Why do we have to study philosophy, read fat and difficult books of theology when we have God's own Word? Is it not simple to give an "account of the hope that is within us"? God is love and love has conquered death. What more is there to say? Do we not betray this simplicity in our complex discussions? But it was not so simple for Mary. This story begins with her puzzlement. "But she was greatly troubled at the saying and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. " Listening begins when we dare to let ourselves be puzzled, disturbed. And then the story continues with her question to the messenger. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

a) The Confidence to Study

The story is told that St Albert the Great was once sitting in his cell studying. And the Devil appeared to him disguised as one of the brethren, and tried to persuade him that he was wasting his time and energy studying the secular sciences. It was bad for his health. Albert just made the sign of the cross and the apparition disappeared. (5) Alas, the brethren are not always so easy to convince! All the disciplines literature, poetry, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, physics, etc that try to make sense of our world, are our allies in our search for God. "It must be possible to find God in the complexity of human experience. "(6) This world of ours, for all its pain and suffering, is ultimately the fruit of "that divine love which first moved all beautiful things. "(7) The hope that makes us preachers of good news is not a vague optimism, a hearty cheerfulness, whistling in the dark. It is the belief that in the end we can discover some meaning in our lives, a meaning that is not imposed, which is there, waiting to be discovered.

It follows that study should be above all a pleasure, the pure delight of discovering that things do, despite all the evidence to the contrary, make sense, whether our own lives, human history or the particular bit of scripture with which we have been struggling all morning. Our centres of study are schools of joy because they are founded upon the belief that it is possible to arrive at some understanding of our world and our lives. Human history is not the senseless and endless conflict of "Jurassic Park", the survival of the fittest. This creation in which we live and of which we are part is not the result of chance, but it is the work of Christ: "all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" [Col 1:16f]. Wisdom dances before the throne of God to express her joy in creating this world, and the aim of all study is to share her pleasure. Simone Weil wrote in April 1942 to a French Dominican, fr Perrin, "The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The joy of learning is as indispensable to study as breathing is to running." (8) The Constitutions talk of our propensio (LCO 77) to the truth, a natural inclination of the human heart. To study should be simply part of the joy of being fully alive. The truth is the air that we are made to breathe.

This is a beautiful idea, but let us admit straightaway that it is very far from the experience of many of us! For some Dominicans, brothers and sisters, the years of study have not been a time of learning to hope but of despair. So often I have seen students struggling with books that seem arid and remote from their experience, longing for it all to be over so that they can get on with preaching, swearing never to open another book of theology after they have escaped from their studies. And even worse than the aridity is, for some, the humiliation, struggling with Hebrew verbs without success, never managing to understand the difference between the Arians and the Apollinarians, and finally defeated by German philosophy!

Why is study so hard for many of us? In part it is because we are marked by a culture which has lost confidence that study is a worthwhile activity and which doubts that debate can bring us to the truth for which we long. If our century has been so marked by violence it is surely partly because it has lost confidence in our ability to attain the truth together. Violence is the only resort in a culture which has no trust in the shared search for truth. Dachau, Hiroshima, Rwanda, Bosnia; these are all symbols of the collapse of a belief in the possibility of building a common human home through dialogue. This lack of confidence may take two forms, a relativism which despairs of ever attaining to the truth, and a fundamentalism which asserts that the truth is already completely possessed.

In the face of that despair which is relativism, we celebrate that the truth may be known and in fact has come to us as a gift. With St Paul we can say: "What I received from the Lord, I also delivered to you." [1 Cor 11:23] Studying is a eucharistic act. We open our hands to receive the gifts of tradition rich with knowledge. West culture is marked by a profound suspicion of all teaching since it is equated with indoctrination and bigotry. The only valid truth is that which one has discovered for oneself or which is grounded in one's feelings. "If it feels right for me, then it is OK." But teaching should liberate us from the narrow confines of my experience and my prejudices and open up the wide open spaces of a truth which no one can master. I remember, as a student, the dizzy excitement of discovering that the Council of Chalcedon was not the end of our search to understand the mystery of Christ but another beginning, exploding all the tiny coherent little solutions in which we had tried to box him. Doctrine should not indoctrinate but liberate us to continue on the journey.

But there is also the rising tide of fundamentalism which derives from a profound fear of thinking, and which offers "the false hope of a faith without ambiguity." [Oakland No 109] Within the Church this fundamentalism sometimes takes the form of an unthinking repetition of received words, a refusal to take part in the never ending search for understanding, an intolerance of all for whom tradition is not just a revelation but also an invitation to draw nearer to the mystery. This fundamentalism may appear to be a rocklike fidelity to orthodoxy, but it contradicts a fundamental principle of our faith, which is that when we argue and reason we honour our Creator and Redeemer who gave us minds with which to think and to draw near to him. We can never do theology well unless we have the humility and the courage to listen to the arguments of those with whom we disagree and take them seriously. St Thomas wrote "As nobody can judge a case unless he hears the reasons on both sides, so he who has to listen to philosophy will be in a better position to pass judgement if he listens to all the arguments on both sides." (9) We have to lose those certainties that banish uncomfortable truths, see both sides of the argument, ask the questions that may frighten us. St Thomas was the man of questions, who learnt to take every question seriously, however foolish it might appear.

Our centres of study are schools of hope. When we gather together to study, our community is a "holy preaching." In a world which has lost confidence in the value of reason, it witnesses to the possibility of a common search for the truth. This may be a university seminar arguing over a case of bio medical ethics, or a group of pastoral agents studying the bible together in Latin America. Here we should learn confidence in each other as partners in the dialogue, companions in the adventure. Humiliation can have no part in study, if we are to give each other the courage for the journey. No one can teach unless they understand from within another's panic upon opening a new book, or struggling with a new idea. So the teacher is not there to fill the pupils' heads with facts, but to strengthen them in their deep human inclination towards the truth, and to accompany them in the search. We must learn to see with our own eyes and stand on our feet. When Lagrange taught at the Ecole Biblique he used to say to his pupils, "Look! You will not say Father Lagrange said this or that, because you will have seen for yourself." (10) Above all the teacher should give the student the courage to make mistakes, to risk being wrong. Meister Eckart said that "one seldom finds that people attain to anything good unless they have first gone somewhat astray." No child can ever learn to walk unless they have fallen flat on their faces several times. The child who is frightened remains for ever on its bottom!

The Wellspring of Hope

b) The Breaking of Idols

In the earliest days, the study of the brethren was essentially biblical, in preparation for pastoral work, above all the sacrament of penance. The first theological works of the Order were confessional manuals. But when St Thomas was teaching those beginners in theology at Santa Sabina he realised that our preaching would only be useful for the salvation of souls if the brethren received a profound theological and philosophical formation. This was for two reasons. Firstly, the simplest questions often require the most profound thought: Are we free? How can we ask God for things? Secondly because, according to the Biblical tradition, what stands between us and a true worship of God is not so much atheism as idolatry. Humanity has a tendency to build false gods, and then to worship them. The exodus from this idolatry requires of us a hard journey, in how we live and think. It is not enough just to sit and listen to the Word of God. We need to break the hold of those false images of God which hold us captive and block our ears.

All his life St Thomas was fascinated by the question: What is God? As Herbert McCabe OP says, his sanctity lay in the fact that he let himself be defeated by this question. Central to the teaching of Aquinas is this radical ignorance, for we are joined to God "as to one, as it were, unknown." (11) We have to be liberated from the image of God as a very powerful and invisible person, manipulating the events of our lives. Such a God would ultimately be a tyrant and a rival to humanity against whom we would be forced to rebel. Instead we have to discover God as the ineffable source of my being, the heart of my freedom. We have to lose God if we are to discover Him, as St Augustine said, "closer to me than I am to myself." (12)

Teaching theology, then, is not just a matter of communicating information, but of accompanying students as they face the loss of God, the disappearance of a well known and loved person, so as to discover God as the source of all who has given Himself to us in His Son. Then we can indeed say, "Blessed are those who mourn; they shall be comforted." McCabe writes, "It is one of the special pleasures of teaching in our studium to watch the moment which comes to every student sooner or later, the moment of conversion you might say, when he realises that ... God is not less than the source of all my free acts, and the reason why they are my own." (13)

The intellectual discipline of our study has this ultimate purpose, to bring us to this moment of conversion when our false images of God are destroyed so that we may draw near to the mystery. But thinking is not enough. Dominican theology began when Dominic got off his horse and became a poor preacher. The intellectual poverty of Thomas before the mystery of God is inseparable from his choice of an Order of poor preachers. The theologian must be a beggar who knows how to receive the free gifts of the Lord.

For us, listening to the Word will demand of us that we free ourselves from the false ideologies of our time. Who are our false gods? Surely they include the idolatry of the State, upon whose altars millions

of innocent lives have been shed this century; the worship of the market, and the pursuit of wealth. I have written often enough about the dangers of the myth of consumerism. Our whole world has been seduced by a mythology, that everything can be bought and sold. Everything has been transformed into commodities every thing has a price. The world of nature, the fertility of the earth, the fragile ecology of forests, all this is put on sale. Even we ourselves, the sons and daughters of the Most High, are to be bought and sold on the labour market. The Industrial Revolution saw the uprooting of whole communities, expelled from their land and enslaved in the new cities. This massive migration continues today. The most acute and scandalous example was the enslaving of millions of our brothers and sisters from Africa, transformed into marketable goods for profit and export. As it was written at the Chapter of Caleruega: 'Men and women must not be treated as commodities, nor may their lives and work, their culture and potential for, flourishing in society be counted among negotiable tokens in the game of profit and loss. ' [20 5]

Our centres of study should be places in which we are liberated from this reductive view of the world, and where we learn again to wonder in gratitude at the good gifts of God. It is through study, by seeking to understand things and each other, that we recover a sense of astonishment at the miracle of creation. Simon Tugwell OP writes, "When we get to the bottom of things, reaching their very essence with our minds, what we find is the inscrutable mystery of God's creative act ... Really to know something is to find ourselves tipped headlong into a wonder far surpassing mere curiosity. " (14) The truth does indeed set us free. This intellectual liberation goes hand in hand with the real freedom of poverty. Like Dominic and Thomas we have to become beggars who receive God's good gifts. The vow of poverty and a closeness to the poor is the proper Dominican context in which to study.

In our struggle to liberate ourselves from this perception of the world, we are helped by being an Order which is truly worldwide. Many cultures do not have a vision of reality which is based upon domination and mastery. Our brothers and sisters from Africa can help us towards a theology which is based more upon mutuality and harmony. The Asian religious traditions can also help us towards a more contemplative theology. We have to be present in these other cultures not just so that we may inculturate the gospel there, but so that they may help us to understand the mystery of creation, and of God the giver of all good things.

The Birth of Community

The Angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus" (Luke 1:30)

The purpose of our studies is not merely to impart information but to bring Christ to birth in our world. The test of our studies is not so much whether they make us well informed, but whether they make us fertile. Every new born child is a surprise, even to its parents. They cannot know beforehand whom they are bringing into the world. So too our study should prepare us to be surprised. Christ comes among us in every generation in ways that we could never have anticipated and may only slowly recognise as authentic, as it took time for the Church to accept the new shocking theology of St Thomas. In the mountains of Guatemala, in our centre of reflection on inculturation AK'KUTAN in Coban, the brothers and sisters seek to help the Order to be born with the richness of the indigenous culture. In Takamori, behind Mount Fuji, our brother Oshida seeks to bring Christ to birth in the world of Japan, or there is our brother Michael Shines in New Zealand, who has for twenty years been struggling to meld the fertile seeds of Maori spirituality with Christian faith. This may happen in all sorts of ways that are not academic. In Croatia one of our brothers heads a rock band called the 'Messengers of Hope. " In Japan I have seen the wonderful paintings of our brothers Petit and Carpentier. Or it may be in the miraculous birth of community in a village in Haiti. How can our preaching bring Christ to birth among the drug addicts of New York or the slums of London? How can the Word become flesh in the words of today, take body in the languages of philosophy and psychology, through our prayer and study? It is for this incarnation of the Word of God in every culture, that the establishment of houses of study, of theological excellence, in every continent, must be a priority of the Order.

I wish to argue that a life of study builds community, and so prepares a home for Christ to dwell among us. There is no more cruel experience of despair than that of utter solitude, the human person

introverted upon his or her self. If our society is tempted so often by despair, then maybe it is because this is the dominant image of the human being in our world, the solitary individual in pursuit of his or her own desires and private good. The radical individualism of our time seems like a liberation but it can plunge us into a lonely hopelessness. The community offers us an "ecology of hope". (15) It is only together that we may dare to hope for a renewed world.

The scholar may seem to be the perfect example of the solitary figure, alone with his or her books or computer screen, and with a sign saying "Do not disturb" on the door. It is true that study will demand of us often that we be alone and struggle with abstract questions. But this is a service that we offer our brothers and sisters. The fruit of this solitary labour is to build community by opening up the mysteries of the Word of God. We learn through study to belong to each other and so to hope.

a) The transformation of mind and heart

Even the very image of the self as utterly alone, an isolated individual, is challenged. For the doctrine of creation shows us that our Creator is more intimately close to us than any being could be, since He is the ever present source of our being. We cannot be alone, because alone we could not even be!

In Western culture there is an obsession with self knowledge. But how can I know myself apart from the one who sustains me in being? St Catherine was deeply modern in inviting her brethren to enter into the "cell of self knowledge ", but that self knowledge was inseparable from a knowledge of God. "We can see neither our own dignity nor the defects which spoil the beauty of our soul, unless we look at ourselves in the peaceful sea of God's being in which we are imaged. " (16) Even the moments of utter desolation, of the dark night of the soul, when we seem to be utterly deserted, can be transfigured into moments of meeting: "The night that joins the beloved with her loved one, the night transfiguring the beloved in her loved one 's life. " (17)

Study can never be just the training of the mind; it is the transformation of the human heart. "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" [Ez 36:26] The first General Chapter of the Order at Bologna said that novices are to be taught "how they should be intent on study, so that by day and by night, at home or on a journey, they should be reading or reflecting on something; whatever they can, they should try to commit to memory. " (18) All the time we are letting our hearts be formed, reading newspapers and novels, watching films and the television. All that we read and see is forming our heart. Do we give it good things to nourish it? Are we moulding it with violence and triviality, giving ourselves a heart of stone?

St Catherine of Siena says of Thomas that "With his mind's eye he contemplated my Truth ever so tenderly and there gained light beyond the natural. " (19) Study then teaches us tenderness and even Thomas was a great theologian because he was soft hearted. fr Yves Congar once wrote that his growing illness and paralysis meant that he became increasingly dependent on his brothers. He could do nothing at all without their help. He said "I have understood above all, since I became ill and in constant need of my brothers' services ... that whatever we can preach and say, however sublime it may be, is worthless if not accompanied by praxis, by real, concrete action, of service, and of love. I think that I have been lacking a little of that in my life, I have been a bit too intellectual. " (20)

When Savanarola talks about St Dominic's understanding of the scriptures, he says that it was founded on carità, charity. Since it was the love of God which inspired the Scriptures, it is only the loving person who can understand them: "And you, brothers, who wish to understand the scriptures, and who wish to preach: learn charity and she will teach you. Having charity you will understand her. (21)

Study transforms the human heart through its discipline. It is "a form of asceticism by its own perseverance and difficulty" [LCO 83] that belongs to our growth in holiness. It offers us the hard discipline of remaining in our rooms in silence, struggling to understand when we long to escape. One of the innovations of the Order was in offering those especially given to study the solitude of an individual cell, but it is a solitude that can be an asceticism. When we are alone, struggling with a text, then we will think of a thousand valid reasons why we should stop and go and see someone to talk.

We will quickly convince ourselves that we have a duty to do so, and that to continue studying would be a betrayal of our vocation and of Christian duty! Yet unless we endure this solitude and silence, we will have nothing of value to give. In the "Letter to Brother John", we are told "Love your cell by making constant use of it, if you want to be admitted into the wine cellar", (22) evidently the thirteenth century novice's idea of paradise! Much study is indeed and inevitably boring. Learning to read Hebrew or Greek is hard and tedious work. Often we will wonder whether it is worthwhile. It is precisely an act of hope, that this labour will bear fruit in ways that we cannot now imagine.

b) Study and the Building of Community in the Order

Study not only should open our hearts to the other but introduce us into a community. To study is to enter into a conversation, with one's brothers and sisters and with other human beings in our search for the truth that will set us free. Albert the Great wrote of the pleasure of seeking the truth together: "in dulcedine societatis quaerere veritatem." (23)

Scholars often reflect the values of our society. Much of academic life is based upon production and competition, as if we were making cars and not seeking wisdom. Universities can be like factories. Articles must pour off the production line, and rivals and enemies must be wiped out. Yet we can never say an illuminating word about God unless we do theology differently, uncompetitively and with reverence. One cannot do theology alone. Not only because no one today would be able to master all the disciplines but because understanding the Word of God is inseparable from building community. Much of the preparation for the Second Vatican Council was done by a community of brothers in Le Saulchoir, especially of Congar, Chenu and Ferret, working together and sharing their insight.

There is a story that while eating with the King of France, Thomas is supposed to have thumped the table and shouted, "That's settled the Manicheesi!" This may suggest that he was not paying much attention to the other guests, but it also shows that theology can be a struggle. We can never build community unless we dare to argue with each other. I must stress, as so often, the importance of debate, argument, the struggle to understand. But one struggles with one's opponent, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, so as to demand blessing. One argues with an opponent, because you wish to receive what he or she can give you. One wrestles so that the truth can win. We have to argue out of a sort of humility. The other person always has something to teach us and we fight with them so as to receive a gift.

One of my most powerful memories of my year in Paris was of fr Marie Dominique Chenu, the master who was always eager to learn from every one he met, even a ignorant English Dominican! Often, late in the evening, he would return from some meeting with bishops, students, trades unionists, artists, happy to tell you of what he had learnt and to ask what you had learnt that day. The true teacher is always humble. Jordan of Saxony said that Dominic understood everything, "humili cordis intelligencia" (24) , through the humble intelligence of his heart. The heart of flesh is humble, but the heart of stone is impenetrable.

Theology is not just what is done in centres of study. It is the moment of illumination, of new insight, when the Word of God meets our ordinary daily experience of trying to be human, of sin and failure, of trying to build human community and make a just world. All the world of scholarship, of biblical experts, patristic scholars, philosophers and psychologists, are there to help that conversation be fertile and truthful. Good theology happens when, for example, the scripture scholar helps the brother working in pastoral work to understand his experience, and when the brother with pastoral experience helps the scholar to understand the Word of God. The recovery of our theological tradition demands not only that we train more brothers in the various disciplines but that we do theology together. Unless we can build our Provinces as theological communities then our studies may become sterile and our pastoral work superficial. Much of Thomas' work was answering the questions of the brethren, even rather foolish questions from the Master of the Order ! (25)

Where do we do theology? We need the great theological faculties and the libraries. But we also need centres where theology is done in other contexts, with those who struggle for justice, in dialogue with other religions, in poor slums and hospitals. Especially at this moment in the life of the Church, true study involves the building of community between women and men. A theology which grows solely out of male experience would limp on one leg, breathe with one lung. That is why today we need to do

theology with the Dominican Family, listening to each other's insights, making a theology which is truly human As God says to St Catherine of Siena "I could well have made human beings 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. " (26)

All human communities are vulnerable, liable to dissolve, needing constant reinforcement and repair. One of the ways in which we make and remake community together is through the words that we speak to each other. As servants of the Word of God, we should be deeply aware of the power of our words, a power to heal or to hurt, to build or to destroy. God spoke a word, and the world came to be, and now God speaks the Word that is His Son, and we are redeemed. Our words share in that power. At the heart of all our education and study must be a deep reverence for language, a sensitivity to the words that we offer to our brothers and sisters. With our words we can offer resurrection or crucifixion, and the words that we speak are often remembered, kept in our brothers' hearts, to be reflected upon, returned to, for good or ill, for years. A word may kill.

Our study should educate us in responsibility, responsibility for the words that we use. Responsibility in the sense that what we say responds to the truth, corresponds to reality. But also we have the responsibility of saying words that build community, that nurture others, that heal wounds, and offer life. St Paul, in prison, wrote to the Philippians, "Finally brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. "[4:8]

c) Study and the Building of a Just World

Our world has seen the triumph of a single economic system. It has become hard to imagine an alternative. The temptation of our generation may be to resign ourselves to the sufferings of this time and to cease to hunger for a world made new. But we preachers must be the guardians of hope. We have been promised the freedom of the children of God, and God will be true to that Word. In San Sisto there is a picture of St Dominic studying, with a dog at his feet holding a candle. In the background another Dominican chases a dog with a stick. The inscription tells us that Dominic did not oppose the devil with violence but with study! Our study prepares us to speak a liberating word. It does this through teaching us compassion, showing us that God is present even in the midst of suffering and it is there that we must forge our theology. It offers us an intellectual discipline that opens our ears to hear God summoning us into freedom.

Felicissimo Martinez OP once described Dominican spirituality as 'open eyed'. And in the General Chapter of Caleruega, Chris McVey commented, "Dominic was moved to tears and to action by the starving in Palencia, by the innkeeper in Toulouse, by the plight of some women in Fanjeaux. But that is not enough to explain his tears. They flowed from the discipline of an open eyed spirituality that did not miss a thing Truth is the motto of the Order not its defence (as often understood), rather its perception. And keeping one's eyes open so as not to miss a thing, that can make the eyes smart. " Our study should be a discipline of truthfulness that opens the eyes. As St Paul says, "Look at the evidence of your eyes. " [2 Cor 10:7]

It is painful to see what lies before us. It is easier to have a heart of stone. Often enough I have been to places which I have longed to forget, hospital wards of young people in Rwanda with their limbs amputated, the beggars on the streets of Calcutta. How can one bear to see so much misery? Yet we must obey Paul's command to look at the evidence of our eyes and to see a tortured world. The books which we read must prise open our hearts. Franz Kafkca wrote "I think that we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us ... we need the books that effect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone whom we love more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. " (27)

Yet it is not enough just to see these places of human suffering, and to be the tourists of the world's crucifixion. These are places in which theology is to be done. It is in these places of Calvary that God may be met and a new word of hope discovered. Think of how much of the greatest theology has been written in prison, from the letter of St Paul to the Philippians, the poems of St John of the Cross, to the letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a Nazi concentration camp. We are, said St John of the Cross,

like dolphins who plunge into the dark blackness of the sea to emerge into the brilliance of the light. A refugee camp in Goma or a bed in a cancer ward; these are places where a theology that brings hope may be discovered.

It is not only in situations of extreme anguish that God may be encountered. Vincent de Couesnongle (28) wrote "There can be no hope without fresh air, or oxygen or a new vision. There can be no hope in a stuffy atmosphere. " (29) Ours has been from the beginning a theology of the city and the market place. St Dominic sent his brothers to the cities, the places of new ideas, of new experiments with economic organisation and democracy, but also where the new poor gathered. Do we dare to let ourselves be disturbed by the questions of the modern city? What is the word of hope that may be shared with young people who face unemployment for the rest of their lives? How may God be discovered in the suffering of an unmarried mother or a frightened immigrant? These too are places of theological reflection. What have we to say to a world become sterile with pollution? Will we let ourselves be interrogated by the questions of the young and enter the minefields of moral issues such as sexual ethics, or do we prefer to be safe?

So then, we must dare to see what is before our eyes; we must believe that it is where God seems most distant and where human beings are tempted by despair that theology may be done. Yet surely, as Dominicans, we must assert a third requirement. Our words of hope will only have authority if they are rooted in a serious study of the Word of God and an analysis of our contemporary society. In 1511 Montesino preached his famous sermon against the oppression of the Indians and asked the question, "Are they not human beings? have they not rational souls? Are you not obliged to love them as you love yourselves? Do you not understand this? Do you not grasp this?" Montesino was inviting his contemporaries to open their eyes, and see the world differently. For clarity, compassion is not enough. Hard study was needed to see through the false mythologies of the conquistadores and it was the source of Las Casas' prophetic stand.

Chenu commented, "It is extremely suggestive to draw attention to the encounter between the speculative doctrine of this first great master of international law (at this moment when nations were being born outside the pale of the Holy Roman Empire) and the evangelism of Las Casas. The theologian, in Vittoria, envelopes the prophet. " (30) It is not enough to be indignant at the injustices of this world. Our words will only have authority if they are rooted in serious economic and political analysis of the causes of injustice. St Antoninus grappled with the problems of a new economic order in Renaissance Florence, as in this century Lebrat analysed the problems of the new economics. If we are to resist the temptation of easy clichés, then we need some brothers and sisters who are trained in scientific, social, political and economic analysis.

The building of a just society does not demand just the equitable distribution of wealth. We need to build a society in which we may all flourish as human beings. Our world is being reduced to a cultural desert through the triumph of consumerism. The cultural poverty of this dominant perception of the human person is ravaging the whole world, and "the people perish for the lack of a vision. " [Prov 29:18] (31) There is a hunger not just for food but for meaning. As the Chapter of Oakland said, "To speak truthfully is an act of justice" [109]. St Basil the Great says that if we have extra clothes they belong to the poor. One of the treasures that we possess and which our centres of study should preserve and share are the poetry, the stories of our people, the music, and traditional wisdom. All this is a wealth for the building of a human world.

Being a prophet is no excuse for not studying the scriptures. We ponder the Word of God, seeking to know His will rather than to discover evidence that God is on our side. It is easy to use the scriptures as a source book for easy slogans, but the study of God's Word is the pursuit of a deeper liberation than we could ever imagine. Through the discipline of study we seek to catch the echo of a voice that summons us to an ineffable freedom, God's own liberty. When Lagrange faced the problems raised by modern historical criticism he quoted the words of St Jerome, "*Sciens et prudens, manum misi in ignem*" 32 (Knowingly and prudently, I put my hand in the fire). Knowing that it might cost him pain and suffering, he plunged his hand into the fire. Lagrange's commitment to the new intellectual disciplines of his time was a real token of trust that the Word of God would surely show itself to be a truly liberating word, and that we need not fear to pass by the way of doubt and questioning. He submitted the Word of God to rigorous analysis because he trusted that it would show itself to be a

word that could never be mastered. Do we dare to share his courage? Do we dare plunge our hands in the fire, or do we prefer not to be disturbed?

The Gift of a Future

"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his Kingdom there will be no end "And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" (Luke 1: 32-34)

How can this be? How can a virgin give birth to a child? How can a woman of this small and unimportant colony of the Roman Empire give birth to the Saviour of the world? Who could have guessed that the history of this people had the seed of such a future? Two thousand years ago it seemed that David's line had failed, but unexpectedly he was given a son to sit upon his throne.

Much of our studies are studies of the past. We study the story of the people of Israel, the evolution of the bible, the history of the Church, of the Order, and even of philosophy. We learn about the past. Central to study is the acquisition of a memory. Yet this is not so that we may know many facts. We study the past so as to discover the seeds of an unimaginable future. Just as a virgin or a barren woman becomes pregnant with a child, so our apparently barren world is discovered to be pregnant with possibilities that we had never dreamt of, the Kingdom of God.

"History does more than any other discipline to free the mind from the tyranny of present opinion." (33) History shows us that things need not be as they are, and that history may open us out to an unexpected future. We discover, in the words of Congar, that there is not only the Tradition, but a multitude of traditions which open up riches of which we had never dreamt. The Second Vatican Council was a moment of new beginning because it was a retelling of the past. We were brought back before the divisions of the Reformation, back before the Middle Ages, to rediscover a sense of the Church prior to the divisions of east and west. It was a memory that set us free for new things.

History introduces us to a wider community than those who just happen to be alive today. We find that we are members of the community of saints and the community of our ancestors. They too have a right to a voice in our deliberations. We test our insights against their witness, and they invite us to a larger vision than we could find in the small confines of our own time.

The retelling of history liberates us not just from present opinion but from the "the rulers of this age. " [1 Cor 2:8] History is normally told from the point of view of the victor, of the strong, of those who build empires, and the history that they tell confirms them in their power. We must learn to tell history from another point of view, from the side of the small and forgotten, and that is a story that sets us free. This is why to remember is a religious act, the primordial religious act of the Jewish and Christian traditions. When we gather to pray to God, we "remember the wonderful works that He has done. " [Psalm 105:5]

Ultimately we are brought back to the memory of a small and apparently insignificant people, the people of Israel. We tell the story from the point of view not of the great Empires, of the Egyptians or the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks or the Romans, but of a tiny people whose history was barely registered in the books of the great and the powerful, yet whose history was pregnant with the birth of the Son of the Most High. And the history in which we discover ourselves is finally that of a virgin who hears the message of the angel and of a man who was nailed up on a cross in a sea of crosses, a man whose story was that of failure. This is the story that we remember in every Eucharist. In this story we learn how to tell the history of humanity and it is a history that does not end on the cross.

Do we dare to tell the history of the Church and even of the Order with such courage? Do we dare to tell a history of the Church which is freed from all triumphalism and arrogance, and which recognises the moments of division and sin? Surely the good news, the ground of our hope, is that God has accepted precisely such fallible, quarrelling people as His people. So often when we learn about Dominican history we are told of the glories of the past. Do we dare to tell of the failures, of the conflicts? The previous archivist of the Order, Emilio Panella OP, wrote a study (32) of what the

chronicles do not say, what they omitted. Such a story finally gives us more hope and confidence since it shows that God always works with "earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. " [2 Cor 4:7] He may even achieve something through us. At the General Character of Mexico, we dared to remember the fifth centenary of our arrival in the Americas. We remembered not only the great deeds of our brothers, of Las Casas and Montesino, but also the silences and failures of others. But they are all our brothers. Above all we remembered those who were reduced to silence or extinction. We remembered so as to hope for a more just world.

There are memories which are hard to bear, of Dachau and Auschwitz, of Hiroshima and the bombing of Dresden. There are acts so terrible that we would rather forget. What history could be told that could bear all that suffering? And yet at Auschwitz the monument to the dead says, "O earth, cover not their blood. " Maybe we can only dare to remember and to tell of the past truthfully, if we remember the one who embraced his death, who gave himself to his betrayers, who made of his passion a gift and communion. In that memory we dare to hope. We can know that "history does not ultimately lie in the hands of the slaughterer. The dead can be named; the past must be known. In that naming and knowing, God is to be met, and in God lies the possibility for us of a different world, a different apprehension of power, a voice for the dumb. " (33) "For the poor shall not always be forgotten: the patient abiding of the meek shall not perish for ever. " [Psalm 9:18]

St Dominic walked through the countryside singing, not just because he was courageous, and not just because he had a cheerful temperament. Years of study had given him a heart formed to hope. Let us study so as to share his joy.

"History says, Don 't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here." (34)

End Notes:

- 1 Cecilia Miracula B Dominici IS Archivium Fratrum Praedicatorum XXXVII Rome 1967 p 5 ff
- 2 Process of Canonisation No 29
- 3 Simone Weil, Attente de Dieu, Paris 1950 p 71
- 4 B. Montagnes Le Père Lagrange, Paris 1995 p 57
- 5 Tomas of Chantrimpé
- 6 Cornelius Ernst OP Multiple Echo ed Fergus Kerr OP and Timothy Radcliffe OP London 1979 p 1
- 7 Dante Inferno Canto 1, 40
- 8 Simone Weil op cit p 71
- 9 Metaph III lec 3
- 10 Bernard Montagnes Le Père Lagrange Paris 1995 p 54
- 11 ST 1A Q. 12, a. 8, AD 1. See the Acts of Caleruega Chapter, 32. This text provoked one of the most passionate debates of the Chapter. It was good to see the brothers arguing over theology!
- 12 Confessions III, 6
- 13 God Matters London 1987 p 241
14. Reflections on the Beatitudes London 1979 p 100
- 15 Jonathan Sachs, Faith in the Future, London 1995, p 5
- 16 Letter 226, Catherine of Siena, Passion for Truth, Compassion for Humanity, ed Mary O'Driscoll OP, New York 1993, p 26

- 17 St John of the Cross, Canciones de Alma 5
- 18 Primitive Constitutions 1 13
- 19 Mary O'Driscoll OP, *ibid* p 127
- 20 Allocution de fr. Congar, en remerciement à la Remise du prix de l'Unité chrétienne, 24 Novembre 1984
- 21 "Dalle Prediche di fra' Gerolamo Savanarola", Ed L Ferretti, in *Memorie Dominicane XXVII* 1910
- 22 De Modo Studendi
- 23 In Libr viii Politicorum
- 24 Libellus 7
- 25 See James A. Weisheipl, *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays* 1980, pp. 41-42
- 26 Dialogue 7
- 27 Letter to Oskar Pollak, 27 January 1904.
28. Master of the Order 1974-1983; died July 1992.
- 29 Le Courage du Futur ch 8
- 30 M D Chenu "Prophètes et Théologiens dans l'Eglise, Parole de Dieu" in *La Parole de Dieu II*, Paris 1964 p 211
- 31 cf the Jamaican National Anthem
- 32 Bernard Montagnes *op. cit.*, p. 84.
- 33 Owen Chadwick *Origins* 1985 p 85
- 34 "Quelle che la Cronica Conventuale non dice" *Memorie Dominicane* 18, 198,7 227-235
- 35 Rowan Williams, *Open Judgement* London 1994, p 242
- 36 Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: version of Sophocles' 'Philoctetes'*, London 1990.