

Spanish to English translation
An in- depth reading of LCM 35
REGULAR OBSERVANCE

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The in-depth reading which I intend to do in this short article on no. 35 of the Book of Constitutions of the Nuns of the Order of Preachers, that treats of Regular Observance is nothing but a profound and thorough reading of the Constitutions, beginning at the heart of no. 35: by "this singular grace of our Holy Father." An in-depth reading as opposed to just reading the Constitutions material, we try to answer the question of the why of regular observance, what is the motivation and its spiritual basis, rather than investigate why and how to observe the Rule or just follow the letter of the law. The question we ask ourselves, then, is not "what do the Constitutions tell us to do?", but rather: "what is the spirit which should animate our observance of the Constitutions to better reflect the spirit of St. Dominic? "

Indeed, the Constitutions abound in a true theology of Regular Observance, a deep sense of regular life in the tradition of the Dominican Order. Sometimes we forget to ponder these profound numbers of the Constitutions that tell us the why of this or that provision, and that often are the basis for the more specific, concrete and practical rules. We usually read them with this mindset: "What do the Constitutions tell us to do concretely? How can we put them into practice? We don't usually read them from the perspective of no 17, which speaks of Dominican obedience: How can we "remain faithful to the spirit and mission of our community" (LCM 17), to the spirit and mission of the Order that the Constitutions present to us as the spirit of St. Dominic: and the mission entrusted to us as a legacy? "

ENCLOSURE AS THE OPENING TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S LOVE

As an example, I want to begin by presenting a brief reflection on LCM 36, which refers to the enclosure of Dominican nuns. It precedes the other nine numbers that deal with specific rules, among which is the one that says: "The enclosure of the nuns is papal enclosure ..." (LCM 37). Many times I have witnessed heated debates on this number and what is meant by "papal enclosure". I must say that I frequently had the impression that such a reading adheres only to these two words (papal enclosure) without striving, also, to understand what follows in that

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number as an explanation of the term "papal enclosure." References to no. 36 are very rare. However, no. 36 contains all the theology and the spirit of St. Dominic, which is necessary for the understanding of enclosure in the context of the Dominican tradition, and consequently the concrete norms that follow.

In fact, this is the only place in the ten numbers that deal explicitly with enclosure, where the Constitutions make a direct reference to St. Dominic: "such was the enclosure chosen for the nuns by the most holy patriarch from the beginning of the Order and faithfully observed until now."

What was the meaning of the enclosure chosen by our holy Father for the nuns from the beginning of the Order?

We need to make an observation first. In the entire no. 36 there is no reference to the material specifications, for example, the grille, the keys. On the contrary, the entire article presents a very dense theological perspective of the enclosure. It treats, above all, "withdrawal from the world, **in fact and in spirit**" insisting that the whole reality of the enclosure must be imbued (impregnated) with a spiritual dimension. In addition, it cites some biblical symbolism that emphasizes the spiritual sense of the enclosure, "the nuns, like the prudent virgins, waiting for their Lord" and "devote themselves wholeheartedly to the kingdom of God."

Finally, it is this key perspective that gives enclosure such a profound meaning, that forces us to question ourselves if all our talk about the enclosure is not often superficial and, therefore, stifles the "true meaning intended by St. Dominic, for the nuns, from the beginning of the Order."

It is necessary to make a more profound reflection starting off with these words, to enable us to discover an element of regular observance, as is the enclosure, on a spiritual level, and that, in a way, make us dizzy: "This hidden life should open their minds to the breadth and height and depth of the love of God who sent his Son so that the whole world might be saved through him." Let me quote more extensively the passage from the Letter of St Paul to the Ephesians, which the text of the Constitutions refers to:

"Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and

the length, the height and the depth; until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God." (Eph.3:16-19)

We perceive the perspective of regular observance that tradition has left us in this beautiful image: as the bird needs two wings to fly, so regular observance is useless if it does not go hand in hand with charity.

It would be easy to illustrate how this applies to all the elements of regular observance. However, it seemed important to me to emphasize in particular, the enclosure because often, wanting to be "observant" in regard to enclosure, we run the risk of sinning against charity. We must recognize that we are far from this **openness to the understanding of the length, the height and depth of God's love.**

A last remark about this magnificent no. 36 of the Constitutions. While often the enclosure is understood as a limitation, as something negative, and unfortunately, not only by others, but also by the nuns, themselves, who are not living the regular life well, no. 36 presents it as a positive occupation: "... remain waiting... ", "...**freedom** from worldly affairs...", "... and allowing (the nuns) to devote themselves **wholeheartedly (*corde perfecto*)** the Kingdom of God..." and " ... Open their minds ..."

Let us now listen to the breath of refreshing and liberating words of S. Paul: "To know the love of Christ, which passes all understanding, that you may be filled with the fullness of God."

Thus, the "freedom of the Spirit" will be realized of which the Fundamental Constitution speaks:

Observing the norms of the purely contemplative life, by maintaining their withdrawal from the world by enclosure and silence, by working diligently. Studying the truth eagerly, searching the Scriptures with ardent heart, praying intently, willingly practicing penance, pursuing communion through their manner of government, in purity of conscience and the joy of sisterly concord, "in freedom of spirit", It is God Who now makes them dwell together in unity and on the last day will gather into a Holy City a people acquired as his own (LCM 1, V).

Once again, the positive affirmations prevail: "caring ... fervent ... searching with an ardent heart... in purity of heart ... with a pure and joyful conscience, with freedom of spirit." The

Fundamental Constitution therefore prepares this approach of deepening regular observance as a school of Dominican contemplation and consequently it is much more than a rigid style of life to which those nuns who wish to be observant must submit.

This in-depth reading of no. 36 prepares the way back to the heart of no. 35.

REGULAR OBSERVANCE AND THE SINGULAR GRACE OF SAINT DOMINIC

At first glance it seems surprising that the heart of no 35, which speaks of regular observance, should allude "to this singular grace," or, to use a more current term, the particular charism of St. Dominic. It is important to underline that the Constitutions often refer to the person of St. Dominic, especially in decisive moments when one tries to captivate the spirit of the Founder and the intention with which he himself lived the charism and mission of his Order. 'Therefore, he would ask the first brothers and sisters to do the same, but without imposing his will.' This is expressed in no. 35 from the beginning, with the following words: "The regular observance adopted by Saint Dominic from the tradition or newly created by him."

We need to keep in mind two things:

1- St. Dominic took elements from Tradition with a view to an end: a vision of the Order, that the Constitutions often define as the mission of the Order

2 - There are some points which he himself renewed in view of new needs and of his new vision.

In addition, the Constitutions tell us that regular observance has as its chief aim "to enable them (the nuns) to live more effectively their contemplative life in the Order of Preachers" (LCM 35) This formulation considers regular observance, situating it in the tradition of the Order of Preachers. While it is true that the Dominican nuns share certain guidelines with other contemplatives and with other religious orders, it is also evident that regular observance is not the same for all contemplatives. LCM 35, II very clearly states: "To regular observance belong all the elements that constitute our Dominican life and order it through common discipline." As they constitute Dominican life, we can say that everything must be viewed in light of the tradition of the Order. This is particularly true in the four essential elements of Dominican life: "the common life, the celebration of the liturgy and personal prayer, the practice of the vows and the study of truth."

What I tried to illustrate with respect to the enclosure, applies to all other elements. Before turning to any of these items and consider how they apply to members of the Dominican tradition, it is good to turn back again to what we considered as the heart of this #35: the particular charism of St. Dominic. Once again we find a dense and rich content in the text:

"Mindful of the first nuns whom the blessed Dominic established in the Monastery of Prouille at the heart of the Holy Preaching, the nuns, while living together in harmony, follow Jesus as he withdraws into solitude to pray. In this way they are a sign of that blessed city Jerusalem which the brethren build up by their preaching. In the cloister the nuns devote themselves totally to God, and perpetuate that singular gift which the blessed Father had of bearing sinners, the down-trodden and the afflicted in the innermost sanctuary of his compassion." (Jordan of Saxony, *Libellus*, 12)

The text leaves no doubt in establishing the first sisters at the heart of the "Holy Preaching." The nuns rightfully participate in the charism of the Order of Preachers. Two images dear to St. Dominic, that appear frequently in the primitive documents of the Order, confirm this: "living together, animated by one spirit" ... "they are a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem."

It is important to stress that the Constitutions do not say that it is "only the friars who, through their preaching build the holy city, but the nuns, in their own way, build up the Kingdom of God." I quote two passages from the Constitutions as an example of this:

LCM 3, II, which deals with the profound meaning of the vows grounded in Dominican life within the context of the common life, presents us a picture of authentic ecclesiology:

"The nuns **first build in their own monasteries the Church of God which they help to spread throughout the world by the offering of themselves.** They accomplish this by being of one mind through obedience, bound together by love of the things that are above through the discipline of chastity, and more closely dependent upon one another through poverty."

I emphasize that this building up of the Church of God, first inside of the monastery itself, effectively surpasses the limits of the monastery. The nuns help the Church to grow in the

world with the gift of their whole lives. We find this universal, apostolic and prophetic dimension of the life of the nuns of the Order back in the Fundamental Constitution of the Nuns 1, §5 quoted above:

"...their growth in charity is mysteriously fruitful for the growth of the people of God. By their hidden life they proclaim prophetically that in Christ alone is true happiness to be found, here by grace and afterwards in glory."

Living the charism of St. Dominic, in the heart of the Church, the sisters discover that Dominican contemplation is always imbued with this apostolic dimension, because the God whom St. Dominic found in the innermost sanctuary of his compassion, is the Father of mercies and the God of compassion.

For Dominican nuns to live the enclosure of the Dominican contemplative life and to dedicate themselves completely to God in silence, penance, prayer and mutual charity, can never mean complete withdrawal from the world because it would entail neglecting the other dimension that truly honors Dominican contemplation: "perpetuating that singular gift which the blessed Father Dominic had of bearing sinners, the down-trodden and the afflicted in the inmost sanctuary of his compassion."

Meditating on these words of Jordan of Saxony, as well as others, "he loved everyone and was loved by all," Fr Duval tells us: in these two reflections of one who loved him very much and knew him well, Blessed Jordan, shows us the heart of Dominic, his life, his work, the ideal he proposes to us: "What can it mean to love everyone?" In the first place, all those he would meet - and in the 20 years of his itinerant life he met a lot of people! But to love all also meant those he dreamed of, and dream he certainly did! He dreamed of the Northern towns, the Muslims, Cummans in the East. 'One day we will go to them', he would cry out dreaming! The number of people he would meet were not enough, they were just a small portion of the inconceivable amount of human beings for whom Jesus Christ died. It was all those persons whom Dominic loved.

To live Dominican contemplation with the apostolic zeal of our Father St. Dominic, finds its deepest expression in the words of Jordan of Saxony: "He carried the suffering of the poor in the innermost sanctuary of his compassion." Fr. Duval comments that a sanctuary, in the sense that Dominic experienced it when he would compassionately come in contact with the miseries of others, contained the presence of Jesus Christ whom he constantly invoked in

prayer. That was why meeting someone was never a superficial encounter. In fact, it was a prolonged long conversation and continued in the sanctuary of his prayer. If he had the audacity to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ to the Muslims, pagans, heretics, it was because God was with them; with them in the sanctuary of his heart, in such a way that when Dominic would meet a Muslim it was as if he was waiting for him. For a long time, without having imagined it, without knowing their name, in his heart he had prayed for those whom he suddenly met. On his face there was always the smile that welcomed everyone who came to him. Behind his smile, there was seriousness, even sorrow, when he perceived that the person he was looking at was one of those souls he had desired to meet for a long time: poor, afflicted, unhappy, someone who perhaps without even know it, was searching for God. So great was Dominic's heart that he was able to bear the suffering of all human beings for whom Jesus died; but as great as his heart was, he considered it too narrow, too small. How could he carry alone all the misery of the world in search of salvation? This flame that burned in the inner sanctuary of his compassion was ten times greater than all his other virtues and energy. HIS intuition of the world in his time would move him to developed bold initiatives. He put into action his practical reason. The reason for the founding of the Order of Preachers was to multiply, all over the world, sanctuaries of compassion. So now we understand better how and why the reference to this sanctuary of compassion appears in the middle of LCM 35, which speaks to us about regular observance: how St. Dominc understood it and what spirit animated it.

APOSTOLIC ZEAL BORN FROM THE INERMOST SANCTUARY OF COMPASSION

This meditation brings us into the depths of St. Dominic's contemplation, in this singular grace of our Holy Father, to understand that the desire to oppose it against the apostolic life has no meaning in the Dominican tradition. Jordan of Saxony insists much on this point: the apostolic and missionary zeal of Dominic was born in the inner sanctuary of his compassion. To walk and proclaim the Gospel of the mercy of Jesus Christ and find the God and Father of compassion in contemplation are not two movements going in opposite direction, but the same movement that begins and ends in the inner sanctuary of his compassion, the privileged place of encounter with this God of Jesus Christ who is the Father of all compassion and mercy.

This is how Dominican contemplation opens itself to this broad perspective that the Fundamental Constitution of the Order defines as the principal end of the Order:

"To ensure that by following Christ in this way we would perfect our love of God and of our neighbor, we consecrate ourselves entirely to God by profession, thus becoming members of our Order and dedicated in a new way to the Universal Church fully committed to preaching of the Word of God in its totality." (Honorius III). LCO III

This fundamental vision of the Order is expressed in other places of the Constitutions of the Nuns. First, the Fundamental Constitution:

"By their way of life both friars and nuns, pressing forward to that perfect love of God and neighbor which is effective in caring for and obtaining the salvation of all people. As the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of all, offered himself completely for our salvation, they consider themselves to be truly his members primarily when they are spending themselves totally for souls. There is indeed a diversity of gifts, but one and the same Spirit, one charity, one mercy. The friars, sisters and laity of the Order are 'to preach the name of our Lord Jesus Christ throughout the world;' 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." (Is 55,10) (LCM 1,II)

The opposition between the purpose/goal of the life of the friars and that of the nuns of the Order, that at times is read into this passage of the Fundamental Constitution of the Nuns is clarified when LCM speaks of the Word of God as the foundation for *lectio divina* and the study of the nuns, and as we see later on, for their contemplation:

"The brethren of the Order, 'commissioned entirely for spreading abroad the Word of God,' fulfill their vocation primarily by preaching. The nuns, while commissioned by God primarily for prayer, are not for that reason excluded from the ministry of the word (cf. *Venite Seorsum*, V). For they listen to the Word, celebrate it and keep it in their hearts (cf. Lk. 2:18), and in this way proclaim the Gospel of God by the example of their life. (LCM 96)

Fr. Damien Byrne, former Master of the Order, used this sentence of LCM in his letter on Preaching, addressed to the whole Order: "The nuns of the Order by the witness of their common life, are the center of our family of preachers."

REGULAR OBSERVANCE: THE WORD OF GOD DWELLS ABUNDANTLY IN YOU

In this same chapter on the Word of God, we find a definition of regular observance that opens a new perspective:

“The purpose of all regular observance, especially enclosure and silence, is that the Word of God may dwell abundantly in the monastery. Therefore, the nuns, after the example of the Precursor, should prepare the way of the Lord in the desert by the witness of their prayer and penance.” (LCM 96,II).

This passage clearly confirms that to prepare the way of the Lord in the desert after the example of the Precursor, is to participate effectively in the work of Evangelization. Both, the nuns and friars are born of the same passion, of the same compassion, which impels them to become "Gospel", "Good News", in and for the world torn apart and in pursuit of salvation.

"The nuns press onward to that perfect love of God and neighbor which is effective in caring for and obtaining the salvation of all people. They consider themselves to be truly his members primarily when they are spending themselves totally for souls."

Although the first responsibility of the nuns is to welcome the Good News of salvation, as Dominicans, they are called also to transmit the Good News and they preach it with the witness of their life.

At this point we can answer the objection that is often raised by some of the nuns, who affirm that study is certainly an element of the regular observance of the friars of the Order because it prepares them directly for the preaching but it is less so for the nuns by the fact that it is only indirectly that they participate in the preaching. Once again, the Constitutions do not allow for this misconception.

“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 informs practical judgment. In this way it fosters the fulfillment of the evangelical counsels with a more enlightened fidelity and encourages unanimity of mind. By its very constancy and difficulty it constitutes a form of asceticism and aids mental equilibrium.”(LCM 100, II)

What a long interpretation of one of the elements of regular observance! Regular observance is not only a means of asceticism and discipline, it contributes as well to the human and intellectual formation of the person, and thus "fosters the way of life of the nuns by helping them in their determination to follow Christ more closely and enabling them to live more effectively their contemplative life in the Order of Preachers." (LCM:35,11)

We are far from an intellectual conception of study, and it is a fact that we are not trying to make the communities of Dominican nuns academic centers full of scholars. As Father Martin Gillet, OP, Master of the Order wrote in his introduction to the 1930 Constitutions of the Nuns:

"This is no a question of filling the monasteries with intellectuals, nor of pretending that in the contemplative life knowledge is superior to love. This would be disastrous. Intellectuals, no; but educated religious, yes; in other words: religious who desire to know God better in order to love Him better; to love Him better, in order to serve Him better."

To know God as much as possible, always to love him more and better to know him more intimately; this is another way of explaining the reason in the Dominican tradition study is a characteristic element of the regular observance of the Order which nourishes contemplation.

The whole Chapter III on the " Word of God" which speaks of *lectio divina* and study is full of wisdom, and enables us to discover the Dominican contemplative life with a very challenging depth:

"The light and source of our study is God who spoke in the past in many and varied ways, and in these last days speaks to us in Christ through whom the mystery of the Father's will is fully revealed in the Church by the sending of the Holy Spirit and all minds are enlightened " (LCM 101, I).

There is a very strong link between study and *lectio divina*: "The study of sacred truth ... is a fruitful preparation for *lectio divina* and an aid to human maturity." (LCM 100, I).

When the Constitutions (93) indicate: "The directories are to provide for a sufficient amount of time, that is about two hours a day, so that at specified times and places the nuns

may be free to devote themselves in earnest to private prayer² and *lectio divina*" it is not enough to provide time for personal prayer. LCM speaks clearly of *lectio divina*, which is more challenging than spending some tranquil moments in Choir or in the cell.

The link between study and *lectio divina* expands to contemplation, liturgy and prayer.

I would like to draw attention to the richness of some of the paragraphs on *Lectio Divina* in the Constitutions: "*Lectio divina* is ordained to a real dialogue with God, for 'we speak to God when we pray, we hear him when we read the divine sayings.'" (St. Ambrose) LCM 97, I)

There follows a profound passage. It deserves to be quoted in full:

"Christ is the Word of God. We hear him in the Sacred Scriptures, everything in them proclaims Christ. We hear him in the voice of the Church, which speaks to us of Him in the sacraments of faith, in the teaching of our shepherds, in the example of the saints. We hear him when the world and our brothers cry out for our love. For there is one Spirit of Christ, who intimately attunes our spiritual ears to his inspirations." (LCM 97, II).

Study, "is a characteristic element of Dominican observance." *Lectio divina* and contemplation are, above all, a gift of the **Spirit of Christ** who, with his inspirations, develops in us deep listening. So, here we are again, in the heart of LCM 35: **This singular grace of our Holy Father**: "Dominic always carried in the inner sanctuary of his compassion the poor and afflicted," thus he listened to Christ... "We listen when the world and our brothers need our charity."

Dominican contemplation is all this: to listen to Christ, the Word of God, and live "all the regular observances, especially the enclosure and silence so that in the monastery the Word of God may dwell abundantly."

"Imitators of St. Dominic, as he was of Christ (1 Cor 4, 16), they perpetuate his fervor and spirit of prayer ... Nor should they forget his frequent cry 'Lord, what will become of sinners?'" (LCM 74, III)

² The Italian translation of LCM has "secret prayer" and "lectio divina" It would be interesting to compare with the original Latin text NT

To listen to Christ in Dominican contemplation also means, as for St. Dominic, to attune ourselves to the cry of those who live in poverty.

Dominican contemplation does not take place in the quiet of the cloister, or in withdrawal from the problems of this world, because just as Dominic did, we encounter there, the God of compassion and mercy. We know that for St. Dominic those long hours of the night were disturbed, troubled, concerned, consumed by this passion for the salvation of the world:

"Therefore, the whole life of the nuns is harmoniously ordered to preserving the continual remembrance of God. By the celebration of the Eucharist and the Divine Office, by reading and meditating on the Sacred Scriptures, by private prayer, vigils and intercessions they should strive to have the same mind as Christ Jesus. In silence and stillness, let them earnestly seek the face of the Lord and never cease making intercession with the God of our salvation that all men and women might be saved. They should give thanks to God the Father who has called them out of darkness into his wonderful light. Let Christ, who was fastened to the cross for all, be fast-knit to their hearts. In fulfilling all these things, they are truly nuns of the Order of Preachers " (LCM 74, 4)

Fr. Vladimir Koudelka calls attention to the fact that here we have the four classical elements of the beginnings of prayer and life with God of the Middle Ages: reading (*lectio*), prayer, meditation, contemplation; sometimes it is prayer that arises from meditation. *Lectio* is a very important element in this spiritual journey, as we see it very explicitly in the paintings of Fra Angelico.

I have not exhausted all the wealth that an in-depth reading of the Constitutions on regular observance offers us. There are elements that I have not taken into account, but I hope that this glimpse may open the way for further in-depth reading. I conclude by stressing two things: Regular Chapter and Tauler, the great master of spirituality in the Order.

It is clear that an in-depth study of regular observance requires from the community, a serious review of its practice and the willingness to help each other to live it. This cannot be the concern of one particular nun; it must engage the whole community. From the beginning of the Order, St. Dominic and the early friars and nuns had the practice of regular chapter as a means to foster mutual assistance and support in fidelity to the Gospel. One of the consequences of this new discovery with regard to regular observance could be to re-evaluate

the practice of regular chapter: "At the regular chapter the nuns gather as sisters in charity and humility under the leadership of the prioress to give one another mutual assistance in the renewal and development of the regular life."

(LCM 68)

"The nuns should willingly examine themselves on their fidelity to the Gospel."

(LCM 71)

A GOOD BARREL FOR A GOOD WINE

We know that our Rhineland mystics Eckhart, Tauler and Suso often preached to the nuns of the Order. There is nothing surprising in their sermons and reflections where they make reference to regular observance. As an example, I present here a sermon by Tauler that Sister Susan Eck, also a Dominican nun, offers us in a magnificent book entitled *Iniciacion a Juan Taulero*. This is her comment: "In Sermon 79, grand and with an attractive title, "Sermon for the Good Use of the Day", Tauler, who speaks to the young nuns of the Order, provides an introduction to prayer. He shows himself as paternal, benevolent, even lenient. He is far from the ascetic demands of the Desert Fathers, which Tauler and his brothers read and knew them well through Cassian.

"It is necessary, initially, to put our own life in order, that is to say, for the young nuns to put themselves in harmony with the Rule of the Order. A well organized foundation is needed to learn to live with God, which means, paying attention to one's own rule of life, health, food, sleep. **A barrel in good condition is needed to hold the good wine of God.** It is not good to force the body to pray: if one falls asleep at the time set for secret prayer, after Matins at midnight, and if, moreover, one cannot get back to sleep when the rest time comes. It is necessary to adapt the schedule to the rhythm of one's body. It is also good to give the body a comfortable position, if it is necessary, in one's own cell or in bed, too!"

We do not omit a certain critical spirit which will find this to be an excessive and detrimental indulgence. Fr. Hugneny, in his 1927 edition of the sermons of Tauler, expressed his disagreement in a note. But our spiritual master goes even further: he says that it is not something very serious to fall asleep at prayer. A sudden jolt will put us before God with so much more strength and renewed fervor that it will be less harmful than a determined, tense prayer, seen as a chore with physical stress. We must, above all, rely in the benevolence of our Creator. "(Susan Eck, *Iniciacion a Juan Taulero*, pp.60-61)

May all the nuns of the Order be able to live their life with this enthusiasm and in the spirit of St. Dominic, thus they will truly be nuns of the Order of Preachers. This is my great desire.

Korea, Feast of Saint Catherine, 1995