

***SANCTUARIES OF COMPASSION:  
THE IDEA OF CARE IN THE DOMINICAN TRADITION***

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”  
(Mt 11:28)*

In Matthew’s Gospel, we read “you are the light of the world . . . your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father” (Mt: 5:13-16). In his book, *St. Martin De Porres: In the Service of Compassion*, Jacques Ambec, O.P. notes that St. Dominic envisioned his sons and daughters being formed in such a way so as to become those lights to the world. Through patience, gentleness, delicacy in prayer, in love, they were to be present to the sick as sanctuaries of compassion.<sup>1</sup> Today, we find ourselves surrounded by a culture of individualism and indifference, a culture that diminishes human life, depriving it of dignity, freedom, and its ability to flourish, as God intended. As healers of the sick and those in distress, we need to ask ourselves, how do we in turn, become those sanctuaries of compassion for our brothers and sisters, who are lost, dismissed as the least, or who find themselves unwanted or even unloved?

St. Dominic took the words he heard in St. Matthew’s gospel about becoming a light to the world, as words addressed directly to himself. As a result, in 1215, along with six companions, he formed his Order. As he did, he was aware that the society around them was changing. As cities continued to grow denser because of their ability to fascinate and draw more and more people, St. Dominic realized their spiritual needs would need to be met in a way that was a radical departure from the practice of the day.

If we look into the very early days when St. Dominic formed his Order, we encounter a man who possessed the ability to see beyond immediate challenges, in order to perceive the beauty and dignity of the whole person. His response to persons in distress was similarly appropriate. As a consoler of the sick and those suffering, St. Dominic applied the same disciplined formula that he purposed for the formation of his earliest disciples, namely, to first listen, then to pray, to study, and then to preach the message of mercy, hope, and healing. In doing so, they would become authentic sanctuaries of compassion, for those seeking mercy, healing and hope. The Dominican Order, more than eight centuries later faithfully, embraces this same vision today.

This example characterizes St. Dominic’s ability to synthesize the data of his pastoral experiences and Church teaching to formulate a healing intervention, whether it be caring for his brothers, the Nuns of the Order, the poor of the cities, non-believers, those who were far from the faith; especially the lost, the least, those who were unloved and unwanted. His charism captured the fire of evangelization and spread the Word of God across the world and through the great preachers of his Order: Albert the Great; Thomas Aquinas; Catherine of Siena; Rose of Lima; Margaret of Castello; James Salomoni; Martin De Porres; Juan Macias; Rose Hawthorne Lathrop; Pierre Claverie, and hundreds of martyrs who lost their lives, defending human dignity and freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ambec, “St. Martin De Porres, In the Service of Compassion” (Chicago, IL: The New Priory Press, 2015) 109.

The answer to becoming sanctuaries of compassion simply requires reclaiming that which already lies within each of us as we live the Dominican charism faithfully, regardless of wherever it is needed throughout the world. What is remarkably unique about this charism is its portability and applicability to every person who has ever been born. Its authenticity is grounded:

- in faith and a pursuit of truth through reason;
- in the recognition of the unrepeatable and intrinsic uniqueness and freedom of the human person;
- in the commitment to care with compassion for the whole person regardless of the circumstances of their lives, or the reason for their illness. or their ability to pay, or whatever they call home;
- in the courage to live St. Dominic's call to be consolers to the sick and all those in distress; to risk becoming vulnerable to all persons, but most especially the lost, the last and the least among our brothers and sisters of our families, in our communities and in our world;
- in the willingness to live along the lines of human brokenness;
- in the courage to respond to all persons, especially those who are unwanted and unloved, to our brothers and sisters who live in families, in communities, and in nations;
- in an authentic willingness to encounter others in dialogue;
- in collaboration with others to change systems that imprison persons that are forced to live under oppressive conditions that crucify humanity in its flesh and in its unity.<sup>2</sup>

In these actions and encounters, we will experience the privilege and the grace to see, to touch, to nourish, and to care for our brothers and sisters; all of whom reveal the very face of Christ in distressing disguise; all unique and unrepeatable masterpieces of His creative act.

When St. Dominic established his Order in 1216, it had as its purpose preaching and the salvation of souls, and more than eight centuries later, this purpose remains today. Though a different kind of ministry, St. Dominic and his followers were able to bring the healing and salvific message of the Gospel to people of his day whether they were troubled, suffering from physical or mental distress, or alienated from God. They preached this healing message of Jesus to those who were far from the faith, the poor, and unwanted, the unloved and those who had lost hope.

We are called by our Dominican life and mission to re-evangelize our world, to serve as sanctuaries of compassion, as we dare to:

- encounter the woman and her children who are homeless, unwanted and unloved;
- listen to the young man who is dying from AIDS, who is without hope;
- embrace the young single mother who must decide whether to carry her unborn child to full term;
- protect the children of our streets who have no bed on which to lay their heads nor mothers to tuck them in at night;
- protect and defend the dignity and freedom of the immigrant who is abandoned and alone;

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<sup>2</sup> T. Radcliffe, "Sing a New Song: The Dominican Vocation" (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1999): 242.

- rescue the exploited, victims of human trafficking, especially women, and those who are forced to live on the fracture lines of our societies;
- listen to the health care administrator who admits failure to be responsive to the cry of the poor seeking care;
- respect the dignity of the prisoner who is difficult to love;
- protect the person with Alzheimer's dementia who seeks relief from a mind entombed;
- be free to become vulnerable in the encounter with the dying, knowing that no cure can reverse the course of the disease;
- go out into the peripheries of human existence, where faith is arid and hopes are foregone, and show the healing face of Jesus, the face of mercy, to the lost, the last and the least among us;
- rescue our brothers and sisters in our urban centers who are forced by systems of oppression to live on the streets of our cities in deafening anonymity;<sup>3</sup>
- advocate for care for the dying who fear being abandoned; and
- care for clinicians who dare to journey with patients when cure is no longer feasible.

The vocation of consoler of the sick and to those in distress, that we find in the life of St. Dominic and which was lived, breathed and embraced by his brothers and sisters, finds its roots clearly in Jesus' own ministry to the sick, to the dying, to those troubled in any way and especially to the despised of his day. Saint Dominic clearly enjoined this mission on his brothers when he spoke his last words to them: *keep charity*. Caring for one another with compassion, affirming and protecting human dignity and freedom, living the virtue of charity, practicing forgiveness toward all, valuing the sacredness of human life of every person, comprise the gift that we are called to embody. This gift is deeply embedded in the genetic code of all those who are called to embrace the Dominican Charism in health care. It is also the genetic code that should make itself manifest in all those persons who are called to be followers of Christ. Thus, they become brothers and sisters to one another.

Our lived response to fulfilling this mission will not be any easier today than it was in the time of St. Dominic and the early Friars and Sisters. If we are to live out our call as ministers of charity, mercy and compassion, we must remain spiritually grounded in prayer and be relentless in our devotion to the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of Charity.<sup>4</sup> Through various encounters with Jesus, we will have the courage and commitment, as they did, to engage in preaching and evangelization in radical ways – to open new and unknown doors and be unafraid to walk through them in spite of fears.

In his solicitude for the Church, Christ calls, in each age, persons to take care of His people -- no exceptions -- every one of them. Each of us should be free to respond to the radical call that evangelization evokes; to open our doors to those who seek healing and hope; to console the sick and the abandoned in their darkest hour, wherever they may be; to believe and then to proclaim that every person born into the world is worthy of our respect and of our unlimited

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, "Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis", Madison Square Garden; Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Cuba, to the United States of America and Visit to the United Nations Headquarters, September 25, 2015. Washington: United States Catholic Conference.

<sup>4</sup> T. Gilby (Ed), "Holy Communion" in *Summa Theologiae* (London: Eyer & Spottiswood, (1975), Volume 59. P 7.

love, regardless of the reason for their illness or their station in life. In these ways we are authentic sanctuaries of compassion.

The work of healing remains the work of Jesus Himself. We stand on holy ground inasmuch as we have become by Baptism, brothers and sisters to one another and to Jesus himself.

Let us continue to be sanctuaries of compassion so together we can engage our society and its diverse cultures and evangelize them. In the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, let us work together with all persons of good will to become “prophets of this new age, messengers of His love, drawing all people to the Father and building a future of hope for all humanity”<sup>5</sup> where human dignity, freedom and human flourishing will be assured, affirmed and protected.

Indeed the work before us is challenging, awesome, and is an integral part of the New Evangelization. This work has been the heart of the Dominican Order for over 800 years. Within these eight centuries of showing the Face of Jesus, bringing his healing mission to the world, the Order of Preachers remains a powerful instrument in carrying forward the Word of God into the lives of all persons.

Recalling the invitation extended by Saint Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the First World Day for Consecrated Life, he said, “You not only have a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.”<sup>6</sup> As Dominicans consecrated to the Word, let us then take up this invitation anew.

In that same tradition that motivated St. Dominic and his early followers, as itinerant women and men, let us “look to the future . . .” As vital centers of contemplation, study, encounter and dialogue, our Dominican communities are ecclesial communities. We are living witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design. As prophets of healing and hope, we are the visible signs for the entire world to see and a compelling force that leads others to Christ. Are we not compelled by the presence of God in each of us and all those entrusted to our care. As we read in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 4:18-19):

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Now let us carry on and be open to the surprises that God has planned for us. In the words of St. Catherine of Siena, OP, “open your mind’s eye and look within me and you will see the

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. “Young People Build a Future of Hope for All Humanity” Closing Homily, World Youth Day, July 20, 2008 (Rome, Italy: Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana: [http://www.Vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/documents/hf\\_benxvi\\_hom\\_2008](http://www.Vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/documents/hf_benxvi_hom_2008)).

<sup>6</sup> St. Pope John Paul II. *Vita Consecrata*, 1996. (No, 110). Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

dignity and beauty of the human person.”<sup>7</sup> Let us continue to be sanctuaries of compassion. Let us catch the fire of the New Evangelization, and share the gifts of our contemplation, our study of truth and the principles of human dignity, freedom, and justice. Let us be living examples of the virtues of mercy, hope and compassion, and then engage others to join us in this noble work.

This ministry of evangelization entrusted to our Order in 1216 continues into our ninth century of preaching truth, mercy and the salvation of souls. The question “who do we really care about” can be acknowledged and answered: no individual regardless of the reason for their illness, color, creed, intact or broken families, social class, immigrant status, ethnicity or community must ever be left behind. Following the model of St. Dominic, as *Lumen Ecclesiae*, let us too light up the world, then heal it! Amen.

Bro. Ignatius Perkins, OP, PhD, RN, Executive Director  
The Dominican Friars Health Care Ministry of New York  
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<sup>7</sup> Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, translation and introduction by Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980), 26.