

# Dominican Preaching: An 800-year-old Gift Ever New

by Barbara E. Reid, OP

The Dominican Order has just concluded its Jubilee celebrations marking the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its official approval by Pope Honorius III in 1216. Founded by Spaniard Domingo de Guzmán in response to a critical pastoral need for preaching truth at the time that the Albigensian heresy<sup>1</sup> raged, it was dubbed by the Pope the “Order of Preachers” (OP), a moniker that well captures the Order’s central charism.

While preaching is a charism not unique to Dominicans, there is a distinctive spirituality, based on “four pillars,” that undergirds the charism: 1) contemplation, 2) study, 3) common life, and 4) ministry.

## Contemplation

Contemplation is both a gift and a practice that we Dominicans cultivate and teach to others. It hones our ability to listen, to hear with the heart of Holy Mystery what God is revealing in our day. In contemplative silence, we allow ourselves to be emptied of all that is not of God and to accept the overwhelming love and mercy of God, poured out on us by Christ, through the Spirit. For Dominicans, contemplation is not an escape from the world and its sufferings, but rather a practice that enables us to hear with the heart of Holy Mystery the cries of those who are most vulnerable, as we let ourselves be prompted by the Holy Spirit to discern how we are to pay forward the mercy we have received. Our practice of contemplative prayer is done both in solitude and communally, as both individually and together we learn to let our heart beat in rhythm with the heart of the Holy One. Without a personal and communal relationship with Christ, who is always the object of Dominican preaching, the word we proclaim would ring hollow.

Dominican contemplation involves the whole self, as demonstrated in the nine ways that St. Dominic prayed: bowing before the altar, prostrating himself, disciplining himself, gazing at the crucifix while repeatedly kneeling and rising, extending his arms forward, or to the side in cruciform, or upward to heaven, sitting in rapt attention with a book of the gospels, and walking. As mendicant preachers, Dominic and his followers are active contemplatives.

---

<sup>1</sup> Albigensians, also known as Cathars, flourished in southern France in the twelfth through thirteenth centuries. They espoused a dualistic worldview that regarded the spiritual as good and the material world as evil. Pope Innocent III launched a crusade against them (1209-1229), but they continued into the thirteenth through fourteenth centuries, when the Inquisition finally brought them to an end.

---

Barbara E. Reid, OP, is Vice President and Academic Dean and Professor of New Testament Studies at Catholic Theological Union.

## Study

Hand in hand with contemplation is study, one of the hallmarks of Dominicans. Study, especially of the Scriptures, insures that Dominican preaching is rooted in the Word. Study is also crucial in the quest for Truth, *Veritas*, which is the motto of the Order. For Dominicans, truth is something to be sought humbly, with an openness to finding it in unexpected places, as we learn from other cultures, traditions, and religions. Thomas Aquinas said that “we are mendicants for the truth, happy to beg a little bit of illumination from everyone whom we meet on the road.”<sup>2</sup>

Another aspect of the Dominican quest for truth is the practice of *disputatio*, that is, entering into respectful dialogue with others who hold a differing position from our own in order to arrive together at truth. When Thomas Aquinas practiced this, he began with the assumption that his opponent is always, in some sense, right. Timothy Radcliffe, former Master General of the Order (1992-2001), observes, “It is easy to identify another person’s errors. Do we have the courage to hear what they may teach us?”<sup>3</sup> To enter into *disputatio* requires assiduous study of the issues, and critical analysis of our social and cultural contexts. The aim is not to prove that my position is the true one – that stance leads to greater division. The aim, rather, is to come to greater unity, through deeper understanding of the multi-faceted diamond that is truth, and to come to a greater respect and understanding of one another, which brings possibilities for healing and reconciliation. The intent is not to erase all distinctions and come to uniformity, but to respect differences and engage them honestly and lovingly, recognizing that truth abides in many unexpected places. St. Catherine of Siena’s<sup>4</sup> image of bridge building captures well the intent of *disputatio*. In her *Dialogue*, she speaks of how Christ is the Bridge that connects us to the divine after the way had been broken by sin.<sup>5</sup> Just so, Dominican study and preaching aims to build bridges that enable healing and reconciliation in a broken world.

For Dominicans, there is a very fine line between prayer and study, the one easily blending into the other, especially since the object of Dominican study is primarily the Scriptures. Moreover, study in Dominican tradition is not solely an intellectual endeavor. Jordan of Saxony, Dominic’s first successor as leader of the Order, said that “Dominic understood all things through the humility of his heart.”<sup>6</sup> Understanding is not an affair of the head alone, but of head and heart together.

While study of the Scriptures holds a prime place in Dominican tradition, it is not the only avenue that leads us to truth about God. Dominicans insist that the whole of creation reveals divinity. Thomas Aquinas warned that “a mistake in our understanding of creation will necessarily cause a mistake in our understanding of God.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, every arena of inquiry is important for Dominicans, since all of creation reveals the Creator. St. Albert the Great wrote, “The whole world is theology for us, because the heavens proclaim the glory of God (Ps 24:1).”<sup>8</sup>

## Common Life

A third pillar of Dominican spirituality that undergirds our preaching is common life. Living together and holding all things in common, we foster a way of living that calls attention to the interconnectedness of all beings in the

---

2 Quoted by Timothy Radcliffe in his book *I Call You Friends* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 170-71.

3 Timothy Radcliffe, *Sing a New Song: The Christian Vocation* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1999), 249.

4 Catherine was a Third Order Dominican who was born in Siena in 1347 and died in Rome in 1380. Pope Paul VI named her Doctor of the Church in 1970.

5 Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/catherine/dialog.toc.html>.

6 Notes from Fr. Thomas O’Meara, OP.

7 Judy Cannato, *Radical Amazement. Contemplative Lessons from Black Holes, Supernovas, and Other Wonders of the Universe* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin, 2006), 7, citing Thomas Gilby, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Texts* (Durham, England: Labyrinth Press, 1982), 76.

8 Albertus Magnus, *In Evangelium secundum Matthaeum*, 13:35 in *Opera omnia*, XX (Paris, 1893), 571.

web of life and the reverence and care that is due to all creatures and Earth itself. For Dominicans, common life is not an end in itself, but is for the sake of the mission. One famous episode in Dominican history that underscores the communal nature of both our study and our preaching happened in Santo Domingo in 1511. The friars had arrived there from Spain in September of 1510. They came to devote themselves to the pastoral care of the other Spaniards and to evangelize the native peoples. Very soon, the friars became aware of the abusive treatment of the indigenous peoples as they were forced to become servants of the Spaniards. The Dominican community, disturbed by the oppression of the native people, devoted themselves to long hours in meetings to study the problem in depth, until they decided to make a public denunciation of the atrocities. The friars prepared the denouncement in the form of a sermon. Together, the whole community deliberated long and hard, writing the text together. Each member of the community signed it, and then they chose Antonio de Montesinos to preach the homily on the fourth Sunday of Advent, 1511. And all stood together to face the repercussions.

## Ministry

The fourth pillar, ministry, is where the fruits of contemplation, study, and common life are manifest. Our motto is *contemplata aliis tradere*, “Contemplate and give to others the fruits of our contemplation.” The primary way in which Dominicans do this is through preaching. While many people think only of homilies delivered from a pulpit when they hear the word “preaching,” Dominican preaching takes a great many forms today. As friar Peter John Cameron describes, “Dominicans preach the Word of God in every possible way including liturgical preaching, parish missions, retreat preaching, occasional lectures, addresses at religious conferences, street preaching, teaching, writing (especially books), through art (especially film, television, and theatre), and by exploiting the advantages offered by the Internet and other advances of the digital age.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it is not only the friars who preach. From the very beginning, the Dominican family has included nuns, friars (both priests and brothers), and lay Dominicans. Today there are also Dominican apostolic sisters, lay associates, and affiliates, as well as dynamic youth<sup>10</sup> who claim and exercise the Dominican preaching charism. All share in the same mission, preaching in myriad ways. And so the holy preaching continues, God willing, into the next 800 years.

---

9 Peter John Cameron, “Dominican Preaching.” Order of Preachers, <http://www.op.org/en/content/dominican-preaching>. For preaching resources available electronically, see <http://www.op.org/en/list-cat-list-type/11>.

10 See more on the International Dominican Youth Movement at IDYM:International Dominican Youth Movement, <http://idymop.org/en/>.