

## THE CONTEMPLATIVE CHARACTER OF DOMINICAN LIFE

MARK HEATH, O.P., AND PAUL M. STARRS, O.P.

---



IN 1895, the Prioress of the Dominican Sisters of Brooklyn was faced with a serious dilemma. Circumstances in America were forcing her to relinquish some of the integral Dominican ideals. At least, so some Sisters thought at that time. Mother Antonine was changing the status of the Holy Cross Dominicans from Second Order to Third; and this move, some claimed, was the end of the contemplative ideal in Brooklyn. The rules and customs of their ancient Mother-house, Holy Cross Convent, in Ratisbon, Germany, a strictly contemplative monastery, were being discarded, and new ones substituted in their place. With the old law would go the old spirit of contemplation, penance and prayer, indeed the integrity of Dominican life. Yet some changes had to be made to make Dominican life possible in nineteenth century America, and this was the cause of the indignation and sorrow. A consideration of the problem, and a glance at history, however, prove that the fear was vain. Today's Dominicans are as contemplative as yesterday's; all Dominicans, whether Friars, Sisters, or lay people are called to this ideal. Their perfection depends on their approaching it.

There is only one Dominican ideal. It was determined by St. Dominic, and is preserved in the laws and customs of the Order. All members of the family share it. Whether they are religious or lay, Friars or Sisters, they seek one perfection, and model their lives according to one plan. A father gives one end to his family, and all its members seek to attain it.

There are differences in the way in which the ideal is sought, but they are superficial and not essential. Circumstances may differ in the various parts of the Order. The field of apostolate may differ, but the means, the preparation, and the spirit brought to it never do. The Friar in a pulpit, the Sister in a cloister, a classroom, or a hospital, and a tertiary in a factory have the same spirit in their work, and use similar means to attain it.

This Dominican ideal has been stated by St. Thomas in the *Summa Theologica* in a section where his tone is that of a pugnacious defender of the Dominican Order against its thirteenth-century enemies. His phrase is like an old medal, holy and ancient, that has been polished to a greater brilliance by the constant rubbing of successive

generations of thumbs. It is the motto of the Order: *Contemplare et aliis tradere contemplata*. To contemplate, and to give to others the fruits of that contemplation.

It means that all Dominicans are contemplatives, and from the abundance of their contemplation, they communicate its fruits to the world. They are wells, in St. Bernard's phrase, that must overflow, rather than channels which merely carry. Their contemplation is the cause of their action, though not a means to it; and the giving over to others is fruitless unless it be preceded by the contemplation itself. To be Dominican, for St. Thomas, is to be contemplative.

This is no empty phrase. Dominicans are ranked among the Church's contemplatives. The orders most familiar as contemplative, the Trappists, for example, are contemplative because the means chosen by their founders foster contemplation and are ordained especially toward it. Yet the Trappists have no means which is not found in the Dominican Constitutions today. If the Trappists are contemplative, the Dominicans are, and to the same degree. Nuns of the Second Order are contemplative, yet the regulations of the uncloistered sisters match theirs for devotion and direction to this ideal. A comparison of Dominican rules, with those of modern communities, moreover, shows that the Dominicans have preserved the medieval tradition, which was contemplative to a perfect degree.

History bears this out. The Friars have ever fought to preserve this character, especially when the pressure of the times was to snuff it out. The restorations completed by Blessed Raymond of Capua and later by Father Jandel, show the fecundity of the Order in bringing itself back to its ancient ideal whenever it falls away. The history of the cloistered Sisters is full of incidents of this sort. Many times, they voluntarily gave up work and closed schools in order to revive the cloistral Dominican life in all its integrity. Dominicans strove always with one end, to preserve, protect, and ensure the contemplative life. It was not to be lost among them.

The history of American Dominicans is but a repetition of the same spirit. A simple entry in the diary of Mother Hyacintha, the third Prioress of the Racine Dominicans, indicates with extreme simplicity this determination. "Nov. 30, 1868: Today we tried the grille for the first time. Thanks be to God; it was hard to make the beginning."<sup>1</sup> This is clear evidence of the attachment of these sisters to a contemplative ideal. The grille was one of many practices asso-

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in: Kohler, Sr., M. H. *Life and Work of Mother Benedicta Bauer*, p. 319. Bruce, Milwaukee, 1937.

ciated with the cloistral life of Ratisbon which the Sisters in America wished to restore. With these aids they intended the preservation of Dominican contemplative life in their convents.

The attachment of these American Sisters, however, was not primarily to a set of observances, or to certain exterior habits of living, but to the life of which they were the infallible guard. Thus in Brooklyn in 1895, and in Racine in 1877, when circumstances forced the Sisters to give up many observances, of which the grille may be taken as a symbol, they insisted on preserving the contemplation. This character has marked the ideal of Dominican Sisters in America today.

The fear that Sisters could not be contemplative, unless at the same time they lived in a strict cloister, was a repetition in the nineteenth century of an objection which faced St. Dominic in the thirteenth. It was an historical fact that previous to his time all contemplative men were cloistered. As a challenge, he formed an army of contemplatives whose cloister, as one historian sneeringly remarked, was the world. Sisters of the Third Order undertook the same vocation.

Dominicans, then, have cherished their contemplative vocations, and American Dominicans have not been amiss in this. That Dominicans are contemplative is admitted. Exactly what contemplation is, is a matter they must investigate.

Certainly contemplation must be something more than simple meditation, for all religious are bound to a daily meditation, and we do not consider all as contemplatives. The contemplative life is something different from the ordinary Christian life; it is also something different from the religious life.

This contemplation then, from which the contemplative life is named must be something special. It has been described as a simple, loving glance at God. It is not, of course, a seeing of God face to face. This is reserved for the blessed in heaven. Nor is it the same as faith. It is through faith that we see God while we are on earth—through a glass in a dark manner. But to see God through faith belongs to every Catholic. Contemplation, though based on faith, gives us knowledge of a sort different from that given by faith.

God is in Himself simple—without parts; but the truths about God which He has revealed to us and which are proposed by faith are proposed in a complex manner. This is the way in which our intellect understands things. A thing which is simple in itself, we may understand only by enumerating its qualities one by one, affirming that these qualities belong to the thing under consideration and

denying that other qualities belong to it. Thus, faith tells us that God is our Father, that He is the Creator, all-powerful, all-wise, all-good. It denies at the same time that He has a body, that He had a beginning, that He can ever change. God is simple, but for our minds to obtain—even to a slight degree—a knowledge of the Nature of God, it is necessary that these various qualities be enumerated.

Meditation proceeds in this same manner. It is a discourse, a certain reasoning process. Suppose we were to meditate upon the statement: "God is our Father." We should examine the concept "father" and see it in its various aspects which make it applicable to God. A father is the cause of our being. So God is the cause of our being. A father watches over his children, he protects them, provides for their needs, teaches them. Each of these we should see as applicable to God. And finally we should conclude that because a father does all these things, and because God is our Father, therefore, we must love Him. Thus, the meditation would terminate in an act of love or charity.

Meditation, however, may vary in its complexity. As one becomes more proficient more and more perfections can be seen in a single idea, and thus the discursive process becomes more simple. A stage may be reached where almost no process or reasoning at all is necessary. All the implications of the term "father," for example, are perceived in a single glance, and the soul in admiration proceeds immediately to an act of love. This simplified form of meditation has been called *acquired contemplation*. It is called contemplation because of its simplicity, and acquired because we ourselves can obtain it. This does not mean that it can be acquired independently of God. Its object is supernatural, for it has its roots in faith; its end is supernatural, for it terminates in charity; and it is not attained without the help of actual grace. Yet it is, properly speaking, the result of human activity, just as is the science of theology, or even of chemistry or mathematics.

*Infused contemplation*, which is contemplation properly so-called, is entirely different. It has been defined as a simple and loving knowledge of God which cannot be obtained by our personal activity aided by grace, but, on the contrary, requires a special manifest inspiration and illumination of the Holy Ghost.

It is entirely beyond our power to obtain, for it is a pure gift of God. It operates particularly through the gifts of the Holy Ghost. These gifts are special habits or dispositions in the faculties of the soul which render it docile to the promptings of the Holy Ghost. The gifts are present in every soul in the state of grace, and are infused

together with charity; but they may be more or less operative. In contemplation their action predominates and the soul acts no longer according to the norms of reason—even of a reason enlightened by faith—but according to the special inspirations of the Holy Ghost. Principal among the gifts which operate in contemplation are the gifts of understanding, whereby we are able to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of faith; knowledge, whereby we judge created things according to their true value; and wisdom, whereby we obtain a sort of divine knowledge even of divine things, that we may the more earnestly desire them.

It is from this *infused contemplation*, then, that the contemplative life derives its name. This evidently cannot mean that a society is called contemplative because all its members contemplate, or even because a majority of them do so. The contemplative life is so called rather because it is ordered primarily to contemplation and contains within itself the means apt to dispose to contemplation. Since infused contemplation is a free gift of God, it cannot be merited by any action of ours. Yet, as Saint Teresa remarks, "we should prepare ourselves for it, and that preparation must be of great service."<sup>2</sup> It is this preparation or disposition which is the immediate object of the means prescribed for a contemplative life.

One can dispose himself for contemplation either positively or negatively. Negative dispositions will remove the obstacles to contemplation. These obstacles are principally deliberate sin and distractions. The positive dispositions will furnish a certain preparation of the matter for contemplation, that is, an intellectual preparation, and, so far as it is possible, will make a direct attempt to move God to grant this grace.

The traditional observances of the contemplative orders are directed to this four-fold disposition. It should be evident that the Dominican Religious Life, as it is lived by all three Orders of St. Dominic, contains these four elements which have always been identified with the contemplative life, and are essentially dispositions to contemplation.

Against sin and any affection for it the various bodily austerities are directed, for it is the senses and unruly passions which are the principal causes of sin. Now, bodily austerities have always been an integral part of the asceticism of the Order. The fast and abstinence, the simple and severe furnishings of the cell, the use of coarse clothing are all means of mortification—of achieving what the spiritual

---

<sup>2</sup> Relation VIII, No. 2.

writers call the active purification of the senses, which is so necessary for progress toward contemplation.

Against distraction we find the cloister and the law of silence—means which have become almost identified with the contemplative life. Though it is true of the Friars, and to a lesser extent of the Third Order Sisters, that the world is their cloister, since they must go into the world in pursuing their apostolate, it is also true that they have a cloister from which the world is rigidly excluded, and it is here that they develop the spirit of recollection which will enable them to go into the world without being contaminated by it. The law of silence, for all the followers of St. Dominic, though not so all-inclusive as the Trappist observance, nevertheless shuts out distractions and guarantees that spirit of recollection which keeps the soul in the presence of God. The very wording of the Constitutions of the Friars is an indication that silence is the general rule, conversation only an exception, for after enumerating the places of special silence (which, indeed, include most of the house) the Constitutions add: "Elsewhere, they may speak with special permission."<sup>3</sup> And this same legislation is found expressly in the constitutions of many of the Sisters. In those of the others, it is certainly implied.

Of the third disposition to contemplation, study, it might be objected that it was not a means in the ancient contemplative orders, but rather is an addition made by the Order of St. Dominic. Yet this is not really true; though the Dominican emphasizes study because of its bearing upon the apostolate of preaching, nevertheless a certain amount of knowledge of sacred things, and therefore a certain amount of study has always been considered necessary for the contemplative life. We say for the contemplative life, for it may happen occasionally that an individual will be raised to infused contemplation with almost no previous intellectual preparation, but this is not God's ordinary manner of acting.

Though the members of the Dominican Second and Third Orders are not expected to acquire the theological science which the Friars must have, the intellectual character of the Order has its influence on them, and their spirituality has about it a characteristically intellectual note, as is to be expected of all those who claim Thomas Aquinas for a brother and Catherine of Siena for a mother.

Finally, among the traditional means which dispose to contemplation, there is liturgical prayer. Here, as in the matter of study there will be certain accidental differences between the three Orders. The

---

<sup>3</sup> *Constitutiones S.O.P.* No. 624.

First and Second Orders bind themselves to the solemn recitation of the Divine Office, while the Third Order Sisters not infrequently substitute the Office of the Blessed Virgin. Yet even in this case, the prayers of the Sisters have at least a quasi-liturgical dignity. This office, too, pertains in a way to the official prayer of the Church. It is not merely a private prayer and the Sisters have always clung most jealously to its solemn recitation in choir, and dispose its hours, as the hours of the Divine Office are also disposed, around the central pivotal point, which is the conventual Mass. The recitation of the Office has been described as the first of the observances of the Order which serve the contemplation of divine truth. This it does in a three-fold manner. First, by the very fact of uniting the mind to God it disposes to contemplation. Secondly, the constant repetition and pondering of the inspired writings which form the greater part of the Office furnish matter for contemplation. Finally, as a prayer and therefore a petition, it is a direct appeal to God for this gift; for contemplation is not earned but freely bestowed by God, and He most frequently bestows His favors on those who ask for them.

Thus, from a consideration of its observances, which are the traditional observances of contemplatives, we can see that Dominican life is truly contemplative. Indeed, the choice of these means can be explained by only one end—a life of the highest contemplation itself. Because Dominicans profess these means, they seek this end. By their vocation they are contemplatives in the strictest sense.

Only contemplation in its strictest sense, moreover, can describe the activity of St. Dominic. His was the highest infused contemplation, and this is the example his sons and daughters must imitate if they be true to him. His life was one of continued contemplation which overflowed into real apostolic activity.

His express intention in founding the Order was that contemplation should flourish in it. There are extant three pieces of legislation written by St. Dominic. One is a section of the Friars' Constitutions, another is a rule he wrote for the Sisters at St. Sixtus which was copied in full in the Papal Bull approving the foundation, and a third is a letter he wrote, the only autograph known, to the Sisters of St. Dominic of Silos convent in Madrid. All these demonstrate clearly the contemplative character which he wished to impress on the members of his institute. These documents abound in references to penitential exercises, and to monastic observances, which are inseparable from contemplation, and are a sure mark of a contemplative community. Dominic himself was a true contemplative. It was his express law that his children should be the same.

Other Dominican legislation sounds the same tone. The Friars' Constitutions states particularly that the end of the order is contemplation, as do the Constitutions approved for the cloistered Sisters of the Second Order. The Constitutions of the other Sisters' congregations, in the United States and England, not expressly, but by inference, express the same devotion.

The Ratisbon Rule Book, a Sisters Rule, written by Blessed Humbert of the Romans, who knew Saint Thomas and Saint Dominic, was the guide to Dominican life in American convents for nearly fifty years. Edited under the direction of Mother Benedicta Bauer in Ratisbon, and used as the Constitutions in the foundation of the Brooklyn, Newburgh, Racine, and San Francisco Congregations, it is a rule whose end is contemplation in the strictest sense. That the American founders chose it is a sign of the direction toward which they hoped all members of their communities would tend with great devotion.

This hope, in its turn, was responsible for the difficulty which Mother Antonine later had in Brooklyn in replacing the Ratisbon Rule by another based on that of an English Third Order congregation. Many Sisters were convinced that the end of the Ratisbon influence would mean the end of contemplative life. On the other hand, the requirements of schools, orphanages, and hospitals made many of the Ratisbon practices impossible. The resolution of the difficulty was this: that the zeal for contemplation was to be preserved, though the rule might be modified.

Saint Thomas teaches that Dominicans are striving after contemplation in its strictest form. In that tract in the *Summa* in which he chooses: *Contemplare et aliis tradere contemplata* as the definition of the mode of life of a mixed institute, such as the Dominicans are, he is speaking of contemplation in its strictest sense, and not in any dilute rhetorical sense. If Dominicans are to be faithful to the motto compounded by St. Thomas, they must be true to it in the meaning which he intended, which is that their end is the highest contemplation.

Yet the height of the ideal, and the difficulty and work involved in attaining it, are incontrovertible. Newman said once that it was dead; there are others today who claim it is impossible.

In defence of its possibility we must assert first that when it is obtained, it rarely is recognized by modern activist standards. A challenge to such opinion is the stern fact that the ideal is attained by Dominicans today.

But there is even more positive reason for encouragement. Contemplation is a free gift of God, given ordinarily to those who are disposed for it, and bestowed especially where it is needed. Contemplatives are needed today, as much as they have ever been. In the face of this need, and mindful of the ever abundant fecundity of the Order in the face of every need, Dominicans may well reason, in the words of the present Master General of the Order:

... if we grant a similarity between this (infused) contemplation and the beatific vision, to which many are called, but few are chosen, have we not compelling reasons for believing that the sons of St. Dominic who ought by reason of their profession to give to others the fruits of their contemplation, are not only among those called but also among the elect, at least when, on their part, they do all in their power to obtain this choice grace.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Martin Stanislaus Gillet, O.P., *Encyclical Letter on Dominican Spirituality*.