

Suggestions for up-dating Dominican Preaching today in the light of its historical origins.*

Dominican Preaching

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Doctrinal preaching to an intellectual and academic audience is unquestionably a true and authentic function of the Dominican vocation which should never be neglected—granted, of course, that it is only one of the many facets of our pastoral work. More than any other period of the Order's history, the thirteenth century saw a close cooperation between our preachers and masters and lectors. This interdependence clearly reveals what Dominican preaching is.

Everyone knows that the office of preaching belongs properly to the episcopal or hierarchical order: "*Praedicationis munus quod episcoporum praecipuum munus est.*" (Council of Trent, 23rd session). We need not dwell on this point. The priestly character of our preaching apostolate flows from the Order's *ecclesial* mission. Preaching the divine Word is, by reason of our priestly ordination in the Order of Preachers, the highest concern for each of us. The pontifical Bull of 1220 states that our brethren are "totally commissioned for the evangelization of the Word of God" (Laurent, *Historia diplomatica S. Dominici*, in MOPH, p. 129).

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Now, the actual preaching of first-generation Dominicans establishes beyond doubt that our preaching is pre-eminently doctrinal. It is not a later innovation, as some have held. M. Lecoy de la Marche in his book, *La chaire française au moyen âge*, (Paris 1886), a classic in this area, states that the didactic form of preaching was introduced in the thirteenth century by the Dominican Order (p. 288-289). But do not equate the didactic manner of preaching with an erudite, scholarly approach which is suited to cultured people only—*clerici* as they were then called. Quite the contrary. Their contemporaries attest that the preaching of the first generation Dominicans was evangelical and simple. But from about the year 1260, the Order slowly abandoned this type of preaching for a more erudite and scholarly approach. What we should keep in mind, however, is that the preaching of the brethren, regardless of how they delivered their sermons—evangelical and simple in the first years and a more scholarly presentation later on—was always didactic and doctrinal. Humbert of Romans' *De eruditione praedicatorum* bears this out quite well.

The doctrinal character of Dominican preaching explains an element which has always been at the core of our Order: the close connection between the assiduous study of theology and preaching. This relationship was established from the earliest days of the Order as a structural element of conventual life itself. The primitive Constitutions legislated that no convent should be erected without a teacher or lector (d. 2, c. 23: ed. Scheeben, p. 75). Every convent would become a sort of school of theology. A vestige of this remains in our present Constitutions: "No convent is to be constituted without a prior, *lector*, and procurator" (C.O.P. No. 275). It should be noted that this conventual structure, which was designed for doctrinal preaching, already existed before the theological renewal of Albert and Thomas. They did not initiate the doctrinal character of the Order but inherited it from the fathers of the first generation. Dominic sent his followers to the universities not so much to exercise a pastoral ministry there but rather to further their preparation for preaching. This is evidenced by the first mission of the brethren to Paris and Bologna in 1217 (see H. M. Feret, O.P., "Vie intellectuelle et vie scolaire dans l'Ordre des Freres Precheurs," in *Archives d'histoire dominicaine*, 1946, Vol. 1, pp. 5-37). As a result of their studies there, one of the brethren's most distinguished duties arose: the university apostolate.

Dominican history not only shows the necessity of a close collaboration between preachers and teachers, but also that preaching is not limited to preachers (as opposed to lectors) and that it was one of the characteristic duties of Masters in Sacred Theology. In his *Brevi principio quando incoepit Parisiis ut Magister in S. Theologia*, St. Thomas writes: "All . . . doctors of Sacred Scripture should lead an eminently virtuous life so as to be qualified for *effective preaching*. . . . They must be enlightened to comment well on the Scriptures. . . . They must be prepared to answer difficulties in disputations. These three functions, (preaching, expounding, and refuting) are mentioned in the Epistle to Titus, ch. 1, v. 9" (*Opusc. IV*, ed. Mandonnet, p. 424).

This apostolate of magisterial preaching was first exercised in the academic milieu, to university students. It was an essential part of university life and pertained to the Master as such. The early morning sermons on Sundays and feast days were institutional elements of university life on a par with lectures and obligatory for the students. It is historically verified that Jordan of Saxony did much to establish this practice. And these sermons were not just homiletic exercises for students or a young Master; they were a true pastoral ministry.

There occurred in the Middle Ages a separation between the work of a teacher and that of a pastor. Previously, the university curriculum had been what I would call clerical or ecclesiastical: the class matter was at the same time a religious instruction in faith and morals. But as the university curriculum slowly evolved into a more scientific arrangement, the primary aim of the university consisted in the education of *teachers* for the various faculties at the university. True, these teachers should have provided the doctrine for the preachers; but with the change in the university's purpose, there arose a dangerous breach between academic knowledge and religious instruction. "Knowledge for its own sake," formerly seen as the aggrandizement of philosophy and dangerous to the Christian message, was now sought after by all. The university itself provided preaching on faith and morals as an institutional element within its structure precisely to avoid the dangers which might arise from the new curriculum. Because of this diligent preaching, the academicians (many of whom became quite noted in their fields) were prevented from remaining ignorant in religious and moral matters while developing their intellectual refinement. It is quite clear that this "institutional preaching" was necessitated by the new curriculum.

APPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

a. *Preaching in the university*

These historical developments, necessarily selective and viewed in a special light, nonetheless are sufficient for drawing some practical conclusions for our time. Undeniably, there is today a real disproportion between the intellectual achievement of the university family (professors as well as students) and their knowledge of the faith. The former expands and is refined daily while the latter, rather than increasing, remains at a high school or even grammar school level. Obviously, this disproportion will occasion many difficulties in the faith. Even if they do not undergo a crisis of faith, persons in the university can easily slip into the so-called "double truth" attitude. While holding on to the faith of their parents, this faith often appears to be contradicted by their professional learning. Because of this unformulated though truly experienced contradiction, university people are often under the impression that they are leading hypocritical religious lives. We must give special attention to the university community, both professors and students. The urgency is even greater than during the Middle Ages.

This doctrinal preaching can take many forms. Besides Advent and Lenten preaching customarily assigned to us in various places, there is a great need for continuous religious education, *v. gr.*: discussion clubs in which the doctrine of the faith is systematically presented in such a way that a true dialogue is begun not only between the preacher and his audience but also within the academic audience itself, the preacher acting as leader and guide. In addition to these rather systematic discussions, it would also be beneficial to have some scripturally orientated discussions in which the preacher would explain the Scriptures and especially show the proper way to read and understand them. There are many problems in this area, not too difficult in themselves, but which pose a great danger to the academic community, well-versed in everything except religion. The above-mentioned specialization of the sciences which caused a narrow or unilateral development of the academic mind demands an untiring and professional doctrinal preaching. In these days when intelligent laymen are becoming more aware of their apostolic vocation in God's Church, it is essential that they be knowledgeable and expert in the faith. Otherwise they will cause confusion and dissension instead of contributing positively.

In view of this situation, a doctrinal preaching—aware of the needs of our age, the needs of the life of the Church and of mankind, tirelessly directed to the university (professors as well as students)—this type of preaching is urgently demanded of us by reason of our Dominican vocation. It should be entrusted especially to our lectors since it is more akin to their doctrinal office. This means that they should also live in the cities where the great universities are located. Our Order should serve these universities by continuous doctrinal preaching of every kind, as time and place allow. Now this does not mean that we attempt a monopoly on this pastoral work. But whatever may be the apostolate of others, our Order should know where *its* proper work lies.

b. Co-operation among lectors and preachers

A second practical conclusion can be drawn from the historical developments mentioned at the outset of this paper. It is clear that there existed at the beginning of the Order a close co-operation among our preachers and lectors in the doctrinal apostolate—to such a degree that this co-operation evolved into an institutional element in our conventual and apostolic life. It could prove very advantageous to revive this tradition according to modern circumstances.

Each day modern problems become so increasingly intricate that our preachers, already over-burdened with too many assignments, cannot possibly keep up. On the other hand, the study of Sacred Truth demands so much attention that lectors are unable to experience directly the secular world. A close apostolic collaboration, under the direction of priors and provincials, appears necessary first that preaching may be efficacious and convincing by drawing from the knowledge and insights of lectors and secondly to prevent lectures, especially the pastoral and kerygmatic ones, from wandering away from real and contemporary problems. Might it not be very worthwhile then to encourage and promote vigorously further complementary studies after the theological course—as our Constitutions provide for our young fathers? This would preclude our apostolate of doctrinal preaching from becoming superficial and haphazard, insensible to the spirit of our age.

Our ancient Dominican tradition provides definite leads for improving the effectiveness of our preaching apostolate. The evening discussion or dialogue was a conventual element of the apostolic life—a structural element of conventual exercises even in houses with no

studia attached. The importance of this function is evident from the admonition of Humbert of Romans that houses and priors energetically foster “*spiritualibus . . . exercitiis intra claustrum, ut sunt scholae, COLLATIONES, sermones, etc. . .*” (*De officiis Ordinis*, C. 3: ed. Berthier, II, p. 202). Modified and adapted to our circumstances, these discussions could play a major role in improving the effectiveness of our preaching. Preachers would deliver talks from their wide experience to lectors, and lectors or professors would do likewise in houses of preachers, presenting some new aspects of contemporary thought. A co-operation of this type would certainly be in keeping with the traditional Dominican spirit in which each member brings to the community, in a fraternal and humble way, his knowledge and experience so that all may be enriched. Such a mutual co-operation would build up the doctrinal character of our apostolic preaching. Undoubtedly, this collaboration would be difficult without a humble charity. But, given this humility, what could prevent experience from enriching science and *vice versa*? Whatever might be the moral dispositions required for a fruitful dialogue, scarcely anyone doubts its necessity.

c. *The role of Scripture*

Thirdly, we can draw some practical conclusions from the scriptural character of our medieval brothers' preaching. The manuals of that era “*de eruditione praedicatorum*” (many of which are still extant) show that the basis for all preaching was Scripture, even when preaching became more scholastic and erudite. Preaching was always a matter of interpreting and explaining some text of Sacred Scripture and applying it to moral and religious conduct. Another motive for scripturally based preaching is that our contemporaries prefer its clear and straightforward language. Besides, “The word, that is the *faith* we preach . . .” (Rom. 10:8) we receive from the Lord and in turn pass it on to others (cf. I Cor. 11:23). Also, if religious experience (which is extensively discussed these days even outside Church circles) is not enlightened from within by the objective revelation of the mystery of Christ, then true religious experience faces the danger of being undermined by some of the current notions and formulations. For it is only in the mystery of Christ (from which flows the mystery of the Church) that the true and integral religious experience is brought to light. All of Sacred Scripture is directed to the reality of the salvation of Christ, in which is manifested the munificence of the Trinity. The Dominican medieval devotion to the humanity of Christ is well in

accord with this. Doctrinal preaching should be grounded in the humanity of Christ who is our way to God as well as God's contact with men.

d. Authenticity and relevance

On the other hand, although the Word of God (written and in Tradition), or the entire content of Christian revelation, is objectively preserved in the Church by the guidance of her teaching authority—it is this Word which we proclaim—we must not forget to preach it *as believers*. For what we preach to others is also a vital element of our own religious lives. So our preaching is not only an act of the mind grasping the faith, but also an act of the heart, emanating from the whole man, as mentioned in the thirteenth-century *On the Instruction of Novices*: “that wisdom which penetrates the depths of the heart and sets ablaze the fire of charity, by which the words of the preacher penetrate the hearts of his hearers to dispel their hardness, so that the preacher speaks and melts their hearts and the ardor of divine love burns off their coldness. . . . Then his hearers will be able to say of the preacher: ‘were not our hearts burning when he spoke to us on the way and explained the Scriptures?’” (*Libellum de instructione et consolatione novitiorum*, see R. Creytens, O.P., “L’instruction des novices au XIIIe siecle” in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, Vol. XX, 1950, p. 164).

Preaching of this kind is all the more urgent because the modern mentality or psychology cannot and will not grasp the truth of the faith unless this truth is confirmed by the religious life of the preacher. When it is, the statement of the *Instructio novitiorum* is verified: “so that it will be evident to all your hearers that you are truly a friar preacher and everyone who hears you will be able to say, ‘you are indeed one of them for your words betray you’” (*loc. cit.* p. 183). St. Paul has the same in mind when he says: “We were eager to hand over to you not only the Good News but our whole lives as well” (I Thess. 2:8) and “We too believe and therefore we speak” (II Cor. 4:13). Profound theological understanding, then, must be embodied in personal religious experience.

But even this authenticity is not enough. It must be complemented by human experience which is steeped, intellectually and affectively, in the total ambit of human life. Our work is to preach the Word of God to the men of our time. We must know not only the Word of

God (which, through personal faith, becomes the vital element of our religious lives); we must also know the recipients of that Word. Our preaching should always have this 'existential' quality, provided it play its proper and subordinate role: to insure that the Word of God is proclaimed in the clearest manner possible. For it is contrary to the purpose of preaching when sermons are "arguments that belong to philosophy, and not a demonstration of the power of the Spirit" (I Cor. 2:4-5); they "bring discredit on our work as God's servants" (II Cor. 4:13).

CONCLUSION

I should like to end this paper with a quotation from the *Instruction of Novices* cited above. This document states that the true wisdom of the preacher is acquired by "humble and devout prayers which enlighten the mind more than all else." For, "you can perhaps acquire a knowledge of any science or art from books, and your preaching will be truthful and polished; but you cannot acquire that wisdom which is from above: humble, virtuous, modest, persuasive, full of mercy and good works, you cannot acquire *that* wisdom unless you humbly and earnestly ask God to grant it to you" (*loc. cit.*, pp. 163-164).

Although it would be precipitate to neglect the technical aspects of preaching, we should not rely on natural means only. For preaching is a *mystery* of the Church: "We are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us" (II Cor. 5:20); it is a *grace*: "I have been entrusted with this grace, to preach to the Gentiles" (Eph. 3:8). "The teachings of the master from without are aids and admonitions. He that teaches the heart has his chair in heaven. . . . There is then a master within who teaches, Christ teaches; his inspiration teaches." (St. Augustine, *In I Epist. ad Joh.* 3:13; P. L. vol. 35, col. 2004-2005). These words of St. Augustine should be our guide. Dominican history clearly attests that the most successful and productive preaching was the work of our greatest saints. But this does not mean that we should neglect technical preparation for preaching—that would be tempting grace which is always helped and complemented by nature. Rather, we should view all technical work and practice as directed to a supernatural purpose, so that humble prayer and a holy life totally inform this labor and make it a worthwhile instrument for salvation. That great preacher, St. Paul, set the pattern when he wrote: "Finally, brothers, pray for us; pray that the Lord's message may spread quickly and be received with honor" (II Thess. 3:1).