

An Order Looks to Itself for Renewal

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This year, the Order of Preachers is celebrating its 750th anniversary. It seems providential for an Order reaching the three-fourths of a millenium mark that it also finds itself undergoing the most important renewal of its long history. The question asked is *how*. How are the norms laid down by Vatican II to be inculcated in the Order's particular framework? How does an Order achieve renewal which will be effective for today and for the future? What role does the Order's rich heritage play in this renewal?

These questions were asked of competent Dominican theologians and historians.¹ The following article is a summation of their reflections on these questions.

Return to the Sources

"The Council tells religious institutes that they will play a contemporary role and contribute to the vitality and growth of the

People of God if they jealously cling to their own distinctive heritage, fire themselves with the spirit of their founder and adhere to the particular goals and wholesome traditions which make up their heritage. During 750 years of existence, the Friars Preachers have made repeated *aggiornamentos*.”² Fr. Chenu states that more is required than just an external return to this tradition. Reflecting on these past attempts at renewing the Order he states: “A perceptive historian noted recently that these reforms were characterized by an ideal for observance, that is to say, by a return to ancient observance, rather than a desire to reconsider the very reasons for the existence of the Order. Today the Council invites the Order, motivated by a profound, evangelical and apostolic awareness, not only to revise its activity and to reform its customs, but to undertake a new consciousness of its reason for existence.”

Preaching

Preaching the Word of God is the Order's reason for existence. This is the essential characteristic which differentiates the Order of St. Dominic from other institutions. “For while earlier religious, namely the Canons Regular from whom you trace your origin in some measure, were assigned to the services of a definite church and were there occupied in the ordinary apostolate, you, aiming at the end for which your father and founder St. Dominic strove, were dedicated to the service of the Church at large in a new role, diligently exercising a rather extraordinary ministry, in particular, the ministry of the word.”³ “The wonder of the evangelical perception of St. Dominic is that he has specialized as little as possible; it is taken from the very heart of the Gospel and the apostolic institution. The essential *activity* is to spread saving truth in multiple ways—the manner being unimportant. The spoken word, writing books, scientific research, reflection, teaching, preaching, radio and television, revues, etc., are all to the point. But in all this, a certain level of quality, a *qualified* preaching or teaching is sought.” Fr. Congar continues by listing the means for this qualified preaching: “assiduous study and a contemplative orientation of life, that is, a framework of silence and prayer, a search for total disposability for God and men, therefore, an apostolic asceticism.” These means will be individually taken up later.

"The return to the Gospel is the very core of Church renewal and of its reform. In fact the Church discovers her being by undertaking her dialogue with the world, in becoming missionary. Let us leave, at its lowest level, the elementary sense which follows upon these words: of sermons and the like. Let us go beyond even the sense of the contents of propositions which the believer admits to be a rule of the orthodoxy of his belief. The Word of God is an act of Divine initiative—an intervention in the course of history and the world. By it, God challenges man, calls his entire existence into question. The Word of God is creative. It is the new creation in Christ toward whom all the Scriptures tend. It reveals to us a new being: a being-in-Christ which we can only meet by faith in this Word. The Church is established through the Word. It is at the interior of this intervention of God that the faith unfolds, takes its consistency and its power of saving. The Word, therefore, is not reduced to a simple 'teaching.' It is not primarily a 'doctrine.' It is a *witness* in the real sense of the word which is at the source of its existence. Certainly the understanding of the faith tends vitally to study its divine object, to organize itself into doctrine so it can be incarnated in one's mind and to be transmitted to one's brother. But it is through *today's* testimony that the evangelical message is transmitted.

"The Order defined itself from its beginning as entirely devoted to the proclaiming of the Word of God. So well, in fact, that the first friars were called the 'new prophets.' Its whole creative and evolutionary dynamism is commanded by this insistence to carry everywhere, primarily beyond the frontiers of Christianity, this evangelical message. Once more in the Church there is an evangelical reawakening. It is worthwhile and profitable to observe the causes and difficulties of this evangelical preaching, not only at the conciliar level, but also on a day to day basis. It is urgent to discern the psychological, social and cultural conditions of the transmission of the message. God is speaking today."⁴

"Dominicans are Friars Preachers, that is to say, they are ministers of the Word of God for the men of our times. If we wish to view our apostolate in this light, all will be clarified, all ambiguities will disappear."⁵ "Updating is very easy for us if we act courageously and vigorously. Our aim is perennial: the salvation of souls through preaching. Not preaching in the narrow sense of pulpit preaching, but in the expansive, apostolic sense that uses any channel available to communicate Christ and evangelical truth."⁶

A Prayerful Preaching

"To bear fruit, Our Lord teaches but one means: *ask* of God for the fruitfulness of the ministry. The intercession of prayer is the most powerful tool for the ministers of salvation and the Word. Like St. Dominic, the apostle prays for a *true* charity. He does not want characteristics which are too human—an overly natural love of God and souls inspired by the native generosity of his heart. He knows that generosity, even in the most noble of souls, is hemmed in by egotism, pride and passion. The Preacher knows that without the grace of God he would not be generous enough to love God above all else and his neighbor as himself for the love of God. So he asks God for a heart opened by a charity which gives itself entirely—with no taking back.

He also prays for an *efficacious* charity. If we belong totally to God and souls our intentions are not enough: we want a fruitful apostolate. That is why the Preacher who is committed to his ministry is not content merely to preach—he asks continuously for a charity which does not become sterile, but which strikes the heart of souls. He asks for an *intelligent* and *zealous* charity which penetrates the depths of the heart. He does not justify himself in advance by possible and foreseen failure, by the thought that he will have spoken the truth and done his duty. He accomplishes his duty and wants results. He wants success and does his best to insure it. And the essential, indispensable preparation is constant prayer asking for a charity which *dares* all.

This is the prayer of the sons of St. Dominic which will make them the speaking mouth, the helping hand, the tangible witness, the vital activity of Christ. To pray in this way while reciting the choral office, celebrating Mass, in private prayers—that is their proper vocation of apostle and religious."⁷

Pope Paul reminds Dominicans of the filial bond between the Order and Mary. From the Order's very beginning, the veneration of the Mother of God has always been a dominant theme in Dominican prayer life. "Again, by long established custom, you venerate in a special manner the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom we extol with rightful praise as the Mother of the Church. To be strengthened for the spiritual combat in which you must engage day after day, to enrich your studies and your pastoral ministry with heavenly life, over and above the practices which matter most, the daily recitation of the Divine Office, hold in highest esteem Mary's Rosary, your family's form of prayer which you must never put aside."

Fraternal Evangelism

“Among the profound inspirations of the Council, rather, among the signs of the evangelical reawakening in the Church, one of the most impressive, though not easily defined, is the sense of community. The Church is not primarily an institution with a juridical, visible structure which constitute a ‘society.’ It is first of all, and without prejudice to this essential character of society, a community. That is to say, a people organically constituted by a quasi-biological solidarity with the same grace of Christ, living within the solidarity of faith, hope and charity. The internal structures of this body, although divine by their institution, are ministerial. The authority is at the service of the community.

Obedience is not a submission of the will to an exterior imperative but an internal condition of communion with the common good. Of this Church community, the preacher is predisposed to prove the truth and the efficacy. The Order of St. Dominic is constituted into a fraternal way of life quite different from monastic paternalism and authoritarian groupings. Qualify, if you will, this term, this regime, as democratic, with its regular elections, its capitular assemblies, general and local, its permanent control of powers, its refusal to place the submission to the constitution under pain of sin. Say further, fraternal evangelism. The order is a fraternity, not a society, where the grace and perfection are communicated through an active and continual participation in an evangelical milieu.”⁸

The Holy Father points out the primacy of obedience within the Order’s fraternal makeup. “In this matter, very important place must be given to that which is the guardian of all the virtues: obedience. Although it is a holocaust and is an even more distinctive sign of renunciation than poverty and chastity, this nevertheless, does not constitute the whole of its makeup, since it produces many positive and noble acts, and guides human zeal in the path it should follow.”

As Fr. Chenu pointed out above, the Order of Preachers is not only a fraternal community geared to Apostolic Evangelism, it is a uniquely democratic community. This note of democracy, if prudently taken advantage of, will greatly help the Order in its renewal. “Our machinery of government, based on a democratic confidence in the collective wisdom of many friars, permits us to change our Constitutions through the affirmative action of three general chapters (the

chapter meets every three years). But this presupposes constant, frank dialogue among Dominicans. There has to be a constant questioning and examination. No other Order boasts such inherent flexibility. In 1220 Dominic placed into the hands of superiors wide powers of dispensing from secondary laws and observances when the needs of study, preaching, or the salvation of souls demand. Responsible, enlightened use of this power gives the Order a day to day adaptability. It can meet local situations and needs quickly. If Dominicans will use their heritage intelligently, wholeheartedly, and promptly in adapting themselves to the current scene, they will give other Orders a valuable lesson in renewal."⁹

Silence

Another important means for efficacious prayer and hence, preaching, is silence and contemplation. "Each son of St. Dominic must get away from the unstable things of this world, must use silence to enter into the inner recesses of his soul, in order to hear the voice of the Lord. Then only will every Dominican be able to go forth, possessed of apostolic strength, to preach Christ to men, whether it be as a consecrated minister, or as a teacher, or a man who casts light before him by example dedicated to God."¹⁰ "Our Order first serves the Church by committing itself to a vibrant living of its contemplative apostolic life. Dominic pioneered this kind of religious life in the service of the People of God. The Dominican must show the world a Christian life based on fraternal love in community, a liturgical life experienced in choir and sanctuary, an apostolic life whose contemplative roots sustain a vibrant preaching of truth in the spirit of Christ and the Apostles. Vatican II writes in letters ten feet high the truth that contemplation is the only authentic base for the apostolic life."¹¹

A Tradition for Truth

Preaching must be more than motivated by charity and grounded in prayer. To use the words of Fr. Chenu, it must be a qualified and competent preaching: a sound preaching founded on truth. "By the end your order has in view, you are charged with the duty of searching out and explaining truth with diligence, with penetration, incessantly. Shunning the fallacies that lie in opinions which are far

from certain, not to say very bold and dangerous, it is your duty to lay hold upon the tradition of truth."¹²

This tradition for truth has its sources in St. Dominic and St. Thomas. "Our most essential heritage is that which we have received from our first Fathers, at the level of grace of foundation which was given to them. The achievement of the great men in our history is, above all, their incorporation and reactualization of the grace of foundation in virtue of which our first fathers brought something new and decisive into the history of salvation. We should turn principally to St. Dominic and St. Thomas Aquinas."¹³

"Our Lord Jesus Christ came 'to bear witness to the truth.' He was the light of the world who defined his office as that of preacher, sanctioned by the heavenly voice on Tabor: 'Hear Him.' He sent his apostles to preach to all nations and established a Church which would last until the end of time. St. Dominic wished to do nothing else than continue this doctrinal teaching in the midst of ever growing heresies. In our day atheism is on the rise; philosophy and literature are becoming the voices of error and half-truths. It is more urgent than ever, given the diversity of charisms in the Church, that there exist priests who teach with competence, who are learned in the biblical and theological fields, to continue the mission of light which was that of the Savior of the world and His apostles. If the Church has perhaps never been so anxious for the salvation of men, so clear-sighted in understanding their needs, so generous in multiplying its works of charity, so also never was the urgency for a doctrinal apostolate more grave and never were the qualified personnel so few. It seems that only the Order of St. Dominic is adapted, *by vocation*, to take part in this momentous battle of ideas. There has never been a better time for the sons of St. Dominic to make victorious the light over the darkness, to reveal God, to justify the truths of the gospel and to make clear the divine message in all its purity."¹⁴

After St. Dominic, we should turn to St. Thomas. "He should not be made a sort of 'law' (in the Pauline sense of the word) nor an arsenal of prefabricated truths, nor the last word on everything. On several points he can be surpassed, and he should be completed. He should be above all our masters, in whose school we can learn, over the long years, intellectual openness, honesty and rigor, a taste for going to the essential and for finding the fundamental. In this respect, even though I think a material fidelity to St. Thomas would be

catastrophic (and quite contrary to his spirit), even though I think St. Thomas offers us means of analysis and does not dispense us from drinking at the sources, I also think that St. Thomas is not a master who has been surpassed whom we should utterly abandon to follow the moderns, those men of whom everyone talks about today. Indeed, the moderns should be read and heard, and above all the *questions* they place. But first we must be assured of the solid and loyal structure of spirit that the frequentation of St. Thomas can assure us."¹⁵

The task of completing St. Thomas lies especially in the correlation of his philosophy and theology with modern science. This is reflected in the thought of Pope Paul and Fr. Fernandez. "The doctrine of this preeminent teacher, however, should not be closeted up, so to speak, within the household closet, kept aloof from the world; but it should be brought into contact with our own age to make it fruitful, or, as we ourselves once urged: let it face the philosophical forms and systems, the findings of natural and anthropological sciences which have sprung up so vigorously in our own times; so that conclusions can be drawn by which today's spiritual and cultural questions can be solved."¹⁶

"Update and vitalize the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas so that they may be actually useful to our times. Furthermore, besides knowing well the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas, it is necessary to have a good knowledge of the modern sciences: psychology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, etc. To show the relation between the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas and the great problems which arise from the advance of the sciences and the intimate connection between them, would be to render one of the greatest services possible to the Church and to the Order."¹⁷

To be true to St. Thomas and to find a measure of success in relating his philosophy with the sciences, we must have the same openness for seeking out and accepting truths as St. Thomas had in his time. "A second distinctive service to today's Church is to hold tenaciously to our Thomistic heritage, not in a narrow, close-minded, bigoted way, but the way Thomas would cling to it were he still standing among us. He sought for, recognized and accepted any truth no matter from what direction it came—he turned to the Greeks, the Arabs, the Jews and his contemporaries (even those who disagreed with him). He studied their thought, penetrated it, purged away its dross and took as his own the nuggets of truth embedded

in it. He challenged both friend and foe when he thought they were wrong.

Also, today we need all kinds of new theologies. We need a theology of work, a theology of love, a theology of contemporary warfare, a theology of outer space, a theology of nuclear physics, etc. A Thomist holding true to his Thomistic heritage can help fashion these needed theologies. He can help keep alive an authentic theological spirit—a spirit ever seeking deeper penetration of truth, but always working from a foundation that is solidly based on two thousand years of Catholic theologizing.”¹⁸

A Continuous Renewal

In summary, we can conclude that the Order of Preachers can accomplish a dynamic renewal by preaching Christ—a preaching based on prayer and motivated by charity and truth. This renewal cannot be accomplished by the Order as an organized whole. It must be brought about by each member individually recapturing the fervor of the evangelical message. Yet, even when this has been achieved, “we will never come to a time when we can sit back and say ‘our renewal is completed.’ We must make continuous renewals. In ten years, today’s renewal will already be on the way to obsolescence, given a world that changes with the speed of nuclear fission. We need a new model ever year, to speak the words of Detroit.”¹⁹

NOTES

¹Quotations by Pope Paul VI was taken from his letter to the Dominican General Chapter which met last year in Bogata. All other quotations have been written for this article.

²William Hinnebusch, O.P.

³Pope Paul VI

⁴M. D. Chenu, O.P.

⁵Jerome Hamer, O.P.

⁶William Hinnebusch, O.P.

⁷Ceslaus Spicq, O.P.

⁸M. D. Chenu, O.P.

⁹William Hinnebusch, O.P.

¹⁰Pope Paul VI

¹¹William Hinnebusch, O.P.

¹²Pope Paul VI

¹³Yves Congar, O.P.

¹⁴Ceslaus Spicq, O.P.

¹⁵Yves Congar, O.P.

¹⁶Pope Paul VI

¹⁷Aniceto Fernandez, O.P.

¹⁸William Hinnebusch, O.P.

¹⁹*Ibid.*