

The Truth Shall Make You Free

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A message about community life for Dominican sisters.

Mentioning freedom these days can be a frustrating thing. As children, perhaps, many of us make plans for "when I grow up." "When I grow up" had an aura of magic that would open everything to us. But when we did grow up, it did not happen that way. Now, adding insult to injury, we find books and articles full of things on freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of action, freedom of conscience. Sometimes we are frustrated when we try to implement this freedom we read so much about. Part of this frustration may be because many of these articles are what Dietrich von Hildebrand called, in a lecture at Saint John's University, "deeply shallow writings in which freedom of speech is substituted for freedom of thought." While these articles might sound good, they are sometimes fallacious because they do not take into account the very nature of freedom. Only when we know what freedom really is can we intelligently act freely.

We are not absolutely free. We did not make us: God did. Since we are not self-made, we do not give ourselves the reason for our being. (Much of contemporary literature is pessimistic and depressing, full of unpleasant emotions, because the atheistic existentialists who author it deny God; in denying God, they logically deny any purpose to human existence.) God gives meaning to our life. We are made to be happy, to be satisfied, to be fulfilled. About wanting this we have no freedom, although we have the power to frustrate our purpose and fail to achieve it. But we alone, of all God's earthly creatures, have the exciting gift of choice and with that, the gift of responsibility. With this concomitant pair of gifts we can choose to respond to the integrity of God's plan for our fulfillment, or we can choose to say no.

We are free in the way we live through the situations of our everyday life—the people and things that attract us, repel us, or just leave us cold. We are really free, but our freedom is contingent upon truth. The question is how far can we go, freely, and with moral rectitude. Superficially at least the answer comes readily: “I am going to follow my conscience and you cannot say anything about it.” I say that this, as it stands, is a superficial answer because conscience is a judgment, an act of the mind, on a particular act as in harmony with the moral law or not, and so to be done or not. The strongest statement I ever read on freedom of conscience was not in *America* or *Commonweal*, but in St. Thomas’ *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*. There St. Thomas says that the hardest of all sciences is morality: that there are valid moral laws, but in each concrete existential situation there must be considered not only the law but also the person, place, time, circumstances, and the complex reality that they, taken together, form. It requires, says St. Thomas, a tremendous honesty and an habitual living in the presence of God to see the total, complex situation as it is, and to judge our moral reaction unencumbered by our feelings, emotions, prejudices. To make a really free judgment of conscience we have to listen to others, for all truth, all wisdom, is not found in any one person. To make a really free moral judgment is the task of a truly open, mature person.

To act as if people and things are only what we think they are, or what we want them to be, or what we think they ought to be, is to be a slave to our own ego. Only when we think of people and situations as they are, and respond to them according to what we are (intelligent, free, Christian, religious committed to do the truth in charity), then, and only then, is our response free. To the degree that we do not know, we are not free. To the degree we fail to be realistic, we are not free. To the degree that we put on an act, or are a “phoney,” we are not free. To the degree that we refuse to know each other as we are, to respond to each other, to give service in love, we are not free. But to know each other we must see each other with the eyes of the heart. Involved in this also, is the dimension of our own suffering. St. John of the Cross says that “The purest suffering carries in its train the purest understanding.” Our own personal sufferings and losses can make us cynical, can make us withdraw from the community, can make us selfish, or can make us tremendously compassionate—free to do the truth in charity.

We know that God is Truth and *Veritas*, our motto. Because *Veritas* is multi-levelled, let us briefly survey its extent. On the first level: from all eternity, God is. When He thinks creatively things are made. Every natural thing in creation is true because it is what God creatively thinks it. This is the truth of being. On the second level: we, intelligent persons also creatively thought by God, come to know things themselves. When our thought is of things as they are, then we have true knowledge. On the third level: when we speak or write, communicating our knowledge to others, we speak truthfully. So, when we say what we think, we speak truthfully; when we know things as they are, we know truly; when things are what they are, they are true because they are what God, who eternally is, makes them.

God made us in a kind of raw, unfinished state—but with tremendous potential. In growing we become progressively more true as we progressively achieve God's eternal idea of us, and at the same time we are progressively being fulfilled in learning to live a loving response to the multiple calls made upon us. The ways that we come to know reality (and people and situations often are enormously complex, but they must be known before they can be freely responded to) are many, but the most common way is through other people. St. Thomas, quoting St. Augustine, has his works peppered with this sort of thing: "Consider not from whom you hear anything, but impress upon your mind everything good that is said, for if it is true, it has to come from God." And we are free, to learn from everyone and to respond, if we are not restricted by emotions or feelings or prejudices. One Benedictine abbot is on record as having said that the Holy Spirit can choose to speak through anyone, even the novices! So we, too, can learn from our students, our relatives, and from each other. It is necessary to learn to live these words of the two great Saints and Doctors of the Church: "Consider not from whom you hear anything, but impress upon your mind everything good that is said, for if it is true, it has to come from God."

As Dominicans we have already responded freely to a very special commitment. The Church has structured the living of the counsels in depth into religious life. Each community has its individual emphasis and interpretation, which is determined by its founder with the approval of the Church. Having seen that the nature of human freedom is humanly to respond to reality as it is, we shall consider this specifically in relation to the Dominican spirit. The Dominican Order exists only as the communities which comprise it; each community is

people. Our community is not a WHAT but a WHO. So, when we talk about *The Community* we are, in a real way, talking about us.

Sometimes we hear it said among us that we have heard the term "Dominican spirituality" so much that we are sick of it. I wonder if the "getting sick of it," is "it" or hearing about "it" without ever quite knowing what "it" is. Dominican spirituality is the living implementation of the Spirit of St. Dominic. Father Clerissac, in his book, *The Spirit of St. Dominic*, wrote something which started my own searching in things Dominican:

Truly it is a sad thing to see a Dominican falling short of his ideal, yet it is sadder still to see a Dominican who has never grasped that ideal. To have eyes and yet not to see marks the spiritually blind, and such blindness is more decisive proof of lack of vocation than the lowest degree of unworthiness.

To know the spirit of St. Dominic is vitally important to us. Vatican II directs us to renew ourselves according to the spirit of our founder. We are free to be renewed, we are free to act only to the degree that we know. Now—and this is a rhetorical question—How would you complete, in 35 words or less, this statement: *The Spirit of St. Dominic Is?*

Of course, there are a variety of ways it could be done, but I would suggest this: The Spirit of St. Dominic is truthful, free, prayerful, joyous, apostolic, and has the leit-motif, the refrain: what the Church wants, we want; what the Church wants, we do.

The Spirit of St. Dominic Is Truthful

—truthful in knowing God, people, things and their complex inter-relationships as they are and responding to them according to what we are. In *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjöld says, "In any human situation it is cheating not to be, at every moment, one's best."

—truthful in studying the truths of God, from books—yes—but even more in the most-used book of Dominic and Thomas: the book of the Cross.

—truthful in knowing, by and in the grace of God, how good we are, how good our Sisters are, not esteeming ourselves or others because of the work we do, or the education we are getting, or anything in the way of external credentials, but because we are persons, loved by God before we could merit anything. Remember that at the baptism of Christ the Father declared Himself well pleased with His Son

—and that was before Christ had done anything but live the hidden life! Dag Hammarskjöld notes that it is futile to compare one person as better than another save on one score: “Those who are what they can be at the moment, and those who are not.”

—truthful because our Father Dominic left us a crusader’s devotion to truth. For him the love of truth was a divine passion consecrated to the salvation of souls. Father Garrigou-Lagrange shows that truth is superior to the fluctuation of opinion, superior to the liberty which it rules and preserves from error and crime, that truth of mind and heart and life glorifies God and makes us loyal, generous, simple. Dominic aimed at truth and attained freedom of soul.

The Spirit of St. Dominic Is Free

We are, each of us, unique. Each of us can say there never was anyone like me, there never will be anyone with my peculiar combination of strengths and weaknesses. When St. Paul tells us to do the truth in charity, to bear each other’s burdens, he did not exclude the greatest burden most of us carry—the one we have to call “me,” and the patience we need with ourselves and with others. Good Pope John realized that people need time to learn, time to be convinced, time to get the moral strength worked up to do what we ought and so he speaks of growth as being “in step with the slow rhythm of nature and grace.” Thoreau refers to it more poetically: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away.”

Because of the special spirit of St. Dominic, every Dominican has a special right to be trusted. (*The Dominicans*, Reeves) Every right carries an obligation. If you have the right to be trusted, I have the duty to trust you, and vice versa. In the way of Dominic and the tradition of the Order, good will and good faith are assumed. (It is also American to presume one innocent until proven guilty.) Witnesses at Dominic’s canonization process both at Bologna and Toulouse testify that if our Father had a fault it was the difficulty he had in seeing malice in people. He began his apostolate among the Albigensians because “These poor sinners have no one to break the bread of truth to them.” Within the Order he penanced faults severely, but invariably attributed them to weakness or carelessness. So, it is especially shabby for a Dominican not to trust others, particularly

other Dominicans. Here is a point in which we might seriously examine our own conscience. How much do we trust each other, how deeply and habitually do we assume good motives of each other?

We all sin, we all commit faults, but we are all trying. We need time. But we do grow faster when we are free to be ourselves, to respond to life in the company of our sisters who accept us, so that we do not waste time and grace in being "phoney." (Grace builds on nature, not on phoniness.) When, at the time of our Investing, we asked for "the mercy of God and your mercy, and the habit of our Holy Father St. Dominic," the "your mercy" meant the mercy of our sisters to live together, and with mutual acceptance, because of our mutual goal, to provide, in mutual help, the ideal growing conditions for life in the Holy Spirit. (from a sermon by Father Paul Hinnebush, O.P.) In the "Decree on Religious Freedom," the Council Fathers specify that "the true end of freedom is growth in love and service to neighbor." Hence our freedom is meant not only for personal exercise, but also to provide the climate in which our sisters can grow, each according to her own time and grace.

The Spirit of St. Dominic Is Prayerful

St. Dominic, on all his journeys, carried with him two books: Matthew's gospel and Paul's epistles. Matthew's gospel ends with the mandate to go and teach; Paul's epistles contain the injunction to pray always. Our Father Dominic, his friends testified, always spoke to God or of God; his days he gave to man, his nights to God. Night after night he prayed for himself, for the souls in purgatory, for poor sinners. Prayer both nourishes life and is nourished by it. In personal renewal it is important to have sane spiritual reading—basically the gospels. Yes, it is necessary to keep up to date, but there is another factor to be considered. Recently Dietrich von Hildebrand warned against the proliferation of articles and books which can cause us to choke to death on their stupidities. At a meeting at Marymount, Father Adrian van Kaam seriously advised the sisters to be careful and critical about many articles on religious life. He stated that not only are many of them theologically unsound, but that the mood of the writer must also be examined, for many of them are the productions of ex-seminarians, ex-nuns who are bitter, frustrated and, more often, suffering from feelings of guilt and failure. These articles are not to be used to judge the gospels; the gospels must be used to judge

them. To be able so to use the gospels, we have to know them well. Knowledge in depth is not just book knowledge—although books, lectures and workshops do provide us with many helpful insights—but it is also and necessarily experiential knowledge gained by contemplation and living according to their spirit.

The Spirit of St. Dominic Is Joyous

Jesus Christ said to our Catherine of Siena, "The religion of thy Father Dominic is joyous." If we are contemplatives, if we praise God corporately and privately in formal prayer and in life, if we are immersed in the experiential knowledge that God is God, other things will take their proper perspective. Dominic, that happy man, sang while he walked around Europe six times in five years making scores of foundations. In our own day, Father Gerald Vann prayed, paradoxically, "Lord, teach me to care and not to care, to care so much I don't care, for it is all in your providence." Father Bede Jarrett, our great English Dominican, said that "Whenever I see a hole I jump down it, trusting God if it is not His will to plug it up." This he said after the missions he had founded in Africa failed miserably. In our own country, Father Walter Farrell wrote to a Sister:

Let God tend to the hopeless-looking things. You are a Dominican, a foreigner to worry and quite a close friend of gaiety. . . . It seems to me quite entrancing to be able to pile into bed realizing there is someone as big as God to do all the worrying that has to be done. Worry, you know, is a kind of reverence given to a situation because of its magnitude; how small it must be through God's eyes. . . . You can't get everything done in a day, nor can you get any part of it done as well as it could be, or even as well as you'd like it; so, like the rest of us, you putter at your job with a normal amount of energy, for a reasonable length of time, and go to bed with the humiliating yet exhilarating knowledge that you are only a child of God, not God Himself.

The Spirit of St. Dominic Is the Spirit of the Church

Mandonnet, our great historian, says that the greatness of the Dominican ideal consists in the reflection of the mind of the Church: to save souls, to restore all things in Christ, to do the truth in charity. With prayer, study, zeal, apostolic charity, life could still be spread too thinly to be fruitful. In a letter to our Master General last July,

Pope Paul repeated a phrase from the "Constitution on the Church," reminding us that it is obedience which gives direction and strength to the apostolate and peace to the individual religious.

St. Dominic received permission to found our Order after the dissenting Pope had a vision in which he saw Dominic supporting the columns of the Church of the Lateran, the mother-church of Catholicism. It is up to us, we who are the Order in 1967, to support the Church. If we are not in the service of the Church, according to the mind of the Church, we have lost our reason for being. If, unlike Christ, we do not do the will of Him Who sent us, we have lost our reason for being. If, unlike Dominic, we are not imitators of the Word, we have lost our reason for being. But if we are in all these things Dominican, then no one is a stranger to us; no one is outside the pale of our concern, our service, our prayers, our love. We will never have that particular, poignant brand of loneliness of which Hammerskjold writes: "What makes loneliness an anguish is not that I have no one to share my burden but this: that I have only my own burden to bear."

In all of this there is the primary value pointed out in the decree for religious renewal according to the spirit of Christ and, for us, Dominic. Basically, community spirit is not a "rah-rah" thing, or a "Mother wants" thing, or a "Let's all pitch in together" thing. When these things are put first they tend to obscure the essence. In answer to my initial question, primarily, we do not reach Christ through the community. We reach the community through Christ. The essence of community spirit is the charity of Christ, and then and therefore, the open trust and acceptance of each other. This is acceptance of each other as people, with the infinite desires and needs that we can fulfill only with each other. The source of "your mercy" must be the mutual help we derive from each one's own union with Christ: the source of charity, the heart of community spirit.

You and I, my sisters, need each other to be free and fulfilled, we need each other to sustain each other in our growing union with Christ; we need each other to find our happiness because, in God's providence for us, it is as Dominicans that we become true persons according to the eternal mind of God.

Echoing Christ at the Last Supper, Dominic prayed on the night before he died: "Father, sanctify them in truth." Let us pray with our Father Dominic that his prayer be fruitful in us, that all men will know we are sisters, because we love one another.