

GESTA DOCTRINAMQUE

Let the brothers reflect on and make known the teaching and achievements (gesta doctrinamque) of those in the family of St. Dominic who have gone before them, while not forgetting to pray for them (LCO 16).

MEDITATIONS ON ST. DOMINIC'S POSTURES OF PRAYER

Fr. Vladimir Koudelka, O.P. (1919 – 2003)

*Editors' note: Fr. Vladimir Koudelka, a Dominican friar of the Province of Bohemia (the Czech Province), made profession in 1939 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1944. He spent much of his life studying and teaching the history of the Order, as well as serving as a spiritual guide for a number of communities of Dominican sisters. He possessed a deep love for the life of St. Dominic, which served him well in both his historical and pastoral work. In the spiritual meditation that follows, Fr. Koudelka makes the postures of prayer described in the late 13th century text *The Nine Ways of Prayer* of St. Dominic his own. The images of the *Nine Ways* are from the Dominican convent in Cazis, Austria.*

AUTHOR'S FOREWARD

We know from our own experience that there is nothing spiritual which does not also concern the body, and we are not ready for any spiritual kingdom that our body is not a part of.

Today, since we have become conscious of the dualistic treatment between body and soul, which in the last centuries has brought about great damage, man has rediscovered the “unity of body and soul” and has begun a “holistic” approach in medicine and nutrition. In theology, we are trying to pay more attention not only to God the Savior, but also to God the Creator. In theology, neglect of the Creator consequently leads to ignoring creation itself, in turn leading to the current environmental plight and to a false attitude towards the body—not only in general, but also as the body relates to prayer. We have prayed too much with the mind alone, and so prayer never became rooted in the personality. It has been locked away in the head.

With respect to prayer today, man tries to overcome the dualism between body and soul with the aid of Asian meditation methods. That the West also had a tradition of prayer in which one prays “holistically” is pointed out to us by a text which dates from before 1280, and which bore the title: “How the Blessed Dominic prayed bodily.” This text, complete with illustrations, was circulated as early as the Middle Ages. The content and the pictures present Dominic in various postures during prayer. For him, prayer was the enfleshment of faith. In this way, he succeeded with body and soul to his origin and goal: he communicated with the Absolute.

Following his example, the first generations of his brothers and sisters cultivated—mainly by night—these “secret prayers” (*orationes secretae*). It wasn’t until the second half of the 14th century that these ways of prayer began to disappear. If our prayer is once again to express our faith, to be a sign of our devotion to God and His veneration, it must also encompass our bodily dimension.

The medieval text¹ has inspired me in the course of my illness to the meditations here before you.

— Fr. Vladimir Koudelka, O.P.

THE MEDITATIONS

THE FIRST POSTURE OF PRAYER: BOWING

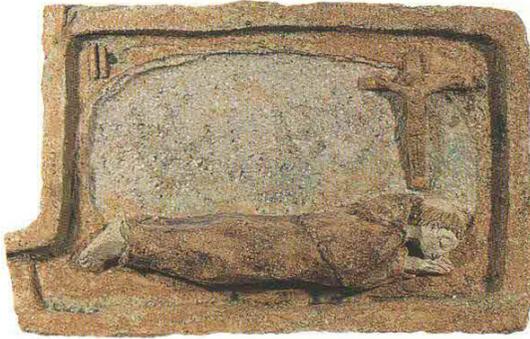


Dominic is deeply moved by God. In various bodily forms of greeting, he displays the posture of a creature towards its Creator, and acknowledges his dependence on Him. When he bows low and worships, he is astonished at the love of God and he experiences His infiniteness. Under the impetus of this Love, he lets go of himself in order to give himself completely to God. With this, he discovers inner, intimate contact with God, his Creator, in the depths of his being and he becomes totally open to the divine—placed totally at the disposal of God's plans for salvation.

Istand up straight and relaxed and bend myself slowly and deeply, so that I can sense the movement in my spine. Through the repetition of this bowing I clear out from myself all absent-mindedness and arouse a yearning for the nearness of God. I let myself go in this longing, so that God can gather me to Himself. I forget all of my foreignness and impatience, and worship God in whatever way He reveals himself. My hands and my heart become free of self-made idols.

I bow myself down before the majesty of God and I humble myself before the lowest and most nondescript brothers and sisters, through whom I can concretely love God. I bend myself the way Christ bent himself to the feet of the disciples and washed their feet. I bow down as the compassionate Dominic bent over human frailty, poverty, and sinfulness. By doing so, I forgive and am reconciled. I can achieve this service with Jesus, who took my burden and guilt upon himself. Then I give honor and glory to God's holiness and his strength, which is made mighty in weakness.

THE SECOND POSTURE OF PRAYER: PROSTRATION



Dominic lies stretched out on the earth (prostratio), because he is formed out of earth and belongs to the earth. He knows that he is dust, yet is loved by God, so that dust would be able to praise God. He abandons himself to God, demanding nothing of Him. That makes him quick to learn and obediently open to the Holy Spirit, who—on account of Dominic's humility—leads him to the Truth. He does not set himself as the measure of things, but measures all things by the Absolute, in whom he completely confides himself in his weakness. With faith in the Absolute, he loudly calls out, weeps and begs on behalf of his brothers, the ailing church, and the stricken world.

I lie stretched out on the floor and try to wish for nothing, to ask for nothing. I contemplate my helplessness and my vulnerability, but also the infinite and silent *now* of God, to whom I make myself over. Or I try—in the spirit of the old liturgical Clamor (the loud crying out)—to place before my eyes the concrete distress of the Church, the world, the abused environment, of my fellow man, and my own neediness as well, and to shout this need out loud. I bring all things—my fellow man, events, and myself—into relationship with God in boundless trust, without wishing for my own solutions. My gaze is not set on gifts requested, but is directed toward the prayer itself, so that I may enter into the plans of God.

In the intercessory prayer born out of reliance on God, I show my solidarity with the needs of the world and the Church. I do that following the example of the incarnated Son of God, in whom God showed himself in solidarity with these needs and with me, and turned Himself toward us. The requests of God and his plans of salvation become mine as well. I desire and I await that which God desires and awaits. This transforms me in my heart, and my prayer becomes a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Through prayer I am not excused from my responsibility for the ideal world and the healthy Church. Only when I concretely commit myself to the needs of my environment and the world around me will I become—like Dominic—one of God's coworkers.

THE THIRD POSTURE OF PRAYER: TAKING THE DISCIPLINE

The discipline is an attitude of prayer that is strange and foreign to us. In this gesture, Dominic shows himself to be in solidarity with the suffering Jesus Christ. Like St. Paul, he tries "to carry on his body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus would also be manifest in his



body” (2 Corinthians 4:10). He understands prayer as a sacrifice offered to God, through which he too might take part in the expiatory suffering for sins, as a partner in Christ’s work of redemption, “who was sent on account of sin for the expiation of sin, so that sin may be condemned in his flesh” (Romans 8:3). He tries to imitate God’s sharing in humanity.

I sense how compulsions and outside influences hold me in chains, as certain structures of possessions and pleasures have taken away my freedom. They prevent me from the pursuit of Jesus and from partnership in His life. I ask Jesus to free me, and I try to free myself as well. I do this by bearing what is burdensome in my life, or voluntarily taking on something unpleasant. It need not be scourging. I can elect to do without something pleasant, or I can fast, take a cold shower, or run my body hard in exercise. In this my intent is not willing renunciation for the sake of renunciation, exercise for the sake of exercise, but rather choosing harmony and maturity—essentially, pursuing a greater love and greater conformity to Christ. Then I can say “no” to all that is makeshift, contradictory, and knotted-up within me. Then, at last, lovingly and in full confidence, I begin to live a shared destiny with Christ. I pray.

At the last supper Jesus spoke the words: “This is my Body, which will be given up for you” . . . and “this Chalice is the new covenant in my Blood, which will be poured out for you” (Luke 22:19-20). Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us—and a man for humanity. I wish to be, like Jesus, a man for others. The lines of the scourging mark the body of Jesus; however it is His heart that was wounded through the sufferings and anxieties of mankind. As He freely shared all the pain of mankind so I too desire to take on my share of it. “I can glorify God in my body” (1 Corinthians 6:20). Then I pray, not only with my lips, but with my entire body.

THE FOURTH POSTURE OF PRAYER: STANDING & KNEELING

Dominic stands before God and intersperses his standing with genuflections. He stands with awe before God, ready to listen attentively and spring into action. He has solid ground under his feet



and yet is borne up. That endows him with faith and new impulses towards new insights. In his genuflections he enters into the motions of interior devotion; his hearkening gives way to ready obedience. Dominic's gaze is fixed on the crucified Christ. From there he receives consolation and serenity. In contemplation, Dominic can then bespeak what is essential with but a glance—he has no need of coming up with many words.

Istand up, straight and relaxed before the cross, and feel the solid ground beneath my feet. It is unyielding. My gaze is centered on the Crucified One. I know that I am looked upon lovingly by God, that he views me in the timelessness of eternity; I can only see myself, with my specific wishes and needs, in the light of the present. God's gaze is that of a creator, this gaze renews me and reveals to me the possibilities that are hidden within me. He makes me clear-sighted and leaves me to marvel at the store of goodness God does and which is hidden in mankind.

I become certain of that which I experience with love and what I consider with love. That way I will not let myself be charmed by the fen fire, nor fall in love with twilight; rather I would like to hold my gaze free from selfishness and half-heartedness, from prejudices, suspicions, and distrust. I would like to open up to Him for earnestness, benevolence, sympathy, and discretion. I would like to submit my own gaze to the purifying light of God, so that He might disarm my hardness of heart and rejuvenate my sight through the ability to wonder at what is within. Then, like

Dominic, I would not look past the pain of others, nor overlook men, their state of affairs, or their affliction.

THE FIFTH POSTURE OF PRAYER: USING HIS HANDS



Dominic does not always pray with the whole body, but often with only the hands. His hands are the mirror of his soul, the tools of his spirit and the intimate companions of his words. He opens his hands, relinquishing his activity, and gives himself over completely to the Absolute. He lives life as a Gift, therefore he can let himself be given away and taken; he can lay his folded hands in the hands of God and thereby bear witness to his dependence on Him. He folds his hands and gives thanks. God can then operate through his hands; He can support what is weak, break and share

bread, heal and bless.

I stand or sit relaxed, and slowly lift my hands until they are outstretched before me. My hands bare my soul; they convey simply that which has already transpired in my mind. I ball my hands into fists and take in the tension that arises within me. I release my hands and they open like husks. With this I let go of every reservation, every bitterness, every distrust. I am free and empty, my hands are ready to receive, so that God can fill them with His forgiveness and love, with the body of His Son. I receive in communion and for communion.

My hands are more than simply parts of my body. What seems distant and foreign they draw close and make able to be experienced. However, they must not clasp things greedily, menacing and destroying. They should be open. Only then does the Spirit confer on them character; it moves them and breathes into them an ever

new form, through which they can bring goodness and love into the world; through which they bless and distribute what they have received. With folded hands I can let go of myself in peace, I will be cradled in the great hand of God.

THE SIXTH POSTURE OF PRAYER: CRUCIFORM

With outstretched arms Dominic prays before the cross. In the cross he considers the repercussions of the love of God for him, and draws from that consequences for his own life. He stands there: open, vulnerable, and needy, ready—as is Christ on the cross—to bestow love in order to awaken love. Out of connectedness with the Crucified, the longing arises in him to try to help extend the reach of the cross, so that they might embrace



and restore the entire world. Beneath the cross, the comprehensive communion between God and him begins—a comprehensive communion that allows Dominic to become a bridge through whom encounters between God and others will take place.

Istand up and let my arms reach out on either side, closely noting how the arrangement of my bodily figure traces the outline of the cross. In the cross contrasts intersect: above and below are united; its lateral extensions proceed to union. What is initially separate becomes unified. There is a focal point in which contraries become reconciled, wherein that which has been torn becomes fused back together: my heart. The bodily form of the cross, which I am myself, also shows forth the spiritual dimension. In my life I may not disrupt the natural order, neither curtailing the horizontal, nor shortening the vertical, lest I fashion for myself my own cross,

which does not conform to the cross of Christ, and which would distort the design of its corporeal and spiritual foundations.

In the shadow of the cross, my limits become unforeseen possibilities. God always sides with the poor and weak, so too does He insert Himself on the side of my own poverty of spirit. In them the love of God is eternally present. Before my cross becomes my cross, it is the Cross of Christ, which carries me—He carries it with me. The love of Christ encompasses my affliction, my nothingness, my dismalness; it supports me. The singular strength of liberation and fulfillment lies in view of the cross of Jesus, which is what enables me to remain believing, hoping, and loving in all situations without having to lay my cross upon the shoulders of someone else.

THE SEVENTH POSTURE OF PRAYER: REACHING TO HEAVEN



Dominic stretches himself towards heaven with his full height. His hands are extended over his head, pressed together or loosely opened, as if he were expecting to receive in them something from heaven. His prayer draws him upwards to God; he is not trying to pull God down to where he is. He reaches himself out to the gift of God, towards the promise of His kingdom. Though neither Dominic nor anyone could achieve this on his own merit, nevertheless it is present to him and gives meaning to his actions. He knows that it consists not in success or failure, rather it comes to fruition in love. For this reason he prays that God would will to give him a true love so that he might work for the salvation of souls.

Like Dominic, I reach my arms over my head—up towards Heaven and gaze in that same direction. I contemplate my rootedness in time and space. In prayer it becomes clear to me that I am stretching myself out to the future and what is to come, while remaining grounded in the present and in reality. For my task is here, in the situation before me, in which my future is fleshed-out and the Reign of God is made present. As coworker in the Reign of God, I hand over to God the completion of all my striving. It preserves me free and unperturbed, and protects me in the face of excessive busy-ness, against resignation or flight into the world of illusions.

I stand in the service of the Kingdom of God; therefore I do not build up my own kingdom, nor hold myself as the engineer of this kingdom. The gifts of God, His Kingdom, is anywhere where a tear is dried, where a conflict is brought to a halt, an unacceptable social framework is altered and an acceptable one found, where faith overpowers doubt. Love absolves me of no obligation to humanity. I stand under God's might, my hands subordinated to a power that is manifest through justice, faithfulness, and love, whose ultimate volition is the Savior's will, whose works are salvific.

THE EIGHTH POSTURE OF PRAYER: SITTING

Dominic sits before God and is silent. God hears his silence, his smiles, and his tears. That is something that men cannot do. In silence Dominic hears the Word of God, and so his silence nurtures his word. Silence and word are for him siblings, which bear each other's burden. Dominic listens and is silent, so that his word may be tender and might heal. In harkening and keeping silence, he comes upon Light, in order to enkindle this light along the darkened paths of humanity. In holding silence, he bears the silence of God, and learns the silence of Love, which carries his silence and his word.



I sit upon a sturdy chair with a high back and let my torso sink into its curves like a pea in a pod. My hands rest on my thighs. I am very relaxed and very loose. I fall silent so as to become calm and silence the noise inside of me. I switch off all thoughts, images, and memories from the world. I need not so much as address God or speak to Him. He becomes present

in my silence, and his presence completely envelops me, that I might later—just like Dominic—speak of His loving presence in humanity and in creation to others.

It is long since God's Word was sent to me in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. In Him, He already said everything to me: that I am loved by God and therefore I should love. In tranquility and silence I can approach the Word of God, encounter it, let myself be transformed by it—even when He does not tell me whatever I'd like to hear. It is not myself that I hear in the silence, but rather the quiet voice of God. I learn to differentiate between God's word and man's, so that my word to my neighbor might lead him to the heavenly kingdom.

THE NINTH POSTURE OF PRAYER: WALKING

After renouncing his title as canon of Osma, Dominic is constantly traveling. His countless journeys are movements through the realm of time and space, a sign that he is not festooned and gridlocked, but that he is still on the path of Jesus Christ. Just like Jesus' Way, so Dominic's way is linked to self-surrender and letting go. His faith and his zeal for the salvation of souls lead him along the way, which is Christ. On the way, he experiences the brotherhood of the friars,

though he also parts from them in order to experience greater intimacy with God in prayer. Thus he is able to guide his companions on the right path—to point out the right direction and be joined ever more intensely with them.



Istand and concentrate on the soles of my feet. Then I walk slowly, as if in slow motion, and try to be tuned to perceive the moving and resting of the soles of my feet along the ground. This should be no high-flying activity. My head is freed from jumbled concerns. I ask God, if He wills it, to come over by me and lead me along the way of devotion. I open myself towards His coming and stretch myself out to Him. In confidence in God's guidance I dare to march out into the Uncertain and the Unknown, in the hope of the fulfillment of His promise.

Lord, you have sent me on the great journey, the pilgrimage of life. Remain with me at my side. Let me walk in your path as the envoy and footman of your love. Give me the strength to be able to leave my comfortable living-quarters and not to leave your path when it may get uncomfortable. Make me convivial, recognizable to the travelers along the way, whereby they may receive direction for making their way along the path and guidance towards their goal. Therefore, I ask through Jesus Christ for the way of the Father to me and my way to the Father.

Translated by Pier Giorgio Dengler, O.P.

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Pier Giorgio Dengler entered the Order of Preachers in 2011.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Dominikus: Gotteserfahrung und Weg in die Welt*, ed. Vladimir Koudelka (Olten: Walter, 1983), 109 – 125. For an English translation of this work, see *Dominic*, ed. Vladimir Koudelka, trans. Simon Tugwell and Consuelo Fissler (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997).