

THE LIVES OF THE BRETHREN

TO BUILD A DESERT IN THE CITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY GIAMBRONE O.P.,

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A New Testament scholar of our province, Fr. Anthony Giambrone recently completed doctoral work at the University of Notre Dame. In addition to his studies at Mt. St. Mary's of the West Seminary and the Dominican House of Studies, he has received degrees from The Catholic University of America and the Pontifical Biblical Commission in Rome. He was recently chosen by the Master of the Order for work in Jerusalem, at the École Biblique, a school founded by the Dominicans in 1890 for the study of the Bible through both archaeology and exegesis, and will soon complete his first year there.

Fr. Anthony, first off, thanks for wandering into the pages of Dominicana. We're grateful for this opportunity to hear from our brother in Jerusalem. Just last year you were assigned to the École Biblique by the Master of the Order. Perhaps you could tell us about your journey to Jerusalem, and your work at the École. When did you first become interested in studying Scripture? And what has Anthony to do with Jerusalem?

God disciplines our passions. Had I never entered the Order I suspect I might have studied Dante—though (like God) I lack the middle science to know for sure. I still indulge strange dreams of producing editions of Heinrich Heine, a profane troubadour as delicious as any of Dante's Provençal peers. In any event, every exegete with devotion is haunted by the twenty-second letter of Jerome: *Ciceronianus es, non Christianus*. The notebooks of Fr. Lagrange are filled with (failed, thank God) resolutions to stop reading novels. Briefly put, I am naturally disposed to literature and history; but my intellectual vices and the austere, lofty nature of studying God's revealed Word make me congenitally unsuited to be an *über*-specialized doctor of the Sacred Page.



Dominican House of Studies, 2006

My path here was certainly not obvious. In my case it took shape as a series of authoritative interventions. As a young student brother, Fr. Albert Paretsky pulled me aside after my first day in his course (we had all written a ten-page paper for him in advance of the first meeting) and he explained in his imposing and winsome way that I should study scripture. He told the President and Dean

the same. After that things went quickly. I did a variety of degrees in a variety of places at the direction of various superiors. Then, the day after my doctoral defense, I got a call from the provincial—I supposed in order to say congratulations. He said instead, “I received a letter from the Master of the Order. He is assigning you directly to Jerusalem.” It was not phrased as a question—“What do you think about the idea?” I was blindsided but not surprised. I knew the École was in need, and on Good Friday in Jerusalem the year before, I had offered myself for this mission in my own private way. The Lord obviously heard, because no one else did.

We take one vow and sometimes we are also asked to keep it. The correspondence of Fathers Lagrange and Cormier is entitled “Exégèse et obeissance,” and there is a profound link between these two ideas: we must both hear God’s Word and do it. That is what I am trying to accomplish here in Jerusalem. I confess the mission here is often extraordinarily difficult. It is also an honor and a grace, however. The assignment belongs to an effort to breathe new life into one of the Order’s proudest, but now limping institutions. We are meant to be something exceptional and profoundly Dominican: individually, missionary intellectuals; collectively, the Church’s biblical think tank.

This issue’s theme is Dominicans and the city, and your current assignment puts you in a city that continues to loom large in Judaeo-Christian history, tradition, and imagination. Jerusalem has seen its share of clashes between evangelical witness and civic religion—Jesus’ encounter with Pilate comes to mind. There’s also the dispute over the temple tax in Capernaum. Standing in that same land, two thousand years later, what would you say we’ve learned about this difficult and often fractious relationship?

There is no shortage of clashes in Israel today, but I’m not sure the categories of “evangelical witness” and “civic religion” apply here like they might in America or Europe. That is litotes. The situation here is impossibly complex and utterly unique.

Eschatology tends to simplify things, though, and one interesting native division in Israeli society is the cultural opposition of two cities: Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. This is not a rivalry like Boston and New York, based on sports teams or styles of pizza. It is earnestly concerned with two incompatible visions of humanity and of God. The earthly Jerusalem is by no means the heavenly city (for which we can be thankful), nor is it Augustine's City of God. But Tel Aviv has a decent claim to be at least a colony of the City of Man. It is strange that Jerusalem's Babylon should now be located in the Land (even if the threats of annihilation still echo from the same old quarters); but this only reinforces the way this tiny, chosen strip of earth is the most remarkable of all imaginable microcosms.

The clash between these two poles is archetypal, and in a way much more symbolic than real. Israel is not a place where one really expects the elapse of two thousand years to make a difference. To live in the midst of every conceivable and recalcitrant form of human conflict is to be mired in a kind of time that does not flow. The shrieking muezzins can certainly foster a crusader spirituality. Today, I think, for a variety of reasons, the experience of hope here has a strongly eschatological accent.

Catholics can't sing. We're also known for being more or less illiterate regarding Sacred Scripture (compared with our Protestant brothers and sisters, for example). But how true is that stereotype, in your experience? After all, anyone attending Mass is inevitably exposed to texts from both Old and New Testaments.

Obviously the conciliar reforms have changed the Catholic culture here considerably. The revised lectionary was one of the more unambiguously successful changes, even if the random verse generator is exasperating and senseless. So, yes, we obviously have a new familiarity with the sacred text. That said, exposure and comprehension are two very different things. In some ways I think the situation parallels another, paradoxical trend. Contemporary

western society is increasingly educated and increasingly culturally illiterate—historically, literarily, and perhaps above all religiously. We are technologically armored barbarians, who give the illusion of great sophistication. I think we must consider the “advance” in scriptural literacy also in this light. A little learning is a dangerous thing, and honestly, I often fear that the sorts of resources typically used to supplement and deepen biblical “spirituality” in parish bible studies do more harm than good. The community of Catholic exegetes is itself still searching for the proper hermeneutic, the blended scriptural science Benedict also sought in *Jesus of Nazareth*. We have been feeding our flock with a typological lectionary and, at the same time, a dry, scientific, even demythologizing critical approach, in which we train our priests and the self-selecting “initiates” who sit in our parish bible studies. The result is routinely incoherent and in some places—here I have the global Church in mind—disastrous.



Detail, Burgos Cathedral — Hosanna filio David (Photo: Lawrence Lew, O.P.)

I think of St. Jerome's famous line: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." I think it's a common experience for many today to come to Scripture weary, distrustful, and unexpectant. The Bible can come across as contradictory, obscure and incoherent. Many passages have been tamed or banalized. Do you have advice on reading Scripture?

I think we can profit most from thinking sacramentally. The Word of God is living and effective. It created the world, accomplishes its purpose, and does not return to him void. We should thus be as expectant in our every encounter with the scriptures as we are in confession or receiving Holy Communion. Something inevitably *happens*. "The word of the Lord *happened*," the Hebrew of the Old Testament loves to say. What is critical is that we introduce no *obex*, no obstacle to the operative *ex opere* grace at work in the Word proclaimed or ritually read. Opening our ears is the trick, because often, like frequent Communion, the Word works like the gentle waters of Shiloh: slowly, silently wearing away our hearts of stone. We must simply learn to access a depth of more profound silence, so that we can resonate with every precious whisper of the Lord's voice. A drip of water can fill a cavernous stillness with its sound. It is like this when his Word abides in us.

How's the food?

Strange. We eat Palestinian food cooked for Frenchmen by Polish sisters.

Back to the city. For better or worse, modern culture takes its direction and energy from the city. Yet our cities are often sprawling, spiritually decentered, and culturally pluralistic and confused places. They're filled with hectic consumerism, noise, traffic, and—all too often—rampant poverty, drugs, and violence. The globalization made possible by the internet has shifted our understanding of community, and social media has virtualized human relationships

in novel and unsettling ways. Is it too strong to say that we're facing real questions about the basic meaning (and perhaps possibility) of human community?

I am not a citizen of Facebook, which is one of many ways I am a disenfranchised cultural inhabitant of the backwaters. Social networks have become our public squares, more frequented by many magnitudes than all the St. Peters' and Times Squares around the world. Even the people supposedly in Times Square are at the moment circulating selfies on Facebook.

We are submitting to a science of fabricated, algorithmic interaction, a controlled machinery and method of people grouping. Plainly this responds to (read, makes a market of) the desire of isolated persons to experience human communion. Such recognition is healthy, as far as it goes. But among the many legitimate concerns about this whole phenomenon—including the hyper-stimulating character of such relentless manufactured “community” and the evaporation of actual ordered public *space* and *time*—I find it very worrisome that agency in this virtual city is also profoundly resistant to hierarchical expression. The pope can have his Twitter account and go viral if he is able, but he is Citizen Bergoglio, like Louis XVI was Citizen Louis Capet, with an egalitarian presence in the city like any other. This enforced individualism at the heart of an ostensibly communal project makes me skeptical about the possibilities for any robustly ecclesial presence in this disincarnate world. In any case, it is like trying to prosper under any unfriendly regime. That sounds sharp, but the revolutionary character of the whole enterprise should not be underestimated. It is a paradoxical world engineered by transhumanist maniacs and technocratic *sans-culottes*. The whole thing is still as confused as can be, of course, with Darwinist whites and anarchic reds still scrambling to win the day. But the encyclopedists of yesterday are the wikipedists of today, which means that structured deference to authority has collapsed entirely, even in the revolutionary “meritocracy” of science.

Is there something like a biblical “vision” of the city, and how can it speak to our situation?

Northrop Frye would say so, and I am inclined to agree, but he also inscribes this biblical-Augustinian vision in a broad literary theory of archetypal metaphors and myths. Briefly, the Zion-Babylon axis intersects with a pastoral-wilderness contrast to structure the whole landscape of biblical revelation. The city, like the garden, represents the world of ordered good, while the chaos resistant to God and man’s reason stands at the opposite pole.

Taking for granted all the countless concrete ways scripture can and does address our situation in specifics, I think the power and clarity of this biblical vision can be tremendously evocative in our world. I’ll mention only one thing: the art of gardening. For the bible and, indeed, for the ancient world, the garden was at once a locus of civilization and of religion. Read Maureen Carroll’s *Earthly Paradises*. The origin of gardening, as an aesthetic rather than an agricultural affair, is in the cult. Temples had ritual gardens—lakes and trees and lawns and even mini-mountains: a recapitalized and idealized creation, understood as the dwelling place of the gods. The architecture of Solomon’s Temple was meant to conjure the same set of associations and to be an Eden erected in the eternity of stone. City building was crowned by this royal act of temple building, bound up with the notion of restoring and order in the world. The medieval cathedral preserved this ancient, biblical vision. The Lamb of the eschatological city is the goal of all this typology.

Today we lack all this. Our cities are ugly and disordered by design, and it is not evident that our new ecological cult has anything essentially civilizing, let alone religious about its activities—which for all that are not all bad, one must say. The scriptures can supply what our civic gardening/planning does not symbolically communicate: “the substance of things hoped for,” an order and beauty adequate to the distress our situation brings.

What does Scripture teach the Dominican about witnessing to Jesus Christ in the city?

Everything, I should think. But perhaps most foundationally the courage, the *parrësia*, the Spirit-guided boldness that not does keep silent, despite the thousand obstacles that arise. I'll give just one example. In Acts 25 Paul is hauled to the capital, Caesarea, after having caused a riot in Jerusalem. It becomes his path to Rome. Paul is tangled up in an uncomprehending, bureaucratic apparatus, but his citizenship permits him a place in this ambiguous machinery of Roman statecraft, and so propels the Gospel on its way. "The Word of God cannot be chained." Tolkien had this notion that the modern world holds us in a kind of degrading captive thralldom. Without demythologizing Paul's experience of real enforced captivity, perhaps we can learn to surf the system of our own modern imprisonment as a providential adventure of Gospel preaching.

In ten words or less, can you explain the implausibility of the Q source?

The skeptic must ask: what if Luke knew Matthew's Gospel?

Friedrich Nietzsche once remarked, cheerily, "It's bad to live in cities; there are too many lechers." Another luminary, Bruce Springsteen, has added that "It's hard to be a saint in the city." Are there certain vices, peculiar to our cities today, that are calling out for the preacher's attention?

I suppose that all the vices are present in our cities, though I'm sure there are certain communities, like Las Vegas, that specialize. I tend to think more in terms of national sins, but what's the difference? Sin is the problem and it calls for preaching. Jerusalem counts as an archetype in terms of messages for the city. And Jerusalem was regularly called to take a posture of radical

faith in the Lord's protection. That meant to stop seeking cover in worldly stratagems as a way of escaping pots boiling over from the north. With the advancing threat of a militant Islam in view and an apocalyptic devotion to Savonarola that predates my entrance into the Order, it is hard for me not to recall the "rod of wrath" wielded by the Lord in the form of a marching army. The providential point of these great war machines on the move is to make the people repent and so avert disaster. I think of this, and I think also of the fruitless tree of Luke 13, which for me resembles the unrepentant West to an alarming degree. It is the Year of Mercy, a beautiful thing! I wonder and fear and pray to know if perhaps we must also soon preach Judgment. I prayed long at St. Vincent Ferrer's tomb in Vanns this summer.

From the Order's founding, Dominicans have gravitated towards cities. In contrast to the monastic models of religious life, the Order of Preachers set up shop smack-dab in the heart of civic life, preaching the Gospel to all, be they prince, pauper, or random pedestrian. The modern city, though, is obviously vastly different from that of the 13th century—what are the challenges city-dwelling Dominicans face today?

We all pick up this formula in our formation, that the Dominicans were an urban reality, and it is by no means entirely false. But it is good to recall two things.

First, we were simply grafted onto the urban life of the canons. The cathedrals had already spawned a city-based form of regular ecclesial life, which was Dominic's own generative matrix. The real particularity and originality of Saint Dominic was not his choice of the city, but his itinerancy. No one feared that the canons were gyrovagues, for they were as fat and rich and sedentary as the monks. Remember, until 1530 when the miraculous image of Soriano revamped our whole iconographic program, our images depicted Dominic with a pilgrim's walking staff, not the boilerplate lily of chastity. The specific challenge facing the first friars was to

shake loose of the same traps of self-importance and inertia that had ensnared the canons and bishops as much as the monks.

Second, it is important to keep things in their proper scale and perspective, for the medieval city is not simply the uncomplicated predecessor of the modern. Medieval cities were walled by definition; ours are in principle unbounded—an allegory perhaps for unbounded lusts (think of Tolstoy's "How Much Land Does a Man Need?"). In the 13th century, Fanjeaux was a big city. It was only a little bigger than today: three or four thousand people in all, a significant percentage of which were farmers in the plain. It was a feudal form of the city-state, and Dominic chose it, not because it was a city, but because it was a strategic site from which to tackle a spiritual pandemic. When we speak about the urban nature of Dominican life, we must ask what does a setting like medieval Fanjeaux really have to do with a modern, technocratic megapolis of four or twenty-four million?

My experience of our priories in many very large cities throughout the world is, honestly, often not so edifying. The same self-importance and spiritual inertia, which was the precise obstacle to the Gospel Dominic identified, commonly infects us rather gravely in these settings. I do not think it helps today to make a platitude or piety out of our essentially city-dwelling character. We must recover, rather, a pressing sense for the preaching mission. That will lead us where we need to be.

In 1956, the Cincinnati Reds finished third, a mere two games behind the Brooklyn Dodgers, despite crushing a league-leading 221 home runs. Suppose you were Birdie Tebbetts; who would you rather see at the plate in a clutch situation, Ted "Big Klu" Kluszewski or Frank Robinson?

What's the score, who's on base, and do we have a righty or a lefty on the mound? It doesn't matter. In 1956 Robinson hit 38 home runs, the record for a rookie until a doped-up phony broke it in the juice-ball year of '87. But statistics lie, in '56 Robbie was an

old 20, and Birdie always followed his gut. Klu once hit a ball 638 feet. He had a blue ox named George Herman. Frank Ralph said Ted Kluszewski's funeral mass at St. Gertrude's; Stan Musial was late. The man practically belongs to our province. If I were Birdie, I'd say: "If only Big Klu could get a whack at that! / I'd put up even money with Kluszewski at the bat."

I do not insinuate that a manager of the Cincinnati Reds would consider betting on his team.

In a similar vein, what are the greatest strengths Dominicans bring to city-living? In many ways, our common life and dedication to contemplation can be threatened if not eroded by modern-city-living.

The first monks of the Thebaid famously made a city of the desert. Grafted as we are on the spiritual stock of John Cassian, we are perhaps positioned to do the reverse: build a desert in the city.

As I said, I fear that at the present moment modern city living is aggressively invasive and often proving to be more potent than our own Dominican structures and praxis. The world almost everywhere prevails—I have our high-paced technical tempo in mind—and, exactly as you say, at the cost of common life and contemplation. If we are meant to change the city rather than vice versa, the priory itself must begin to be experienced as our principal *polis*. The Dominican *civitas* has its proper cult, society, and laws and we must sink deep, deep roots in this culture and our cloisters. If that sounds too ghettoish, monastic, or impermeable, think of it as a neighborhood. Neighborhoods are rightly in vogue. One way or another we must be in the city but not of the city.

Br. Paul Clarke entered the Order of Preachers in 2013. Before joining the Order, he studied philosophy and Catholic Studies at the University of Saint Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota.