

# LIVES OF THE BRETHREN

## A MAKER OF CULTURE

AN INTERVIEW WITH FR. PETER JOHN CAMERON, O.P.

*Frassati Davis, O.P.*

**T**he Dominican vocation to preach for the salvation of souls has, through the centuries, been lived in an astonishing variety of circumstances. In our own day, Fr. Peter John Cameron, O.P. has exemplified the diversity of ways by which the Dominican communicates the truth of the Gospel. From being the editor-in-chief of *Magnificat*, to teaching homiletics, to refounding Blackfriars Repertory Theatre, and to his current work with *Hard as Nails Ministry*, Fr. Peter John's life and ministry has reflected St. Paul's own desire to "become all things for all men, to save at least some" (1 Cor 9:22). We're grateful to him for speaking with us.

(This interview has been edited for clarity and length.)

*Fr. Peter John, what initially attracted you to the Dominicans?*

I felt the call to the priesthood since I was a boy, but for whatever reason I was not drawn to the diocesan priesthood. Principally I was interested in a priesthood with a wider possibility of apostolates, as opposed to just running a parish. So, I expressed that to my parents who were raised in Rhode Island. In those days

there were Dominicans everywhere in Rhode Island—there were two parishes plus Providence College. I read the biographical novel about the life of St. Thomas Aquinas called *The Quiet Light* by Louis De Wohl. I was very moved by this book and discovered that St. Thomas had a lot of pressure put on him by his family to become a Benedictine. He wanted to become a Dominican, and his reasons were the same as the ones that were attracting me. I had a strong devotion to the Eucharist and a desire to preach, as well as to be a good confessor. Those reasons clinched it for me.



*Fr. Peter John Cameron, O.P.*

I decided to go to Providence College precisely to check out the Dominicans. While I was there I did a study abroad program in Fribourg, Switzerland, where I met Fr. Romanus Cessario, O.P. He was finishing his doctoral studies and he encouraged me during the year to visit all the holy Dominican places that I could. Based on his friendship and his influence, I decided to apply to be a Dominican in the Province of St. Joseph right out of college.

*When you were a student brother in formation, did you always have a sense of how you could live your Dominican vocation by evangelizing through the arts?*

It's strange because, when I made the first steps to go through the application process, I think every single Dominican that interviewed me asked me, "Do you know about Blackfriars Theatre in New York City, and would you ever be interested in reviving it?" I was a double major in theater and humanities at Providence College, so I was aware of Blackfriars Theatre. But I was surprised that as an applicant they would ask me about reviving Blackfriars Theatre, because this was about something so far down the road. [Blackfriars Repertory Theatre is a Dominican Apostolate in New York City which proclaims the saving power of the Gospels via the theatrical medium. For more information, see [blackfriarsrep.com](http://blackfriarsrep.com)]

*Were there any Dominicans or other role models that led to you refounding the Blackfriars Repertory Theatre?*

I was very encouraged by and found inspiration in Fr. Thomas Dominic Rover, O.P. He himself was a member of the original Blackfriars Theater and received a graduate degree in playwriting from Yale. Fr. Gilbert Hartke, O.P. also encouraged me. He founded the department of theater at Catholic University of America which was founded almost at the same time as Blackfriars Theatre in New York City. Fr. Hartke was my mentor when the Province gave me the go-ahead to pursue a master of fine arts degree in playwriting.

*I was reading a couple of your lectures published online. In one lecture, The Role of Theater and Evangelization of Culture, you cite Gaudium et Spes. In chapter 2, the first line states that "man comes to a full humanity only through culture." Are there aspects of*

*American culture that you find particularly troubling for Catholics today?*

We are in big trouble. People don't know how to think. People don't really have a desire for *veritas* (truth). Culture is a way of systematizing value, and what do people value nowadays? Many do not seek the highest good. I love the way the *Catechism* speaks about the heart. The heart is a place of encounter, a place of decision making. All you have to do is look at the plays that are considered popular now in New York City. A lot of people don't live from their heart at all.

*There's a certain vein of Catholics who might not trust culture, because they see the things that are going on and they don't want to have any involvement in it. They shut themselves away. But there must have been some point in your life where you saw how culture can really help you to engage in the intellectual life and think deeply, and even more, lead to contemplation and prayer. Was there any work of art that you can remember where the light turned on and you realized there's something important here?*

I am a firm believer of what Pope John Paul II said: that we are makers of culture. Catholics have to be the makers of culture, people who generate and purify culture. We have to be proactive about this, and it is not a time to withdraw, but a time to jump in and really get dirty.

The original Blackfriars Theatre members had a very different approach on how theater should evangelize. Fr. Hartke felt that the Dominican's role was to educate theater artists so that they would be people of integrity and virtue, so that whatever was created would reflect their relationship with God. Fr. Urban Nagle, O.P., felt that their responsibility was to be the leaven in the midst of the theater community. This is the philosophy that I subscribe to, even though it's not easy.

Today, Blackfriars Repertory Theatre produces its plays at the Sheen Center in New York City. The shows are not very

expensive, and they are very good! If you don't believe me, just look at what the reviewers have said and what the people coming out of the audience have said. One of the very reasons we go there is so that people have an option for theater.

*One of the main ways that many readers of Dominicana would know you is from your work with Magnificat. Can you explain your initial involvement in getting Magnificat started in the United States?*

*Magnificat* began in 1998 and I was asked to become editor-in-chief by the publisher of *Magnificat* in France. They wanted to found an English edition for American reading and an American company that would be under the umbrella of the main company in Paris. I had been writing for the *National Catholic Register* and the editor of that newspaper was friendly with the publisher of *Magnificat* in France, Pierre-Marie Dumont. Pierre-Marie had asked for some leads about people he could go to in order to work on the magazine in the United States.

I'd run into *Magnificat* through Fr. Romanus Cessario some years before, when I read the French edition. I said to him as soon as I saw it, "This needs to be in English!" *Magnificat* offered me the position and the Provincial said yes. In 1998, I was a full time member of the faculty at St. Joseph Seminary in Dunwoodie as the chairman of the homiletics department. One of the reasons why one of the first offices of *Magnificat* was located on the grounds of St. Joseph Seminary was so I could just walk there from my room everyday.

Over the years we started publishing books and offering companions for Lent and Advent. It became clear that *Magnificat* needed to be a full time job. So a few years later, it became my principal work. But I still taught a little bit on the side. I taught a few semesters at the Dominican House of Studies, traveling back and forth from New York City. And the theater was always something that was done on the side.

*Finding the time to do theater on the side while editing Magnificat must have been a challenge. What were some of the more demanding aspects of the job you held for 20 years?*

I cannot remember anything particularly demanding apart from the fact that the editor is always working for a deadline. We had an astonishing editorial team. It was small but we all shared the same work ethic. We knew what our deadlines were and we were always ready well in advance. The biggest challenge was just making sure that I applied myself to what needed to be done well before things were due. Every now and then, something would go wrong and a meditation would have to be pulled or replaced. Those were the most challenging moments.

Also, the only reason *Magnificat* can exist is because of the internet. Because of the way everything is laid out and published, the only way Europe would get our files was through the internet.

*Do you receive letters from subscribers who experience life-changing moments through their reading of Magnificat?*

Gratefully, yes, we do. They are some of the most powerful signs of God. Statistically, we receive more letters than *Reader's Digest* when you do the math on how many readers they have and how many letters they receive from that readership. God is using this little magazine to bring his kingdom closer to people.

One of the first letters we ever received was from a woman who visited St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. When she looked across the chapel during Mass and saw someone with a little book with a thin red line, she knew there was another American reading *Magnificat* in Rome. They went over and talked to each other after the Mass, united by that thin red line. The chief aim is to create a *Magnificat* family, which is really the Body of Christ. But people really feel those bonds in a much greater way because they share *Magnificat* with other people.

*Finally, can you explain a bit about your new work with Hard as Nails Ministries?*

*Hard as Nails Ministries* began in 2002, founded by a Catholic layman named Justin Fatica. As a teenager, he went through a very profound conversion. He discovered he had an exceptional gift for being able to speak about the faith to people who had turned away from God. The real genius of *Hard as Nails* is that it targets young people, especially young people who are suffering. Everybody suffers, but young people especially are suffering and almost no one is interested in listening to them. We go after them with prayer and offer friendship and accompaniment. There's a chance for a new beginning that is not possible unless someone goes to them and is willing to be another Christ to them in that way.

In 2010, Justin created a missionary program for 18–20 year-old lay volunteer missionaries. These young people give a year of their life to the ministry and go through a rigorous training that includes spiritual, pastoral, human, and physical formation. They join to do something that the Synod on Young People was very emphatic about, the idea that nobody can evangelize a young person like another young person. Being in charge of their formation, I make sure they receive a lot of St. Thomas and a lot of St. Catherine of Siena. The missionaries are being taught a way of approaching the faith that is very Dominican.

The world needs Dominicans. That is a need that is not going away any time soon.

*Br. Frassati Davis is from Bellevue, Nebraska. Before entering the Order of Preachers in 2015, he studied philosophy at St. Mary's University of Minnesota, and later worked in the Archdiocese of Omaha as a catechist and youth minister.*