

Sacra Praedicatio and Dominican Spirituality

Conference given to the Sisters of the Zimbabwean Congregation at their General Chapter
September 2002

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I want to share some thoughts with you about praedicatio Jesu Christi (sacra praedicatio) as a way of talking about Dominican spirituality. First thing I want to say is this: you and I gathered here are a sacra praedicatio. I am saying this in order to make an important point about Dominican spirituality. Dominican spirituality is not a body of teaching or techniques written in a book or existing out there in the mind of someone like Timothy Radcliffe, something we can draw upon and receive from others. Dominican spirituality is what Dominicans, women and men, are and do in the Spirit, together. I love to hear you express your desire to become more and more immersed in Dominican spirituality. But sometimes I seem to hear in those expressions a feeling that you must get Dominican spirituality from others; a fear, too, that you need to be delivered from the influence the Jesuits may have had on you in the past, almost a sense of guilt about it! And that, of course, would be nonsense. Once you make your profession as a Dominican, and your profession is recognised by your Dominican brothers and sisters, you are fully Dominican. It is true that you, like all of us, need to cultivate your Dominican identity by relating as actively as you can to your Dominican sisters and brothers - of the present and also of the past, as we know about them in our rich tradition. But in that relationship we are all givers as well as takers. We need to listen to one another. But we are all competent to say to one another what being a Dominican is. Because we are Dominicans we have all had different elements in our experience, many of them coming from outside our own tradition. Catherine learned much from the Augustinian William of Flete. It did not make her any less a Dominican. You have drawn from the experience of working closely with Jesuit men. You have absorbed that and you feed it into our common Dominican tradition, without apology or sense of inferiority.

Revisit the Story of the sacra praedicatio

It is in that spirit that I want to share with you some of my thought on the sacra praedicatio, to revisit with you the rock from whence we are hewn, the charism that came to birth in Dominic during those desert years in Fanjeaux. What Dominic discovered in Fanjeaux was that the Gospel is only preached when a whole church preaches it; and that a whole church only preaches the Gospel when it lives the Gospel. He saw there the limits of merely clerical preaching: clerics preaching in isolation would not be doing Gospel preaching. But he saw that neither would there be Gospel preaching without clerics. Dominic had come to know the movements of lay preaching that were flourishing in his day. These were revealing that what made preaching credible was not canonical mandate but Gospel living. Dominic learned this from them. He learned it too, it must be said, from the Albigensian preachers, who were often people of austere and simple life. But from his own experience, and from various deviations that had already emerged in independent lay preaching, Dominic also knew that canonical mandate and ordination had their place in preaching. The preaching of the Gospel draws people into reconciliation and unity in the Eucharist, and in that builds them together in the communion of the Church. The ordained make it possible for the preaching of the Gospel to reach this ecclesial fullness. Dominic accepted that they had not alone a place but a certain role of leadership in the sacra praedicatio. But his more original intuition was that the canonical mandate to preach given to the ordained would only be effective if they were first and foremost Gospel people; and to be truly Gospel people, not a clerical elite, they would need to live in communion with and share the preaching with all the gifted people in the Church - women and men, cleric and lay, religious and secular, educated and non-educated. That was something of what Dominic discovered in Fanjeaux, in setting up the sacra praedicatio.

Dominic's ecclesial sense made him recognise the place of Bishops in Church. He was always ready to work with them, when he saw they were men of the Gospel. So, when he was invited by Bishop Foulques, who was the bishop of Fanjeaux, to come to Toulouse to set up the sacra praedicatio there, he willingly went. He couldn't take the whole sacra praedicatio, that by now was gathered around the monastery of Nuns at Prouilhe, along with him (nuns had stability, lay people had homes and families). He took those he could. In Toulouse, he soon developed contacts with some laymen (Peter Seilha) who gave him a house where he could live in with his preaching brothers. One of the first things he tried to do - although unsuccessfully - was to set up a monastery of Nuns. Dominic never did much without having women involved in it. Later on when the bursar of the friars in Bologna wanted to build a proper house for the brethren, Dominic told him to leave that for the present and to first build a house for sisters; when that was done he could look after the friars. Cynics will say Dominic wanted a house built for the women because he wanted to lock them up! A more human explanation would be that he knew the sisters could be counted on to always give board and lodging, and a bit of tender loving care, to the friars, whereas it was very unlikely the friars would do that for the sisters. But real reason is, I am sure, much deeper; Dominic was convinced that there could be no preaching of the Gospel where women were not involved in the preaching.

Quite soon Dominic went off to Rome, with Bishop Foulques. It is often said he went to get confirmation of “The Order.” Simon Tugwell has an interesting re-reading of this, that merits consideration. He suggests that what Dominic wanted confirmation of was not a religious order, but the *sacra praedicatio*. But Rome had no canonical formula for such a community, nor was it ready to create one. So, what Dominic was told was to get the brothers who wanted to live their part in the *sacra praedicatio* to choose an established rule, and to organise themselves into a religious order of men. And as you know, that is what Dominic did. But he continued his care for the other groups who formed the *sacra praedicatio*. Very soon Dominic was authorised to gather the women who wanted to play their part in the *sacra praedicatio* by living a cloistered life into monasteries of nuns. It took more time for people, men and women, who were living a secular life to be organised around the *sacra praedicatio*. The statutes for a lay Congregation of St Dominic in Bologna (1244) and new statutes for a Congregation of Our Lady in Arezzo (1262) are to be found in *Dominican Spirituality* (edited by Tugwell). The Arezzo statute is explicit about the admission of women, saying – a little patronisingly, but that is the way things were in those days – “there is no difference in the sight of God between men and women in the performance of the works of salvation” (p.444). In 1285 came the first rule for what was then called the Order of Penance, and would later become the Third Order. Among those laypeople who lived in the world there were from very early times women who lived a vowed evangelical life in association with the Order of Friars. They were not nuns, but neither were they secular women with active responsibility for family and the administration of property; some of them were widows whose families were already raised. They lived lives of prayer and imitated the healing ministry that was an integral part of the preaching of Jesus himself. They gave themselves to the *sacra praedicatio* in the form of medical care, education and all the other caring ministries. They made the best they could of whatever canonical forms of life were made available to them by the clerical leadership of the Church.

Some Consequences for Dominican Life Today

There are a few important consequences that I would like to draw from this reading of our Dominican origins. You and I have been born as Dominicans out of a *sacra praedicatio*. The original ‘rock from which we have been hewn’ is preaching, not a way of life devised by Dominic. Now, Dominic did not invent preaching; preaching belongs to the Church; there would be no Church without it. The Church was preaching in Dominic’s day. But the preaching was ineffectual. What Dominic recognised was that the preaching could become effectual if the people doing it were truly living the Gospel that they preached. He called his followers to Gospel living for the sake of Gospel preaching. We are not, then, men and women who adopted various forms of Gospel living, and then took on the ministry of preaching as our specific mission. We are, rather, preachers who, in order to be real Gospel preachers, took on various forms of evangelical life. As men and women, seculars and clerics we have taken on different canonical forms of evangelical life. But because our common origin is in the *sacra praedicatio* we have stayed related to one another in those different forms, convinced that it is in our togetherness that the Gospel will be most effectively preached. Anything we say about ourselves, then, any characterising we do of Dominican spirituality, must start with preaching, with the *sacra praedicatio*. And it must start with the belief that it is only the full *sacra praedicatio*, made up of the different branches of what we now call our Dominican Family, that lives the spirituality and holds it together. No group can say: ‘we have it, and the rest of the family must take it from us.’

A Difficulty for Sisters

Now in saying that it is preaching that makes us what we are, we run into a difficulty about Dominican Spirituality that you must feel especially as Dominican sisters. It arises about using the language of preaching to describe the spirituality of members of the family other than the friars. You will say, and our nuns and Dominican laity will say: but we are not allowed to preach in the Church; how can we see and feel ourselves as preachers?

Now I know you answer that difficulty by saying that you preach by your own apostolates of nursing and education, and by the witness of your lives. And you are perfectly right in saying this. But I think the saying needs to be teased out a little in order to get the full Dominican spirituality significance of it. When we talk about preaching as Dominicans, we are talking about Gospel preaching, about the *praedicatio Jesu Christi*. We are not talking in the first place about what I call ‘canonical preaching,’ by which I understand the act of verbal preaching that is mandated by the Church and at the present time generally, although not exclusively, confided to the ordained. Canonical preaching has its place in Gospel preaching. Indeed without it Gospel preaching will not be full Gospel preaching. But canonical preaching would not be Gospel preaching without many other things. First and foremost it could not be Gospel preaching unless it is being done in a Church that gives a strong witness of Gospel living. But it could not be Gospel preaching either if it was not being done in a Church in which there is a strong practice of the healing works of mercy. Gospel preaching is the preaching of Jesus. Jesus spoke a great deal. But he spent a huge amount of his time healing the sick; and what he was saying was very much related to what he was doing. His Church can only be doing his preaching when it is continuing his doing as well as his saying. It does not have to be the same people who are doing and saying. But the saying is just words without the doing, without the healing of the body, without the healing of the mind in education, without the healing of the spirit in counselling, without the healing of the injustices that bring death through social and political action. One must say that it was that total preaching that Dominic wanted to revive in the Church, a preaching that was event of salvation as well as word of salvation, that was the coming of

the kingdom in the announcing of the Kingdom. And he saw that this preaching could only be done by a full ecclesial group, made up of women and men, clerics and lay, religious and secular.

Dominic's Strategy

But, as I pointed out earlier, Dominic was a realist. Faced with canonical structures set by the Church that seemed to block the realisation of his vision, he decided to live with those structures, but to walk around them. I think that from the way he prised open some of the established structures in organising the life of the friars, he must have wanted to put a pressure on all structures that would eventually change them. He used the kind of common sense that Jesus used when faced with Peter's question about paying the temple tax. With Jesus Dominic saw there was no point in making an issue of these things, as long as one could find a way around them. They were of little importance compared to the needs of the preaching. They would change one day. In the meantime the *sacra praedicatio* could go on in spite of them. Indeed they might even be used and developed in a way that would be of service to the preaching. And it is worth noting that it wasn't just Church structures that Dominic went along with. In those days, for example, only men had regular access to education. There were a few valiant women who managed to study and become learned, but they were very much the exception. There was not too much Dominic could do about that – although it seems one of the purposes of the monastery at Prohilde was the education of young women converted from Albigensianism.

Dominic's strategy, then, was to let the different group of the *sacra praedicatio* do what they could within the framework that Canon Law, and social mores, provided for each of them. The Gospel wholeness of preaching would be ensured by the close relationship the groups would maintain with one another. And I dare to say that he believed that closeness would eventually lead to changes in the structures of Church life. In this sense the Dominican Family is not just a family of men and women who share a common spirituality. It is a group of men and women, ordained and lay, religious and secular, who share the mission of Gospel preaching, a preaching that no one group of them can do alone. It is from their shared mission that they have a shared spirituality.

Some Negative Consequences

The negative side of Dominic's strategy of foundation was, of course, that it exposed the different groups to the temptation of settling down in the canonical and social structures in which Dominic let them come into being. And they risked taking those structures as seriously as they took the Gospel. The friars were particularly exposed to this temptation, because their position was one that carried certain privileges and power. As clerics and for the most part educated men, they had a decisive role in the preaching and could dominate the family of preachers. It is something they have often tried to do. But they were not all or always bad! They have consistently recognised that their Dominican preaching was never complete without their being related to women religious, and to lay men and women. They have a solid record of drawing women into the preaching as nuns and as religious sisters, and of setting up fraternities of secular Christians. There have been moments of great success in the sharing of the preaching. Catherine of Siena was an astonishingly wonderful Gospel preacher. She probably could never have been the preacher she was without the encouragement and support of the friars. If she had been dependent on bishops, her voice would surely have been muted. She would never have had the freedom she had through her association with the friars. The friars, for their part, drew extraordinary strength from Catherine's preaching at the time she lived, and ever afterwards.

Study in Dominican Spirituality

What I have been saying up to now concerns the way the *sacra praedicatio* came to be structured as different branches of the Dominican Family. I hope it can help you to understand how Dominican spirituality is a spirituality of preaching; and why it is that no group in the family of preachers can be proprietary about it. Because we all together make up the holy preaching, you have as much right to tell me what Dominican spirituality is as I have to tell you.

But once we have established this principle from which our Dominican spirituality flows, we have to go on to look at the concrete ways that spirituality has come to be practised among us, and at the elements that have come to be recognised as being essential to it. Among those essential elements we all recognise: the particular form that the evangelical life - the living out of the counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience – has taken among us; our ways of praying; the ways of living together in community that we have developed; the spiritual value we recognise in the practice of study; and there are the ways we approach our different forms of apostolate. I thought that just now it might be useful if I were to say a few words about study. It is one of the very distinctive practices of our spirituality, one in which Dominic was really an innovator. I think it might also be one of the practices that is calling us today to possibilities of renewing the way preaching has been structured among us; and in particular to giving our women Dominicans ways of access to canonical preaching that have up to now been generally denied to them.

Study and Preaching

The first thing to be convinced of is that, astonishingly, study is as much an integral part of our spirituality as is prayer

or the common life. It is so because of its intimate connection with our preaching. It was for the sake of preaching that Dominic made the practice of study be an essential element of Dominican spirituality. Dominic discovered the mission of preaching in a very particular set of historical circumstances. I hate being told that Dominic founded the Order to combat heresy. It can turn him into an inquisitor and a crusader. Some historians have in fact painted him in these colours, attributing to him things that some later friars, identified by their wearing of the Dominican habit, did in the name of their vocation. It is a fact that Dominic discovered his preaching call in the midst of the turmoil created by Albigensianism. But he was neither an inquisitor nor a crusader. He was already dead when the first Inquisition was set up; and the really horrible Inquisition was the one set up in Spain some centuries after his death. And he had nothing to do with the crusade against the Albigensians led by Simon de Montfort. Dominic's dominant attitude to heresy was one of compassion. He saw that the real tragedy of heresy was not that people were adopting false doctrine but that they were being divided one from another. And the religious divide was bound up with social and political divisions; and more importantly with different ways of thinking. The real tragedy of heresy was not that people thought differently but that they stopped talking to one another; that they broke off communication and therefore communion with each other. Dominic realised that the fault was not only on the side of the heretics. What the official Church was saying to people – what it was preaching – was taking no account of the changes that were happening in the lives of people in those days, nor of the dissatisfaction they were feeling with the way the official Church treated them. They were not listening because they were not being listened to. And there were preachers of other forms of religion, that were fundamentally un-Christian, who were ready to speak to them in a language they understood and to give them ways of dealing with the changing world as they were then experiencing it. Their break with the Church was being supported by political leaders who had their own reasons for opposing and wanting to break down the political power of the official Church.

Study, Preaching and the Restoration of Communion

Now Dominic saw that the Gospel way to overcome the break in communion at its source was to try to get people talking to one another again. He saw that preachers of the Gospel could only succeed in doing that if they, first of all, became poor and refused to be allied to the powerful ones of this world. But he saw that more was needed. To get the talking going again the preacher had to do a lot of listening. There had to be listening to the heretics, the separated ones, to hear the truth that was in what they were saying. If Dominic spent a whole night in conversation with the inn-keeper he must have done a lot of listening; and he must have had more to say to him than 'You're wrong.' At the same time there had to be listening to the tradition of the Gospel, hearing its truth, hearing the things that might have grown up in this or that phase of the handing on of the Gospel that might now be obstructing its truth, hearing new words of Gospel truth than might only now be emerging.

For Dominic that is what study was. It was the cultivation of the listening ear, using all the human techniques of language and science. It was the careful cultivation of a listening ear that would be hearing all truth, wherever it was coming from. It was limitless immersion in the Word of God, in the Scriptures as handed on in the Church of God. It was at the same time limitless immersion in the words of men and women, and in the world of nature, so that the truth that is there would be brought to light. But most of all, it was the thoughtful effort to build bridges of understanding and conversation between people, so that they could see a way through their differences and be drawn together in communion. The Gospel is for drawing the whole of creation together in unity. The right preaching of the Gospel must be able to affirm what unites people, to face up to the sources of division, and to offer people ways of overcoming them.

Once again it can be seen how it is preaching that makes something be part of our spirituality. Study is for preaching and its purpose is to make the preacher a compassionate healer of human divisions and an affirmer of the truth that can make people be free and be together in love. Understood in this sense study for Dominicans can never be just the following of academic courses in order to get professional qualifications. It is sometimes that, but is always something more. Many of the things we study in order to be qualified for our ministries teach us much that is true about the universe and about the human condition – science, mathematics, philosophy, medicine, literature, history. These studies have their own value, and they equip us for ministries that can be a preaching of the Gospel. But for them to make us preachers, they have to be drawn into the study that we do of the Word of God. We cannot be Gospel people without studying the Word of God. Our study of the world - of our world and the world of the people we are sent to – inevitably makes us ask questions of the Word of God, and the Word will tell us what God is saying about and to our world. That makes us theologians, not necessarily professional theologians, but people who begin to see all things and all truths the way God sees them.

Study and Contemplation

For Dominic, study could have that quality of making us be able to talk about God, not just, nor indeed primarily because of its intellectual quality, but because it was to grow out of a practice that he inherited from monasticism and that has its roots in the New Testament and indeed in Judaism. It is the practice of *lectio divina*. This is a meditative reading of the Word of God. It was recognised in the spiritual tradition as the great school of contemplation. It gives

not just knowledge of God and God's ways, but a profound sense and experience of God. Dominic wanted his preachers to be contemplatives; it was that, more than anything else, which would authorise them to speak of God. They would become contemplatives through being immersed in the Word of God. But whereas the monk and nun read the Word of God with a view to their own union with God, the preacher would be bringing all the concerns of the people to whom he was being sent, all the reality of their world that he learned about with all the means at his disposal, into his contemplation of the Word. Contemplation would grow into study, and study would be rooted in contemplation. And all would be with a view to preaching

Study Makes Preachers

I believe that taking up the theological orientation of Dominican study offers you, sisters, some of the most interesting opportunities for development in your Dominican life and spirituality. I believe it is something that will enrich the spirituality and the preaching of the whole Dominican Family. One of the requirements for being admitted to the status of canonical preacher in Dominic's time was to be theologically educated. And from the earliest times, the Dominicans required a higher than average standard of theological education of their preachers. At the time of Dominic, and for centuries afterwards, that meant that women were excluded from canonical preaching. But finally things are changing. More and more women are making their mark in the academic study of theology. And even without becoming professional theologians they are becoming as theologically educated as men,. And so they can become just as qualified as men to preach. Dominic sent out the novices to preach, provided they had some theological education. There was no stipulation that they were ordained. Dominican women are beginning to do what I have called 'canonical preaching' more and more. They preach retreats and they preach on special occasions. And sometimes they can even find a way of getting around the canonical prohibition that excludes them from giving the liturgical homily! Dominican women have been in the forefront of this movement, especially in the United States. It is giving all of us Dominicans a new way of being *sacra praedicatio*, because it is bringing women's gifts more fully into the spirituality and practice of the Preachers.