CONSECRATION AND MINISTRY IN THE DOMINICAN ORDER

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THE ORDER of Friars Preachers or Dominicans is the oldest of the apostolic orders. Its foundation marked the opening of a new period of the religious life – the era of the orders engaged in the ministry. Monasticism in its origins did not envisage an external apostolate as its ministry. Monks relinquished the apostolic ministry to the clergy and devoted themselves to the contemplative life of the cloister. Though there were exceptions – the great irish monk-missionaries in the seventh century and St Boniface and his benedictines in the eighth immediately come to mind – normally monks did not become evangelists. They might engage in pastoral work when people founded towns and villages in the shadow of a monastery, but an active ministry was not part of their life.

The monastic picture remained unchanged for almost 1,000 years. The first significant alteration in its components occurred when the Orders of Mercy sprang from the crusades, especially the Knights Hospitallers and the Knights Templars. For the first time a ministry was grafted onto the monastic trunk. Consonant with their purpose, the new orders also developed the first beginnings of an 'international' governmental structure. The grand master controlled recruitment and assignment of personnel. The day of the apostolic orders, however had not yet dawned. The purpose of the orders of mercy was too specialized to inaugurate a decisive trend in monasticism.

The dominican order was a new shoot growing from the monastic trunk. (We do not include the Friars Minor at this point, because that order sprang in its original inspiration from the lay apostolic movements of the 11th and 12th centuries.) The dominicans reunited two ancient elements of the early Church – consecration and ministry. The two are clearly stated for the first time when Peter called for the selection of deacons:

> It is not fitting that we should neglect the word of God to serve the tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of attested character . . . but as for ourselves, we will give our whole attention to the prayer and to the ministry of the word.[1]

This text, in the understanding of the monks, describes the life lived by the apostles and believers in Jerusalem and established by them in the first christian centres. It included both prayer and ministry. Monasticism devoted itself to the first of these elements. The monk consecrated himself to a life of contemplative prayer. Tradition assigns no other end to the life of the monk than 'to seek God' or 'to live for God alone', an ideal to be attained by a life of prayer and penance. The first and fundamental manifestation of such a vocation is a real separation from the world. Though the monk as monk did not devote himself to the directly apostolic ministry, yet he considered his prayer, contemplation and example mighty sources radiating for the upbuilding of the Body of Christ – a true ministry.

From its origins, however, the dominican order united consecration and ministry. It speaks of its mission as that of a contemplative apostolic order. This terminology was formulated by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*; his thinking on the subject had been matured under the attack on the mendicant order during the 1250's by William of St Amour, professor at Paris, who claimed that it was sinful for religious to teach, preach and hear confessions. Rather, their life was that of the cloister, separated from the world. Thomas, Bonaventure and other friars sprang to the defence. The formulation of Thomas when speaking of the new orders – 'to contemplate and to give to others the fruit of contemplation' – became classical, and his own order accepted it as an exact statement of its purpose. The phrase of Thomas is a lineal descendant of the statement of the order's aim incorporated by Dominic in 1220 into the text of the earliest dominican *Constitutions:* 'Our Order was founded for preaching and the salvation of souls'. Since the days of Dominic and Thomas, dominicans have used both formulations to describe their life – it is contemplative and apostolic. The Dominican is a contemplative apostle. The two elements of his life are contemplation and preaching. In the terminology here adopted, 'consecration' is equivalent to the religious life man entered into by vow: 'apostolic', to ministry.

For a short time the order interpreted 'preaching' strictly:

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[1] Acts 6, 3–4.

preaching by word of mouth was meant. Dominic himself opened the way for teaching the word from the master's chair, when he sent friars to the University of Paris to study. The immediate purpose was to train teachers for dominican schools, but no one might teach without a degree; and no degree could be earned in the medieval university without in-course teaching. When the opportunities arose in 1228 and 1229, therefore, the order had no hesitation about accepting chairs of theology at the University. From the beginning dominicans also regarded foreign missions as an integral part of the order's ministry. During Dominic's lifetime, missions were opened among moslems, pagans, and schismatics on the northern and eastern frontiers of Europe, in Africa, and in the near and far east. From 1221, the mission provinces of Greece and the Holy Land were established. In the sixteenth century, the order founded ten provinces in America and established the Province of the Holy Rosary, recruited in Spain but established in Asia, with the Philippine Islands as a base. It has retained its missionary character to the present day.

During the decade after Dominic's death, the order's ministry became almost as diversified as today, barring later developments of the apostolate, such as the use of the communications media. Any means of disseminating truth was looked upon as a legitimate extension of the dominican mission. By the end of Gregory IX's pontificate (1241), dominicans were serving as confessors and spiritual directors, teaching, acting as advisers, messengers, legates and arbitrators for ecclesiastical and civil officials. Only parishes, the episcopate and the inquisition were considered by St Dominic and the constitutions to be foreign to the order's mission, because they impeded the preaching of the word. Pressure from Gregory forced acceptance of the last two functions. In modern times, the order first tolerated, then in the twentieth century, under the pressure of modern conditions, approved dominican staffing of parishes.

In the foundation of the order, the ministry came first. Dominic's determination to found an order and the kind of order he established resulted from his experience and observation during ten years of missionary work among the cathar heretics of southern France (1205–1215). He saw how badly the Church needed preachers trained in scripture and theology. To counteract the ignorance and worldliness of the clergy and the pleasure-loving tendencies found in rich areas like Provence and Italy, it needed preachers who could give an example of a holy life based on apostolic poverty. Experience had also taught Dominic that only a religious order organized

for the purpose could fill these needs. In southern France papal legates, cistercian abbots, and theologians from the University of Paris failed to provide the sustained effort that only an order of preachers professing poverty could provide.

Dominic, therefore, founded the order in 1215 for the preaching ministry. At the head of its *Constitutions* stands the statement: 'Our Order was founded from the beginning for preaching and the salvation of souls. Our study ought to tend principally, ardently, and with the utmost endeavour to the end that we might be helpful to the souls of our neighbours'. Pope Honorius III (who confirmed Dominic's foundation in 1216) developed this key-idea at greater length:

> God, who continually pours new life into his Church, wishes to bring our times into harmony with the apostolic Church and spread the christian faith. So he has inspired you to embrace a life of poverty and discipline and thus to devote yourselves to preaching the word of God and proclaiming the name of our Lord Jesus Christ throughout the world.

In pursuit of this purpose, the *Constitutions* (in a section directly inspired if not written by St Dominic) urged the brethren 'to live sincerely and devoutly like men who seek to gain their own and others' salvation – gospel-men who follow the Saviour, speaking always to God or about God among themselves and with others'.

The founder created a new kind of religious Institute that joined ministry to consecration as an essential and permanent part of its religious life. He united the work of the evangelist to the contemplative life of traditional monasticism. Tension was inherent in such a marriage of apparent opposites. He obliged his sons to the monastic regime, yet demanded that they be a body of trained, mobile preachers, quick to respond to the needs of the Church in any locality. He had cogent reasons for what he did. Men of the gospel proclaim the word of God, a heavenly reality that cannot be fathomed by a purely intellectual process; it must be the fruit of 'experience', of personal savouring that when it matures becomes love. Only when God's word has been pondered in the contemplative prayer of the consecrated religious can it be proclaimed effectively. Dominic wanted his children to be men of prayer who had experienced the word: he required them to become contemplatives as a condition of becoming apostles.

The tension that exists between the demands of the contemplative and the apostolic life is found in the Church itself:

> She is both human and divine . . . eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it. She is all these things in such a way that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation . . .[2]

As the order, so the Church must resolve the tensions that exist between consecration and ministry. Believing it can be done, she calls on all religious to incorporate into their orders what Dominic made an essential part of his:

> They will seek God above all things and him alone: and in them, contemplation, by means of which they cling to him in mind and heart, will be wedded to the apostolic love which empowers them to share his redemptive work and spread God's Kingdom.[3]

The dominican order modelled the contemplative side of its life in great part on that of the Canons Regular. It borrowed the first part of its *Constitutions* from those of the Canons of Premontré; but it made significant omissions and changes in adapting the text to its own needs. With the exception of organized teaching and study, all else that pertained to life inside the dominican priory conformed to then current practice. The liturgy, centring around the mass and including the chanting of the divine office, formed the central feature of the friar's day. Concern for the liturgy prompted a thirty-year search, apparently inaugurated by Dominic himself, for a unified liturgical usage. The search came to an end when the liturgy devised by Humbert of Romans, fifth master general, was approved by the general chapter of 1256. The dominican liturgy became a family trait and a source of unity. It was abandoned only as a result of the liturgical renewal begun by Vatican II.

Regarding the spiritual life of the dominican as a consecrated religious, the *Constitutions* contented themselves with essentials. They incorporated no ascetical code beyond the staple ingredients of the religious life. All else was supplied by the daily life of the priory. They provided for the chanting of the office, the holding of a chapter of faults and the care of the sick, regulated the observance of the cloister and of the dormitory, and prescribed fasting, abstinence from meat, and silence in the cloister, cell, refectory and chapel. They made provision for the selection and training of recruits, summarized the duties of the novice master, indicated the quality

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[2] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2.

[3] *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5.

of the friars' religious habit, clothing and bedding, and tabulated faults against the rule and constitutions. Sections of the Premontré Constitutions, regarding the ceremonial of the refectory, dormitory and choir, as well as the obligation of manual labour, were dropped by Dominic.

Both parts of the primitive dominican *Constitutions*, the first dealing with the life of the priory and the second (and original part) regulating study, the apostolate, poverty and the government of the order, fully recognize the principle of subsidiarity and are a model of the brevity that Vatican II called for in current revisions. An order that envisaged the world as its field of ministry could not weigh down the provinces and houses with excess baggage provided by the top administration. The judgment of provincial chapters, provincial superiors and local communities was respected.

In founding his order, Dominic was progressive and original, but not in the extreme way suggested by Herbert Scheeben in his *Der heilige Dominikus* (1926). He tried to sustain the thesis that Dominic wanted to establish small mobile groups of preachers who would live together but be bound by no vows, no monastic routine, and none of the trappings of contemporary monasticism. Innocent III, he held, refused to approve such a radical departure from the accepted ideas of what a religious order should be. While this reconstruction of Dominic's intentions points to the innovative character of what he projected, historical evidence militates against it. Dominic's whole outlook was different. He himself had been a canon regular before he became a founder: he deeply loved the liturgy and the asceticism of silence, prayer and fasting. Furthermore, the mind of the Church had not yet developed to the point of authorizing societies of the common life without vows. Dominic even had difficulty initially in inducing the Holy See to permit his friars, who were clerics, to live without patrimony or other endowments. Only gradually was he able to introduce full mendicant poverty. His originality did not lie in the realm of the contemplative life of his order; for this, we must look to his implementation of the order's ministry.

When the dominican turns from his contemplative life to his ministry, he is immediately confronted by the tension already mentioned – the tension inherent in the purpose of his order, the tension between consecration and ministry, contemplation and apostolicity. The demands of the ministry appear to conflict with the demands of the spiritual life. Monastic regularity seems irreconcilable with

the flexible mobility of the preacher. In fact, one historian has held that there have always been two kinds of dominican, the contemplative and the apostolic. This has been true during times of stagnation, but not during the better periods of the order. It has never been verified in friars who were sincere in living their consecration. These men unified at the summit what appears to be divergent at the base. Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas de Vio, Cajetan, Lacordaire, Jarrett and many more like them, experienced the tension but knew how to resolve it.

Dominic himself understood these opposing thrusts in the structure he was building and provided a keystone to hold them in balance: the power of dispensation. In the *Constitutions*, the prior was given 'the power to dispense the brethren in his priory when it shall seem expedient to him, especially in those things which are seen to impede study, preaching, or the good of souls, since it is known that our Order was founded, from the beginning, for preaching and the salvation of souls'. For the first time a functional, rather than a personal, dispensation entered a monastic rule. Not so much reasons of health or personal hardship as the demands of the ministry permitted dispensation from laws and observances. Being provided for by the law itself, such a dispensation was not a failure to obey the *Constitutions* but another form of their fulfilment. From the outset, dominican professors and students were exempted from some of the services of the choir: the exemptions increased as the student progressed to the higher levels. Albert and Thomas could not have pioneered so successfully in theology had it not been for the dispensations they enjoyed. Likewise, students were not held to the full rigours of poverty (they were allowed to acquire money to buy books), the perpetual abstinence from meat, and the dominican lent that stretched from September 14 to Easter. Friars who went out to preach, sometimes for weeks or months on end, necessarily had to be dispensed from many liturgical and monastic regulations, though Dominic by word and example encouraged these men to adhere to observance as far as it was compatible with their work.

The preaching ministry of the order led to other innovations that sound ultra-modern. Theology was the operative element, study and schools the necessary instruments. Study in dominican religious life replaced manual labour, even when the latter is understood as work in the monastic *scriptorium*: discursive thought replaced *lectio divina*, that is, the contemplative savouring of a spiritual text. The study-cell and the classroom replaced the workshop, the *scriptorium* and

the cloister-carrel. Dominic's attitude toward learning led to another pioneering concept. For the first time in monastic history, a religious founder wrote into the constitutions of his order, provisions regulating study and the supervision of students, and granting concessions to them and professors. In course of time this nucleus grew into a full-fledged academic code. Study was given the value of a religious observance. As a service it paralleled the liturgy and was binding as much as attendance in choir. It was mandatory because of the ministry committed to the order by the Church. Dispensations, as we have seen, resolved the outer tension existing between these two obligations. Dominic intended the very coupling of study with liturgy to resolve the inner tension. Dominican study was never to stop with the mind; but through pondering truth it was to lead to the experience of love. It was in the liturgy especially that a dominican was to savour the truth he had learned.

In the dominican plan of the religious life, silence gained a new dimension. Dominic insisted on silence because it touches every aspect of the dominican vocation. An essential aid to prayer, study, contemplation and preaching, it aims to establish a contemplative atmosphere in which these can flourish, in which the penetration of the word of God that formed Paul the apostle, preacher and theologian, can take place. Hazlitt underscores the apostolic value of silence when he remarks: 'Silence is one great part of conversation'. The dialogue so essential to the ministry begins in silence. Man can enter into dialogue only when he is able to fall silent and listen to what his partner in dialogue is saying. 'Talking is like playing the harp', wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes: 'There is as much in laying the hands on the strings to stop their vibrations as in twanging them to bring out their music'. A dominican who has not faced himself and God in the stillness of his own heart preaches and teaches with difficulty. Homily or lecture demands the technique of dialogue. It cannot be a monologue; it must so address the congregation or class as to evoke a response. Significant communication requires the unimpeded flow of meaning from side to side. A preacher or teacher 'is alert to and activates the meanings of his hearers in relation to what he is saying'.[4]

The order was frequently successful in resolving the tension inherent in its consecrated ministerial life. It produced individuals of eminence who exemplified all that it intended for its sons. The most

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[4] Howe, R. L.: *The Miracle of Dialogue*, (New York, 1963), p 280.

noteworthy are its saints and *beati*. However, even in its so-called golden ages, such as the thirteenth century, there were friars who failed to achieve the ideal. On the other hand, in less than splendid epochs, there were outstanding, even saintly friars. From the mid-fourteenth through the fifteenth century, when many dominicans had sunk into laxity, dominican reformed groups produced a great many men who have been beatified or canonized, notably Henry Suso, Vincent Ferrer and Antoninus. The reform so far succeeded that the next century and a half saw Pius V, John of Cologne, Louis Bertrand, Catherine de Ricci, and Rose of Lima. In the nineteenth century, when the order was struggling out of the morass of the revolutionary and napoleonic period, it produced Lacordaire, Jandel and Lagrange, and since then Gardeil, Sertillanges, Jarrett, McNabb, Chenu, Farrell, Congar and Schillebeeckx.

Dominican life is finely balanced and hard to live. When thrown off centre, its constituents destroy themselves: the monastic element becomes 'monkish', regarding the apostolate a distraction: the doctrinal element becomes 'bookish', having little to do with evangelizing men: the apostolic element becomes self-serving, spending itself in feverish activity. To keep the balance, the dominican must nourish his zeal with a burning love for Christ, making contemplation primary in his life. His prayer, centring on Christ crucified, engenders the apostolate. Père Régamey has crystallized this truth: 'An apostolic message that has not been shaped in the sanctuary, the choir and the cloister is never complete'.

Only the ideal friar can successfully harmonize his ministry as a gospel-man, seeking the salvation of men, with his consecration as a religious, seeking the joys of contemplation. He must be a man of inner spark who accepts his consecration under vow and lives it. He must be recollected, prayerful, studious. Yet he must be pauline, so in love with the 'Message of the Way' that he wants to preach the word on every suitable occasion, in every possible way, so that men might come to the truth. If his neighbour did not need him he would prefer to remain at home praising and thanking the Lord: but because he is so needed, he goes out to preach and teach. The spirit that impels him is captured by St Thomas in the following passage:

> There are some who have ascended to such a summit of charity that they even put aside divine contemplation, though they delight greatly in it, that they may serve God through the salvation of their neighbours: and this perfection appears in Paul. Such also is the perfection

> proper to prelates and preachers and whosoever works to bring about the salvation of others.[5]

Gerald Vann expressed the same thought in words that are less technical: '. . . to be contemplative means to be a prayerful person, and that means to be a person who is thoughtful before God. Now, this does not necessitate a great deal of *physical* stillness. Many saints have led lives of intense activity'. St Dominic was such a saint. He sacrificed the peace and quiet of his cloister at Osma for years of continual travelling and preaching.

St Thomas also pointed out the extremes to be avoided. With his customary acuteness, he described the failure of religious who plunge into the apostolate for less than perfect motives: 'They are led to engage in external works rather from the weariness which they feel for the contemplative life, than from a desire to attain the fulness of divine love'.[6] They are 'deprived of freedom for divine contemplation and immersed in secular affairs willingly or without regret: in these persons very little or no charity is evident'. Thomas also found selfish contemplatives who 'so enjoy divine contemplation that they do not want to forsake it, even to consecrate themselves to the service of God by the salvation of their neighbour'.[7]

The order foresaw that friars cannot stay out on ministry indefinitely without risk. They were expected to return regularly to their priory, to drink anew of the sources of the christian and dominican life. After a three-day period of rest, they were obliged to return to the full routine of the priory. Historically, about a third of the priory's membership was engaged in external ministry at any one time. Consequently the order sought to maintain communities sufficiently large to enable enough men to be at home so that the religious life would be maintained in full vigour. God was continuously worshipped in prayer and study: men on the ministry were supported by the prayers of their brethren who were at home: they knew that a place of renewal awaited them when they returned. In its totality, the community, too, resolved the tension between contemplation and ministry. Some friars were always engaged in prayer and study: others always in the ministry.

In more modern times accommodations have had to be made, especially in protestant and missionary countries. In England, Holland, the United States, and parts of Germany, the order was forced by circumstances to relax its age-old reluctance to accept

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[5] *De caritate*, a. 11, *ad* 6. [6] *De perfectione vitae spiritualis*, c. 23. [7] *De caritate, loc. cit.*

parishes. Accommodation to modern conditions has not been the same in all parts of the world. Whereas the dominicans of the United States found their apostolate mostly among the country's large immigrant classes and their descendants, their french and english brethren made their appeal chiefly to the intelligentsia, except for the more recent worker-priests. All the provinces in developed countries have shouldered their christian responsibility to preach to all nations by sending men to the mission fields.

The dominican order was the first apostolic Institute to receive from the Church a ministry extending to the whole world. It is now more than 750 years old; yet today's religious can learn much from its outlook and history, especially now that Vatican II has summoned all of them to be both contemplative and apostolic, to be both consecrated and devoted to a ministry. Even contemplative nuns are so charged in conformity with their particular vocation. To the extent that this demand of the Church is implemented, tension will arise in the orders. Indeed every member of the Church needs to resolve the same tensions between consecration and ministry, between contemplation and apostolicity. Vatican II has reminded them that they are a priestly people consecrated to holiness by baptism, that they share the ministry of proclaiming the Good News of salvation to all nations. If a christian seeks to meet this responsibility, he will experience the tension that dominicans have lived with during the centuries of its existence. They and their brother-religious of every apostolic Institute are well aware that a precarious balance exists between consecration and ministry, contemplation and the apostolate.

Centuries-old experience has drilled this truth into the dominican mind. The order has witnessed exceptional periods and exceptional provinces in which an unusually large number of eminent men arose, many of whom successfully harmonized consecration to the contemplative life and zeal in the apostolic ministry. It has seen periods when the opposite was true, when more failed than succeeded. There have been times when it has had to lift itself painfully out of the pit. It has learned to be happy when those who keep the balance out-number those who do not.

Reflecting on its history, it realizes that the tension inherent in its very life and purpose cannot be resolved once for all. When vigilance slackened and renewal ceased, it became stagnant and sometimes decadent. A constant battle needs to be waged against self-seeking prayer and prayerless activity.