

Jordan Aumann, O.P.

The Contemplative Dimension of Dominican Spirituality

Following the example of their founder, St. Dominic, the friars of the Order of Preachers are apostolic men, serving the People of God through the ministry of the word. Like the Franciscans and the Jesuits, they also have a glorious record as missionaries to pagan lands. As professors they have staffed such renowned centers of learning as the École Biblique in Jerusalem, the University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome, the University Santo Tomás in Manila and Providence College in Rhode Island. It is no mere coincidence therefore, that the "Common Doctor" of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas, was a Dominican or that the missionary protomartyr of China, Francis Capillas, was also a Dominican.

There is another side to Dominican life, however, and it is succinctly summarized in the motto of the Friars Preachers, coined by St. Thomas Aquinas: "To contemplate and to give to others the fruits of contemplation."⁽¹⁾ In order to understand the full meaning of this motto, it is necessary to consider the historical setting from which the Order of Preachers emerged.

DOMINICAN ROOTS

From the very beginning of the monastic movement, both in the East and in the West, the monks and nuns withdrew totally from the world in order to dedicate themselves to a life of prayer and penance. They embraced what is called the contemplative state of life and they were usually lay Christians, not priests.

A great change took place in religious life in the twelfth century. St. Norbert (+1134), founded the canons regular known as the Premonstratensians and received special permission from the Holy See to preach everywhere, a ministry formerly restricted to bishops. The canons regular followed a monastic life-style but they also ministered to the People of God. Thus, two innovations are introduced into religious life; the Premonstratensians are a *clerical* order and they live what is called "the mixed life," as distinct from the contemplative life.

In the thirteenth century St. Dominic (d. 1221) and St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) appear on the scene. Inspired by God and prompted by the needs of the People of God, they founded the Order of Preachers and the Order of Friars Minor respectively. They were not monks or canons regular, but mendicant friars. They lived a monastic life and dedicated themselves to the ministry of the word, but with this difference: while the early Franciscans were laymen, from the very beginning the Dominicans were a clerical order.

Both St. Dominic and St. Francis intended from the very start that their friars should be "apostolic" men, not only by living the Gospel but by engaging in the apostolate of preaching. Thus, the primitive Dominican Constitutions stated that the Dominican Order was founded from the beginning for the preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of souls. But preaching is a work of the active life. Why, then, did St. Thomas begin his statement with the phrase "to contemplate"?

THE CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION

To answer this question, it is necessary at the outset to clarify our terms. Stated quite simply, contemplation is a type of knowledge that begins and ends in love; it is more experiential and intuitive than theoretical and discursive. Psychologically, it is very similar to the esthetic experience that results from one's awareness and appreciation of the beautiful. St. Thomas Aquinas describes it as a loving gaze, and St. John of the Cross speaks of it as the loving awareness of God.

Union with God is the goal of the spiritual life, and the bond of that union is the love that is charity. In order to strive more effectively for the perfection of charity, devout souls throughout the centuries have left the world, as it were, in order to lead a contemplative monastic life. Through a life of detachment and prayer, they strove for the most intimate possible union with God. The monastic motto was *Solo Deo* (God alone).

In due time spiritual authors extolled the contemplative life as the most excellent form of life available to the Christian. This in spite of the fact that St. Augustine (+430), St. Gregory the Great (+604) and St. Thomas Aquinas (+1274) had approved and praised the "mixed life"; that is, an active, apostolic life that proceeds from some sort of contemplation. Indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas went so far as to say that the mixed life surpasses the purely contemplative life in excellence. His reasons are well worth quoting:

The work of the active life is twofold. One proceeds from the fullness of contemplation, such as teaching and preaching. . . . And this work is more excellent than simple contemplation. For even as it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, so is it better to give to others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely to contemplate. The other work of the active life consists entirely in outward occupation, for instance, almsgiving, receiving guests, and the like, which are less excellent than the works of contemplation, except in cases of necessity. . . . Accordingly, the highest place in religious orders is held by those which are directed to teaching and preaching, which, moreover, are nearest to the episcopal perfection. (2)

But if the Franciscan and Dominican friars were committed to the apostolic life, and precisely to the ministry of the word, why did they retain the monastic observances? Some persons have maintained that St. Francis and St. Dominic could not do otherwise. They had to obey the canonical legislation that prevailed in the thirteenth century.(3) The inference is that if St. Dominic had lived in the sixteenth century, perhaps he would have founded a totally active Order similar to the Society of Jesus. However, the Order of Preachers has existed for almost 800 years and has consistently legislated in favor of the monastic observances. These have always been regarded as necessary safeguards for the contemplative aspect of Dominican life. R. Creytens has made some interesting observations on this point:

The friars had realized that they were neither monks nor canons, but rather constituted a particular type of order, the Order of Friars Preachers. This conviction was upheld by the friars from the very foundation of their Order. As a matter of fact, they always referred to their claustral customs, whether in the General or Provincial Chapters, or in the other writings on the Order, as regular observances, never as monastic or canonical observances. (4)

The distinctive element of the Order of Preachers has been consistently described in the Dominican Constitutions as an order founded for the ministry of the word -- preaching, teaching, writing -- flowing from the assiduous study of sacred doctrine and directed to the salvation of souls. The various exercises of the community life provided an atmosphere in which the ministry of the word could more readily flow "from the fullness of contemplation," as St. Thomas Aquinas had stated. It would seem, therefore, that the "assiduous study of sacred doctrine" has a high priority as a contemplative activity of the Friars Preachers. But does the study of sacred doctrine qualify as a type of contemplation? The question has been answered by a former Master of the Dominican Order:

We must note particularly, in order to avoid all ambiguity, that contemplation may be understood in a wide and in a restricted sense. In the wide sense, it may be twofold: one intellectual, the other affective. The theologian who gives his whole soul to study in order to penetrate more deeply the mysteries of faith and employs the proper methods of positive and speculative theology to know God more fully and more profoundly with his intellect is

similar in some respects to the philosopher who contemplates the truth which he has discovered by the light of reason. Contemplation of this kind. . . scarcely exceeds the limits of mere knowledge, even though it considers supernatural truths. This is contemplation in the wide and analogous sense of the word. . . .

After study, it is the duty of a Friar Preacher to meditate in the sight of God upon the truths which he has acquired in the light of faith informed and vivified by charity. This affective meditation draws us. . . to a certain kind of contemplation of divine things which is called *acquired*, in as much as it is the fruit of our personal activity aided and sustained by grace. This acquired contemplation is of the greatest importance in our spiritual life, since it disposes us to contemplation properly so-called, or infused [contemplation], which proceeds from a living faith and the gifts of knowledge, understanding and wisdom, but under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. . .

We must not confound this contemplation in the strict sense. . . either with study -- for it is the affective apprehension of God, not mere speculative thought -- or with meditation, because [infused] contemplation presupposes a particular inspiration of the Holy Spirit.(5)

St. Catherine of Siena makes a distinction between knowledge acquired through the use of reason alone and knowledge acquired through the use of reason enlightened by faith: "We have in us a natural light which the Creator has given us to distinguish good from evil. . . . It is proper then that we should use this natural light. . . . But to know God well and to know ourselves in God. . . it is necessary that this natural but imperfect light be joined to the supernatural, perfect light which is infused into our souls with grace: faith properly so-called, received at baptism" (Letter 301).

STUDY AS CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVITY

One of the most obvious differences between the active life and the contemplative life rests on the very notion of "action" and "contemplation." Action performed in the apostolate originates in the agent of the activity and terminates in the recipient. To use a few simple examples, in giving alms, we enrich the person who receives them; in teaching, we expand the knowledge of the student.

However, before we can give an alms, we have to have the money to give; before we can impart knowledge to students, we ourselves must possess that knowledge. Consequently, those who are deputed to the ministry of the word must first acquire the requisite knowledge of sacred doctrine. This is done by the contemplative activity of study. The purpose of this particular contemplative activity is to perfect the one who studies; it begins and ends in the agent. The Friar Preacher, however, does not study simply to become a scholar, but to prepare for the ministry of the word for the salvation of souls. He is to give to others "the fruits of contemplation." G. Bedouelle, who has recently published an excellent work on St. Dominic and the Friars Preachers, has this to say about study in the Dominican Order:

Always study! This was the recommendation Dominic never ceased to repeat in his exhortations as well as his letters. . . . The word "always" is not to be taken lightly, for Dominic himself set the example. He studied the Epistles of St. Paul assiduously, until he knew them almost entirely by heart. . . . "The Friar Preacher is not a good religious unless he is a man of study. . . ." (6)

A new and essential bond was thus forged between study and preaching: through the union of these two elements the Preacher worked for the salvation of souls. . . What did the early brethren study? If we can judge by Dominic's own example, we will answer: the Bible, bearing in mind that this served as the cornerstone for all theological learning in the Middle

Ages.

When Jordan of Saxony wrote that the rule of the Friars Preachers consisted in "a life of holiness, learning and teaching," . . . he was simply commenting on and adapting the definition of preaching by word and example which he ascribed to his master, Dominic. But he was emphasizing the importance of study, an integral part of the Dominican vocation. . . . We should remember that Dominic, called in the liturgy *Doctor of Truth*, never thought of theology as something to be pursued for its own sake: it was always to tend toward, be oriented to, the service of truth.(7)

Unfortunately, it is precisely this contemplative activity of study, buttressed by the regular observances of silence, cloister, prayer and the common life, that is often neglected by those who are more intent on *doing* than in *becoming*. Dominicans are not exempt from the temptation to discard the regular observances that foster a contemplative attitude. If they do this, however, they may carry on an effective apostolate, but it will be "the fruit of a form of contemplation that is more intellectual than religious in character."(8)

It is undoubtedly very difficult to preserve a contemplative attitude in our contemporary environment: The monastic observances that foster such an attitude seem to be incompatible with an intensely active apostolate. But recognizing that fact, St. Dominic introduced the practice of granting dispensations. While there will always be a certain degree of tension between a demanding apostolate and the contemplative element in Dominican life, one must avoid placing an irreducible dichotomy and opposition between contemplative activity and apostolic action. The motto of the Friars Preachers summarizes it very clearly: "To contemplate and to give to others the fruits of contemplation."

We conclude this brief article with a challenging statement by V. Walgrave: "One thing seems quite clear to me: to judge the return to an authentically contemplative life of canonical and monastic inspiration as something unrealistic, in essence would be to renounce the formula chosen by Bt. Dominic. Doing this, and still calling ourselves the *Ordo Praedicatorum* would be, in a certain sense, a kind of usurpation."(9)

St. Thomas Aquinas Priory
River Forest, Illinois

Notes:

(1) *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 188, art. 6.

(2) *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 188, art. 6.

(3) This is the opinion of H.C. Scheeben in *Der heilige Dominikus*, Freiburg-in-Breisgau, 1927. It has been refuted by V. Walgrave in *Dominican Self-appraisal*, Priory Press, Chicago 1968, pp. 49-50 (English translation).

(4) R. Creytens, "Les Constitutions des Frères Prêcheurs dans la redaction de S. Raymond de Peñafort (1241)," in *Archivum FF. Praed.*, 18 (1968), pp. 22-23.

(5) M.S. Gillet, *Encyclical Letter on Dominican Spirituality*, 1945, pp. 34-36, *passim*.

(6) A. Duvall "L'étude dans la législation religieuse de saint Dominique, in *Mélanges Chenu*, Paris,

1967, p. 237.

(7) G. Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press. 1987, (English translation), pp. 156-168, *passim*.

(8) V. Walgrave, *Dominican Self-Appraisal*, Chicago, 1968, p. 111.

(9) V. Walgrave, *op.cit.*, p. 335.

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