

DOMINICAN CONTEMPLATION AND STUDY

Editor's note: These reflections on Dominican contemplation and study are drawn from the conference, "Recovering the Contemplative Dimension," that our Dominican brother, Fr. Paul Murray, O.P., Professor of Spirituality at the Angelicum, gave at the opening of the General Chapter of Providence in July 2001.

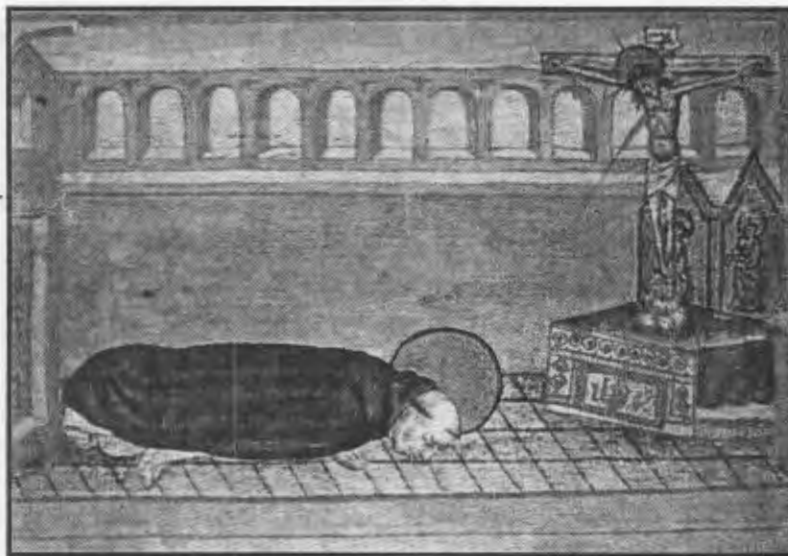
THE WORD "CONTEMPLATION" in early Dominican texts does not possess the rather esoteric and highly mystical character that it acquired in the sixteenth century.

Often it can mean, in fact, little more than a simple act of attention or prayerful study. In modern times, to add to the confusion, we tend to use the word "contemplation" as a basic synonym for prayer itself.

The thirteenth-century Dominican, Hugh of St. Cher, notes that among the things a man ought to see in contemplation, and ought to write in the book of his heart are the needs of his neighbors. He ought to see in contemplation what he would like to have done for himself, if he were in need, and how great is the weakness of every human being. He says, "Understand from what you know about yourself the condition of your neighbor. And what you see in Christ and in the world and in your neighbor, write that in your heart."

These lines are memorable for the compassionate attention they give to the neighbor in the context of contempla-

tion. However, their emphasis as well is on true self-knowledge, and simple openness to Christ, to the neighbor, and to the world, strikes a distinctly Dominican note. The passage ends with a simple but impressive reference to the task of preaching. We are exhorted to understand ourselves and be attentive to all that we see in the world around us and in our neighbor, and to reflect deep within our hearts on the things we have



observed. Then we are told to go out and preach: "First see, then write, then send. What is needed first is study, then reflection within the heart, and then preaching."

Contemplation: A Vision of Christ

Juan de la Cruz, a sixteenth-century Dominican, exposed as exaggerated the emphasis in that period on the need for special interior experiences. He defended simple vocal prayer and underlined the importance, in spiritual transformation, of the ordinary, everyday struggle on the part of the Christian, to live a life of virtue.

Prayer is a grace, a gift that lifts us beyond anything that we ourselves could attain by ascetic practice or by meditative technique. Accordingly, communion with God, actual friendship with God in prayer, although impossible even for the strong, is something God himself can achieve for us in a second, if he wishes.

Is it not the case that, in the Gospel, Christ encourages us to pray with great simplicity of heart and straightforwardness? When, over the years, Dominicans have found themselves confronted with detailed methods and techniques of meditation, and with long lists of instructions of what to do in meditation, and what not to do, their reaction has almost always been the same: they instinctively feel that something has gone wrong.

The down-to-earth sixteenth-century Thomist, Francisco de Vitoria, said that genuine contemplation is reading the bible and the study of wisdom. He had St. Dominic as his model. Dominic's prayer is never in any way esoteric. It is always simple, always ecclesial.

In St. Dominic's "The Nine Ways of Prayer," we are afforded a glimpse of him repeating the Publican's prayer while lying down prostrate on the ground before God. His heart, we are told, would be pricked with compunction, and he would blush at himself and say, sometimes loudly enough for it actually to be heard, the words from the Gospel, "Lord be

merciful to me, a sinner." The words of this prayer are prayed in deep poverty of spirit, but the prayer is said with utter confidence all the same. Why? Because the words of the prayer are Gospel words and because Christ, the life-giving healer and source of mercy, is at its center.

Contemplation: A Vision of the World

The authentic contemplative in our tradition, the authentic apostle, conscious of his or her own weakness, and humbly identified, therefore, with the world's need, calls down a blessing. Dominic clearly possessed a very firm and vital hold on the immediate world around him. That sense of openness to the world is a marked characteristic of many of the great Dominican preachers.

Our Dominican brother, Yves Congar, in a letter to a fellow Dominican in 1959 wrote:

"If my God is the God of the Bible, the living God, the 'I am, I was, I am coming,' then God is inseparable from the world and from human beings. My action, then, consists in handing myself over to my God, who allows me to be the link for his divine activity regarding the world and other people. My relationship to God is not that of a cultic act, which rises up from me to Him, but rather that of a faith by which I hand myself over to the action of the living God, communicating himself according to his plan, to the world and to other human beings. I can only place myself faithfully before God, and offer the fullness of my being and my resources so that I can be there where God awaits me, the link between this action of God and the world."

In Congar's terms, Dominic's decisive action was to surrender himself with faith and hope to the great, saving initiative of God. "There is only one thing that is real," Congar writes, "one thing that is true: to hand oneself over to God." Congar is also well aware that in the life of Dominic and the early friars, this handing over of self was never simply an individual act of will. It was always a surrender that involved, on the part of the brethren, a daily following in the footsteps of their Savior — a radical and free acceptance, therefore, of an evangelical way of life.

It is at this point that we meet head on some of the most obvious and most concrete forms of the contemplative

is unthinkable without the ecstasy of prayer or attention to God, and vice versa.

One needs to surrender oneself to God in prayer, with at least the humble ecstasy of hope. For, as Saint Catherine of Siena reminds us in *The Dialogue*, "[O]ne cannot share with others what one does not have in oneself." For the early friars, the grace of preaching, the surrender to God's living Word, was always intimately linked with a communal life of prayer and adoration. It was what Jordan of Saxony calls in a fine phrase "apostolic observance."

The pattern of Dominican life and community prayer was, in Jordan's understanding, not some sort of arbitrary or external discipline.

Rather, Jordan saw it with enthusiasm as an opportunity for us to experience, here and now in faith, Christ risen among us. In a letter to the brethren in Paris, Jordan speaks of the need for each one of us to hold fast to the bond of charity, and keep faith with the brethren. If we should fail to do this, Jordan says, we risk missing an opportunity really to meet the risen Christ. For the man who

cuts himself off from the unity of the brotherhood may from time to time feel some very slight and fugitive consolation of the spirit. But in the opinion of Jordan "he can never fully have sight of the Lord unless he is with the disciples gathered in the house."

In contemplation we turn our whole attention to God, but there is something else as well. God's Word, though utterly transcendent in its source, has come down into the world, and has taken flesh. The initiative is always his. Ac-



dimension of our life: choir in common, for example, study, regular observance, the following of the Rule of St. Augustine, and the discipline of silence. These particular religious exercises and practices represented for St. Dominic a vital part of the evangelical way of life.

For St. Dominic and the early friars, speaking about God "*de Deo*," the grace of preaching, presupposes first speaking with God "*cum Deo*," the grace of actual prayer or contemplation. In the apostolic life, adopted by the friars, the ecstasy of service or attention to the neighbor

cordingly, both in our work and in our prayer, we come to realize that Christ is not just the object of our regard. He is the Word alive within us, the friend in whom we live and move and have our being. Thus, we can make bold to say, echoing the First Letter of John: This is contemplation – this is contemplative love – not so much that we contemplate God but that God has first contemplated us, and that now in us, in some sense, and even through us, as part of the mystery of his risen life in the Church, he contemplates the world.

Living at St. Jacques in Paris, in the modern Priory that bears the same name as the thirteenth-century priory, the great Dominican theologian, Marie-Dominique Chenu, discovered that what he saw in the world somehow prompted him to contemplation. The world and Word of God should not, Chenu insisted, be separated. Our priority is to go out into the world. For the world is the place where the Word of God takes on meaning.

Contemplation: A Vision of the Neighbor

One of the statements about St. Dominic most often quoted is that “he gave the day to his neighbors and the night to God.” It is a telling statement, but in a way not strictly true. For, even after the day was over, in the great silence and solitude of Dominic’s long night vigils, the neighbor was not forgotten. According to one of the saint’s contemporaries – Brother John of Bologna – Dominic, after lengthy prayers, lying face down on the pavement of the Church, would rise up, and perform two simple acts of homage. First, within the Church, he would visit each altar in turn

until midnight. Then he would go very quietly and visit the sleeping brethren; and, if necessary, he would cover them up. The way this account has been written down, one has the sense that Dominic’s reverence for the individual altars in the church is somehow intimately related to his reverence and care for the sleeping brethren. It is almost as if Dominic is acknowledging, first of all, the presence of the sacred in the altars, and then – with no less reverence – acknowledging that same presence in his own brethren.

lifted high in spirit,” God revealed to her something of the mystery and dignity of every human being. “Open your mind’s eye,” he said to her, “and you will see the dignity and beauty of my reasoning creature.” Catherine obeys at once. However, when she opens the eye of her mind in prayer, she discovers not only a vision of God, and a vision of herself in God as his image, but also a new and compassionate vision and understanding of her neighbor. St. Catherine writes that she immediately feels compelled “to love



Many years ago Yves Congar quoted from Nicolas Cabasilas: “Among all visible creatures, human nature alone can truly be an altar.” Congar himself, in his book, *The Mystery of the Temple*, makes bold to say: “Every Christian is entitled to the name of ‘saint’ and the title of ‘temple.’”

Among all those within the Dominican tradition who have spoken and written concerning the neighbor and contemplation, the most outstanding is probably St. Catherine of Siena. On the very first page of her *Dialogue*, we are told that “when she was at prayer,

her neighbor as herself, for she sees how supremely she herself is loved by God, beholding herself in the wellspring of the sea of the divine essence.”

Contained in these few words of St. Catherine is a profound yet simple truth: the source of her vision of the neighbor and the cause of her deep respect for the individual person, is her contemplative experience. What Catherine receives in prayer and contemplation is what Dominic had received before her. She has received not simply the command from God to love her neighbor as she had been loved, but an unforgettable insight

beyond or beneath the symptoms of human distress, a glimpse into the hidden grace and dignity of each person. So deeply was she affected by this vision of the neighbor that she remarked on one occasion to Raymond of Capua that, if he could only see the inner, hidden beauty of the individual person as she saw it, he would be willing to suffer and die for it. "Oh Father, if you were to see the beauty of the human soul, I am convinced that you would willingly suffer a hundred times, were it possible, in order to bring a single soul to salvation. Nothing in this world of sense around us can possibly compare in loveliness with a human soul." This assertion of a willingness to die a hundred times for the sake of the neighbor sounds extreme, but it is typical of Catherine.

In another place, she writes: "Here I am poor wretch, living in my body, yet in desire constantly outside my body! Ah, good gentle Jesus! I am dying and cannot die." That last phrase, "I am dying and cannot die" Catherine repeats a number of times in her letters. When Catherine uses the phrase, "I die because I cannot die," she never uses it to express a desire to be out of this world. Of course, Catherine longs to be with Christ, but her passion for Christ compels her, as a Dominican, to want to serve the Body of Christ, the Church, here and now in the world, and in any way she can. Her anguish of longing comes from her awareness that all her efforts are inevitably limited. She writes, "I am dying and cannot die because of my desire for the renewal of holy Church, for God's honor, and for everyone's salvation."

The mysticism of Catherine of Siena, like that of Dominic, is an ecclesial mysticism. It is a mysticism of service, not a mysticism of psychological enthusiasm. God is, of course, for both saints, always the primary focus of attention, but the

neighbor and the neighbor's needs are never forgotten. When on one occasion, a group of hermits refused to abandon their solitary life in the woods, even though their presence was badly needed by the Church in Rome, Catherine wrote at once to them, "The spiritual life is quite too lightly held if it is lost by a change of places. Apparently, God is an acceptor of places, and is only found in a wood, and not elsewhere in time of need." This outburst from Catherine does not mean that she had no appreciation for the ordinary aids and supports necessary for the contemplative life: solitude, for example, and recollection, and silence. Catherine deeply respected contemplative silence. What she did not approve of at all was the silence of certain ministers of the Gospel who, in her opinion, ought to have been crying out loudly and clearly on behalf of truth and justice.

Dominic was a man possessed not only by a vision of God, but also by a profound inner conviction of people's needs. It was to the men and women of his own time, to his own contemporaries, whose needs he received almost like a wound in prayer, that Dominic was concerned to communicate all that he had learned in contemplation.

At the very core of St. Dominic's life was a profound contemplative love of God – that first and last. Reading through the very early accounts of Dominic's prayer-life, what also immediately strikes us is the place that is accorded to others – to the afflicted and oppressed – within the act of contemplation itself. The "*alii*" – the others – are not simply the passive recipients of Dominic's graced preaching. Even before the actual moment of preaching, when he becomes a kind of channel of grace, the afflicted and oppressed inhabit the inmost shrine of his compassion. They form part even of the *contemplata in contemplata aliis*

tradere. Jordan of Saxony writes: "God had given Dominic a special grace to weep for sinners and for the afflicted and oppressed; he bore their distress in the inmost shrine of his compassion and the warm sympathy he felt for them in his heart spilled over in the tears which flowed from his eyes."

In part, of course, this means simply that when he prays Dominic remembers to intercede for those people he knows to be in need, and for sinners especially. But there is something more – "some special grace" – to use Jordan's phrase. The wound of knowledge that opens up Dominic's mind and heart in contemplation, allowing him with an awesome unprotectedness to experience his neighbor's pain and his neighbor's need, cannot be accounted for simply by certain crowding memories of pain observed or by his own natural sympathy. The apostolic wound Dominic receives, which enables him to act and to preach, is a contemplative wound.

Study

Dominican preaching that flows from contemplation or the contemplative wound is profoundly linked to study, the *misericordia veritatis*, as the General Chapter of Providence in 2001 reminds us.

• Number 104: "Thanks to St. Dominic's innovative spirit, study ordered to the salvation of souls was involved intimately in the purpose and regular life of the Order. St. Dominic himself led the brethren to places of learning in the largest cities so that they might prepare for their mission. 'Our study must aim principally, ardently and with the greatest care at what can be useful for the souls of our neighbors' (LCO 77,1). From then on, study would be linked to the apostolic mission of the Order and to preaching the Word of God."

• Number 106: "It is into a studious and concerned wisdom of this sort that

Thomas Aquinas inscribes the Dominican vocation — *contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere*. . . It belongs to the gift of wisdom not only to meditate on God but also to direct human actions . . . Sapiential study thus unfolds itself necessarily as intellectual compassion; a form of compassion which presupposes insight (*intellectus*) gained or developed by study; and a form of insight which leads to compassion. For even as it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, so it is better to give others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely to contemplate. Thus, even though God's mercy and compassion are made available to the world in a multitude of ways, through the Dominican charism it is available through study and the consolation of truth."

• Number 107: "Our constitutions point out the contemplative dimension of study by calling it a meditation on the multiform wisdom of God. To dedicate oneself to study is to answer a call to 'cultivate the human pursuit of truth.' From the start, the brethren were inspired by the innovative audacity of St. Dominic who encouraged them to be useful to souls through intellectual compassion, by sharing with them the *misericordia veritatis*, the mercy of truth. Jordan of Saxony states that Dominic had the ability to pierce through to the hidden core of the many difficult questions of their day 'thanks to a humble intelligence of the heart.'"

• Number 108: "Study is thus linked with *misericordia* which moves us to proclaim the Gospel of God's love for the world and the dignity which results from such love. Our study helps us to perceive human crises, needs, longings, and sufferings as our own."

In this way Dominican study can and must serve the "*misericordia veritatis*" that it cultivates. Dominican study is a permanent way of life, nourished by contemplation and the life that we share together as contemplative preachers. ▼

