

June 2008: Lessons from Dominic on Ministry and Prayer

We have a lot to learn from our foreparents in the consecrated life. That is how I concluded my last reflections. I wish to start with one simple example here: the relationship between prayer and active ministry. I begin with a quote I bumped into the other day from a biography of St. Dominic Guzman (1170-1221), founder of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), a group consecrated to Christ and to communicating the Gospel:

In order, to insist upon the apostolic spirit being kept alive, St. Dominic enforced upon his preachers the law of silence, of fast, of Divine Office said chorally, of the discipline of cloister, of poverty, chastity, and obedience. It may seem a contradiction to assert that, in order to make his apostles apostolic, St. Dominic first made them monks; in order to drive them into the world he drove them from it. But the explanation of this paradox is to be found in the strange law that governs human nature: you must die to live, lose your life to find it. (Bede Jarrett *Life of St. Dominic (1170-1221)* [NY: Image Doubleday Books, 1964], 90)

What does it take to foster a powerful ministry of evangelism? The Dominicans' influence spread dramatically from their small beginnings in France and Italy throughout the Christendom of his time. How do you keep the "apostolic spirit" alive among a team of ministers committed to minister day in and day out in the midst of fierce competition from popular cults and heresies? The Dominicans ultimately won the day in their conflicts with the heresies of their period, and they became well known for their apostolic fervor.

Let me give you a bit of background. Dominic Guzman was, after his education, a helper at the cathedral of Osma in Spain. He was ordained at age twenty-five and then worked as an assistant to bishop Diego. Dominic accompanied Diego on a few long journeys where he was struck by the needs of the church and the influence of certain "cults" of the time. Diego suggested that what was needed were some itinerant preachers who would present a serious intellectual refutation to the ideas of the opposition, but who would also live a life of poverty like Christ (matching or surpassing the style of the cults). Many of Dominic's first converts were French women. Diego and Dominic organized these women into a convent, which then became their base for further missions.

Dominic began to collect his own followers into the mission, and ultimately this group became a distinct "Order" of the Church. The Dominicans were, with the Franciscans, a new kind of Order. They refused not only private property, but the collection of community wealth. The world was their cloister, for they wished to be available in the world for active ministry rather than essentially associated with a geographic monastery location. This was the start of what is known as "mendicant orders." In the very first section of their Constitutions, Dominic gives the leader of the order freedom to dispense with some of the canonical observances (like public liturgy, fasting, private prayer and such) for the sake of the "good of souls." The Constitutions read, "since our Order is known to have been founded initially precisely for the sake of preaching and the salvation of souls, and all our concern should be primarily and passionately

directed to this all-important goal, . . .” (Dominican Constitution of 1228, Prologue) You can see how important ministry was to the early Dominicans. They bent the history of monastic institutions for the sake of active ministry.

So why start an Order at all? Why not just get out on the streets, like the cults around them and preach the true Gospel of Christ without having to worry about “canonical observances” at all? Wouldn’t it be a lot more radical just to abandon the institution and the rules of the Church (the cults had lots of critical things to say about the Church at the time - sound familiar?), form independent communes or mission associations, and break off on their own? Might it not be even a bit more “effective”?

Dominic thought not. Part of Dominic’s genius was his sense of the balanced training of missionaries. True, things were a bit more flexible. This prayer or that regiment of fasting was “dispensed” for the sake of giving someone freedom to travel and preach over here or over there. But this flexibility was an adjustment (not an abandonment) of a basic pattern of life, a life rooted in common prayer, community accountability, and personal self-restriction.

Dominic foresaw a few dangers in his young ministry. He was concerned that his preachers have the proper academic training to be able to address the issues that would confront them in ministry. But the emphasis on academic training itself had a danger. Jarrett writes in Dominic’s biography, “Therefore in the eyes of St. Dominic, the danger, especially for the chiefest and best of his children, would be their absorption in study, in the mere interest of the preparation, so that the labour of the ministry would become repulsive to them” (pp. 88-89). Could it be that Dominic guessed that the life of study and preaching could get so interesting that they might all become a bunch of dry academics or rhetorical technicians, consumed with their own questions or church growth strategies and only peripherally concerned with real ministry? Could Dominic have suspected that the “seminaries” he founded (and he did help found universities for the training of preachers) might eventually become “cemeteries,” housing lifeless scholars with little deep connection with Christ?

Jarrett states, “the danger for the Dominicans was therefore to be remedied by making them drink deep of the spiritual life, for the apostle, who has his interest in mere intellectual pursuits, will find that the tendency to remain absorbed in pure abstraction is corrected by monastic observance” (p. 89). Intellectual preoccupation corrected by monastic observance.

I wrote my first Rule of life when I was in seminary, in part because I experienced this danger. As the years have gone by I have seen others dangers to authentic ministry as well: the constant needs of those around us, our own sense of self-importance, the expectations of parishioners or supporters.

I think we have something to learn from Dominic. In order to make apostles apostolic we must first make them monks. We must drive the world out of ourselves in order to enable us to be powerful agents of Christ in the midst of the world. How is this done? I think we have much to

learn from our foreparents in the consecrated life.

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