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## THE PROMISE OF LIFE

“I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.” John (10.10)

25 February, Ash Wednesday 1998

**fr. Timothy Radcliffe, o.p.**



When St Dominic gave the friars the habit, he promised them “the bread of life and the water of heaven”(1) . If we are to be preachers of a word that gives life, then we must find the “bread of life” in our communities. Do they help us to flourish, or merely to survive?

Shortly after I joined the Order, the Province was visited by fr. Aniceto Fernandez, then Master. He asked me only one question, the traditional question of all visitators: “Are you happy?” I had expected some deeper question, about preaching the gospel, or the challenges facing the Province. Now I realise that this is the first question we must put to our brethren: “Are you happy?” There is a happiness which is properly that of being alive as a Dominican, and which is the source of our preaching. It is not an endless cheerfulness, a relentless bonhomie. It entails a capacity for sorrow. It may be absent for a time, even a long time. It is some small taste of that abundance of life which we preach, the joy of those who have begun to share God’s own life. We should have the capacity for delight because we are children of the Kingdom. “Delight is the intrinsic character of the blessed life and the life which by the gift of the Holy Spirit is on the way to blessedness”.(2) When we sing to Dominic we conclude by praying: *Nos junge beatis*. Join us to the blessed. May we share some glimpse of their happiness there now.

If we are to build communities in which there is an abundance of life, then we must recognise who and what we are and what it means for us to be alive. as men and women brothers and sisters, and as preachers.

We are not angels. We are passionate beings, moved by the animal desires for food and copulation. This is the nature which the Word of life accepted when he embraced human nature. We can do no less. It is from here that the journey to holiness begins. Yet we are created by God in his image, destined for God's friendship. We are *capax Dei*, hungry for God To be alive is to embark on that adventure which leads us to the Kingdom.

We need communities that will sustain us on the way. The Lord has promised "I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36.26). We need brothers and sisters who are with us as our hearts are broken and made tender.

Every wise person has always known that there is no way to life that does not take one through the wilderness. The journey from Egypt to the Promised Land passes through the desert. If we would be happy and truly alive, then we too must pass that way. We need communities which will accompany us on that journey, and help us to believe that when the Lord leads Israel into the wilderness it is so that he "may speak tenderly to her" (Hosea 2.16). Perhaps so many people have left religious life in the last thirty years not because it is any harder than before, but because we have sometimes lost sight of the fact that these dark nights belong to our rebirth as people who are alive with the joy of the Kingdom. So our communities should not be places in which we merely survive, but places where we find food for the journey.

To use a metaphor which I have developed elsewhere,<sup>(3)</sup> religious communities are like ecological systems, designed to sustain strange forms of life. A rare frog will need its own ecosystem if it is flourish, and make its hazardous way from spawn to tadpole to frog. If the frog is threatened with extinction, then one must build an environment, with its food and ponds and a climate in which it can thrive. Dominican life also requires its own ecosystem, if we are to live fully, and preach a word of life. It is not enough to talk about it; we must actively plan and build such Dominican ecosystems. This is, in the first place, the responsibility of each community. It is for the brethren and sisters who live together to create communities in which we may not just survive but flourish, offering to each other "the bread of life and the water of heaven". This is the fundamental purpose of the "community project" proposed by the last three General Chapters. This will only happen if we dare to talk together about what

touches us most deeply as human beings and as Dominicans. My hope is that this letter to the Order may open up discussion of some aspects of our Dominican life. I look at the apostolic life, the affective life, and the life of prayer. These are not three parts of each life (Contemplative life, 7am – 7.30am; Apostolic life, 9am – 5pm; Affective life ?.). They belong to the fullness of any life that is truly human and Dominican. Nicodemus asks how one can be reborn. This is our question too: how can we help each other as we face transformation, so as to become apostles of life? Not every community will be able to renew itself and attain the ideal envisaged by our Constitutions and recent General Chapters. A Province will therefore have to evolve a plan for the gradual renewal of communities in which the brethren may flourish. It is to these communities alone that young brethren should be assigned. They will carry the seeds for the future of Dominican life. Unless a Province plans the building of such communities, then it dies. A Province with three communities where the brethren flourish in the Dominican life has a future, with the grace of God. A Province with twenty communities where we just survive may well have none.

## **1. THE APOSTOLIC LIFE**

### **1.1 A life torn open**

The Dominican life is in the first place apostolic. This may easily be understood to mean that a good Dominican is always busy, engaged in “apostolates”. Yet the apostolic life is not what we do so much as what we are, those who are called to “live the life of the apostles in the form conceived by St Dominic”.(4) When Diego met the Cistercian delegates sent to preach to the Albigensians he told them “go humbly, following the example of our loving Master, teaching and acting, travelling on foot without silver and gold, imitating the life of the apostles in everything”.(5) To be an apostle is to have a life, not a job.

And the first characteristic of this apostolic life is that it is a sharing of the life of the Lord. The apostles are those who accompanied him “during all the time that Lord Jesus went in and out among us” (Acts 1.21). They were called by him, walked with him, listened to him, rested and prayed with him, argued with him, and were sent out by him. They shared the life of the one who is Emmanuel, “God with us”. The culmination of that life was the sharing of the Last Supper, the sacrament of the bread of life. Though one left early because he had too much to do.

The apostolic life is therefore for us more than the various apostolates that we do. It is a way of life. Yves Congar OP wrote of preaching that it is a "vocation that is the substance of my life and being,"(6) If the demands of the apostolate mean that we have no time to pray and eat with our brothers, to share their lives, then how ever busy we may be, we will not be apostles in the full sense of the word. Meister Eckhart wrote: "People should not worry so much about what they should do; rather about what they should be. If we and our ways are good, then what we do will be radiant."(7) Dominic was a preacher with all his being.

But this apostolic life necessarily tears us apart. This is its pain and the source of its fertility. For the Word of God, whose life the apostles share, reaches out to all that is farthest from God and embraces it. According to Eckhart, the Word remains one with the Father while boiling over into the world. Nothing human is alien to him. The life of God is stretched open to find a space for all that we are; he becomes like us in all things but sin. He takes upon himself our doubts and fears; he enters into our experience of absurdity, that wilderness in which all meaning is lost.

So for us to live the apostolic life fully is to find that we too are torn open, stretched out. To be a preacher is not just to tell people about God. It is to bear within our lives that distance between the life of God and that which is furthest away, alienated and hurt We have a word of hope only if we glimpse from within the pain and despair of those to whom we preach. We have no word of compassion unless somehow we know their failures and temptations as our own. We have no word which offers meaning to people's lives, unless we have been touched by their doubts, and glimpsed the abyss. I think of some of my French brethren, who after a day of teaching theology and doing research, take to the pavements at night, to meet the prostitutes, to hear their woes and sufferings, and to offer them a word of hope. No wonder that, from the beginning, we Dominicans have a bad reputation! It is a risk of the vocation. Jordan of Rivalto, in the fourteenth century, tells people not to be too hard on the friars if they are bit "grubby". It is part of our vocation: "being here among the people, seeing the things of the world, it is impossible for them not to get a bit dirty. They are men of flesh and blood like you, and in the freshness of youth; it is a wonder that they are as clean as they are . This is no place for monks!"(8)

So the apostolic life does not offer us a balanced and healthy "lifestyle", with good career prospects. For it unbalances us, tips us into that which is most other. If we share the life of the Word of God in this way, then we are hollowed out, opened up, so that there is the space and the silence for a new word to be born, as if for the first

time. We are people of faith who reach out to open our hearts to those who do not believe. Sometimes we ourselves will be unsure of what it all means. We are like the apostles, who were summoned by Christ, and who walked to Jerusalem with him, knowing that he alone had the words of eternal life. And yet they argued as to who was the greatest, and often had no idea where they were going.

So the apostolic life invites us to live a tension. We have promised to build our lives with our Dominican brothers and sisters. "For us henceforth to be human, to be ourselves is to be one of the preaching brethren, we have no other life-story."<sup>(9)</sup> Here is our home and we can have no other. But the impetus of the apostolic life propels us into different worlds. It has taken many of our brothers into the industrial world, to the world of factories and trade unions. It takes others into universities. It takes us into the cyberworld of Internet. A new project of the French Dominicans, *Jubilatio*, carries us into the world of the young. A project in Benin takes us into the world of ecological farming. We are present in the worlds of Islam and Judaism. This tension may tear us open, so that the only life we have is not built or planned by us, but received as a daily gift, "bread of life" that Dominic promised.

## **1.2 Work in contemporary society**

In our contemporary society, this tension can easily become a simple division. We can become people with two lives, our lives as Dominicans in our communities and the lives we live in our apostolates. This is because of the way that work is perceived today. If this happens then the beautiful, painful, fertile tension at the heart of the apostolic life is broken, and we may become simply people with jobs who happen to go back to religious hotels at night. Let us see why this is a particular challenge we must face today.

### **a) The fragmentation of our lives**

Contemporary western society fragments life. The weekday is separated from the weekend, work from leisure, the working life from retirement, at least for those lucky enough to have a job. You can be a history teacher in the day and a parent at night and a Christian on Sunday. This fragmentation can make it hard for us to live unified and whole lives. Dominicans preach in an almost infinite variety of ways. We are parish priests and professors, social workers and hospital chaplains, poets and painters. How do we live these apostates as friars, members of our communities, vowed brethren and sisters? I remember being very moved talking to a young

Dominican journalist who shared with me the difficulties of living in the world of the media. In the day he lived in one world, with its moral assumptions, its “lifestyle”. At night he came back to his religious community. How was he to be one person, friar and journalist? When we come back to the community at night, then like everyone else in society we will want to shut off the burdens of the day. What we do at work is “another life”.

### **b) The professionalisation of work**

Increasingly work is professionalised. For the preaching of the gospel we will often become qualified professionals. One can even get a diploma in preaching or a doctorate in pastoral studies. None of those whom Jesus called had graduated in “apostleship”! There is nothing wrong with this professionalisation. We must be as qualified and professional as those with whom we work. Yet we must be aware of the seductions of becoming a “professional”. It grants status and position. It locates us in a stratified society. It gives identity and invites us to a way of life. We may bring in a salary to the community. How is this doctor, professor, pastor, to be a mendicant, an itinerant friar or sister? Does our profession confine us to a narrow path, with only the prospect of promotion? Does it leave us free for the unexpected demands of our brethren and of God?

### **c) The work ethic**

Finally, in western society, the work ethic has triumphed. It is what justifies our existence. Salvation not by works but by work. The unemployed are excluded from the Kingdom. Whatever we may preach, surely the hectic activism one so often encounters in the Order may suggest that sometimes we too believe that we can save ourselves by what we do. We praise Dominic as Praedicator Gratiae, “preacher of grace”, but though we may preach that salvation is a gift, is that how we live? Do we live as those for whom life, and the fullness of life, is a gift? Is that how we regard our brethren? Do we compete to show how busy and therefore important we are?

## **1.3 The wilderness of meaninglessness**

So to be a preacher is to have one’s life prized open. We have somehow to share in the Exodus of the Word of God, who comes forth from the Father to embrace all that is human. Sometimes this Exodus may carry us into the wilderness, with no apparent way through to the Promised Land. We may be like Job who sits upon the dung heap

and proclaims that his Redeemer lives. Only sometimes we merely sit upon the dung heap. If we let ourselves be touched by the doubts and beliefs of our contemporaries, then we may find ourselves in a desert in which the gospel makes no sense anymore. "He has walled up my path "(Job 19.8).

The fundamental crisis of our society is perhaps that of meaning. The violence, corruption and drug addiction are symptoms of a deeper malady, which is the hunger for some meaning to our human existence. To make us preachers God may lead us into that wilderness. There our old certainties will collapse, and the God whom we have known and loved will disappear. Then we may have to share the dark night of Gethsemane, when all seems absurd and senseless, and the Father appears to be absent. And yet it is only if we let ourselves be led there, where nothing makes any sense any more, that we may hear the word of grace which God offers; for our time. "Grace shows itself where we break through despair into the affirmation of praise."(10)

Faced with void, we may be tempted to fill it, with half believed platitudes, with substitutes for the living God. The fundamentalism which we so often see in the Church today is perhaps the frightened reaction of those who stood on the edge of that desert, but did not dare to endure it. The desert is a place of terrifying silence, which we may try to drown by banging out old formulas with a terrible sincerity. But the Lord leads us into the wilderness to show us his glory. Therefore, says Meister Eckhart, "Stand firm, and do not waver from your emptiness".(11)

## **1.4 Communities of apostolic life**

How can our communities sustain us in this apostolic life? How can we support each other when a brother or sister finds themselves in that wilderness, when nothing at all makes any more sense?

a) The apostle is the one who is sent. The apostles did not apply for the job! We give our lives to the Order so that we may be sent out on its mission. In most Dominican communities there is the regular rhythm of going out in the morning and coming back at night. But we are not just going out to work, like a professional leaving his house. It is the community that sends us. And "on their return the apostles told him what they had done" (Luke 9. 10). Do we listen to what our brethren have done in the day when they come home in the evening? Do we give them the chance to share the challenges that they meet in their apostolates? We are out there, in the parish or the classroom,

for them, on their behalf, representing them. The community is present here in this brother or sister.

How can the prayers that we share together, morning and evening, be not just the common fulfilment of an obligation but part of the rhythm of the community that send out and receives back its members? Do we pray for and with our brothers in their apostolates? If not, then how can our community be said to be apostolic? It may become just a hostel.

The General Chapter of Caleruega has given excellent and clear suggestions as to how communities may plan and evaluate the common mission of the community, so that the brethren grow in a real sense of collaboration. I strongly urge all communities to fulfil these recommendations (No. 44).

b) In our communities we should be able to share both our faith and our doubts. For most of us, especially many who are joining the Order today, it is not enough just to recite the psalms together. We need to share the faith that brought us to the Order and which sustains us now. This the foundation of our fraternity. Perhaps we can only do this tentatively, shyly, but even so we may offer our brothers and sisters the bread of life and the water of heaven". General Chapters frequently recommend that there be preaching at every public liturgy. This is not only because we are the Order of Preachers, but also that we may share with each other our faith.

We must also be able to share our doubts. It is above all when brother enters that wilderness, when nothing makes sense any more, that we must let him speak. We must respect his struggle and never crush him. If a brother dares to share these moments of darkness and incomprehension, and we dare to listen to him, then it may be the greatest gift that he could ever give. The Lord may lead a brother into the dark night of Gethsemane. Will we go to sleep while he struggles? Nothing binds a community more closely together than a faith that we struggled to attain together. This may be in a theological faculty or a poor barrio of Latin America. In wrestling together to make sense of who we are and to what we are called in the light of the gospel, then we shall surely be astonished by the God who is always new and unexpected. We may even be surprised to encounter and discover each other, as if for the first time.



## 2. THE AFFECTIVE LIFE

### 2.1 In this is love

“In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”.  
(1 Jn 4.10f)

All apostolic life is a sharing in that redemptive love of God for humanity. If it is not, then our preaching will be at best a job, and at worst an exercise in manipulation of others, the propagation of an ideology. Perhaps in some countries the churches are empty because the preaching of the gospel is seen as an exercise of control rather than the expression of God’s boundless love. So to become alive, abundantly alive as preachers, means discovering how to love well. “My vocation is Love”.(12)

But one could put it the other way around. For us Dominicans, learning how to love is inseparable from being caught up in the mystery of God’s redemption of humanity. This is our school of love. Today religious formators all over the world are beginning to face the question of “affectivity”, a word I dislike. How can we form those who join the Order so that they may love well and fully, as chaste religious? Most of us had little or no formation in facing our emotions, our sexuality, our hunger to love and be loved. I do not remember ever receiving any formation in this area. It seemed to be assumed, or perhaps hoped nervously, that a good run and a cold shower would solve the “problem”. Alas, I cannot run and I dislike cold showers!

In this letter I will not discuss issues relating specifically to formation and affectivity, since I hope there will be a letter to the Order on the topic of formation soon. I will just say this: it is not enough to hope that all will be well if we recruit well-balanced young men and women, free of obvious emotional disorders. Would well balanced people lay down their lives for their friends? Would they leave the ninety-nine sheep and go and look for the one that is lost? Would they eat and drink with prostitutes and sinners? I fear that they may be too sensible. Commenting on St John’s gospel, Augustine wrote “Show me a lover, and he feels what I am saying”. (13) It is only those who are capable of love who can possibly understand the passion of the apostolic life. Unless we let ourselves be caught on the wave of that immense love, then all our attempts to be chaste may end up in being exercises in control. We may succeed, but at the risk of great damage to ourselves. We may fail, at the risk of terrible damage to others. So unless our apostolic impulse and our capacity for love

are deeply integrated, then they become a matter of either controlling others or myself. But Jesus let go control of his life, and placed it in our hands.

## **2.2 “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (Jn 15.13)**

Loving humanity may be very admirable but it may seem like a pale and abstract substitute for that deep and personal love for which we sometimes hunger. Is it really enough? And we may feel this all the more in contemporary society in which the dominant model of love is the passionate sexual love of a man and woman. When we feel this urgency, then can we be satisfied with loving humanity?

That passionate, spousal love is indeed a deep human need, and I shall say something about it later. It may also be an image of our relationship with God, for example in the medieval commentaries on the Song of Songs. But there is another complementary tradition which is perhaps more typically Dominican. It is at the heart of John’s gospel. “Greater love has no one than this, that he lays down his life for his friends.” So this is what the mystery of love looks like, someone giving away their life for their friends. Here we see a love that is profoundly passionate, in Jesus’ relationship with the disciples, with the prostitutes and publicans, the sick and the lepers, and even the Pharisees. It is a passion whose consummation is the passion that leads to Golgotha. Is not this as passionate as any love affair?

Our society may find our way of loving incomprehensible, since we have apparently rejected the typical experience of love, the sexual union with one other person. We may feel that sometimes ourselves, that we have missed out on “the big experience”, and that we have not lived. But St Thomas Aquinas taught that at the heart of the life of the God who is love is friendship, the unutterable friendship of the Father and the Son, which is the Spirit. For us to live, to become unutterably alive, is to find our home in that friendship and to be transformed by it. It will overflow into all that we do and are. As Don Goergen OP wrote, “Celibacy does not witness to anything. But celibates do”.(14) We witness to the Kingdom if we are seen to be people whose chastity liberates us for life.

Our communities should be schools of friendship. When he was dying St Hyacinth repeated the words of St Dominic to the brethren, “Have goodness and gentleness (dulcedo) of heart. Keep love of God and fraternal charity”.(15) Are we always sufficiently good and gentle hearted towards each other? In religious life there has often been a fear of friendship, but perhaps this has not been so present in the

Dominican tradition. From the beginning there have been profound and loving friendships, of Dominic for his brethren and sisters; of Jordan of Saxony for his beloved Diana and for Henry; of Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua. I remember an old Dominican saying in Chapter when I was young, "I have nothing against particular friendships; it's particular enmities to which I object!". This friendship is never exclusive, but profoundly transformative, painfully and slowly liberating us from all that is dominative or possessive, all that is patronising or contemptuous. If it is a sharing in the life of the Trinity, then it will be a love that lifts the other to equality and sets them free. As Bede Jarrett, the English provincial, wrote in 1932, "Oh dear friendship, what a gift of God it is. Speak no ill of it. Rather praise its Maker and Model, the Blessed Three-in-one."(16) If it is truly a friendship which is of God, then it will propel us out into the mission of preaching the good news.

The culmination of our loving will be a dispossession. Those whom we love we must let go; we must let them be. Does my love for another give them freedom to make their own lives and leave me free for the mission of the Order? Does my love for this woman, for example, help her to grow in her love for her husband, or am I tying her life to mine, and making her dependent? This painful but liberating dispossession invites us to become peripheral to the lives of those whom we love. We should find that we disappear from the centre of their lives, so that they may forget us and be free, free for someone else, free for God. This is the hardest thing of all, but I firmly believe that it can give us more joy than we can ever say or imagine. It is when our sides are opened up, so that living water may flow out.

One of the beautiful examples within our Dominican tradition is surely that of the love between Blessed Jordan of Saxony, Dominic's successor as Master of the Order, and the Dominican nun, Blessed Diana d'Andalo. Clearly they loved each other deeply. How many Masters of the Order have written with such openness to a woman? "Am I not yours, am I not with you: yours in labour, yours in rest; yours when I am with you, yours when I am far away?(17) And it is clear that she taught him much about how to love. But in his letters Jordan is always giving her away to the Lord. He is the Bridegroom's friend, whose role is to bring the bride to the bridegroom: "Think on him." "What is lacking to you because I cannot be with you, make up for in the company of a better friend, your Bridegroom Jesus Christ whom you have more constantly with you in spirit and in truth, and who speaks to you more sweetly and to better purpose than Jordan".(18)

We even have to be dispossessed, in a sense, of our own families. We will rightly love them and delight in their love for us, but once we make our profession in the Order we should be free to go where the mission of the Order needs us, even if it is far from the homes of our family. That is part of our poverty. Now our first belonging is to the Order and the preaching of the gospel.

## **2.3 Sex, Bodies and Desire**

### **a) An unattainable ideal?**

This is a beautiful ideal, but it may seem remote and unattainable. As we struggle with sexual desire, with fantasies and possessiveness, then this selfless friendship may seem beyond our reach. The media assures us every day that this ideal is “unrealistic”. But God does not transform humanity by inviting us to labour up to heaven. The divine life comes to where we are, flesh and blood. Jesus summons Zacchaeus to come down from the tree and join him on the ground. The Word becomes bodily, takes upon himself our desires, our passion, our sexuality. If we would meet the Lord and be healed, then we too must become incarnate, in the bodies that we are, with all our passions, with our hurts and hungers.

We start from who and what we are. When we are clothed in the habit, we bring to the Order this person, who is the fruit of a history, and carries its wounds. This is the person whom the Lord has called, and not some ideal human being. We come with the scars of past experience, perhaps with the unhealed memories of failures in love, of abuse, of sex. Our families have taught us to love; they may also have inflicted wounds on us that will take time to heal. To grow in this Christlike love takes time, and this time is given. It is a gift, and God always gives his gifts through time. He took centuries to form his people, preparing the way for the birth of his Son. God gives us life patiently, not in an instant. If we accept his gifts, we must accept the way God gives, “not as the world gives do I give unto you” (Jn 14.27). Accepting this gift of time is perhaps especially important in our society, in which adolescence is prolonged, and it is only late that most of us arrive at maturity. We must start with our desires, our hungers, our bodies. We are neither angels nor beasts, but flesh and blood and spirit, destined for the Kingdom. But, as Pascal said, if we make the mistake of thinking that we are angels, then we will become beasts.

## **b) Desire**

“I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh ” (Ezekiel 36.26). If our hearts are to become flesh then we must let our desires be transformed. What are the desires that shape our heart, and which we hide from others and perhaps even from ourselves? “None of us is so self-transparent as to know quite where, in fact, our hearts are set.”(19) Until we look squarely at our desires in the face and learn to desire well, then we shall be subject to their control and so their prisoner. This is especially hard in a society which is dedicated to the cultivation of desire. Our society is dying not of famine but of an excess of desire. Every advertisement encourages us to desire more, endlessly, infinitely. The world is being consumed by a voracious, unmeasured desire, that may consume us all. Unrestrained sexual desire is merely one symptom of how we are taught to see the world, as there to be taken and consumed.

In the first place, that love which is friendship invites us to see the other without seeking to possess them. We delight in them without seeking ownership. It is hard to attain this liberty of heart if we remain captivated by the culture of the market, in which everything is there to be acquired and used, even other people. Thus true friendship asks of us that we break with the dominant culture of our time. We have to learn to see aright, with clarity, with eyes that do not devour each other and the world. St Thomas wrote “ubi amor, ibi oculus”. “Where love is, there is the eye.” (20) He says that when we lust we see the other as the lion sees the stag, as a meal to be devoured. Love is therefore inseparable from a true poverty of heart. As William Blake asked, “Can that be Love that drinks another as a sponge drinks water?” (21) So the healing of desire implies a different way of being in the world, true poverty. And what sort of sign would chastity be if we remain just as acquisitive in other ways? As Don Goergen OP wrote, “If I partake of consumer society, defend capitalism, tolerate machismo, believe that Western society is superior to others, and am sexually abstinent, I am simply witnessing to that for which we stand: capitalism, sexism, western arrogance, and sexual abstinence. The latter is hardly deeply meaningful and understandably questioned.” (22)

We also need to see sexuality clearly and free ourselves from the sexual mythology of contemporary society. We have to demythologise sex. On the one hand a sexual relationship is usually seen as the culmination of all our hungers for communion and the only escape from loneliness. It has been called the last remaining sacrament of transcendence, the only sign that we exist for another, or even that we exist at all. To

be without a sexual relationship is therefore to be half dead. On the other hand, sexuality is trivialised. An English madam recently declared that sex is of no more importance than having a cup of tea. It is this combination of the deification of sexuality and its trivialisation that makes celibacy so hard to bear. We are both told that we must have it, and that it is ours to have without a moment's thought. The re-education of our human hearts demands that we see sexuality clearly. It is indeed a beautiful sacrament of communion with another, the gift of oneself, and so it can never be trivialised. Yet there are other ways in which we may love fully and completely and so its absence does not condemn us to isolation and loneliness.

Finally, faced with the insatiable desires of the market place, we are invited not to repression, but to hunger for more. We are passionate people, and to kill all passion would be to stunt and wither our humanity. It would make us preachers of death. Instead we must be liberated into deeper desires, for the boundless goodness of God. As Oshida, the Japanese Dominican, says, we beg God to make himself irresistible. Our desires may go astray not because we ask for too much, but because we have settled for too little, for tiny satisfactions "The ideal is for us not to control our appetites at all, but to allow them full rein in the wake of an uncontrolled appetite for God (23) The advertisements that line our roads invite us to struggle against each other, to trample upon each other in the competition to fulfil our endless desires; our God offers the satisfaction of infinite desire freely and as a gift. Let us desire more deeply.

This transformation of desire will surely imply some asceticism. This is a conclusion which I have long resisted! Dominic surely arrived at his freedom, his spontaneity, his lightheartedness partly because he was a temperate man, who ate and drank little. He feasted with his brethren but he also fasted. There is an asceticism which is not a Manichean rejection of God's world, but teaches us a proper pleasure in it. "It is about giving up not desire itself which would be inhuman – but its violence. It is about dying to the violence of pleasure, to its omnipotence." (24) Temperance measures our appetites against the real needs of our body, and so rescues us from the delusions of fantasy and the tyranny of desire.

### **c) Bodies**

I cannot have a mature relationship to my sexuality until I learn to accept and even delight in human bodies, my own and other people's. This is the body that I have, and

that I am, getting older, fatter, losing my hair, evidently mortal. I must be at ease with other people's bodies, the beautiful and the ugly, the sick and the healthy, the old and young, male and female. St. Dominic founded the Order to rescue people from the tragedy of a dualistic religion, which condemned this created world as evil. Central to our tradition from the beginning is an appreciation of corporeality. It is here that God comes to meet and redeem us, becoming a human being of flesh and blood like us. The central sacrament of our faith is the sharing of his body; our final hope is the resurrection of the body. The vow of chastity is not a refuge from our bodily existence. If God has become flesh and blood, then we can dare to do so as well. We discover what it means for us to be bodily in that climax of Jesus' life, when he gives his body to us: "This is my body, given for you". Here we see that the body is not just a lump of flesh, a bag of muscles, blood and fat. The Eucharist shows us the vocation of our human bodies: to become gifts to each other, the possibility of communion.

The immense pain of celibacy is that we renounce a moment of intense bodiliness, when bodies are given to each other, without reserve. Here the body is seen in its profound identity not as a lump of flesh but as the sacrament of presence. This sexual act expresses, makes flesh and blood, our deep desire to share our lives. That is why it is a sacrament of Christ's unity with the Church. We religious too, in our corporeality, can make Christ present in our way. The preacher brings the Word to expression, not just in his or her words, but in all that we are. God's compassion seeks to become flesh and blood is us, in our tenderness, even in our faces.

In the Old Testament, we often find the prayer that God's face may shine upon us. This prayer was finally answered in the form of a human face, Christ's face. He looks at the rich young man, loves him and asks him to follow him; he looks at Peter in the courtyard after his betrayal; he looks at Mary Magdalene in the garden and calls her by her name. As preachers, flesh and blood, we can give body to that compassionate look of God. Our bodiliness is not excluded from our vocation. "And the man who is both a preacher and a brother can learn, painfully and probably with every uneven progress, what it means to be a face for God precisely in having a human face, a face that can smile and laugh and weep and look bored ... It is in all our uniqueness and individuality, which is eternally valid and desired by God, that we are also the revelation, the manifestation, the expression of him who is the One Word coming forth from an eternity from the silence of God."(25)

True purity of heart is not about being freed from contamination by this world. It is more about being fully present in what we do and are, having a face and a body that expresses ourselves, beyond deceit and duplicity. The pure in heart are not concealed behind their faces, watching warily. Their faces are transparent, unprotected, with the nakedness and vulnerability of Christ. They have his freedom and: spontaneity. "Only he who has a pure heart can laugh in a freedom that creates freedom in others." (26)

#### **d) Generativity**

Perhaps more than anything else, I have missed not having children. And if I, as a man, feel this, then what can it mean for a woman not to have given birth? This is a fundamental desire we must recognise. Yet if our apostolic life is caught up in the fertile love of God for humanity, then we will be fruitful. Meister Eckhart says that God's love in us is green and fertile. God is in us "ever verdant and flowering in all the joy and the glory that he is in himself" (27) "God 's chief aim is giving birth He is never content until he begets his Son in us. And the soul too is in no way content until the Son is born in her." (28)

It belongs to our love of the brethren and sisters that we help each other to be fruitful. The apostolic life is not just a matter of endless work. If our apostolates are alive with the abundance of God's own life, then we shall share in his creativity. But to be a parent is to live through the joy and pain of letting your children go. The consummation of being a parent is to give one's children their freedom, and let them build lives which are different from what we hoped for them. We too must let go what we bring to birth. We know that we have really been fruitful when projects that we have initiated, and to which we have given our lives, take off in new directions, and are in the hands of others. That is hard, but the generosity of parents is to give their children freedom.

### **2.4 How may we sustain one another?**

If we let the love that is God touch us, then we shall slowly become alive. It may seem safer to remain dead, vulnerable, untouchable. But is this so? "Nature abhors a vacuum. Terrible things can happen to a man with an empty heart. In the last resort it is better to run the risk of an occasional scandal than to have a monastery — a choir, a refectory, a recreation room — full of dead men. Our Lord did not say 'I am come that they may have safety and have it more abundantly'. Some of us would indeed give anything to feel safe, about our life in this world, as in the next, but we cannot have it



both ways: safety or life we must choose.” (29) If we choose life, then we shall need communities which support us as we come alive, which help us to grow in a love which is truly holy, a sharing in the pouring forth of God’s Word.

## **a) Communities of hope**

Above all we should offer each other hope and mercy. Often we are drawn to the Order because we admire the brethren. We hope that we will become like them. Soon we will discover that they are in fact just like us, fragile, sinful and selfish. This can be a moment of profound disillusionment. I remember a novice complaining of this sad discovery. The novice master replied to him, “I am delighted to hear that you no longer admire us. Now there is a chance that you might come to love us.” The redemptive mystery of God’s love is to be seen not in a community of spiritual heroes, but of brothers or sisters, who encourage each other on the journey to the Kingdom with hope and mercy. The risen Lord appears in the midst of a community of timid and weak men. If we wish to meet him we must dare to be there with them. Jordan of Saxony wrote to the brethren of Paris, who were clearly just like us: “It cannot be that Jesus will appear to those who cut themselves off from the unity of the brotherhood: Thomas, for not being with the other disciples when Jesus came, was denied sight of him: and will you think yourself more holy than Thomas?”(30) Above all we will need our communities if we fail in love. We may fail because we enter a time of sterility when we feel ourselves to be incapable of any love, when our hearts of flesh have been replaced by hearts of stone. Then we will need them to believe for us that:

“Hidden within the deepest  
self – no matter how  
treacherous one has been  
or how corruptible – hidden  
within the deepest self  
the seed of love remains. (31)

Our communities must be places in which there is no accusation, “for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down” (Rev. 12.10). We may sin and feel that we have destroyed our vocations, and that we must leave the Order in shame. Then our brothers and sisters may have to believe for us in God’s mercy when we may find it hard to believe ourselves. If God can make the dead tree of Golgotha flower, then he can bring fruit out of my sins. We may need our brothers to believe, when we cannot,

that some failure is not the end, but that God in his infinite fertility can make it part of our journey to holiness. Even our sins can be part of our fumbling attempts to love. All those years of Augustine's sexual adventures were perhaps part of his searching for the one who was most beloved, and that chastity was not the cessation but the consummation of his desire.

## **b) Community and sexual orientation**

It is here that cultural differences can be seen most clearly. Great delicacy is needed if we are to avoid either scandalising or wounding our brothers and sisters. In some cultures, the admission of people of homosexual orientation to religious life is virtually unthinkable. In others it is accepted without question. Anything that is written about this topic is likely to be scrutinised to see whether one is "in favour" or "against" homosexuality. This is the wrong question. It is not for us to tell God whom he may or may not call to religious life. The General Chapter of Caleruega affirmed that the same demands of chastity apply to all brethren of whatever sexual orientation, and so no one can be excluded on this ground. There was much debate at Caleruega over this question, and I am sure that it will continue.

How can our communities support and sustain brethren as they confront the question of their sexual orientation? First we must recognise that it touches deeply our own sense of who we are. This is therefore a sensitive and important question for many young people who join the Order, for two reasons. First of all there is often a profound hunger for identity. For many young people the overriding question is: "Who am I?" Secondly, because of the- prolonged adolescence which characterises many cultures today, the question of sexual orientation is often not resolved until late. Sometimes we receive requests from brethren for dispensation because only late in life have they realised that they are fundamentally heterosexual and so able to marry.

If a brother comes to believe that he is homosexual, then it is important that he knows that he is accepted and loved as he is. He may live in terror of rejection and accusation. But this acceptance is bread for the journey as he moves to discover a deeper identity, as a child of God. For none of us, heterosexual or homosexual, can find our deepest identities in our sexual orientation. Who we are most deeply, we must discover in Christ. "Beloved we are God 's children now; it does not appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 Jn 3.2) By our vows we commit ourselves to follow Christ, and to

discover our identity in him. It belongs to our poverty that we are carried beyond these small identities. "At the root of all other possessiveness is the ultimately possessive desire to be a self: the desire that there should be at my centre not that unnameable abyss into which as into a vacuum, the nameless God is inevitably drawn, but an identity I can own, an identity which is defined by my ownership of it."<sup>32</sup> Any brother who makes his sexual orientation central to his public identity would be mistaking who he most deeply is. He would be stopping on the roadside when he is called to walk to Jerusalem. What is fundamental is that we can love and so are children of God, not to whom we are sexually attracted. But it does not only concern an individual's personal sense of identity. We have an identity as each other's brothers and sisters. We are responsible for the consequences for our brethren of how we present ourselves? especially in an area as sensitive as that of sexual orientation.

So, every brother should be accepted as he is. But the emergence of any subgroups within a community, based on sexual orientation, would be highly divisive. It can threaten the unity of the community; it can make it harder for the brethren to practice the chastity which we have vowed. It can put pressure on brethren to think of themselves in a way that is not central to their vocation as preachers of the Kingdom, and which perhaps they may eventually discover to be untrue.

### **c) Falling in love**

However much we present friendship as a supreme revelation of that love which is the life of God, yet we may fall in love, and this may be one of the most significant experiences of our lives. One of the first public questions that I was ever asked after my election as Master, at a meeting of a great crowd of Filipino Dominican students, was: "Timothy, have you ever fallen in love?" And the second question was: "Was this before or after you joined the Order?" If this happens, then we will indeed need the support and love of our communities.

For a brother or sister who has professed their lives to the Order, to fall in love is almost certainly a moment of crisis. But as fr Jean-Jacques Pérennès often reminds us in the General Council, a crisis is a moment of opportunity. It can be fruitful. Any experience of love can be an encounter with the God who is love. Falling in love can be the moment when our egocentrism is torn open, and we discover that we are not the centre of the world. It can demolish, at least for a time, that self-preoccupation that kills us. Falling in love is "for many people the most. extraordinary and revealing

experience of their lives, whereby the centre of significance is suddenly ripped out of the self, and, the dreamy ego is shocked into an awareness of an entirely separate reality". (33)

Once we have gone through this profound "unselfing", then we cannot just go on living as if nothing had happened. We cannot pretend that we have never met this person, and that we can return to our old life as if nothing had happened. And this may be one reason why if a brother falls in love he may ask for a dispensation from his vows, for that old life to which he pledged himself is over.

When Thomas Merton, an American Cistercian, was at the height of his fame as a spiritual writer, he fell utterly in love with a nurse who had cared for him in hospital. He wrote in his diary that he was "tormented by the gradual realisation that we were in love and I did not know how I would live without her". (34) Othello says faced with the loss of his beloved Desdemona, she is "where I have garner'd up my heart, where I must live or bear no life, the fountain from which my current runs or else dries up". Then we cannot imagine a life apart from the person we love and so we have to pray for the gift of a life that indeed we cannot imagine, a life which can only come as a gift from God. On the cross, Jesus awaits no imaginable life, only the inconceivable and abundant life which the Father will give him. Then we cannot make a life. It must be given.

It is so very hard to let ourselves go into the hands of the Father at this moment, trusting that this death will give way to resurrection. We will need our friends and brothers and sisters as never before, who may have to believe for us when we cannot, that in this desert we may meet the Lord of life. Possibly we have never before felt so alive, so vital. We may feel that this love is what we have been looking for all our lives. How can we take the risk of losing it? We may become dried up, bad tempered and frustrated! At this moment we have to trust that if we remain faithful to our vows then God will be faithful too. We will receive life abundantly. Merton's biographer says that finally Merton's experience of falling in love gave him "an inner liberation, which gave him a new sense of sureness, uncautiousness, defenselessness in his vocation and in the depths of himself. (35)

It may seem as if I am suggesting that such an experience is almost a necessary step on the road of our spiritual development. This is not what I am saying at all. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." As religious we pledge ourselves to receive the fullness of life in mystery of that unpossessive friendship. Also we priests and religious can inflict terrible damage on ourselves and

others when we fall in love. We may be seen by others as “safe” and consider ourselves to be safe too. We can easily abuse others by indulging in a form of “emotional tourism”, which leaves us free to return back to the our community when things become dangerous but possibly leaving the other person damaged, and their trust in the Church and even God, undermined for ever.

#### **d) The wilderness of loneliness**

In our growth as people capable of love, we may sometime have to pass through the wilderness. This may be because we feel ourselves incapable of love, or because we fall in love, or perhaps fail in our vows. If the apostolic life leads us to the bewilderment of Gethsemane, where life loses all meaning, then crisis in love may confront us with the solitude of the cross.

The experience of loneliness reveals a fundamental truth about ourselves, which is that alone we are incomplete. Contrary to the dominant perception of much of western society, we are not self-sufficient, self-contained beings. Loneliness reveals that I cannot be alive, I cannot be, by myself. I only exist through my relationships with others. Alone I die. This loneliness reveals a void, an emptiness at the heart of my life. We may be tempted to fill it with many things, food, drink, sex, power or work. But the emptiness remains. The alcohol or whatever is merely a disguised thirst for God. I suspect that we cannot even fill it with the presence of other people. A room full of lonely people changes nothing. “The awfulness of this loneliness shows itself precisely in the fact that all share it, none can relieve it.” (36) When Merton fell in love, then he discovered that what he was looking for was perhaps not his beloved, but a solution to the hollow at the centre of his heart. She was “the person whose name I would try to use as magic to break the grip of the awful loneliness of my heart”. (37)

Ultimately I suspect that this loneliness must not simply be endured. It must be lived as an entry into the loneliness of Christ in his death, which bears and transforms all human loneliness. “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” If we do that, then the veil of the temple will be torn in half and we shall discover the God who is at the heart of our being, granting us existence in every moment: “Tu autem eras interior intimo meo.” “You are closer to me than I am to myself” (38). If we take upon ourselves the cross of loneliness and walk with it, then it will be revealed that the modern perception of the self is not true. The deepest truth of ourselves is that we are not alone. At the deepest point of my being is God giving me the abundance of

life. St Catherine describes herself in the Dialogue as “dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God’s goodness toward her.” Profound self-knowledge reveals not the solitary self of modernity but the one whose existence is inseparable from the God who grants us life in every moment.

If we can enter this desert and there encounter God, then we will become free to love unpossessively, freely, without domination or manipulation. We will be able to see others not as solutions to my needs or answers to my loneliness but simply there, to be delighted in “Therefore stand still and do not waver from your emptiness”. It was at the foot of the cross, where Jesus gave his mother and the beloved disciple to each other, that the community of the Church was born.

### **3. THE LIFE OF PRAYER**

**“I have called you friends, for an that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15.15).**

The person who is touched by the abundance of life loves unpossessively, spontaneously, joyfully. His heart of stone becomes a heart of flesh. This deep transformation of our humanity implies, according to our tradition, both study and prayer. Jordan of Saxony tells us that they are both as necessary to us as food and drink. Through study we remake the human heart. We discover that “intellectual illumination which breaks forth into the affection of love “(39). Both study and prayer belong to the contemplative life to which every Dominican is called. But you will be spared any more reflections upon study, since I have already written a letter on it. I will share a few thoughts about prayer and the fullness of life.

#### **3.1 Community of the Word**

At the end of most visitations, the visitator will make some edifying remarks about the need to pray more. We will nod sagely and make vague resolutions. Does one have the impression that what is at issue is how these dry bones shall live?

When a child is born, its parents immediately begin to talk to it. Long before it can understand, a child is fed with words, bathed and soothed with words. The mother and father do not talk to their child so as to communicate information. They are talking it into life. It becomes human in this sea of language. Slowly it will be able to find a place in the love that its parents share. It grows into a life that is human.

So too we are transformed by immersion in the Word of God, addressed to us. We do not read the Word so as to seek information. We ponder it, study it, meditate on it, live with it, eat and drink it. "These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. " (Deut. 6.6f). This word of God works in us, making us human, bringing us to life, forming us to in that friendship which is the very life of God. As Jordan wrote to Diana in his Christmas letter of 1229, "Read over this Word in your heart, turn it over in your mind, let it be sweet as honey on your lips; ponder it, dwell on it, that it may dwell with you and in you for ever"(40).

Some friends of mine adopted a child. They found him in a vast hospital ward in Saigon, an orphan of the Vietnamese war. For the first months in the ward no one had had the time to look or speak to him. He grew up unable to smile. But his adoptive parents talked to him and smiled at him, with a labour of love. I remember the day on which he first smiled back. The Word of God nurtures us, so that we come alive, human, and even able to smile back at God. A community that offers life will be one in which we find that Word of God treasured and shared. It is not enough just to say more prayers. These may stifle us, especially if recited at great speed. When Dominic prayed he relished the word of God, "savoring the words of God in his mouth and, as it were, enjoying reciting them to himself" (Fifth way), like someone enjoying a good French wine. Albert the Great says that we need "to be nourished often by the charm (again dulcedo) of the word of God".(41)

As the child is fed by the words of its parents, then it makes the liberating and terrifying discovery that it is not the centre of the world. Behind the breast there is a mother. Everything is not at its command. It discovers itself as part of the human community. In the conversation of our parents, we discover a world in which we may belong. So, too, as we are nourished by the word of God, we are led into a larger world. The good shepherd who has come that we may have life and have it more abundantly, is the one who opens the gate, so that we may come out and find large open spaces. In prayer we make an exodus, beyond the tiny shell of our self-obsession. We enter the larger world of God. Prayer is a "discipline that stops me taking myself for granted as the fixed centre of a little universe, and allows me to find and lose and re-find myself constantly in the interweaving patterns of a world I did not make and do not control".(42)

The child ripens in the conversation of its parents, and discovers that it is not alone. So too we are caught up into God's friendship, and are healed of self-obsession and begin to glimpse the real world. Yeats wrote, "We had fed the heart on fantasies; the heart's grown brutal from the fare."(43) Prayer heals our hearts of fantasies. St Thomas says that praying the Our Father "gives shape to our whole affective life".(44) Praying that God's will be done and that the Kingdom come, our hearts are remade.

As we are liberated from our self-obsessed fantasies and enter God's larger world, we discover that others suffer violence and sorrow. fr. Vincent de Couesnongle talked of "the contemplation of the street". For Dominic, the afflicted and the oppressed "form part of the 'contemplata' in 'contemplata aliis tradere' ... The wound of knowledge that opens up Dominic's mind and heart in contemplation, allowing him with an awesome unprotectedness to experience his neighbour's pain and his neighbour's need cannot be accounted for simply by certain crowding memories of pain observed or by his own natural sympathy".(45) It is, fr. Paul Murray says, a "contemplative wound." That is why the contemplative life is at the heart of any search for a just world. Contemplation makes us capable of seeing selflessly.

### **3.2 Communities of celebration and silence**

As a child grows up, it will stop screaming and become capable of both speech and silence. It will learn both to talk and to hear. So too for us, building communities of prayer implies more than adding another psalm to Vespers. We have to create environments in which we can both speak and hear, rejoice and be silent. This is the ecosystem that we need if we are to flourish

In the Dominican tradition, speaking to God is above all else asking for what we want. This is not infantile but realism. It shows that we are waking up from the little fantasy world of the market, in which everything is for sale, and recognising that in the real world everything is a gift from the one who is the "the source of all that is good for us" (II II 83 a 2, ad 3). When we begin to ask then we are on the way to adulthood. When we pray together, then do we dare to ask from God what we most deeply desire? Or do we merely recite a few petitions from the breviary?

The exodus from the Egypt of self-obsession is a moment of ecstasy. We are liberated from the dark and cramped little world of the ego. Like Miriam after the crossing of the Red Sea we will surely be exuberant. We exult in having entered the wide open spaces of God's friendship. David danced wildly before the ark; Mary



exulted in the Lord, and the marvellous things he had done for her. The prayer of the preacher should surely be exultant, ecstatic. We are called "To praise, to bless, to preach". When the psalms say "Let us sing a new song to the Lord", then let us do so! Dominic was exuberant in his prayer. He used his whole body, stretching out his arms, lying on the ground, genuflecting and making a lot of noise. The whole body is saved by grace and so prays. Some of my most beautiful memories of praying are with the brethren. I think of the ecstatic Eucharist celebrated in Haiti, in the midst of poverty and violence, of the dance and song of our Zulu sisters in South Africa, of the marvellous and passionate singing at the Easter Vigil in Krakow, of firecrackers and gongs one year later in Taiwan. Do we celebrate the liturgy, and exult together in the Lord who has done marvellous things for us? Do we regard it merely as an obligation to be fulfilled? It is an obligation indeed, that most solemn obligation which comes from friendship. We delight to do things for our friends.

Eckhart wrote that "the very best and noblest attainment in this life is to be silent and let God work and speak within"(46) There is no friendship without silence. Unless one has learnt to stop, be quiet and listen to another, then one remains locked in one's own little world, of which one is the centre and the only real inhabitant. In silence we make the wonderful and liberating discovery that we are not gods, but just creatures. There are different types of silence. There is the silence of the women at the tomb, who "said nothing to anyone because they were afraid" (Mk 16 8). It is the silence with which we exclude the utterly unexpected, the new, the unthinkable. It is the silence by which I shut out unwelcome words which may rob me of peace of mind. And then there is the silence of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, as they listen to the Lord as he expounds the scriptures to them. Then they say nothing, but afterwards they exclaim "Did not our hearts burn within us, as he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk 24 32) Paul Philibert OP has called prayer our openness to God's secret initiatives. In that vulnerable silence we let him do new and unexpected things. We are open to be astonished by the novelty of the God of surprises: "Behold I make all things new" (Rev 21 5).

This is the silence that prepares the way for a word of preaching. Ignatius of Antioch said that the Word came out from the silence of the Father. It was a strong, clear, decisive and truthful Word, because it was born in silence. He "was not Yes and No; but in him it was always yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor 1 19f). Often our words lack authority, because they are yes and no; they hint and nudge; they are coloured by innuendoes and ambiguities, they carry little arrows and

small resentments. We must create that silence in which true words can be conceived and shared.

How can we rediscover such a silence in ourselves and in our communities? In my experience there is no way other than simply taking the time to be silent in God's presence every day (cf LCO 66.11). This is the discipline that I have sought and evaded, attained and let slip ever since I joined the Order. In it I spend most of the time thinking of food and faxes. For this contemplative silence we need each other's support. We need communities which help us to grow in tranquil silence. A Buddhist monk told Merton, "Before you can meditate you've got to learn not to slam doors". Anyone who lives near me knows that I have not mastered that art yet! Each community needs to reflect upon how it can create times and places of silence. This is not the depressing silence of the morgue which one sometimes found in the past, the silence which shuts out other people. We hunger for a silence which prepares for communication rather than refuses it. It is the comfortable silence which comes before and after we share a word, rather than the awkward silence of those who have nothing to say to each other. When I was a child, my younger brother and I often went into the woods, to look for animals and birds. The secret was learning to be silent together. It was a communion in shared attentiveness. Maybe we can find that, as we listen together for the word that may come.

### **3.3 The wilderness of death and resurrection**

Jesus summons us to have life and to have it abundantly. This is the good news that we preach. Yet we have seen that in answering that summons we may find ourselves led into the wilderness. As preachers of the word, we may discover that we have no word to offer, that nothing makes sense anymore. As those who preach the love of God, we discover that we are desolate, alone and abandoned. As those who are invited to find ourselves in God's own life, we will be confronted with our mortality. We are creatures and not gods, and we must die. Then we may cry out like the Israelites to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" (Ex.14.11) Then we must "stand firm and not waver in our emptiness", trusting that life will be given.

How are we to sustain and encourage each other as we face mortality? First we must stimulate each other with the freedom of Jesus. Knowing that the Son of man must die, he turned his face to go to Jerusalem. This is a freedom that I have seen sometimes in the brothers and sisters, giving away their lives. In the years before he

was assassinated, fr Pierre Claverie OP, Bishop of Oran in Algeria, took the road to Jerusalem, as he refused to give in to threats and leave his people. In 1994 he said in a sermon, "I have struggled for dialogue and friendship between people, cultures and religions. All that probably earns me death, but I am ready to accept that risk".(47) Jesus' freedom in the face of death found its culmination in the night before he died, when he took his body and gave it to his disciples, a gesture of astonishing liberty. This is what it is given to us to do together, in the face of mortality. I remember one Easter morning at Blackfriars, joyfully celebrating the Eucharist with a brother dying of cancer. All of the community was crammed in his room. Afterwards we drank champagne in honour of the resurrection. I remember celebrating the Eucharist with the brothers and sisters in Iraq a few weeks ago, as we waited for the military attack that would surely come. The Eucharist should not be the centre of our common life because we feel that we are united, or even so that we may come to feel so. It is the sacrament of that abundant life which is purely a gift, the "bread of life" which Dominic promised we would find in the Order. We receive it together, offering each other food for the wilderness.

We live out the meaning of that Eucharist in setting each other free, infecting each other with Christ's immeasurable freedom. It may be in the small freedom of forgiveness freely given, or letting ourselves break some old pattern of life, of taking a risk. We let go. As Lacordaire wrote "I go where God leaves me, uncertain of myself, but sure of him". In all these ways we let ourselves be caught up in the sweep of the Spirit coming forth from the Father and the Son, crying within us "Abba Father". As Eckhart says "We do not pray, we are prayed". Yet it is also our entry into freedom and spontaneity, when we become most alive. We let ourselves be caught by the movement, like a dancer who gives in to the rhythm, and finds in it grace and freedom.

Wisdom danced in the presence of God while she made the world. St Thomas says that the contemplation of the wise person is like play, because it is pleasurable and because it is done for its own sake, like a dance. "Unmitigated seriousness betokens a lack of virtue, because it wholly despises play which is as necessary for a good human life as is rest."(48) The abundance of life leads us into that playfulness of those who have laid down the burden of being little gods. We can drop that terrible seriousness of those who believe that they carry the world upon their shoulders. Then our communities may indeed be places in which we will begin to know the happiness of

the Kingdom. Saint Dominic, Nos junge beatis. Join us to the blessed, and may we share some glimpse of their happiness there now.

**Notes:**

- (1) Stephen of Salagnac I.9, ed. Thomas Kaeppli OP MOPH XXII Rome 1949 p 81
- (2) Cornelius Ernst OP, The Theology of Grace Dublin 1974 p 42
- (3) The Identity of Religious today The Conference of Major Superiors of Men, USA. 1996
- (4) Fundamental Constitution IV
- (5) Cernai 21, quotes by Tugwell (ed), Dominic London 1997 p 125
- (6) Dominican Ashram March 1982, "What is my licence to say what I say?" p 10
- (7) Die deutsche Predigten und lateinischen Werke Stuttgart 1936 vol V p 197
- (8) Prediche del Beato Giordano to Rivalto ed A. M. Bisconi e D. M. Manni Firenze 1739 p 9
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