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# THE DOMINICAN DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

By Fr. Peter John Cameron, O.P.

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ON JUNE 22, 1805, on the day that the Dominican Province of Saint Joseph was being formally established by the Master General of the Order of Preachers, another great thing was happening in America. Captain Meriwether Lewis and Second Lieutenant William Clark were halfway through their historic twenty-eight month expedition crossing the continent of North America to reach the west coast of the United States.

Lewis and Clark had set out from Hartford, Illinois, on May 14, 1804, on an arduous trek through hostile, uncharted territory to Portland, Oregon. There, in early December 1805, with the shimmering Pacific in sight, William Clark wrote in his journal: "Ocean in view! O! The joy!"

The two explorers then turned around and soldiered their way eastward again, traveling a total of over 8,000 miles until they reached their final destination, St. Louis, on September 23, 1806.

Why did they do it? Why did Lewis and Clark submit themselves to dangers and hazards and risks beyond all reckoning? The President of the United States at the time, Thomas Jefferson, had himself selected the two men and given them their mission. He wrote: "The object of



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your mission is to explore the Missouri River and its course with the waters of the Pacific Ocean [so as to find] the most direct water communication across this continent for the purpose of commerce."

In other words, Thomas Jefferson was asking Lewis and Clark to forge a way to a new horizon for America. That is why they said yes.

Why are there Dominicans in the world eight hundred years after the day of Saint Dominic? Why does the Dominican Province of Saint Joseph continue to exist after two centuries? Why have Dominicans — like so many dinosaurs — never become extinct?

## New Horizons

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, offers us an answer in his new encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. The Holy Father writes:

"Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."

Why are there still Dominicans around today? Because people are longing for their life to be given a new horizon. People demand decisive direction that will lead them to their happiness.

Leading people to that new horizon...revealing the decisive direction that makes happiness happen...is the very heart of the Dominican charism, namely, Veritas, Truth.

For Dominicans have a way of looking at reality that enables them to lay bare the deepest truth about it so as to show how it makes sense, to render up its meaning. Dominicans staunchly believe that everything that exists is good because God created it and that Jesus Christ in his Incarnation has identified himself with this creation.

A Dominican, then, is a supremely reasonable believer of the Gospel. The most reasonable person in the world is the one who perceives that, at the outermost limits of reason, there is still something yet beyond it. Reason, in the highest operation of its power, leads us to this something,

this Mystery beyond, an eternal Presence of which we can be certain and who is the meaning of our life.

The Dominican vocation is like the television show *Antiques Roadshow*. People take all their old stuff — items that they have dismissed as so much worthless trash, that they have kept stored in their cellars and closets for years — and they bring them to an expert, an appraiser who analyzes them with an authoritative eye. Once he has made his assessment he speaks his judgment: This thing that you had discarded in the attic, that you thought was worthless junk — it is a priceless treasure. It is worth a fortune.

### Appreciating our Lives

Dominicans exist to do this for God's people. By their preaching, Dominicans help others to look at the mystery and the mayhem and the mess of their life, and to see that — in fact — their life is a treasure. The reality they live is filled with reasons that reveal the merciful heart of God the Father. Dominicans continue to minister in God's holy Church to convince all men and women that they are made for more.

### Dominican Encounter

How does this happen? As the Holy Father says, it is the result of an encounter. Why does the Pope insist on this word "encounter." Because an encounter is a meeting with another that provokes a powerful question in us: What are you looking for? Even as the question is being evoked in us we know that somehow it is being answered through the very encounter with the one who has prompted it.

An encounter opens up our deepest self. It fills us with wonder; it electrifies our reason; it makes us want to stay with the one we have met.



Photo: the Croisiers / Fr. Gene Plaisted

### Example of Saint Catherine

The great Dominican saint whom we commemorate today, Saint Catherine of Siena, Doctor of the Church, well could be revered as "patroness of Gospel encounter." For, no matter whether Catherine was speaking to widows or politicians, poets or hospital rectors, hermits or lepers — or for that matter even Pope Gregory XI exiled in Avignon — Catherine provoked the question, "What are you looking for?" and offered an answer in her holy friendship.

We see this in a poignant way in the case of Francesco Malavoti, a young Sienese nobleman whom his contemporaries described as being

"bold and hot-headed, lascivious and unrestrained." Francesco had trouble with chastity. He tried to keep his sins of the flesh from Saint Catherine. But it was no use because she figured it out anyway — it is said that Saint Catherine could read hearts and smell sin. And in a letter to the wayward, guilt-ridden Francesco, Catherine wrote this:

"Open the eyes of your understanding, dearest son! Raise them above the darkness! Acknowledge your sin, not with spiritual dejection but with self-knowledge and trust in God's goodness.... Run back to ask your [heavenly] Father for mercy. He will help you and

will not reject your desire, grounded in sorrow for the sin you have committed. No, he will lovingly fulfill that desire. Where are your dear desires? Oh unhappy me! I've discovered that the evil has stolen away your soul and your holy desire. The world and its servants have set their traps. Don't let the devil trick you with fear or embarrassment. Keep living in God's holy and tender love."

That is the way that Dominicans deal with sin. When some of Catherine's companions expressed doubt over the possibility of Francesco's future perseverance, Catherine replied: "Never mind, my sisters. This fellow can't escape my hands, no matter where he may choose to go! For just when he thinks I am far away, I shall throw such a noose or yoke around his neck that he will never be able to get out of it again." With that remark, all the sisters burst into laughter.

### Encountering Jesus

That God is love is a fact that can only be verified in the experience of a human encounter, because love is not the subject of a discourse — it cannot be proved by what someone says. Only an encounter can raise us above the darkness of spiritual dejection, can give our understanding decisive direction, and can open our eyes to the new horizon of "the gentle Jesus and his tender love."

For the encounter is an encounter with an event, a person. No one is saved by a message! Too many people in the Church today want to reduce Christianity to the "message" of Christ. However, a message is not enough, and the Dominican Order exists to give witness to this ineffable Truth. Being Christian is not the

result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea. Because ideas can be manipulated. That is why the heresy of Albigensianism came to be in the first place: because someone tried to reduce the Gospel to an idea that to many seemed very compelling.

Being Christian is the encounter with the Event, the Person Jesus Christ, through the maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

What exactly do we mean when we say that Christianity is an "event?" We mean that we are called to live our faith like a person who has just fallen in love. I remember an Italian priest telling the story about when he was a very young lay man. He fell in love with a young woman. His parents did not approve of this relationship, and they forbade the man ever to see the young woman again. The young man saw her anyway, secretly. Or so he thought. Because one night, after dinner, the young man volunteered to wash the dishes — something he had never done before. With that, his parents screamed, "You're seeing that woman!" Only the event of love could make the young man so generous toward what formerly he found so repugnant (washing the dishes). His parents knew that the cause of the change in their son could only be the fruit of the event of love. It was so palpable and undeniable that it even affected the young man's parents.

Dominicans exist to live the Event of Christ in just that way, with that distinctiveness, that intensity so that others will be drawn into union with the Person of Christ.

Why did that famous Albigensian innkeeper convert to Catholicism after staying up all night with Saint Dominic? Because he experienced an event! In coming face to face with the person of our Holy Father

Dominic, that man had an encounter and that encounter transformed him — it changed his life for ever. He lived for ever out of the event of that meeting with Saint Dominic. It was an event in the past that refused to stay in the past, that informed and transformed every moment of his life.

As the beloved late Pope John Paul II expressed it: "Marked through the gift of faith by the encounter with the Redeemer, believers are called to become an echo of the event of Christ, to become themselves an 'event.'"

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### Making All the Difference

We Dominicans of the Province of Saint Joseph exist simply for this: to show and tell all people what we have found. We have found the Person of the Son of God Incarnate. You may ask: What kind of difference can that possibly make? All I know is this: after Lewis and Clark returned from their momentous mission, all the maps of America had to be changed....

*Fr. Peter John Cameron, O.P., is editor-in-chief of Magnificat, founder and director of the Blackfriars Repertory Theatre in New York, and an award-winning playwright.*